

Issue 17, June 2017



ACS ALUMNI Magazine



Featuring
Mara Bozhilova-Popova '38
First Arts Fest
Slava Doytcheva '07
Kosara Tsoneva '17



Disney
**HIGH
SCHOOL
MUSICAL**

ON STAGE!

**The
Brainiacs**



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Outer back cover - Construction of the American College Simeonovo Campus, ca.1926-27

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dr. Carl Djerassi (1923-2015). Dr. Djerassi lived a long and distinguished life (which included 14 months as a pre-WW II ACS student) and left a legacy of achievement in science and technology, as a distinguished man of letters, as a patron of the arts, and as a philanthropist. Throughout his life Dr. Djerassi acknowledged the transformational impact ACS had on him as a student and a person, and he left a significant bequest for our school in the hopes of perpetuating such experiences. Our science building, now dedicated as Djerassi Hall, was here when Dr. Djerassi was an ACS student. It is a building already full of stories, stories of extraordinary and dedicated educators and amazing young students growing in their awareness of the wonders, the mysteries, and the challenges of the world around them as well as their own worlds within, all the while awakening, as Carl Djerassi did, to their unfolding lives ahead. We dedicated Djerassi Hall in the hopes that it will be the site of many more inspirational stories for years and years to come.

Finally, I am happy to welcome the latest distinguished group to join the alumni of ACS: the Class of 2017. The academic achievements of so many in this class have been exceptional. This year we had twelve students who maintained a 6.0 average throughout their high school years, an achievement matched only once before in the history of ACS. In total, over a third of this class earned academic distinction. As a class, they have shown strong commitment to community outreach and service and to leadership in our many clubs and activities, from the ACS musical to the Fission Science Fair. The Class contributed enormously as well, through their leadership and fine sportsmanship to the success of our sports program. This year for the first time, either an ACS boys team or a girls team, and often both, won every ACS Open Tournament we hosted: football, basketball, volleyball, tennis and table tennis. Beyond all of these accomplishments, they continued to develop as good and thoughtful people: working well with each other and partnering with teachers to make the most of the exceptional opportunities available at ACS.

To the parents of these latest graduates, I say thank you for your trust and faith in our school. To my colleagues on the faculty and staff, I say thank you for your extraordinary dedication to the mission and work of ACS... and for your friendship and support. And to alumni and friends, I say please join me in welcoming the Class of 2017 to the exceptional society of people that is the ACS alumni body!

With appreciation and best wishes,

Richard T. Ewing, Jr., Ed.D.
President

Dear Alumni and Friends of ACS,

September 15, 2017 marks the 25th Anniversary of the re-opening of ACS. We look forward to celebrating this important milestone in the coming year, which will include the anticipated opening of the new Campus Center in early 2018. Acknowledging the position of strength that ACS has re-established over the past quarter century as a leading school in Bulgaria and the Balkans, we believe the time is ripe to review what has been accomplished, assess current opportunities and challenges, and set a compelling course for the future. To launch this work, we recently held a Board & Constituent Retreat, which included representatives from across the ACS community – alumni, current and former parents, students, faculty, administrators, and trustees – who worked together to envision a dynamic future and to outline work necessary to make that vision a reality. We will report on this initiative in the months ahead.

Right before the Retreat, trustees, special guests, members of the Djerassi family, and the full school gathered on June 9 to dedicate the science building at ACS in honor of

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ACS Alumni Magazine is issued twice per year (June and December) for the alumni of the American College of Sofia. We welcome all readers' feedback, submissions and suggestions.



Petia Ivanova '97 at the ACS Campus Center site

“...Within thy campus hidden lies

The springtime of our lives.”

(Unknown ACS Poet,

Yearbook 1934)

Dear Alumni,

The day you get this, June 30, 2017, my friends from the Class of 1997 and I will be celebrating our 20th anniversary reunion here at ACS. 20 years since my classmate Michael popped that bottle of sparkling wine (yes, as in real wine) on the steps of Sanders Hall on our last day of school in May 1997. Our class, with the selfless assistance of the two classes that followed, was the reason most rules were added to an originally couple-of-pages-long student handbook. 20 years ago we sat in black caps and gowns under the burning midday sun in front of that same Sanders Hall with its yard newly widened and paved for the occasion. As of the following year, commencement ceremonies would begin wisely at 5 pm. You see, some things we had to experience, so those coming after us wouldn't have to.

Hopefully, I've grown in more than one way in those 20 years since graduation, but today I'm grateful for having developed a genuine interest in people outside of my own generation and circle of friends, as well as the ability to ask questions and (with varying degrees of success) to listen to what others have to say. Back in 2009, my colleague at the time Natalia Manolova, took me, a recently appointed alumni relations specialist, to the home of the late Nikola Kyosseff, Class of 1937, to demonstrate the importance of keeping in touch with ACS pre-war alums. I made time for two pre-war alum interviews a year – one for each of the two alum mags – and was happy with that... until I began loving the interviews. I'm not sure if it was Lili Ikonopisova's story that touched me deeper than those of everyone else I had interviewed before, or Nikolay Georgiev '44 sharing at the end of our interview how he had opened up to me more than he had intended, or perhaps the war story of Dobrin Georgiev '43, a patriot in a sense of the word that doesn't send shivers down my spine for a change. One thing is for sure: had I not started loving pre-war alum interviews before I spoke with Mara Bozhilova-Popova '38, whom you are about to get to know on the following pages, talking to her would have been my turning point.

You will meet a couple of other pretty amazing human beings – fascinating, wise and talented, and yes, all of them female, which I relished, though (promise) it was not on purpose! Slava Doytcheva, Class of 2007, enlightened me on the depths of acting, a topic that I – though an avid movie fan – had hardly any clue about. Kosara Tsoneva, one of our newest graduates, you will see, is a go-getter in a league of her own. Finally, a few weeks before ACS Arts Fest's 23rd edition, Art Teacher Nia Decheva and the wife of former ACS President Dr. Arthur Charles, Sandy Charles, took us way back to 1995 and the “springtime of our lives,” when this favorite event in the school calendar had its premiere. As you have realized by now, I love revisiting my old ACS days (especially those after the unfortunate bangs period in 1992-1994). And I hope you do, too.

Have a fabulous summer!

Much love,

Petia Ivanova '97

Conquering Countless Admirers, Having a Friend for 72 Years that You Never Met, Flying Solo to the USA at 86, and the Importance of Daily Routines: The Incredible Journey of 98-year- old Mara Bozhilova-Popova '38

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97



98-year-old Mara Bozhilova-Popova is the oldest American College alumna I've interviewed. Her daughter Doriana contacted me a few months back in response to a greeting card our office sent to Mara and the rest of our pre-war alumni. Mara was convinced it was sent by current ACS students ("The style seemed that of kiddies.") Kiddies we are, even if almost middle-aged. Doriana shared with me how excited Mara was about the opportunity to meet younger American College alumni and how she would love to find out whether she is the oldest graduate. While I could not confirm the latter – we do not always hear back from the pre-war alumni we send post to, so we don't know who is still around – we did manage to carry out the interview on the morning of November 10, 2016. At the door of their cozy flat in the heart of the old Sofia center, I'm met by a mother and daughter. Mara doesn't look her 98 years at all – she walks on her own, occasionally lights a cigarette, has a great sense of humor, flaming red hair, and a youthful twinkle in her eye. I become her life-long fan when I realize she recalls my ACS admissions exam essay: it got published in the newspaper where she read it and it made an impression. The essay question had us choose one person, anyone in the world, to spend a day with, and I chose the handsome stranger sitting next to me at the admissions exam. As it turns out, Mara, Doriana, and I, all three of us, believe in fate. Also, we like talking, which we do plenty of on that autumn morning.

Mara, how did you end up enrolling at the American College? How did you and your family find out about the school?

I'm originally from Varna. Not many knew of the College there or elsewhere outside of Sofia, I suppose. When I was done with junior high school, my parents were wondering where to send me. There was hardly any choice in Varna, just the High School of Commerce. Right about then a family friend, who was the Minister of Education, said to my parents: "There's no question. Of course you should send her to the American College." We flipped, what did he mean *'the American College'*? Keep calm, he said. He had met Mr. Black on business, and they had become friends too, so he had a lot of positive things to say about both him and the school. I was a good student even if a tad absent-minded. Upon sending us off to the College, our mothers' eyes were full of joy and laughter, wishing us all the best. They were glad because they knew exactly where they were sending us – to a place both famous and good. I was very happy myself.

Wasn't it hard for you to move from Varna to Sofia, so far away from family and friends?

Not at all. I am very sociable. As soon as I entered our sleeping quarters, the teacher responsible for us girls brought in a Jewish girl named Beraha. Our beds were allotted by names in alphabetical order: Bozhilova, Beraha, etc. So she was crying, even though she was from Sofia. I left my luggage and everything, turned to her, and started convincing her how yes, it was possible, it would be fine, see how far I come from. Others joined in, and we managed to comfort her in the end. She became my first friend at the College, the first of many.

I recall an American College alumni gathering some ten years ago and a dear friend of mine from my class was there, so was Maria-Louisa, the sister of exiled Tsar Simeon. My friend was speaking to some girls



The Girls of the Class of 1938 as Second Formers, 1934 (Mara is in the back row, center)

from a lower grade, and the first thing they asked her was: "Where is Marcheto?" Everyone knew me, you see, I was very popular, maybe because I was so sociable.

How often did you get to see your parents while you were a student at the College?

I saw them only during the breaks. Or when they happened to have business in Sofia, they would come visit for an hour or so. But that was once a year, at most.

