



ACS ALUMNI Magazine



Featuring
Liliana Ikonopisova '42
Dr. Roger Whitaker
John Kelly
Garth Greenwell
Nelly Afzali '17 and Nia Alexieva '17



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photo by Katrin Gidulska '18

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FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

Although I have only been at ACS a year-and-a-half now, I have gained a deep appreciation for and a strong belief in the mission and work of this unique institution. I want to share a few brief thoughts about what makes this school so special.

Imagine, if you will, a pyramid that has five layers. Each layer represents a fundamental characteristic of our school. At the very top of the pyramid is our mission, our purpose as an institution. In its shortest, most basic form, our purpose is to support and enable student growth and achievement. The reason for our existence is to support and guide and challenge young people at this exciting and transformational time in their lives.

At the next layer of the pyramid is our philosophy. We approach this purpose with an educational philosophy that stresses the importance of educating the whole person. Make

no mistake: academic excellence is highly valued at ACS. And so, too, is ensuring that our students develop as thoughtful human beings, following their interests and their passions, and becoming responsible community members. We believe in turning out strong and good people and good citizens, not just good students.

At the next level of our pyramid, we have three core values that we emphasize at ACS: responsibility, integrity, and respect. We believe in the importance of taking responsibility for one's own actions. We believe in the importance of integrity: acting in good faith and honesty. And we believe in the importance of respect: respecting yourself and respecting others; and that means respecting not just those who are your friends, but also those who are not.

There are two more values that I believe are also characteristic of ACS: courage and grit. A very wise person once said: "Courage is the value that makes all other values possible." At ACS, we believe in the courage to stand up for what you believe. We believe in the courage to take on great and worthy challenges. And we also believe in the courage to fail. Not because we admire failure, but we admire and respect the effort to try new and bold things, which of course can result in failure. We know that initial failure is so often the precursor to great success. And we want to engender grit. Grit is a term that has come into use as a combination of perseverance and resilience – that is the determination to pick oneself up after setbacks and carry on in the face of adversity.

To take on these challenges and help our students develop academic knowledge and skills as well as true grit, at the fourth level of our pyramid we have the great faculty and staff at ACS. These men and women are here to guide our students, to challenge them, to inspire them, and to support them. ACS students past and present have experienced the great blessing of working with them as teachers and mentors. They ask a lot of our students, of that there is no doubt, but the educational experiences that our students have with them are ones they long treasure.

Finally, at the base of our pyramid is this unique and venerable place of learning all around us. We are blessed to have as our home for teaching and learning this beautiful and historic campus. There is in this place a great history and tradition of excellence. There is also a tradition of innovation. We are, in fact, a dynamic institution with a healthy tension between respect for the tried and true and an eagerness to explore ways to do things better. We are a community of learners with an appreciation for our heritage and a focus on the future.

So yes, we honor the past, we look forward to an exciting future, and we are eager to work with all members of the ACS community to help make the most of the great opportunities we have here, right now, in the present.

Sincerely,

Richard T. Ewing, Jr.

President and Head of School

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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

Dear Alumni,

Do you also go around humming John Lennon's "So this is Christmas / And what have you done" for the better part of December? (You will now.) A brilliant song, but the answer to the question it poses is not always at hand, at least not for me. Fortunately, this issue is about a selection of inspiring people who have done plenty.

Among them there are those that reaped laurels more apparent, like former English Lit teacher Garth Greenwell whose debut novel *What Belongs to You* was published in February to great critical acclaim (it comes out in paperback on December 20). Garth, a star now, was so gracious to make time amidst weeks and weeks of book-related travels and readings around Europe to talk to yours truly (in person, at ACS!) about writing and teaching, and naturally, about Bulgaria, where the story in his stunning novel is set. You will soon see what I mean when I say I so wished that conversation would never end.

Many international teachers, Garth included, have shared their stories of how they ended up at ACS in Bulgaria but I think former ESL teacher John Kelly's is the one containing the greatest coincidences and leaps of faith, the most unlikely set of events. And not only because his rare story takes place before internet, emails, and mobile phones, but simply because he and Bulgaria were meant to meet. Last summer John returned to his second homeland for the first time in this millennium, and he's already planning his next visit in the summer of 2017, so those who didn't manage to catch up last summer, watch out.

2017 marks 25 years since the College reopened and who could possibly be more suitable to look back and reflect on those crazy times but founding ACS president Dr. Roger Whitaker! With loads of humor he shared another set of zany stories, "funny on reflection," from the early ACS days. Our conversation started in late spring but I had the pleasure of seeing him in autumn too, at the ground breaking ceremony for the Campus Center, for the realization of which he once again was instrumental, this time as Chair of the Board of Trustees. (And who knows, maybe in 2041 he'll have a set of stories from the road leading to this.)

A slight physical resemblance between 93-year-old Liliana Ikonopisova '42 and someone I loved very much and sadly lost 5 years ago may have been part of why I was so determined to interview Liliana even when it took years of waiting and rescheduling. I couldn't be happier that I didn't give up. Liliana's ability to keep her hope and faith alive throughout a life of so many trials, and, her true (how not to use Dr. Ewing's favorite word here?) **grit**, are simply uplifting! I look forward to seeing her in a week when I deliver the printed version of this magazine to her in person!

Complaining about how hard it is to choose which of the many fascinating current ACS students to interview for the magazine has no place in the last paragraph of the editor's note. So I'll just say instead that I was glad to be able to accommodate two this time, as talented Nia and Nelly are very good friends and a double interview came naturally. Contagious positivity, astonishing self-knowledge, and so much humor characterize the upbeat Proust-questionnaire-style interview with these two sweet seniors, who enjoyed revealing their tastes and aspirations. You'll find enough smiles there to get you through January!

Keep smiling, stay true to yourselves, and never give up!

"A very merry Christmas
And a happy New Year
Let's hope it's a good one
Without any fear"

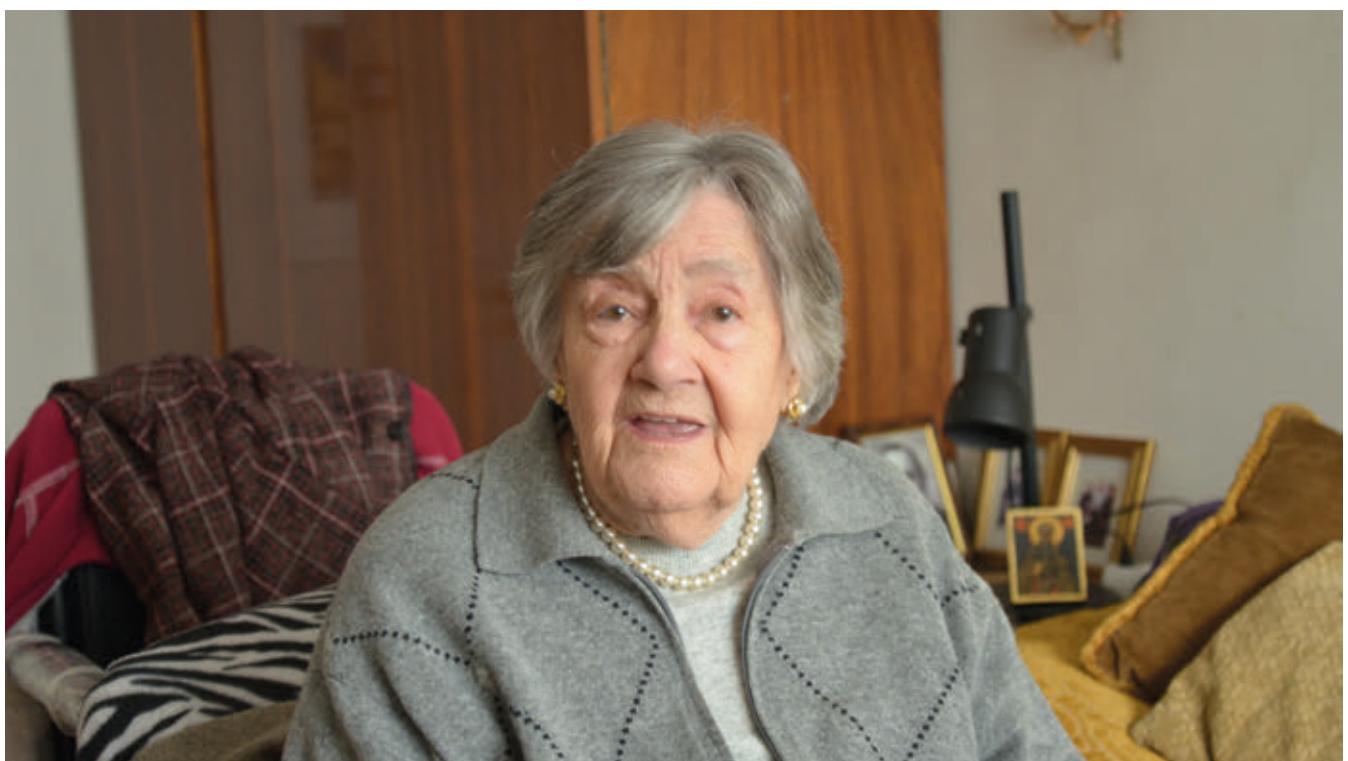
With hope,

Petia Ivanova '97

Liliana Ikonopisova '42: Together for Better, for Worse

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

I first met Liliana when her famous classmate the late Professor Carl Djerassi visited the College in May 2013 to be awarded an honorary high school diploma (ironically, the professor had no official high school transcript). Liliana Ikonopisova (née Zaharieva) and Professor Nikola Alexiev of the same class were among the guests. She walked slowly with a cane, taking small steps, leaning on her good friend Nikola (Kolyo) every now and again but oh, so elegantly. Three years later, I finally pay a visit to Liliana in her cozy home at the foot of snow-covered Mt. Vitosha, where she has been expecting me, in her armchair, with a woolen scarf around her shoulders and understated pearl jewelry. She speaks slowly and distinctly, her voice soft and her thoughts fluid and steady in spite of the many questions and interjections from my side (I really can't help my curiosity). Aunt Lili is what the few dozen neighborhood kids she taught English used to call her. I can't wait to hear what she was like while at the College, and how her life turned out afterwards.



Lili, how did you come to attend the College? Was it hard to be away from your family? Tell us about your first impressions of the school.

My sister, Elena Zaharieva, graduated from the College in 1936. When the topic of where I would go to high school came up, my parents were explicit – the College, as they already had impressions of the upbringing and instruction offered there. I graduated from junior high

school with an overall straight A, and it was clear I would get in. Some had it more difficult, as their grades weren't very good or they had disciplinary problems. But I applied and got in the fall of the year my sister graduated. Many of the girls from upper classes already knew me through my sister, and everyone wanted me to become their “pet.”

Before the first day of school, September 20th, I received a letter confirming that I had been

admitted. That motivated me greatly, and I started to embroider my initials on the sheets I was to bring along. Everyone had to, as everyone had a unique number for the laundry room where we handed in our dirty laundry in exchange for clean and ironed sheets.

It was hard to be away from my family for the first time in my life. For the first two days, as soon as somebody mentioned my sister's name (they would call



Lili's sister Elena '36 as a senior

me Lencheto's sister), I felt the tears welling in my eyes. Why couldn't she be here now to help me along when I'm having a hard time?!

We arrived on the Abbott Hall steps, as requested, on September 20th, 1936, at 10 o'clock in the morning. Ms. Leech, the dormitory matron, was to take us 24 newcomer girls to our bedroom up on the third floor, where we dragged our bundles and suitcases with the help of our parents.

Ms. Moskovska awaited us there – she was responsible for the first form girls and showed us into the room labeled Dormitory. The room turned out to be a huge hall with 24 white iron spring beds, and behind each one was a locker for our clothes. The parents started fussing, taking apart the bundles, placing mattresses and pillows on the beds and a couple of hours later said, "Goodbye, dear children, you're on your own now, cope as well as you can." We were left there in rather low spirits, teary-eyed, but luckily, time passed quickly with everyone trying to decorate their locker door with photos – of relatives, pets, and

even famous movie stars like Jeanette McDonald and Robert Taylor. Quickly, the locker doors were turned to art galleries.

Friendships were forged from day one. There were girls all the way from Balchik, from Nevrokop (the old name of Gotse Delchev); from the North to the South, all corners of Bulgaria were represented. We talked and talked until late the first evening, taking turns to tell the others where we came from, what our family was like, where we had studied, and what we were interested in. When the bell rang at 10 pm and Ms. Moskovska opened our door to say, "Time to go to sleep, good night!" Tsetsa Beleva replied, "Don't let the bed bugs bite!" Everyone laughed. Tsetsa brought this and other wisecracks from the American Grade School where she had previously studied. Her English was quite good already, so she skipped one grade.

The next day, the bell summoned us to our classrooms where we were met by our English teachers. Every class had two of them – teacher A for us was Ms. Moskovska, the same kind and lovable woman who was responsible for all first form girls; and teacher B was Ms. Sheddern, recently arrived from the US, who

spoke no Bulgarian whatsoever. As soon as we entered our classrooms for the first time, they knew our names and used them to call on us, so they must have looked at our pictures and learned our names this way. And so, Ms. Sheddern wrote 20 words on the blackboard during our first class, told us what they meant and started building from there. 20 words were all we had, but we drilled them that whole first class: "point to the window, the door, all the objects found in the classroom," until we learned them. For some, it was very difficult to pronounce window, for instance. Whenever someone had learned a word they would point correctly, and if they hadn't – they would look down, embarrassed. This way we started speaking English from day one.

