



ACS ALUMNI MAGAZINE



Issue 24, July 2023



DR. ROGER WHITAKER

Mary Chakalova '31
Stefka Papazova
Mark McGivern



The American College of Sofia

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CONTENTS

2 From the President

3 Editor's Note

4 Mary Chakalova '31:
Letters from a Spring in Italy

10 Dr. Roger Whitaker
Commencement Address 2023

14 Stefka Papazova:
Teaching Is My Favorite Occupation

17 Mark McGivern:
Students See Me as Someone They Can Talk to

20 Return to ACS

4

10

14

17

Outer front cover – Dr. Roger Whitaker and ACS President Emily Sargent Beasley next to the sculpture of Dr. Floyd Black and Ms. Inez Abbott in front of Abbott Hall, 2023
Inner back cover – Basketball at the American College in the 1930s
Outer back cover – All school photo, September 1992

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Alumni,

I hope this message finds you well. It finds me appreciating the telltale signs of summer at ACS, with activity around me that speaks to a consistent excitement and energy that comes with transition as we close one year and invite in another. It is this activity that motivates me and so many others who have chosen education as our life's journey.

It is my pleasure and my privilege to welcome you into this activity. Regardless of your graduating year, I have no doubt that the ACS experience of today is resonant with what you experienced. The aspirations that interrupted your thoughts as you deliberated sitting for the Admissions Exam are likely very similar to the aspirations of those who most recently sat. The aspirations that inspired you to do your very best in each and every academic challenge are likely very similar to those that motivate the classes coming forward. The desires that encouraged you to get involved in extracurricular activities are likely the same desires that prompt our students to make their way to the stage, to the field, to the court, and to serve. We continue to be "that" school, and our purpose for each individual student and for Bulgaria has not changed. We strive to be as relevant today as we were yesterday; it is within this relevance that I hope you continue to find inspiration.

This past year, we celebrated our thirtieth year since reopening our doors. With this celebration came opportunity to call attention to the many ways our history continues to direct our attention. Each of you was in some way present. For all, this presence was in spirit. For many, this presence was also in action. It is through your continued achievements, contributions, and engagement that the reputation of ACS lives on beyond your time here and contributes to our identity today.

As has always been true, the essence of who we are comes through an almost reciprocal energy between faculty and students. It is an energy that is spoken through the voices and actions of our students. Our students are a remarkable group of individuals destined, like you, to do great things. These great things, regardless of the pace of this ever-changing world, will have meaning and will be of significance. The beauty of these great things is that they will take place within a community of alumni of influence whose track record of meaningful impact, locally and internationally, withstands the test of time.

I invite you to reconnect with your fellow alumni and share experiences, insights, and resources. Whether it be attending reunions on campus or get-togethers abroad, participating in career events, mentoring current students through the Students Activities Fund, or attending events that are so uniquely ACS, like that of Parent Teacher Conference Day as translators. Your active involvement enriches the lives of our students and contributes to the continued success of our institution.

To close, I extend my warmest congratulations to all those who have achieved milestones since leaving ACS. I have no doubt that the traits of commitment and perseverance that contributed to your success at ACS are the very traits that you bring to your chosen life's journey. We here at ACS, fellow alumni, and friends of ACS are eager to continue to support and celebrate your successes.

With the support of so many, I look forward to upholding the values and traditions of the American College of Sofia with each of you. Let these ways continue to bring meaning to our Mission.

And on behalf of many,

Emily Sargent Beasley

President

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submissions, and suggestions.*

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*Elena Anatchkova '11, Petia Ivanova '97,
and Alexander Tomov '04*

Dear Alumni,

This 24th issue of the alumni magazine is being published as we finish our thirtieth year since the reopening of ACS. Naturally, we had to include a piece by the person instrumental to that reopening, Dr. Roger Whitaker, with his wise and illuminating words to the Class of 2023 at their Commencement Ceremony. In this issue, you will even find out why he ended up in temporary possession of a pile of hard, or should we say cold cash in 1992. For those who haven't had the fortune to meet him in person yet, you will come a little closer to his infectious energy, disarming sense of humor, and warm personality.

Such is our job that we keep coming to work expecting a regular day at the office only to end up receiving a call, an email, or a visit by a relative of one of our pre-war alumni and being transported to a different dimension of sorts. And so, in this issue, we offer you the moving story of Mary Chakalova, Class of 1931, as brought to light and generously shared with us by her devoted, history-loving son Georgi Shopov. At least two more stories of the Chakalovi family are waiting to be told, of Georgi's uncle, Grigor (Gocho) Chakalov, Class of 1938 and of his grandfather Georgi Chakalov, a truly mythical figure from the Class of 1887 of the College. In addition, we are in touch with the daughter of Leo Leviev, Class of 1943 in Connecticut and the grand-daughter of Isabella Kyurdian, Class of 1940 here in Sofia. Perhaps you too know of such pre-war alumni stories yet untold and wish to share – let us know!

We know some of you sometimes worry whether the College is doing just as good a job of supporting young minds today as when you were students here. Instead of convincing you with our words, we will leave it to a teacher many of you know, Stefka Papazova, as she has been teaching ever since 1992 (and still rocking at it we might add!), as well as a relatively new teacher on her team, the wonderfully enthusiastic, approachable, and funny Mark McGivern. Whether sports were important to you back in the day or not, we hope you enjoy the stories from our cherished PE teachers and join our effort to keep improving the athletic facilities at the College by donating.

Stay well, keep us posted about exciting things you're up to, and return to ACS. We look forward to having you,

Petia Ivanova '97,

Alexander Tomov '04,

Elena Anatchkova '11

MARY CHAKALOVA '31:

Letters from a Spring in Italy

Written by Petia Ivanova '97

Based on materials collected and shared by Georgi Shopov



Maria (Mary) Chakalova is a College alumna from the Class of 1931, daughter of the school doctor and American College graduate Dr. Georgi Chakalov, Class of 1887. Five years after graduating from the College, Mary joined its staff as an assistant to the financial manager Ivan Monedjikov. It was her son Georgi Shopov who shared her life story with me several years ago. Like all life stories, but especially the stories of people who lived through different political regimes, which is the case of most pre-war American College alumni, it is a story of a life filled with trials and tribulations, drama and occasional happy moments. These happy moments, this fleeting happiness, or rather promise of happiness to come, is uniquely captured in Mary's at times daily letters to Georgi's father Krum, in the first half of 1938, the period of their courtship and engagement which, with the exception of two meetings, took place entirely through letters. While reading the letters Georgi kindly gave to me, I could almost hear a young woman's vibrant voice. I got to know Mary, especially through the Italian adventure she undertook in April 1938, as chaperone to a group of female students. I laughed at the manifestations of her sweet sense of humor and charming self-irony. And so, I followed my urge to share that special spring of Mary's, that unique promise of happiness, with you all, but first, briefly her life story.