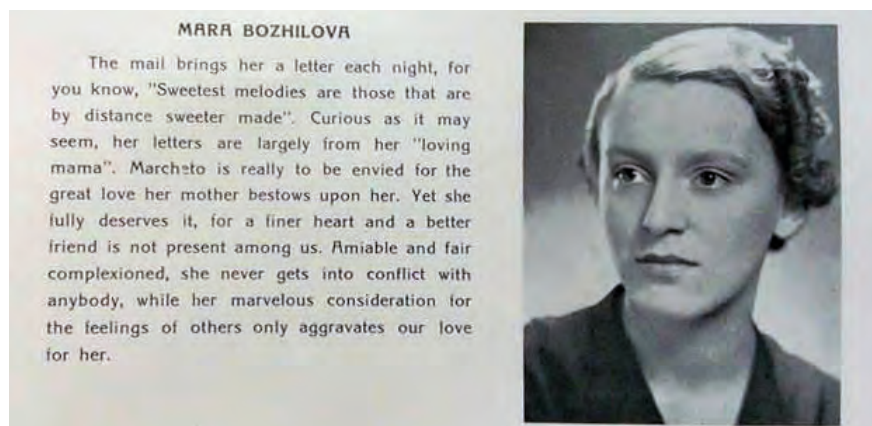
What are your most vivid memories from the College that you've held on to all these years?

Mara: We didn't have parties often, usually only on the days of sports events like Mountain Day or Field Day, but those were just once a year. If there was a more interesting match, we would come watch and

chat with the boys. Otherwise, it was just little letters and notes. Many were in love with me. In that period I was a little infatuated with someone myself, a guy in Varna actually, who had seen me, liked me, and sent me a message through someone else. So I was thinking about this guy, but nothing along the lines of love with a big 'L'. At the College, I had admirers in every grade level. What did they all find in me? Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw no beauty queen.

Doriana: It's her being so cheerful and outgoing.

Mara: One of the funniest memories I have – well, I don't know if it's that funny – in junior or senior year, a new American teacher arrives, I think he taught Sociology, a guy with authority. And I can't understand a



Mara as senior, 1938

single word he says – not the content and not the language either, it was as if he was doing it on purpose, making everything sound more complicated, incomprehensible. Can you imagine the embarrassment to not be able to understand him after so many years of studying English?

And something else, we had this PE teacher, Ms. Faye Tobias, she was cute but sort of wicked, too. So, we were having a written final exam. I had no clue what to write, so I was trying to cast an eye on the sheet of the girl next to me. I thought I saw the teacher keeping a close watch on someone else when in fact she had been watching me. So she scolded me, I apologized, looked humbly, and promised never to do it again.

And another case: why I wanted to get to Sofia so badly, I don't recall anymore, but it wasn't on one of the designated days when it was allowed, yet I was determined to go. At the College gate there was a guard in uniform, so I had to leave from somewhere else to avoid being caught; I had chosen the fence at the back. I had to do it outside lunch hours, too, so that most students would be in class. So I arranged with a friend of mine to skip foreign language class – she studied German and I French – and to meet at the chosen spot by the fence a little after 3 o'clock. How would I jump over the fence? She would help me up. I jumped over and picked up my bag. How I got to Sofia I don't recall but I must have taken a cab. And the way back? There was a regular bus line going to the College, but the horror I went through, afraid some of the College employees would be on the bus, see me there, and recognize me! I got on without looking around, huddled myself on one of the back seats, my heart about to burst the whole time. Not even when I was through the gate and in our building did I look up. I ran to our bedroom, took off my coat and ran to the dining hall, where I finally calmed down. How I pulled all this off without fainting! And nobody found out.



Daniel Linder, Faculty Adviser, 1934

What were your favorite school subjects?

I've always had a thing for History.

Tell us a bit about your teachers.

The teachers who came from afar got bigger salaries. There were some very young ones among them. It must have been in our second or third year at the College that romantic love started to occupy our thoughts and we were all in love with Mr. Linder who taught English to the three youngest grade levels. Poor Mr. Linder dreamed of studying Medicine but didn't have the means for it, so he became teacher here to save some money and go back to pursue his dream. Once I saw Elena, one of my friends, lying in bed scratching an "L" on the bedside with her necklace. "Lenche, got you," I told her, "L for Linder."

There was another very handsome young teacher, an American College alumnus from the Class of 1931, his name was Krum Konstantinov. I don't know whether he studied Sports after graduating the College, but either way he returned to the College as a PE teacher. He taught only the boys but many of us girls liked him. He fell for his colleague PE teacher from the United States Ms. Tobias, and the two of them later moved there and got married. In the United States he had no contact to Bulgarians so he had forgotten his mother tongue, some

of my classmates told me after meeting him there.

Did you play some sports while at the College?

Yes, volleyball. (*The 1938 Yearbook tells me Mara was also on the girls' Carnegie Club. She was the President of the Much Ado about Nothing Club, too.*)

You know the Carnegie Club, right? So this representative of the Club comes to the College where a representative of the school's boys' Carnegie Club is his host. They take him to the dining hall for dinner, only one table is set and they look for someone to wait on them – girls, of course – and a friend of mine says to me: "Come, let us go." And I agree. So the two of us show up and at some point she comes to me, "Come, help me out. This guy wouldn't stop talking and I can't get to his plate without interrupting him." I tell her to calm down, go up to the guest in question, and tell him in a kind and polite manner, "May I?" "Yes, of course," he says, and I clear the plate. The story ends there for the time being. Later it comes out that right then the College Carnegie Club host had fallen in love with me, at first sight. I don't recall on what occasion – a sports match probably – but at some point later on he came to me to introduce himself, Pencho Hadjigenchev, Class of '35. The purest human being in the world, and so smart. I wasn't in love though, even if he thought I was.

After graduating the College, he decided to study at the Higher School of Commerce. I stayed on in Sofia and had other people on my mind he didn't know about. He then came back to Sofia and was to leave for Germany for a specialization. Can you imagine, he already knew English fluently, now German, too! I think he got a PhD. I saw him when he was about to leave for Germany. He said he had to pick up a document of some kind in Shumen and asked me to come there and meet him. I thought what the heck, I'd go. And there, while saying goodbye, we kissed each other

halfway between the cheek and the mouth, an innocent kiss showing he was hoping for more. By the time he came back, I had already had a couple of other sweethearts in the meantime. I started at the Higher School of Commerce in Varna myself, so that I could be close to my mom. The love between my mother and I was proverbial. *(tearing up)*

Doriana: Indeed exceptional. It may have to do with my mother marrying and moving to Sofia later. After her mother had been her guiding light for so long, she missed her all the more. It's as if this love intensified with the years even if my mother visited Varna every summer for a month or as long as she could. They exchanged letters, every single day they wrote to one another.

Mara: I was famous for my correspondence with my mom at the College. Our class representative was the one to deliver the letters to us and she brought one for me every single night. Who distributes the mail to you nowadays? *(I explain how letter writing has become sort of obsolete.)*

Doriana: My grandmother was a Literature major, she enjoyed writing. Indeed, those two had a very strong relationship and every time Grandma's name is mentioned, my mom starts crying.

Mara: So, upon his return from



Pencho Hadjigenchev '35

Germany, Pencho contacts me to tell me he is appointed at the National Bank in the town of Haskovo. I thought, "Is he delirious? Varna won't do for me, and he wants to take me to Haskovo. Forget about it." I said nothing. And I didn't go. And that was that.

He thought I would come to him in Haskovo. It was through the newspaper he found out I was getting engaged to someone. I received this two-word telegram: "Why, Marche?" What answer could I come up with? None. How to tell him? That was the end of our story.

So who does a girl with so many admirers choose to marry in the end?

Some things are just meant to be... My friends from the College were all from Sofia and we kept our friendship even after I moved back to Varna, where I wasn't really happy. In Sofia, I had relatives, too. I had a place to stay. My intentions were definitely to move to Sofia for good. So one summer, no, I think it was fall, my best friend Beba (Alexandra Avramova) invites me to come stay with her for a while. And I come. On my way to the train station in Varna, I realize I've left my brand new and very fancy suit at home by mistake and right then, we run into an acquaintance, give him the key to our house, and ask him to run home, get it, and catch up with us at the station which he does. So, this crisis gets averted.

I was taking my time in Sofia, but it was time to go back to university. What could I do to stay around some more? I enrolled in a stenography and type-writing course to make it look like I was working on my education. In that course I become friends with a girl. One day, we are on our way out of the course building and we start discussing where we're from. I say I'm from Varna, and she says she has a cousin there but also a cousin here in Sofia who likes blonde girls, just like me. I think she arranged that we would meet there a few days later, because that's what happened. And so we were introduced to one

another. And he took a liking to me. That didn't mean much, of course. So he asks me out on a date and it turns out that he borrowed a bicycle for me from the shop of one of his father's employees. How did he know I could in fact ride a bicycle, did he ask me first, I don't know. So we were walking about talking and we found out we were in love...

Doriana: ... and that he is a resident of Sofia.

Mara: He was very handsome and successful too, and I was impressed by men of high standing, *(turning to me)* aren't you? *(Not as much as expected, I suppose.)* And when I learned of his standing I fell in love even harder *(we're all laughing)*. We had a big age difference though; he was 14 years my senior. He thought that was too great a difference. I said, "Forget about it, I will always, always love you." But he was really worried.

And so the time came that I had to leave and he was sending me off at the train station with a flower bouquet this big *(forming a full circle with her arms)*. Trains had to travel at night only, because of the air raids. So we kissed and I was thinking how I should hit him on the head with this bouquet so hard that I would break his stupid head... And over it was. In Varna, I was desolate, I spent a lot of time sobbing but said to myself in the end "Let bygones be bygones." It's over and I go back to being my old self, having fun, being friendly and open to girls and to boys, too. Years went by, there were other boys in my life but I kept thinking of him. One day my mother tells me, "Marche, why don't we bake the guy a *kozunak* and send an Easter package to him up in Nish." That's where he is mobilized. And we do. So he gets the package from me, no other woman has done this for him, and that's when he finally believes that I do love him, and tells me: "I will come see you." And he does.