Since I had not always been able to point correctly, I felt burdened and came to my room after classes, threw myself on my bed, head on my pillow, and cried the whole afternoon. How can everyone else know more than I, and manage while I fail? My sister had managed. Ah, if only she were here, she would be able to console me and help me, too. As evening fell, I started to calm down. Trying to console me, Ms. Moskovska said,



The girls section (Lili is on the third row, third from left, her head tilted to the right)



Ms. Moskovska, instructor in English and first form girls responsible

"Don't cry, in just a month you will know as much as everyone else. I could call your mother, if you want me to, and it would be up to her whether she takes you back home or not." When the girls' school secretary suggested something along the same lines, I knew I would have to pull myself together and cope alone. *Take me home? Never!* I thought and then said, "Do not trouble my mother, I will be fine." And, indeed, I coped.

When the bell rang at 5 pm, Ms. Moskovska summoned us, "Time to go to dinner in the dining hall, everyone, get ready." All 24 girls followed her along a covered hallway leading to the dining hall, which turned out to be enormous. I learned that girls and boys would enter through two different doors on opposite ends of the dining hall, and everyone was to take their designated place at the table. The tables there were heavy, massive, lacquered wooden tables and a few students in white aprons and bonnets stood by each of them – those were the students on scholarship, like my friends Zlatka and Tsetsa from the girls, and from the boys – my

future husband Ruli, Evgeni Gubev, and Kuzman Bakrachev. As compensation for the work they did, they would get tuition fee reductions. Their parents were thankful their children had this kind of access to a better education than what they could afford.

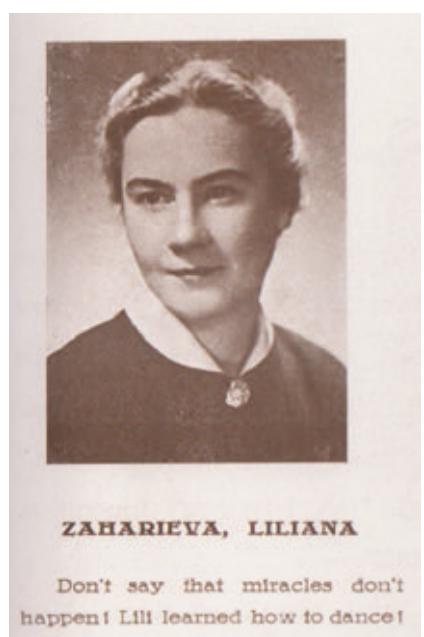
In the center of the dining hall, between the girls' and boys' sections, there was a big round table where President Black and his wife sat. They were accompanied by two seniors: a boy and a girl. They would discuss contemporary topics. It was very democratic. Behind the round table the choir stood, consisting of half a dozen singers: Zlatka, Tsetsa, and Ruli were in it. Before we could sit down and eat, they would sing a prayer-like anthem. While they were singing, the silence was absolute and, once they were through, we would sit down with immense hunger and devour the food. This is a memory I cherish. Most of the student waiters spoke better English than the rest of us. Once contacts between the girls' and boys' schools were established, the choir members would carry love letters in their pockets while they sang. A serious volume of

two-way correspondence in the dining hall and the kitchen took place through them.

What are some of your most vivid College memories?

My most vivid memories were of celebrating Christmas at the College; this was a real fête! The windows of the Assembly Hall would be adorned with pine branches and thick burning candles. Under the music teacher Mr. Goncharov's conducting, the choir would sing religious music. Mrs. Stolzfus would play the harmonium, and it was so exciting; we would leave the hall inspired, as if we had been reborn. It was magnificent! On Christmas Eve the choir would walk around and stop under our windows to sing Christmas carols. I remember how only the candles would throw some light in the dusk, the smell of pine and the sweet sound of the choir. We had some grand singers, both male and female. They even performed at Bulgaria Hall once. Some of the Jewish girls were very good singers, as unlike most of us they had had a musical education from an early age and could play the piano, too. Next to where the College flagstone is today, there used to be a music room with 4 or 5 pianos, and those who played would practice there. Among them was my classmate Iveta Behar who, upon graduating the College, went to Tel Aviv to become a Music Professor in Singing.

Another vivid memory I keep to this day is our *boro* dance. Usually, we would be free on Saturdays, and boys and girls would gather around the fountain for *boro* dancing. There was boza, lemonade, and small pastries baked by Ms. Rumlena, the supervisor of the dining room and kitchens, and her helpers in the kitchen. The pastries were sold for a



ZAHARIEVA, LILIANA

Don't say that miracles don't happen! Lili learned how to dance!

charitable cause, as the College financially supported a kitchen for the poor in Dragalevtsi. We had very good, although amateur, musicians play the trombone and drums. Everyone else would be dancing. It wasn't easy for me to learn to dance *boro*, but I did. In the 1940 yearbook, under my photo it reads, "Don't say that miracles can't happen! Lili learned how to dance!"

Who among your teachers impressed you the most? Tell us about your favorite subject and perhaps extracurricular activity.

We had many excellent teachers, all of them unique; not only



In Mr. Panayotov's class

teachers, they were also professors. One exceptional History teacher I had was Laurence Moore. He had traveled the Middle East far and wide, lived in Egypt, worked on the pyramids and he instilled in us a love for Egyptology. Some Sundays there would be mass at the College, and on others – lectures on interesting historical, geographical, and other scientific subjects where he was often the lecturer. He had many movies he would play for us; whenever he spoke about something, he liked

to be able to show it to us, too. Another exceptional teacher and historian was Mr. Panayotov, who was an excellent speaker; his lectures were gripping. From another teacher, Ms. Lyon, I still keep some cooking recipes, but unfortunately my deteriorating vision prevents me from using them.

Mr. Shechner, an English teacher and a rather unpleasant type, if you ask me, who had the habit of sitting cross-legged on his desk, taught us how to do Puppet Theater.

I took part in all the drama competitions and auditions and many of the plays throughout the years, both those staged by *Razvitie* and those by the Dramatic Association, of which I was the secretary. I took up acting relatively early on, in second form. Miss Stewart, an English Language and Literature teacher and Dramatic Association coach, decided that we would stage *Harlequin and Columbine*, and chose Rufi and me to play the main characters in this romantic play.

One of the plays staged by *Razvitie* was Pencho Slaveykov's narrative poem, *Ralitsa*, and I entered into my part (Ralitsa) with such passion that the Assembly Hall witnessed what to me felt like the loudest applause in its history. I was also the Chair of the Student Council, where I assumed the greatest responsibility. I was also in the Band of Mercy Club, the *Rilski Shepot* editorial staff, as well as in a club on Home Economics and Housekeeping for girls called Good Companions. There was such a rich array of extracurricular activities to engage in, and I drew on it with thirst.

Rufi and I met on the first Mountain Day and have been



IKONOPISOV, RUFİ

His extra-curricular activities far outnumber his school subjects.

together ever since. We went to (medical) university together, got married, and stayed by each other's side until his passing. He was a gorgeous, tall, well-built poet, writer, and singer with a heavenly voice. He could imitate Sinatra so well that people were stunned when they heard him first. At the College, he played in the operetta *Geysha*. We had a good life at the College. The years spent there were some of the happiest of my life.

Tell us about other College classmates and friends that you still recall or have close relations with.

I recall Lili Vidinska '39, also a member of the Dramatic Association, whose aunt was a renowned seamstress in Sofia. Lili would sew the costumes for all the stage performances, and I would help her. To participate in an operetta you had to be a good singer, which wasn't my case, so I helped out with stitching the costumes, instead. Another girl from my class, Ellie Goinarova, was a natural-born artist. In the College museum you will find small plates, hand-drawn with embroidery-like patterns done by her. She was so talented, yet she

did not go to university. She kept on drawing, but just out of love, for her friends.

Rufi was a close friend of Evgeni Gubev's, who earned a PhD in Microbiology (*tracing faces on the pages of the 1940 Yearbook with her finger*). Seven of my classmates studied Medicine: apart from Rufi and Evgeni, there were Nikola Alexiev, Drago Mushmov, Dobromir Dobrev, and Ivan Petkov. Mushmov told the best jokes while faking a Greek accent; ah, we used to laugh so hard. Anna Dobreva became an Accountant. Of the girls in my class, Tsetsa and I are the only two still around here in Sofia. Every time I talk to her over the phone, she says she "hugs me to suffocation".

What do you recall from 1942, the year of your graduation and the closing down of the school?

How we cried. I remember the bell summoning us all to the Assembly Hall, and Prof. Black saying: "It is with deep regret that I inform you that we are now at war with America." He added, "I love Bulgaria." And we all started singing the Bulgarian anthem "Шуми Маринца." Black was crying. He was so attached to our country. His wife Serafinka was Bulgarian and a very interesting woman. When we were in first form, she invited us over to their house a couple of times. She was trying to teach us good manners; there were girls among us coming straight from villages, for instance Lyubka Vachova from Hayredin, Vratsa region. She later studied Chemistry at university, and became a Chemistry teacher. Her father had a roof-tile factory, and all three of his daughters studied at the College and then went to university – one of them became an Architect. See, he had realized that his kids had potential and

would make good students, so he did his part in making it possible.

In Communist Bulgaria, anyone who was previously associated with a Western educational system faced extreme scrutiny. Did you experience that, as well? What profession did you pursue?

As I mentioned, Rufi and I studied at the same university: my major was Dentistry and his was Medicine. We worked alongside one another at a village health center; it was the law back then that upon graduating university you were to work for 3 years in a village. So, once we got married, we were sent off to work as the district Doctor and Dentist in a village.

The times were such that as American College graduates, we would have a hard life. Rufi was sent to a concentration camp for a year and a half: he was away for the greater part of 1948 and well into 1949 for his past as an American College graduate who was actively involved in the community (*pointing to a black-and-white framed photograph on the wall*). This picture of us with our first-born, Evelina, was taken on the day Rufi was freed, 13 September 1949, which was also Evelina's

first birthday. He said, "Let us take a photograph, we may never be together again like this."

While Rufi was in the concentration camp, I stayed on in the village; I couldn't get a job in Sofia, even though I was born there, so my mother came over to take care of our little one to allow me to work. While Rufi shared some of his experiences from the camp with me, we never told all of it to our kids, for their own sake. After returning, he did manage to get back on his feet again, mainly due to his love for his work. While we were working in the village, the Ministry of People's Health initiated a "Chutnov brigade" there, after the example of a Soviet village named Chutnov. The District Doctor (Rufi in this case) examined each and every one of the village inhabitants, created medical records for them, and started following who was suffering from what and keeping records to be able to refer to for interventions elsewhere within the health system. After the brigade's successful completion, Rufi received a special order of excellence from the Ministry.

I worked as the dentist and assisted the doctor in everything he did:



Geisha, 1940 Yearbook



Lili, Rufi, and their daughter Evelina, 1949

from immunizations through regular check-ups for children. Twice I acted as a midwife while he was away on some business trip. I didn't get a prize, though. I never got a job in Sofia once we moved back there, not until our younger ones, the twins Elisaveta and Antoni, were two and a half years old. I stayed home with them and got work assignments from an artist, Ruska Popvasileva, the wife of my primary school's principal. The assignments included stuffing the rag dolls she made and sold with cotton and shavings. Yes, I had to take all possible jobs, often as a replacement and always temporarily.

There was a manager within the municipality's health department, Kondova was her name – a real monster! I would go to her office weekly, looking for a replacement spot. The moment she saw me peek in, she would not hesitate to shout, "For **you** there is no job here." I never managed to find a job as a dentist in Sofia.

One day, I ran into Prof. Vulchan Hadjivulchanov's wife on the street. Vulchan was an American College graduate as well, from the class of 1940, and a good friend of Rufi. So, his wife Greti

says to me, "Why don't you find a job with your fluent English? There is an English translator job opening at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) Central Library as we speak. Why don't you apply? In fact, come with me right now!" We went to the library's secretary, to whom Greti said, "I know this girl, let her apply for the vacancy!" The secretary replied, "The deadline was yesterday." Immediately, I thought I had been given a brush-off yet again. But the secretary turned out to be a very kind person and accepted my request. I took part in the competition and received the highest result. The director made a comment, though: "This is not enough. For this position, International Relations, you need to know German, as well." Immediately, I was given an exam in German, too. I passed this test, also, since I had studied German at the College as a second foreign language. Sometimes I wonder how I kept my knowledge of the language through all those years. Before I applied for that job, I hadn't practiced my English in 15 years. By the way, Petko Bocharov '38 was on the examining committee

and proudly said, "See, how well prepared our girl is." And so I was appointed as the new English Translator at the library of the BAS.

I never went back to dentistry. At the library I became the International Book Exchange Department Coordinator. I developed myself professionally there very well, and stayed at the library for 35 years. I created 380 book exchange channels with libraries abroad. This means a constant two-way exchange of books and other publications. And since the Academy did not have the means to purchase foreign books (we had a quota for foreign currencies that was enough to buy 10 books or so), I decided to get in touch with universities like those in Los Angeles and Berkeley – and offered them ethnic music instruments, if they should be interested in collecting those, in exchange for books. I sent them a wooden pipe (*duduk*), a shepherd's pipe (*kaval*) and a bagpipe, a tambourine, etc., only so I could get English language books. And it worked – they subscribed us to a very important, world-famous scientific magazine, *Index Medicus*, publishing everything of importance in the world of Medicine. I saved the Academy a lot of money – thousands and thousands of dollars. They gave me a medal for excellent service.

I didn't stop working after retiring: I taught English to half the Boyana district, 60 kids or so. They used to call me Aunty Lili. Even now, it happens sometimes that they stop me in the street, as they recognize their former English Tutor, and come up to me with open arms.