Born on June 9, 1912 in Kavarna, Mary Chakalova along with her family left her hometown when the South Dobrudzha region was handed over to Romania in the spring of 1919. They lived for a while in the village of Kozludzha, now the town of Suvorovo, before moving to Varna in 1922. Mary started her studies at the College in 1926 while it was still in Samokov and moved with the school to Simeonovo in 1928. Her class, the Class of 1931, was the last to graduate after a five-year course of studies. It was extended to six years afterwards which is why there is no Class of 1932. Among her classmates were pianist Mara Miladinova, translator and literary critic Neli Dospevska, public figure Anna Fadenhecht, as well as poet and revolutionary Nikola Vaptsarov's sister Rayna Vaptsarova.

Mary recalled the conditions in Samokov as military-like and Spartan. In winter, the stove in the bedrooms was lit only at dusk and wood burned just a couple of hours until bedtime. The windows were always kept ajar at night, and on winter mornings the covers of the nearby beds would have a thin layer of snow. Mary missed her family a lot and looked forward to vacations



*The Chakalovi siblings in Kozludzha, 1921:
Gocho in Mary's old clothes, Nikola, and Mary*

when she got to visit them in Varna. Her seven years younger brother Grigor (Gocho) would see her off at the train station and run parallel with the train until he couldn't anymore, while Mary cried uncontrollably. As the family's finances were insufficient for all three children to study at the College, Nikola, born in 1915, went to a regular school, while Gocho, born in 1919, got to follow in Mary's footsteps. In 1932, he joined the Class of 1938 on a scholarship.

After she graduated in 1931, Mary first moved back to Varna where she was active in the Bulgarian Red Cross. In 1934, Mary's father retired from his work as doctor at the train station and harbor in Varna and the whole family moved to the campus of the American College in Sofia where he took the doctor's position. Gocho was already living on campus. Mary's parents would often open the doors of the family's villa to his classmates, including that one time when the College, forced into a period of cost cutting, stopped the steam heating in the school buildings, including student bedrooms. As Mary described it in a letter dated May 4, in what must have



*In front of the girls' bedroom in Samokov -
Mary is first from left, standing*

been a pretty cold May: "The College has decided to cut costs and they have turned off the steam heating in the buildings. Knowing that we still have the stoves burning, there is a radio and nice conversation always at our house, and as they are always welcome, the guests keep coming."

Two years after her father, in 1936, Mary also joined the College staff, as an assistant to the bursar and business manager of the College, Ivan Monedjikov, who was married to History teacher Mary Monedjikova, an American. For Christmas 1938, which back then was still celebrated in January, an acquaintance of the family came to visit Dr. Chakalov, and brought along her 34-year-old brother Krum Shopov, a deputy district judge in Burgas, who was considered an aging bachelor at the time. This was how Mary met her husband-to-be. An intense correspondence followed: at first less regular, as they were trying to get to know one another in spite of the distance, but eventually more impassioned as they tried to make an informed decision about getting engaged and marrying, the urgency coming from the elder Krum, as feelings of attachment and love gradually grew between them.

In her letter from March 7, 1938 Mary wrote: "As you said yourself, the ice is breaking within me. Spring is coming after all, isn't it?" And then in her letter March 21: "I hope I will be worthy of you. My parents have left me quite free to choose my future companion, and I think in this



MARY CHAKALOVA

That's persistence true to Latin to the end! No difficulties of Cæsar and no complicated constructions drove her away from it. Bravely she overcame all obstacles and was sure to reach the end of Cæsar's conquests. Slow and calm in her actions, this has not hindered her quick palpitation for some friends among those living towards Vitosha. Her talent for the piano has not reached the desired standard, but anyway, we well enjoyed those preludes she used to play at Morning Assembly in Samokov. Perhaps more chance was given to another musical instrument — her voice, so there you find her in the rows of the choir, singing with genuine devotion.

Mary in the 1931 Yearbook

case they would not mind; they would readily give their blessing."

With time, and especially after their second meeting in May, which also became their engagement, the correspondence between Mary and Krum intensified and they wrote letters to each other every single day. "I always carry a stamped envelope with me and use any free time I get to write to you," she wrote in one of her many letters to him.

As part of her job, Mary organized the traditional monthly faculty dinners at the College and was tasked with decorating the table according to the season. In a letter dated April 4, 1938, she wrote, "Tomorrow we're having faculty dinner. We have those once a month; I must have written to you about them before. I am in charge of these dinners: I will see how many people will come, arrange seating and assign places with the help of some table ornament or a season-appropriate card. Last time, our dinner was on March 1, so my decorations were simple: I cut swallows out of black cardboard with *martenitsas* in their beaks. And now, I have been cutting and painting ducks galore during my working hours, and I will put a he-duck in front of the ladies, and a she-duck in front of the gentlemen. I plan to decorate the tables with willow branches, so that the yellow ducklings and the willows remind them that Easter is coming soon. As you can see, even after work I keep myself busy."

At the end of the same letter Mary wrote, "I am sending you a larger picture this time. I find the little ones cuter though. You see, as I am not with you now, I hurry to send my replica."



Mary Chakalova in the 1938 Yearbook

After Mary and her fiancé Krum Shopov got married on July 3, 1938, she quit working at the College and moved to Ivaylovgrad in the countryside where he got his next

appointment as judge. On her next to last day at work, the Thursday before the Sunday wedding, she was told that her boss was summoning her to another building of the College, where it turned out many faculty and staff had gathered to surprise her; the wedding march was playing, and gifts were laid out on the table. Apparently, as per the American custom, a wish list of things for the newlyweds had been made in advance and this time also in secret.



Left to right: Mary, her husband Krum, Nikola standing, Dr. Chakalov in the center, in his lap Georgi Shopov, Gocho and Dr. Chakalov's wife Neda

Mary was a very happy new bride. She got pregnant soon after the wedding, had some pregnancy-related discomforts, and traveled in the spring of 1939 from Ivaylovgrad to Sofia to give birth to their son Georgi, close to her family at the family home in the presence of her medical doctor father.

