



# CM

Commonwealth School Magazine Spring 2015

*Also in this issue:*

**Aha! Moments**

**A Nose for the New**

**Dead Bunnies and the  
Close-Reading Mafia**

# *Mary Lives*

**The Biography of a Schoolhouse**





# Why I Made It

## A Balanced Pot

by Maria Ronchi '15

Today I want to create something special. Centering my attention as mindfully as I center the clay, I tune out the chatter in the room. To apply pressure and force the increasingly uniform mass into the very center of the wheel is not as easy as it looks! I open the pot and start bringing it up—forming the sides. Reminders keep running through my head: “Leave a quarter inch on the bottom...don’t bring up too much at once...slowly...” I know nothing but the developing form under my fingertips. It starts out a cylinder, but then on a whim, I expand the middle and carefully make the top thinner; I tweak the sides and rim and then pick up the wooden rib Jean taught me to use last year. This tool gives a pot a more geometric surface, changing the vaguely curved bottom into a slanted edge that merges with the curve halfway up. I like this combination of even rigidity and smooth, gentle arcs.

A week after throwing the pot, I trim it meticulously. Once it’s fired, I seek a glaze that will fit it. This pot seems to need a light glaze, but the contrast between top and bottom demands two colors, so I choose celadon and clear. I take a chance and let the celadon drip down the sides. Though I’ve never before tried this style, I have an idea that it might look nice to let the colors cross the division of the sides.

It’s my best piece so far this year. The balance of the angular and curved sides and the clear boundary between top and bottom, combined with the free-dripping glaze, all reflect the methods I used to create the art. On one hand, focusing on the techniques I’ve studied, I make a concrete object from an abstract idea. On the other hand, I experiment with components of the pot. The element of chance means that I don’t quite know what my pot will look like until it comes out of the kiln a final time, then awaits in the studio to surprise me.



**T**hese days, I've been thinking about the value of speaking up, and even, sometimes, of talking back. The idea came to me when I noticed that David Allen '87, who created the Chatfield Travel Scholarships at Commonwealth (see the story on page 22), and Mark Denbeaux '61, the Guantánamo-detainee defender we profiled two years ago, both arrived at Commonwealth because they had rebelled against their previous schools. They may not have intended to use disruption to find a new path in life, I realized, but that's what happened, and in both cases the world is better for it.

Commonwealth is, in many ways, a school built on speaking out. Charles Merrill made a bold statement just by creating a co-ed high school in the center of Boston. And he continued on his own route to accomplish what he wanted. For more than half a century, classes here have worked best when students chime in, partly because the unexpected comment often sparks the greatest excitement. Honest dialogue among teachers at faculty meetings, and frank discussion between teachers and their advisees and students have proven essential to the school's doing its work well. At recess, the most memorable announcements are frequently the edgiest.

It seems to me that we have reached a similar realization in our culture. Today large numbers of people write, speak, protest, and otherwise give of themselves seeking justice and fairness for communities of color in their relationships with law enforcement (and society as whole). This includes many Commonwealth alumni/ae—a natural fit with their progressive leanings and history of commitment to social causes. On page 8 you'll find photos and short texts concerning actions and protests that four of our number have organized and participated in. They, as well as many other alumni/ae I've had contact with in the last few months, see this as a time to actively show their children, families, and friends the importance of direct involvement, of standing up to speak out for principles you believe are important.

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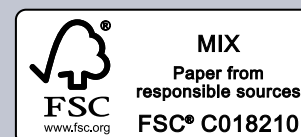
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**Corrections**

In the fall issue, on page 6, Amanda Dai should have been identified as a member of the class of 2015. We also misspelled the name of Perri Wilson on page 24. We apologize for the errors.

# CM

Commonwealth School Magazine Spring 2015

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**On the cover:** Ever since 151 Commonwealth Ave. and its now-conjoined mate at 303 Dartmouth St. were built, they have, in one way or another, been homes. And even as the fluted columns, ornate woodwork, and grand stairways have welcomed generations with warmth, grace, and gentility, they have also witnessed dramatic changes in how the brownstones are used. On page 14, former English teacher Brent Whelan imagines the earliest days of the school and traces its life into today, and beyond. Photo by Kathleen Dooher.

## Great Steps to a **GREAT**ER GOOD

Students organize a school-wide Day of Service

**I**t started with a prayer—at least that’s how junior Kevin Ballen remembers it.

“I was volunteering at the Pine Street Inn, serving dinner at the Women’s Emergency Shelter with a church group from Quincy. Before we began, they included me in their prayer circle. As a fairly unreligious person, I was reluctant; but they insisted that they would not pray unless I joined in. So I held hands with the people on either side as they passionately shouted, ‘Praise the man above!’ Their invigorating exclamations echoed through the kitchen. I lost myself in the moment and instantly forged a connection with these strangers. We were all there and all grateful for the same reason: we could help others.”

That experience sparked the first Day of Service anyone can remember at Commonwealth. Kevin led the complex effort, with crucial help from his advisor, Frédérique Thiebault-Adjout. They recruited committees of students to line up organizations where teenagers could volunteer and to lead teams for each location. Every student and nearly every teacher signed up for one of thirteen sites in and around Boston. On November 10, with classes cancelled, the groups fanned out across the city to their assignments.

“My group went to the Women’s House,” in Dorchester, says sophomore Maya Venkatraman (on the right in the photo on the opposite page). “We prepared a lunch for the women there. We bantered while sautéing vegetables and chopping onions; it was a lot of fun!”

Classmate Jazmin Lantigua served at the same location: “I discovered that my eyes can tell there’s an onion in the room even without the onion having been cut. And I also remember how Maya and I delayed the lunch (thereafter getting teased) because we cut the food so slowly.”

Sophomore Isabella Pucker’s group helped with yard work and maintenance at the Jamaica Plain home of a senior citizen, Patrice. “The coolest moment for me was seeing Patrice’s reaction after we had finished. Her life appeared to involve a number of instabilities, and our help raking and weeding seemed to lift a weight off her chest. She was so grateful, and thanked us profusely. Although we did not rake every leaf in the world, or even every leaf in Jamaica Plain, it was powerful to see the huge difference that we made.”

“Although the day was very fun and festive and important,” Kevin explains, “what I remember most are the emails, the spreadsheets, the meetings, the crises, the complaints, the concerns. I loved all of that because we were working towards a goal that I feel passionate about.” Nor is Kevin the only one to express enthusiasm about the day; nearly everyone involved shared his excitement and voiced the desire to participate in another Day of Service, perhaps as soon as next year.



BILL WHARTON



Students who volunteered at the Women's House in Dorchester during the Day of Service enjoy the pasta and salad lunch some of them made for the guests of the house. Opposite page: other students in the group built Adirondack chairs.

## Day of Service Sites and Projects

**Our Place, Cambridge:** working in a daycare center for homeless children

**Pine Street Inn, Jamaica Plain:** running an arts and crafts activity; preparing lunch

**Pine Street Inn, Dorchester:** painting a mural, running an arts and crafts activity, preparing lunch, building Adirondack chairs, gardening

**Pine Street Inn, South End:** preparing and serving food for the emergency shelter and street outreach programs

**Massachusetts Coalition for Homeless, Lynn:** decorating children's beds for a program that gives furniture to homeless families when they move into permanent housing

**Hale House, Boston:** working one-on-one with the elderly

**Women's Center, Cambridge:** assisting women's advocacy

**Boston Public Works:** cleaning parks in the South End

**Mujeres Unidas Avanzando, Dorchester:** English tutoring

**Drumlin Farm, Lincoln:** working on the farm

**Elizabeth Peabody House, Somerville:** organizing a food pantry

**Boston Rescue Mission:** preparing and serving a meal

**Ethos, Jamaica Plain:** yard work



KIERAN KESNER

# Allez!

Junior Owen Lynch attacks an opponent during a match at the Massachusetts State Fencing Championships in January. Owen advanced from the preliminary rounds to the finals in men's épée, where he finished fourth. Senior Mattie Glenhaber placed fifth in women's saber, and junior Shyam Venkatramani finished eleventh in the men's saber championship round.

# Arts & Letters

**E**ighteen Commonwealth students earned thirty-four awards—including three Gold Keys—in this year's Massachusetts Regional Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. The contest, sponsored by the *Boston Globe* and coordinated by the Museum of Fine Arts, received more than sixteen thousand entries. Gold Key winners advance to the national awards competition.

**Katharine Bancroft '16:**  
Gold Key, Short Story, *Raphael*

**Megan Berry '15:**  
Gold Key, Mixed Media, *Whaling Wives*  
Silver Key, Personal Essay/Memoir, *Melodies*  
Honorable Mention, Humor, *A Present for Martha*

**Catherine Cray '15:**  
Gold Key, Short Story, *Bottle Beach*  
Silver Key, Poetry, *insomniac; Stereoscopy*  
Silver Key, Short Story, *Rosa*  
Honorable Mention, Short Story, *MIA*  
Honorable Mention, Poetry, *Dancer*  
Honorable Mention, Short Story, *Where Have All the People Gone?*  
Honorable Mention, Flash Fiction, *Leaving*  
Honorable Mention, Writing Portfolio, *Moments*

**Julia Curl '16:**  
Honorable Mention, Photography, *mexico series 01*  
Honorable Mention, Photography, *doorways*

**Amanda Dai '15:**  
Honorable Mention, Printmaking, *Soaring*  
Honorable Mention, Personal Essay/Memoir, *Tears*

**Rachelle Flowers '15:**  
Silver Key, Drawing and Illustration, *Helena*

**Elise Friedman '15:**  
Silver Key, Poetry, *Stories*  
Silver Key, Short Story, *Tic-Tacs*  
Honorable Mention, Poetry, *Not Enough Space, Not Enough Time*  
Honorable Mention, Science Fiction/Fantasy, *The Boy*

**Mattie Glenhaber '15:**  
Honorable Mention, Printmaking, *There And Back Again*

**Anna Koch '15:**  
Silver Key, Drawing and Illustration, *Diana*

**Jazmin Lantigua '17:**  
Honorable Mention, Science Fiction/Fantasy, *She Who Burns*

**Katrina Lee '15:**  
Silver Key, Short Story, *A Brief History*  
Silver Key, Personal Essay/Memoir, *A Growing Predicament*  
Honorable Mention, Short Story, *Allergies*

**Calliope Pina Parker '16:**  
Honorable Mention, Mixed Media, *Reptilian*

**Ian Polakiewicz '15:**  
Honorable Mention, Photography, *Mr. Davis*

**Emma Porter '17:**  
Honorable Mention, Photography, *Hidden*

**Fiona Pratt '15:**  
Honorable Mention, Painting, *Thea*

**Zoe Wennerholm '15:**  
Silver Key, Mixed Media, *Your Personal Astric Luckless Tarot*

**Julia Wu '15:**  
Honorable Mention, Printmaking, *Caterpillar*

**Sarah Wu '17:**  
Honorable Mention, Photography, *Ceilingscape*



# Aha!

**W**e've all had them: moments when life snaps into focus. An idea, a discovery, an ambition suddenly shapes the way we see the world. Math and science teacher Andy Clifford had his most memorable “aha!” moment with a dinosaur.

