

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A reflection from David Beare, Keystone Academy's founding Dean of Faculty

The Art of Teaching and Learning in a Boarding School: A Dean of Faculty's Perspective

On a Sunday evening last autumn, I poked my head around the library stacks looking for a conference room tucked away in the back of the Middle School library. Kacy Song, one of our teacher librarians, had invited me to a discussion of Chinese and Western poetry, and I eagerly looked forward to the conversation. Nothing in my previous experience in boarding schools, though, prepared me for what I was to find that night: a bright room filled to overflowing with members of the Keystone community, students and teachers together, reading poems aloud in unison, earnestly discussing their meanings and contexts, and telling stories about the great Chinese Poets. I had never seen anything like it – not at Phillips Exeter, not at Loomis Chaffee, not at Hotchkiss – and it was then that I felt for certain that our boarding program, and our school, was going to be something uniquely successful.

Certainly having the right physical structures sets the stage for a great boarding school. Keystone Academy students are fortunate to have large, well designed dorm rooms, comfortable common spaces and close proximity to faculty apartments right on their corridors. Our academic buildings and sports facilities are marvelous. But it is the people that live and work in those wonderful spaces that create a lively social and intellectual atmosphere. That night, it was Kacy Song and our Chinese language and literature teachers Li Haiyan and Pei Lu, along with a couple dozen of their students, who made our boarding program sing.

No one was required to be there on a Sunday evening. There were no assignments given, no assessments required or expected. The group came together because they loved poetry and wanted to explore it together. This is exactly why my wife Rachael Beare, the Dean of Admission, and I have chosen to be part of a boarding school. Great boarding institutions allow for the development of a rich school community that can only exist when creative, intelligent and committed teachers, students and administrators are willing to share their energies and talents beyond the classroom setting. This, I can tell you, is one of the pleasures of being a teacher at a place like Keystone. Living in community with this group of adults and students is a privilege, and a joy.

As Dean of Faculty, I am very keen on continuing to improve the quality of our classroom settings. It is my experience that encountering students in a variety of ways outside of class always reflects back in improved teaching. When I see a student competing in a basketball game, or dancing on stage in the school play, or hard at work during study hours on a particularly tricky math problem, I come to understand more about their particular strengths or weaknesses. Bit by bit, we as

teachers learn about our students' commitments, intellectual and otherwise. There are moments on a hike or a shopping trip when we can connect with the kids as *persons* – and they with us – rather than only as students in a class. It is this being seen and being *known* that encourages students to go farther in their studies, and take intellectual risks in class. When they feel that their teachers truly care about them and their thoughts, students blossom and are less afraid to make mistakes. This is when teachers can begin to engage those open minds with true rigor, and students can make substantial rather than superficial progress. Of course, this can happen in all sorts of school settings. I am convinced, though, that for secondary students it happens more quickly and more deeply in a residential community.

And it is just plain fun. A boarding school is a great environment to be a student, to be sure, but it is also a great environment to be a teacher. Meals in the dining hall afford an opportunity to see friends and colleagues. The faculty kids run around and play in the quad after supper, while the adults have a chance to chat and to catch their breath. One group of teachers swims in the early morning – they call themselves the “Keystone Carps,” a pun that has more resonance in English than in Chinese – and another meets every evening to enjoy the pool with their families after the work of the day is done. There are spontaneous ping-pong matches with the students, dessert evenings with friends, book discussion groups that bring together Chinese and expatriate faculty to examine literature available both in Mandarin and English, student/faculty/staff football matches – any number of opportunities for community members to form bonds of admiration and friendship. What this means for our students at Keystone is that they will enjoy, over time, the heady atmosphere of very bright, talented, and accessible adult mentors who have come to love the place and commit themselves to its success and to the success of the students with whom they work.

For example, imagine the impact on a student's education of going out to lunch with a group of teachers to a local Japanese restaurant to participate in a discussion of Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country*. The book appears on our IB Diploma Programme reading list, and the teachers had gathered to explore some of the book's themes, imagery, and spare language. Right next to graduates of Beida and Columbia, Harvard and Tsinghua, the student took her place at the table: listening, yes, but also offering ideas, questioning and laughing with the rest, an essential partner in the conversation. I think that this lunch outing shows Keystone at its best – inclusive, supportive, and respectful of the talents that all our members bring to the school.

In the end, our boarding community develops both the head and the heart. From Friday night in the Design Technology space constructing trebuchets with Mr. Baxter, to engaging veteran actor Lei Quesheng in conversation, to a memorable evening in the library reciting classical poetry, life here at Keystone is incredibly rich for students and adults alike. This, then, is the art of teaching and learning in a boarding school: Together we commit to discovering and developing the best in ourselves, but more importantly, in one another.