

View from September 11, 2002

WILLIAM WHARTON, HEADMASTER

DURING THE PAST YEAR, I'VE BEEN ASKED on a number of occasions how, at Commonwealth, we handled the crisis of September 11th. The answer to that question is twofold.

First, in the days immediately following the attacks, we, like everyone else, were shaken, profoundly aware of how little we knew about what was happening and why. As much as possible, we carried on with our routines, recognizing the important anchor they provided for all of us. But we also allowed time for people in the school to come together. That Tuesday, we set up a few televisions around which students and teachers gathered during free periods, and our consulting psychologists made themselves available to talk with students who might suffer losses. (We were fortunate, for no one from the Commonwealth community was lost that day.) An additional aftershock came on the 12th, when the FBI closed off streets and raided the nearby Westin Hotel in the belief—mistaken—that the terrorists or their accomplices had lodged there. In place of Thursday's scheduled assembly, we held an all-school open meeting to encourage students to speak their hearts and minds; many did. We also sent a letter home to our current families outlining our response to the atmosphere of distress and confusion. A week later, Hancock provided a physical and mental respite from the turmoil, and when we returned to Boston, it felt as if we were starting the year again.

As a broader answer to the question, we can point to courses, assemblies, and conversations that reflect our character as a school as much as they do any specific reaction to the terrorist strikes. A philosophy course on Theories of Justice added Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars* to the syllabus. My twelfth-grade class discussed with particular passion their readings from Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, a book that addresses questions of civilian casualties in war. Our tenth-grade Medieval World History class contains a unit on Islam. This year, using passages from *The Quran* and the *Hadith*, students wrote essays exploring divergent interpretations of *jihad*. Charles Merrill, in customary fashion, raised provocative questions about the attacks at a November assembly. In the following months, other assembly speakers—Samantha Power, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Jessica Stern, and Shahla Haeri—challenged students to rethink their own ideas about American power, about an individual's ability to effect change, about terrorism, and about women and Islam. During March break, at the instigation of history teacher Steven Young, each teacher selected a modern Arabic or Israeli novel to read, with a view to creating a short list of recommended summer reading and to choosing one or two titles to require of all students.

All these assignments and events are rooted in the school's determination not to shy away, in any year, from difficult questions and debates. We thus aim to equip our students with the intellectual tools they need to listen and think critically and to talk intelligently about even such painful issues. The closing paragraph from the letter we sent home on September 12th speaks to our fundamental commitments as a school as much as it does to the tragedy we faced last fall:

We will also offer opportunities for your children to discuss and question yesterday's events, counseling patience with the inevitable uncertainty amidst the maelstrom of report and rumor, and patience with the emotional turmoil. We will talk about the vulnerability inherent in our freedoms, and challenge students to imagine what might have driven people to such acts. While acknowledging the need for a vigorous response, we must recognize that until our rage and sadness are tempered with understanding, we will find no way out of the cycle of vengeance that so powerfully draws us into its orbit. ▣

The John Hughes Grants for Faculty Development, 2002

THE CAMPAIGN FOR COMMONWEALTH raised \$200,000 for a faculty-development fund, named in memory of beloved English teacher John Hughes. This past summer marked the second round of the Hughes Grants. Ten teachers received stipends (ranging from \$1500 to \$4000). In

history, Barbara Grant prepared a new half-credit elective on the History of Japan; Steven Young plunged into scholarly literature on the long-term causes of the "European Miracle" as well as the most prominent recent critics of "the rise of the West." Fern Nesson and Mallory Rome did research and studied the curricula for courses they are teaching for the first time this year: Medieval World History and Ancient History, respectively. Other grants in the humanities: Catherine Brewster planned a new writing-centered English curriculum for twelfth graders; Kati Koerner enrolled in an acting workshop in New York, offered by Philippe Gaulier.

Frédérique Thiebault-Adjout took a course for teachers of Spanish as a foreign language at the University of Cádiz and visited Madrid to make arrangements for our new exchange with Colegio Alarcón. In the fields of science and math: Jeff Racioppi developed a syllabus and text for an advanced half-credit seminar in Environmental Biology; Farhad Riahi wrote the first draft of a geometry textbook suitably rigorous for our ninth-grade A section (geometry is now taught in ninth grade, Algebra II in tenth); and Rebecca Jackman put together a new laboratory program and lab manual for our Chemistry 1 classes. ▣



Rhett duPont '04