“It was my first year of grad school. My research project involved examining the relationship between soft tissue structures in an animal and the underlying skeleton.

“My advisor had somehow procured the Tyrannosaurus Rex skull that paleontologist Barnum Brown (named after the showman P.T. Barnum) discovered in 1903, and had it delivered to the lab in a wooden crate on the back of a flatbed truck. We wheeled the crate in, peeled off the boards, and I remember staring, transfixed at the most famous dinosaur skull ever discovered (to that date). My ‘aha!’ moment came when it dawned on me that we would attempt ‘real science’ on material that until then had just been abstract notions in my head. Standing there face to face with this giant dinosaur skull, knowing we’d now begin work to figure out parts of this dead animal’s life, I was hooked.”

Making moments like that happen on purpose, however, proves to be a challenge.

“I do my best to discover my students’ interests and to link what we talk about in class with whatever they feel passionate about,” he says. “But when I’ve tried to engineer ‘aha!’ moments in my classes, I’ve almost always failed. And that’s because it turns out that virtually all these moments occur unpredictably and spontaneously. Surprise can play a crucial role in young people’s developing a method for understanding the world. I believe that once kids let themselves be surprised in a science class, they open their minds to the idea that things do not work the way they expect.”

So Andy waits for, and delights in, the “aha!” moments his students make for themselves—when, for example, they see the connections linking history, geology, and economics that influenced Darwin; or when they draw parallels between quantum theory and musical harmonics. While such breakthroughs catalyze excitement in classwork, they prove even more important for the way they can broaden a student’s point of view beyond the context of biology. “With realizations like these, my students begin to experience the practice of science as a whole way of thinking.”



KATHLEEN DOOHIER

# THE *New* CIVIL RIGHTS

Since last summer, the violent deaths of two black men—Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—followed by court decisions not to charge the police officers who killed them, have driven a wave of protests and civil disobedience in cities across the country. A range of issues—systemic racism, white privilege, unequal



## NEW YORK

Last December, as watery winter light filtered into the streets of Manhattan, a crowd estimated between 25,000 and 60,000 marched north from Washington Square Park. At times a mile long, the mass of people chanted and sang. One of them was Robert Johnson '71, who took this photo. “The march was a wonderful experience. It had been a long time since I had been involved in something that large, peaceful, and with such a clear purpose and an easy-to-understand message.”

“With my friends and relatives of the less liberal persuasion, I try to point out the truly unequal application of the law on people of color, especially in the African-American communities. The conversations can get very tense, even the ones that are truly civil. But giving up is not an option.”



## WASHINGTON

On the other side of the nation, Jane Cutter '82 (above, far left) took a role in the movement in Seattle both as a protester and as a “militant journalist” for *Liberation News*, the newspaper of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. “Demonstrations were a nearly daily occurrence in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The goal was to put out a message of ‘No Business as Usual.’ The police showed up with their usual overkill, wearing full riot gear, armed with flashbangs and pepper spray, to face unarmed demonstrators engaged in first-amendment and civil disobedience activities. I participated because opposing all forms of bigotry is important to me. Racism in particular is the biggest obstacle to progressive solutions to social problems in our society.”

LIBERATION NEWS

# MOVEMENT:

## THROUGH COMMONWEALTH EYES

distribution of wealth, the militarization of police forces, and police violence—have become topics of vigorous national discussion. Numbers of Commonwealth alumni/ae have participated in these conversations, and many have written to recount their experiences as they joined the demonstrations. Four of them talk here about their experiences.



JEREMY HOGAN / HERALD-TIMES



### INDIANA

In the university town of Bloomington, Indiana, just a four-hour drive from Ferguson, Ivan Kreilkamp '86 and his wife, Sarah Pearce, thought it important to involve their children. At the rally, Celeste and Iris (seen on the left of the photo; they have red hair) “saw a lot of people they knew, including their fifth-grade homeroom teacher, who gave them a marker and paper to make a ‘Black Lives Matter’ sign. I asked the girls what their impressions were,” Ivan wrote, “and Iris commented, ‘seeing how many people were there made me realize how important this is to them, that they would put this much effort in to making their statement.’”

### MASSACHUSETTS

Mary Helen Newburger Nsangou '85 (center right) and her husband Usmanou (far right) assumed the lead in organizing the Brookline March for Racial Justice, which took place two days after the demonstration in New York. “As a multi-racial family this movement has great significance for us. Like all parents of brown-skinned boys, we continually worry about the safety of our teenage son. The topic of racism is active and ongoing in our household.” Her family wanted to show that their community will “stand up for racial justice and will hold our local institutions accountable for their actions. I do believe,” Mary Helen adds, “that this *is* a movement, and I hope deeply that it lasts long enough for changes to take root that will move us forward as a just and fair society.”

A woman with short, wavy brown hair and glasses is shown in profile, smiling. She is wearing a pink cardigan over a dark top and a gold hoop earring. She is holding a yellow pencil in her right hand, which is raised towards her chin. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Dead  
Bunnies  
*and*

The Close-Reading Mafia

# After forty years at Commonwealth, Mary Kate Bluestein is retiring. She, and some of her many students, look back on what she learned, and what she taught.

BY MARA DALE

Photographs by Kathleen Doohar

Asked for a favorite Commonwealth memory, Kate doesn't hesitate:

“During a Hancock marathon reading, we were all dozing on the floor in sleeping bags, rousing each other for each 15-minute slot. At one point I woke up; a sophomore girl was reading. When a complicated sentence came out wrongly inflected, she stopped and read it again. As far as she knew, no one was listening; she just cared about having the sentence sound right. That was dynamite to me. I love when kids cherish literature, and pay that respect.”

Kate uses words like “cherish” and “respect” because for her, attentive reading holds the key to discovery; she revels in what “adventurous, sensitive readers” many of her students become. “I love it when a student makes *me* notice something new in a poem or passage.” Another, recurrent, favorite moment: “When a strong English 11 class writes on the last passages of *The Great Gatsby* during the final exam. As they settle in, the air becomes electric with excitement! The kids hand in their bluebooks looking exhilarated—both exhausted and ecstatic at all they’ve discovered. It’s as though you are present at the moment they fully realize what’s possible.”

## “Blissfully Rich in Reading”

Born and raised in New York City, Kate attended City and Country School in Greenwich Village (“a hippy place, with plenty of red-diaper babies”). She spent hours in the cozy library, enjoying “complete freedom to read whatever I wanted.” Next up, the very academic Brearley School, rather a culture shock: “A Park Avenue crowd, and I was Downtown.” But Kate soon found her footing—not surprisingly, in the school’s “marvelous” English classes.

Kate’s summary of those years? “A childhood blissfully rich in reading!” She remembers, too, exploring 1950s New York: “Kids roamed the city on their own without parental worry.” Summers brought time on Fire Island: “wooden boardwalks, no cars, no TV, a scratchy party line for a phone. The grown-ups generally ignored us. We kids had lots of freedom to imagine and create. We swam, sailed, played tennis—and of course, *read*.”

At Mount Holyoke College, Kate minored in art history and majored in Ancient Greek rather than English—disappointed by that department, “in retrospect, because they didn’t teach close reading!” But Kate remembers college Greek classes as “close reading at its best”: Homer, Greek tragedy, Thucydides, Herodotus, Plato. Immersed in Greek, Kate often found herself actually *reading* in the moment rather than *translating*—a “thrilling” realization, “possibly the most intellectually exciting experience I’ve ever had.” After toying with the idea of pursuing archaeology, Kate ended up at Boston College, earning her Ph.D. in English, “my first love.”

At B.C., Kate encountered “a great introduction to teaching close reading” in team-teaching a sophomore literature course with Anne Ferry (mother of Stephen ’78 and Elizabeth ’85; wife of poet David Ferry). Ferry became a thesis advisor and her mentor. Kate focused on seventeenth-century poetry, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century British fiction and poetry; she wrote her thesis (“now deservedly sitting dusty on a shelf”) on Wordsworth and Eliot. It was only a matter of time before Kate joined “the close-reading Mafia”: in 1975 she began her tenure at Commonwealth—recommended by Anne Ferry, who knew of the school through Polly and Charlie Chatfield.



Early on, Kate team-taught with Charlie. Their classes were small—sometimes seven students to two teachers. “It was like another graduate education,” she recalls. “Charlie and I compared notes and talked about our classes all the time—I still remember his phone number.” Teaching alongside him was “heaven. He was such a scrupulously respectful, tactful person, and such a brilliant reader. I greatly admired his control and his playfulness in the classroom, and I learned so much.” Polly Chatfield recalls often seeing Kate and Charlie standing in the doorway of his office, discussing a text so intently that they were “oblivious to the corridor racket and the press of kids all around them.”

Kate took immediately to this school that Charles Merrill built, appreciating both its denizens and its setting: “I loved looking out my office window at the architectural details of the Back Bay houses; when the snow drove against the street lamps on Marlborough Street it looked like Dickens’s London.” Of Mr. Merrill himself, she remembers: “He was often elliptical, but always unvarnished, provocative. His vision for a school was so radically different, in its intellectual seriousness, respect for students, and sense of the value of art. He was rare in his candor about his own struggles and doubts. He worked very, very hard, and he never compromised.”