Krum's work path as judge would determine the young family's location which changed frequently in the period 1939-1947: Ivaylovgrad until 1941 (Mary learned of that appointment upon Krum's arrival for the wedding in Sofia), Tarnovo next until 1943, Dobrich after that until 1945, followed by Balchik until 1947. Things must have become very difficult with Krum suffering a stroke in 1942 that left him partially paralyzed and severely depressed for the rest of his life. His job in Balchik changed from judge to lawyer with hardly any customers. In 1947, at just 44, he took his own life.

In 1945, Ivan and Mary Monedjikovi still lived on the College grounds. The school buildings housed mostly officers of the American mission of the Allied Control Commission. Mary and her son Georgi took the bus along with the officers traveling from work to the American College, where Georgi and his mom would be staying with the Monedjikov family. For little Georgi it all was very interesting: summer time, the bus opened on the side, with cords to hold on to, and a roof, so when it rained, it wouldn't rain inside. Everyone was very kind, and the Bulgarian driver would stop every now and again to pick up people from the neighboring villages such as Darvenitsa. At the Monedjikov house, they also met the son of Dr. Floyd Black, Cyril Black. It was pleasant for 6-year-old Georgi to communicate with Cyril, because unlike Mrs. Monedjikova, he spoke Bulgarian, while Georgi did not yet speak English. Cyril would later be branded a "spy and saboteur" by the communist regime.

After Krum's death in 1947, Mary and Georgi moved to Sofia to live with her parents. Their new home was frequently visited by former faculty and staff members of the College: the Toskov family – Spas Toskov was the manual labor instructor; the Malchev sisters – Ruzha was a telephone operator at the College,

and Tsvetanka, an accountant; Ivanka Moskovska who taught Hygiene and her sister Veneta; Miss Theopia Kmetova, the Household Arts instructor; Mrs. Parmakova, the shopkeeper's wife; Dimitar Goncharov, the choir conductor of the College, later choir master and choir conductor of the Sofia Opera, and his wife Katya Gonchahrova, Class of 1938; as well as History teacher Ivan Panayotov, Geography teacher Asen Nikolov, Math teacher Metodi Georgiev, and Chemistry teacher Petranka Peneva, who subsequently, somewhere around 1952-53, emigrated to Western Europe. She just came in one day and said, "I will not be calling you anymore, do not ask me any questions. I am leaving but do not see me off, please."

With both her high school diploma and her only work experience coming from the American College, Mary couldn't get a job anywhere in now communist Bulgaria. She would get declined, for example, when applying to a publishing house, and was told it was a confidential job. One time, in the period when rationing was in force, she was refused ration coupons on account of not having a job. Her fellow American College alumna Nellie Dospevska came across the memoirs of Major Thompson, published by his brother and his mother, and gave Mary the task to read and make a summary for her and make some money this way. The Narodna Kultura Publishing House decided not to publish the translation of the memoirs and that was that. Mary also helped her brother Grigor (Gocho) in publishing an English-Bulgarian dictionary (1948) and a Bulgarian-English dictionary. She worked as a cashier in some cooperative organizations, at first in the so called *Exemplary Office* on 17 Solunska Street, then in *Card-filing*. Her fellow alumna and friend Anna Fadenhecht, then married to famous director Stefan Surchadzhiev, also helped her look for work. But it wasn't easy and became even more difficult when Mary was diagnosed with cancer. Her first operation took place in 1948. After another nine years and as many operations, she passed away in 1957. She had worked as a typist at the Technika Publishing House in the last years of her life, cut short at the age of 45.



To honor Mary's life, we took a closer look into that Italian spring of 1938, when everything was about to happen, art was everywhere, and hope was almost tangible.

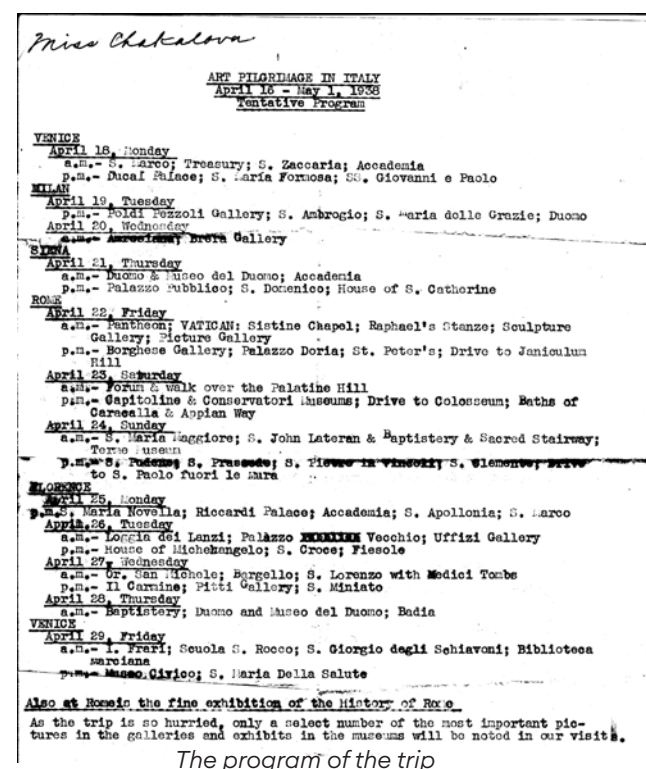
In an early March letter, Mary wrote to Krum that Dr. Floyd Black, the principal of the College, wanted a Bulgarian female member of staff to chaperone a group of College girls on their upcoming school trip to Italy to take place in April 1938. After the initially chosen chaperone broke her leg skiing, Mary was urged to take her place, as with her in that role Dr. Black would be "completely at ease." All her expenses would be covered by the school. Besides Mary, a female teacher and History teacher Lawrence Moore, both from the US, would be on the trip. "The organizer of the group is the art history teacher – a well-mannered man, very nice, funny like my father, he lived in Italy for several years, traveled a lot and therefore he will know exactly where to take us, what we should see, he will explain everything properly to us." In another letter she shares how the trip almost got canceled after tickets had been purchased because of Hitler's upcoming visit to Rome and the Italian state declining visas in an attempt to minimize the number of foreigners in the capital prior

to and during his visit for the period April 23 – May 10. In the end, with the help of the US consulate they got visas until the end of April, and could use their tickets and follow the original plan. This was a bitter-sweet moment for Krum and Mary as had it not been for the Italian trip, Krum would have traveled to Sofia for his Easter break to spend time with Mary and her family and get to know her better.