Sofia, January 2016

Dr. Roger Whitaker: Looking Back, Planning Ahead

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

As many of you know, Dr. Roger Whitaker (Professor at George Washington University in Washington DC) was the first President (1992-1994) of the reopened American College of Sofia. He kept his close connection to the school over the years as a member of the Board of Trustees and he currently serves as the Chair of the Board. Our interview with Dr. Whitaker and his wife Susan conducted in 2010 for the printed alumni magazine was recently shared electronically and is one of the posts with the most views on the ACS blog and among the most popular on the school's official Facebook page. Last summer, six years after our previous conversation, we turned to Dr. Whitaker again to talk about some of the most noteworthy new developments at the College.

We have a number of questions for you about the current challenges and opportunities at the College and your perspective on the work of the Board of Trustees. But, before that, and on behalf of our readers, can you share with us a few new stories about the unusual things you encountered as the school reopened? We know how serious many of your challenges were but perhaps you could recall some funny experiences that you have not shared before?

During the first years at ACS there was a story a day – some funny or uplifting, some frustrating or perplexing, some encouraging, some dismaying. In this respect, I think our experiences, during those fluid times, paralleled closely those of every person in Bulgaria during the early days after the changes. But, since you asked, here are a few strange episodes (funny on reflection) that quickly come to mind. While they stand alone as simple personal experiences, I believe they do reflect the social, political, and economic context of the time.

Early Threats to Close ACS

There were a number of attempts to make it nearly impossible for ACS to open or stay open – some serious, some less so. Within the first month of opening the school, we had a government fire safety inspector tell



Dr. Whitaker giving a keynote speech at a graduation ceremony at the George Washington University

us that to meet code, we would need to install water sprinklers in every classroom. Without the installation, he warned, we would need to close the school. I told the inspector we would gladly comply with regulations to have sprinklers and we would do so just as soon as he provided me with a good example of another school (just one would do) anywhere in Bulgaria that met the requirement. He left in a huff; I was told later that his brother-in-

law ran an installation company. We did, of course, make sure we had fire drills and available equipment.

There were plenty of others who would have liked to shut us down. My view was that while many might not have approved of the College reopening, no one – at that point – would have wanted to be accused of being responsible for shutting us down. I used this presumption (Balkan Hardball, as it were) as a foundation for some of my hassles



The first enthusiasts, the ACS faculty in 1992

with government offices. More than once, I stated to an official: "If we close, it will be because of a decision you made and we will make sure your decision is known!"

Empty Classrooms: Bansko to the Rescue

Obviously, we needed furniture to open the College and welcome our first class of students. We needed desks and chairs for the classrooms and all kinds of household furnishing for the faculty houses at the campus that were empty when we arrived. Here is how we tried to solve this problem.

One day Vladimir Palankov (graduate of the College in 1942 who headed up the campus rehab work in the first few years) took me to Bansko to a factory that made wood furniture. I told the firm's director that we needed 300 desks and chairs and we needed them soon. He was dumbfounded by the request but when he realized I was serious he turned to the question I hadn't really thought about until that moment: what kind of desks and especially, how tall and wide? So, Mr. Palankov,

the factory boss, and a number of his workers (some tall, some short) and I took turns sitting in an office chair estimating how high to make each desk, none of us having much of an idea. The eventual delivery – just in time to start the school year – was a glorious occasion for those of us worried that the students would have to start at ACS sitting on the floor.

By the way, the students respected the new desks in the first years – no graffiti – until one carved LARS into his softwood desk. Stanimir and I found an agreeable solution: he



The new desks, September 1992

said he was sorry, sanded the desk, and we moved on without further fanfare. To tell the truth, the chairs were pretty lousy and didn't hold up well for long. But, it was a start. And oh yeah, we ordered huge quantities of parquet since the Police Academy had taken out all the flooring as they vacated the buildings and we knew that inflation would grossly increase the cost of the flooring if we delayed.

Furnishing the Faculty Houses – I'll Bid on That!

The U.S. embassy was auctioning off excess furniture in the fall of 1992. This was not an unusual practice for furnishings left by departing personnel. We needed those furnishings for the College and I would have bought all of them on the spot but we were told there needed to be a proper public auction for anyone who wanted to participate. We thought it would be awkward for an American (me) to bid on all of the excess embassy furnishings and so, with 25 or 30 people standing outside on a Saturday morning to bid on each item, I worked a scheme with Nikola Palankov (driver and general handyman at ACS). He stood to one side of the crowd with me on the other. Each time a piece of furniture came up that I thought we needed,



Taking down communist leaders' faces with a jackhammer, 1992

I would touch my face and Nikola would bid. If someone upped the bid, Nikola would look to me for guidance. No one knew we were in cahoots and they seemed perplexed as to how it was that this one young unassuming working class Bulgarian was buying everything.

Sorry, I Cannot Sell That to You. Really?

I scoured the city in the summer of 1992 to buy any furniture or appliance that I thought we could use. I found stores with strange combinations, such as one appearing to sell only two things: satellite dishes and pantyhose. No comment.

One day I hit what I thought to be gold: I saw a store on Blvd. Vitosha that had a nice-looking refrigerator on display. I was so excited I told the sales person (perhaps the owner of the restituted storefront) that I wanted to buy three refrigerators. She said they had come from Greece and were no longer available so she couldn't accept the order. Dejected, I said, ok, at least I will take the one you have here. She said she couldn't do that either, explaining, "What would I put in the window?" I guess owning a shop was about preserving inventory, not turning profits.

Trivia Taken Seriously!

In the fall of the first year, we arranged for a "trivia contest" to include the First English Language School of Sofia. We all knew this school was distinguished as among the very best in Bulgaria and was a favorite of families of high position or influence.

Teams from each school were pitted against one another as a moderator read questions. The first team to hit a button to turn on a light (prepared by good ol' Bai Marko – our ACS electrician) had the chance to answer – a point for a correct answer, a lost point if wrong. Andrew Robarts organized the whole event. There were a number of question categories: geography, history, science, and English. The rules specified that participants had to be enrolled in the prep year. Well, to be honest, on the English portion of the questioning, we had a secret weapon. One of our prep year students had attended an English-speaking school in Zimbabwe before coming to ACS and he was fluent in English. Daniel Ivandjiiski won every question in the category and we won the contest.

The Admissions Examination

I was involved in the admissions exam process for the first three years of the College. Each year I was struck by two thoughts: 1) how paradoxical it was that I was head of a school I could not have been admitted to myself; and 2) how sorry I was for the hundreds of deserving students who we would not have the room or resources to admit. I was, of course, in awe of the two with the top results of the nearly 3000 kids who sat for the exam the first year (Maria Mircheva and Georgi Benev) and I was astonished at how brilliant the kids were who finished in the top 50 boys and 50 girls and who were awaiting admission for the new year. However, I thought also about those who we disappointed and I knew it would continue to happen every year. I am quite sure that there were actually hundreds of test-takers at the time I was there who would have been just fine at ACS. They had a bad day or had talents not reflected on the kind of exam we constructed. I am sure there were talented musicians and promising actresses, accomplished artists and potential athletes, budding poets, those with prodigious abilities in math and science who struggled with the essay (and the other way around).

I am not sure if there are ways to improve the admissions process. Should we organize a free test-prep program at the College? Should we publish hundreds of past questions and answers (with explanation) to help students know better what to anticipate? Should we give the test twice and take the student's highest of the two scores? Should we add some supplemental criteria for admission without compromising the core criteria of academic merit that have served us well? There are no plans to change our time-honored admissions policy, but I



Peter, Jordan, and Georgi at Science Fair 1996 with the improvised "trivia answering device"

do think we will want to continue to reflect on these complicated but important issues.

Well, enough story telling for now. Let's save a few stories for 20 years from now when we do our next interview and I can share some more complicated and serious episodes that will be better told with even more distance.

The Campus Center is by far the biggest new project, which when complete would present ACS students with a brand new library and cafeteria, both of those overlooking the campus park and the fountain. What do you think will be this project's implications for student experiences?

We have a 50-year use and occupancy agreement (signed in 1994) to operate the College on our campus. Since we don't own the property, there has always been a question about how much money to spend on capital projects – improving campus facilities. However, the Board of Trustees concluded three years ago that the campus buildings, grand as they are, have become "tired" and are in need of serious upgrading. With the generous support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF), we

completed a comprehensive campus plan. The Board decided that the first phase of campus renewal should feature the construction of a new building, replacing the one stuck on the back of the auditorium that was built by the Police Academy in the 1950s or 1960s and which is wholly inconsistent with the iconic Georgian architectural style of the other campus buildings. This new building is conceived as a Campus Center with many new features, but highlighted by a new library and resource center and new dining facilities to replace the very worn out cafeteria that served the College since its opening. The new building will reflect what we know about "next generation high schools" with respect to student-centered design, flexible learning places, appropriate technology, and learning opportunities anywhere, any time.

It has not been easy to undertake the Campus Center project. We have had many challenges with such a major project, not the least of which has been raising the money to fund the construction. We estimate the cost will approach ten million dollars. Our trustees (especially the executive and budget committees) have spent a great deal of time working on budget

issues as we assemble the resources to undertake such a big project. The funding will come primarily from a major grant from ABF, plus grants from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA, a part of U.S. AID), significant personal donations from trustees, gifts and pledges from friends of the College, and alumni contributions that are substantial, growing, and very much needed, as well as the prudent use of some reserves held by the College.

When we had our last interview in 2010, the Board of Trustees had just one alumni representative, Nick Mazing '97. Currently there are four graduates: Lisa Kostova '97, Theodora Konetsovskaya '97, Nedko Kychukov '03, and Evgenia Peeva '04. Is this part of a general plan to include more alumni?

The short answer is yes. Nick was a tremendous addition to the Board as our first alumni trustee and we expanded participation after he rotated off the Board. While we don't have a formula or quotas for representation on the Board, we are committed to diversifying perspectives among our trustees. We have 22 trustees, all unpaid volunteers who even cover their own expenses to travel and attend meetings of trustees. Our newest trustee is Marcie Ries – recent U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria who has kindly agreed to join us. We have four College graduates, as you listed, but also we have four parents of students who graduated from ACS. Collectively, we are made up of business leaders, finance experts, diplomats, lawyers, technology gurus, entrepreneurs, and educators. There is no question that the former-student trustees are a tremendous help to the Board. They are each accomplished professionals who know the College in unique ways and draw on their perspectives as Bulgarian nationals. They each



Theodora, Lisa, Evgeniya, and Nedko, the alumni on the Board of Trustees

now sit on an important committee of the Board. The impact of their service on the Board is evident, but they also helped establish the Alumni Fund and they have hosted meetings of alumni in New York and London. I anticipate we will add more alumni trustees as vacancies occur or if we expand the size of the Board.

You mention the need for diverse perspectives. Does this mean there are occasionally differences of opinion among trustees?

I am amazed and gratified by how well we work together. Our meetings are friendly and fun, even as we take on very serious responsibilities. For example, we hire and evaluate the ACS president, develop and approve annual budgets for the College to operate, define policies and procedures to govern the College, fix tuition rates and set enrollment targets for each incoming class of students, ensure legal and regulatory compliance, and establish strategic goals for the continuous improvement of the school.

Our trustees share a common commitment to make ACS the best school possible and whatever differences we may have, they don't seem to me to be fundamental. I cannot think of any issue that

wasn't resolved by means of the free and respectful exchange of opinion. Naturally, over the years we have had some differences. We have had varied opinions on matters such as the IB (International Baccalaureate) vs. AP (Advanced Placement) and whether the IB should be an option for Bulgarian or only international students. We have had some differences with respect to the appropriate use of instructional technology, especially distance education/on-line courses to complement the curriculum. We have had some variation of opinion about the value of the admissions test to predict academic success at the College. We have had complicated discussions about how to respond to the test prep tutoring industry that gives an advantage to already advantaged kids, and so on.

My view, as Chair of this Board, is that it is important to invite differences without hard feelings; that is what drives strategy. Hard feelings can compromise the effectiveness of the Board but false harmony is every bit as dysfunctional. Frankly, our Board rarely experiences either. We work wonderfully well as a team and I have great respect for the expertise, tireless commitment, and mutual respect shared among our trustees.

Finally, please share with us from the perspective of the Board of Trustees your sense as to the biggest challenges now facing the College.

ACS is a complex organization working in a complex environment. As such, the College faces a set of enduring and emerging issues. Some of these are inevitable and ongoing, due to our limited resources and various regulatory and compliance requirements. Others deserve our full attention.

Let me mention several complex issues that our Board of Trustees considers of great importance at this time.

Enhancing Civility

Next year we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the reopening of the American College. The year leading up to this milestone will be a time for reflection on the kind of school we have and the kind of school we want. We delight every day in the success of the College as it graduates amazing students who we know will make a difference in their chosen futures. Most ACS graduates will continue their education at universities in the U.S., Bulgaria or other parts of Europe. Many will continue to pursue graduate degrees



Class of 1997 busy learning how to play softball as preps in 1992

and establish themselves as first-rate professionals in whatever field they choose. The academic rigor of the College ensures our graduates are prepared to continue their education. This is our obligation. But we hope for more than professional distinction from our graduates. We also hope that over their years at ACS, students will have developed the sensibilities and sensitivities to fight against increased racism, ultranationalism, and intolerance that are, arguably, resurfacing in Europe and the U.S. We need educated citizens for a stable democracy, a vibrant economy, and a civil society. Beyond its academic rigor and extracurricular enrichments, we need to continue to reflect on how the ACS experience can successfully prepare responsible citizens for our vulnerable but increasingly interdependent world.

Increasing Student Diversity

We need to reflect on the diversity of our student population. I'm not talking here about diversity of gender, race, ethnicity, religious preference, sexual orientation or identity, though each is important.