Kate has taught every Commonwealth English class and numerous electives, but her baby, her favorite, is the Modernism elective. “Teaching it was a joy—my students’ insights and collegiality always surprised me.” The Modernism bug bit Kate early: “I started reading Virginia Woolf in sixth grade (my mother gave me *The Waves* one day when I was home sick). I grabbed *Dubliners* from my parents’ bookshelves when I was around 12. I would speed through a story, then come to a screeching halt at the end, wondering, ‘Did I miss something?’ But I kept reading because I was fascinated by *how* the stories were written. In high school, I thought William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Eliot, Woolf, and Becket were as cool as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez (my highest accolade back then). My boyfriend introduced me to e. e. cummings. A friend gave me Stevens’s *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Then I fell in love with *Ulysses* in a summer course at Columbia. The astringent, ironic, somewhat impersonal take, which gives rise to, or makes way for, moments of transport or vision or love, grabs me.”

Having run through that litany, Kate adds, “But my favorite novel of all time is actually *Middlemarch*, so go figure. I always wanted to teach it at Commonwealth, but it’s just too darn long. It’s also not really a young person’s book at all, so it’s probably best I never tried....”

## Many Hats

All Commonwealth teachers wear many hats, but Kate more than most: Admissions, Summer Planning, and Projects. She sat on the Board of Trustees and its Executive Committee, and twice served as Interim Head (during Chatfield and Wharton sabbaticals). For nearly twenty years, Kate was Director of Student Life, dedicated to supporting students’ emotional health. Created by then-Head Judith Keenan, the position addressed the absence of organized, on-going support for students who were undergoing emotional strain or for those who required learning accommodations. Under Kate’s leadership, the school built up a robust program, and the position has expanded to full-time. Kate applauds “the degree to which the faculty, working together, have shaped and continue to shape the school.”

## “Like Family”

Kate has known some Commonwealth colleagues—Eric Davis, Judith Siporin, Larry Geffin ’69, Jean Segaloff, Rusty Crump, Bob Vollrath, Rebecca Folkman, Brent Whelan, and Bill Wharton—for decades. “At this point,” she says, “they feel like family. I’ve worked with them for two thirds of my lifetime! Fortunately, they are originals, every last one of them, and funny, generous, and smart. I love the integral role studio arts teachers play—they have taught me so much, in part because they come from a visual perspective, not a verbal one. They get us thinking freshly. And I am forever indebted to Larry for his observation that we want our kids to realize that ‘the world is not a self-cleaning oven.’”

With long tenure can come the running joke: “Years ago, when Bob [Vollrath] supervised the jobs program, I was in charge of the library—and occasionally received unsolicited books. One such, titled *Dreary Lane*, was a maudlin tale about a handicapped child. I tossed it in the trash. But each day, the kid who emptied the baskets carefully placed it back on my desk. Finally, I stuck it in Bob’s mailbox with a note asking him to dispose of it. Since then, Bob and I have snuck it into each other’s lives.” First, Bob arranged for Kate’s daughter, Jen Bluestein ’90, to slip it into Kate’s bedside reading; one year Kate had the seniors present it to Bob during senior skits; during a sabbatical, Bob sent it to Kate from France.

Brent Whelan recounts a story he calls “How Kate Bluestein Became My Hero Forever”:

“It was one of those low-ebb seasons when all the students seemed to want to do was lie around on couches or in dark corners, limbs entangled, smooching. Faculty meetings dissolved in despair—how to tackle the situation? Then one day at announcements, Kate stood up and, without introduction, began reading a passage from *Wuthering Heights*. The narrator enters a dimly lit peasant cottage and observes a pile of what he thinks are cats in a dark corner. But as his eyes adjust, the narrator realizes he is actually seeing a pile of dead rabbits. Kate stopped reading, looked up at no one in particular, and remarked: ‘Many of you seem to think that the rest of us think of you as cute little kittens when you lie around in couples on the floor, but actually we think you look like dead bunnies.’ Ba-dah-boom! The kids of course fired back by creating the Dead Bunnies Award, which only proves how effective Kate’s intervention was.”

Eric Davis and Judith Siporin admire Kate from a parents’ perspective, as they watched Eric’s son John Davis ’89 and his daughter, Theo Davis ’90, “come into their own as writers and literary thinkers” in Kate’s classes. They appreciate her way with language—“crisp, incisive, sometimes startlingly honest, it cuts through all the bogus sentimentality, jargon, and platitudes that fill the air with static”—and her mastery of “the warm, witty, and gracious gesture, perfectly timed and well-tuned to the recipient.” An example: “Everyone in the lunchroom was reading the student-published satirical magazine, *The Leek*, hot off the press. Delighted, Kate dashed off to the market. Ceremonially she presented a large leek to the editor, who accepted it as if it were the *Palme D’Or*.”

In recent years, Kate has enjoyed getting to know the children of former students—Maria Rodrigues ’78’s son Justin Centeio ’11, Katy Lacy ’79’s kids Ben Hirsch ’07 and Josie Hirsch ’14, Kate Gilbert ’78’s daughter Alexandra Domeshek ’17, and David Gleason ’79’s son Pher ’15, among others. It’s amusing, Kate says, “to discern traits in the children that recall their parents, but also to work with former students in their roles as parents. It feels like a great act of trust and confidence for them to send their kids here.”



Kate's well-worn copy of *Beginning with Poems* dates to her days as a graduate student, when she studied with co-editor Anne Ferry. "It has a sort of archaeological flavor to it," Kate says.

## Mrs. B.

As teacher and advisor, Kate plays the role of "partner/backstop/sounding board." For advisee Rosie Cerulli '16, "Mrs. Bluestein epitomizes the careful balance of brilliance and sensitivity that makes this place so special." Advisee Bella Pucker '17, worried about upcoming tests, emailed Kate one night. "Mrs. Bluestein wrote back a lengthy email full of helpful advice; she included her phone number in case I wanted to chat, and she checked back with me throughout the week."

Kate's graduation present to Jonathan Sapers '79, a copy of Robert Lowell's poetry, bore the inscription "For Jon, from Mary Kate Bluestein. A poet in your mold!" Jon felt "thrilled with the idea that this poet and I shared a mold! As a consequence, I could consider myself a writer!" Today Jon *is* a writer, "thinking constantly" of lessons learned from Kate. "Analyzing literature, writing about it, turns out to be an artfully disguised roadmap for fiction writing."

Theo Davis, now a tenured professor of English at Northeastern University, remembers that Kate "took it for granted that we would take seriously what was being discussed; her faith helped us rise to a higher level." Theo picked her way carefully through Kate's copious comments on papers, "working hard to respond in kind. I learned critical writing skills that are with me to this day."

Cara Bayles '03, writer, journalist, and John Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University, adored Kate as advisor and teacher. She took Modernism with Kate "not because I was particularly interested in early twentieth-century literature, but because I was interested in what Mrs. B. had to say about it. I know my classmates feel nostalgia for that light-filled room where we enthusiastically discussed how the language in *Portrait of The Artist as a Young*

*Man* matured with the character, how Joyce's failing eyesight might have affected his sensory descriptions, and the role of mythological references. We felt disappointment every time the bell rang. As seniors, we speculated that this was what college would be like. But we've discussed it since and agreed that college never quite lived up to class with Mrs. B."

Final words go to Kate's daughter, Jen.

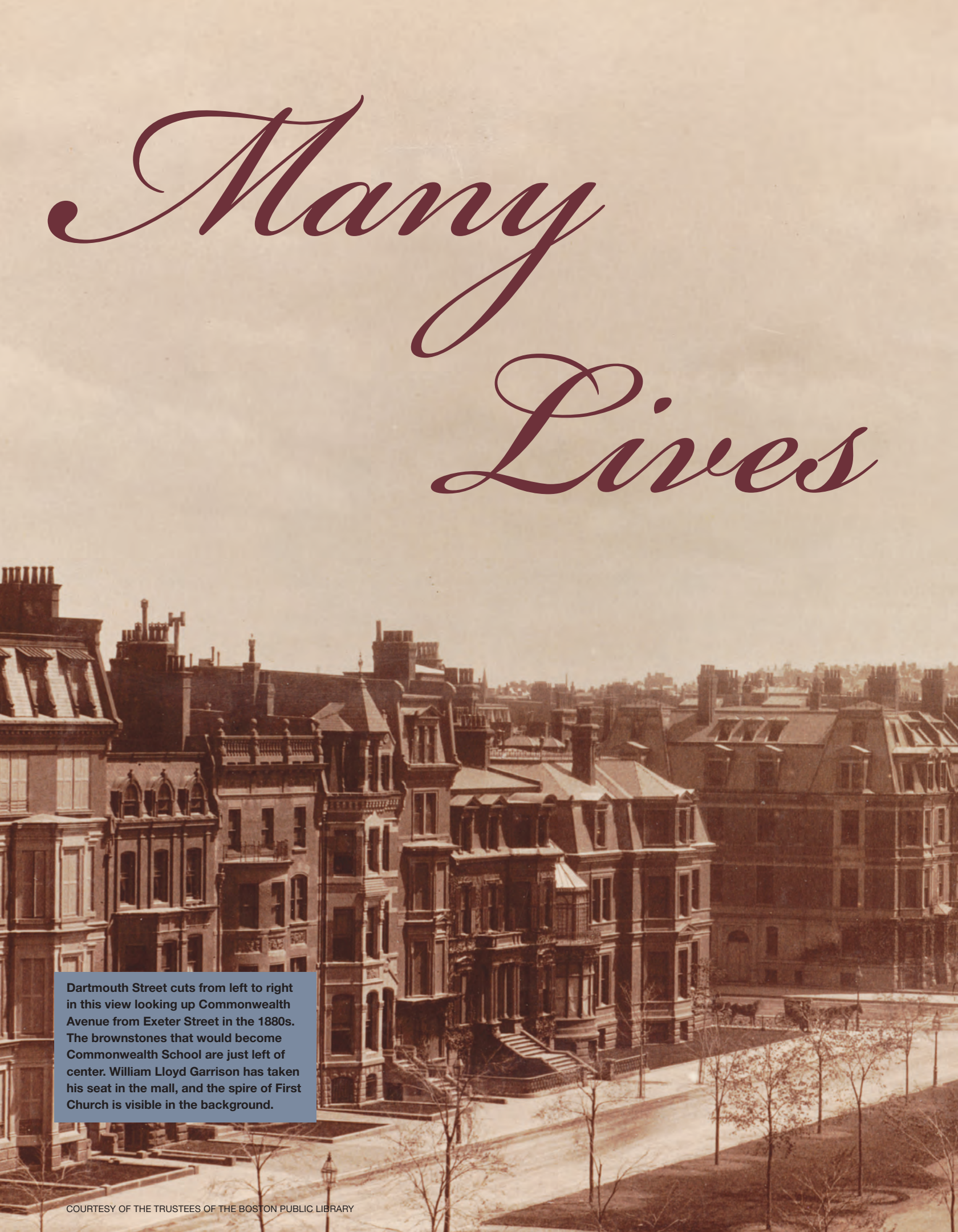
"I always knew how special my mom was to students for whom literature was their chosen priority. But I've learned—from the many times someone shared a cherished memory of her—how steadfast she's been to students who struggled in class, or needed help navigating the shoals of adolescence. She never gives up on *anyone*, and deeply respects grit.

