

Issue 10, December 2013



ACS ALUMNI Magazine

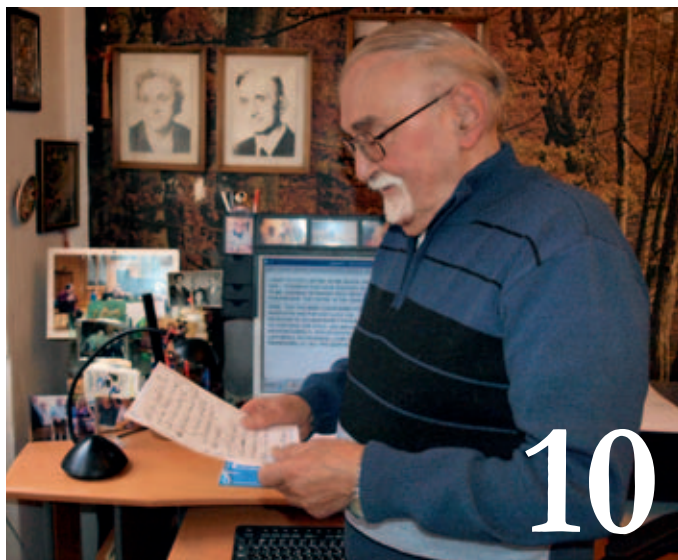


Professor Nikola Alexiev '42: Living with Memories

Maria Mircheva '97: Sugar Pines and Other Adventures

In Memoriam: Mihail Ivanov '05





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On the outer front cover – Fall at ACS;
inner front cover – Snow games on campus, winter 2012-13
(Photographs by Zornitsa Haidutova)

On the inner back cover – Campus decorations, winter
2012-13 (Photograph by Zornitsa Haidutova);
outer back cover – ACS Christmas Concert 2012 (Photograph
by Konstantin Karchev '15)

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Greetings:

In addition to enjoying the lovely weather this fall, we are working on several important projects including a self-study for the re-accreditation of ACS and the building permit for the Campus Center. Both are important for different reasons.

Every seven years a school has to renew its accreditation. Part of the process is a self-study and it is required for every accredited school. Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, our accrediting agency, is well-known and accredits dozens of international schools as well as schools and colleges in the US. We will spend this year assessing the current status of the school and determining the areas that need improvement. We will review information from student, staff, parent, and alumni surveys in addition to other data collected by review committees. During the fall of 2014, we will host a team of experienced educators who will review the self-study and review our educational program to determine our accreditation status. ACS is a well-organized and successful school and I am completely confident that we will maintain our accreditation status.

As you know, we received a large grant from the America for Bulgaria Foundation to build a Campus Center containing a new dining room, new library, and space for students to socialize and study. As you might imagine, obtaining a building permit is a long and arduous process requiring diplomacy and patience. Deputy Director Maria Angelova is working on acquiring the permit and is making progress. You will receive notice as soon as we have acquired the permit.

Enjoy this edition of the Alumni Magazine. You will notice that there is a report from the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee with the good news about last year's fund raising campaign and the plans for a future campaign.

I hope to see you at the Christmas Concert on December 19 and the Alumni reception afterwards.

Happy holidays!

Dr. Paul K. Johnson

President

ACS Alumni Magazine

Issue 10, December 2013

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Letters may be edited for publication.



Petia Ivanova '97

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Dear Alumni,

It feels as if I was sweating over the first editorial of Issue 1 of the ACS Alumni Magazine just yesterday, when in reality that was 4.5 years ago. And here it is, on your screen / in your hands, Issue 10 of our young publication. Feeling a little proud has to be in order. Proud we are also of a fantastic first year of the Alumni Fund whereby 9% of all ACS alumni gave back by donating, raising more than 34,000 BGN. Amazing! Look for information about the newest fundraising effort in the following pages.

While working on the magazine and organizing on-campus events we meet pre-war alumni of the College every now and again. As soon as we exchange a few words I go for my agenda, making plans for an interview because every one of them has an interesting and eventful life behind them. Listening to their stories feels like opening a door to an exotic world of a kind I know I will never have a chance of experiencing first hand. Meeting Prof. Nikola Alexiev '42 was no different in this regard. You will soon find out his story spanning at least three very different historical periods. Many things impressed me while talking to him but here I will mention two of the College values he pointed out that I distinctly recall from my years at the school, as well. He was as impressed as me by the friendly attitude of his College teachers, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect at the school. One of the people who impressed him the most was the College President Dr. Black, whose granddaughter and current ACS trustee, Christina K. Black, we had the pleasure of interviewing for this issue, as well. Prof. Alexiev's teachers, too, used to motivate their students to learn and achieve ever more in the best possible way, by making their lessons interesting and appealing to the specific age group they were facing. Isn't it amazing that the 50-year gap did not change those College values one bit! Another 21 years have passed since the school's reopening and I know those values still prevail as the positive atmosphere and progressive teaching methods are always mentioned in our annual survey among applicants as two of many things that attract families to the school.

I am probably not unique in having close ACS alumni friends doing all kinds of exciting things all over the world. One of my closest friends is a university lecturer in Particle Physics in Rio de Janeiro. After majoring in Art History years ago, another one of them has recently taken up Art Conservation studies. A third one currently coordinates the design of parks and streets in Sydney, Australia. And this is just naming what three of my friends are doing. Yet, when I ask them to share their exciting stories with other alumni on the pages of this magazine they all decline, doubting their stories are interesting enough for that kind of attention. So, you can imagine how lucky I felt when another close friend, Maria Mircheva '97, agreed to tell us about her sugar pine saving project in the area of Lake Tahoe, USA and her life before that which led her there. And luck didn't leave me there. Stefan Ognyanov '04 did not shy away either and so you will find out in this issue how the Free Sofia Tour took shape and exactly how its founders manage to have fun working while roaming the streets of Sofia.

But the contents of an ACS Alumni Magazine must be as varied as life, of which death is an integral part. Towards the end of the issue you will come across an article on Mihail Ivanov '05 ("Misho") who recently passed away. Upon finding out the sad news of Misho's death, his friend Svetlyo Vasilev '05 contacted a few of their mutual friends and former teachers in an attempt to collect memories of the Misho they weren't ready to let go of yet. Fully aware of the shortcomings of words in expressing deep feelings, Svetlyo and his friends gathered a bunch of images as well. I don't know how - is it Misho's broad and charming smile on most of the photos or is it the beauty of friendships that defy distances and even death - but somehow light shines through all the grief in this material.

Merry Christmas to you and your loved ones, everyone!

Warm regards,

Petia Ivanova '97

Chief Editor

ACS Alumni Fund Report September 2012 – August 2013

Welcome to the first annual report of the ACS Alumni Fund! It has been a truly exciting year as together with ACS we laid the foundations of the Alumni Fund and worked hard to engage the community in the alumni fundraising effort.

A year ago we committed to achieve a participation rate of 10% of the alumni body in the Fund's first year of existence. We also committed to provide transparency and visibility around the College's financial situation and build a fundraising platform based on the principles of focus, freedom, and accountability.

We are happy to report that today ACS has an online platform that allows donations in multiple categories and provides statistics on participation rates and donation amounts. We have a reporting system in place that allows us to publish information on the College's budget online and in/via our semi-annual Alumni Fund reports. We established a network of Class Representatives to help us connect to alumni and disseminate information about the Fund. Lastly, with your help the Alumni Fund achieved over 9% overall participation in the first twelve months after its launch. This translates into 153 unique alumni donors, 173 donations and BGN 34,024 raised.

We appreciate the contributions of everyone who took the time to give back to ACS. Your generosity will allow ACS to make the school experience even more special. We would like to extend our gratitude to the twenty five Class Representatives whose efforts were invaluable in helping the Alumni Fund progress toward achieving its participation goal for past year. Lastly, we would like to thank the staff at ACS' Alumni Relations, Development, and Admissions Office who has been instrumental in helping us develop the fundraising platform.

We realize that with your donations also comes great responsibility. We are committed to building on our achievements and are entering the new year with more vigor, passion, and dedication. Our main focus in the 2013/2014 academic year is to ensure the long-term sustainability of the alumni fundraising effort. We will achieve this goal by i) working hard to achieve a 10% participation rate in the second year of the Fund's operation; and ii) working within an improved Committee structure with a stronger team. We have already undertaken changes in the AFAC structure by electing a chairperson for each committee within the organization and drafting a set of bylaws that we will use to govern the work of the Committee going forward. Expect to hear us ask for feedback and see us working to improve the alumni fundraising effort over the course of the year.

We would also like to use this opportunity to inform you that our Chair, Nedko Kyuchukov, has been invited to join the Board of Trustees of the American College of Sofia. We believe his new role will further the collaboration between the Committee, the Board of Trustees, and the ACS Administration.

Thank you so much for the support, and let us together reach our annual goal of 10% alumni participation!

Best regards,
The ACS Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

From the President of the American College of Sofia

Dear Alumni:

Congratulations on the successful 2012-13 campaign of the Alumni Fund.

Our ACS alumni continue to help us in many ways in addition to the Alumni Fund. During the past two years, we have invited alumni living in Sofia to participate in our information meetings during our admissions events. I think it is safe to say that the presentations from our distinguished alumni are the most popular part of the info sessions.

