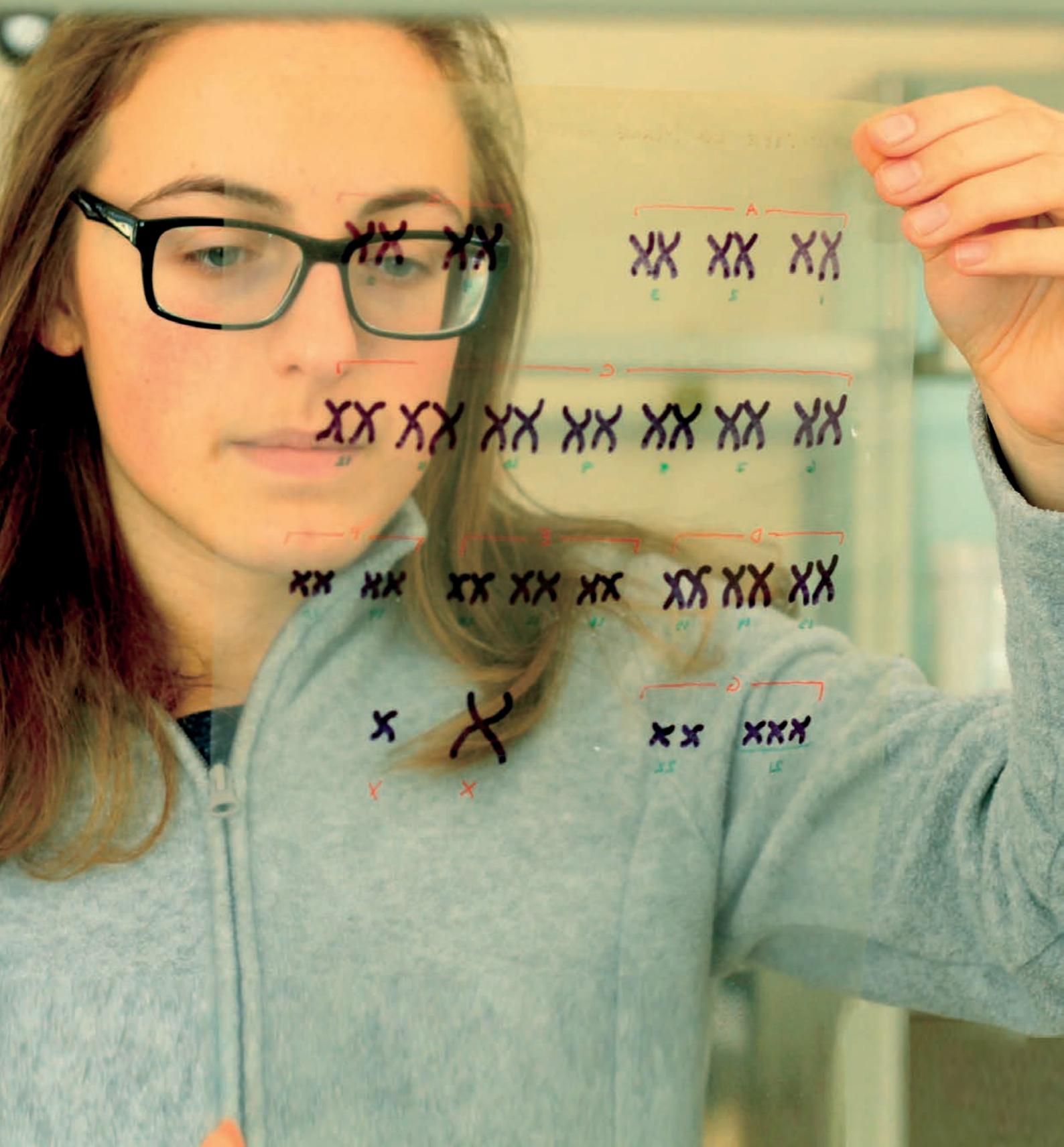


Issue 14, December 2015



ACS ALUMNI Magazine





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particles" - Rumi (Photograph by Rumyana Mihaylova
'05)

Outer back cover - Hand-made Christmas garlands
(Photograph by Rumyana Mihaylova '05)

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

There is a distinctive spirit at ACS that is palpable: whether on the volleyball court at the recent ACS Invitational; at the extraordinary Thanksgiving Dinner hosted by international staff, at a career speaker series sponsored by the Young Women's Empowerment Club, or in the many lively classrooms led by our faculty around the College. What a privilege it is to be on this historic campus with such a strong and dynamic faculty and staff. And I feel especially privileged to work with such an outstanding student body comprised of such interesting and thoughtful, as well as talented and dedicated students. ACS is a good school (in its sense of moral and ethical purpose) as well as a great one, and I have very much enjoyed my first few months here. While it has been a busy transition, I feel that it has been a particularly opportune time to be here with the important initiatives we have underway. ACS is a school with a powerful new presence and an exciting future as well as great traditions from its storied past.

By now most of you have heard of the Campus Center Project, which is a key part of the ACS Master Plan and which will be the first school building to be constructed on our campus since the 1930s. Important project milestones have been reached this past year. We have a building permit, and we hope to have a general contractor on board by early spring, at which point we plan to begin construction. The approved building design is inspiring. If you have not seen it, we look forward to sharing it with you, and we would also love to discuss ways you can support our effort to put this transformational new school building in place.