In her letter from March 23, Mary shared how in the evenings, after dinner with her family, she withdrew to her room to daydream.

"That is when I think of you the most, so if you find yourself sneezing¹, know it is because of me." To which Krum answered in his letter two days later: "I often sneeze in the evening. I had no idea why but now I know. Now it's your turn to sneeze!"

Mary's letter dated March 31 showed excitement at the approaching adventure:



The program of the trip

"Now I can hardly believe I'm actually going to Italy on vacation."

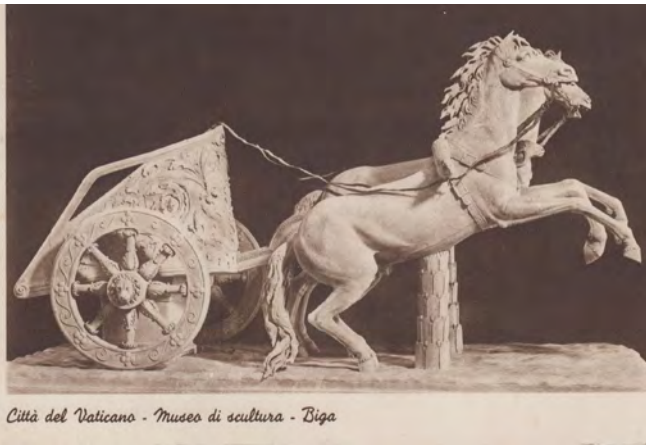
In a letter dated April 16, she sent Krum a copy of the trip program. She wrote it on the train and posted it in Dragoman. She sent letters from Venice, Florence, Siena, Rome, and a postcard from the Vatican with a very short text with a unique postmark.

On April 18, Krum had written in a letter sent to *Miss Mary Chakalova, American Express Company Inc., Prof. Moore's group, Rome, Italy*: "I hope you return the same as you were upon leaving! Today, I got the letter you wrote to me on the train. Thank you! You are traveling now, I am with you in my thoughts. Enjoy all this beauty, do it for me, too, and when you get back, tell me all about it, God willing!"

Mary's letter from Venice, dated April 18, said:

"Krum, Your name is so short that it is completely lost

¹ According to Bulgarian superstition, you sneeze when someone is talking or thinking about you.



Postcard from the Vatican

next to the ad of the boarding house where we are staying. I just don't believe this is all real, I think I'm dreaming. How I wish that instead of always having these cheerful and squealing girls with me, I could be here with you, enjoying myself and sharing everything with you! Hopefully, some day I win the lottery or something, so we can come here together.

"[...] At the Trieste station the train stayed about 3 hours. We got off, had lunch at the station buffet, took the tram into town and went sightseeing. We explored a Roman

where the train to Paris was. He held his head with both hands, shocked and said "Mon Dio, ello partito" and indeed we saw the back of our train leaving. After that, of course, we had no choice but to request our luggage be unloaded in Venice, see when the next train was, and how we could pass the time so as to miss that one too.

"Once we realized there were two hours left, we had a walk by the sea, reached the aquarium and decided to check it out. I was most amused by the octopus. I even think we became friends, because as soon as I tapped his glass wall, he spread his tentacles and fins, while remaining completely indifferent to the teasing of others."

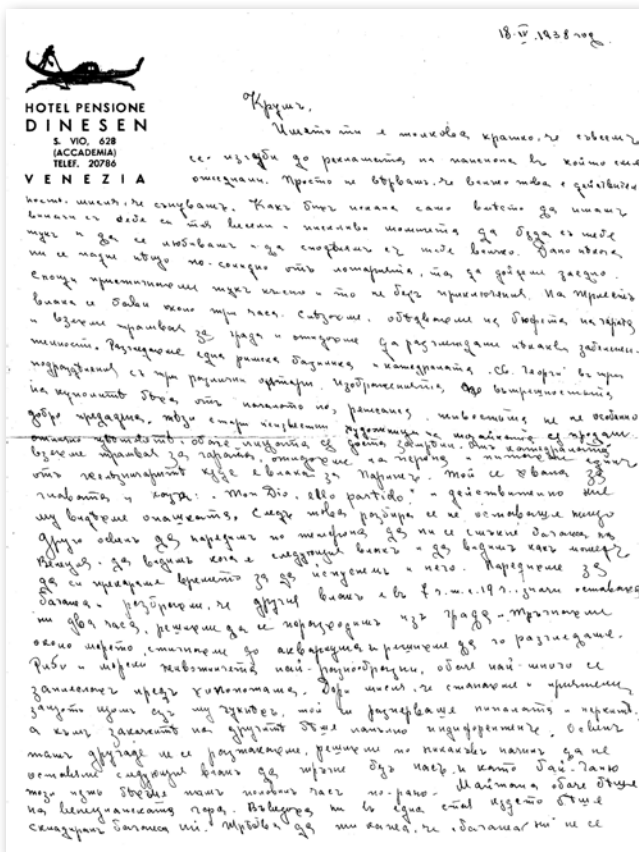
In a letter from the town of Siena, dated April 21, Mary wrote:

"Our group is very cheerful, we laugh to death, but I can't relax properly and treat them as friends or they would grow out of control. Yesterday we registered yet another small adventure. On the way from Milan to Florence, the train was delayed for more than an hour at the Bologna station. Our program said breakfast on the train and dinner was to be rather late in Siena, so in the absence of a restaurant car on the train, our professor decided that we should have something warm for breakfast at the station. I stayed on the train with one of the ladies to guard the luggage and our compartments, and everyone else got off and went to breakfast.

"The professor helped seat them and – the gentleman he is – he came back to take over luggage guarding duty while we had breakfast. A little later, one of the ladies, now done with breakfast, went to swap with him, while he came back to the cafe. This way, I could go back to the train with the students, the other teacher staying in the cafe to keep him company. Time passed, the professor wasn't coming back, I noticed the station was emptying of people, the doors of the carriages closed, they were still not coming back. I started panicking, heard the whistles blowing, the train departed, and right then, our professor and the lady solemnly emerged from one of the underground exits. They tried to get on but were held back. They barely managed to give us the tickets as the train departed and told us to instruct the bus to wait for them in Florence with the next train. It's a good thing that the lady who stayed with the professor was not the Italian-speaking one, otherwise we on the train were doomed without anyone speaking the language. In Florence we were met by American Express, our luggage was placed on the bus, we found out that the next train was to arrive in an hour and we decided to use the time to walk around the city a little, so that when we came back again next week we could rightfully say that we've been here before."