As we anticipate the future of ACS, there are two areas of utmost importance at ACS, improvement of the facilities and needs-based financial aid so that worthy students who do not have the money can still attend ACS.

At ACS, we have a campus that most schools envy. We have a large park and beautifully designed buildings. The buildings now are almost 100 years old, and although structurally sound, need many repairs. In addition, methods of instruction change and facilities that were suitable 20 years ago no longer meet the needs of today's learners.

Luckily, we have support from several sources to improve the facilities. The America for Bulgaria Foundation ("ABF") has taken an interest in ACS and has provided a large grant for improving our food service area and library. ACS Trustees and friends of the College have increased their giving to provide the match for the ABF grant.

Alumni can make an important contribution to improve facilities by contributing to the Campus Center. The America For Bulgaria Foundation ("ABF") has approved a grant of 80% of the \$7.6 million cost. That leaves 20% for ACS' share, which will come from private and alumni donations plus other grants. Nellie and Bob Gipson, who support several scholarships to ACS students, have pledged to contribute \$1 for every \$1 that is donated by ACS alumni towards ACS' share. That's \$2 toward our share for every \$1 donated by an alumnus to Infrastructure/ACS Campus Master Plan category. What a deal!

Thank you for your enthusiastic support of ACS. See you at the Christmas Concert.

Sincerely,
Paul Johnson
President of the American College of Sofia

From the Board of Trustees

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of ACS, I would like to congratulate the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee on their efforts this past year. Not only did this energetic, extraordinary, and extremely well-organized group of committed alumni bring ACS alumni fund-raising to fruition, the level of participation and the overall giving for the first year of the fund were outstanding.

The results of the initial year of fund-raising were reported to the ACS Board of Directors at a recent meeting in Washington,

DC and were met with a round of cheers and congratulations. The Board of Trustees of ACS have long discussed ways to broaden alumni support for ACS. Displaying the drive and competence befitting graduates of ACS, it should come as no surprise that the initiative and successful establishment of an alumni fund ultimately came from the alumni themselves. Again, congratulations and many more happy returns to come.

Andrew Roberts
Trustee liaison to the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee
 November 5, 2013

Campus Development Fundraising Effort

We are delighted to share with you some very exciting news about the **ACS Campus Master Plan ("Master Plan")** and the **Campus Redevelopment Fundraising Drive!**

The Master Plan initiative started about two years ago, driven by the Board of Trustees and the Administration. The Master Plan aims to transform the ACS campus from its original 1920s set-up to a true 21st century campus. While the school has consistently ranked as the leading Bulgarian high school educational institution since its reopening, its infrastructure has unfortunately lagged top international schools. A telling story of this is the experience of a recently hired ACS teacher, who came from a South African school. She arrived with a list of e-textbooks that she wanted to use with the students but was surprised to learn that the school was not in a position to offer access to such learning methods.

The centerpiece of the plan is the conversion of Ostrander Hall into a student center, featuring a new state-of-the-art library, a new student and faculty dining facility, new spaces for students to congregate, and renovated offices and relocated services to provide first-encounter welcoming spaces for those visiting the campus.

The Master Plan carries the hefty price tag of \$7.6 million¹. ACS would never be able to finance this endeavor if not for the help and support of its friends. Luckily, the America for Bulgaria Foundation ("ABF"), a longtime partner and donor to ACS, came to the school's aid and committed to fund 80% of the total cost (\$6.1 million), so long as ACS raised the remaining c. \$1.5 million. ACS was fortunate once again to be able to rely on its friends. The Gipson family, which has long standing ties to school, made an important commitment through their foundation. They are generously matching alumni contributions 1:1 for up to \$250,000 of alumni donations, in addition to raising \$500,000 specifically for the proposed state-of-the-art library. ABF and the Gipson family are committing \$6.8 million while ACS is looking to its alumni manage to raise up to \$250,000 as part of the Gipson matching program. The remaining funding gap is already being filled by friends and family of ACS. As of November 2013, \$232,522 have already been contributed toward the Campus Redevelopment by a combination of current and former trustees, alumni, the Tianaderrah Foundation (run by Bob Gipson) and various other friends.

There is a very important timing aspect of the plan. The remaining 20% of the total cost has to be raised from friends, family, alumni, and other sponsors by 2015. This is why ACS urgently needs your help TODAY to successfully complete the **Campus Redevelopment Fundraising Drive!**

The Master Plan has a number of tangible benefits for current students and faculty, as well as, alumni, including but not limited to:

- Since the renovation is virtually fully funded with third party contributions, there is no expected impact (no increase) on student tuition fees...
- ...and the significantly improved infrastructure would allow ACS to remain competitive with international schools globally;
- Alumni get a chance to have a say in the school's future and have their donations directly and positively impact the experience of students and faculty;
- Recognition of donors – the alumni classes that contribute the most to the Campus Redevelopment Fundraising Drive will be recognized prominently on campus (stay tuned for details)!

How can you help?

Alumni donations are of utmost importance to the success of this project since every \$1 donated brings another \$1 towards ACS' share for the campus redevelopment. Raising the necessary amount from sources, which include alumni, is a critical condition of the pledges of the two biggest sponsors - ABF and the Gipson family.

To contribute today, please go to:
http://www.acs.bg/Home/Giving_to_the_College/Donate.aspx

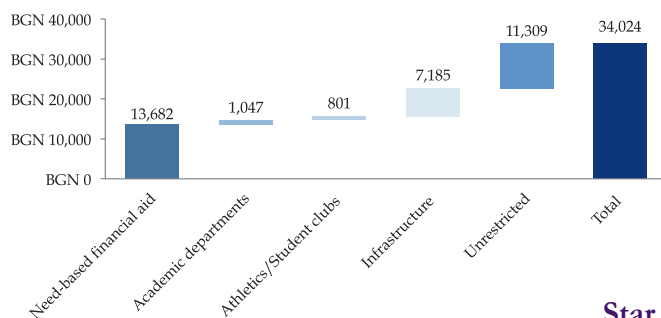
PLEASE SELECT "INFRASTRUCTURE / ACS CAMPUS MASTER PLAN" TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CAMPUS REDEVELOPMENT. ANY ALUMNI CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE CAMPUS REDEVELOPMENT EFFORT WILL BE MATCHED BY NELLIE AND BOB GIPSON.

The First Year in Numbers

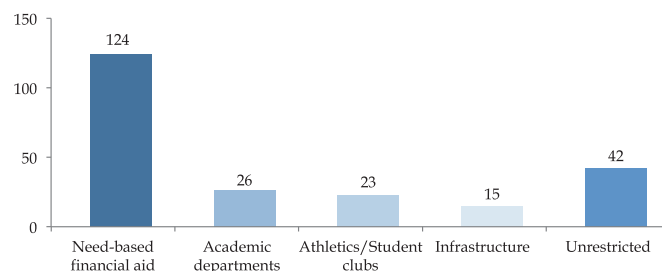
- 153 alumni contributed to the ACS Alumni Fund making 173 donations
- BGN 34,024 raised and put to work to help ACS and its students
- **Raised 57% of the total cumulative amount donated to ACS by individuals over the past 20 years!**

¹ Including VAT.

Breakdown of Donation Amount by Category



Breakdown of Donations by Category²



Star Classes

- Top 3 Classes by Participation Rate: 2003, 2001, 2004
- Top 3 Classes by Donations Amount: 1997, 2004, 2001
- Six classes passed the 10% participation target: **2003, 2001, 2004, 2010, 2005, and 1998.**

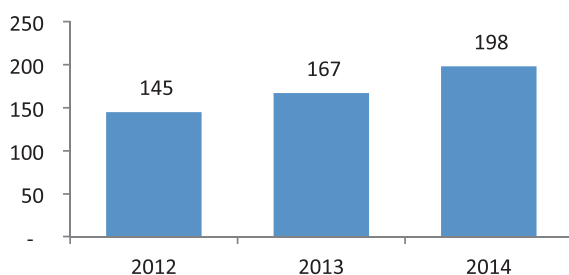
Your Gifts at Work



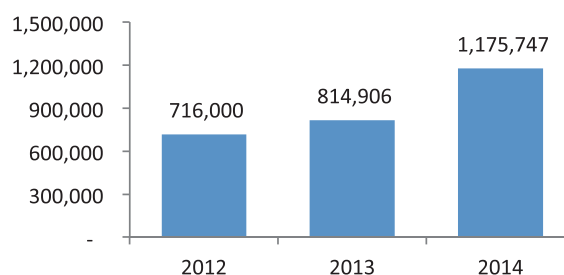
The money raised from donations is already making a difference. Just one example is that half of the non-fiction titles the ACS library purchased in 2012 were funded by your donations. In addition, ACS utilized alumni donations to purchase 10 new digital projectors, which are being used in math and foreign language classrooms.

Your contributions are also helping ACS provide need-based financial aid to students who could not afford the full tuition. Over BGN 11,100 of alumni donations raised during the first twelve months of the existence of the Alumni Fund have been given out as need-based financial aid to students in the 2013-2014 school year. The resources help ACS continue to increase the amount of money dedicated to financial aid and expand the number of scholarships given out to students each year.