As you know, last year ACS went through an extensive re-accreditation process and received strong praise for its academic programs and the exceptional accomplishments of its students. This process also produced several recommendations for continued growth in three areas of importance: English language instruction and using English as the language of instruction, student services and assessments, and institutional communications. We have established school committees to help advance our work in these critical areas, and we look forward to reporting on their progress in future publications. We have also continued important initiatives in promoting conversations about pedagogy and providing faculty members professional development opportunities at home and abroad. Nine teachers and two academic administrators, for example, recently participated in an international math workshop in Warsaw. In addition, we have been working with department chairs to review and revise our faculty evaluation process.

Meanwhile, to help familiarize myself with the work of the College, I have been visiting classrooms and meeting with students. The interactions between our students and teachers are impressive to see. Our students are fortunate to be at ACS, and I know that our teachers feel that they are fortunate to be teaching such students. While I do not get to teach them, I have sought other ways to spend time with our students. I greet students each morning (with the exception of testing day on Monday) at the entrance of Sanders Hall. Most of them are eighth graders, heading to their ESL classes on the second floor. I do not yet know all of their names, but I am making progress and what a delight it is to begin my day greeting them. The spring in their steps and the smiles on their faces are infectious. In addition, I have begun a series of Friday lunches with seniors by advisory groups. I could not be more impressed by the type of young people ACS is producing. Our seniors are intelligent, hard-working, highly accomplished, and also very thoughtful and engaging young people, and it is a pleasure and a privilege to spend time with them. It has been so gratifying to hear them speak of their heartfelt gratitude for the time they have spent in the ACS community of learners.

So all this is to say that I am very grateful for the privilege to serve at such a dynamic, important, and historic school with such a wonderful community of students and teachers. And I am grateful as well for the interest and support of our alums, of our parents and past parents, of our trustees and benefactors, and of ACS friends around the world. I look forward to working with all of you in the months and years ahead to advance the mission and great work of the College.

Sincerely,

Dr. Richard T. Ewing, Jr.

President, American College of Sofia

ACS Alumni Magazine

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Published by:

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

Letters may be edited for publication.



Petia Ivanova '97

Hello again!

It feels good to be back at ACS. The pleasant familiarity of the old and the excitement over the new both occupy my mind.

Among the things that have welcomed me, unchanged since the old days, are: the way Coach Gigova still takes to heart **every single** ACS Open volleyball match, the persistent piano-practicing student(s) in our building, the teenage couples furtively stealing last kisses in the corridor as the bell pierces everyone's eardrums, and the just about never-waning hope of a snowy Christmas. Wait, the last one is a new thing: to spite all climate change skeptics, there wasn't a single snowless Christmas back in the 1990s.

Over my first couple of weeks back at the college, I've been busy with this magazine while in a flurry of catching up. Ostrander (ex-Main) has been temporarily closed off for upcoming reconstruction – except for the steps. The steps are full of life, as always, at the smallest glimpse of sun. Once the Campus Center project is completed, though, an even more appealing and up-to-date campus will welcome the members of the ACS community. Meanwhile, a temporary cafeteria has landed on the asphalt field where the boys I was once in love with used to play football or basketball or whatever the -ball of the day was. All ACS stage productions will have to happen elsewhere while the Whitaker Auditorium is unavailable, but the kids are on fire as always and will make any stage around Sofia come alive. Come see for yourselves at the Christmas Concert!

Speaking of kids on fire, this issue's Student in the Spotlight feature will hopefully bring you closer to the three talented ACSers behind FISSION, an upcoming international science fair at ACS organized by and for students. Ivana, Misho, and Tsveta are very different, yet a dream team together. We'll be there in March to cheer them on, wishing that they'll stay inspired and keep inspiring others.

Those that know me well already know that a dream job for me would best consist of reading quality books (well, perhaps seeing good movies for a change, too). I'm happy to report that this dream came true as I read talented English teacher Garrard Conley's moving memoir *Boy Erased* to prepare for the interview with him in the Current Faculty section of this publication. I cried, fretted and even burst into laughter on public transport, but I didn't want to put the book away and stayed up nights to read just a little more - very unwise for a parent of two small children. I was so intrigued, my head buzzing with questions to ask Garrard. Luckily, I even managed to formulate some of them.

Sadly, the most prominent ACS alumnus, Professor Carl Djerassi, passed away early in 2015 at the age of 91. The college community keeps the warmest recollections of his five visits over the last 17 years. He was best known for inventing the oral contraceptive pill, but had many passions besides science and within his lifetime moved steadily "from the pill to the pen." Everyone knows how important the pill is; but we knew from Prof. Djerassi himself that he devoted a much greater part of his life to the pen, so we chose to look back and honor his beautiful mind with a poem of his own, *The Clock Runs Backwards*.

Keep in touch, everyone, stay true to yourselves, and don't stop looking for that passion until you've found it!

Merry Christmas!