Mary's letter from Florence dated April 26 reads:

"...We wander all day from a museum to an art gallery and next to some church and then visit a monastery, all day. At noon, we barely have time to have lunch followed by about 15 minutes or so to get ready for the afternoon round. We have dinner at 7:30 p.m. and after that, we either go to some of our professor's friends – he has those in almost every town we've been to –



Letter from Venice

basilica and the St. George Cathedral. The images on the domes' insides were from the beginning of the Renaissance, liveliness not particularly well conveyed. These unknown mosaic artists have rendered the colors perfectly, but left the faces quite dull.

"From the cathedral we took the tram to the station, went to the platform and asked one of the railwaymen

and they talk to us about art and show us paintings, or they visit us in the boarding house, where we tell them about Bulgaria and sometimes even sing them a Bulgarian song or two. As you can see, we also do some propaganda.



In front of the villa the Chakalov family lived in, Mary is first left, 1937



The villa Chakalovi lived in on campus, Bliss House, 2023

“My head is already overflowing with art, I don’t know if it will fit any more of it... The students on this trip are all very good students and they all seem to be very well versed in art history. Yours truly didn’t know the last thing about these matters at first. But I wasn’t going to have it, so I took whatever books the professor had on the various arts, and in the evenings, after everyone had come home, I would prepare by reading about whatever we were going to go look at the next day.”

On May 1-2, upon her return from the trip to Italy, she wrote:

“Do not pay attention to the broken glass of my photo. It must have bothered me as it prevented me from

being closer to you, and that’s why I broke it. [...]Tonight I went to an Art History Club meeting and you should be proud of me, I made an impression. My memory wasn’t useless after all.”

And speaking of memory, and especially thinking of the memories preserved of lives past and sadly cut short, it is only fitting to close with a fragment from one of Krum’s letters to Mary dated April 23 that he sent to Florence: “Before me, lies the printed schedule that you sent me. As far as I can understand it, you are now at the Forum or on your way to the Palatine Hill in Rome. You are observing the remains, a sign of spiritual and material culture; but maybe dark thoughts cross your mind, when you come to think that not a trace is left of the people (the gray ones) – they were born, lived, and disappeared unnoticed until now, just as they came to be. Once again, dark thoughts are upon me! Don’t you look at it that way – enjoy the beauty that they have created and left behind!”

Eternal is the beauty of stories people leave behind.



Newlyweds, July 1938

DR. ROGER WHITAKER

Commencement Address – May 20, 2023

Roger Whitaker served as the founding President of the American College of Sofia when it reopened in 1992. In celebration of the 30th anniversary of the reopening, Professor Whitaker offered these reflections at the Commencement Ceremonies for the Class of 2023.



It is a great honor to be with you today to celebrate the Class of 2023 – the 27th class to graduate from the American College since the College reopened – 30 years ago. I was very proud to be a part of the ACS community in those early days. And I'm every bit as proud to be a part of the community today to recognize our students' success that builds upon the College's distinguished history. *Congratulations.*

Perhaps you know the basic outline of the College's history. Started in 1860, ACS considers itself one of

the oldest American educational institution outside the U.S. In the 1920s, the boys' and girls' schools in Samokov merged and moved here to build this marvelous campus. The College, at that time, enjoyed support from the Bulgarian government. But, as you know, in 1942 the College was forced to leave its cherished campus and it remained closed for the next **50 years**. But then, as the winds of change swept Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, a long-held hope for the College came to life: the

possibility of returning to the campus that had been lost half-a-century earlier.

I was privileged to be a part of the team that accepted the challenge of reopening the school. On September 15th, 1992, 100 brave students (1/3 from outside of the Sofia region) and many of their parents – joined with 12 excited teachers (half Bulgarian, half American including my wife Susan) and a young College leadership team on the steps of what is now Sanders Hall. We gathered with a joyful spirit of optimism about the future – the details as yet unknown – but guided by a model of teaching and learning integrating the values and best practices of American education with the rich tradition of educational excellence in Bulgaria and Europe. It was, in essence, the renewal of a unique joint venture (American and Bulgarian).

We took a now-famous photo of everyone that first morning (and this has been done every year since). We spread water on the steps of Sanders Hall, and opened the doors to a future filled with boundless hope amidst uncertainty. I have 100 stories from those early days but I've chosen just two to illustrate the dynamic interplay between planning and surprise, hope and doubt, confidence and uncertainty that characterized those early days. From those stories, I offer three "lessons learned".

Lesson 1: You Cannot Plan for the Unexpected

The effort to reopen the American College was guided by months of planning but there were many unanticipated twists and turns and plenty of surprises. Let me share one surprise that had major consequences for restarting the College.

The U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria in 1990 was Sol Polansky. When on a trip to Varna, the Ambassador

and his wife Kay arrived at their hotel where the doorman greeted them and said: "Welcome to our hotel; I hope you have a good visit." The Ambassador was surprised and asked the gentleman where he had learned his excellent English: He proudly answered, "At the American College of Sofia."

"Dynamic interplay between planning and surprise, hope and doubt, confidence and uncertainty characterized those early days."

Ambassador Polansky didn't know much about the old College at that time but, based on the encounter in Varna, he vowed to learn more. One thing led to another and the Ambassador and his wife planned a reception for graduates from the College; more than two hundred alumni came. The graduates shared how proud they were to have been at the College, and they started a petition urging its restoration.

Many others were also encouraging, among them President Zhelev who told Robert Hubbard, the Chair of the College's Board of Trustees that he was supportive of reopening the American College. It won't surprise you to know that while there appeared to be widespread interest and support for the reopening of the College, there were some who were – let me just say – **less enthused** and frustrated our efforts. I'll save those stories for another day. After several months of careful assessment, the Trustees voted with a sense of firm resolve to proceed with plans to reopen the school.

The story of the doorman illustrates an important



Dr. Whitaker at the ACS Commencement Ceremonies, 2023

lesson: you never know when a chance encounter or an unexpected development may start, shape, or change a plan. Who knows what might have happened had the Ambassador not, by mere chance, met a graduate from the old College?