Students Receiving Scholarship



Money Used for Scholarships



Your contributions to financial aid are also making a difference by fostering a sense of commitment to ACS and nurturing a culture of giving back. This does not go unnoticed by the members of the community and is just as important as the financial resource provided to students. Please see the following letter submitted by the parent of an ACS student.

Letter from a Parent

Please pass on my own, my husband's, and our daughter's, Nia, sincere gratitude to all ACS alumni who participated in last year's fundraising campaign to support the best secondary education institution in Bulgaria and the region. The cause is truly noble and I am sure that the effort will educate the current students of the College in the same spirit of commitment to an institution, which is developing young people who are thoughtful and confident in their abilities and knowledge and are active citizens of the global society in which they live and develop.

Nikoleta M.

Parent of a current ACS student

² The total is more than the number of individual donations (173) as those are often split into different categories.

Quality of Education Report

Selected Quantitative Indicators

- At the end of school year 2012-13, ACS students again had highest results in the country at the mandatory state exam in Bulgarian language and Literature and in English.
- Test-takers from ACS have ranked around the 90th percentile on the SAT in recent years.
- Since 2011, all 10th graders at ACS take the Preliminary SAT (PSAT). Students have achieved the 73rd percentile in critical reading, the 91st percentile in math, and 91st percentile in writing.
- The number of AP exams taken by ACS students has increased from 36 in 2008 to 156 in 2013. Over 80% of ACS test takers score a 3 (minimum score to receive college credit) or above.
- Over 90% of each graduating class gains college admission in Bulgaria or abroad.

Selected Qualitative Indicators

- Senior Mihaela Zaharieva won a silver medal at the International Astronomy Olympiad in South Korea.
- IYPT bronze for the Bulgarian Team Featuring ACS student Victor Kouzmanov '14
- ACS tenth grader Konstantin Karchev ranked third in the national round of the Astronomy Olympiad.
- ACS eighth grader Hristo Papazov represented Bulgaria on the Junior Balkan Mathematical Olympiad.
- ACS students won 10 medals in the National Math Competition for Language School Students.
- Senior Silvia Cherneva took the first place at the Young Poetics Festival.
- The ACS table tennis team (girls) became Sofia tennis table champions for the second year in a row.

Please be sure to check the Education Quality section on the ACS website (http://acs.bg/Home/Giving_to_the_College/Education_Quality.aspx) for a more comprehensive overview of how our school monitors teaching and learning.

Upcoming Events

Three classes, spanning 15 years of ACS alumni, will be having their reunions this year: Class of 1999, Class of 2004, and Class of 2009.

Alumni are invited to join the celebration on Friday, **June 27, 2014**, at ACS' campus.

Other events on campus:

- Christmas Concert and Alumni Reception – December 19, 2013
- Science Fair – January 15, 2014
- Bulgarian Drama Performances – March 7 and 10, 2014
- Musical Performances – May, 8, 9, and 10, 2014
- Graduation of the Class of 2014 – May 17, 2014
- Arts Fest – June 7, 2014

Sports on campus:

- ACS Open Basketball – March 17, 18 & 19, 2014 (to be confirmed)
- ACS Open Table Tennis – March 15-16, 2014 (to be confirmed)
- Football (Spring Tournament) – April 9-17, 2014 (to be confirmed)
- Tennis – April 26-27, 2014 (to be confirmed)

We look forward to seeing you there!

Want to donate? Have questions?

You can donate online at “Giving to the College” on the ACS website or the Alumni Office, located on the ACS campus. To contribute to the Campus Redevelopment Effort please select “Infrastructure / ACS Campus Master Plan” as your selection on the donations page. Any alumni contributions to the Campus Redevelopment Effort will be matched by Nellie and Bob Gipson.”

If you have questions, concerns or suggestions, please feel free to reach out to any AFAC member (http://acs.bg/Home/Giving_to_the_College/About_the_Alumni_Fund.aspx) or to your class representative.

If you are not sure who your class representative is, please contact Petia Ivanova '97, e-mail: p.mironova@acs.bg, from the ACS Alumni Relations Office to find out.

To learn more about the Fund and share your suggestions with its members, please reach out to us via e-mail at alumnigiving@acs.bg or visit us online at “Giving to the College” on the ACS website.

Christina K. Black: Balance Hard Work with Joy!

Christina K. Black is the granddaughter of Dr. Floyd K. Black, President of the College in the period 1926-1942. She is a member of the ACS Board of Trustees since 2011. Her father and mother both served on the ACS Board of Trustees. Currently, she is the Chief Budget Officer at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Find out more about her in the following interview conducted by Natalia Manolova.

What is the place of ACS in your life?

I didn't hear much about ACS growing up because the school had unfortunately closed. I think both my father and grandfather were upset by the closing and the difficulty faced by their friends and relatives in Bulgaria and by the school itself. My grandmother, Zarafinka Kirova, was from Yambol and spent her life teaching first at Robert College in Istanbul, where she met my grandfather, Floyd Black, then at ACS, and then at Robert College again after the war. Floyd and Zarafinka retired to the US where I spent time with them as I grew up and heard a lot about Istanbul, but not much about Bulgaria or ACS. I am getting to know ACS now, beginning with the first graduation in 1997. So ACS feels like a part of my life, even though it really has not been until very recently.

What are some of the beliefs cherished by your grandfather, Dr. Floyd Black, that you want to see in ACS today?



Christina is holding a medal given to her grandmother Zarafinka Kirova Black in 1912 by Queen Eleonore, also President and co-founder of the Bulgarian Red Cross. Her grandmother received the medal for visiting wounded Bulgarian prisoners of war during the First Balkan War, who were taken to Istanbul where she then lived. She went a number of times, as did Dr. Black on some of the visits, and wrote letters home for the soldiers. The medal reads "For a God Inspired Deed".

Floyd valued a strong work ethic above all else – he worked very hard and expected the same of those around him. This meant doing very well at school. Whatever the country, his belief was that education is the key to helping individuals live a stable, productive, and interesting life than they might otherwise. He also felt strongly about giving back to the community, and initially had received a Doctorate in Divinity

from Harvard which might have led him to a different vocation. I hope in some way to help ACS continue to provide high quality education to Bulgarians. Back when people regularly wrote letters to each other, Floyd always asked me in his letters how I was doing in school and what worthy paper or other work I had produced. Fortunately, I was a good student so I could answer on a positive note!

When did you visit ACS for the first time and what were your first impressions?

I visited ACS for the first time in 1997 at the first graduation after the re-opening. It was a very moving event and the visit also allowed me to get an impression of ACS – it was already a beautiful campus. The buildings were majestic but there was still an enormous amount of work to be done to repair the damage of the prior 45 years. Many dedicated staff and Trustees have accomplished a huge amount of this work since then in a short time. I continue to be impressed by the ACS students and alumni – a uniquely intelligent and focused group.

When and why did you join the ACS Board of Trustees?

I joined in 2011 as the request of my cousin, Jim Clayton, Floyd's nephew. I hope to be able to contribute to the continuation of the mission, in a rapidly changing Bulgaria, EU, and broader world.

Being a member of the Board you have the chance of visiting the College regularly. What are some changes you have noticed in ACS and Bulgaria?

Actually, I have only been back twice since 1997. The campus is in much better condition now and as you all know ACS is an even more charming school. The country overall seems to

have a growing economy, despite some fits and starts and political challenges, and the opportunities for Bulgarians now expand across the EU. Sofia and greater Bulgaria still retains its special charm and beauty though, while other countries I have visited basically are beginning to look like everywhere else.

What are you currently busy with? What makes you happy lately?

My job at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City takes a lot of time. In my spare time, I try to enjoy New York City, which for me includes theater, bicycling (there are paths around Manhattan on the water), playing tennis, and re-learning piano. I am also happy when my two children – both of them in college – are home visiting and we can find time to get away together for a long weekend, and even better if my brother and his family can also visit. I would like to travel more – maybe one day.

Any exciting future plans of yours that you would like to share with our readers?

Unfortunately nothing yet that qualifies as “exciting”. Unlike most of the readers of this magazine, my friends and I are keenly aware of our limited remaining lifespan and wondering how to fully inhabit that time. While most of us have to continue working for 15-20 years, friends’ dreams range from a new career to exotic travels to crossing the country

in a recreational vehicle on an evangelical mission. Maybe eventually I will have a plan worth sharing.

Do you have a message to the ACS alumni?

Hard work is a focus of excellent high schools and universities everywhere, and then becomes a focus of post-education work life. But it is important to instill a balance. Take time for what you enjoy – family, sports, bee-keeping – whatever it may be. If you have been given the opportunity to have a good life (and so many are not), take some time and effort to build a balanced life that includes joy and community, however that may come about. One aspect of Floyd I recall all too well is that he had no concept of relaxation, and in his retirement we had to try very hard to get him to sit down for an hour to play cards... but first we had to teach him what a card game was!