"Virtually every school night that I remember, my mom spent at least an hour, often many more, poring over essays, preparing class, or talking on the phone with students or their families. Almost every night for forty years! It is a total act of love on her part; she demonstrates the best qualities Commonwealth claims for itself: a belief in hard work, and generosity of time and spirit.

"Just today she said to me, 'We lost power on Tuesday.' And I said, 'Jeez, how quickly did you send the kids home?' She answered: 'Oh, we didn't. It wasn't *that* cold. You could still READ!'"

*Kate's husband, Dick Bluestein, suffered a stroke in 2013. Kate looks forward to having more flexibility and time to spend with him during his continuing recovery, both to support him and to do the things they so enjoy together—especially spending more time on their beloved Martha's Vineyard.*

# Many Lives



Dartmouth Street cuts from left to right in this view looking up Commonwealth Avenue from Exeter Street in the 1880s. The brownstones that would become Commonwealth School are just left of center. William Lloyd Garrison has taken his seat in the mall, and the spire of First Church is visible in the background.



## The biography of a

# Schoolhouse

By Brent Whelan

If you had stopped in at 151 Commonwealth Avenue, say, 125 years ago, a maid would have ushered you into the entrance hall, and perhaps offered you a seat in the reception room we call the front office. There Mrs. Robert Gould Shaw—wife of the architect, not his cousin the Civil War hero—might have greeted you and invited you to dine, if you had come to dine, in a dining room whose décor we can only guess at, submerged in time beneath the white boards and periodic table charts of the chemistry lab. Or she might have invited you up the ornate staircase to the front parlor we call ‘the library,’ with its sunny bay windows looking out on the Commonwealth Mall. There a second maid would serve you tea while you traded social anecdotes with Mrs. Shaw. Unless, of course, you were a gentleman friend of Mr. Shaw. Retired from his brief practice of architecture

(this very house was one of its high points), now devoting himself to his collection of theatrical memorabilia, Mr. Shaw would most likely have received you in the deep-paneled study where Mr. Wharton now keeps his desk.

If you weren't family, that's as far as you would ever penetrate this Brahmin enclave: above you were two floors of bedrooms, spacious and well-appointed, and above them, a warren of maids' rooms and work rooms under the eaves. Nor would you ever see the basement kitchen where your meal was prepared, the laundry rooms where table and bed linens were kept clean and pressed, or the coal furnace that kept the house cozy in winter. But the rooms you did visit, the parlors and reception rooms, the dining room, were splendidly arranged and furnished with the taste of cultivated aristocrats living off the spoils of their forbears' industry and trade.





PHILIP GLEASON '15

If you had come calling a few years earlier, you would have needed a boat: as late as 1860 the Back Bay was still a bay, and the new district existed only on paper. The heroic business of damming and filling it, with automated trains full of gravel shuttling nonstop from Needham, block by block, for forty years, has been much admired. Starting at Arlington Street it took about five years to fill, clear and build each block west between Beacon and Boylston Streets; the builders had reached Dartmouth Street by 1878.

But back to our visit. If you had gone around the corner and rung at number 303 Dartmouth Street, a similar experience would have awaited you—that is, if Mrs. Arthur Hunnewell was at home. More often than not, she wasn't. Unlike her sister-in-law, Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Hunnewell seemed to prefer her country residence in Wellesley, part of her father-in-law's 500-acre estate, or if it was summer or fall, her shore house on Buzzards Bay. Your best chance to find her at home in the Back Bay was during 'the season,' in late fall or winter. Then she would be disposed to receive you in today's room 1A before taking you up the grand staircase to dine in 2C, or sit in the front parlor, now cluttered with library tables and computer terminals—newfangled things! Her husband Arthur was more likely to be in residence, as he worked at his father's bank downtown, and he

might have received you in his study (2A and 2B conjoined) if he wasn't at one of his many clubs.

They made a neat fit, the Shaws and the Hunnewells, two Brahmin households with eight children between them, each with a mansion in Wellesley and a townhouse on Commonwealth Avenue. Mrs. Shaw was a Hunnewell, Arthur's sister, and their father had given each of them a house lot in the new Back Bay. Old Mr. Hunnewell was a railroad baron and banker, one of the richest men in a business culture that was full of them. His wife was a Welles—they founded the town of Wellesley. Arthur Hunnewell and Robert Shaw had been a year apart at Harvard. Robert's brother George went on to practice architecture with Arthur's brother Henry after Robert retired, so the firm of Shaw and Shaw turned into Shaw and Hunnewell.

The twin house lots were peculiar in shape, as happened at the ends of blocks. Each block of the Back Bay was laid out in regular 25-foot parcels, as was 151 Commonwealth, but 303 Dartmouth is a different shape: broad but thin, its corridors stretching from side to side, not front to back. The footprints of each house are not rectangles but dovetail into one another at odd angles, as any Commonwealther knows who has tried to track the firewall that divides one building from the other. Somehow that interpolated floor plan seems to match the closely interwoven families who lived there—and makes it seem more normal that the two houses were integrated into one.

That consolidation happened in stages. First the Shaws moved out, relocating to more fashionable quarters in Brookline as the Back Bay began a slow decline. The house at 151 was sold in 1924 to an up-and-coming institution, the Katharine Gibbs School of Secretarial and Executive Training for Educated Women, which used it as a residence for its students. Founded in 1917, the Gibbs School marked a moment in the advancement of women's careers, preparing women for managerial positions in a workplace that began to open to them during the Great War. The Gibbs became a residential school with chaperoned living and dining space. When Mrs. Hunnewell died in 1930—Arthur had died prematurely in 1904—the Gibbs School bought the house at 303 Dartmouth and opened up doorways through the firewalls to make a single institutional space. The two halves of our current library were joined into a large room for typing instruction, the front office and headmaster's office became dining rooms, and there was even a smoking lounge in what is now the biology lab.

The success of the Gibbs School led it to sell its quarters on Commonwealth Avenue and move to Newbury Street in 1954. The now-merged houses sat unoccupied for four years, while wealthy Bostonians moved out to the suburbs and the Back Bay lost its social luster. Into the breach stepped a young educator named Charles Merrill, armed with a sizable inheritance and determined to locate his new school not in a bucolic setting like the Deerfield of his youth, but in the heart of a city. The \$80,000 he paid for both buildings, even translated into today's dollars, might make the current trustees drool.

## Moving In

The buildings where Mr. Merrill intended to locate his school were a hybrid structure: though still retaining the elegant woodwork, the graceful staircases and paneled studies that showed their Brahmin heritage, they had already largely made the transformation to institutional use. As the school welcomed its first students in September of 1958, the basement had been outfitted with a simple kitchen where an ambitious Harvard faculty wife prepared famously gourmet lunches. The lunchroom itself, long known with affection as the gymnocafetorium, was still under construction on the site of a forgotten outbuilding. Mr. Merrill describes a half-finished room with tables where students, teachers, and workmen sat down to eat together that first year. The Neighborhood Association of the Back Bay—which later mandated breast reduction for the Warsaw Mermaid bas-relief on the Dartmouth Street side, and might very well have vetoed the new structure altogether—had been founded only a few years earlier, and lacked the clout to challenge the new addition.

The structural wall that divided the two halves of the library had already been reengineered by the Gibbs School to make a large instructional space, but Commonwealth's first teacher, Tim Barclay, remembers that during the first semester the room was still being renovated to hold the large collection of books Mr. Merrill had bought for his new school. Passageways between the two buildings were simply framed openings, as Barclay remembers, without doors, much less the fire doors that were required later. "You felt you were going from one house to the other," he recalls.

That homey feeling diminished somewhat twenty years later, as Commonwealth endured a first renovation. Carpets and more institutional lighting made the space feel less like an adapted town-house and more like a school, though visitors today will still feel the legacy of its domestic past.

Meanwhile students and faculty adjusted themselves as best they could to the unusual setting. Labs were installed from the beginning in the first-floor rooms where they are today, with rudimentary equipment for conducting experiments, though as science teacher Barclay recalls, the curriculum was weighted toward math and humanities, not science. Teachers shared cramped offices, while students sought refuge in the "nooks and crannies of the fourth and fifth floors," as Dane Morgan, another early faculty member, recalls. "No privacy but lots of intimacy."

Stairwells and corridors, then as now, became informal lounge and study spaces, though at some point in the 1960s official student lounges were established, one for seniors and one for juniors, in what are now third- and fourth-floor classrooms. As Larry Geffin '69 recalls from his student days, these were democratic spaces, equally available to all members of the relevant grade, with none of the social hierarchy that marked later student lounges. Smoking was permitted in the lounges until 1968.

Eventually the unused 'nooks and crannies' on the upper floors became more regularized as 'studies,' improvised spaces outfitted by a small group of older students and passed down year by year to a next crop. Likewise faculty offices were carved out of closets and pantries, most often shared, and eventually furnished to reflect the personalities of their long-term tenants.

## Caretakers

Who would care for this cherished but somewhat fragile structure? When Mr. Merrill's first custodian didn't work out, he was replaced on the fly by a burly Nova Scotia fisherman named John MacIsaac, who would hold the job for nearly thirty years. John was not a custodian by trade, or a carpenter, or a housepainter, but he had a good eye. One of the hidden marvels of the old building can be found near the top of the gorgeously ornamental staircase on the Dartmouth side. When one of the delicate wooden balusters broke, John was asked to replace it—no further instructions. A practical man, he noticed that the delicate curvature looked familiar: a pool cue! So he neatly cut and inserted a section of pool cue and it remains today, identical in shape to the others but still bearing the faint diamond inlay that identifies its former use. Ask Larry Geffin to help you spot it.

