Mr. Pettus has the rare ability to connect with students outside of the classroom. Insightful, understanding, and blatantly honest, he played a tremendous role in helping me transition into life in Beijing.

— Sally Deng CN’10

“Tim is the best math teacher I ever met,” says Lili Shi, SYA China’s assistant program director. “He works hard to help each student with math skills, spending considerable time before and after classes to help each one of them. Following their time in our program, many of these students agree that Tim is one of the best math teachers they’ve ever been fortunate to know.”

Over the years, Pettus has developed high regard for his SYA China students. “They’re very different from most other American high school (as well as college) students in that they’re willing to give up their sports, acting, singing and so on and live with a host Chinese family,” he says. “This willingness, and even eagerness, on the part of the students to work with.”

Pettus also has strong praise for his Chinese colleagues. “The Chinese faculty is the best group of teachers I’ve ever encountered,” he says. “They’re always looking for ways to improve. They sit in on each other’s classes, tape classes and spend time evaluating one another and talking about what happens in their classrooms. These teachers also insist on their students being prepared every day and speak only Chinese in class.”

For Pettus, living and teaching in China was somewhat of a homecoming. “My father was born in Nanjing and was raised in Beijing, where he graduated from Peking American School in 1926,” he says. “My grandfather was in China for more than four decades and united several schools that taught Mandarin to foreigners. He raised $315,000 in the United States and built a campus in Beijing.”

When Pettus first came to Beijing, he visited his grandfather’s school, which has since become a community center for Chinese senior citizens. “They use it as a place to play games such as mahjong and cards,” he says.

Beyond the classroom, Pettus has enjoyed learning about Chinese society and culture. In particular, several experiences hold especially powerful meaning for him. “I’ll always have fond memories of taking my friends, family and students to Sancha, which is a small mountain village located near the Great Wall,” he says. “I love taking the students on a seven-hour hike loop in the area that includes several hours on the unrestored wall itself. On the return trip, we visit a Buddhist cave, which is great for exploring. I’ve also enjoyed our study trips with the entire student body in South China to remote villages where the local people haven’t previously seen foreigners. Being greeted in these villages with the women beautifully adorned, playing musical instruments and treating us to rice wine was quite a treat.”

Pettus fondly recalls when, one winter’s day, he and two SYA students decided to join the elderly who swim in small pools made available on a year-round basis within Beijing’s parks. “The two students climbed in first and started screaming for me to join them, but I decided to make a more grand entrance,” he says. “I ran on the ice, planning to slide into the prepared area. However, I tripped and broke through the ice about five meters from the pool. I guess my entrance was grand and different, as I had to break ice just to swim to the pool. Of course, we didn’t mind letting everyone know we found the water difficult to stay in!”

Looking back, Pettus says he’s grateful to have been a part of SYA China. “The program revived my enthusiasm for teaching,” he says. “Much of what I saw was new and different. The students I was fortunate enough to teach were more adventurous and interested in trying new things than were their American counterparts. SYA China was a great and exciting way to end my teaching career.”