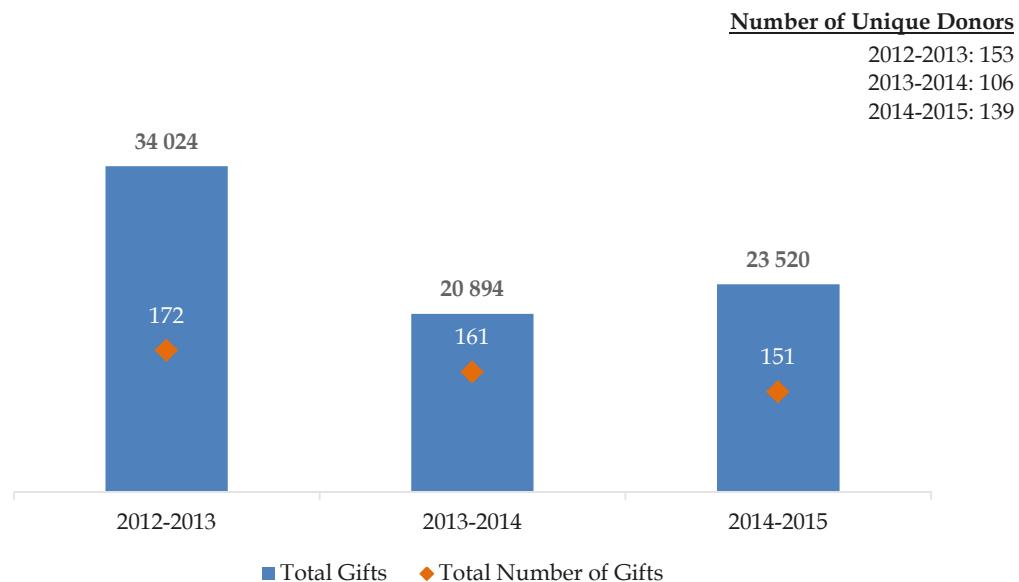
Warm regards,
Petia Ivanova '97
Chief Editor

ACS Alumni Fund Report

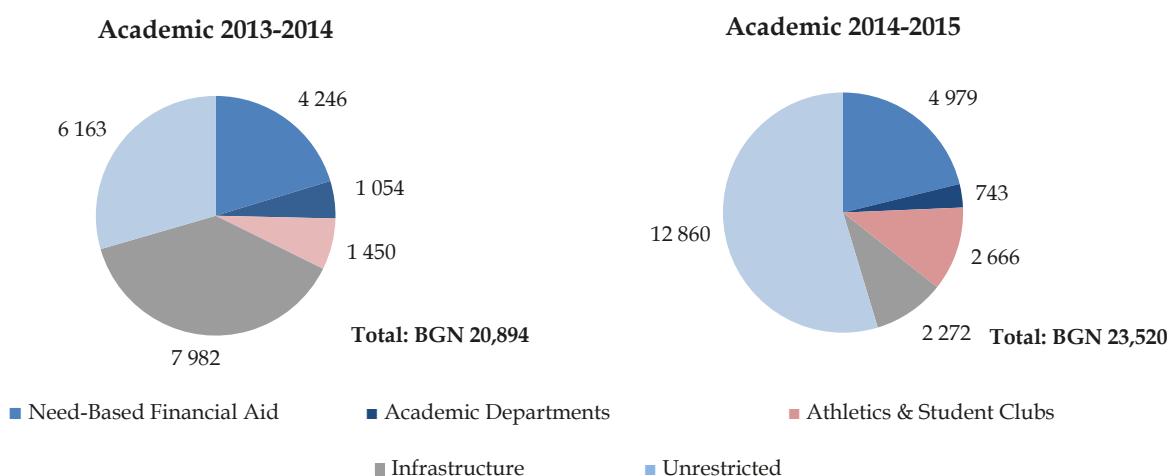
September 2014 – August 2015

Quick Overview

Gifts Breakdown by Year (Bulgarian Leva)



Gifts Breakdown by Category (Bulgarian Leva)



Message from the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

Dear Fellow Alumni,

The Alumni Fund Advisory Committee (AFAC) has completed its third full year of assisting ACS alumni in giving back to the College. In 2014/2015, you raised over 19,000 leva by making 148 gifts. This adds up to an alumni participation rate of 7.0 percent, surpassing last year's 5.5 percent rate! We thank you for giving back and challenge you to make 2015/2016 the first year we pass the 10 percent participation target! We also know that you give back in more ways than one: last year you participated in the ACS Open Days for prospective student recruitment, worked with the Parent-Teacher Association to fund student projects, guided seniors in making university choices, participated in ACS strategy committees, organized alumni events, and much more. In the meantime, AFAC continued working to help you give back. We aided ACS in adding social media sharing to the online giving platform. We also sought and collected your feedback actively throughout the year, which we then presented to the Board of Trustees and the administration. The Board, now boasting four ACS alumni, together with the school administration, took keen interest in what we had to say and is fully supportive of our alumni engagement initiatives.

We would like to especially acknowledge the alumni Class Representatives, who have helped AFAC spread the message and connect with you. We are planning on continuing this strong alumni initiative, so look out for emails from your Class Reps in the new year!

This year we mark the departure of four AFAC members: Boris Statev '03, Svilen Rangelov '03, Mariela Vacheva '04, and Ivan Peykov '09. We thank each of them for their tremendous contributions in making AFAC a well-functioning alumni organization. We are very excited to welcome Mariya Tsvetkova '10 and Zara Rancheva '14 on board. Lastly, Georgi Klissurski '10 was elected Chair for 2015/2016.

We have an ambitious year ahead of us. We plan on working closely with the Board of Trustees and the school administration to improve reporting and transparency, and deliver it to you in a format suitable for your busy schedules. We will continue growing the impact of the Class Reps initiative to build a strong alumni community. Lastly, we will keep soliciting your feedback and channeling it to the relevant ACS stakeholders.