Later a theater stagehand jack-of-all-trades named Mike Palmer would assist John, then replace him in the basement office that juts under the Dartmouth Street sidewalk. Without fanfare that space served more than a few students—mostly boys—as a refuge from the intellectual rigors upstairs. Helping Mike was a way to prove your worth even if your math or Spanish teacher wasn't convinced.

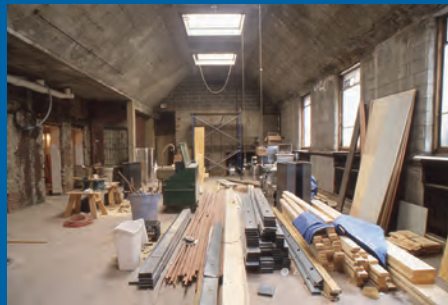
One of the school's earliest cultural distinctions, though, was that all the students became part of the maintenance and kitchen staff. Teams of students would sweep, mop, and dust, while others took on jobs serving lunch and cleaning up. Crews of students even did the end-of-day security checks before the motion-detector system was installed. According to Morgan it was Seymour Alden, history teacher and erudite Medievalist, who designed a job system modeled on the ideal of the castle keep.

When a fire broke out in the art studio, activating the sprinkler system, the water caused more damage than the fire itself. Students stayed on through the night, helping to dry out the building so school could go ahead the next day. Clean-ups, when students and faculty picked up dust cloths, buckets, and brooms and fanned out through the building, sprucing things up, took place through the 1980s.

## A Home for Art

Charles Merrill outfitted his new school with a well-stocked reading library, but he makes no mention of works of art. Before long, though, printmaking teacher 'Waddie' Wadsworth was hanging his distinctive collographs around the school, abstractions from the Maine landscapes he was attracted to. Student work started to appear too, under the tutelage of painting and drawing teacher Herb Parsons, and later his student Larry Geffin. Now of course the student art that fills the Commonwealth lobby and stairwell is an essential part of the school's identity. The spring art show of student works became a custom early on.

Commonwealth also gradually acquired its own permanent art collection. At the suggestion of printmaker Rusty Crump students and art teachers began to visit an annual exhibition of prints, with a budget from Charles Merrill to select artworks for the school. That revolving collection of framed art, along with watercolors by ceramics teacher Jean Segaloff and calligraphy by Larry Geffin, has helped shape the building's character.



Whether in its original state (left) or following a mid-90s renovation (center), the “gymnocafetorium” has always served many functions.

But in the cramped quarters of a double townhouse, how would space be found for art studios? The unfinished maids’ rooms on the fifth floor were a first thought. Several little rooms on the Dartmouth side were fitted out for pottery wheels, while a larger space on the Commonwealth side became the dance studio, despite its rather slippery linoleum floors and eclectic murals painted by students. When Jackie Curry arrived to teach dance in the mid-70s her classical training was incompatible with this casual arrangement, and she quickly persuaded Charles Merrill to put down a specialized Marley floor and install mirrors and a double *barre* to make as elegant a dance studio as any high school could hope for. John MacIsaac painted over the murals, but as Jackie tells it, the mural figures kept rising up through the white paint like ghosts.

Printmaking was also relegated to a corner of the fourth floor, and photography? There was no formal program until a student, Tom Kates ’87, began teaching a class under the supervision of printmaker Rusty Crump. The darkroom was fitted into an underused bathroom, and a single digital terminal came along in the early ’90s. Rusty was motivated to learn more about photography, and is now a distinguished exhibiting photographer, whose manipulated prints merge the disciplines of printmaking and photography.

Art teacher Herb Parsons had reservations about banishing the arts to the further reaches of the building, and early in the school’s history, at his insistence, the drawing and painting studio was located in a central first floor space, room 1A, where it would feel more integral to the school. This arrangement worked well while Parsons taught there, but when Rusty Crump replaced Waddie Wadsworth in the printmaking studio, he also took on the drawing and painting. After some months of hiking up and down the stairs to get from one class to the other, Rusty pleaded with Mr. Merrill to move the two studios closer together—as they still are.

From the early improvised years, when disused space was found for the arts, the art studios have evolved into highly professional spaces. The watershed year was 1996, when Head Judith Keenan launched the building’s first major renovation. Arts faculty worked closely with architects. Ceramics opened up from a series of cramped maids’ rooms to a bright, open space with room for more wheels. Rusty was able to design a larger and more efficient printmaking space, as well as a proper darkroom for the well-established photography program, and also expand from one to four (and now seven) digital terminals. And a few years later Larry Geffin’s drawing and painting studio expanded from two smallish rooms to one large, sunny space. The arts, rather than feeling sequestered on the upper floors, have made them their domain.

One casualty of the renovation was the dance studio. Jackie Curry’s program was becoming so popular that it was hard to fit all

the students into the elegantly appointed studio she had designed twenty years earlier, and there was no practical way to enlarge the space. With some reluctance the dance program moved off-campus, eventually finding space in the Boston Center for the Arts a few blocks away in the South End. That decision was a first indicator that the double townhouses might not be adequate to the needs of a healthy, growing school. Various administrative offices have since followed the dance studio off-campus to adjacent locations in the neighborhood.

## Wiring up the Walled Garden

**I**n the mid-1960s Commonwealth acquired what few schools then had: a BASIC computer terminal, set up in the bio lab and connected by telephone to a mainframe computer in Hanover, New Hampshire. Courtesy of a parent with connections to Dartmouth, where BASIC was developed, the system allowed for programming instruction years before other schools embarked on it. As Tim Barclay recalls, students would send in their work via the phone line to the time-share system at Dartmouth and find out the next day if their program ran successfully.

It would be many years before the school invested more largely in computer-based education but by the early 1990s the polished floors and elegant woodwork of room 2B—Mr. Hunnewell’s former study—housed a computer room full of desk-top terminals networked to a server located in a closet on the third floor. The computer room became home to a whole sequence of programming courses, as well as a place where students wrote increasingly word-processed or computer-researched assignments. More than that, it became the locus of a cult: mostly but not all boys, a tribe of computer nerds found a home there, gathered around a succession of bright young computer science teachers recruited for the most part from MIT.

In the summer of 1996, as the school was wired for cable to run its new Novell computer network, it installed a Telrad system of phone lines centrally connected to the front office, with intercom capabilities, a uniform messaging system, and other applications that left senior faculty bemusedly poring through user manuals. Bit by bit (so to speak) Commonwealth was preparing itself for the information age, and though much of the new infrastructure was hidden in walls and between joists, the decorous Back Bay home began to hum.

Other changes came along as needed. Computer terminals found their way into the library as more research happened online and computer room capacity was exceeded. A sequence of newly trained librarians took on the task of teaching students how to use the new resources responsibly, including the broad access that opened up to

the Boston Public Library's electronic resources and other scholarly archives. A FileMaker database replaced the one that math and physics teacher Bruce Molay '71 had handcrafted years earlier, followed shortly by a FirstClass email system (now supplanted by Google). Uniform Dell computers appeared on teachers' desks in the early 2000s and stayed there for perhaps five years until the school switched over to Apple, and laptops gradually replaced the clunky desktops. Server capacity in the third-floor closet expanded steadily, and by 2005 so much sensitive school business was online that a firewall was added to the system to separate the network from Internet service.

While much of this electronic revolution remained invisible as increasing volumes of information flowed through cables and then over airwaves, the character of the genteel old double townhouse was certainly changing in some intangible way through the proliferation of technology, just as the daily work of students and faculty changed somewhat in character as it moved online. One visible sign of the new technology was the set of access points, nine small fixtures hanging from the walls that enabled the school's wi-fi Internet access, starting in 2005. Another visible presence were the smart boards that appeared a year later in several classrooms. Looking a bit like whiteboards but effectively serving as large computer screens, these were intended to usher in the era of the electronic classroom as teachers could bring the Internet directly to their classes. Few chose to, however, and the smart boards found themselves on history's ash heap a few futile years later. A similar effort to introduce iPads into the Commonwealth teaching repertoire—they are apparently indispensable at many other schools—has so far met with limited success; teachers, and especially students, don't want to give up jotting in the margins of a book. Technological transformation has hardly run its course, though: Eno boards, updated versions of the smart board with easy laptop compatibility and built-in projection, will soon take their places in all of Commonwealth's classrooms alongside the vintage mantels and crown moldings of an earlier age.

## Home Renovations

Though the most basic adaptation from home to school had arguably already happened by the time Charles Merrill set foot in the buildings, keeping the facilities in tune with evolving needs has been a constant theme. The initial modifications in the year leading up to opening day in 1958 involved mainly the library and the basement dining area, apart from all the furnishing of classrooms in what had been mostly dormitory rooms.

Whatever small adjustments were made—and there must have been many—the school still “felt like a grand old home and a school at the same time” to Will Brownsberger '74 when he arrived around 1970, and the disused spaces in the upper reaches still had an air of “mystery,” as old houses do. The building waited twenty years to get its first substantial overhaul in 1980 in the form of carpeting, lighting, painting and general refurbishing. And over one long weekend in the early 1980s French teacher Rebecca Folkman and a team of students took down all the library books, which had been shelved

in no particular order, dusted the shelves, removed an accumulation of “underwear, desiccated sandwiches, crumpled paper, and unmentionables,” and replaced the books in a more orderly arrangement. Further library renovation and a computerized catalog would follow twenty years later.

By the 1990s the building seemed antiquated in certain essential respects, and when Judith Keenan arrived as Head in 1990 she soon began to plan the school's first capital campaign to finance major renovations. That work began in the basement with asbestos capping and removal in the spring of 1996, and continued full bore through the next two summers, working from the ground up. Architects pondered the complex acoustical challenge of a room that was used for



South-facing windows enhance the Parisian-artist's-garret ambiance of the fourth-floor drawing and painting studio.

dining, assemblies, fencing, occasional dramatic productions, and any other large gatherings. You wanted the voices of speakers and performers to carry, but not the high-spirited din of kids eating lunch. An ingenious system of live and dead spots was engineered by means of an acoustical ceiling, with paneling to add dignity to what had been a rough-and-ready basement space.