Dr. Floyd Black and his wife Zarafinka Kirova, here with a visitor to the College, Professor Thomas Whittemore, who was uncovering the mosaics of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, 1938

Professor Nikola Alexiev '42: Living with Memories

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

On a gloomy November morning, I head downtown for a conversation with alumnus Professor Nikola Alexiev '42. We have met several times before, the last time in May when he and his classmate and good friend Lilly Ikonopisova '42 joined us for the official ceremony of awarding another classmate of theirs, famous Prof. Carl Djerassi, with an honorary high school diploma. Each time I have met him he has been so energetic and soft-spoken that it is impossible to believe he is in fact 90 years old. Prof. Alexiev welcomes me in his cozy home on Vitosha Blvd. and further into his study/living room where he has been busy jotting down notes on his PC. The walls are covered with framed photos, both black and white and more modern such and I sense I will learn a lot today. But we start from the beginning.

were very patriarchal indeed. So, upon finishing my pre high-school studies, he summoned me to his office and asked me what I would like to study next. "Languages", was my immediate reply. "Good", my father said, "I have chosen for you just the right school for that, the best one in the country actually." And so I was sent to the College of which I knew nothing up to that day.

My family's origin is Macedonian, my father's parents coming from Thessaloniki and Struga and my mother's parents - from Bitolya and Ochrid. Actually, my great grandfather, was Dimitar Miladinov, the famous writer for the Bulgarian national revival. His daughter Tsarevna Miladinova (*pointing at a photo of her on the wall*), my grandmother, was a teacher. Her husband Nikola Alexiev, was a leather

from Zagreb. After their death, the Russian consul in Constantinople, Count Ignatyev, asked his colleague in Bitolya, Alexander Hitrov, to get in contact with Dimitar's children and choose one of them to be sent to Russia where he/she could get a good education. My grandmother had four sisters and one brother but the consul chose her as the most alert of them all. She was sent to Kiev to study, and after returning worked as a teacher in Shumen and several other places before she founded the first high school for girls in Thessaloniki. Story has it that in 1913, just after the Second Balkan War while Greek soldiers were forcing all ethnic Bulgarians out of Greek territory, one officer asked my grandmother whether she wanted to stay in the school she founded and teach Greek students instead, to which she replied by boldly asking him whether he wanted to join the Bulgarian army.

On my mother's side of the family, Robevi, almost everyone was a physician and while I would never have chosen medicine myself, my father made that choice for me. I have always liked to create, to make things with my own hands and imagination, so I was convinced I would be an engineer. But as soon as I graduated from the College in 1942, my father summoned me again and upon hearing what I wanted to be, simply said "No way! You must carry on the family tradition and become a physician." Maybe my father was an insuperable obstacle for me or maybe my respect for him was too great to oppose him openly. But such was my destiny. And to be honest, I do not regret succumbing to his will on this one.

What are your memories of the College?

Memories! When you are 90 years old you have a lot behind you and naturally, you live with memories. Lately, I succumb to memories from my College days. I tend to dream a lot and just last night, maybe because I knew you would be coming to interview me, I dreamt of the College again. When we entered the school back in 1936 we were just kids, altogether 70 of us, boys and girls. The next year, when we were second form students,



Prof. Nikola Alexiev at his home in Sofia, November 2013

Prof. Alexiev, how did you come to attend the American College of Sofia?

My father was a merchant, a local representative of foreign trading companies. He was very intelligent and spoke many languages. Through his work, he had a lot of connections and always did thorough research before making important decisions. He was also very strict, and the times we lived in

merchant and also a very interesting person. You may know that revival heroes and brothers Dimitar and Konstantin Miladinovi died from poisoning in a prison in Constantinople where they were imprisoned on charges of instigating rebellion among the Bulgarian population of the Ottoman Empire. But first they managed to publish their famous selection *Bulgarian Folk Songs* with the help of Josip Strossmayer, Roman Catholic bishop

three from our class left and six new ones came from the American school in Sofia, among them my good friends Kuzman Bakrachev, Ruzi Ikonopisov, Eugene Gubev, Zlatka Vlaycheva (who later fled the country and changed her name to Alice Zlatka Litov), and Tsvetana Beleva. Throughout the years students dropped out and only 45 of us graduated. *(He fetches a folder where he keeps dear College memories and fishes out the faded invitation to the Graduation of the Class of 1942. I notice that Nikola and Lily were the two student speakers listed on the invitation and I comment on that.)* Oh yes, both of us recited our patriotic speeches so fervently, you should have just seen us!

I think my stay at the College was the happiest time of my life. The school environment gave us so many opportunities to grow. First and foremost, we were surrounded by knowledgeable teachers we respected greatly. They were not there by chance but were specially selected. After teaching at the College, some of them became academicians. In the classroom, they managed to make their classes interesting, so it was easy for us to follow and learn without having to spend hours cramming our heads afterwards. Teachers were always so understanding and we grew close over time. This is no surprise as we were practically living together as a big family, you know, with the College being a boarding school at the time.

The College was our own small world where we – everyone with their own qualities – were helping and trusting each other, forming friendships for



Part of the Class of 1942 before attending an official dinner at Dr. Black's house (first three on the first row from left to right Nikola Alexiev, Liliana Zaharieva (Ikonopisova), and Ms. Steele responsible for the girls' building they are standing in front of)

life. Just think about it, 72 years have passed since we graduated and the few members of our class that are still alive feel so tightly connected, so loyal to each other and to our College. Why such overwhelming enthusiasm? To me the simple answer is clear. We lived, studied, played, grew up, and developed as persons while boarding at the College. The school provided us with unique possibilities for learning and developing our abilities including within the many extracurricular activities. With its high standards of education, the College taught us to work hard, consistently, and honestly, to be bold and brave, to stay true to one's moral standards, and never to surrender. In short, it prepared us for our future life.

On campus we were surrounded by beautiful nature – from the trees and flowers on campus to the green hues of the Vitosha hills above us, the low humming of the small river, and the green meadows. This world of beauty and perfection we were immersed in created in us a sense of liberty and a desire for hard work and perfection. If you let me cite a letter from Mr. Black dated March 28, 1939 "Students who have studied at the College ought to be capable of achieving high results in any profession they enter in the years to come." How wise, predictive if you will! His words have been confirmed for many College graduates before and after us and our class was no exception either. The solid education received at the College made it possible for many of us to continue our studies and enter professions such as engineers (6), architects (1), philologists (3), dentist (1), lawyers (2), physicians (6), university associate professors and professors (4), all this despite the dramatic turn of events in our country with the established communistic regime and the limited possibilities, actually, discrimination against College graduates. And yet, friendly relations continued between us. Mutual help and understanding prevailed. Loyalty and honor were cherished and existed. In general, the moral standards of our College education survived. In retrospect one realizes how foresighted our College education and social training were!

But you asked me about my memories. I remember I used to wake up early while at the College, even before the bell that rang at 6.30 AM every morning. So, I got

up and took morning walks. There was a small marsh that we called Venice on campus where we used to catch frogs, roast them, and eat them. I remember these beautiful mornings, I remember the snow-covered Vitosha hills in the wintertime; I remember our teachers, the classrooms, the study room where all the boys were studying together for four years. When we became juniors and then seniors we got our own more private study rooms where we could work in smaller groups. I distinctly remember a night. It must have been May in my senior year. The weather was great outside but we were sitting in preparing



A couple of boys from the Class of 1942 at the steps of their building, nowadays Science Building

ourselves for the matriculation exams in the basement of what you call Science Building today. I believe. There was a net on the window and whole waves of May-bugs were flying against the net. I still remember that sound and our longing to be outside in the splendid night with its dark sky and sparkling stars.

Yet times were grand. We had so many different experiences together – in class and during extracurricular activities. I was a tenor in the choir and I also had parts in a musical *Geisha* and the Bulgarian drama performance of *Ivanko, the Slayer of Asen* among others. There was a tradition that juniors organize a special dinner for seniors with moving speeches and self-made decorations. Our talented artists had drawn on a big canvass, hanging on the bottom wall of the canteen, the College Gate with the line "Fling wide the gates!" *(He fishes out the invitation from the folder. I use the opportunity to tell him about the current tradition of the Last Bell Ceremony whereby juniors present seniors with a flower and then seniors listen to their very own selection of favorite songs at the Fountain and celebrate continually counting to twelve.)*

You surely know how boys and girls were separated on campus when we were students and we met each other only very seldomly at national holiday celebration at the Fountain where we played choro. Even our home weekends were alternated so we wouldn't have a chance to meet up in Sofia. So, the only chance to meet one of the girls really was to go out at night, pass by the pool, then by the water tower after which you were officially on the girls-only ground also known as "Tursko" meaning Turkish. Then we would go to a small building next to the College entrance, which was a music room where the girls learned to play the piano during the day and this is where they would wait for us. Of course, this had to happen at a previously agreed signal that we were giving them with flash-lights from the roof of our building just before heading into the night.

You know, I read the alumni magazine with pleasure. And every time I see a beautiful campus photo of a girl and a boy sitting next to each other on the grass talking, I feel so happy for them. This is freedom. This is how it should be. But times were different back then.

Another thing I recall is this funny sport we came up with ourselves. We would buy two boxes of chocolates and whoever was bold enough to accept the challenge would take one of them and eat all chocolates while walking around on campus and without drinking water. The prize would be the other box but, of course, by the time you had managed half of the first one you would feel sick. Plus all your friends would be walking around you joking with you until you would give up or in some rare cases manage to complete the challenge.

Which one of your teachers impressed you the most?