Now let us consider a less happy lesson in the summer of 1992:

Lesson 2: Sometimes You Need to Act before You Are Ready

To be honest, we were not fully prepared to open the school on September 15th, 1992. There were so many things happening at the same time, so many decisions to be made, encouraging moments followed by frustrating ones. I'm sure you know what it feels like to be overwhelmed; your experience of final exam week is a good example, I'm sure.

In the days before the admissions exam, we registered hundreds and hundreds of applicants, so many that an architect who worked in the same building as our ACS office on 2, Tsar Osvoboditel Blvd. – advised us not to let too many students on the steps at one time because the stairs might collapse.

We charged 250 leva (that's old leva) for each of the approximately 3,000 applicants. But we could not deposit the money in a bank because we were not yet a legal entity. Some of you have heard the story of what I had to do. I wrapped stacks of registration money in newspaper each evening, put it in a string bag with a loaf of bread and carried it to my apartment. I filled the freezer with the leva. *Pretty cool.*



A full-page advertisement in *Democracy*, the newspaper everyone was reading in 1992

Our team was making great progress, overcoming challenges every day and growing more and more confident, **until...**

On Friday afternoon before the admissions exam – to be given Sunday, July 12th, I received a disturbing hand-delivered message from an official instructing me **NOT** to give the exam. The note said we should **NOT** move forward to give the exam because we had not yet been recognized as a legal entity.

Imagine the turmoil at that moment as, like a flash of lightning, it became terrifyingly clear that the opening of the College was not inevitable; in fact, all of a sudden, I had serious doubts it would open at all. I needed to talk to the trustees who sent me to Sofia. But, I could not reach the Chair of the Board

or other trustees because it was the weekend and this was a time before email or text messaging or cell phones.

So much to consider, but it seemed to me that the most critical issue was whether ACS could sustain its momentum if the exam was delayed or canceled. My view was (and still is) that if we canceled or delayed the exam we would never have put the process back together in time for the approaching school year. And, if we decided to delay the opening for the next school year, I had serious doubts we would ever open. What about the 3,000 students and their families spending an anxious weekend awaiting the exam? I thought about the Board of Trustees who hired me with one goal: to open the College and serve as the first head of school. I took a two-year leave of absence from my position as Professor and Associate Dean at Boston University to head to Sofia with that one goal. Now what? It felt like a classic case of **now or never**. The stakes were that high.

“There are moments when we must overcome our timidity about possibly being wrong.”

The next morning, the day before the exam, I told the team: **“Let’s do it!”** And we did. We gave the examination. On the following Tuesday, the Council of Ministers approved the College as a legal entity on the recommendation of the Ministry of Education, pending compliance with the requirement to have adequate space. Thankfully, on August 7th, we received the keys to campus Building 4 (now Sanders Hall – but then an abandoned building in terrible condition) and we spent the following four weeks frantically putting the building into shape for opening. We could not have imagined the beautiful campus we have today would come from such a humble beginning.

Looking back, the decision to give the entrance examination feels right. But what if it wasn’t? The Ministry wasn’t wrong to say we were not yet a legal entity, but how does one decide how to respond? What we can say is that we cannot always live our lives with certainty. There are moments when we must overcome our timidity about possibly being wrong; we must assess the risks of making wrong decisions – often with incomplete knowledge and before we are ready. As often said: “Sometimes, not taking a risk is the greatest risk.”

Mark Twain offered his wise counsel on this issue. He wrote: “20 years from now you will be disappointed by the things you **didn’t do** more than by **the ones you did.**”

I wrote this to the Chair of the Board: *Bob, we have taken some bold risks in recent weeks. We advertised to register candidates without being legalized as a recognized educational entity. We are giving an exam to 3,000 hopeful kids when we do not yet have any facilities for them. We expect to open in September but have no furniture. We have a planned curriculum but don’t have a full set of teachers or books. We hope to rehab one building*



Dr. Whitaker in front of the Auditorium bearing his name, 2023

on campus but don't have the keys and have not decided who can help us restore the building. And yet, it all seems very right, and inevitable at this point. This College is reemerging day-by-day, I am just along for the ride.

Which leads me to **Lesson 3: Do Your Best and Have No Regrets.**

Our team learned in the summer of 1992 that without assurances of success, all we could do was our best. And that is all any of us can do, knowing that if we have good intentions and do our best, we should have no regrets. I wrote to the Chair of Board at the end of that fateful summer: *With student interest so high, how can we as teachers and administrators do anything but our best to be as good as they expect?*

That is what the American College has done since its founding and since its reopening in 1992.

So much has changed in 30 years. Today we have over 900 students and 100 teachers, 35 percent international. Today we will graduate 181 remarkable students who will join 3,141 others who have graduated from ACS since the first class in 1997. The 21 members of the Board of Trustees now include six trustees who are graduates from the College, including the fantastic Chair of the Board, Theodora Konetsovska. Sanders Hall is now but one of many beautiful buildings on our campus.

But, from my perspective, the most important thing that has **not changed** is ACS's uncompromising pursuit of excellence in the magical process of teaching and learning – inside and outside the classroom. It is hard to be a teacher – day in and day out. I know. I used to be one. And so, I especially thank our teachers for another year of generous work and I hope you, as students, will personally thank them too.

Our work is never finished, nor should it be as our troubled world turns. Under the superb leadership and vision of our President – Emily Sargent Beasley – and her wonderful staff – I know the College is in the

best of hands, honoring the past while advancing a model of academic excellence and innovation within a student-centered, kind, and supportive learning community.

And so, I share with our students three lessons I learned long ago: As you move on to your next adventure in life, I hope you are able to **manage the unexpected**, to take well-considered **risks without being stalled by the convenient excuse of uncertainty**, and do your best in all that you do, **without regret**.

“Our work is never finished, nor should it be as our troubled world turns.”

I leave you with the first part of a famous Irish blessing:

*May love and laughter light your days,
and warm your heart and home,
May good and faithful friends be yours,
wherever you may roam.*



With his wife, former ACS teacher Susan Whitaker, 2023



Click here to watch
video of the address.

STEFKA PAPAZOVA

Teaching Is My Favorite Occupation

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Stefka Papazova is one of the mythical ones, these first dedicated teachers and courageous pioneers that Dr. Roger Whitaker selected in 1992 to become part of the restored American College of Sofia. While not the only one who stayed at ACS for over 30 years (that achievement is shared with Ms. Maria Angelova), Ms. Papazova is the only one who kept teaching. Physical Education (PE) and tennis are the areas she thrives in and to this day enjoys teaching immensely. And it shows.