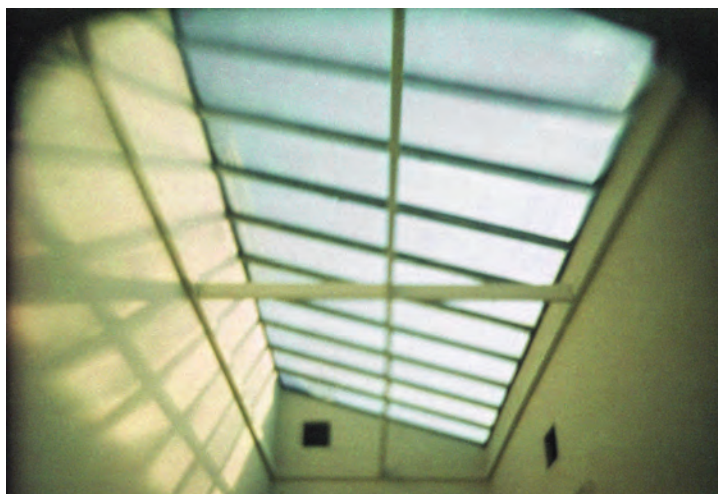
More than just the gymnocafetorium, the whole basement was reconfigured, with an annex (replacing the boys' locker room) to hold more dining tables for an expanding school, a straight wide corridor to please the fire marshal, and a new cafeteria-style food service plant in place of the old family-style service, which inspectional services had prohibited. Never fancy, the new dining system took on a more professional, less improvised and homey feeling, to the regret of many, though the regulations left little choice.

Meanwhile the wire and cable for phone and computer networks were being installed, as well as the plumbing and electricity needed for the revamped chemistry and biology labs that were built out the next summer. It was in the course of that subsequent work that a workman mistakenly took down a wall in the bio room, only to discover a perfectly preserved heating stove, hidden behind the wall for perhaps seventy years since it had last warmed the Hunnewells in their back parlor.

Smaller-scale renovations kept happening, summer after summer, as new needs and opportunities made their way onto the punch list. When the printmaking studio relocated to the fifth floor a large

classroom was furnished out in its place, part of the effort to accommodate a growing student body. Later the room was reduced in size to make a place for a photocopy room, which had migrated through inadequate spaces on the third and fourth floors. The development office, which hadn't existed at all for the first three decades, found a home on the fifth floor, but then moved to rented office space in the Ames mansion across Dartmouth Street (and now joins other Commonwealth offices on Berkeley Street) so that teachers' offices could fill the space. A similar fate met the business manager's office, once a fixture on the third floor, now 'offshored' to Berkeley Street to allow for another classroom. The biology lab underwent further renovations, including a dishwasher, when new protocols for lab experiments required them. And on it goes, a shifting pattern of needs and solutions as a very finite space is made to serve the incessant demands of an evolving school. A few years ago, as study tutors increased in number and were seen shuffling from room to room with their charges like the itinerant scholars of another age, a tutorial study was carved into a just-adequate niche at the top of the fourth floor, Commonwealth side.

JULIA CURLE '16



## Where Will They Make Themselves at Home?

From the first months, like an experiment in adaptive biology, the students of Commonwealth were turned loose in their double building in search of suitable habitats. Classes are one thing: you get your schedule, you show up at the assigned rooms and times, no further questions. But in an institution designed to serve the needs of teenagers, the bigger question has always been, where can I go to hang out with my friends? In a building as chock-full as Commonwealth's, the answer has never been obvious. But students are ingenious, and so a variety of solutions emerged.

Peter Shulman '62, from Commonwealth's second graduating class, recalls that "at the very beginning there was a lot of congregating in the lobbies of both buildings. Then over the year it moved to outside the library." That constant schmooze on the floor between the library and his office occasionally irritated Mr. Merrill, as it has every Head since, when it got too loud. On the other hand, what better way to keep a finger on the pulse of the school? During the first year, Shulman remembers, some students set up 'clubhouses' on the fourth floor, while he did his studying on the Commonwealth stairs leading to the third floor. Those 'clubhouses' became known as 'studies' and continued to be staked out by students under informal

but transferable title arrangements for the next two decades until more official uses were found for the upper floors.

One of these studies became known as the 'Soul Shack,' a closet-sized space shared by three young women of color. They painted it deep purple with colorful stripes, and eventually admitted other African-American girls from classes behind them. A few white friends became honorary members, and boys were allowed in "on sufferance," as long-term teacher and trustee Polly Chatfield recalls. Eventually the Soul Shack reverted to other uses—today it serves as a cleanup pantry for the Drawing and Painting studio—but for a time it was an essential link in the much larger story of Commonwealth's minority students.

Meanwhile, like Shulman, each new student found a bit of staircase, a landing, the corner of a corridor to call his or her own. As a teacher I recall how you simply *knew* that if so-and-so wasn't in class she could be found sitting in the corridor outside teacher X's office, or gabbing with students Y and Z on a certain stair landing. You could call it a system, and a good one, because it was predictable.

Periodic reconfigurations did redistribute these informal gathering places. When closets were removed to make cubbies on the third and fourth floors, the spaces in front of the cubbies were quickly populated. In the late 1990s a faculty committee reconsidered the Dartmouth lobby, recommended better lighting and sitting arrangements, and created a deluxe hang-out at the foot of the stairwell, as well as more informal but also more discrete nooks in the little niches beside the entry stairs. When the front of the Commonwealth lobby was reserved for visitors, the back of that lobby, by way of compensation, got a spacious couch—too spacious, it turned out, too conducive to sportive behaviors of various sorts. One summer it was unceremoniously removed.

Still the lobbies continued to draw their regular clientele, each new year producing a new mix of lobby-dwellers. Interestingly, the two spaces seemed to attract different types of students until the terms 'Commonwealth lobby' and 'Dartmouth lobby' came to serve as short-hand adjectives—metonyms, really—whose exact denomination was always shifting. Were the 'Commonwealth lobby' kids the math nerds and philosophers while the 'Dartmouth lobby' crowd was more into alternative rock and active flirtation? Or were they the delinquents, and the Commonwealth lobby types the goody-goodies? Somehow the mellower lighting and proximity to a side exit onto Dartmouth Street in the one case, the spot lighting and nearby offices, Head's and front, on the other, created different vectors for each space. In any case the dialectic between the lobbies became one of the more complex cultural features of the school, and remains so.

The official junior and senior student lounges of the 1960s were one approach to regularizing student spaces in the building, but the need for additional classrooms seems to have doomed them. Student requests for a lounge were constant, though, and after the 1996 renovation an unwanted basement room at the front on the Dartmouth side became the kind of student lounge any teen-ager might dream about: far from adult incursions and relatively private, adaptable to discarded but comfortable furniture and cushions, a place where posters and random artwork seemed to belong on the unfinished walls. It was the one place where music could be played—not too loud—without official censure.

Successive cohorts of students made this haunt their school base for about ten years. Initiatives to paint it, to 'fix it up,' to clean up the inevitable pigsty it turned into, became episodes in the ongoing saga of school life. Periodically Mike Palmer or Judith Keenan



MEGAN BERRY '15

would close it down when it got too sloppy, and committees vowed to design a system to make it work.

What never worked, though, was its apartness. The lounge encouraged a certain distancing of its denizens from the rest of the school community—for some that was the whole point—and a certain exclusivity came to be a problem. Finally faculty patience wore thin, the room was refinished into a classroom/conference room, and the student lounge moved to less private quarters above ground. It was installed in a succession of rooms—4A, 1A, 3D—but no location seemed to address the twin problems of orderliness and exclusivity. These days the student lounge is a fading memory—or perhaps an idea, whose embodiment continues to be the collection of nooks and niches where students gather in their free time.

## Housing the Future

One thinks of a house, a structure, as the archetype of stability, but really it is more of a matrix through which a variety of things flow: dwellers, experiences, adaptations. The twin houses at 151 Commonwealth and 303 Dartmouth have formally taken on several different identities in the 140 years since they were built, but even in the 57 years of Commonwealth School's tenancy the buildings have assumed a constantly shifting array of uses and designs.

Now in 2015 the schoolhouse is poised on the brink of a whole new series of renovations. Driving much of the change is the decision—determined in part by accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act—to install an elevator so that Commonwealth's vertically aligned school can be available to everyone. No longer will a student on crutches trigger a whole set of room changes, and students or adults who use wheelchairs will gain access

to all six floors. Running through the central airshaft, with doors opening at each of the Commonwealth stair landings, the elevator will change the use of space everywhere in the building in ways that can only be partially anticipated. We know what will be displaced: a bathroom and art display cabinet on the first floor, bookshelves, cubbies, bulletin boards, and niches and hideaways on the upper floors. The stairs to the basement will be relocated below the existing Dartmouth staircase to enlarge the science labs and offices, and the basement food preparation areas will be rearranged as well.

What we don't know yet is how the school will take shape around these new structures. Where will the 'Dartmouth lobby' kids make their home? Well, those kids will still find each other—we just don't know where. Or maybe by the time the elevator carries its first passenger, they will have left for college. Or have other friends who hang out on a different stair landing. New spaces will need to be found, and with luck and ingenuity they will be. New walls will be adapted to carry the student art that has defined the school's atmosphere since the early days. New jokes will replace that tired old tease about selling freshmen passes to the (no longer apocryphal) elevator. Commonwealth teachers will find ways to teach with the new Eno boards—or else they won't.

The school that makes its home in the double townhouses on Commonwealth Avenue will not, as Heraclitus knew, be the same school in the twenty-first century as the one Charles Merrill launched in a leap of faith all those years ago. The school with the new elevator and the missing cubbies won't be the same school as it was the year before. But in a way it will.

*Brent Whelan taught English at Commonwealth from 1988 until his retirement in 2012. He is working on several fiction projects, writes a blog on climate change, and does green-space advocacy work with the Charles River Conservancy.*

# A NOSE FOR THE NEW

*How the whiff of garlic David Allen '87  
caught in an Italian neighborhood  
led to adventures for scores of  
Commonwealth students.*





By Jonathan Sapers '79

When David Allen '87 thinks of high school, he remembers an adventure. "We had gone to see the *Last Supper* of Andrea Del Sarto," he begins, recalling a visit to the outskirts of Florence during a school trip to Italy with art teacher Larry Geffin '69. "After we saw it, we were a bit hungry, and we smelled the aroma of cooking garlic. And we started walking towards the smell. We thought, it's probably someone's house. We turned right and it got a little stronger and we turned left and it got a little stronger. And finally we walked into a tiny restaurant. There were no menus. And we had an amazing meal."