We want to reiterate that ACS needs your help! The Campus Renovation Master Plan is an ambitious initiative aimed at dramatically improving the quality of student life. The College also remains dedicated to providing significant financial aid and to attracting the best and brightest students from around the country. The Student Activities Fund has grown tremendously over the last year and is now the most reliable source of financial support for innovative student organization projects which enhance experiential learning. In general, alumni gifts are a key element in most U.S. educational institutions' budgets. Moreover, they are an essential metric for institutional donors (state and NGO) to determine the eligibility and the levels of funding they provide to schools like ACS. So your participation matters, regardless of the size of your gift!

We look forward to working with you and to finally passing the 10 percent participation rate target!

To find out more about our activities, please visit the ACS website, and if you have questions or suggestions, please reach out at alumnigiving@acs.bg

Sincerely,

The Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

Fourth Alumnus on the Board: Meet Nedko Kyuchukov '03

Nedko was a major force in establishing the ACS Alumni Fund in 2011 and has served as the Chairman of the Alumni Fund Advisory Committee. He became a member of the ACS Board of Trustees in 2013. Find out more about him in the following interview taken by Petia Ivanova '97.

What have you been up to since you graduated from the College in 2003?

It feels like I have been living out of a suitcase since I graduated from ACS, changing cities every couple of years! My education took me to Hanover, New Hampshire, where I got my BA from Dartmouth College, as well as Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I got my MBA from Harvard. A few months of study abroad in Berlin allowed me to return to Europe for a bit. Then, a career in investment banking, private equity, and hedge funds gave me the opportunity to live in fascinating cities like New York City, Washington, DC and London. I am now finally settled in one place - I call London home and work as an investor in the public equity markets at Westray Capital.

In your opinion, what useful experiences are you bringing to the Board, and ultimately to the College, and the process of shaping its future?

I think I bring experience in three key areas - finance, strategy, and alumni relations. First, my career has been entirely focused on the world of high finance, and I have had the opportunity to work at some of the world's premier firms. I believe that this experience is helpful to the Board when looking at financial matters, which are key to the long-term prosperity of the school. Second,

I have gained helpful experience in setting the strategic direction for both non-profit and for-profit organizations through my education at Harvard Business School and my interactions with various Boards while at the private equity firm TPG Capital. Finally, my experience with setting up the ACS Alumni Fund has allowed me to interact with brilliant ACSers and understand the concerns and interests of the alumni community.

What was your reaction to the Board's invitation to become a trustee?

When I got the call from Board Chair Roger Whitaker I was ecstatic, yet apprehensive. It was great to know that I could use the skills I had accumulated to give back to a community that I really cared about. However, I was also

keenly aware that representing the interests of the entire alumni body was a great responsibility.

What would you say ACS means to you now, 12 years after your graduation? What did you learn at the College that you still find useful?

The College is where I truly started forming my adult personality. I started learning about time management, discipline, and balance. While I developed each of these skills much further during the next stages of my education and career, I had laid the foundations at ACS. It's also where I developed a lot of long-term friendships, which will hopefully last for many more years.

So do you keep in touch with ACS classmates?



One of the benefits of HBS is learning about leadership and man-management from a legendary manager like Sir Alex Ferguson



Boris Michev '03 (first from left), Nedko (third from left), Vihren Jordanov '02 (fifth from left), Kosyo Boychinov '03 (sixth from left)*

I try to. I was extremely happy to have many ACS classmates at my wedding a few years ago, and especially happy to have Vihren Jordanov '02, Konstantin Boychinov '03, and Boris Michev '03 by my side as groomsmen. I also try to regularly attend or organize alumni gatherings in London, where there are plenty of alumni. Finally, my work at the ACS Alumni Fund and as a Trustee has given me a good excuse to reconnect with old friends or meet some of the younger generations of alumni.

What is your favorite ACS story?

There are way too many, and some of them can't even be shared here! However, there is one story that stands out in my mind. I had made a bet with my favorite German teacher, Kremona Pavlova, that I would show up to her morning class after the night of our senior prom. While it definitely took some extra effort, I was there at 8.15AM, ready to take the spoils

of my victory. Those of you that know Kremona will be keenly aware that she is an ardent, life-long fan of Levski (Sofia). So, having to wear a CSKA (Sofia) scarf around her neck for the day due to the lost bet was definitely not the favorite moment of her ACS career!

How would you fill the dots in “ACS was where I first...?”

ACS was where I first painstakingly learned how to properly use citations in an academic paper. Also ACS is where I first witnessed a teacher playing his guitar in class. I hope Mark Doser is doing well these days and still playing American Pie!

What makes you happy these days?

Simple things make me happy - a movie night at home with my wife, enjoying a fresh home-cooked dinner and a glass of wine.

Any exciting future plans you

would like to share with our readers?

There are many exciting plans that the Board of Trustees has for the school. ACS is at a stage of its evolution where alumni are steadily gaining a much stronger voice in how the school is governed, and I think that this is extremely exciting. The Campus Center is also a fantastic opportunity to invest in the facilities for future generations, financed by the generosity of foundations, sponsors, and donors, with little or no impact on the College's operational budget. I would urge all alumni to keep informed about such developments at the school, as well as to actively seek accountability from the Board and Administration.

* Wedding photographs courtesy of Ivo Popov Photography - "<http://www.icapturedreams.com/>" www.iCaptureDreams.com

Students in the Spotlight

FISSION Seniors Ivana, Misho, and Tsveta: Critical Thinking and Team Work - That's What Science Is All About

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Photographs by Rumen Mihaylov '05

On top of all regular school assignments and university applications, ACS seniors Ivana Andreeva, Mihail Georgiev, and Tsveta Kamenova have been extremely busy with their project FISSION (Fair of International Student Science for Implementable Original Notions), a student-organized science fair with a focus on the practical side of science and mathematics. The fair is to take place in March at ACS, and will gather high school students from all over Bulgaria and several other European countries. The young scientists participating will provide new original solutions to relevant and yet unanswered scientific questions and issues. We are thankful to have had Ivana, Misho, and Tsveta make some time to share more about their project.