Our trustees are thinking about two other kinds of diversity:

home? Should we develop more housing on the campus? There are no obvious answers, but the general topic will continue to be discussed by the Board of Trustees.

Economic Diversity

We have done our best to provide financial assistance to families who have demonstrated need. However, we need to do even more to increase financial aid and to make assistance more broadly known to the public. The evidence is pretty clear that the best predictor of academic success in U.S. universities is the wealth of the parents. It is likely true elsewhere in the world and at all levels of education. This should not come as a surprise. Wealthy families provide opportunities that enhance academic preparedness (including tutors, as mentioned). Given the budgetary limitations at the College, we will always be a tuition-driven institution with restraints on our ability to provide unlimited scholarships. It can hardly be otherwise. However, to the extent possible, we need to explore ways to expand scholarship assistance and make the College even more accessible, to engage the notion that education, at its best, is a vehicle for social mobility, redirecting what some have called the "probable destiny" of those without the opportunities afforded to others. This is a big challenge, a global one actually, that will require our best thinking, careful planning, and increased support from alumni, parents, and friends of the College as we celebrate ACS as a treasured opportunity for the broadest possible array of students.

John Kelly: Bulgaria as Serendipity

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

As I was wrapping up work on the summer issue of the alumni magazine, long-time ACS ESL teacher Roumy Ivanova called to tell me that John Kelly was coming to town, for the first time since he left back in 1999. I instantly agreed with her that we absolutely needed to interview him for our magazine. John taught English to ACS preps between 1995 and 1999. To those he didn't teach, he was known as the cool smiling American teacher who made a special appearance on the school musical *Grease* (1997) and played the blues on national TV, too. We managed to steal a good two hours of his busy schedule in Bulgaria on a beautiful day in early June – well, technically two hours minus the many interruptions each time someone who knew John entered the office and started hugging and chatting with their old friend.

John, tell us how you ended up at ACS back in 1995?

After finishing graduate school at the University of Kentucky, I found a copy-editing job in Washington D.C. After a few months in a cubicle I started looking for a teaching job. I was living in a house with four guys from college and one of them had gotten involved in a Georgetown University volunteer program called Students for Central and Eastern Europe that sent teachers to Czechoslovakia and Poland. So, one day, I was sitting at the table, eating dinner, and one of my housemates was on the phone, and I overheard him say, "No, no, I am not interested in Bulgaria, I've already started taking Czech lessons." He hung up, and I asked, "What was that?" and he told me a little bit about the program, and said they had just received a contract and they were looking for teachers to go to Bulgaria. "Really?" I said. I got the phone number, interviewed over the phone, and sent off a cover letter and resume.

I also called my parents, and I thought that if they were against it, I wouldn't do it. But they were like: "Oh, you have to do it!" There was no doubt in their minds that this was a wonderful opportunity, and literally three weeks after overhearing my housemate's phone conversation, I was on an Air France flight to Sofia knowing very little about this coun-



John at home, summer 2015

try that would become my home for the next six years.

Originally I was going to be in Bulgaria for one school year, but I ended up staying two years teaching English at the language school, Bertolt Brecht, in Pazardzhik.

So, one winter day in my second year, I was on a train coming from Sofia back to Pazardzhik, and there was a group of students, reading some books in English. I recall that one of the books was Camus' *The Stranger*. Even though I was tired, I decided to strike up a conversation, "Oh, do you speak English?" and we started talking. The students were so enthusiastic about practicing their English, which was excellent, and also quite proud of their school,

the American College of Sofia, that I caught myself thinking, "What is this ACS place that turns out such good conversationalists?" The students I taught in Pazardzhik were often nervous or reticent when it came to speaking in English. Well, it turned out that one of the student travelers, Katya Kormusheva '97, was from Pazardzhik, and her father met us at the station, and gave me a ride back to my flat and even invited me over for dinner later on.

Fast forward a few months and I was in Sofia literally to buy my plane ticket, one-way, back to the States. I was staying at a friend's apartment near the Pliska Hotel, and as I got on a bus to head to the center to find a travel agency, who do you think

got off the bus? Katya! I let the bus go without me, and we started talking. At one point she said, "Oh, you should definitely call Dr. Charles, the College President." So I decided to hold off buying my plane ticket, and later that day I took the 76 bus to the College. I arrived, and of course, there was that moment when I was like "Where am I?" There was nothing but some unwelcoming communist-style blocs and a closed gate. I almost turned around, but for some reason, I walked up to the gate, talked to the guard and wandered on the ACS campus. I couldn't believe the campus and again asked myself, "Where am I?" This hidden corner of Sofia looked like an American boarding school that had landed like a spaceship in Mladost. A little bit discombobulated, I asked directions from some students playing basketball, and found my way to Sanders Hall to meet with Dr. Charles. After a good conversation about the College and its history and the ups and downs of living in Bulgaria, he invited me to come back and teach a lesson.

I returned to Sofia and the magical ACS campus a week later to teach one of Jill Snedden's prep classes. I don't remember which students I taught, but do remember it was a lesson about eggs and also that I was very nervous despite having been a teacher for five years. After the lesson I talked with Dr. Charles and he said, "Okay, we're going to call you." After a few days of waiting and wondering if my phone in Pazardzhik might be broken I thought, "Okay, well it wasn't meant to be. Time to buy a plane ticket home." And then the day before I was going to travel to Sofia to buy a ticket, he called me. I returned to ACS one more time for another interview, and was offered a contract. I remember signing the contract and thinking, "It's a 2-year contract. I am going to be 30 years old when this contract is up; I nev-



John on the train to Koprivshtitsa with students

er thought I would be that old and living in such an exotic and foreign place."

I stayed four years at ACS. It was literally Katya (and the 76 bus!) I have to thank. When she graduated, even though I had never taught her, I gave her a graduation present because without her it would have been a very different world for me. I hope she knows that I often think about our initial meeting on the train and then at the bus stop. Such serendipity!

What have you been up to since you left Bulgaria in 1999?

I didn't really have a plan when I left ACS other than a hazy idea of maybe a return to graduate school. So my first job after I came back from Bulgaria was helping a friend build a straw-bale house in Colorado. That meant lots of manual labor: carrying boards, shoveling rock, and pounding nails. The two of us had met at Cornell, and his brother, who was also helping, had gone to Penn, so we joked a lot about how we were truly putting our Ivy League degrees to work. But it was great.

The other thing keeping me busy was studying for the GRE, which I did while on the job. I would be

hammering nails and my friend and his brother would be yelling vocabulary words at me. I ended up applying to Harvard for a Master's in Education, and, of course, my essay was all about Bulgaria and teaching and living here. One of the themes I talked about was how the words *uchenik* vs. *uchitel* have the same root in Bulgarian and how learning and teaching really are two sides of the same coin.

One of my favorite courses was History of the Balkans taught at the Kennedy School of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations. The teacher and several other people were from Greece, and we also had a person who had lived in Romania, so I became Bulgaria's representative/ambassador in the class. It was a small class, twelve of us, so we would sometimes get together for dinner and share dishes and stories from the Balkans. As you can see, Bulgaria has been a major theme in my life since the early 1990s.

I finished graduate school and got a job at a public school outside of Boston, teaching 6th grade History and English. Quickly I realized I was not cut out for teaching middle schoolers and joked that the school was too big and the kids were too



John with students on the annual Prep 5 and 6 hike up on Vitosha

small, so I started to look for a job teaching older kids, and found one at a boarding school in Maine. After a cold but fun winter of skiing, living in a tiny dorm apartment, and teaching 8th graders, I decided to move some place warmer and less remote. Eventually, I found a job in New Orleans at an independent day school and had been there a year when hurricane Katrina showed up and devastated the city. My house and my classroom survived the storm, but the school suffered some damage. The main problem, however, was that half of the students were not coming back because they had lost their homes. So for the first time in my life I was laid off from a job. Luckily, after only a month or so of unemployment I received a phone call, "Hello, I am headmaster at a private school in Oklahoma City, and we heard you might be looking for a job teaching History." I think I surprised him when I asked, "Oh, is it Casady?" which it was.

I knew about the school because there had been a Biology teacher at ACS, Leslie Surbek, who had graduated from Casady and whose parents had been teachers there, as well. I recall that we used to tease her a bit about being from Oklahoma City. I think with our East Coast bias that

we were also surprised that there was actually a private school in Oklahoma City. (Always be careful what you joke about!) So, once again Bulgaria and my Bulgarian connections came into play. I got the job as the History Department Chair and arrived in Oklahoma City in 2006. Oklahoma City was very different from other places I had lived in but I joked that if I could live in Pazardzhik, I can live in Oklahoma City. (I guess part of that joke is that I really loved my time in Pazardzhik just like I have loved my time in Oklahoma City.) So eventually I bought a house, and I've been there for ten years, which is the longest I have stayed in one place since my four years at ACS.

What are you currently busy with, apart from teaching and now traveling to Bulgaria?

I've been coaching baseball, which reminds me of the softball games here at ACS on the tiny field south of Sanders. The one thing I like about teaching and the school year schedule are the opportunities to travel. Oklahoma City gets a little hot in the summer, so I usually leave and visit my parents outside of Boston or my friends in California. Oklahoma City is also nicely situated in the middle of the country, so equally easy and quick to get to both coasts, although

I've spent a lot of time exploring neighboring New Mexico and Colorado as well.

What did you manage to do so far on this trip?

It was an amazing trip down memory lane just getting ready to come back. I spent a lot of time looking through shoeboxes of photos and old yearbooks.

It's been magical being a tourist here. I had never actually spent a summer in Bulgaria; I would always go home to work at a summer school in the US. There was actually one year when I was working at ACS that I got on a plane after graduation, flew to Boston, had dinner, went to sleep, woke up, and went to my first day of work at my summer job – the world's longest commute! After that, I decided that summers were more for relaxing. While I was teaching at ACS I used my Trabant to explore all over the place, and even drove it out to the Black Sea a couple of times.

I haven't been back in Bulgaria since 1999, so it's been seeing 17 years of change all at once. The campus is the same, people are the same, but the world around us has changed, you know, with smart phones and wifi. Having a smartphone and all the different apps has really made being a tourist a lot easier than it was back in the 90s. My former students have probably changed the most, from teenagers to grown-ups now and many with families.

The other day I walked about 25 kilometers all over Sofia, I just couldn't stop. It has been fun taking the metro around, too. I can still remember how to get around, and I have been to Slaveykov Square, Vitosha Boulevard, different museums (that I rarely visited when I lived here), and the *Zhenski Pazar*. I was so happy when I saw some *gyuvecheta* in the market. I make *sirene po shopski* once or twice a month, usually when I have people over. It's my go-to dish, as it's unique and easy to make. I am definitely



Three Trabants on ACS Campus, 1999

bringing back more *gyurecheta*.

My house has a lot of Bulgarian stuff in it; I've got a poster of *Saving Private Ryan* in Bulgarian that I have framed. I also have this old sign I found on the College campus that says *telefon*. The other sign I would love to get a hold of is *Ne pipai! Opasno za zhivota!* so I am keeping my eye out for one that I can liberate.

I don't know if it's still the same, but as teachers at ACS we had this special English-Bulgarian hybrid of a language. We would use handy Bulgarian phrases in our English speech, like 'na gosti'. You wouldn't say even to an American "Oh, I am going to visit my Bulgarian friends and we're going to have so much food!" So we would say: "Oh, I am going 'na gosti' and everybody knew what you meant. Or 'boza' – how can one really translate 'boza' to English? Or the really short 'sus ili bez' when being asked with or without cheese for your 'purzheni kartofi.' I was a little surprised when I first came to Bulgaria that there were a lot of English words like 'weekend' or 'teenager' being used in Bulgarian.

I remember you appeared once on a Bulgarian TV talk show and played the blues. Do you still play the guitar?

(*Looking at the Yearbook 1997*) Oh, my gosh, there they are, the lyrics. I

think somebody taped the show here on TV and then I took the tape to America so my parents could see it. I found it years later when I was moving from New Orleans to Oklahoma City. I got it converted to a DVD and put clips of it on Facebook recently, as part of my planning for this trip. In the crowd shots you can see Roumyana Ivanova and Vlado Marinov, and a few other familiar faces.

I was actually on a cooking show first, called *Ot nishto neshto*. It started with my Bulgarian teacher Lora Tomova tasting my apple cobbler at the Thanksgiving party that the American teachers would throw for their Bulgarian colleagues each year. She loved it and connected me with the cooking show. And they came up to the College to film for a day, I cooked some chili, some cornbread, and apple cobbler, of course. And since they were going to air it right before St. Patrick's Day, I made some Irish soda bread, too – the only time I've ever made soda bread – following my mom's recipe. After the show, a few letters came to the College with people asking me for more recipes.

Later, I played the guitar on the *Kak shte gi stignem (amerikantsite)...* - Todor Kolev's show. That was the absolute highlight of my musical career. A huge thrill to be able to play with such talented musicians and in front

a national audience. I still have some of the memorabilia they gave us for appearing on the show. In my spare bedroom there is a clock that doesn't run anymore, but it says *Kak shte gi stignem*, so it is more art than function.

What are some of the most vivid or funniest memories that you keep of your time here?

I recall how on some long weekends during the school year, all I wanted to do is stay in the house and put a tape in the VCR. My mom would send me tapes she had made of all Thursday and Friday television shows, six hours; she would even tape the commercials. And the other teachers would just come over to the house and we'd watch American TV for a few hours. Remember Bill Fisher and Kalinde Webb? My sister was coming to visit, and she was leaving on a Friday, and Thursday night they were broadcasting the last episode of the hugely popular show *Seinfeld*. So my sister tapes the show, gets on a plane on Friday, and arrives here on Saturday. We pull into the College, Bill comes out of the house, says to my sister, "Hello! Welcome to Bulgaria! Where's the tape?"