Doriana: Can you imagine what he's had to go through to do that? It takes place in 1944. They get married on 3 September, so this is in the end of August, the Russians



Beba Avramova, Beba Balamezova, and Bozhidar Takev as seniors, 1938

are on their way over and it's no secret what's about to happen and how it will happen, so all people of high standing are gradually making their way out of Sofia and the country. And he is heading the opposite way. At the train station in Nish he runs into colleagues of his, you know, from the Chamber of Commerce he is vice-chairman of, and they go, "Popov, where do you think you're going? Turn around and save your neck!" They are saying he should go to Germany, after all he had studied there and knew the language. It wouldn't be so hard to reach Germany from Nish. "I can't," he replied, "I've made a promise, I'm getting married!" "Are you crazy? A wedding now! It will get ugly there, go back!" "No, I've made a promise." And he returns on 1 September. He catches a terrible cold on the road; he had his tonsils so he was apt to catching colds and having anginas. On the day of the wedding he has a 40-degree-Celsius fever but returns to say 'yes' to this lady here. They get married at the cathedral in Varna. A lot of people come to the big wedding. My mother has organized the whole thing as soon as she has found out it's really happening. His parents are there, his brother lives in Varna already, where he also gets married later, so many relatives are there anyway. I don't know much about the wedding but knowing my mother, the dress must have been ready a year prior to the proposal.

Mara, what happened to your husband who, as you said, 'had a high standing' before

9 September 1944, and what happened to you as an American College alumna?

My husband lost his job overnight. The things that happen in one's life, the fortuities, there's no end to it.

Doriana: It's as if nothing happens by accident.

Mara: As per my career, I met a fellow alumna from the Higher School of Commerce and she told me that there were vocational retraining courses for teachers at the High School of Commerce. And I thought, this sounds like the right job for me, after all I studied Commerce after the American College. So I enrolled and completed the course. But the things I had to go through to get all the signatures on my certificate of completion in the end, the number of times I had to come back and beg, the number of questions about the College I had to answer. There was this doorman who asked me once: "What's wrong with you? You keep showing up here." But it was great that I took this retraining course, because later it allowed me to give private English lessons and so made it possible for us to get by financially.

My younger sister studied at the College, too. She was 6 years my junior, so she started the year after I graduated, Class of 1945, so they couldn't complete the full course of their studies at the College.

Doriana: The odyssey with my mom's jobs is endless – one month here, half a day there, same at the next place. My father, unemployed. At first, they were searching for him

and he was hiding.

Mara: His father hired him to work for the Commercial Newspaper as commercial manager. That was his 'big' office, 80 leva monthly salary, you really don't want to know. His family used to be rich and influential before. Then they had to discontinue the newspaper, as well, so he joined the Municipality as a craftsmen inspector, on account of his previous Chamber of Commerce experience.

Years later, my son applied to be a member of the Communist Party, which was a must for some higher positions, and he was denied membership because of his parents' Western education, mine at the College and his father's in Germany.

Doriana: Only a handful of us could keep leading a decent life during communism. Everybody else – in the sticks, no matter that they were intelligent, had higher education and professions.

Mara, did you stay in touch with your classmates?

Yes, I stayed in touch with everyone in Sofia. Two of the boys in our class kept inviting the whole class over. One of them was famous basketball player Bozhidar Takev. At the College he used to date my best friend Alexandra Avramova. Bozhidar and I weren't close back then, he and Beba were always together, and there's a crowd. I was close to his wife later though, Dancheto, also an American College alumna, Class of 1940. Dancheto and Bozhidar came from the English Junior High School and skipped a year upon enrolling at ACS. I think she fell in love with one of the young male teachers at the College in our senior year. She lived close by. On the other hand, Bozhidar's older sister had studied with my husband.

Some years ago, it was election time and I was on my way to our polling station when I ran into Bozhidar and Dancheto on the street (we were neighbors), so I asked them to vote wisely. A few days later I saw the announcement that she had passed away. They only had



Daughter and mother: Doriana and Mara

one child. I heard Bozhidar dreamt of having a Bozhidar Junior, which didn't come to pass. They have one son, Alexander. He grew up abroad and works and lives abroad now. He isn't a basketball player.

My closest friends were Beba (Alexandra) Avramova, she was the granddaughter of Sofia's first mayor, and Beba (Evdokia) Balamezova, the daughter of Professor Balamezov, Dean of the Sofia University Law Department who later became rector of the university. We called both of them Beba because they both had older sisters, in those families they endearingly called the younger baby girls Beba.

(Mara leaves the room and I use the opportunity to ask her daughter about the relationship between the two of them.)

Doriana, you mentioned the strong bond Mara had with her mother. It seems to me that similar closeness and warmth characterizes the relationship between you and your mother.

Doriana: She is sort of my baby now that my granddaughter is 17 already. I lost my husband 11 years ago and my mother is the person to take care of now. I've devoted myself to her. It's an attitude you

have. The example you see growing up is what you know, what remains at the end of the day.

My mom was the one who came up with my rather unusual name, of course. I rejoice at her vitality, her typical Capricorn clearness of purpose: she is always right, you know. We have a daily routine, her longevity may very well have to do with that routine – everyday at least a half hour of walking.

Mara: Yes, I'm a Capricorn, I was born on January 9. My General Practitioner's assistant calls me Mary Christmas – I'm merry and I'm Mara – Mary, born on Christmas according to the Julian calendar.

I've been wondering whether I would be able to come visit the College sometime soon. If Bozhidar were still around... He would come pick me up in his car whenever there was a celebration of some kind there, and we would gladly keep each other company to the College and back.

(I'm standing up to leave when the topic of the newly elected 45th President of USA comes up. "I'm in shock since yesterday with this idiot elected," Mara says and then she is reminded of something so interesting we have to sit down again.)

I nearly forgot to tell you the story of how I went to the USA when I was 86. All by myself. So, in freshman year at the American College, I start corresponding with an American girl named Alice. Is this still done at the College? Like I said, we started in freshman year, so we would have a sort of decent vocabulary and get a chance to practice it. Our whole class would write letters to a whole class of kids our age somewhere in USA. I've received letters from others too, but only my letter exchange with Alice grew into a life-long correspondence. We created a bond that lasted from my third year at the College, that is 1934-35, until I visited her in 2004, and afterwards, too. She came from North Dakota but she was married to a pastor and they moved a lot. As high school students we would write to each other about our friendships, our romantic relationships, the things that moved or excited us. I recall how at some point, facing the prospect of their next move, this time to Minnesota, Alice was filled with indignation: "Instead of sunny California, I'm to roam the freezing cold here." After retiring, they bought their own place in Battle Lake, Minnesota, where they would hold yearly extended-family gatherings: they would set a weekend to meet up and it was a large family, you know, they had four kids of their own and adopted a couple of black kids.

So how did this idea of you going to the USA at 86 come about at all? How was it carried out?

At some point Alice wrote to me that her youngest daughter's husband, also a pastor, is appointed the head pastor for the KFOR in Kosovo during the war there, and Alice's daughter Donna had the right to fly to a safe country nearby, like Bulgaria, and pay him a visit. She decided to use the opportunity and come meet with her husband in Sofia. We discussed this in a series of letters. "Don't you worry, I will be her hostess," I told my friend.

The KFOR forces were based in the Rodina Hotel which is not far from

our place. When the day of Donna's arrival came, I went to the hotel and asked about her at the reception desk. They called her room, went up and checked in person, she was out. How could that be, we had arranged a meeting! I didn't know what to do and went back home in the end, desperate. And who do I find there? Donna with her daughter. They visited our home a couple of times during that week, my son took them to the Rila Monastery, we traveled around the country a bit, and then they left.

A year later, Donna calls me on the phone: „Mary, want to come to America?“ I stand there with the phone receiver in my hand, speechless. „What do you mean, America? There's no way I can afford the ticket.“ „Forget that, she says, my brother and I are paying. You see, we have decided to surprise our mother for her birthday. You'll be the surprise!“ And indeed, they arrange the tickets and one fine day, my 86-year-old self sets off on a journey, alone. Crazy, the fear I felt, I was terrified! It's not just crossing the ocean and landing over in America: one flight to New York, then the next one across the country to Arizona. At the airport they were waiting for me with posters saying „Welcome, Mrs. Mary.“ There were even journalists from the local TV station.

Doriana: Alice and her husband traveled to Arizona to escape the Minnesota winters, too cold for them. They stayed in a house perfect for retired people, with social workers assisting them with the daily tasks. My mother was very satisfied with her visit. She stayed less than 2 weeks, though it seemed long to her, but she saw all the must-see sites. They even took her to a casino. The journalists from the TV station were impressed with the longevity of this friendship; they kept it up 72 years, from the time they were 14 to the present, both of them 86, only through exchanging letters, without meeting each other. They knew everything of importance about each other, they shared a lot – I gave



Mara on Slavi's Show

birth, my son this, your daughter that, who married whom and does what for a living.

Mara: Arizona is sort of the southernmost state in the western part of the USA, almost in the desert. It is the state with one of the largest percentages of Indians in the USA, a big part of the area of the state is reservation land. I was surprised to find out that Indians were in charge in the commercial and building sectors there. When we went to the casino, to which I was initially reluctant, I even won a dollar; I still keep it. I recall seeing this super old Indian in a wheel chair pushed by a young white guy, the Indian waving his cane around as if he owned the place.

My hosts took me to church too, of course, at Sunday mass. Everyone stood up to greet me because the pastor had told them about the 86-year-old guest coming all the way from Bulgaria. The whole congregation stood up and out of nowhere I heard myself singing the psalm with them. We must have studied it at the American College. They were stunned, they even gave me the floor afterwards so I could tell them about myself. I held my little speech.

Doriana: Oh, my mom has the gift of speech. Next, the media here in Bulgaria heard of the old lady that went to meet her American pen pal after 70 years. One day we get a call

from *Slavi's Show*; they even came over to discuss inviting my mother as their guest so she can tell the story of her friendship with Alice. And so, we went, my mom was on *Slavi's Show* alright. Next, the newspapers wrote about the show. But the best part was that during the show they rang up Alice and the two friends spoke to each other on air. After that my mom was a little disappointed that she wasn't treated like a media star. „They keep mentioning Petko Bocharov but not me. Am I not a media star too, now?“

Mara: Sadly, both Alice and her husband died the year after my visit. I'm glad we did this in time, you know.