How did you come up with the idea of organizing an international science fair at ACS?

Misho: Tsveti and I took part in the INMM¹ Vienna International Science and Engineering Fair. We didn't expect to win anything, but actually both ACS projects - the other one, the Maze Robot, becoming the overall winner - were very successful. We won in our category, Health and Human Behavior, and this showed us that Bulgarian students, in spite of having far less practical lab work, can make projects good enough to win international science competitions. At the fair, we were very impressed by the cultural exchange and the spirit of cooperation. We decided we needed to create a place back home where young scientists could compete with each other but also share and collaborate. However, since there are just a few available spots at a national level for people who want to compete in international Olympiads, there is hardly any chance for similar benchmarking to occur. Enter FISSION.

Ivana: Last year I participated in the European Union Science Olympiad,



Misho – king of the lab



Tsveta (left) and fellow ACSer Victoria (right)

a practice-oriented competition. The tasks required participants to apply scientific knowledge to solve problems. The first task was a crime scene investigation and the second was an analysis of a soil sample from an industrial area. I worked together with a physicist and a biologist to solve the tasks, and that was when I realized the importance of everything I have been taught at ACS. Science is all about critical thinking and team work because it is impossible for a single person to be an expert in all the different areas of science. One of the goals of FISSION is to give Bulgarian students the opportunity to develop precisely those qualities and skills. Interacting with other EUSO participants, I found out that students in other EU countries have more opportunities to work on independent scientific projects than students at most Bulgarian schools. FISSION aims to become

a platform through which Bulgarian students will be able to conduct their own scientific research, meet peers who are interested in science, and be inspired by our jury members and lecturers who will offer their support for the projects. The fair will motivate students to seek the application of theoretical ideas in practice, to envision the future of their projects beyond the presentation in March, and to be not only scientists but also entrepreneurs.

Is science your natural habitat or are you multi-talented, as is not uncommon among ACSers?

Tsveta: Natural sciences are my primary interest but I enjoy humanitarian disciplines, as well. I love learning foreign languages and find it extremely satisfying to be able to read or listen to someone speaking in a new language and be able to understand them and reply.

At ACS, I take Spanish but I have also attended Russian language private lessons and would like to study some German at some point in my life. Also, I enjoy Math quite a lot. I like the logic in it, as well as the idea that everything follows and is derived from the same basic set of principles.

Misho: It was very difficult for me to be sure, and still is, that I am a “scientific type of person.” I’ve always had interests in a wide range of subjects and I value the holistic approach to knowledge and education. I love debate, drama, philosophy, and literature just as much as I love science. Science is just another way to develop yourself, though it requires a different approach. Nonetheless, the application process and many other pigeonholing processes forced me to look for the stereotypical scientific traits in myself. It was hard

and I resisted a lot. I felt like I had to erase such a large part of my personality to make it fit. Organizing FISSION and working with Tsveti and Ivana gave me back my self-respect as a scientist. A large part of my motivation is something I like to call “the fission of the stereotypes about science,” that is to promote discussion on the skills pupils are taught as part of science classes.

Ivana: Science is my main focus at ACS because chemistry is the subject I am most passionate about. I like to think of the sciences as interconnected and I am always excited about learning something additional in the field of physics, astronomy or biology; that's because it usually changes my perspective on a chemical concept that I didn't understand as well before. However, at school I am also interested in the Humanities and Social Sciences, especially in history and philosophy. Last year I qualified for the National Round of the Philosophy Olympiad. Unfortunately, it took place the weekend before EUSO and so I was unable to attend. I had a very important conversation with my parents at that time and realized that I had to choose wisely and prioritize. I do not believe that I am multi-talented, because none of the things I have achieved were because of talent. To understand science I have put in a lot of effort. Moreover, I do not have the physical ability to commit as much time as I would like to each of my interests. Both philosophy and history are connected with science. As our astronomy teacher likes to say, the more interested we are in science, the more metaphysical we get, because science exposes the basic principles of the Universe.

It must be hard combining the senior year work load with an ambitious project like FISSION. How are you managing?

Ivana: Combining the responsibilities of a 12th grader with demands of daily work on the SIHP¹ is also a very difficult job that led us to divide up our roles very carefully within the team. What is more, time management has a new meaning for me this year. It is not a balance between available time for fun and work anymore. It is a balance between time for socially beneficial work on one side and studying and applications on the other.

Tsveta: I would say that there is also a great deal of stubbornness in the whole thing. Sometimes, when balance fails, sheer stubbornness is what keeps us going. We love this project, and have already spent so much time on it that right now I can hardly think of anything that would make us drop it. At the same time, school work is no less important and the university applications are... well, what will determine where each of us is going to spend the next three or four (probably more for Ivana and Misho) years of our lives.

You must have needed financial support at most stages of the project. Have you been able to find such?

Ivana: We found financial support, but we are still far from being able to provide the access we wish to provide to all interested students. We want to cover the costs for all people from outside of Sofia. The necessary budget is large and sponsors are afraid that they cannot support us with all of the costs of FISSION. However, we appreciate all donations regardless of how big

they are. We also need help with the accommodation and food, so we are also searching for sponsors who could offer us a discount or provide them.