This must be Mr. Stefanov, a Bulgarian language and literature teacher and Head of the respective department. He was so erudite, yet kind, friendly, and always ready to help. Math teacher Mr. Georgiev was also unforgettable. He was responsible for the building where we slept from second form to senior year. After school, we had compulsory activities first in the common study hall, then in smaller groups and at 10 PM when we were supposed to go to bed we weren't sleepy at all, being young and restless and all. Before going to

his lodging in the same building, Mr. Georgiev, a big man, would go down the corridors of our building and scream at the top of his lungs while turning off the lights "Lights out! Everybody go to bed!" There's a yearbook caricature depicting him doing this.



Mr. Georgiev turning off the lights in the boys' building

Mr. Goncharov, our choir's music director who also taught Descriptive Geometry was of Russian descent. He was very capable and later became choir conductor in the National Opera. He was very agreeable and I loved him as a teacher, as well, because I enjoyed math. He was working very professionally with us choir members and as I was the first tenor in the choir, he worked individually with me and really helped me set my voice. As a medical academy student I won a singing competition and even had an offer to sing in the Musical Theater that I declined, determined to go on with my medical studies. That's the sort of teachers we had the pleasure of working with.

From the international teachers Dr. Black made the greatest impression on me. He taught Psychology and Ethics. I should definitely mention Mr. Howard Bliss, as well, who taught American and English Literature. Until our fourth year, boys and girls studied in separate classes. After that, starting in sophomore year, we were divided in two mixed groups (boys and girls together), classicists and realists. The first ones studied a lot of Latin with Ms. Steele and us, realists, concentrated on math. We were happy to study alongside the girl realists in English and American Literature classes. So, Mr. Bliss was our class advisor. He had a very warm and affectionate personality. He was always smiling, very artistic, and great at reciting and singing. Somehow, he managed to daze us during classes. Much later, when our class got together in 1992 to celebrate 50 years from our graduation, also the year

the College reopened, and people came from as far as USA, Canada, and Israel, Mr. Bliss sent tapes with his own songs which really moved us.

How did you experience the closing down of the College in 1942? Did you feel there was a war going on?

I remember one early morning in my junior year when we all heard a great rumble at about 5.30 AM. These were the British bombers passing above us on their way to Ploesti, Romania to bomb the oil fields there. This was the first time I saw flying fortresses in my life.

When Bulgaria declared war on America in 1941, Dr. Black gathered us in front of Sanders Hall and held a speech



The College Choir with its conductor Mr. Goncharov, 1940

ringing with emotion. He said that war has been declared and our countries are opponents in it though we, at the College, remain friends and care for each other just as before. He added that he would stay behind with a group of teachers and make sure we graduated from the College in spite of the war. And so they did.

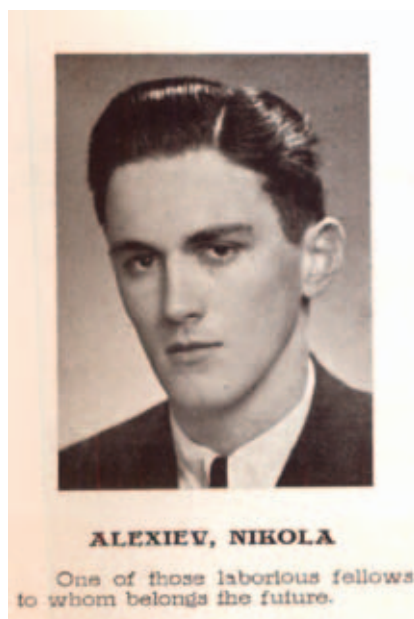
One time we organized a strike because of the bad quality of the food during the war and in particular the bread in the canteen. It was made with potatoes and was kind of soggy, so we, class representatives, gathered and decided to start a strike whereby we skip all classes one day and sit in a nearby field instead. And so we spent the whole day there, though secretly, our friends that helped in the canteen as part of their scholarship packages were nice enough to bring us meatballs from the day's lunch. In the evening, Dr. Black summoned us class representatives for a sincere conversation. He started off by agreeing with us on the hardships of the situation but asked us to stick together in this. It is amazing, now that

I think of it, how he did not punish or reprimand us, he simply explained everything in a diplomatic manner, smiled, invited us to tea and cookies, we talked some more and just like that the strike was over.

What is the College to you? Did you experience difficulties after September 9, 1944 on account of your College past?

The College is a dear memory but also an influence we felt every day of our lives as it shaped our characters, and made worthy human beings of us, not only knowledgeable but also socially skilled and caring for our communities, the College one and the one outside the school. This helped us enormously after September 9, 1944 when we were persecuted. Do you know that we couldn't practice our spoken English, that we were afraid to contact, let alone meet each other because we were being followed? In those times, it was the College and what we were taught there that gave us strength, a feeling of belonging, commitment, and readiness to help each other and survive. Even without meeting each other we felt the support of our fellows who were out there somewhere. The friendship between us classmates remained inexhaustible throughout the years, immortal if you will. I am convinced that if it weren't for this spirit we wouldn't have managed with our lives and hardships afterwards.

Yet in the first 30 years after graduation we rarely saw each other. Only in 1972, did our class become bold and organize its first class reunion, the 30th anniversary of our class. We gathered at Feyata Restaurant across from Borisova Gradina and many of our Bulgarian teachers showed up, among them Mr. Kyutukchiev, Mr. Kabasanov, Mr. Panayotov, Ms. Vladova, Ms. Ognyanova, and Ms. Beleva. Afterwards, as a class representative I was called and asked to explain in detail what the meeting was about. We organized class reunions after that for our 40th and 50th anniversaries and afterwards we started gathering annually. But over time there are fewer and fewer of us and this year it was just Lilly and myself, so we went to Tsetsa's place, as she doesn't leave her flat anymore, to boost the number a little.



Young Nikola Alexiev in the College Yearbook of 1940

In 1942, upon my graduating from the College with Summa Cum Laude, my father had already enrolled me as a medical student in Basel, Switzerland. I refused to leave though as I didn't want to leave my family behind in war times, so I started studying medicine here in Sofia. After September 9, 1944 I had a lot of trouble and was summoned a couple of times to the Communist Party City Committee, located on Slaveykov Square where the City Library is today. I was ushered in a room where 10 people were sitting around a table watching me. They told me that they would like to help me as I am such a good student but first I need to sign a letter which turned out to be a request to disown my father. What great misfortunes my father had already gone through being persecuted, all his property taken from him! He never lived to see freedom again. Naturally, I refused and was expelled. With the help of my friends and because of my good grades though, I managed to regain my student status but I was always closely watched.

Other classmates had even worse destinies. In the events after September 9, 1944 one of our classmates disappeared without a trace, some ended up in camps and came back half the men we used to know, some were expelled from universities and could not finish their majors.

When I was done with my medical studies I had to do my military service.

After that I started working at the Institute for Pulmonary Diseases where I had the pleasure of working alongside good people who saw me for what I was, a young capable person with a desire to learn and develop, one that knew foreign languages unlike most, and they let me help them. But there were positions and responsibilities outside my reach. For instance, my colleagues kept suggesting me as chair of the local labor union but as soon as it reached a higher authority my nomination was declined. I had to ask my colleagues to stop nominating me as it was a lost cause in view of my past. Fortunately, I had a very good managing director who valued me for my hard work and competences, and I was able to become an associate professor. I worked really hard for this. In 1968, thanks to my father's connections I managed to do specialized training in hospitals in Switzerland and Italy. I had an offer from the Swiss hospital to stay but this wasn't really an option for me as my parents, my wife, and my two kids were waiting for me in Sofia, and so was my work at the institute. Times were hard but owing to my industriousness and resilience, again qualities developed at the College, I managed to establish myself and even to retire as a professor (Ph.D. and D.Sc.). It is as if the College laid the tracks of my future life and threw its light on everything I did afterwards as teacher and lecturer in medicine of a lot of medical students.

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

I am happy for the young people of today that have all those opportunities for modern education, informational technologies in the classroom and all, that can study abroad wherever they wish. Plus they have a chance to live in real freedom, to have their say and protest when this is how they feel, things we deeply missed and longed for. I have to say I side with the protesting students today.

I would like to finish off by wishing the younger ACS alumni and students to be brave, enthusiastic, and good citizens of our country. I hope they embrace the opportunities they get upon graduating from the College, travel and explore the world to return later and help our country and its people, for they have suffered enough.

Maria Mircheva '97: Sugar Pines and Other Adventures

Text by Maria Mircheva '97

Introduction by Petia Ivanova '97

I am blessed to have Maria Mircheva as a dear friend. I have kept close contact with over the many years that have passed since we studied together at ACS. I have always admired Maria's never failing energy, genuine curiosity, and enthusiasm for life. Her latest exciting project, The Sugar Pine Foundation, was something I simply couldn't resist sharing with other ACS alumni and current and former faculty, especially after Lisa Kostova-Ogata '97 mentioned Maria's initiative in her moving keynote speech at the Graduation of the Class of 2013. So, I turned to Maria asking her to share the story of how she ended up saving sugar pines in South Lake Tahoe. Enjoy her tale!



Maria holding a 20-inch long sugar pine cone she found on Tahoe's West Shore.