Do you have a message to current students at the College and younger alumni?

Oh, yes, I even drafted something here.

Doriana: She dictated this to me when you called the first time, you know, before we knew you would come.

Mara: (reading): „Dear young people, I see that my favorite old College, where I spent the happiest years of my youth, continues to give you new goals, just as it did with us once.“

Doriana: She means how you take care of the bond between the school and its old alumni.

Mara: (continues reading): „Follow these objectives diligently and you will find yourselves turning into strong and good people in the process.“

In January, a couple of weeks after Mara has turned 98, we talk on the phone and she tells me her birthday celebration was huge. Her best present - a letter from her friend's daughter Donna that arrived on her birthday. Coincidence?

When Sanders Hall Was Art Central Arts Fest's Premiere in 1995

By Georgi Iliev

It was the toughest period after the fall of communism. It was the time of Jean Videnov's socialist government, when electricity and water were rationed, banks went bankrupt, people's savings were lost; hyperinflation and social unrest ran rampant. "Bulgaria was in an incredibly difficult situation, and so was the College," Nia Decheva says.

Nia started working as an art teacher at the American College of Sofia in 1994, and with the start of that academic year, she also became head of the Arts Department.

"There were no cafes in Sofia back then, there was nothing, I don't think there was even a McDonald's yet. (*The first McDonald's in Sofia opened in 1995 in Slaveykov Sq.*) Out this way, it was a dark zone: there were no buildings, there was absolutely nothing, only roaming stray dogs. There were thorn-bushes, one could not pass. We all gathered in Sanders: all the classes and all teachers were there. I taught in Rm. 303 on the third floor."

In the Austrian Confectionery on Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd., Sandy Charles proposed this brave idea to Nia: "What do you say we do an Arts Fest?"

Sandra "Sandy" Charles was the wife of then-president Arthur Charles and worked as a pro-bono PR for the American College of Sofia.

She recalls: "The intimidating presence of Mevrey (*MBP, the Ministry of the Interior*) on the campus during the post WWII era until ACS reopened in 1992 made the campus off limits to everyone. We wanted students to feel a sense of ownership, as well as parents and the public to feel welcome on the campus, and most especially the remaining alumni to be free to visit their beloved alma mater. An open-house event like the Arts Fest when all of the public was invited in provided an opportunity



Nia Decheva, ACS art teacher since 1994

for people to come in numbers and, we hoped, feel relaxed about coming on campus and possibly have some fun in the bargain."

The image and philosophy they wanted to convey to Bulgarian people was openness. "She wanted to show the College's proper place in the cultural society of Sofia," Nia understood in that first meeting.

The idea was to exhibit Bulgarian artists in Sanders Hall.

Sandy knew that an event of the size she wanted it to be would need long-

range planning. Mustering resources, arranging logistics, advertising and most of all, selling the idea to parents, students, teachers and persuading artists to participate.

Sandy turned to Nia because she was a renowned author herself. She was very active at the time, frequently exhibiting and functioning in the thick of things. As she put it, "I know everybody and everybody knows me."

Sandy wanted Nia to invite whoever she felt would be appropriate to



ACS staff in 1996, Arthur and Sandy Charles in the middle

participate in an exhibition. The idea was to promote the College – to spread the word that it was being active in the city, to have its name heard more and more, and have it connected to the cultural life of Sofia. “It was an incredible idea, very much revolutionary,” Nia says. “And so I got on with it.”

She called preeminent artist Svetlin Rusev, former Chairman of the Union of Bulgarian Artists (1973-85), the only painter member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, a great public figure and household name to this day. He wholeheartedly embraced the idea. His endorsement was a significant achievement, and when the press reported the event the main focus was on “Svetlin Rusev exhibiting in the American College.”

“I went to his studio,” Nia recalls. “He gave to the College two works that I picked up still dripping. The price was \$2000 which was high. They were quite large, at least 50 cm by 70 cm. He said that if we sold them all the money would go to the College. He said, *You know that they're lining up at my studio for these works.* He sells everything.”

Then Nia rushed over to sculptor Georgi Chapkanov who had a studio on the same street. He also gave a number of works to be sold at the exhibit with a percentage of the profits to go to the College.

The other star artist to participate was painter Gredi Assa. The rest who took part were Nia Decheva

herself who exhibited textile art, her colleagues Dobrin Peychev and Natalia Himirska, who was the first art teacher at ACS in 1992, and Valentin Stefanoff who lives in Paris and creates black-and-white drawings.

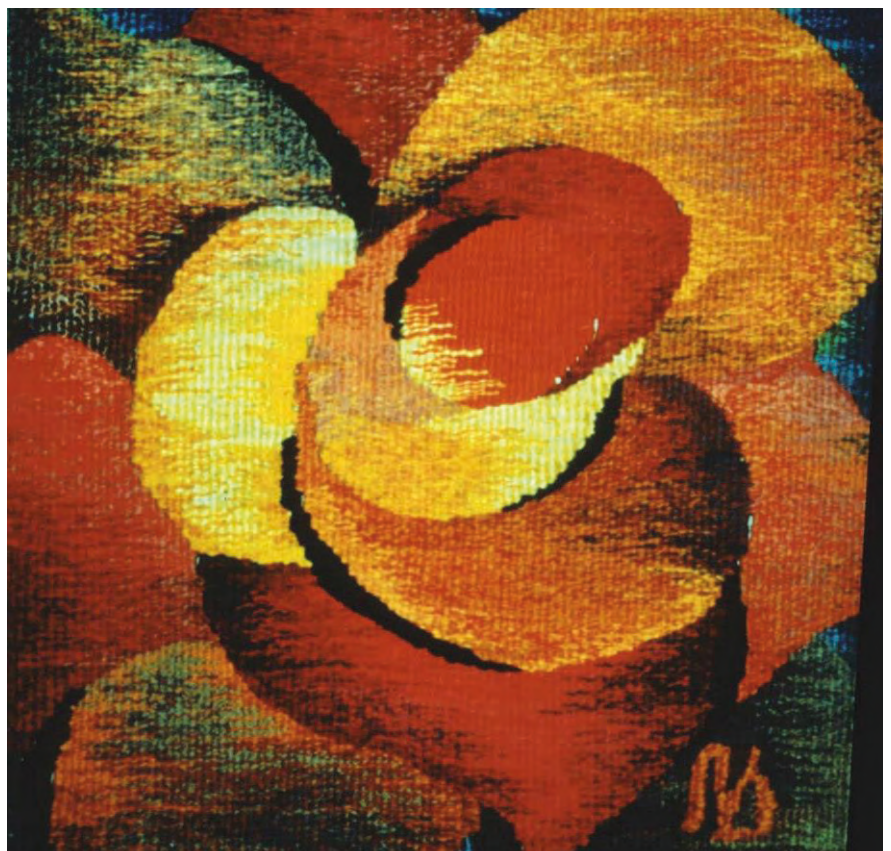
“With these artists we wanted to attract the public's attention,” Nia says. “Because where they go cameramen and journalists follow. Our goal was to draw attention to the College, and we succeeded.”

“I remember that Svetlin was very

keen on seeing where his works were displayed,” she relates. “So I picked him up on Saturday, and he came to the College to see them. I'll never forget how in those days nothing on campus was ever locked. There was nobody, it was deserted for the weekend. I showed him Room 303 where the art studio was. Downstairs, he saw the exhibition that we had arranged in the Art Gallery. The entire Arts Fest was in those two rooms. Everywhere was unlocked – I even showed him the office of the president, because Arthur Charles kept a little exhibit of student art. I wanted to show him what the students were doing.”

And when the day came – May 14, 1995 – the success exceeded the organizers' expectations. The turnout was great, the emotions ran high, and the wave of publicity was strong.

“What Arts Fest is now is what we came up with back then,” Nia says. “There was always a talent show but it used to happen at the Fountain. There was always a musical program



Bulgarian Rose, tapestry by Nia Decheva



ACS Arts Fest, 1996

but it would take place in Ostrander, which was Main then. There have always been games, raffle draw. Myself and the computer department made the tickets and invitations. The raffle tickets sold for 50 stotinki, which later became a lev. That was Sandy's idea, selling everything for coupons. It was a novel practice for me."

Then-president Arthur Charles wrote: "Your work and dedication turned Sanders Hall into one of the finest art galleries in the country."

Sandy admits that absolutely none of it would have happened without Nia's commitment to the idea: "I could not have done anything on the scale we did without her. It was she who got artists involved and interested in exhibiting their art, took me to radio and TV stations to pique their interest, and in general guided me every step of the way with cheer, a can-do attitude, ideas, and solutions to problems."

"Furthermore, exhibiting at the American College at the time was somewhat risky, because we were still teetering on the edge," Nia adds. "The period of Jean Videnov was a frightful time in Bulgaria."

Apart from a work by Valentin Stefanoff there were no sales. A couple of prominent art patrons from the business elite didn't come through. But the event had an irrevocable PR effect.

Sandy summarizes, "More than an auction, the exhibited art work was a gallery of different styles and

mediums to be enjoyed. Another objective was to involve parents in life at the College. We had games, food, and chess tournaments. Parents donated food and beverages, and volunteered time to help run things. Parent volunteering was a new concept and not easily instituted, but in the end, they did it."

Since the first Arts Fest, things have changed and developed, while others have become tradition. It has certainly spread beyond Sanders Hall and expanded to feature mostly student art and activities.

Nia says, "I want us to remember Stoyan Karadjov. In this format of Arts Fest, I want to thank Stoyan Karadjov and his *boro* in front of Sanders that concluded every Arts Fest. He enthused kids and teachers alike with his incredible *joie de vivre*, with the positive attitude he exuded, with his great professionalism. And I also want to give a shout-out to Vlado Marinov and his rock'n'roll. We had modern dance with Elisaveta Yordanova who is now in New York and has a troupe for modern dance and Bulgarian folk dancing."