Did you, at some point, almost give up on the idea?

Ivana: I continue doubting that we will succeed, because there have been very discouraging moments. When one receives continuous rejections from sponsors and there doesn't seem to be as much enthusiasm about FISSION as we had expected, it is difficult to keep up the motivation. However, the three of us somehow always divide our roles and while one is pessimistic, the others manage to introduce a positive note. It is not only the team that inspires and motivates me, though. Having conversations with students and teachers who want to participate is one of the main reasons for us to continue, even at difficult times. After all, it is those people we are organizing FISSION for.

Tsveta: I think we will succeed. ACS supports us. People like our idea. I don't think they will let us give it up. A teacher once told me, “You can't give up. You have a responsibility to all those people who support you.” I think I see what she meant now.

Are the three of you friends outside the classroom? What is your formula for successful team work?

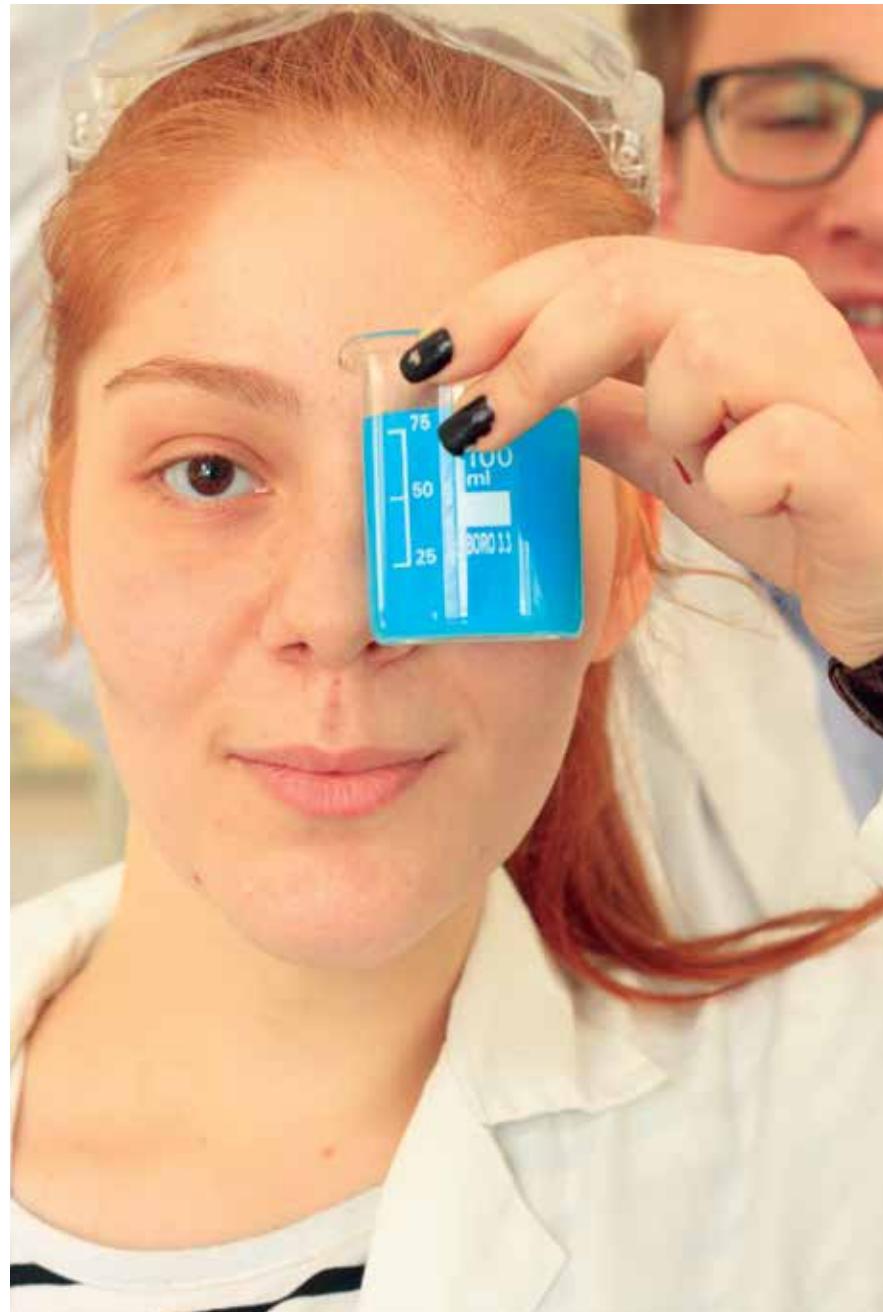
Misho: We are friends outside of the classroom and in a lot of non-chemistry classrooms, like Ms. Velinova's, where we passionately debate. Our friendship is a debate and rarely involves one party admitting defeat. We fight! That makes it such an enriching friendship.

¹Senior Independent Honors Project

Ivana: We balance our relationship so that if the professional aspect suffers, the personal one does not break down and vice versa. I have been in the same section with Tsveti for four years now and our friendship and academic collaboration has changed dramatically. I find that in the beginning of our relationship we used to be extremely competitive whereas now we are open and supportive of each other. We are in a constant cycle of interchanging

roles in terms of FISSION: when I am having a nervous panic attack about something going wrong, she attempts to be calm and balance me out; when she is angry, I try to stop her from acting impulsively. Last year I was in the same chemistry profile class with Misho and our scientific debates brought us together. We both want to study medicine and he understands my plans for the future very well.