It seems like a long time has passed since I studied at the American College of Sofia but my life is a mirror of my experience at the College in many respects. I was in the first class after the reopening of the College in 1992. I could have gone to a “regular” language high-school but I was drawn to the novelty of the College. I enjoy adventures, learning new things, and starting projects.

Back in 1992, at the College, I helped start our school newspaper, *College*

Life. I have always enjoyed working with people and being involved. I was very excited that we had clubs at the College and eagerly participated in almost every one of them. The school grew with every year and so did the number of clubs. Therefore, I concentrated my interests “just” on *College Life* newspaper, student government, ecology, math, and art clubs. Well, not exactly a concentration, I am a generalist.

Even though I grew up in a big city, I was always passionate about nature and saving the environment. I still remember going on a hike to Vitosha near “Kominite” and building a snow cave with the ecology club and our advisor Ms. Davis. Also, I really admired Mr. Cunningham who biked to the lift with his skis on one shoulder and did some backcountry skiing on Vitosha. The Outward Bound school trip we took to Malyovitsa in 9th grade was totally enthralling to me, too. When I was walking around, I loved tree watching as much as people watching. I didn't know at that point that this interest would develop into

a career for me later in life. Well, at least one of my careers.

As I was good in math and a fairly practical person, I started out studying Volkswirtschaftslehre (National Economics) at the University of Heidelberg. Half way through, I decided to transfer to California and ended up in Santa Barbara. It was a beautiful setting with the mountains on one side and the ocean on the other. I ended up majoring in Business Economics with an Emphasis in Accounting, since it was somewhat challenging and got me a job after college. I thought about double majoring in Global studies but it would have meant another year of school and an addition to my student loan, so I didn't pursue it.

Instead, I launched my career at PricewaterhouseCoopers in San Jose. It was a new office serving the flourishing technology start-ups of that time; a growing practice with lots of technical challenges such as software revenue recognition and valuation of options. Surfing was only an hour away in Santa Cruz! After two years at PwC, I got my Certified Public Accountant certification and accepted a position at Sun Microsystems' Internal Audit Department. I moved to San Francisco where I lived a block away from ACS classmates Lisa Kostova and Nadya Direkova whom I had the pleasure of seeing often. My



ACS winter hike including building a snow cave up on Vitosha with Ms. Davis, Mr. Cunningham, and Ms. Dimitrova, winter 1993-94

new job sent me all over the world to open new offices and investigate corruption. On one of these trips, while reading my guidebook on my flight from South Korea to Indonesia, I realized I really wanted to do some work that filled the heart and not just the mind. I wanted to work towards solving some of the many current environmental problems.

Back in San Francisco, I looked into some graduate programs and applied to a few. I ended up in a familiar paradise, the Bren School of Environmental Science and Management in Santa Barbara. While getting back into science, I was working as a Teaching Assistant for Entrepreneurship classes in the Business program. In the summer, I went on an environmental exchange to Russia. That is when the Sugar Pine Foundation idea was born.

As a participant in the Tahoe – Baikal Environmental Exchange Program, I met my husband John, who had the bold and eccentric idea to start a non-profit to save the sugar pines. Sugar pines are the largest pines in the world with the longest cones, up to 24 inches. They are in the family of white pines or five-needle pines and have been threatened by a non-native invasive fungus called blister rust. The US

Forest Service has been working on strategies to eradicate the fungus and restore sugar pines and western white pines, which are commercial species in the American West, since the 60's. At first, they tried to eradicate the alternate host to the fungus, the currants. However, there were too many currants, and other plants turned out to be hosts as well. Scientists and land managers have since agreed that the only viable restoration strategy is to identify trees resistant to blister rust, which are about 5% of the population, and propagate their progeny. Unfortunately, funding for white pine restoration is relatively scarce and the Forest Service works with partners, mainly logging companies, to implement that strategy.

Lake Tahoe is an ecologically sensitive zone, so no logging has occurred since the 1860's. In 2005, John decided to start a non-profit and get some private funding to identify seed trees in this area. I met John in 2006 and helped him climb some white bark pine trees and collect some cones from sugar pines with a sling shot. I really enjoyed climbing the trees and working in the forest. I helped John



John climbing a 150-foot blister rust resistant sugar pine to collect its cones.



The whole family walking down a street near our house in South Lake Tahoe.

write a few grants to fund this work while I was still in graduate school. In 2007 we got married and John took a “real” job as forester in a fire district. We had our first child, Sasha. I was working in an environmental consulting firm. We maintained the Sugar Pine Foundation as a hobby. In 2009 I got laid off and had our second baby, Max. In 2010 my husband and I built a passive solar house in the Angora Fire scar. It was a lot of work but we see the result every day ever since – our house is warm and sunny while our utility bills are low.

While staying home with the kids, I worked on growing the Sugar Pine Foundation. Over five field seasons, two of which with a baby bjorn, I went around the forest with a seasonal helper and collected cones from 500 sugar pines and 150 western white pines for testing. We collected 3-7 cones from healthy trees with a big sling shot, tagged them, and recorded their GPS coordinates. Then we sent them to the Forest Service Nursery and they grew little seedlings in families. They infected them with the rust and the ones which survived were recorded



Shooting with a big sling shot to collect sugar pine cones for blister rust testing.

as coming from a resistant mother tree. As a result of the testing, we identified 65 sugar pine seed trees and one western white pine. Every year in September, we go back to the trees identified as resistant, climb them when the seed is ripe, and collect the cones.

We started planting in 2008 and since then we have planted over 70,000 seedlings. I work with public and private landowners to identify planting sites. My two staff and I also work with employee groups and schools to organize plantings. It turns out most people like to plant trees. It is relatively easy and very rewarding. As one volunteer put it “It is creating life in your own neck of the woods.” We work with about 700 volunteers per year. It has been seven years since I got involved with SPF and five years of working exclusively for it, and is hereby the longest job I have had.

Over the next couple of years, we are hoping to establish a western white pine restoration program. The nursery is growing our first batch of resistant western white seedlings and we are looking for partners to host the plantings. We are also working on improving our monitoring and maintenance of previously planted

sites. In collaboration with other local groups we are implementing a “No Child Left Inside” environmental education program. We work with local schools to take students on field trips in which they plant trees, participate in orienteering and other activities to learn about forest and watershed health. Our organizational goals include diversifying our funding and strengthening our membership

And in 20 years, the four of us can go to the planting sites together and see grown trees waving their branches in the wind as a result of our work. Few professions can boast giving one such satisfaction.

Recently, I have also gone back to teaching and I hope to see some results from that, as well. I try to inspire my students to get to know themselves and learn how to learn.



Maria on a recent visit to try to save the Whelan Tree – the largest known sugar pine - 207 feet tall, 11 feet diameter at breast height, 8990 cubic feet of lumber.

program. The SPF has a seven-person Board of Directors and about 500 members. Anyone interested can find out more and join us as a member on our website www.sugarpinefoundation.org. Feel free to also like us on Facebook and stay informed of current endeavors this way.

As you see, the Sugar Pine Foundation has been a great adventure for me. It is a feel-good job and I am even able to involve my children in it. Like all children, Sasha and Max love digging in the dirt, watering, and climbing trees.

I wish for all of you to discover your passions and turn them into hobbies, or even better, into jobs that fill your hearts.



Maria planting a sugar pine with volunteers at a community planting.

Free-Sofia-Touring with Stefan Ognyanov '04

Text by Stefan Ognyanov '04
Introduction by Petia Ivanova '97

At the autumn parent-teacher conferences at ACS, we had the pleasure of having lunch with Stefan who sometimes helps translating for ACS international faculty. After discussing local and seasonal vegetable supplies extensively, our conversation shifted to the Free Sofia Tour project we had heard about and knew Stefan was involved in. The project had been waiting patiently on our list of ideas for future alumni interviews but the time had come. Fortunately, Stefan gladly agreed to share not only the story of how he ended up free-Sofia-touring but also some of the most exciting parts of this fun job of his.

At the College, I was a sporadic presence at the 8th grade soccer team practices, attended elective courses on history of religion, fitness and nutrition and even went so far as to win a 3rd place award in a literary contest held by *The Fountain*. After May 2004, I spent a semester studying Public Relations at the Sofia University, two semesters studying Political Science at the Fairleigh Dickinson University based in New Jersey (the campus being just a half-an-hour-long ride to New York. Pretty cool, eh?), before finally settling back at Sofia University in 2006, in pursuit of a Master's Degree in Law.

Currently, I am responsible for the recruitment, training, and introduction of new people, as well as quality control and improvement plus building the team spirit in the increasingly popular Free Sofia Tour project of the 365 Association. It all started in August 2011 when a guy called Kris, who had just completed his studies in Germany, decided he missed the interaction with international people and also felt there was no convenient way for unorganized visitors of Sofia to actually walk around Sofia and discover what the city is all about.

He put two plus two together and started the free walking tour. Shortly after, he was joined by a couple of friends and, as the cliché goes, the rest is history.

The story of my personal involvement is somewhat similar. After returning from the US, I did a couple of improvised tours for some friends visiting from overseas and I was a bit surprised to find how much they enjoyed the city and me as a guide. This is why, when I learned about the Free Sofia Tour and the fact that they were looking for new members of the crew, I didn't think twice. After going through the three-month-long application and training process, I joined in

May 2012. My motivation was very simple: I love history, I love my home city, and I really love showing various people around.