Those are the people who created Arts Fest. It all started with great enthusiasm and love. "Perhaps because we were young," Nia says. "It was a great time. The people who worked here had faith in everything we did, and we loved each other very much. When one is young and believes, one's perspective is very different."

And then, "I thought that Arts Fest

would be a flash in the pan. And it stayed. Non-stop, every year. That is the event that the kids are looking forward to. It's great that we're giving the arts in the College their due, because it is what makes this college unique. Because we're not a music school or art school or ballet school, and we're exhibiting great levels of skill."

At the time of the first ACS Arts Fest President Charles summarized it best: "It is wonderful to know that so many people could have been so united in their love for the College. Thanks to people like you the College will endure despite the many difficulties it may face on the outside. I am certain that our arts festival will become the benchmark by which all other such events will be measured in the future."



The Charles's at the Arches National Park, Utah, 2017

Slava Doytcheva '07: Acting as Self-Revelation

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

I first came across Slava's name in her capacity as Sofia Pride Film Fest artistic director in 2016. Later that summer, I saw her award-winning short film *Heart of Lead* (2013) at an open-air screening in my favorite Sofia, the Sofia of summertime. The following winter Slava was the person to come to the rescue of a pre-war American College alumnus looking for a Dictaphone to safeguard his rich life-story. Sometime after that, on what seemed to be the coldest winter day ever, we ran into each other on the Sofia University stairs at a small local Women's March on Washington. I wanted to know more about Slava and her work, so this April, I asked her for an interview and she instantly agreed. To my surprise, Slava had no desire to be informed of the interview questions beforehand. She came to ACS on that strange April day when it snowed. As she was shaking snow off her parka's hood, Slava told me with a hint of a smile that she passed for a student at the police gate.



Slava, in say 7 words, what have you been doing since you graduated from ACS 10 years ago?

I can do it in one word: seeking. It encompasses all the other ones. I'm still seeking and think it's going to last long, if not my whole life. But I'm happy with that.

How and when did you get into

acting and film-making?

Actually, I started by acting. It was a complete accident and it happened while I was at ACS. There was a casting for some American film and a friend of mine brought me, almost by force, to accompany her. So they took my photo, my phone number, and never called me.

Two years later, I was 15 or 16

then, an unknown number starts calling me over and over again and finally I pick up and they say, *we want to invite you to this casting, this Sunday, this place*, and I say *yes* with no intention of going. I didn't think they would follow through. And Sunday comes, I'm not there obviously, and my phone keeps ringing, ringing, ringing. Somehow



Slava in London Film School

my home number starts ringing next and I tell my parents *don't pick up or if you do, tell them I'm not here*. They did it once, did it twice, and finally my mom starts a conversation with the person on the other side. It turns out she is the sister of a colleague of my mom's, and my mom says, *we have to go, we can't embarrass ourselves in front of these people*. So I went and I was a very bratty child in this casting: *I don't want to sing, I don't want to tell you a joke*, but they liked it. And I went through the next round and the next, and finally they chose me. And my attitude was *if I'm not good, that's completely your problem, I never pushed for this*. So very liberating! It was very, very exhilarating actually. And I fell in love with film then.

This was *Christmas Tree Upside Down*, a feature film by Bulgarian film-maker Ivan Tscherkelov. I like that film very much. It was a very special experience. And then I started thinking, I don't want to be an actress, but I want to be the one who makes all the decisions, I want control! Whenever we had breaks, I would go to the gaffers, the lightning technicians, and the sound people and ask them how things worked. It was very interesting to learn the whole process.

But then, I wasn't brave enough when I graduated from ACS to really pursue this; I didn't believe enough in myself. So I went to Milan (Bocconi) and studied Economics like everyone else back then. I hated it, I hated everything about

it. So after I graduated, I made the decision, *okay, I really have to do this*. I was lucky though, because with Bocconi, I could do an exchange program with the US, so I spent one semester at Boston College, and they had no requirements on what kind of courses I would take, so I took all the art courses and it was amazing. And when I came back from that semester abroad it was decided and I started looking into film schools. By the fall, I was in London studying Film. As you see, it wasn't a straight path.

Is there a part you dream of playing? That is, if you want to act.

Funnily, I want to act more and more now. I started by not wanting this and now things are changing. I have three films as an actress. That first one was great but I don't know how it happened, what they did; it was just accidental in a way. The second one was not so good, because the expectations on me were very, very high at that point. It wasn't like *if I'm bad it's your fault*, it was *if I'm bad, it's my own fault*. Years passed, I studied Film and I made films until I acted again and I loved it, because now I understood what was happening and it was a very powerful experience. Now, after that, I actually want to do it again.

And no, I don't have a particular part I dream of playing but I actually would like to work with a director that is going to push me beyond my limit. I don't know who that is

though. That's the joy of acting. I've been wondering a lot lately, as I'm doing the casting for my own film, *what do I do, what do I enjoy, what am I looking for in a person?* I work a lot with non-actors, but I don't differentiate in that way. It's not about training at all, it's about something else that either you have or you don't. If you do have it, you have to work on it of course, expand it.

The thing about acting in its true sense, I think, is that you have to be very, very open to let things pass through you, to be willing to experience things, to be broken, to be exhilarated. You have to accept that you are a vehicle of emotions. It's a high, an addiction actors feel. You want to feel, you want to experience things, you want to cry; it really is like a drug. You want more and more. So, to be pushed even beyond that, I think, is the dream of every actor. You acquire an experience but every time, you have to get there anew. It's possible to do it on your own but it's, of course, much better if it's in collaboration with the director. It's not good if actors are directing themselves although it happens often.

There's a great misconception that acting is playing a part, being another person, pretending to be something, that it's pretense, false, a game if you will. But in its true and purest forms, acting is actually self-revelation, it's you finding things in yourself and exposing them, the real thing, like stripping yourself naked and allowing yourself to be vulnerable and to show things that maybe you don't like about yourself. That's when it works. Besides, with films you don't know what kind of scripts are out there. It's not like theater where the big plays are already known and you read them and you want this part. With film, it's a constant innovation, there are new and new stories, so you never know what's going to come your way. It's interesting.

Looking back now to that first movie of yours, can you describe how it happened that you performed so well?

Yes, yes. The director knew what he



Slava in *Crayfish* (2009) - Photo by Simon Varsano

wanted and he just casted well. In film-making casting is maybe 85% of the job of the director. If you get the right person, it's going to be OK. And then there's another 15% which is creating the right circumstances, allowing something real and truthful to really happen in that moment.

Who are your heroes in film-making?

I don't want to list names because there are many film-makers that I admire. But I can generalize and say that these are people who are relentless in their work. They really dig deep and go as far as they can without compromising. They all have integrity and the honest intention to tell and share something important, often personal.

What inspires you?

It can be anything. We can be sitting here and I see the workers down there, a small situation happens, I notice it and something can grow out of this. In this kind of job you don't know where inspiration will come from, so the best you can do is do a lot of things, random stuff.

And keep your eyes open?

Yeah, definitely. You have to be on your toes. I think I've learned a lot about people this way. It's very important to understand people, to

read not even between the lines but behind everything. Film-making is a lot about psychology.

Do you have a favorite film character?

Now I'm thinking of a character that's just funny to me. It's a film by this Turkish director, Nuri Bilge Ceylan called *Distant* (2002). There's a character, basically the director and filmmaker's alter-ego. It's a very slow film where almost nothing happens, but it's funny because there is a scene – and maybe you'll have to cut this – where his cousin, a very simple man, is visiting from the village and our guy pretends to be super intellectual, so he turns on this amazing film that all film-makers love, *Stalker*, and they both doze off. As soon as the cousin leaves the room, the main character turns on the porn channel and starts masturbating and he is obviously much more alive in that moment but when he hears the cousin moving about next-door, he turns on *Stalker* again. It's self-irony at its best! But back to your question, it's rare to find real strong female characters. I think that's a problem with cinema now, in the whole world. There aren't enough women film-makers who are given the same chance as men and as a result we have a lot less female characters. So I think I still have to

see that character that will make me exclaim, *ab, this is it!*

Create it!

I'm trying... Of course, you're right, but there are people who are better than me, they can do better, and I still have to learn, as well.

What are you up to now?

I'm currently in pre-production for a short film. It's going to be the first short I'm actually shooting in Bulgaria: only Bulgarian cast, Bulgarian crew. It's a very, very personal story and it's been tough to get it to the point where it is but hopefully, next year, around this time, we can have some interesting updates about it.

Tell me, what is ACS to you now, 10 years after graduating? Is there anything you learned here that you still find useful?

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to study here. I see what a difference that made to my life and to the way I was prepared for certain challenges. It creates a discipline of thinking, approaching problems, and problem-solving. It does give a lot broader view of the world, so I'm grateful for having been here.

What are your worst and best memories at ACS?

I don't think I have worst memories.



Slava at *Heart of Lead* shooting

The whole high-school experience wasn't as dramatic for me as it was for other people but it wasn't as exciting as it was for others, either. I was kind of in the middle of it, it just went by. But what I remember often is how much I loved being on the football team. Many of my best memories are from practices and games.

I think I was a very lazy student until like 10th grade. I didn't put in any effort at all but then something clicked and I became interested in actually all the subjects and it was exciting; I actually started to like reading, learning, knowledge... I don't know how it happened, what triggered it, maybe it was a gradual thing. Around that time I discovered that I loved writing. I had super bad grades in Bulgarian classes until 9th grade and then there was a click and *ah, I get it now*, and it was super nice from then on. So I had things like that. And I had good teachers.

What would you say is your most marked characteristic?

I don't know. I'm very curious about life and people. Curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back.

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

I won't change anything because I've learned that over time, your weaknesses can turn into strengths;

all the problems you think you have could be blessings in disguise. It's just a matter of self-awareness.

If you could change one thing about school, what would it be?