Sports Department, 2021

Where are you from, literally and metaphorically?

I am from ACS ;)

How did you become a teacher?

I take teaching as a calling. I think it runs in the family.

How did you come to ACS?

Before the political regime change, it was difficult to find a school with English and tennis. ACS was that. It's common now, but in 1992 it was impossible.

What do you like most about teaching? About being a coach?

Working with students is what I like most about both teaching and being a coach.

What are the challenges you face in teaching PE at ACS?

The sports facilities have always been a challenge for us at the College, but they have been improving over the years. In the first year, our sports classes were mainly held outside, no matter what the weather was. Rainy, muddy, we would play baseball joining classes together with my colleague Andrew Roberts¹, who taught me about this amazing game, for which I am grateful to him. The students were enthusiastic and eager to learn new things; it was all incredibly interesting for teachers and students alike. Baseball was our sport, unique for Bulgaria. We didn't have the Bubble or any gym then. Our President Dr. Whitaker, the person charged with and responsible for reopening the College, arranged that we rent some of the sports facilities of the Technical

¹Andrew Roberts was an intern, fresh out of college, whose father, Richard Roberts was a trustee. In that first winter, using the school van, Andrew would drive the students with the longest commute to the College and he would also help with sports classes. In the second year, he taught Geography and coached basketball and later, was a trustee himself. Dr. Roberts is currently an Associate Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design.



Baseball on the small field next to Sanders Hall, 1993

University. The school van would drive students there for classes: swimming, tennis, aerobics. It was very different but fun, too. I'm very happy that the renovations of our sports facilities, starting with the Green Field, are a strategic priority. This is a much needed improvement that will affect the experiences of our students and provide new opportunities for them to practice their favorite sports.



Andrew Roberts (center front) in front of Sanders Hall, 1993

What was your favorite subject as a student?

Physics, Maths, and Sports.

Who was your favorite teacher?

My favorite teachers were my teachers in... Physics, Maths, and Sports, indicative of how strong the correlation between a favorite teacher and a favorite subject is.

What change do you wish for ACS?

A swimming pool would be great to have.

What's your idea of a perfect PE class or tennis match?

In a perfect PE class or tennis match the students or competitors would be happy and content with their effort.

What was your most memorable or favorite teaching moment at ACS?

At ACS, I love the Project-based Learning approach that we have adopted, as it offers students the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills through engaging projects set around challenges and problems they may face in the real world. I also enjoy very much 12th graders' presentations on diverse sports: fencing, sambo, rhythmic gymnastics, tennis, golf, ballet, skiing, Latin dances, swimming, folk dances, kickboxing, calisthenics, etc.



Sports Awards, 2005

What is your most marked characteristic?

I always strive to do better.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Perfect happiness is to both welcome and send the day off with a smile.

What is your greatest fear?

After 30 years of teaching at ACS, I have no fear. ;-)

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

Thanks and Bravo, if those can ever be overused.

“We could use some of the unique enthusiasm that had taken over Dr. Whitaker and made him believe that he could re-create this thing called “the College”, ignite a spark, which continues to shine and illuminate, to this day.”

When and where were you happiest?

I am happiest with my family, anywhere.

Which talent would you most like to have?

I have always wanted to do classical dances.



*Giving the Sports Department Award to
Anastas Pushkarov at Senior Dinner, 2011*

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

I would very much like to not take everything so seriously.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

As a teacher, getting the Teacher of the Year prize from the Ministry of Education was my greatest achievement. As a coach, that would be our students' success at the ACS Open tennis tournaments.

What's your teaching superpower?

Calmness and positivity.

What is your favorite occupation?

Teaching.

What do you value most in your friends?

Honesty, high spirits, supportiveness.

Who is your favorite athlete?

Roger Federer.

Who is your hero?

Albert Einstein.

You've been at ACS the whole time since the reopening, more than 30 years now. If you could bring back one thing from ACS in 1992, what would it be?

Perhaps we could use some of the unique enthusiasm that had taken over Dr. Whitaker and made him believe that he could, with 6 Bulgarian and 6 international teachers chosen by him and 100 talented girls and boys, re-create this thing called "the College", ignite a spark, which continues to shine and illuminate, to this day.



ACS Open in Tennis, 2006



ACS Open in Tennis, 2008

MARK MCGIVERN:

Students See Me as Someone They Can Talk to

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Mark McGivern is from Scotland and in his own words, "would have been a professional football player today if it weren't for the Scottish weather." Apparently, he tried a different sport - volleyball - to get out of the rain and that led him to Continental Europe: The Netherlands, France, Bulgaria and ultimately, ACS, where he has been teaching Sports and coaching the basketball team since the fall of 2021. And boy, are we thankful for that bad Scottish weather!

Where are you from, literally and metaphorically?

I grew up in a small town on the East Coast of Scotland called Glenrothes in Fife, across the Forth Road Bridge from Edinburgh, so technically I'm a Fifer. However, if anyone asks, it's much easier to say I'm from Glasgow. My family were all from a small town outside Glasgow but moved to Fife when I was born because my Dad was a miner. The mines all closed in the late 1980's but my parents stayed in Fife for years until 2007 when they moved back to their childhood town just outside of Glasgow, where they are now, and where I consider home. It's also where I met my wife, and the only place in Scotland that both of my kids consider home. I moved away from Scotland to pursue a professional volleyball career in 2007, age 24, and have lived in several countries in Europe since then that I really felt at home in, but having settled in Sofia, I definitely feel like this is where our home is now.

How did you become a teacher?

I studied Sports Coaching and Management at The University of Dundee so I have always known I wanted to work in the field of teaching/coaching. I

"Something that brings me deep satisfaction is when a young person tries to do something outside their comfort zone and succeeds."

coached multi-sports throughout university, and my first official job after university was teaching Physical Education in elementary schools. I taught for a year but always knew I wanted to play professional volleyball. There is no professional volleyball league in the UK, as volleyball isn't one of the popular sports there so I knew I would have to move abroad to either Italy, Poland, France or another European country where volleyball is high level. Fortunately,



I was given the opportunity to follow this dream when I was offered a professional contract in The Netherlands. Of course, accepting the offer meant my teaching career had to go on hold for a few years, but I always knew it was a career I would find my way back to.