For me personally the most enjoyable part is the fact that groups comprised of individuals from all over the world who, as a rule, don't know each other and meet for the first time at the beginning of the tour. This facilitates the appearance of an atmosphere of friendship and togetherness making the tours all the more personal and fun. At this point we, as a group, have shown our city to over 40,000 people coming from, without exaggeration, every corner of the planet including places like Fiji,



Guest 40,000 joined a free Sofia tour at 11 a.m. on October 3, 2013 and received as a souvenir a little bottle of rakia, wrapped in some geranium and a red string, as is suitable for a traveler.

Guadeloupe, Mauritius, and Saint Kitts and Nevis to name just a few. In my opinion the main reason for this success is the fundamental idea that we want to offer an interactive, fun, and friendly tour rather than just pour tons of often boring information on our victims.

One of the most interesting things about the city of Sofia is that it is enshrouded in a plethora of urban legends to the extent that actual reality is often completely invisible unless you put in the extra effort to do extensive and in-depth research. Due to that, one could almost say we're in the business of busting myths. This sometimes renders my claim, that I know everything about the city, with which I begin my tours null and void. For instance, we have all heard the story that the bell of the Saint Sophia church (which gave its name to the city) was hung on a tree in front of its entrance because the residents of Sofia wanted to greet the Russian army upon the city's liberation by ringing it. Well, I had the pleasure of having a botanist in one of my groups and was promptly informed that, even though it was possible that the tree in question might have existed at the time, it could not have positively been larger than a sapling, let alone been able to support a bell. Another time, my universal knowledge of the city was undermined by one guest inquiring about the type of rock that Romans used for the road visible at the eastern gate of Serdica, visible in the underpass in front of the former Communist Party headquarters. Probably the

funniest occasion however, was only a couple of weeks ago. At the monument of the Unknown Soldier, I shared my personal experience with it mentioning how as a kid I had believed in some kind of magic that kept the eternal flame eternal. One day, however, when I was somewhere between eight and ten years old, I happened to see a couple of workers replacing the gas bottle that fuels it. At this point I explained to the group how this was one of those moments of disillusionment that made me grow up, much like the time I realized Santa Claus didn't exist. Immediately I heard a boisterous 'Thank you! We've been trying to explain this to her for years.' I had forgotten there was a little nine-year-old Australian girl with her family in the group. At least

Many people are quite surprised when they learn the actual reason why the city is named Sofia, what the relationship between Sofia, Saint Sophia, and her three daughters really is, what the story behind the yellow cobblestones is, and many more. This is why the tour is not only targeted towards foreign visitors but to locals, as well.

So, no matter whether you are local or foreign, if you're looking for some more information on the place where you are currently living, you can always join us at 11 a.m. or 6 p.m. every day at the corner of the Palace of Justice. For more information you can check us out on freesofiatour.com or facebook.com/freesofiatour, or contact us at info@freesofiatour.com. Of course, I can't guarantee



Stefan doing his last trial tour in May, 2012, here at his favorite stop, the Saint Sophia church where he was baptized as a little kid.

she will probably remember me for life.

The fact is, though, that urban legends are usually characteristic of locals, rather than foreigners.

you'll have the extreme luck to join one of my groups but don't worry too much about that, the other guys and gals are also cool. At least we'll know that you get the jokes!

In Memoriam: Mihail Ivanov '05

Introduction and materials collection by Svetlin Vasilev '05

On October 1, 2013, following a tragic accident, we unexpectedly lost our dear friend Mihail Ivanov, an ACS alumnus from the Class of 2005. An extraordinarily smart and dedicated person, he excelled in most academic subjects. Curious and hungry for new experiences, Misho had wide ranging extracurricular interests. While at ACS, he was an active member of the Maths and Physics Clubs and took part in the advanced stages of various Olympiads. Misho loved sports and put his considerable height to good use with the ACS Volleyball team. A self-taught guitarist, he loved music and performed with his band *Saliva Control* at several talent shows and Arts Fest concerts.

After graduating from ACS, Misho chose to jump across the Pond to continue his studies at the University of Chicago. While there, he got the chance to work with some of the most renowned professors in his chosen field of Economics. This bigger 'playing ground' did not daunt Misho – he completed his university studies as a Student Marshal, an honour given to students excelling academically and demonstrating outstanding commitment to extra-curricular activities, and a member of the nation-wide Phi Beta Kappa society. He then spent the following 3 years working at Société Générale in New York City.



Rest in peace, Misho!

Misho was in equal measures a visionary and a pragmatist. His spirit of adventure, never quite satisfied, took him to places all across the globe, from Mongolia to France to Thailand. In 2012, he got back to University of Chicago to pursue an MBA at Booth Business School. True to himself, Misho recently took up sailing and ventured into digital entrepreneurship, helping a mobile payments start-up secure funding for its future growth.

The following section contains memories from some of Misho's closest school friends and teachers. While no words can ever encapsulate the myriad of ways in which he has touched our lives, we hope they can go some way towards capturing the caring, intelligent, creative, and cheerful person that Misho was. May his spirit rest in peace.



I met Misho a year before going to ACS at a prep class we took together. I remember him distinctly as the one who always explained math problems at the whiteboard and the one who read his exemplary essays. Needless to say, this practice did not change during his time at ACS; he was a go-getter. We became close in our sophomore year at ACS and have been friends since. He was not only a gifted mathematician and entrepreneur but also a fierce

and true friend. He has always been someone I could lean on, ask for advice or simply call to chat about life. His laughter and jokes had the ability to light up a room and when they did, he loved the attention. His ideas were big, courageous, and unique, making everyone around Misho strive to be more like him. He was never good enough for himself and I will remember him as the dreamer whose dreams were never too far to reach. For those of us who knew



Celebrating the Class of 2005 Prom (and vigorously counting to 12 on repeat) – with Darry Spasova, Polly Draganova and Svetlin Vasilev

and loved him, he remains an inspiration and a friend who will be greatly missed.

- Darina Spasova '05

Still in disbelief about Misho's passing away, I am writing these few words about him though nothing makes sense when faced with the sudden disappearance of such an intensely alive person. Misho lived his life every single day with something other than the mundane everyday consciousness most of us develop over the years. Everything had intensity and precision, some kind of cutting edge, no distractions and no deviation. The sense of purpose filled everything. There was also a kind of fearlessness, a provocation, as if his energy was packed too densely in each molecule to fit in the limits of ordinary life. In any case, words are meaningless now. To all of you out there reading this, please remember to stay close and connected to your friends, to do the things you love, and to be generous, kind, and forgiving. Nothing else makes sense in this life, especially because death comes so simply and suddenly, and takes everything away. Blessings for Misho's spirit and

I hope his energy finds a new abode somewhere in the universe.

- Sonya Mladenova '05

When I got the message of Misho's passing away, I could make nothing of it. It sounded so unbelievable and impossible that I had to read it several times to grasp what it said. Then an image came to my mind – I saw Misho laughing. This was the usual way I saw him. He loved everything surrounding him, he enjoyed everything, he accepted everything with great enthusiasm, finding the interesting and the new in all he did. I remember him playing the guitar, singing, trying to explain how to play the guitar. I remember him solving problems in a way that makes them look easier than they are. I can't believe that such life-loving person can pass away just like that, so I should believe that it's because he has been too shining for this world. And I'm sure he can see us now, so let's just smile while thinking of Misho.

- Desislava Yordanova, Mathematics Teacher at ACS since 1996

I looked up to Misho, and not just because he was one of my tallest friends. Everything Misho did, he did with maddening ease, be it sports, music or school. And his ambition took nothing away from his humour, his silliness, his cool. He was the kind of person you'd envy for this ease and his achievements, if he weren't so humble and magnanimous.

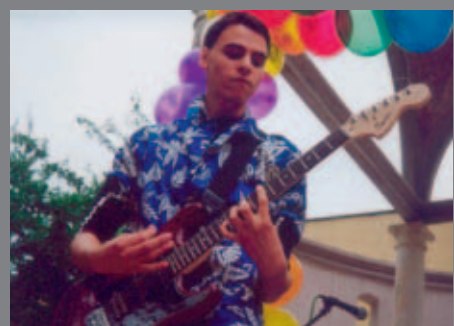
With our makeshift band we used to cover the Red Hot Chilli Peppers a lot, and when I learned he had died, one tune started playing in my head, as good music seems to do at overwhelming times:

Road trippin' with my two favourite allies
Fully loaded we got snacks and supplies
It's time to leave this town
It's time to steal away
Let's go get lost
Anywhere in the U.S.A.

He did get lost in the U.S.A., and after a short meet-up in Berlin and then Sofia in 2007, I never



"Whatever tomorrow brings I'll be there, with open arms and open eyes" - jamming to Incubus' Drive at the ACS Arts Fest, 2005



saw this favourite ally again. Now that he is gone, I'll still look up to him. I'll look up, and remember him, for the great friend and amazing person he was. Let's go get lost, let's go get lost.