I haven't thought about it from a teacher's perspective but I do think there has to be a lot more creativity in school, in the way things are approached, so kids don't think *I have to memorize this and repeat it*. There has to be real problem-solving, creativity has to be encouraged. Whatever you become in life, it's very nurturing and nourishing to allow yourself to create. Actually, the things I enjoyed the most while at ACS were projects where we had the freedom to come up with something on our own.

What do you most value in your friends?

I value most honesty, a certain willingness to be open and vulnerable, and a sense of humor is very important.

And what is it that you most dislike in people? Dishonesty, I suppose?

Yes, although sometimes I can understand it because it's very scary to be honest and to be vulnerable. What really puts me off is aggression, violence, and dismissal of other people.

Sometimes you need to let out steam and even be aggressive

though.

Yes, but there's a way to do this which is both honest to yourself and respectful to others. It doesn't mean you can't get angry or can't shout but I think a lot of people overstep the boundaries to the point where any communication is turned into a constant humiliation: you humiliate me and I humiliate you, I pass it on and it becomes an endless cycle. It's very apparent here in Bulgaria. It's a constant thing. I don't know how it can be stopped. I've talked a lot about this with my friend Ralitz Petrova¹, it's everywhere and it's unstoppable because no one is strong enough to stop themselves from taking their frustrations out on another person after having been humiliated.

It can start from you saying *No, I won't let you humiliate me*.

Or not taking things personally, which is extremely hard. I don't have the key to this, I'm just thinking out loud. Because when you just say *no*, sometimes the reaction doubles, which in turn pushes your buttons and you still go there.

Which phrases do you most overuse?

I hope I don't have such phrases. I care about language and I always try to be super precise with the way I express myself. It's crucial to my job as a director and artist, but I have found that this can apply to any life situation. I always pay attention to when or why someone loses my attention when they talk and vice versa. Words are extremely powerful when used right.

What is your greatest fear?

I have many fears and if you watch my films you're going to find out what they are. (*laughing*) I work with fears every day, with myself, my own fears. Fear and anger are big propellers for people. Fear usually paralyzes me but then I think about it a lot. So then it becomes a creative thing and I want to recycle it, I want to understand it, to work through it. You're going to see it in my next film which is about another fear.

¹Director of *Godless*, winner of among others Golden Leopard for Best Film at Locarno 2016. Slava is assistant director for *Godless*.



Slava in *Lift for Patients* (2017) - Photo by Yana Blajeva

Is there anything that you regret?

No, not really. It's good. Of course, in the moment it's super hard to see it but as time passes you see that it had to happen this way, there's a lesson you learned, nothing is ever in vain.

How did you get that wise so young?

I don't know, I just spend a lot of time thinking about things, reflecting. *Why am I like this, why are people like this?* And I put a lot of work into myself, I go to a psychologist, we talk a lot about these things. I just want to keep asking questions, to doubt things, nothing is so defined in this world, there's always another angle.

I like this interview.

Me too.

Are the questions over?

No, there are like ten more.

Great.

What is your idea of perfect happiness? And don't say it's being pushed beyond the limits.

No, no, I am aware this is just a step on the way towards happiness, whereas happiness is beyond that, it's where you don't need to be pushed. It's a spiritual concept for me, this perfect happiness, it's beyond this life. I don't think it's attainable here. It's always fleeting.

There's a story about a priest, or was it just a simple man, a very wise

one in any case. When he was dying he gave his son two boxes, one was yellow, one was blue. *When everything goes well open the yellow box*, he told his son. *If everything goes bad, open the blue box*. The son's life was not very easy, he had a lot of problems, his child died, so he opened the blue box and it said *'This, too, shall pass'*. After that things started going better, he got rich, his wife had more children and finally, he opened the yellow box and it said *'This, too, shall pass'*. Of course, it's so easy to say these things, but life is constantly challenging. So, just keep asking questions and try to be more aware, not just action-reaction.

What is the biggest challenge you have faced in your life so far?

It has to be coming out. Coming out to myself first was hard, because it relates to how you interact with others and how much you can take or allow. But I think I'm on the other end of it now. I'm doing The Sofia Pride Film Festival, a movie festival showing the Bulgarian audience a selection of the best contemporary LGBTI movies in the world in the week leading to Sofia Pride. The fest has been running for 5 years, and I have been involved in creating the program since last year. That was great for me – it provided me the opportunity to apply my strengths, to demonstrate my courage and to be a source of inspiration for other people.

What do you consider your

greatest achievement?

It has to be the same answer. As I said earlier, your weaknesses become your strengths, so overcoming myself, centering myself is my greatest achievement.

Who helped you the most to get where you are?

I've been very lucky to have met several mentors in my life without looking for them. The director of that first movie I acted in, he became my mentor and still is in certain ways. Someone else who I was in a relationship with is still my guiding post creatively. Then, when I came to Bulgaria I was lucky to meet one of my best friends and also collaborator, Ralitza, who is (in my opinion) one of the most promising film-makers of the world today. I must say I always gravitate towards people that I can learn from, I seek them constantly, so I'm happy that I meet such people and that there are these people that I keep learning from in my life. But that also means you avoid or dismiss other people, friends have told me I've been dismissive. I'm not that wise to be completely accepting of others. This is something I have to work on.

What is your favorite journey?

Any journey can become eventful. I do love to travel but I can't choose one favorite journey, because special things have happened to me on the shortest trip to Kremikovtzi, while traveling across the Atlantic has not always been as charged. You have to really be open to life, the best things really are those that are unplanned.

OK, I have this one example of a really special journey: I was in Berlin last year for the Berlinale, where my current film project was selected for development, and the day I arrived in Berlin, where I had never been before by the way, I had a few hours before having to start the program. So I was just roaming about this new city and I went into the museum of terror and that was, that was... The experience completely devastated me. But it was very important that it happened to me in that moment. At the museum, you first see how the whole Holocaust operated, the structure, the daily simple things of

how it all worked out. Then they have different sections about the groups of people they targeted, starting with political prisoners, Jewish people, Roma people, mentally disabled people, that I didn't know were also eliminated... So I was moving methodically, going from 1.1. to 1.2. and so on until I came to the section about homosexual people... and at that moment, with all this build up, I just broke down. It felt very personal to me, it pushed a button. Something big happened and it was that pain and that experience that then allowed me to go through the whole development week there in Berlin. It gave me purpose and courage, I felt I was on the right track with my project and most importantly that this project mattered. At the end, this whole trip changed me absolutely. During that whole week, the best kinds of coincidences happened at the same time, they pushed me, (*laughing*) I was pushed beyond my limits and that was great.

What is your current state of mind?



Slava at the Berlinale Short Film Station

Actually on the way here I was very stressed because of my work, I was worried about finding a location. I'm also casting now and I'm constantly looking around, always running through my head *Is this person right? Can they do it?* But now, after we started talking, I feel very present, so I'm happy right now.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I want to be wiser.

What do you want to be known for?

I want to be known as a proper person, a solid person, a person with integrity in whatever I'm doing.

Your message to whoever reads this?

Don't get too comfortable! (*I probably look puzzled because Slava proceeds to say*) We're seeking comfort all the time and I don't think that's good for us in the long run.



Slava on set, 2011

Kosara Tsoneva '17: Always on the Go

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Kosara has been involved in every ACS musical since she joined ACS. She acts, sings, dances and likes math, too. At ACS, she started up the Women Empowerment Club and come summer, she'll be off to the USA to study business at an Ivy League school. Always smiling, always active, when I ask her to meet me for an interview she seems not to mind in the least adding another appointment to her already busy senior year musical performer schedule. On the last day before spring break, a mere couple of weeks before her last high-school class and her last ACS exam, Kosara has a free 7th period so we meet at Onda. I notice again how graceful she is, fragile on the outside, but as I'm about to find out, fierce and very determined, too. Oh, to be young again! We share a couch at an accidentally empty Art Gallery and talk about Kosara's ACS, her personality and aspirations.

What are you up to these days?

I have 14 more days of school. I'm pretty excited about graduation but at the same time, I know I'm going to be very sad at Last Bell and at my last musical performance the day before. I play Carmen on opening night.

What's your current state of mind?

I'm curious about what's happening in the next couple of months, excited about where I'm going next, sort of nostalgic.

This year's musical that you are a crucial part of is *Fame*. In your opinion, does fame give or take more?

It takes more than it gives, probably. In 9th grade I was on *Bulgaria's Got Talent*, which was very demanding, and stressful, too, as I had the College at the same time. When you appear on TV, everyone starts making comments about you. At first, I made the mistake to read those comments against my better judgement and my parents' advice and the mean ones affected me. In the end, the experience made me stronger though.

How did you and your family choose ACS?

It was my decision that my parents supported. I'm originally from Varna, so enrolling at ACS was a



Kosara in *High School Musical* in 2014 - Photo by Konstantin Karchev '15

pretty big step for the whole family. My mother moved with me while my father stayed in Varna because of his work, coming whenever he could to Sofia. It was totally worth it. I can't imagine my school years being better. Yes, it was demanding but I like being challenged. I had so many things to do, three days of the week I was coming home after school at 6:30 pm because of the musical and pulling all-nighters.

When do you actually take a break and relax?

I'm one of those people who are just energetic and like to be always on the go, who once that they've started with something, want to see it through. Breaks are needed,

I take them sometimes, but I get pretty bored (laughing).

You are the founder of the ACS Women Empowerment Club. In your opinion, how do we empower women?

I founded the club in my junior year. We empower women by showing role models, by inviting as our guest-lecturers successful women from sectors not seen as typically female, like Information Technology, Investment Banking, etc. We are actually having the elections for next year's president and vice-president of the club next week. I'm proud to be leaving something to ACS.

When did you first appear on

Kosara on *Bulgaria's Got Talent*

stage?

It was in a ballroom dancing competition back when I was 5. That was a bitch (laughing). In kindergarten and middle school I was always singing, acting, and dancing. I continued with ballroom dancing; in Varna I was a competitor, training for many hours daily. Here, I had the academics and the musical, plus the whole process of finding a partner who is a good fit for me in a new city. There are many girl dancers, but few guys who don't quit after just a couple of months of dancing, who stay long enough to actually become better. I dance in the musical though. That's something I love about the musical – that it combines all my passions in one.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I haven't decided yet. That's probably why I'm pursuing a dual degree. I know I will find my passion in college.