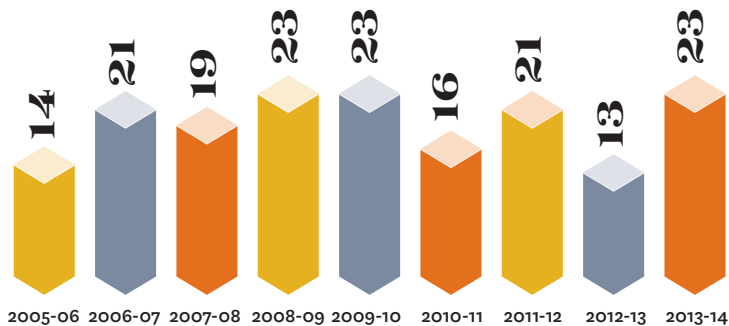
David was able to go on that trip only because his mother, a TWA flight attendant, could get very inexpensive tickets. He had, in fact, already made several trips to Italy, where the mix of art and history stirred his intellect. In 1984, as a new tenth grader at Commonwealth, the connections became stronger. In Polly Chatfield's Renaissance History class, David says, "I remember at one point reading the *Divine Comedy* and all of a sudden Dante refers to Giotto as the greatest artist of his time. We'd just finished studying Giotto's frescoes in Padua, and Polly said, 'Isn't it amazing how it all comes full circle?' For the first time, I saw the big picture. I thought, 'this is cool.'"

His life changed. "For the first time, I was interested in actually being an intelligent person. I wanted to live a life where I could travel and study art, literature, and culture." Being able to travel, to him, meant doing well in school and getting a good job.

Now the managing director of the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, in London, David credits the art history skills he first honed at Commonwealth with helping him get a job on Wall Street. After graduating from Berkeley with a focus in art history and economics, David went to an interview at Morgan Stanley. "We have people from Wharton Business School who want to work in the mergers and acquisitions department," he remembers his interviewer asking. "Why should we hire some guy who did Italian Renaissance art?"

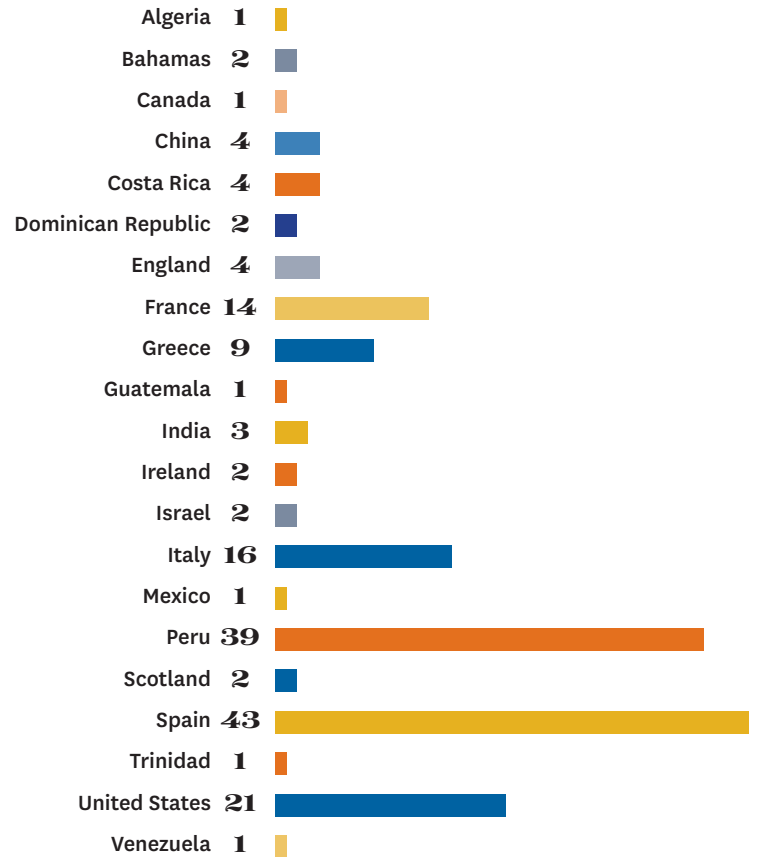
Unfazed, David, who besides his other interests had also been investing in stocks since his teenage years, responded, "Looking at a painting and trying to figure out who painted it, why they painted it, and when they painted it, without knowing all the

Number of Chatfield Scholarships Awarded



Total: \$161,428

Number of Chatfield Scholarships Per Country



information, in a very short amount of time and then drawing conclusions about it in writing is like investing," he says he told them. "They actually bought it."

When he returned from that seminal trip to Italy, David also remembers being acutely aware that not everyone at Commonwealth had a mother who was a flight attendant. "We were all talking about our trips and I felt really bad for the students who had not been able to afford to go," he remembers. "I felt it would be great if everyone could."

Out of that impulse was born, in 2004, the Mary P. Chatfield Cultural Scholarship, which supports some \$30,000 of student travel a year. Though others have contributed funds, David is still the principal donor. Any student can put together a budget and apply for a grant; often a modest scholarship can fill the gap between what a family can spend and the cost of a program.

"There are no restrictions on it," says Larry Geffin, who administers the program. "You don't have to study something specific. You don't have to do a foreign language. You just can't sleep at home. We've had one kid who went no further than Walnut Hill Music Camp (thirty minutes away by car, but because he stayed there, it qualified) and another who went to India. It can be used for our Spanish, French or Latin/Art History trips or for independent travel."

The school aims to create a self-sustaining fund to underwrite the Chatfield Cultural Scholarships. Doing so is part of an ongoing

effort that, for Larry, represents Commonwealth's financial coming of age. "We're institutionalizing Charles Merrill's policies," he says. "What he used to finance out of his own pocket we are now supporting as a community."

For David, the best part is the vicarious adventure. Each year, he gets a bundle of reports in the mail from grant recipients, and he is taken back to his peripatetic youth. "For me it's Christmas," he says. "I run to the post office, get the package of letters and run home and read them."



Michael Sailsman '06 sought adventure in the Maine woods.

## MAINE

### Felling Tales

For his project month, lifelong city-dweller Michael Sailsman '06 dreamed big: he wanted to either ship aboard an Alaskan fishing vessel or spend a month being a lumberjack. Since he couldn't swim, he went for lumberjacking. "I lifted weights with the Commonwealth Fitness Club for a month or two, and I thought I was ready to go," he says.

He took a bus to Portland, Maine, where he was picked up and driven another two hours to a place he remembers as being close to Canada, where he lodged with a friendly couple who had converted part of their house into an inn.

The next morning (and every morning after that) Michael was picked up and taken out to learn about modern lumberjacking. First lesson: "It has a lot to do with conservation," he says. "They want to make sure the animals that they're uprooting can make the jump to the next tree so they cut down in stages."

Second lesson: no axes. "If you use an axe it's going to take you thirty or forty minutes, and no one has time for it," he remembers being told as his minders reluctantly agreed to teach him the skill he had wanted to learn. "So we're going to show you how to do it a bunch of times and then you're going to do it once with a chain saw."

Michael recites the process from memory: "You cut a notch on the side of the tree where there are the most branches and then you cut straight through the tree to the notch. In theory, the tree will fall in the direction of the notch and then you just yell 'timber' after that."

In Michael's case, the theory proved true. "It fell the exact way I thought it was going to fall. I didn't kill myself or anyone else," he says.

After graduating from Wheaton College, Michael is now patient access coordinator at South Boston Community Health Center. But he still enjoys telling people about his stint in the Maine woods. "If it ever comes down to it," he says, with an air of resourcefulness. "I know how to cut down a tree."

## COSTA RICA

### Nights with Turtles

Duncan Eddy '09 says he spent his grant doing what he calls the best exercise program he's ever tried: walking up and down a beach in northeastern Costa Rica, looking for spawning turtles.

"I helped out the Caribbean Conservation Corporation [now the Sea Turtle Conservancy] for a month with their nesting leatherback turtle rescue program in Tortuguero," a national park whose name translates to "land of turtles." Each night, he and his crewmembers, usually two researchers and two other volunteers, would "walk along the beach five miles in one direction, get to the end, turn around and walk back. We'd just do that all night long with our group of people, lit by the stars."

Leatherback turtles, which Duncan says have been around since the days of the dinosaurs, are very large and, in the dark, very hard to distinguish from rocks. Duncan knows from experience, having stumbled over the first one he found. The turtle was almost as long as Duncan was tall (then nearly six feet) and as wide as his outstretched arms.

Over the next hour and a half or so, they examined and tagged the turtle, counted how many eggs she produced, and checked for any markings to help with future identification. As they finished up, someone in the group noticed two pairs of eyes surveying them from the jungle—jaguars, perhaps hoping the hunched figures snuffling in the sand were capybara, large rodents which jaguars like to eat. The researchers quickly stood up straight and resumed acting like noisy humans.

Between the turtles and leopards, beetles the size of paperback books, and golden orb weaver spiders that nested in the research station, Duncan was hooked. "It's pretty much defined what I now envision for time off," he says. "No cruise, no shopping trip somewhere will ever interest me again. A vacation is walking in the sands for five miles at night getting dirty in some research project."

Now a graduate student in aerospace engineering at Stanford, Duncan says as a result of his project-month trip he sees himself as more versatile, more able to take on challenges. "Even if I've never done it before I believe I can do it. Chances are I will survive."



A Costa Rican tree frog perches on Duncan Eddy '09's shoulder.



Katrina Lee '15 (center) and classmates Hannah Pucker (left) and Zehra Jafri at Machu Picchu.

## PERU

### Meeting a Friend in Person

Senior Katrina Lee's grant allowed her to travel to Peru on a school trip, when the country, which had been her "pen pal," during Spanish 3 class, became a real friend.