What will you be taking with you



Kamelia is one of the many students involved in the different stages of the project

once you leave the college? What is ACS to you?

Misho: I'll be taking with me all the people, as well as the indescribable sense of ambiguity and conflict that every great school has in it. The clash between the desire for freedom and ambition, the clash between being natural and playing a role, and the conflict between being existential and being an overachiever. The drama, the sleeplessness, the sheer rate at which you forget and you have to move on. The things you forget which you cannot forget. I think the greatest thing about ACS is that it's full of all kinds of people, confusion, problems, debates and wasted paper in the library. It's an island on the verge between two and more cultures. This hybridity and opulence of ACS-specific inside-jokes makes it so charmingly Marquezian.

What's next? Do you already know what and where you are going to study?

Tsveta: I want to study natural sciences, probably in the UK. I have not yet decided in what area of professional development I am going to pursue a career but for now, I am thinking about Genetics.

Ivana: My dream is to become a surgeon, although my parents have attempted to warn me about the risks of that profession. Right now, I just want to study medicine. It does not matter where, as I simply want to better understand the human body, apply all the concepts I have learnt in science classes so far and participate in humanitarian projects by being a different type of volunteer. I hope that one day the three of us can collaborate on a research project at a more advanced lab than ours here at ACS.

Best of luck!

Find more about FISSION including ways to support or participate at fission.acs.bg

Current Faculty

Garrard Conley: “Literature Saved Me”

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

*Garrard Conley has taught English Language and Literature at ACS since 2013. He recently finished his memoir *Boy Erased* on surviving Love in Action's “ex-gay” therapy as a nineteen-year-old college student who, to further complicate things, is the son of a Missionary Baptist pastor. Upon reading Garrard's beautiful, heartfelt but also important book, which we absolutely loved, we felt compelled to learn (and then share) more - about his resources for finding strength, his particular creative process, and last but not least about his experience teaching teenagers.*



Garrard Conley at ACS

Photograph by Colin Shafer

When did you first see your “ex-gay” therapy experience as a future book?

For the longest time I thought mine was an unremarkable experience, believe it or not. I grew up in the Deep South with a Missionary Baptist preacher for a father, after all, and I'd met so

many other LGBTQ¹ individuals who had it so much worse than me—so much so I didn't really feel like I had the right to tell my story. The first time I realized my life could be fashioned into a story was in a nonfiction class in my UNCW² Master of Fine Arts program. A teacher of mine told

the class we needed to tell our stories, and when the time came for me to suggest an idea, ‘ex-gay’ therapy was the first thing that came out of my mouth. The entire class literally leaned forward in order to hear more details about the experience, and that's when I knew I needed to tell my story.

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (or questioning)

² University of North Carolina-Wilmington

Tell us more about your creative process.

It involves waking up at 4:30 in the morning in a panic, terrified that I won't finish my book on time, and writing until it's time to shower and teach for the day. I came to ACS under a one-year book contract, and I knew this was my one shot to make it in the publishing world, so I wrote and taught like a maniac for a year. I don't know how I did it, honestly. Now that things have settled down, I write more sporadically, and I read with enthusiasm. It's so great to have time to read widely again!

When did you know your memoir was finished and needed no additional work?

When I sent my book out on proposal (a long process that eventually, with luck, lands you an editor), I had to write a detailed outline for each chapter, along with 100 pages of an early draft. I remember long conversations with my friend Ashley when I was all in a panic about how to transform these sundry details of my life into art. I ended up writing an arc that closely resembles the book in its present form, though there were of course some changes made during the editing process. I knew it was done when I reached the part in the story that is the final day of "ex-gay" therapy, the day I left (spoiler alert: I'm still gay), and I was breathless, because I couldn't believe I'd actually finished something so huge.

As a person - not as a writer - to what extent do you want Love in Action to never have happened

to you and to what extent do you think it was a necessary evil for your particular family at that particular time that made your parents understand how much you actually loved and did not want to lose them, ultimately making them really see you?

I think I said something to this effect in the disclaimer at the beginning of my book: "I wish none of this had ever happened. Sometimes I thank God that it

you had to pick just a sentence or two, what would you say to them?

Breathe. You Can Survive This.

Have you contacted any of your LIA counselors after your stay there?

Yes! I'm actually part of a secret Facebook group for survivors of Love in Action. It's been really healing to see these people on a regular basis, doing silly things and



Bulgarian and native English writers, invited by Garrard Conley and fellow ACS teacher Laurel Zmolek-Smith, during a panel discussion with ACS students on writing and the writing life, June 2015

did." Though this is meant to be a bit tongue-in-cheek, I generally feel that this is true. I try to resist the "someday this pain will be useful to you" narrative, because I think it is very harmful and can lead to bad thinking, but I also can't deny that I have learned quite a bit about my family, not to mention the way that the world works, from this experience.

What do you feel for the people still in "ex-gay" therapy? Your book is a powerful message to them and many others, but if

working through their difficulties in transitioning to "ex-ex-gay." A crazy word, I know, but it just means people who are no longer involved in reparative therapy.

You are, to my knowledge, the only openly gay teacher here at ACS. How does that feel?