What inspires you?

Positivity. I usually try to look on the bright side of things myself,

which is why I'm always positive and smiling. You should enjoy what you do, your life.

Who helped you the most to get where you are?

My parents, for sure. They've been nothing but supportive, never trying to impose their opinions on me, trusting that whatever I choose would be the best for me.

And my friends, too. My closest friends are the ones who really believe in me and whom I can rely on and share with. When I learned

I got accepted to UPenn, Wharton Business School, Huntsman Program (in International Studies and Business), I recall it was December 9 and I was in London, staying with my best friend at her dorm. And when my other close friends in Bulgaria found out, they called me on Face Time all screaming, so happy for me. And I saw how truthful they are, even if the news meant we would be far away from each other come fall, as most of them would be studying in the UK. We're not too worried though, we know we are going to keep in touch. Plus I'll be on the East Coast of the US which is a little closer (laughing, looking at the bright side of things again).

What's your favorite journey?

Improving myself, bettering myself in whatever I do, fulfilling my intellectual curiosity.

If you could change one thing about yourself what would that be?

I don't know. It's me, everyone has good and bad sides. I'm very emotional, so it could be interesting to see how things would be if I weren't that emotional.

What do you most dislike in people?

I dislike negativity, lies, laziness (chuckles)...

Kosara in the musical *Fame Jr.* in 2017



Kosara as the Valedictorian of her class, May 2017

What words or phrases do you most overuse?

I'm so excited about this. It's amazing. Haha. I'm laughing all the time, even at the stupid jokes of my friends. It's sort of a remedy.

Who are your favorite writers?

Fitzgerald, Alcott, Camus. We were lucky to be studying very interesting books in ELL classes here at ACS. This school year it was plays, Peter Shaffer's weird but interesting *Equus* among others.

Who is your hero?

My mother.

What's your greatest fear?

I have fear of death.

Is there anything that you regret?

No, I don't regret anything.

What's your idea of perfect happiness?

Being fulfilled with yourself, being the one that you wanted to be. And if you're not there yet, strive to get there or find it in yourself, and be fulfilled with your life.

What was your worst and best

year at ACS?

Junior year was the worst. I had to take so many exams for my US university application, on top of the academics here. I had started my application process earlier and was able this way to apply Early Decision to the university I wanted the most. But yes, I was really tired. ACS was very demanding, and I mean all subjects, everyone, and all these extra exams – it was crazy. And also, I had the musical and my club, everything.

At the same time, I couldn't imagine going to ACS and not going on the musical after school two days a week. Interestingly, most of the people that join the musical in 8th grade stay on until they graduate. Those that join later on often just stay for a year or two.

And the best year, it's actually two years, 8th and 12th grades. In 8th grade everything was so different, I was so excited about meeting all these new people, seeing this new campus – in my middle school it was just several rooms in one building, shared by a kindergarten, the one I went to, and a middle school; basically I had spent 10 years of my life at this one little place. And then coming to Sofia and to ACS with this huge campus, I was kind of stressed out, lost between the buildings.

And now, the last days in senior year are also very happy days. I just regret I won't be here to see that new campus center once it's ready. I'm so jealous of the students who will enjoy it.

What was the most important lesson that you learned here at ACS?

Don't waste your potential, develop it. Involve yourself in everything that you feel you should because that's the time to experiment with different things.

(Was I that wise back when I was 19? Not so sure.)



Kosara at Arts Fest, 2015

What is ACS to you?

My home away from home. That's how I feel with the relationships that I've built with my friends, my teachers, the whole community, my musical director Boris Pankin. I basically feel as if he is my second father. I've spent so much time with him working on the musicals; he is so devoted to developing the potential of his students, to his work. With years, teachers change

but with the musical, 5 years, so many hours, he was always there.

My eighth grade teacher, Ms. Tsvetkova, stayed very close to my heart, too. In eighth grade, I was sort of almost scared of her; she is an amazing teacher but very demanding, which helped me a lot in 9th grade.

My classmate ACS alumna and former ACS trustee Lisa Kostova '97 went to Wharton

Business School. Have you two been in contact?

Yeah, she was actually assigned to interview me because she was in the same program as me. She was a tough interviewer, I'm pretty sure I panicked at some point in the interview. But it went well in the end. The Huntsman Program (in International Studies and Business) at UPenn, Wharton Business School was my number one choice both as program and university. Elon Musk and Warren Buffett both went there, both of them great people with great ideas that they realized. And they give back a lot to the community, too, which is inspiring!

Getting into my dream university was amazing, but the best part was that I was awarded a full scholarship, too. That was another moment that made me realize how the years at ACS have indeed been totally worth it.

It's going to be so nice at my next place. I hear it's a small community within a big university, 50 people per year only, sort of exclusive.

Will you join the performing arts there?

I'll probably stay involved in the performing arts, yes, as a hobby. That's what I really like about the American university system because, as in ACS, I can join many clubs and still participate in acting. There's a ballroom dancing club at UPenn. And I'm probably going to join debate as well.

Thank you, Kosara. I look forward to seeing *Fame*!

And then there's Last Bell. It's going to be a really emotional week. I'm going to miss this place!

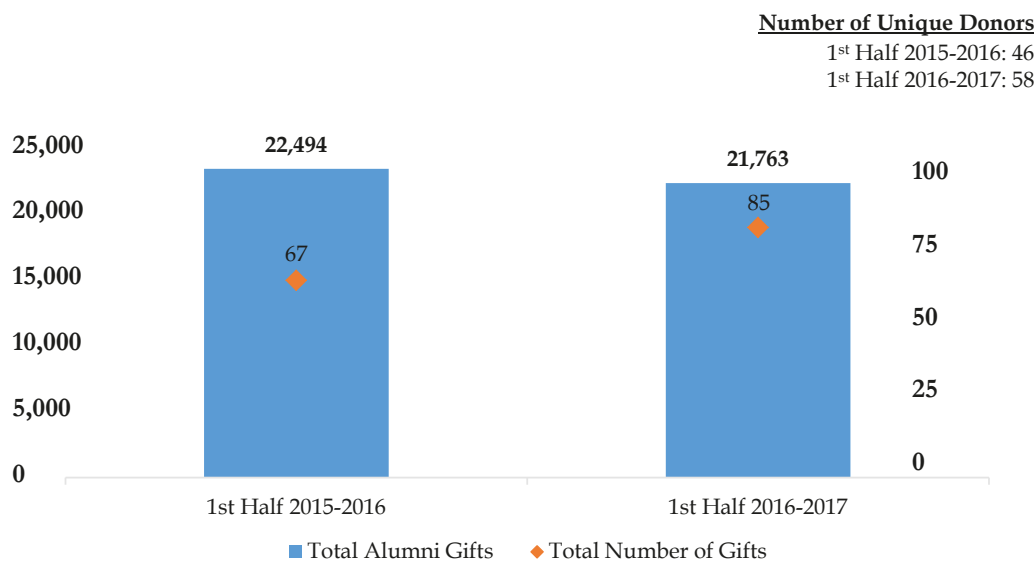
During her last days as an ACS student, Kosara won both the Arts Program award and the Valedictorian Award, her grade point average for Grade 9-12 being 6.0! Congratulations!

ACS Alumni Fund Report

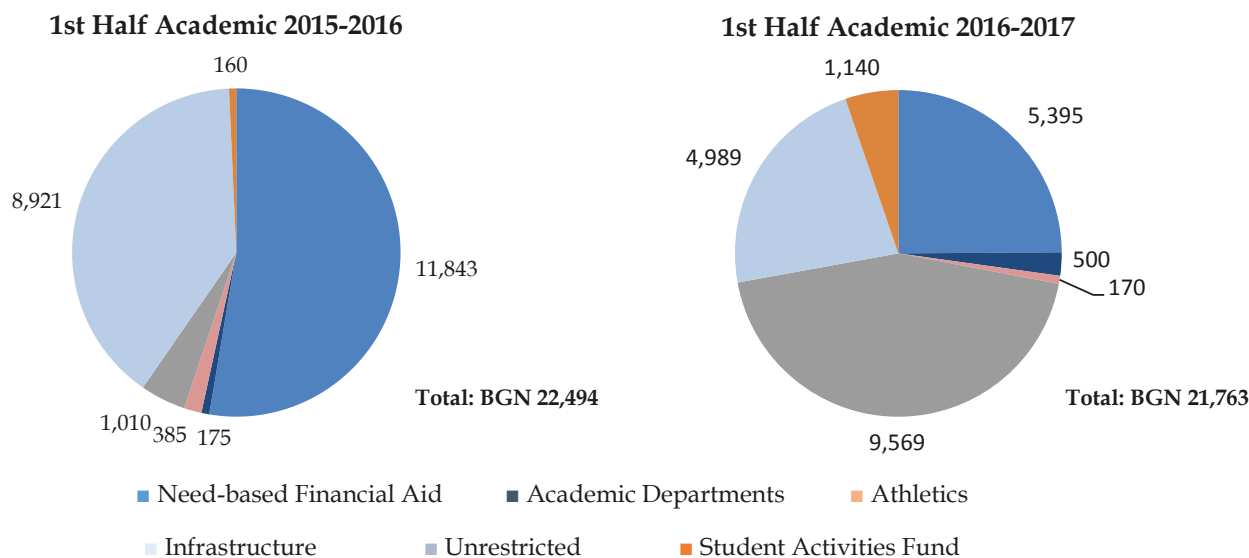
September 2016 – March 2017

Quick Overview

Gifts Breakdown by Year (Bulgarian leva)



Gifts Breakdown by Category (Bulgarian leva)



Message from the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

Dear Fellow Alumni,

Thank you for your continuous support of ACS! As of March 31, 58 alumni have made contributions to the Alumni Fund, and more have followed suit since. 2017 marks the fifth annual campaign of the Fund as well as 157 years since the founding of the College in 1860. To celebrate both occasions, the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee (AFAC) has set a participation goal different from that in previous years: 157 alumni making a gift by August 31. In the first four years of the Alumni Fund, the 10 percent participation target has never been surpassed. Will you make a gift of any size today to help the Fund build participation of at least 157 alumni this year? Additionally, if you would like to automate your giving for future years, you can choose to enroll in recurring giving online.

