

Do What You Can, With Love:

A TRIBUTE TO POLLY CHATFIELD P'71, '79



Above: Polly Chatfield in her Cambridge apartment in spring of 2021; left: Polly during a recent event with the Commonwealth Board of Trustees, with fellow Trustee Charles Fried P'79, '81, GP'19, '23, in the foreground; right: memories of Polly's tenure from the Commonwealth archives



Mary Post Chatfield, affectionately known as Polly, has supported Commonwealth School for more than half a century, teaching English, Latin, Greek, and Renaissance history (among other subjects), and serving as both a member and Chair of the Board of Trustees. The end of the 2020–2021 school year marks her third "retirement" from the school—and her warmth and wisdom will be missed.

In 1985, when I came to interview for a history and Latin teaching position at Commonwealth, I met with Headmaster Charlie Chatfield for forty minutes, and then spent the better part of the next hour being shown around the school by Polly. Charlie's curiosity and Polly's warmth made it easy for me to accept the position when Charlie called to offer it. It was Polly who mentored me through my first year, and persuaded me to rein in my pedagogical ambitions, explaining that I'd get more from the kids by asking less: Her Renaissance History students learned, with their brief weekly exercises and her razor-sharp responses (always returned on Monday), to craft crisp, powerful sentences and paragraphs. I emulated, but never matched, her skill as a teacher.

She stepped down when Charlie retired in 1990 but returned four years later to chair the Board. It was she who called me to offer the Headship in October of 1999, and, with the prospect of enjoying her mentorship once again, I enthusiastically accepted. She stepped down in 2002 to care for Charlie, but returned as a trustee in 2013, and since then has been a voice of conscience and wisdom for trustees.

**“Do what you can do well and with love.
That is the way to live a life.”**

—Polly Chatfield

Doing for others is a constant in all that Polly does, and alongside her commitment to teachers and teaching, she cared deeply about Commonwealth's capacity to accept and support students from diverse backgrounds. Alumnus David Allen '87—inspired by his life-changing senior project, an art history tour of Italy that Polly helped him conceive and organize—established the Chatfield Cultural Scholarships in her honor to permit Commonwealth students to dream big about their projects and to take part in overseas exchanges and trips, regardless of their families' financial situations. When she stepped down as Chair of the Board, trustees and alumni/ae established the Chatfield Scholars program in her honor, which since 2004 has provided multi-year aid to six students through their time at Commonwealth. Polly's generous spirit and unflagging encouragement have sustained and inspired our work. She has interviewed applicants for senior Capstone Projects, consulted with teachers about their courses, and read and evaluated teachers' applications for Hughes Projects since that program's inception in 2001. Her full post-teaching life outside Commonwealth has shown the same devotion to scholarship and equity: she has edited three editions of Renaissance Latin poetry for Harvard University Press and served as a tireless volunteer for YouthLink, a program for at-risk youth in Rockland, Maine. But Commonwealth has held a central place in her heart.

A former Head of Groton School used to say that every school leader needs a confessor priest on the board, someone who has held or knows the unique challenges of a job that can be emotionally grueling and isolating. Polly was mine. She knew intimately the challenges of balancing the tensions—of caution and risk, of justice and mercy—that forever pull at a head's heart and mind. Polly was the one I could reach out to and share the difficulties, and she never failed to make the burden light or to restore spirits with her generous support and affection.

Polly's departure closes a Commonwealth career that reaches back fifty-five years. For all who are staying and have worked with her, her influence will carry on in all the little ways she has taught us about teaching and scholarship, about working with young people, about this “spacious house...fit for an Academy.” (Quotation is from Milton's *Of Education*, a favorite of Polly's.)

—BILL WHARTON