I vividly remember the first graduation, because it was really hot, and I remember the seniors of 1997 complaining because they were wearing these strange black robes.

I remember how one year, my first or second one, my students had been working in secret on this enormous hat with all sorts of decorations on it, and they gave it to me to wear for the prep March Madness parade, which I hear is still a tradition.

I was happy to see posters of *Grease*, the musical still up on the walls in Sanders. I sang a song, *High School Dropout* – a terrifying experience!

I also remember Robin Morrison, an English teacher organizing a Monster Mash lip sink performance for a Halloween featuring Nathan



John on Bulgarian National TV

Monash, Rebecca Glenn, Kevin Samuelson, Robin, and myself as various monsters, ghouls, and goblins. I think the students thought it was a real hoot.

What makes you happy these days?

Gardening is a new hobby I have, although Oklahoma is a difficult place for gardening because of the extreme weather. I like to grow weird things. I grow spinach and kale and easy things like that. But I also use my gardening as a history project. I teach high school History, so each year I try to grow what I call “historical crops”: peanuts, cotton, and even tobacco. I don’t smoke, but I grew tobacco because the history of it is interesting. I also grew winter wheat. Oklahoma is mostly oil and gas economy but they also grow a lot of wheat. And the wheat here originally came from German immigrants who had been living on the steppes of Tsarist Russia. You plant the wheat in the fall and harvest it early in the spring. It seemed strange to me, being from New England, to be planting seeds in October but it is

big business in Oklahoma, so I was curious to see it grow. Apparently a lot of farmers have cattle graze on it during the winter but I only have squirrels who dig it up to bury pecans. The squirrels have sort of domesticated me and I usually head to the garden with peanuts and sunflower seeds in my pockets to give them.

Did I tell you the story of my neighbor in Oklahoma City? After I bought a house, I was in my back yard, and sure enough, on the other side of the fence I heard a woman speaking Bulgarian to her kids. A few days later, she was in the front yard and as I was getting out of my car she came over and said, “Hi, I’m Maya, welcome to the neighborhood”. And I replied, “Moje da govorim na bulgarski?” She was stunned! “What?” she replied slightly confused. I answered her with, “Razbira ce, vseki amerikanets mozhe da govari malko bulgarski.” And of course we became friends and they’d invite me over to their house. And there were parties, a whole little Bulgarian community. You could buy *sirene*, *kashkaval*, and *lyutenitsa* in some stores nearby but you can’t get *rakia*, for some strange reason, probably because Oklahoma has strange liquor laws. You can get *rakia* in Boston, though, and every time I go back home I bring some, as well as some *lukanka*. I used to bring *rakia* to my parents as a gift, but they only drink it when I’m there. So 17 years later, I just finished my supply of *rakia*. So it was time to bring more. “Why did you come back?” “To stock up on *rakia*.” (laughing)

Do you have a message to our readers, ACS alumni?

If you mean alumni teachers, I would say, “Come back!” When I was here it was a little difficult to travel around Bulgaria. The phone wasn’t always reliable and guidebooks were often out of date or had wrong numbers and information. But now it’s just a question of a few clicks or a cell

phone call to arrange everything from bus tickets to a hotel room.

Actually, alumni – teachers and students, - come back and visit the campus! I’ve never gone to a reunion. My parents have moved, so I don’t really go home to the place that I grew up in, so this is the first time I’ve ever really done anything alumni-like. So I recommend coming back and being a tourist. It’s nice to be back here and not thinking about essays to grade or tests to make. It’s a very different experience, you have more time to sit in cafes and meet with people and appreciate how wonderful Bulgaria is.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

When I was at Harvard, I wrote a treatment for a documentary I wanted to make about ACS. I never got beyond a script, but the story was, and it wasn’t really a secret, about how some of the books from the American College library had been moved to the Rila Monastery during WWII. I think it was a Saturday when a few of us took the school van up to the Rila monastery to bring the books back to the campus, and they were put on display in the library. A few months later one of the pre-war alumni was visiting and started smiling because he saw his name on one of the old library cards that he had used to check the book out 50 years ago.

In high school I probably would have been voted “The Least Likely to Travel outside the United States”. When I tell my high school friends that I spent six years teaching in Bulgaria, they are shocked. Jumping on a plane and coming to Bulgaria was a giant step... It changed my life. It’s amazing that I was only here for six years, because I think and talk about Bulgaria all the time.

Sofia, June 2016

Garth Greenwell: „Every Human Life Is Infinitely Valuable“

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Garth Greenwell taught English Language and Literature at ACS between 2009 and 2013. Next, he wrote a stunning debut novel – *What Belongs to You*. The book is currently longlisted for the National Book Award, shortlisted for the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize, named one of *Publishers Weekly*'s Top 10 Books of 2016, one of the best books of the year by *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The Spectator*, *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard*, *Vulture*, *The Telegraph* and described as “the year's publishing sensation” by BBC Arts. The lyrical story of love and desire, and their consequences, is set in Bulgaria. I read the book as soon as it was published in the US and loved it for its unique beautiful language, so when I heard Garth would be coming to Sofia in October for the launch of the Bulgarian translation¹, I immediately got in touch with him to ask for an interview. He graciously agreed.



Garth against a Mladost skyline

How did you end up teaching at ACS in Bulgaria?

Pretty much by chance. I sometimes say that the real decision took place three years before, when I decided to leave my PhD program and take a job teaching high school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I thought at the time it was just going to be a year, like I was taking a break to see if I wanted to continue with my PhD. And it's really true that I fell in love

with my students. Harvard was very kind and extended my leave for a second and then a third year. And it was in that third year that I realized that I wasn't going back and that I didn't want to finish that PhD. The school I was at was amazing, a really wonderful place, but I remember I was living in this apartment complex, one of those awful suburban apartment complexes in the States, and across the street

there was an old persons' home and I remember thinking, because this school was the kind of place where people have entire careers, how easy it would be to just blink and wake up and live across the street. And so, I'd always wanted to live abroad, I'd never been abroad until after my first year of teaching high school when I chaperoned a group of students to France, and I decided I just wanted to be in Europe.

¹ Translated by Nadezhda Radulova and edited by freelance journalist Dimitar Kenarov (ACS Class of 1999). Published by Black Flamingo under the title „Каквото ти принадлежи“.

And so, I was on the market and of the two offers I got, one was this Swiss boarding school, very posh, and one was ACS. As I researched them both I realized that ACS would be the much better teaching experience because the students would be better. And also I thought it would be the more interesting cultural experience, because I would actually be living in a city and not just sort of on a mountain top in a sort of beautiful bubble. So that's why I chose to come to Sofia. Also I had one friend in Sofia, who in my first year at ACS taught music here, Neda Tsvetkova, and whom I knew from conservatory. We were together at the Eastman School of Music back in the day. So that's how I ended up here.

I remember, when you came to ACS in 2009 you already spoke Bulgarian at the start of the school year. This made you pretty unique among American teachers. How did it happen?

I love learning languages. I started studying Bulgarian as soon as I had the contract in March, so I had 4-5 months when I was studying with a teacher in Plovdiv over Skype, and I was studying hard. So I came and I had survival Bulgarian. And that full first year I worked really hard on my Bulgarian. I wasn't really writing because I was using that time to work on Bulgarian. I couldn't imagine being in a place and not speaking the language. Not that I ever spoke Bulgarian perfectly, but I did speak enough to have real friendships with people who didn't speak English, and to be able to have real conversations with people who didn't speak English. I just can't imagine living in a place without that. It's true in Sofia it's fine, you can get around perfectly easily just with English, and certainly most young people speak English. I mean, it took about three years before, reliably, my Bulgarian was better than the English of people I would meet and so people would not immediately switch to English with me. But you know, language is not just information, language is also culture, and I feel like there's so

much about Bulgaria that I learned not because of the translatable information carried in language but because of a different kind of information language carries. I think that's something really important to be cherished about languages, and it's something I feel strongly about as an English speaker, because we live in an age where English is the global language, and on one hand that makes it feel sometimes to people who speak English, especially to Americans, as though what would be the point of learning other languages, you don't really need it, everybody wants to speak English – and especially what's the point of learning a language like Bulgarian, which is spoken by only about 8 million people. Almost everything that I did and that was valuable about my experience in Bulgaria was tied up with the language and with being able to speak it, with being able to turn on the television and watch something, being able to listen to the radio, being able to read Bulgarian literature, which is not to a very great extent available in English, being able to read the stories of Yovkov. And also in terms of teaching at the American College, like when we read Shakespeare's sonnets, to be able to bring in Valeri Petrov's translation of a sonnet and to look at them side by side, or when we read *Huckleberry Finn* to bring in the first few pages of *Yan Bibiyan* which I think are very sort of Huck-Finn-ish. Especially teaching

something like literature, you want your students to be engaging with the text with their whole lives, with their whole beings, and that means making connections between, you know, a book they read as a kid like *Yan Bibiyan* and a book like *Huck Finn* and see the use the great poet Valeri Petrov made of Shakespeare. And this just allows for a much richer conversation.

You have said in interviews that in a sense Bulgaria made you a writer. Can you explain?

One of my biggest fears for English-language literature is that English-language writers don't read in other languages, don't know other languages. And the history of English-language literature, the history of innovation in English-language literature has always been history of encounters between languages. I mean, English language as a literary language came into being to a very great degree because Chaucer was a customs official and so he was reading tons of Italian Renaissance books and French books. And the English Renaissance happened because Wyatt was reading Italian sonnets and Romanticism happened because Coleridge went to Germany and read German philosophy, and Modernism happened because Eliot and Pound were reading French. I do feel sometimes that if English literature becomes a conversation with itself, then English literature,



The Bulgarian premiere of Garth's novel in Peroto

despite the fact that English is the global language, is going to be a parochial literature. And I certainly feel like my novel, in fact I was thinking at the book presentation, you know that scene with the fly - Georgi Gospodinov is obsessed with *muba*, you know, *muba* appears in all of his books, and I'm sure that was part of why that scene with the fly is in my book. I remember when I was writing that second section, which is very kind of crazy and scary, so scary that after I wrote that section I put it away and didn't look at it for a year, and it was in that year that I read Teodora Dimova's *Maykite* and it was a really important reminder that, all right, literature can do this. So, I wanted to learn Bulgarian for totally selfish reasons, because I think learning languages and reading other literatures makes me a better writer.

But it also shows what a special person you are, really open to everything around you.

That's the nice way to put it. Also, I think writers are always kind of vampires, and they want to take whatever they can from their experience and from what's around them. Language is this great resource and yeah, I do think that my book is really deeply influenced by my engagement with Bulgarian – and the least of that influence is the fact that there are Bulgarian words in the book.

I've heard you say that Bulgaria made you turn from poetry to prose.

I think that's true. I don't fully understand it. I think something about just the kind of density of information that I was taking in every day being in this place and being so fascinated by it... I remember when I originally conceived of the Mitko story, I remember thinking I would write it in poetry and then, you know, instead, it came out in unbroken sentences. That had to do with Bulgaria. I also think it really had to do with teaching high school kids after a life as an academic, training to be an academic. Doing a PhD degree is such a solipsistic work

in some sense, you're so caught up in your own head, your most important relationships are with books and the most urgent things in your life are your own thoughts. And then to go from that to being sort of thrust into the lives of 70 adolescents is a powerful change. And teaching is, in some sense, in a meaningful way, a kind of long looking. I mean you look at these kids in a way that no one else in their life looks at them – their parents look at them in a different way, their friends look at them in a different way. And this is especially true when you're teaching English and reading their writing. I think that is what made me interested in narrative: I became interested in these students and their lives as narratives. I became interested in other people's lives. I was living in a beautiful place in Michigan, I was biking 8 miles to school and I think that made me more aware of the natural world and I think my poems became more like scenes and more like little narratives. So I think it was teaching high school that prepared the ground and then being in Bulgaria that made me start writing prose.

How did it feel to be the only openly gay teacher at ACS at the time?

I was the only openly gay adult, there were other gay adults in the

community but none of them open, for a very good reason. I was the only gay American adult. It was hard. I mean, it was not super easy to be an openly gay high-school teacher even in the States from 2006 to 2009. There was a lot of pushback against that and, you know, other teachers would say to me, "Why do you have to be open? Why should your students care about that? Why should they know about that?" And I would just say, "You're wearing a wedding band and your husband comes to events, how is that not telling students about your sexuality?" That is, fundamentally, I think the most dehumanizing way of thinking about LGBT people that straight people often take for granted, which is that they reduce LGBT relationships to sex, so that in some way, my being openly gay is rubbing sex in students' faces in ways that this woman bringing her child and spouse to the school is not, in her mind. So it was a matter of education there, too, and just pointing that out, saying, "Actually, wearing a wedding band is advertising your sexuality." Certainly, in the States, the pushback came from the adults and never from the students. At ACS, the most painful thing was that there were incidents with students. Never my students, actually, but other people's students in the community. Homophobia or prejudice of any kind is not actually



Garth in his classroom at ACS: the photo was featured in *College Life*

about real people, it's about an idea, a myth of people. And the most moving thing and the thing that made it all worth it is that pretty much every year one of my students, at least one of my students, usually like a sophomore boy, very macho in that way young guys sometimes are, they would come to me saying, "At the beginning of the year I had certain ideas about gay people and those ideas have changed." Because they're myths, and I do think that when kids spend a year actually seeing the reality of a human being in front of them it's very hard to sustain those myths. That's one way in which I do think that it's important to be open, it's important to be visible. If you're visible people can't continue associating you with these totally false monstrous myths they have.