In the first half of 2016/2017, one exciting initiative marked the Alumni Fund campaign. The Gipson Family matching campaign came to an end on December 31, 2016, after running for over three years. Incentivized by the generosity of the Gipsons, ACS alumni contributed 14,558 BGN in the last four months of the campaign alone! Overall, alumni gave almost 66,000 BGN and thanks to the 1-to-1 match offered by Nellie and Bob Gipson, the total contribution to the College will be over 130,000 BGN. AFAC sends heartfelt thanks to both the Gipson Family and all alumni who supported the campaign! The Campus Master Plan construction phase began in September 2016 and is expected to conclude by the end of 2017.

In addition, in the first half of 2016/2017, alumni raised 5,395 BGN for need-based financial aid, enough to cover about 50 percent of the annual tuition of one student. 1,140 BGN was allocated for projects supported by the Student Activities Fund (SAF). This notes a marked increase from the same period last year and is 115 BGN more than the entire amount raised for SAF in all of 2015/2016. The projects selected for funding in November 2016 include, among others, TEDxYouth, Restoration of the Forest Alley (SIHP), Career Orientation Club, Medical Club, Architecture Club, and Friends of UNICEF. Beyond financial contributions, ACS alumni gave time as well; informal reunions continued to take place thanks to the leadership of alumni across the globe, notably in London and Sofia.

AFAC welcomes your ideas and questions so please do not hesitate to contact us at alumnigiving@acs.bg. Our team strives to provide opportunities for alumni to give back to ACS and to strengthen our bonds, so your feedback is essential! In July, AFAC will also be recruiting additional members, so look out for our emails.

Sincerely,

The Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

Georgi Klissurski '10

Zara Rancheva '14

Nicole Levakova '16

Kalina Kourdova '11

Alex Kanov '12

Hristo Popov '01

Carl Djerassi, the Courageous

By Georgi Iliev

On June 9, the Science Building on campus was officially named Djerassi Hall – to honor Professor Carl Djerassi, the world-renowned scientist, writer, patron of the arts, and former student at the American College of Sofia.



Prof. Djerassi's son Dale and grandson Alexander unveiling the Djerassi Hall sign in the company of Martina Strong (US Embassy), ACS President Dr. Richard Ewing, Nikol Kralimarkova (Class of 2017), and Dr. Whitaker (Chair of the Board of Trustees)

Never one to shy away from definitive statements, in a 2013 conversation with ACS alumna Lisa Kostova '97 for this magazine, Carl Djerassi said that scientists don't have a sense of history. It is true that history is the story of change, while scientists are dedicated to the pursuit of everlasting truths. So Professor Djerassi deliberately set off to transcend this proverbial scientist's mold.

Thinking outside the box is a prerequisite to a scientist of his caliber, but he set off to live outside the realm he had mastered, the realm he was recognized for. He set foot further than biochemistry, he ventured into entrepreneurship, into art, into public life. And here we want to pay tribute to his courage. Because in this pursuit of a different

calling – and it was a public pursuit, – one's very identity can be at stake.

When one has built a towering career and reputation, as Professor Djerassi had, to go out and alter it, enhance it, expand it, can be a frightening prospect. What if his plays didn't play dramatically? What if his taste in art got questioned? What if his company didn't prosper? These are not theoretical what-if's to be tested in a sterile lab.

In a lab, a scientist – just like an artist faced with a blank page – can afford to ponder and experiment and live within the expanses of his mind. The scientist, or artist, may build constructs or tear down models, test the strength of his convictions and discover the weaknesses of his preparation and then learn and come back as a master. That is the beauty

of it. That's what is happening in that science building and that is the immediate purpose of it.

But then, the awesome thing is when the scientist, having mastered that, transcends it, steps out into the world, acquires – by his own design – that sense of history, of actual, contemporary change taking place in the everyday world... and manages to be a vital player in that too.

Einstein did it, as did Umberto Eco and Stephen Hawking. Carl Djerassi transcended his timeless scientific endeavors and managed to be just as effective and brilliant in his timely dealings with the burning questions of the living, breathing, contemporary world. That took much more than skill. It took extraordinary courage. But then, that was the kind of man he was.

CLASS NOTES

Faculty

While working on the Arts Fest material in this issue, we got in contact with **Sandy Charles**, wife of former ACS President Dr. Arthur Charles. Here's her message to all ACS alumni she got to know 1994-97:

"Dear Alumni,

Our time with you all at ACS was a life defining assignment for us. The challenges and rewards cannot be compared to anything else we did. The students were of the highest caliber and the teachers put them through their paces. We consider ourselves fortunate to have been a part of that time. I look back on those first arts fests as one of the best things I have ever done.



This is Art and I hiking in Zion National Park in Utah. We left our home on the coast of Maine in mid-April and spent 5 weeks driving to California and back visiting as many national parks along the way as we could, as well as spending a week with our children in California.

With warmest affection,
Sandy Charles"

Alumni

Virginia Irintcheva '97 shared:

"When I first decided I wanted to be a teacher at the age of 7, it was because I wanted to write with a red pen. My other career choices included doctor, like my parents, gas station attendant, so I can give my mom free gas, and a veterinarian, because I have always loved animals (I currently have a cat named Mishka, a dog named Bernie, and a horse, called Zeppy). I think teaching won the contest because of the amazing teachers I have had along the way, most of them at ACS. I completed my PhD in Pharmacology and Physiology at Saint Louis University in 2006 and have been a college professor for 11 years now. I absolutely love my job. I don't really care about the red pen so much anymore but I love the intellectual stimulation, the continuous learning, and the relationships I can build with my students. Of course having a long vacation is not a bad deal either. I teach Biology and Anatomy and Physiology to freshmen and sophomores. I also work with Pearson Publishing as a consulting advisor and media author for an Anatomy and Physiology textbook.

Recently I moved from the Midwest, where I lived in Missouri and Iowa for 17 years, to Reno, Nevada, so I can be close to the mountains and the beautiful Lake Tahoe, where I can enjoy my other hobbies, including snowboarding and hiking."



Dobrina Vassileva-Tosheva '97 sent us an update, as well:

"Hello from Sofia. I'd like to tell you about my latest project: Workshop Meta Thinking 3.0. I have started a Facebook page that will gradually become a portal of resources to develop one's thinking and metacognition. This is my first attempt at such an enterprise, even though the name may suggest otherwise – 3.0 shows that we are at the outset of a 3rd wave of efforts to enhance human cognition: philosophical, scientific and currently, digital.

My attempts to create an online collection of resources go hand in hand with my effort to start a real workshop where I can spread the word about some scientific, yet simple ways of being a better thinker and ultimately a happier person. F2F contact among eager participants or the comforts of self-paced e-learning, or somehow both, that is the question.

When I'm not discovering the practicalities of Facebook, online learning, and marketing, I am



Virginia snowboarding with fellow alumna Maria Mircheva '97



Dobrina's family

working as a research consultant in health-related ad hoc projects with GfK Bulgaria. I have been there for a number of years now, ever since I said goodbye to ACS as a teacher of 9th and 10th grade philosophy disciplines.

For all these years away from teaching and the College I have felt that something was missing. I was rather busy, getting married to my beloved husband, Nikola, and raising two curious and lively children (Sasho, 7, and Yana, 5), on top of working full-time. However, it was only recently that I realized I actually miss teaching. I enjoyed very much the relationship that I had with my students. It was difficult to capture their attention and win their trust, yes, but once that mission was accomplished, we embarked on a journey of self-discovery, both they and I, that led us to unexpected results. That thrill and mystery is missing from my current job (even though being a researcher/consultant has its perks), so I started looking for ways to engage in the magic of teaching and mentoring again. I have been a mentor with Step for Bulgaria, and have also qualified to serve as a Leader for the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award. These have led to some contact with young people, but my passion has always been with thinking and improving it, so I decided to be bold and start something big.

If you want to discuss meta-cognition, thinking, motherhood, children, marketing research, healthcare, health fads and myths, or anything ACS, let's meet on Facebook @meta.thinking.3.0.”



Georgi Klissurski '10 had news, too:

“Hi everyone! Over the last three years I lived in New York City, working for NERA Economic



Georgi with Ivan Badinski '10 hiking in Zion National Park in August 2016

Consulting alongside fellow ACS alumna Dani Simova '02. I was lucky to have a sizeable community of ACS alumni in the City, but I will be moving to Boston in August to start graduate school. I will be pursuing an MBA/MPA at two institutions, the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and the



Georgi with Mrs. Cattelle and Stassi Andreev '07 in New York in September 2016

Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. If you are ever in Boston or Philadelphia over the next three years, please get in touch! I will be in Bulgaria for most of July and August this summer.”

Gergana Manolova '12 has been really busy since her graduation 5 years ago. She completed her double major Bachelor's degree in Webster Vienna with honors and is a few short months away from obtaining an MSc from Imperial College Business School London. In the meantime, she co-founded two companies in Bulgaria and is eager to return to Sofia after graduation. In the beginning of July, she will be opening a contemporary restaurant on the 24th floor of the newly opened Millennium Center, located in central Sofia. The restaurant's name, The View, hints about the spectacular panoramic view of the city. Additionally, it boasts modern interior and amazing cuisine. All ACS alumni are very welcome!

facebook.com/TheViewRestaurantSofia



Gergana Manolova '12

Gergana's future plans include launching a new Bulgarian wine, scheduled to appear on the market in the fall, and working on the development of a second exquisite restaurant, which she hopes would earn the first Michelin Star for a restaurant in the country.



Send your exciting news and updates any time of the year to p.mironova@acsb.org and we'll include them in the next alum mag.





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