



# COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL

## Newsletter 2008

***Support** (tr. v.) to give aid or encouragement to a person or a cause; to strengthen; to provide for or maintain by supplying necessities; to argue in favor of; to champion.*

On the eve of the School's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, the *Newsletter* celebrates Commonwealth's support of its students and staff.

TOM KATES '87 started the photography program at Commonwealth. In 1985, he asked Rusty Crump to offer photography (in addition to printmaking) as an art. Rusty remembers the conversation in which he told headmaster Charles Chatfield about Tom's proposal. Rusty liked the idea, "But," he admitted, "I've never been in a darkroom." Charlie answered, "That's all right. Tom can teach the course." And he did—until he graduated. Now established professionally in the Boston area for many years, Tom has been Commonwealth's official photographer for more than a decade. In this Newsletter, we reproduce some of our favorites among his photographs that have appeared in our viewbook and on our website. ☒



### *Fifty is Good*

WILLIAM D. WHARTON

**C**HARLES MERRILL incorporated Commonwealth in 1957, the year of my birth. This fall, we will mark 50 years since the School's 1958 opening, and the coincidence of its conception with that of its current Headmaster offers the opportunity for a few reflections on our path to middle age.

When I arrived at Commonwealth in 1985 at the age of 28, I was bedazzled by the brilliance of the students and impressed by the intelligence, energy, and assurance of my colleagues. We worked fast and smart, often shot from the hip, and enjoyed considerable individual authority. We believed that we could do it all, and do it without the burden of a big administration—we had Ellen Cole, after all! The work was exhausting and exhilarating, the successes thrilling. But bumptious, youthful confidence contributed to a number of collisions and lapses. My first ancient history classes embodied the full range of these contradictions. In my excitement at teaching such bright, hardworking students, I demanded college-level scholarship from freshmen. Parents lined up to complain at PTAs; colleagues helped me zealously fend them off; and while some students found it a transformative course, others were overwhelmed. It was only at Polly Chatfield's gentle remonstrance late in that year that good sense dawned. Not many schools would have given a new teacher such latitude, but Commonwealth then was, in a sense, like the young Alcibiades: gifted, vigorous, and audacious.

As the school entered its 30s, however, we felt a growing sense that we had to provide better for ourselves and our students: our annual allowance from Charles Merrill, while generous, no longer sufficed. This realization coincided with the arrival of Judith Keenan, whose wise leadership laid the groundwork for Commonwealth's passage to maturity. Mrs. Keenan made the school more self-sufficient. She saw to it that Commonwealth lived within its means while,





at the same time, building more professional admissions, business, and development operations. With the unflagging encouragement of the Board and its Chair, Polly Chatfield, Mrs. Keenan raised money to promote financial aid, faculty study, and professional development. Building on her predecessor Charles Chatfield's initiative, she put in place a more formal framework to ensure our students' academic and emotional well being by hiring a consulting psychologist and appointing Kate Bluestein as Director of Student Life. The School opened itself more to the city, introducing the City of Boston course and the community service requirement. Nor did Mrs. Keenan ignore literal nuts and bolts. She fixed up the house. Her decade at Commonwealth produced lab and studio renovations and the installation of broad stairways with skylights, an efficient kitchen, and a more cheerful lunchroom. And always, she worked tirelessly to ensure that Commonwealth's intellectual spirit be guided by civility and thoughtfulness.

Our run-up to 50 has seen continued bolstering of the institutional and financial strength of the school (including marked progress in development) and of Commonwealth's historical commitment to diversity. Following on the recent Long-Range Plan, the School has undertaken substantial efforts to build a more active community of alumni/ae and parents; to strengthen the Annual Fund and endowment so that the School can increase the levels of both student financial aid and faculty compensation; to improve facilities and tools available for students; and to continue raising Commonwealth's visibility in the Boston independent school market. We have hired a professional librarian, our first Director of Diversity (part-time), put in place more systematic support and evaluation of faculty and staff. Closer relations with city charter schools and other programs have directed growing numbers of students of color

to the School. Spurred in no small part by Larry Geffin '69, we are discovering innovative ways to help students who receive substantial financial aid, including counseling about summer programs, scholarships for projects and summers, and, most recently, the initiation of a transition assistance program for students who arrive with shaky academic skills. In 2002, Commonwealth instituted Health and Community, a 10-week seminar for ninth graders, to encourage literacy about drugs, alcohol, sexuality, and other matters of importance to adolescent health and safety. More recently, in collaboration with the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind/Body Medicine, the School has introduced the teaching of stress-reduction techniques. Students still push us—to create a baseball team, to offer courses in Greek or Abstract Algebra, to preserve the long spring Hancock weekend by taking on most of the administrative duties themselves, and to establish our new composting and recycling program. Our spontaneity continues unabated. But the school now draws more effectively on its whole community of parents, alumni/ae, and friends to secure the resources and opportunities that make it possible for us to do our work and respond to student initiatives.

Like many of my generation—and many of our students—who passed through adolescent years turbulent with the crosswinds of idealism, self-indulgence, and overconfidence, the School has emerged into a healthy adulthood. As it has settled down and made sure it can support itself and its family, it has lost none of its creative spark or sense of humor. Today, our energy is tempered by both the judgment that comes with experience and the acknowledgement of our stubborn, all-too-human limitations. We may not run quite as fast or act quite as boldly as we used to, but in this gem of a school that attracts so many outspoken, smart, sweet, sassy students, how can we help but stay spry? Even at 50. ☒