Garrard Conley said that being the only openly gay teacher, he sometimes felt as if he was "enacting some kind of public service all the time," sort of always having to be at his best.

Well, I push back against that really hard in general as a high school teacher. I think it's really deadly. In the United States there's this taboo, like a teacher should never acknowledge to a student that he/she had smoked pot, this idea that teachers are saints. I mean, there's a fine line, and there is such a thing as oversharing. My goal as a teacher was always to be useful to my students, and I think if there's a necessary boundary with authority, like if you've become their friend you aren't useful to them in the way that you need to be useful. I think it's very important that you know there is a line. Now I can be friends with former students, but when they were in class with me it was very clear that no, you know, we're not friends. I was in a position of authority and that was what allowed me to be useful to them. I also think though that if you are inauthentic, you also stop being useful to them. And so, if students ask me questions that I did not feel comfortable answering, I would tell them, "I don't feel comfortable answering that." But I would not lie



Michigan University professor Linda Gregerson's virtual visit to ACS and Garth's students, December 2010

to them. I would not say to them, "Oh no, of course, I have never done drugs, that would be awful, what a horrible thing." Because they know that's a lie, and then you can't be useful to them in terms of what does it mean to be a responsible person and what resources are there if you need help. You want to have an authentic relationship, so I didn't feel like I had to be perfect in some way.

It's kind of like with the representation of gay people in general. I think there is a sense among some activists that in order to gain rights and recognition for gay people, gay people have to be presented as kind of ideal, an ideal that very often looks very much like straight life, you know: a monogamous relationship centered on the raising of a child. And I think that that's just a mistake. Dignity is not something that LGBT people earn by acting in a certain way that seems dignified to people who are disgusted by LGBT people. LGBT lives as they are lived, in the communities in which they are lived, have dignity and value, you don't have to pretend they conform to a single model of what dignity looks like. You know, once when I was talking about my novel, a very kind of aggressive interviewer at the BBC, her first question to me was, "Why, after decades in which gay men have been reduced to sex, would you begin your book with a sexual encounter in a public bathroom?"

Did she just read the first pages?

I wondered, I actually did wonder but no, she read the second section, too, because she said, "That's the part I liked." And I said, "Okay, you like that part because the narrator is the victim and it's easy to sort of sympathize with him."

Oh no, I said that about the second part, too. But in my defense, I think I did so because I'm a parent and everything involving parent-children relationships interests and moves me even more.

To me, it is the most important part of the book, there's no question. But when it comes to the question of sympathy, you know, or distance, in the second part the narrator is easy to sympathize with because he is being victimized and in the other sections he is not. I think it's bound to be much more complicated than that. But I said to this woman, "You know, the fact that gay people have sex does not diminish them." And after I gave her this sort of long nuanced answer – this was a pre-taped interview, so she said to me, "You have to speak in shorter answers because we're going to have to edit this down." And I said, "You need to ask questions that are not densely impacted homophobic narratives that I have to take the time to pick apart." I mean, it was clear from the beginning that she was going to be hostile, so I was like "OK, I will be hostile right back." But this idea that "Oh, you know, we need to represent gay people acting well." Well, according to what

standard? It's a funny analogy, but it's similar to what Flannery O'Conner would often be asked. People would say, "You call yourself a Catholic writer. If you're a Catholic writer how can you write these stories in which these horrible things happen, you know, people are killed, all these things?" And she said, "If you really have faith, then you have the courage to present the world as it is, because you know that God is there." And in the same way I feel like I'm not making an argument that gay lives have dignity, I am asserting that gay lives have dignity, I'm recognizing the dignity they absolutely have. And I do think that dignity is not something that you bestow on someone, it's instead something that you recognize in someone. What happens when lives are stripped of dignity, it's a way of seeing, you know, they are being looked at in a way that refuses to see the dignity that they have. I believe that every human life is infinitely valuable and it doesn't matter whether that life is rich or poor, whether that life is in New York or Dublin or Afghanistan or Sofia or wherever it is. Human value is not an accident of history or circumstance, it's always there. And I do think literature is the way of seeing that most powerfully recognizes that value. But it's not by changing the world, it's by looking at the world as it is, as closely and carefully and lovingly as you can.

I heard the term GSA for the first time in my life when I had to translate your new faculty intro paragraph. Now we have a GSA² at ACS. Have you been back to the school in the last three years? Have you seen any significant changes that you want to comment on?

I have, and I've seen extraordinary changes. In fact, I've been back to the school every year, and when I was here last year, I couldn't believe the changes I saw. There was a presentation of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation fellows and I was here in the audience and well,

for one thing, in the back of the lecture hall there were two boys holding hands. That would have been unimaginable in my time here, absolutely unimaginable, and so clearly ACS has changed. I was so relieved and happy when Garrard took the job – to have someone being a visibly gay person living his life with dignity, you know, that is just so important. It's clear that other teachers arrived who became really fierce allies, and I stayed in close touch with them and heard about some of the battles they fought and won. I've tried to be an ally from afar. I think ACS is a safer place now for all students than it was when I was a teacher here. I think it's great!

Have you kept in touch with your former students?

Yeah, very much, I mean Facebook is wonderful for that. The only real value Facebook has is that. But also, you know, the biggest joy of [the] book tour has been how many students I've seen pretty much at every stop. Both American and Bulgarian students have been at almost every reading, and that's really wonderful. I remember how joyful I was at the second reading I gave in New York - there was a big contingent of Bulgarian students who were in the New York area. And I remember I was signing

books when I heard this Bulgarian conversation and said, "Oh, I'm so happy to hear Bulgarian!" We went to dinner afterwards, and it was just wonderful. And now, I'm going to see two students, at least, when I'm in London for my reading on the 10th. That's a real joy of being a high school teacher, that there's this network of friends everywhere that you run into.

What's the best and what's the worst about teaching?

The best and worst thing about teaching is actually the same thing: it's the intensity of it. I just taught university fiction for the first time. As part of my graduate studies, I taught at Harvard and at Washington University at St. Louis, but I did not teach at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, because I was doing a fellowship. And so this summer, at NYU, I taught my first college-level fiction workshop. It was fine, the students were good, but I kept feeling like there was an intensity missing. I saw the class twice a week for three hours each time, Monday and Wednesday, and then from Thursday to Sunday I didn't think about them at all. It was like I didn't feel I had a real relationship with them, I didn't feel like I got to really see their growth over the course of the workshop. There was missing that kind of



ACS alumni at Garth's reading at Foyles in London, October 2016

²Then known as a Gay Straight Alliance, now called a Gender Sexuality Alliance to be inclusive

intense constant engagement you have when you're a high school teacher and when you're reading a ton of their work and they have million assignments over the course of the year. You really can see this extraordinary growth. And when they come to talk to you during lunch period and they want to talk to you after classes and they want to tell you about their lives and talk about their other classes. The intensity of that engagement and relationship is what was transformative for me about high school teaching. I really did discover as a high school teacher feelings I didn't know I was capable of, a kind of disinterested love. I mean, never in my life have I ever thought that I wanted to be a parent and I still don't, and I'm very grateful for that because my life would be so much harder if I wanted to be a parent. But I discovered a kind of parental feeling I did not know I was capable of as a high school teacher, and that is what made high school teaching such an important element of my growth as a human being and of my growth as a writer, I think. But it is also why after seven years of high school teaching I was just really burned out. It's just such a hard, exhausting job. It is the kind of job where nothing you ever do will actually be enough, you feel you should always be doing more. And with the students here's a kind of reward, because you see that growth, and everything. But then there's also the other side of high school teaching, which is the administrative aspect, and there it's just no reward, it's just you give up this energy and there's no sense of satisfaction. And then the other thing was that I was writing this novel, and so I was waking up at 4:30 in the morning to write for two hours and that was all I could do – I wrote a novel and I taught and then that was it, you know. There really wasn't space in my life for a relationship, even for really sustained friendships. It was really hard. And then also I realized that two hours in the morning is not enough and that I could never

discover what I could do as a writer if I didn't quit high school teaching. So, it's that intensity that's the best thing, and it's that intensity that, for me, made it unsustainable. I just couldn't do it.

What was the most and the least successful ELL assignment you ever gave here at ACS? (I loved that story you shared in Peroto about the *Dubliners* assignment, only on Sofia, where students had to include real maps that you really checked.)

Actually, the first non-scholarly prose I ever published was an essay about that assignment called "A Native Music." I think somebody wrote me that a teacher here³ teaches it to his ELL students. It was definitely the best assignment. And the worst... you know, my students could tell you. Trying to sort of balance as an English teacher all the different things you need to be doing and encouraging the students to do is really hard. Definitely, every year there were assignments – every year I tried to revise my assignments to make them more useful – but every year there would be something where I thought this was a waste of time. And I felt terrible if I felt like I had wasted the students' time. I wanted never to give them busy work, never to give them work that just took up their time without a clear benefit, and I think there were assignments that did that, definitely. Anytime I was doing that because of having to have a certain amount of grades in a quarter, that just felt horrible, awful.

What is the best lesson you ever taught your students in class and perhaps outside?

The Sofians story, because it taught them a way of seeing. The other best thing I did, and this I did more in the States than I did here, was when I made my students memorize Shakespeare sonnets. That is the most lastingly meaningful assignment - I mean, I still get emails from my very first students who

say how something happened and it made them think of the sonnet, and they were just so happy to know it. 'Cause, you know, memorizing poetry is kind of accoutrement of the self, it enriches your life. Like, for me, every time I see the first flowers on the trees in spring I think of a certain poem by Hopkins, and that's an enrichment of my life.

What is ACS/Sofia/Bulgaria to you?

My experience in Bulgaria - and ACS and Sofia are a part of my experience in Bulgaria, - totally changed my life in every way. There was just no part of my life that was untouched by it. And I think it's a richer life because of all those things. And my experience in Sofia would not have been as rich if I had not been working with young people in Sofia, because working with young people makes you invest in a place in a certain way. And caring deeply about my students made me care deeply about Sofia and about Bulgaria. Caring deeply about my students' fates made me care deeply about the fate of this place, its destiny. Caring deeply about those things made me a richer human being and a writer.

What is the most beautiful place in Bulgaria you've been to? Have you written about it yet?

That's hard. There are a lot of beautiful places. I do think Sozopol is very beautiful. I think Veliko Tarnovo is just ravishing, it's just incredibly gorgeous. And then I think there are many beautiful places in Sofia, too. Someone said to me at this literary festival in South Africa, "Oh, Sofia. I hear Sofia is the ugliest former Soviet capital." I almost punched him in the face! But instead I said to him, "You don't know anything about it. You've never been to Sofia." I think Sofia is an incredibly beautiful city. I think Mladost's just beautiful. I came to Mladost the other night to have dinner with a friend and I got out of the metro and just looked at the landscape, you know, the mountain

³ In fact, both Isabel Norwood and Tim Ward do that.

and then the *blokore* – it's very beautiful. It's alive!

Tell us more about your creative process. Do you experience things in order to write about them later or do you write about stuff you experienced?

I don't think you can engineer it. I think there's a kind of inexplicable chemistry you either have with a place or you don't. And I felt it immediately in Sofia. It is like the chemistry you have with a person – it's either there or it's not, and I know where I feel it and where I don't. I don't feel it in Madrid, I do feel it in Granada. I don't feel it in Iowa City, I do feel it in Santiago.

Maybe it has to be a little crooked?

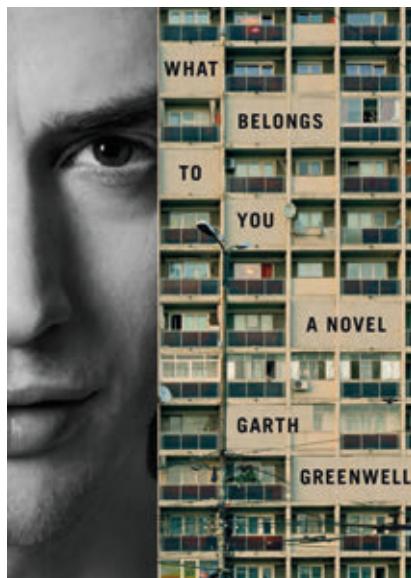
Maybe it has to be a little crooked. I think that's part of it. A place that's sort of perfectly manicured doesn't interest me. It's also true of people. You know, if there's a kind of perfection of appearance, I'm sort of not interested in some way. It doesn't need to be something extreme. In the States: Portland yes, Los Angeles no. I don't understand it. And you can't engineer it.

After the tremendous success of your book, have you been able to actually breathe out and just enjoy being successful without feeling guilty for not working on something new or making a living? And without feeling bad about a less positive critic (if such exist)?

Oh, they exist! There hasn't been a lot of breathing over the last ten months or so, but I'm hoping I'll have a chance soon. After this, I'm going to be in England, for 6 days, visiting 7 cities, and doing 8 events – there's just no way to write. But after that I'm done. I go back to the States and I'll go back to these projects. I will also head to a residency in Texas, where for five weeks I hope I'll be able to unplug and begin to process the last year. And mainly I hope that (finally!) I'll get to write in an uninterrupted way – something I miss being able to do very much.

What inspires you?

I really think anything can be



What Belongs to You, US cover

inspiration, and I find it all around me. For me, it's usually the weird alignment of two things that seem unlike each other: something I see connects with something I'm reading, or with a piece of music I'm listening to, or with a memory I have. It's less any of those things alone that counts as inspiration than the relationship they make.

You wrote the first draft of *What Belongs to You* in a series of notebooks. Do you still write by hand? Is it because inspiration comes unexpectedly, or is it something else?

I do write by hand. I find that it slows me down in a way that's useful, and lets me feel sentences in a different way. And, maybe most importantly, it keeps me away from the internet and its distractions.