- Stoyan Popkirov '05



Always setting his aim high, pursuing it with determination, and achieving any goal with ease, Misho was nothing short of the best and brightest person I have known. He will always be in our hearts and memories, with his wit and unique sense of humor, his broad smile, his catchy bursts of laughter, his capable support, his leaps of intellect, his sincerity, his charming clumsiness, his open mind, his creativity, his punctuality, and his passion for his family, loved ones, and friends. Distance was never too great, time away was never too long for him to forget to care, nor was it ever for all of those, who were proud to be his friends, to care for him. Distance and time will not affect us now, either. Rest in peace, my dearest friend.

- Pasko Paskov '05



In many ways, Misho and I were different – he was ambitious, adventurous, eager to try new things (usually with seemingly effortless success). Music was what brought us together as friends, at an age when we were both trying to find our place in the world. What kept us together were the hours spent idly ordering Chinese takeaway, listening to all sorts of bands (and trying to imitate them, normally with limited success), having random midnight phone conversations and doing the silly things that only teenage boys' brains can come up with. Without even realising it, we grew up together.

After high school, we each took our own path, getting on with studies, careers and all the other boring stuff that comes with growing up. Even though we didn't get to see each other as much as we should have, every time we did, it was as if no time had passed – we would just pick up from where we had left off. Misho was always the one checking up on me, concerned about how things were going, always there to offer words of wisdom and advice. He was remarkable, caring, and took full advantage of the myriad opportunities that life gave him. He was also the closest I have ever had to a brother... which was probably why we called each other 'batka'.

I don't know when we will see each other again, batka, but I know that when we do, we will just pick up from where we left off.

- Svetlin Vasilev '05



Misho with Pasko Paskov, Svetlin Vasilev and Svetlin's sister Yoana at the Class of 2005 Prom



Misho (third from right to left) and his teammates of the ACS boys' volleyball team holding the Hector Cup in December 2005 after beating the French High School 3:0 as well as the hosts from the National Gymnasium of Natural Sciences and Mathematics with 3:1 in the tournament's final

When he first came to the University of Chicago, I introduced Misho to my friends as a younger brother - same high school, same neighbourhood, same at times incomprehensible accent (and same height - there are many alumni at our university who are convinced all Bulgarians are at least 6 feet tall). People loved him for his sense of humour, ridiculous jokes, and endless hospitality. His parties were always the most popular, with the most interesting crowd, crazy dancing, and a good measure of the newest European techno thump. And we all deeply respected Misho's formidable intellect and desire to learn. His brilliance ensured his dominance in academia, where he spectacularly outdid all of his mentors. But most of all, his friends from ACS, University of Chicago, Société Générale, sailing, business school, and on, and on, will all miss his huge heart and his ability to always be the soul of the party. There is a huge void in front of all of us now, and we can only hold on to our memories and share them with each other, and hope that you rest in peace, Misho, until we meet again one day.

- Lilia Dobрева '04



Misho knew how to dream.

No, not everybody can dream. Many people love to fantasize, others are able to plan well. In the true meaning of the Bulgarian word for a dream - 'мечта', Misho seemed to be able to

combine in equal measures plan, fantasy and idealism in everything he accomplished. Actually, the only times I saw him impatient were when the people around didn't think enough about the practicalities, or concentrated too much on the practicalities, forgetting the vision. A great debater, Misho never missed to consider 'on the one hand' argument, 'on the other hand' argument, and most importantly 'What's next?' The way Misho lived was the opposite of inertia, the opposite of contentment with success. I believe that, as a natural born doer and a natural born dreamer (with an unforgettable smile), he enjoyed every step in his path. We, his teachers, classmates, friends, share the disbelief and the pain of having to use the past tense when talking about him. However, we also share the gratitude of having known him.

- Petya Rousseva, Bulgarian Language Teacher at ACS in the period 1995-2006



Misho at the foot of the Moussala Peak in the Rila Mountains

CLASS NOTES

Former Faculty



Standing: Dave Kahill, Will Heron, Lou Perske, Derek Tellis, Pete Muilenburg, and Djorf Amirouche; Seated: Aaron Schmidt, a bottle of rakia, and Cooper Green.

Former ACS President (1997-2007) **Lou Perske** sent us a fun update on a special ACS teacher reunion:

In late July, 2013, eight former ACS teaches traveled from across the world to gather in Las Vegas for a different sort of reunion.

The ACS Fantasy Football League was founded circa 2003 by former ACS teacher Chad Schwaberow. The league took a year or two hiatus and then reformed in 2005 with Patrick Love as the League Commissioner. In 2006, Pete Muilenburg became Commissioner, and in 2007, Derek Tellis assumed the mantle and has been Commissioner ever since. The ACS Fantasy Football League is a web-based National (American) Football League season-long competition amongst the members of the ACS Fantasy Football League. Teams earn points according to how their pro

players perform each week in the real NFL. The ACS league is one of the 1000's of private fantasy leagues.

The members of the league have always met annually in cyberspace to do their annual NFL football player draft. But this year, Commissioner **Tellis** had the idea that they meet in person in Las Vegas to draft their players. He organized the entire affair, complete with hotel rooms at the MGM Grande, unique printed t-shirts, bios of each member, roast of each participant, 20-person-limo ride for 8, dinner at a Bulgarian restaurant, a team bowling tournament, and, of course, the draft. Remarkably, eight out of the 16 league members made the effort to travel to Las Vegas for this event, while the others, scattered around the globe, joined them via the internet for the draft.

While being in Vegas with all that it has to offer, doing the draft, and other activities were great fun, the consensus was that just seeing each other all together after so many years, telling numerous (unprintable) stories about each other, and feeling like it was just yesterday that they were together at ACS was what made the event so special. Clearly, many lasting friendships were formed at ACS and the College holds a special place in the hearts of the members of the ACS Fantasy Football League. Members vowed to continue with ACS Fantasy Football League reunions in the future, perhaps even at the College...

On August 25th, former faculty members **Kate McKenna** and **Michael Branch** welcomed Robert De Filippis Branch into the world! Bobby Branch was born in Shanghai, China, which is where Kate and Mike moved



Kate, Mike and little Bobby all set for Christmas holidays 2013

after leaving ACS. This year has been a busy one for the family - in addition to becoming new parents, Mike assumed a new role as Head of the English department at the Shanghai American School, and Kate left the counseling office to work as an administrator in the high school. Kate and Mike look forward to taking Bobby to the United States for the first time during the winter break and introducing him to their friends and family. When he is a little bit bigger, they are hoping to return to Bulgaria so that Bobby can see the country and, of course, visit ACS.



Andrew Jones sent us an update on his life with wife and fellow former ACS teacher **Erin Kahle**:

Erin and I welcomed Eliza Kahle Jones to the world on September 10th in Chicago. In theory, we did all sorts of other important things this year, but none of those things seemed to matter much once we met our beautiful little daughter. Actually, she's growing at an astronomical rate, so I don't know if we call her little any more. She might be working on her basketball post moves very soon! We enjoy



Happy parents Andrew Jones and Erin Kahle with little Eliza, November 2013

watching her change with each new day, and can't wait until we can tell her all about how her mom and dad met in Bulgaria while working at ACS. After all, the most important lesson we can teach her is that life's best love stories start in Sofia with a little shopska salad, rakia and Balkan dancing. We hope that all of our friends at ACS and former students have a wonderful holiday season.

Alumni

Greta Ivanova '10 shared her exciting news:

Hi all! I am in my final year at Oberlin College where I study psychology and cognitive science... and I have two pieces of exciting news. Among other research I am doing, I am working on a music cognition experiment in collaboration with my partner, Will (we are joint first authors). The paper is intended for the Cognitive Science Conference in Quebec this summer. Incidentally, I've also gathered a team to build a retina tracker and adapt it for research in my department: all with the help of mostly recycled electronics and a 10-year old 3D printer that the guys in the printing lab revived. That's how we roll!

Unfortunately, I won't be able to visit Bulgaria this winter but I hope all of you going back will have a great time. Still, y'all should be (somewhat) jealous because Will and I had a blast driving across the US (twice!) this August and had the pleasure to meet up with the fantastic **Meghann Hummel Green** and her beautiful baby girl Lucy in San Francisco where we ate the best Chinese food. Ever.



News about **Aysel Kucuksu '11** reached us by means of a Youth

Goodwill Ambassadors press release saying:

World's happiest nation appoints ACS Alumna as Ambassador!

Ambassadors are usually appointed among diplomats and it is definitely not common that Ambassadors are young people still attending university. This is however the case with Aysel Kucuksu. She has just been chosen as Youth Goodwill Ambassador of Denmark, the small Nordic country often referred to as the world's happiest nation. "The job is to advocate student exchange, intercultural knowledge and career opportunities. It is an honor and very exciting", says the newly appointed Youth Goodwill Ambassador Aysel.

Aysel is a 21-year old student of Law at Queen Mary. As part of her study she applied to attend a university in Denmark. And just after arriving another application was filled out: "When I arrived in Denmark, I applied to become a Youth Goodwill Ambassadors of Denmark and I am very excited that I was accepted. The Ambassadors' task is to promote Denmark to my peers in London and back home with the overall objective of sharing my personal story about international student mobility to foster intercultural exchange and global career opportunities," says Aysel.

"It's really a tremendous opportunity! I have met so many international students, expanded my network, attended world-class lectures by Harvard professors and corporate CEOs! Next April, I will even meet HRH Prince Joachim of Denmark!"





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