"In school, we learned about the different cultural groups of Peru; in Peru, we watched a dinner show that showcased the very same groups," she wrote in her essay. "Peru was hands-on learning. It connected deeply with everything I had learned in school. I was immersed in the language and culture, in the province where a novel had been set, or visiting an ice cream store my teacher had told me about, or in a library that featured an author I loved, or at the Incan ruins in which a movie had been set."

Spanish also became more than just declensions and accents. "I was forced to speak Spanish if I wanted to order food or buy a blanket," she wrote. "As Spanish slowly became the norm, my friends and I started speaking Spanish in our downtime. I'd open my mouth and I'd be speaking Spanish without even thinking about it."

Among her favorite memories of the ten-day trip: extra time at Machu Picchu, the result of a propitious scheduling snafu. "We had four extra hours," she remembered in an interview. "It was just incredible and we saw a lot of other ruins that aren't as famous but are just as cool."

Those moments deepened relationships with the other classmates on the trip. "Maybe that's cliché but there were a lot of people on the trip who I didn't really know and I couldn't help but get to know them."

The experience has Katrina eager for more. "Knowing Spanish opens doors," she says. When only seen in translation, "sometimes cultures get diluted and I think it's just so interesting to learn about them firsthand."

## ALASKA

### Caring for Mountains

Matt Spitzer '12 says he was taken on his first hiking trip at the age of one. So when he decided to travel, the mountains were an obvious choice.

He spent a summer month working with the Student Conservation Association (SCA), building a new trail across the ridge of a mountain near the entrance of Denali National Park in Alaska. He was part of a crew of six high-school volunteers and two leaders.

The trail had to be built so that it would not wash away during glacial flooding in the spring. "Most of our work involved finding rocks on the hillside, rolling them carefully down to the trail, digging holes for them and placing them in the holes."

The team's days began at six in the morning. "We would wake up, make breakfast (usually oatmeal), and then walk to our worksite, which was three miles up the mountain. As we walked we had a view of snow-capped Mount McKinley." One of the crew leaders regaled him with funny family stories and tales of backpacking trips. "He taught me how to build a deadfall to trap small animals like squirrels in case I become stranded in the wilderness."

Matt came away with a deeper understanding of what it means to interact with wilderness. "Walking down a trail may not seem to create much of an impact on a forest, but over time the impact can be substantial," he explained. "If there were no trails, the impact of human use on forests would be so devastating that they could no longer be called wilderness."

Now a junior at Middlebury College with a double major in religious studies and economics, Matt is studying this year at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu. But even in Nepal, his thoughts return to those wilderness experiences.

"After having such a great experience in Denali and making such great friends, I signed up again to participate in the program the next summer, this time in Glacier National Park in Montana," he wrote. "Two summers ago I worked for SCA as a leader on a crew in Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, and I am considering working again for SCA this summer."



Mountaineer Matt Spitzer '12

TRISTAN DAVIES



Alisha Atlas-Corbett '01,  
president of the CWSAA

### From the President:

“Every Commonwealth alum knows Charles Merrill. Whether you remember him as headmaster or as an annual speaker at assembly, he is a Commonwealth legend. For me, he is a storyteller more than anything else. As a student I always enjoyed hearing him talk about the school’s early days, or about his travels in Europe, or about whatever else happened to be on his active mind. It seemed only fitting, then, to devote one of our alumni/ae events to stories. In November, the Commonwealth Alumni/ae Association and a standing-room-only crowd of alums, staff, parents, and friends took over the back room of the Burren in Somerville for *The Mermaid*, a storytelling event in the style of NPR’s *The Moth*. Read on for a few snippets that we hope may entice you to watch the whole performance on Commonwealth’s YouTube channel at [bit.ly/mermaidstories](http://bit.ly/mermaidstories).”

### Alex Lennox-Miller '99

“And so, for the last Lit Mag announcement of the year, I got up in front of the entire school, tore off my pants, ripped off my shirt, and, in my Speedo and a cape, announced the final results.”



### Nathan Kohlenberg '07

“At this point I realized I’m carrying a small wearable camera in my pocket. And the Egyptian military is frequently warned of the degree to which American spies are trying to discover Egyptian secrets, and that anybody from America is probably a spy and is probably there to gather intelligence. So I realize I have this in my pocket, and I realize this is going to be a long ordeal now.”



### Hugh Chatfield '79

“I crashed my car when I was about to go to Harvard Law School, so by the grace of God I was saved from becoming an attorney.”



### Susan Thompson P'10 P'12, drama teacher

“The evening comes, and she says, ‘where’s my chamber pot?’”

### Jan Presser '68

“I got in the elevator and there were three guys in the elevator. Right here there’s a suit with a clipboard, and right here there’s a guy who looks a little more rough-cut, he’s wearing one of those black and red wool check jackets that hunters used to wear. And over here there’s this kinda small guy with a windbreaker jacket and chinos on. So I turned around, which we all do on the elevator, and I thought about it for a minute, and turned around again, and I said to the little guy, ‘Are you Cesar Chavez?’ and he said, ‘Yes, yes I am.’”



### Lynne Weiss P'10

“While we were talking, suddenly I heard this kind of thump and yelling and some running and then his phone went dead, and I realized, I just heard my son being mugged while I was talking to him on the phone.”



### We also heard from

**Laura Benkov P'12 P'16**, **Josh Berlin '82**, **Shawn Carraher P'18**, trustee and former teacher **Polly Chatfield P'71**, **Janet Limke P'12 P'17**, **James Palmer '04**, and staff member **Lauren Alverson**. Everyone vastly enjoyed the afternoon so full of surprising and striking tales.

# Villages

By Ludovica Ferme '06

Artwork by Rossella Cerulli '16

If you had seen the smiling, eager, sixteen-year-old me on my first day at Commonwealth in September 2005, you might have believed I didn't have a care in the world. You would not have seen a student fresh off the boat from Italy. Nor would you have perceived what I strived more than anything to hide: that I was a girl who had lost her sense of balance, her feeling of belonging, her inner peace.

I arrived at Commonwealth having barely survived a tumultuous school year in Milan, where my new professor of history and philosophy had intentionally set unachievable standards. The inability to receive recognition for hard work translated, for me, into a deep sense of inadequacy, an eating disorder, and a need to constantly prove that I was a perfect student. In admitting this, I wish to underscore how astonishing it was for me to come into the Commonwealth community and rediscover what it meant to be part of a group of people who cared about one another's well being and success.

having to buy a share from only one farm, as in a typical CSA. We also work with customers whose main point of access to food is the supermarket, and for whom fresh and local options are scarce. Here, Farmigo's aim to achieve farm-to-neighborhood networks comes to life. Groups of individuals in their own homes, parents in schools, members of congregations and churches, and many others have set up Farmigo pick-up sites.

The other arm of Farmigo's business supports more than three hundred farmers across the U.S. and Canada. We provide them with software and tools to process payments, forecast seasonal growth, and work with their customers.

Tyler Dennis is one of those farmers. He was twenty-four in April 2014 when he started Alewife Farm. Armed with an affinity for sustainable farming and a strong determination to succeed, his first plantings included over a hundred varieties of vegetables; some of them went to Farmigo's customers. Almost a year later, Alewife's

production has doubled as Tyler enters his second season with us, delighting those who have fallen in love with his produce. His bestsellers? Organic beets and a delectable salad mix featuring spicy mustard greens, watercress, and tender baby spinach.

Farmigo's model supports individuals in small enterprises in their livelihood, and an important side effect of building farm-to-neighborhood networks is the ability to foster community among pockets of people invested in a common cause. My colleagues and I share the strong belief that small farmers can be part of the food system in



Commonwealth helped me develop the tools I needed to build my confidence and pursue important goals. I went next to Bryn Mawr, which, similarly, encouraged me to find a job that could be more than a nine-to-five commitment. I chose Farmigo, a start-up online farmers market, where I have worked for almost two years and whose supportive environment reminds me so much of Commonwealth's.

Our mission at Farmigo is two-fold. One arm of the company emulates a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, with weekly pickups of local goods and produce. Farmigo participants, however, can purchase from a whole network of farmers, instead of

America, and we are all dedicated to the movement and the people who play an integral role in keeping it alive. We regularly visit our farmers, and we feel proud when they share their enthusiasm for our company, or when we witness first-hand how much their business has grown as a result of our partnership.

The intensity of the relationships among Farmigo employees, farmers, and consumers is the aspect I cherish most. Because our members work so closely together, each is committed to the success of all the others. As I did at Commonwealth, I feel part of a connected and mindful community.



# Spur Your Class to **VICTORY** in the Second Annual Mermaid Cup Competition!

**Y**our gift to Commonwealth's Annual Fund enters you in our now-yearly all-decades class-participation contest. The reigning champion, boasting 20 benefactors, is the class of 2005. Second place for 2014 went to the class of 2001 for its 16 donors, followed by the class of 1967, with 14.

Who will prevail in 2015? Remember, the class who musters the highest number of individual alumni/ae contributors (before June 30) wins the Cup and a gift from Commonwealth as well. You can check your class's standing at [www.commschool.org/alumniae](http://www.commschool.org/alumniae).

Help your class clinch the coveted Mermaid Cup. Support the Annual Fund today!

**[www.commschool.org/makeagift](http://www.commschool.org/makeagift)**

## CLASS REPRESENTATIVES

Mark Denbeaux '61  
Ellen Gordon '62  
Maxine Levine Charlton '63  
Richard Hall '64  
Doug Kant '65  
Joe Spivack '66  
Phyllis Schroeder Rector '69  
Tanya Riseman '81  
Steve Hanna '82

Doug Hsiao '83  
Ethan Forman '84  
Ivan Kreilkamp '86  
Kirill Abramov '90  
Megan Buhr '97  
Geoff Stanbury '98  
Jonathan Sheffi '99  
Emily Clark '01  
Abbie Cyr '03

Emily Bullitt Miles '03  
John Oliverio '05  
Ben Orlin '05  
Ludovica Ferme '06  
Dylan Nelson '07  
Laura Pedrosa '10  
Miriam Seldin-Stein '11  
Ruth Hanna '13  
Gabrielle Farrah '14

*We send thanks to everyone who has already given and offer special gratitude to our volunteer Class Representatives. Would you like to become a Class Rep? Or involve yourself further with the alumni/ae association? Email [gpalmer@commschool.org](mailto:gpalmer@commschool.org).*

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