Do most writers wake up at 4:30 in order to write before having to go to work for a living?

Every writer is different – but I think a lot of writers do do things like this, yes. Irish writer John Boyne, who wrote this book called *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, reviewed my book for The Irish Times and I met him at a reading in Dublin. He was like, "I do most of my writing while traveling." I can't imagine. Although, you know, it could be, and all of my friends who've sort of been doing this for a long time, they're like, "Every morning for an hour write,

and it will change everything." But I haven't been able to while traveling.

How about the editing process?

I worked really hard with my editor at *Farrar, Straus, and Giroux*, my American publisher, and I feel immensely grateful to her. Together, we made the book a lot shorter than it was, and she helped me see where the language was less strong than it needed to be, where I needed to rewrite to make it stronger.

How does writing a critically acclaimed book change the life of its author?

In the most important way, nothing has changed: when I try to write something new, I'm alone with the blank page. In other ways though, a lot has changed. I feel (not always comfortably) like a writer in a public sense now, and over the last year I've spent almost all my time traveling and speaking about the book. Most importantly, the book has bought me time: limited time, but still time in which I can think about the next book without the demands of a full-time job.

Have readers and critics discovered things in your book you hadn't initially intended?

Oh definitely. I think the meaning of a book happens somewhere between the author's intention and what a reader brings to a book. I've discovered so many things about the book from conversations with readers.

Name three books we absolutely MUST read NOW.

The books that have excited me most in the last year are: Anuk Arudpragasam, *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, Brian Blanchfield, *Proxies*, and Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City*.

Name three books that have changed your life.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*, Edmund White, *A Boy's Own Story*, and Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*.

Nelly Afzali '17 and Nia Alexieva '17: Drawing Inspiration from People and the Present Moment

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Nilofar (Nelly) Afzali is the girl with the guitar and the broad smile who takes part in all art events at ACS, whether she is playing the guitar or singing or both. I'd been waiting for a chance to interview her ever since I saw a beautiful and moving video about migration that Nelly created last year.

Nia Alexieva is the girl with the 'a video a day' project, creating unique, touching videos, or "time capsules" as she calls them, of community events and personal moments, capturing the atmosphere and people's emotions beautifully. Always first when it comes to volunteer work, Nia seems to be everywhere, and always there when you need her. Actually, they both are. Also, they are true friends to one another, so finding them together was pretty easy and so was getting them to agree to share a bit about themselves in a 2-in-1 interview that warmed us up inside on a freezing December day.



When did you both start making videos?

Nia: My first video was made in 9th grade for our Geography class with Mr. Zhelev with technology from the previous century, so naturally it was a tragedy. But the first actually good video was for English class in 10th grade, when I had to do a monologue for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. I guess ACS is what started my whole obsession.

Nelly: I remember doing a video for that class, too, with very, very bad equipment and quality! But if I have

to say when I started making videos, I guess it goes back to 2011 on a funny little webcam. My first proper video on my current channel was posted 2 years ago. Since then, I have 105 public videos, most of which are music covers.

Nelly, when did you start making music?

I've been singing as long as I can remember, but the thing that made me start making music was the a cappella group at ACS, called *Lotus Notes*. I was part of the first formation in 2013. This group

gave me the confidence to get on a stage and sing, and just a year after that I started my YouTube channel and also participated in the school concerts as a solo performer. I don't think I would have improved as much as I did if I wasn't part of this a cappella group.

What is your most marked characteristic?

Nelly: My smile.

Nia: I talk a lot. I'm in constant search for an argument to pick up (no bad intentions, of course). I just think that there are too many



Nelly, photo by Nia

important topics that should always be discussed by as many people as possible.

What do you want to be known for?

Nelly: I want to be known for something good. And maybe that sounds cheesy and very predictable, but the reality is that a lot of people are known for that one bad thing that they've done or said. I want to make a change and to inspire people, and not so that I could gain acknowledgement or fame out of it, but because this is what I feel is right.

What inspires you?

Nia: The present moment. I always want to make the most out of my time and I value every second that I have, so instead of trying to focus on what could or couldn't happen, I just try to concentrate on where I am now and what I can do to make the most out of the current situation. I mean, it sounds quite counterintuitive, but staying grounded in the now is a much better motivational starting point than trying to shape my future that hasn't even happened yet.

Nelly: People. I think people are so fascinating. We see the same things, but the meaning is different for each and every one of us. We share so many qualities, yet we are so different. One of the main reasons for me to keep filming and sharing my videos is that I want to show everyone how I view the world and find people that share

this perspective. It is something that I am able to do thanks to the internet and the technology available to us.

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

Nia: Definitely trying to understand who I have become, what my voice stands for, the perspective I use to look at the world. I can't even contemplate the way that I grow with every passing year, even every month and every time there is quite the drastic change. I guess that is why I resort to the camera so often because it is the way that I can record my perspective for the moment and see how it will change overtime.

Nelly: I definitely agree on this one.

I've always wanted to keep a journal, but I've never done it successfully and my videos are the best way I can look back at my life.

Who helped you the most to get where you are?

Nelly: My friends. Being surrounded by such wonderful people that support you and encourage you is one of the best things one could have. They are the reason I am here. I did not have a camera when I started with my new channel and I always borrowed a friend's. This friend taught me the basics of editing and using different software. The first guitar that I taught myself to play on was a friend's, and the one that I have right now is a present from my friends. They've always been there for me, and they've helped me build up my personality into the person I am today.

Nia: For me it is also my friends. I am in a constant state of self-doubt, so actually having someone there that will always reassure you, if needed, is priceless.

What is your favorite journey?

Nelly: One of my favorite journeys is definitely the one I went on almost 5 years ago to Afghanistan. It was a dive into a completely different culture than the one I had been surrounded with for my whole life. I got to see where my parents grew up and I met with relatives I had only seen in pictures. The only



Nia, photo by Alexandra Baranova '17

thing that I regret is not knowing to film back then. Showing the world this beautiful country through the eyes of a 12-year-old would have been a very interesting movie that unfortunately will never be a reality.

Nia: Definitely the biggest journey I have been on is the first 10 years of my life. We moved from Germany to America to England and to Stara Zagora before we arrived to Sofia and the influence that all these cultures, people, and places have on me still resonates within almost everything that I say and do.

What is your greatest regret?

Nelly: My biggest regret is not going to any music lessons ever. The fact that technically, I do not understand almost anything about music is one of the biggest obstacles I have right now. There is no chance for me to develop much further in music if I do not have musical knowledge, but as a senior in high school, I don't have the time to start going to lessons now.

Which talent would you most like to have?

Nia: I would love more than anything to have any kind of musical talent. Everybody around me is very musical, and I myself need music as a constant background to everything I do, so playing an instrument or being able to sing a cover with my friends would be a dream.

Nelly: I would love it if I could write any kind of literature nicely. I think it takes a lot of talent and practice to write something of value and quality.

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

Nelly: I am the worst procrastinator that I know of. Even this interview was postponed until the last possible day. After years of warnings from teachers not to leave the major assignment for the night before the deadline, I've always took it as a personal challenge to prove them wrong. As you might have guessed by now, most of the times I did not succeed. However, this is something I'm working on in my final year at ACS, and it is definitely a thing I would like to change about myself.



Nia and her dog (from the People of Sofia collection)

Nia: I want to have a little more faith in myself, since I always try to stay out of my comfort zone, which lays a very solid foundation for self-doubt. I do owe this to being a perfectionist, since I cannot possibly put something out there if it is not polished to the furthest possible extent. So I guess becoming less of a perfectionist and not being so hard on myself will definitely help me, although these are characteristics that I very much do value.

If you could change one thing about your school?

Nelly: I think that the one thing I truly dislike in the school system in general is that the focus has shifted from learning to memorizing, from creating something meaningful to writing just enough to get a 6. Our brains are filled with rubrics that we have to follow and the whole purpose of thinking is lost.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Nelly: Mine will have to be getting on a stage for the first time and managing to get through a full song without crying. It was definitely one of the scariest and most exciting moments in my life.

Nia: This is going to sound ridiculous, but getting a dog is my biggest achievement. I have wanted a dog since I was three years old and it took me nine years' worth of arguing that I can take care of a dog. It is an actual living being that I need

to take care of and I am completely alone in this task.

What is your most treasured possession?

Nelly: Our cameras?

Nia: Oh yeah, our cameras. They offer you a completely different perspective on the world and that is so valuable, say, when you travel. The way that I can capture countries and cultures through the lens of my camera has no match. It is this little time capsule that you can carry around and keep some of your most important memories.

Nelly: Yeah, and although cameras are much more accessible nowadays, I'd still say that's my most treasured possession. It gives me the chance to control what I show, so that I could create a world that anyone can see. I give people the chance to look through my eyes and a tool like that is irreplaceable.

What do you most value in your friends?

Nia: I value that they are all individuals of their own. I think it's something that recently has been questionable, like the identity of someone just as a person and who they are. And I think that all of my friends are very self-identified.

Nelly: We kind of have the same friends, so I can talk for both of us. I'd say that one of my favorite things about them is the fact that they want to make us better people.



Nelly and her guitar

Essentially, that is what people look for in their partners, but that's what we have right now. Sometimes they criticize us, but it's always with a good intention.

Nia: And also trust. These are the people that we trust the most and we share basically everything with each other.

What is it that you most dislike?

Nia: I dislike negativity. I really like it when people have an open and positive outlook on life. It's just draining when you are surrounded by negativity. **Nelly:** I completely agree. There is no point in spreading hate and being pessimistic. I try to avoid people like that.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Nelly: It doesn't exist. Nothing is perfect. I think that anyone whose goal is to be perfect, will always be disappointed because this concept is created to be unreachable.

Nia: I don't know about the word "perfect," but happiness is when I do the things that I love and want to do. That's my goal in life.

the energy of the school, the spirit that is one of the most unique and honestly, just heart-warming feelings.

What is the best lesson you learned at the College?

Nelly: The best lesson I've learned here is to always strive for better and to never feel satisfied with something below my capabilities. Although I am definitely not saying that every project I've turned in is perfect and represents the best I can do, the whole drive to pursue that is what makes students here different from those in any other school in Bulgaria.

Nia: The best lesson that I learned is understanding how much I am capable of. I have never thought that I'd be spending over 20 astronomical hours for one project and really, it's the fact that we do these for ourselves and not so much for school. That is extremely important. In the end, it is most important to be motivated to do something because you find it interesting and worth your time.

What is ACS to you?

Nelly: ACS is the place where I built myself. In these five years, I found all of my strengths and weaknesses. I was given the chance to develop further - not only my academics, but also my artistic personality.

Nia: Change. These five years have been the biggest and probably best change up to this point and I value that above all else.

Do you know what and where you are going to study?

Nelly: I am definitely going to take a Filmmaking/Film Production Course in university, which is hopefully going to be somewhere abroad. Unlike my peers though, I am not so stressed out about the application process. We'll see what's going to happen with us in 10 years, when we are going to be the alumni receiving these magazines.

Nia: I am applying to five countries and have too many interests to stick to only one. I guess we can only wait and see how things are going to unfurl.

ACS Alumni Fund Report

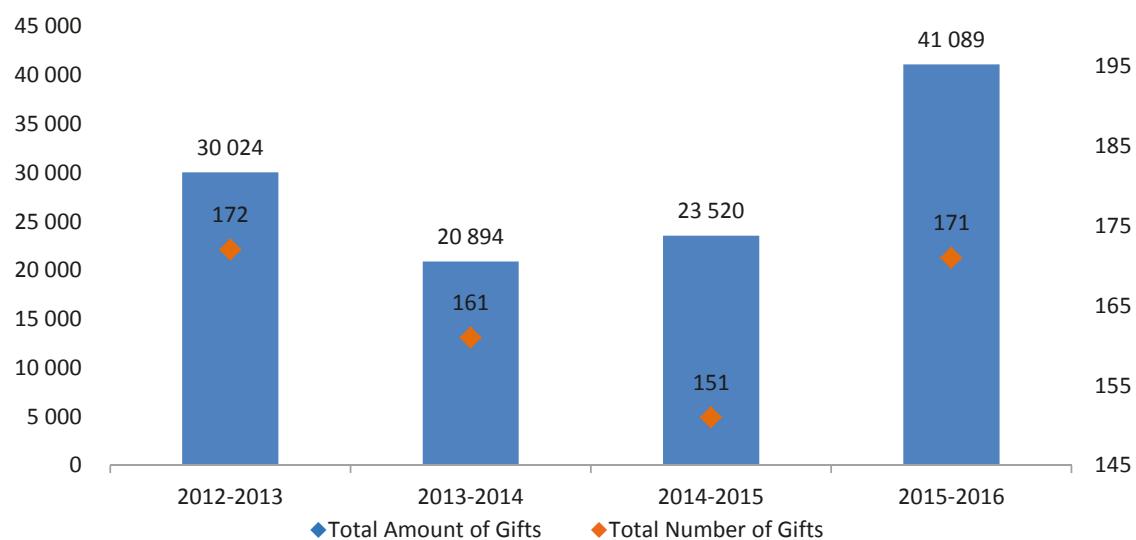
September 2015 – August 2016

Quick Overview

Gifts Breakdown by Year (Bulgarian Leva)

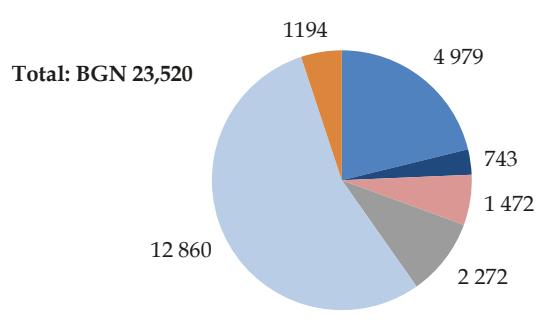
Number of Unique Donors

2012-2013: 153
2013-2014: 106
2014-2015: 139
2015-2016: 122

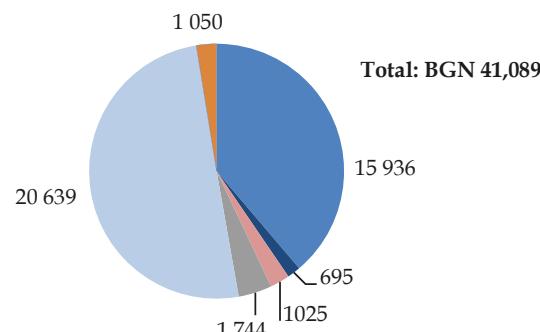


Gifts Breakdown by Category (Bulgarian Leva)

Academic 2014-2015



Academic 2015-2016



■ Need-Based Financial Aid ■ Academic Departments ■ Athletics

■ Infrastructure ■ Unrestricted ■ Student Activities Fund

Message from the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

Dear Fellow Alumni,

Thank you for making the Alumni Fund's fourth annual campaign a success. For yet another year, the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee (AFAC) would like to thank you for joining us in giving back to ACS. We are happy to announce that this was a record-breaking year, with over 40,000 BGN raised! The contributions of 122 alumni, regardless of size, helped bring the overall participation rate to six percent. Congratulations on a fantastic accomplishment, ACSers!