How did you come to ACS?

We arrived in Bulgaria in September 2018 after 8 years in France. One of my good Bulgarian friends/teammates from Lyon had moved back to Sofia with his family and returned to his childhood team to take the role of President of Levski Volleyball Club. He was looking for a Middle Blocker with experience and I fit the bill. My wife and kids had been to Bulgaria a few times for vacations, and we have made many Bulgarian friends over the years of volleyball in Europe, so we knew some of the culture and the warmth we experienced from Bulgarians. We decided to give Bulgaria a chance. I played 3 great seasons for Levski and I truly believe that Levski Volley are the team to aspire to here in Bulgaria; the youth development and their new facility are second to none.

When I realised my volleyball career was coming to an end I started to explore what opportunities were available to me in Bulgaria. We knew of ACS so I decided to check their website for job openings; call it fate or coincidence, but to my surprise there was an opening for a PE teacher. I applied and, let's just say, the rest is history.

What do you like most about teaching? About being a coach?

I know it sounds cliché but I genuinely love working with young people. I really believe it just takes one positive role model to affect change in a young person's life. I've had so many influential role models in my life; as a student, a professional athlete, a



Mark and fellow sports teacher and coach Valeri Banchev with the ACS boys' basketball team

person, a father, and a teacher. My goal is to be a positive influence in the lives of young people and pass on what I have learned from the coaches and teachers I've had the pleasure of learning from. Something that brings me deep satisfaction is when a young person tries to do something outside their comfort zone and succeeds. It's what this job is all about. As Maya Angelou said, "People will forget

what you said, people forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

What are the challenges you face in teaching PE?

I think for me the challenges come when a young person faces some type of adversity, physically or emotionally, and the only thing I can do for them is listen and be there. Sometimes I feel helpless in those situations. I can also say that Bulgarian language isn't my strong suit... but I'm a work in progress.

"PE is so important for young people's mental and physical health so it's my job to make sure they prioritise these things."

What was your favorite subject as a student?

It won't come as a surprise but PE was my favourite subject at school. I played a lot of football, table tennis, badminton, basketball... the list goes on, I was a very energetic child. (It's also no surprise that my son has a lot of energy!)

Who was your favorite teacher?

I didn't necessarily have a favourite teacher in school. However, my first volleyball coach, Colin McGinlay played a huge role in the path my career took. His enthusiasm for all things sport and his outlook on life really inspired me.

What change do you wish for ACS?

To be honest, I love working at ACS but if I were to choose one thing, it would be to upgrade our sports facilities. (Which we are in the process of doing... Thanks to everyone involved in trying to make this happen!)

What's your idea of a perfect PE class/game?

My idea of the perfect class is a gym full of students doing sports; moving, laughing, working hard, smiling, with music, energy, motivation... For me it doesn't matter the sport or the activity, the important thing is the students are not thinking about anything other than what they are doing in that moment, of course with a smile on their face.

What's your teaching superpower?

I think the students see me as someone they can talk to. I have a good connection with the students and I hope that means I am approachable if they need to talk about something. ACS is a very ambitious school with high standards and a lot of students who push themselves to be the best, so I try to be someone the students know they can have a laugh with whilst also building healthy habits. PE is so important for young people's mental and physical health so it's my job to make sure they prioritise these things.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

I think perfect happiness is anywhere with my family and friends. Or watching my favourite football (soccer for the Americans) team, Glasgow Celtic with a beer in hand!

What is your greatest fear?

My greatest fear is being out in the sun too long – this pale Scottish ginger complexion wasn't made for direct sunlight.

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

If I could change something about myself I would have become a professional football player when I was a youngster. I definitely still think I would have made it, like most “wee lads” in Scotland, I could kick a ball around the park for hours, and I think I can still beat anyone at “keepy ups” – and let's be honest, volleyball and teaching don't compare.



Mark as part of the Olympic Team of GB, 2012

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

My greatest achievement professionally was representing Team Great Britain in volleyball at the Olympic Games in 2012. It's a tournament that every professional athlete hopes to play in during their career, from the absolutely spectacular opening and closing ceremonies, to meeting some of my sporting heroes; Kobe Bryant, Sir Andy Murray, Sir Chris Hoy, sitting in the same food hall as Usain Bolt,

and playing in a packed stadium of 10,000 people every match, to the memory I will keep forever; our first match of the tournament against Bulgaria – which did not go our way but given the path my life took after 2012, it feels like it was serendipitous. Of course, my greatest personal achievement is being “Dad” to my two wonderful kids, Maia and Callan.

Who are your favorite athletes?

My favourite athletes are LeBron James and Henrik Larsson (for those unaware, former Celtic FC and former Barcelona FC football player).

Who is your hero of fiction?

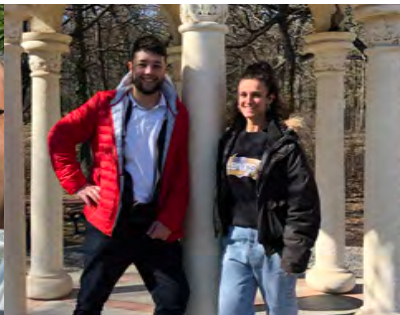
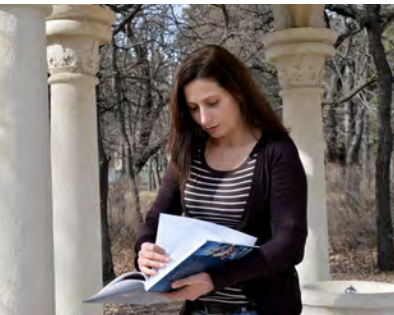
Fictional hero I think I would have to say Ted Lasso. (IYKYK!!)

What do you value most in your friends?

Having lived in a volleyball bubble for more than 15 years and never having immediate family close by to lean on, we have a lot of friends who became like family. I think professional sports life is somewhat similar to international teaching life, where you live in such close contact with people who have or have had similar experiences to yours. This makes friendships sometimes quite intense. Identifying when someone needs space and when someone needs help or company is really important. Accepting that when a friend moves away it doesn't mean the relationship is over, it just changes a little, and will take a little more planning to make work. My kids have aunts and uncles all over the world and that for me is pretty special, because it takes a village.



Mark with his family



RETURN TO ACS



STAY IN TOUCH



GIVE BACK







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