2015/2016 marked several exciting developments that signal the continued strengthening of alumni support for ACS and its students. Nine alumni used recurring donations, seamlessly making gifts annually or monthly. In addition, many of you have consistently made a gift for four years in a row without specifically using the recurring donation option. Notably, the ACS alumni in New York City organized the first of its kind fundraiser, dedicating over \$1,500 to need-based financial aid. Several informal get-togethers were organized in London and Sofia, giving ever more opportunities to alumni to reconnect.

At ACS, alumni support has been felt in numerous ways. Projects sponsored by the Student Activities Fund have made a significant impact on campus life. The international science forum FISSION, along with 12 other funded projects, allowed students to learn outside of the classroom, lead in real-life situations, and make a positive difference. Five Senior Independent Honors Projects were also funded and will be supported throughout 2016/2017. AFAC encourages all alumni to contribute to the Student Activities Fund and help bring ACSers' incredible ideas to fruition.

As you might know, the ACS campus is currently undergoing a significant transformation. The Bubble was replaced over the summer and a brand new facility is scheduled to be in use at the start of 2017. The construction of the Campus Center commenced in September 2016. You can support this initiative through the Alumni Fund by making a gift to either the "Infrastructure/Campus Master Plan" or the "Unrestricted" category. Only until December 31, 2016, all alumni gifts allocated to the Campus Center will be matched 1:1 by Robert Gipson, one of ACS's best friends and most generous donors. Let us all join in congratulating Mr. Gipson on his recognition from the President of the Republic of Bulgaria: Mr. Rosen Plevneliev bestowed Robert Gipson with the Saint Cyril and Methodius First Grade acclaim for his philanthropic contributions to Bulgarian education and culture.

The members of AFAC love hearing from fellow alumni, so if you have questions about giving or ideas for how to get involved, please contact us at alumnigiving@acs.bg.

Sincerely,

Georgi Klissurski '10
Hristo Popov '01
Zara Rancheva '14
Nicole Levakova '16
Kalina Kourdova '11
Alexander Kanov '12

ACS Is Where We Met

Kristina Pappas and Rob Braithwaite

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

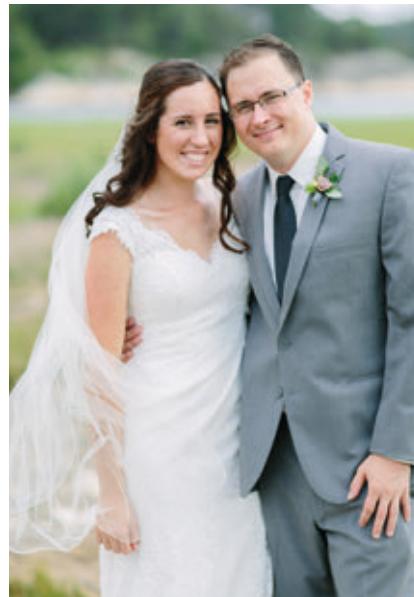
There have been quite a few of them over the years – ACS faculty couples who met at the College and stayed together, happily ever after. Last summer the good news of Kristina Pappas (former Biology teacher, 2010-2013) and Rob Braithwaite (former ELL teacher, 2010-2013) getting married put a smile on my face, so naturally I had to ask how it all began and the happy bride Kris was kind enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Kris, when did you know Rob was the one?

Both of us began teaching at ACS in 2010 and we quickly became friends. We bonded while on our international teacher orientation trip; we loved exploring the beautiful Bulgarian countryside and seeing Melnik and Kovachevitsa. Rob began bringing me Onda coffees and asking me on dates, and I eventually said yes! (Best decision ever!)

What is your favorite campus-related memory?

We loved Thanksgiving at ACS. The tradition of the international teachers cooking a meal for the Bulgarian faculty and staff and their families and getting to share that as a community was so special. We also loved performing in Faculty Follies and making fools of ourselves for a great cause. We will never forget Mr. Altman's rapping of "Dim Da Me Niama!"



Aside from being the place you two met, what do you think makes ACS and Sofia special?

Rob and I will always have a big place in our hearts for the students and faculty at ACS; we felt so

welcomed and inspired by the entire community. Rob and I always talk with our friends and family back in the States about how beautiful of a city Sofia is. We miss walking on the cobblestone streets downtown, marveling at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, and hiking on Mt. Vitosha.

Where in the world are you today? What are you up to?

We live in San Francisco, California, in the United States. We still have our cat Raja that we adopted in Bulgaria after Zori Semkova found her, and we adopted another cat named Leo in California. I'm teaching Biology to 11th and 12th grade students as well as coaching tennis, and Rob is teaching 8th grade Humanities. We got married this past summer near Boston, and were lucky to have some wonderful old friends from ACS there to celebrate with us!

When are you coming to ACS and Sofia again?

We really miss ACS and Sofia so much! That being said, right now we are exploring the West Coast of California, and are making plans to visit South America next summer, so we aren't sure when we will be able to be back to visit. We hope that any students who end up out here send us a message so that we can get coffee and hear about your lives!

Your message to ACS alums, those you knew and taught, and those you didn't?

The ACS students that we taught were so passionate, intelligent, and driven. We know that they can change the world!



The ACS guests at Kris and Rob's wedding

Sarah Grimesey and Eric Lenze

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

These two actually got married back in the summer of 2015. At ACS, Sarah taught ELL (2011-2015), while Eric was a History Teacher (2012-2015). We've been missing them terribly since they left ACS that same summer – her sunny smile, his funny/scary 'Movember' look, their memorable Faculty Follies performances over the years - but we are so happy knowing they are together taking good care of each other. Here's the story of how they met as retold by Sarah.

Was it love at first sight? When did you know Eric was the one?

I had a bit of a crush on Mr. Lenze when he asked me what I was doing for the Enlightenment weekend break (end of October-beginning of November 2012). I told him that I was going to visit a friend in Germany, and I may have said that IF he didn't find anything better to do, he could come with me. Now, I thought he wouldn't want to come (it would have been a trip with just me and a friend), so I was a little surprised when he immediately responded with "Well, that sounds great!"

What's your favorite or perhaps funniest campus-related memory?

Well... my funniest campus-related memories might not be entirely appropriate for a publication of this sort (insert suggestive eye-brow raising here). However, we do love all our memories of petting mama-dog, sharing martenitsi and birthday/name-day chocolates, and playing sports with the other teachers on campus. Oh, and who will ever forget the moment Mr. Lenze rolled across the stage as a "Wrecking Ball" during Faculty Follies? So much fun!

Aside from being the place you two met, what do you think makes ACS and Sofia special?

We miss "the nature," especially the mountains and parks. It is hard to find a city that has so many unique parks seamlessly intertwined with architectural beauty. And the ACS campus is such a great demonstration of this. When I close my eyes and imagine my "happy place," I always imagine myself standing on the Dog House balcony overlooking campus; trees an arm's length away, the fountain and Dafina's garden in sight, Vitosha just around the bend.



That is my definition of serenity.

And the people are great! I loved working with my coworkers in Bulgaria; so many were true professionals who took teaching seriously, yet loved to laugh and enjoy life. And the students were such a joy to have in class. I truly miss everyone.

Where in the world are you today and what are you up to?

Mr. Lenze and I moved back to the USA at the end of last school year. We now live two hours west of Chicago in Davenport, Iowa. We both still teach; Mr. Lenze teaches Geography and American Government, while I teach 9th grade English and Newspaper.

When are you coming to ACS and Sofia again?

Great question! We keep talking about it, but we haven't figured out the finer details... such as dates. We hope to come back either summer 2017 or 2018.

Yay! How about your message to ACS alums, those you knew and taught, and those you didn't?

Embrace challenges with open arms and open eyes. Take risks and don't be afraid to try new things, but don't rush into new challenges without understanding the consequences of your actions. Always remember that you are loved, that you are appreciated, and that you are wise... I mean, how else do you think you got through years at ACS? We wish you all the best! Keep in touch!



Sarah and Eric at the Elephant Nature Park, a rescue and rehabilitation center for mistreated elephants in Chiang Mai, Thailand

CLASS NOTES

Ani Kodzhabasheva '08 shared with us:

"After obtaining my BA from Vassar College, Master's from the University of Oxford, and spending a little over a year in Berlin, I am currently in the third year of my PhD at Columbia University in New York City, studying The History of Modern Architecture, as well as Comparative Literature.

I've enjoyed my intense, highly interdisciplinary program here. The university promotes an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and discovery that has allowed me to utilize the languages, skills, and other competencies I've picked up in different places around the world.

I've now been working for three semesters as a teaching assistant at Columbia, where I lead discussion-based classes for undergraduates. I'm grateful for the chance to share my knowledge and skills with such a diverse and talented group of students. As a fellow of the university's Teaching and Learning Center this year, I am opening my classroom to outside observers and collaborating with instructors from other disciplines in order to develop more effective teaching strategies.

I've presented my research at a few academic conferences in the past year, including the American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting at Harvard University. Additionally, I've been serving as a co-organizer of the Collins/Kaufmann Forum for Modern Architectural History at Columbia since the fall of 2014. Sometimes I write for an outsider art blog. I share a small, sunny apartment in Morningside Heights with my partner.

For ACS alumni thinking about graduate study in the United States, or anyone who shares my interests and would like to talk, or for those just passing through NYC who would want to say hi, my email address is k.ani@columbia.edu."

And Nedyiana Daskalova '10 sent us a life event update:

"My name is Nedyiana Daskalova and I'm from the ACS Class of 2010. On May 31, 2016, I married my US university fellow graduate Alejandro Scaffa and we were happy to have many ACS friends as our wedding guests. Interestingly, it was the ACS Head of College Counseling Kate McKenna who advised me to apply to Grinnell College for my BA and she knows the college counselor at the high school in Brazil, where my husband studied. Both counselors were happy to have played their part in bringing us together!



ACS guests at Nedyiana's US wedding...

At the wedding Monica Zgurova '10 was our maid of honor, Dayana Sheyanova '10 was a bridesmaid, and Vasko Yakov '11 – our groomsman. Other fellow ACS alumni, some of whom study at Brown University with us, were also there – Sophia Dimitrova '10, Alex Kanov '12, Teodora and Ekaterina Shalevi '12, and Mira Nikolova '09.

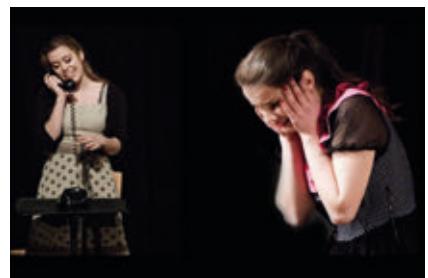
In September, we had a Bulgarian celebration with more ACS alumni as our guests: Monica and Vasko were present again, and this time so were Kameliya Belcheva '10, Stanimir Vichev '10, Kaloyan Pashov '10, and Panayot Poshtov '09."



... and at the Bulgarian one

Monika Kovacheva '16 and Eva Ruseva '15 wrote us a letter:

"We are two former ACS students, who now study in London, and we can tell you it's great! In the end it's worth all those endless ACS assignments. We study BA Comparative Literature – Monika attends University College London (UCL) and Eva studies at Queen Mary University of London. Living and studying in the big city is an experience like nothing else, as it really offers "everything for everyone". It is the ever-changing and innovative London art scene that has inspired us to bring a little something of that magic back to Sofia. Our very first professional project is an English to Bulgarian translation of a play called "White Rabbit, Red Rabbit", which will be showing in various theatres around the capital. It is a unique piece by the Iranian writer Nassim Soleimanpour. What is so unique about it? It is a play, which has no rehearsals; the actor and the audience have no prior knowledge of what this 'social experiment' as the author calls it, is about. Each performance is unique as each night a different actor performs the piece. The beauty of it is that the less you know the more you are blown away by this adventure, which sits on the borderline between comedy and drama. DON'T research



the play (however tempting it is now) but do come and see it for yourself. The performances will begin in the end of March and run throughout April. More information coming soon!

Anyone interested in getting involved with the production process of the play, or even being one of our actors, don't hesitate to contact us!

Monika Kovacheva
monikovacheva@gmail.com

Eva Ruseva
e.ruseva16@gmail.com"





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