Well, there are a lot of harmful stereotypes that still exist today about LGBTQ individuals, one of which is that we're all perverted child molesters, a fact that couldn't be further from the

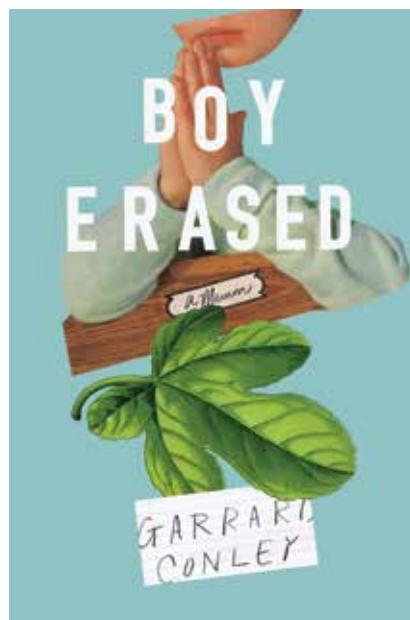
truth. So I sometimes get self-conscious, worried that people think I'm some kind of "big gay monster." Of course most people at a place like ACS would never think such bigoted thoughts, but it's a difficulty I deal with on a daily basis. For the most part, people at ACS are very supportive, and my students are very open-minded. In this way, I see myself as performing an important service for students at ACS, letting them see that I'm not any different, really, from any of their other teachers. There are, of course, days when I find this really exhausting, when I just want to forget about sexuality and focus on my job and not be enacting some kind of public service all the time, but it's not very often that this happens. Most of the time I'm just happy to have this amazing job!

Do you consider ACS an environment free of any kind of discrimination, be it based on gender, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, etc.? If not entirely, what are some further steps you think need to be taken next?

No place is entirely safe from discrimination. We will always have work to do, because humanity is complex and constantly evolving, and the things we think are correct are always being turned on their heads with each passing decade. I think ACS could begin to think more seriously about issues of safety, ensuring that all of our students feel protected from any kind of discrimination.

How does your experience at the "ex-gay" therapy camp affect your teaching ELL to teenagers and dealing with kids of that specific age?

Being in "ex-gay" therapy made me realize that dogma of any kind is dangerous, so I always try to let students have their own voices in my classroom. I encourage students to explore with new ideas and try to fashion their own moral vision of the world. I think there is no better tool for this kind of development than literature. Literature is what saved me from suicide, and it's what has consistently motivated me to be a



The book cover of Garrard's memoir *Boy Erased*

better person, so I of course want to teach my students first of all to fall in love with literature.

Have things in the USA and especially the Bible Belt states changed much since June 2004?

My mom used to joke that she'd be dead and buried before she'd see same-sex marriage in the US. So there's that. Of course we still have a very long way to go. Have you seen those articles about the parents who killed their 4-year-old because he was "acting gay?" I think the next big issue the US and other countries need to focus

on is LGBTQ homeless youth.

Have things changed in Sofia since you first came here in 2013?

I'm not quite sure. Things seem to be getting incrementally better. I helped out with the Pride parade last year, and everything was very peaceful and celebratory.

What is Sofia and ACS to you?

Sofia is the place where I first fell deeply in love. It's the place where I first met an amazing group of writers (the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation) and drank wine on the Black Sea and talked endlessly about philosophy and literature. I absolutely love it. And ACS is hands down the best place I've ever worked. These students are amazingly gifted.

Can you imagine Bulgaria as your home for good?

Yes.

What makes you happy these days?

Writing of course, and that feeling I get when I've just witnessed something beautiful happen in my classroom. There's that electric feeling you get when a class goes well, when you can actually feel the sparks flying in a discussion of good literature. These kids really are amazing.

Are you currently working on a new creative project?

Yes, I'm working on a novel and a series of essays to complement the book.

Thank you. We can't wait!

In Memoriam: Professor Carl Djerassi '42

(1923-2015)

“There is no death. We are just knots along the infinite channel of the Universe. We tie ourselves and call this “birth,” untie ourselves and call it “death.” -Carl Djerassi¹

Introduction by Petia Ivanova '97

When looking back at the rich life of a world-famous multifaceted person like the late Carl Djerassi, who was a scientist, artist, philosopher, and author of three autobiographies among many other literary works, where does one even start? And more importantly, how does one cover a lifetime in a couple of pages? I only knew that I would look past the birth control pill he invented – not because I don’t see the magnificent importance of this invention for mankind, but because I knew from fellow alumna Lisa’s insightful interview with this most prominent ACS alumnus, published two years ago in this magazine, of his irritation when interviewers would inevitably start off by asking about something he did as a 28-year-old as if he hadn’t done anything of importance afterwards.

So, optimistic as always at the start of a new project, I got all Djerassi’s works available at the ACS library plus his latest autobiography from a helpful colleague’s book-covered desk, and started going through video interviews² with the professor. The online videos, I warn you, are addictive, as Professor Djerassi is both smooth-tongued and totally amusing. As I delved into the voluminous material, I felt that



Professor Carl Djerassi at ACS in May, 2013

Photograph by Boriz Urumov '15

my propensity for hard work and thoroughness had just met its match in Professor Djerassi’s rich creative legacy. And the more I got to know this intriguing person of wide-ranging interests and passions, the slimmer the chance of finding an adequate way to cover his lifetime in just a couple of pages seemed. How was I to move forward?

I read and I watched and I listened. And then I came across this poem about a 60-year-old man “who has everything” and looks back at his life while unwrapping his birthday presents. The poem was written

by Carl Djerassi in 1986, but he kept revising it all the way until the interview in 2005, where I was lucky to find it (thank you, Roumy!) “The great virtue of poetry is that it condenses,”³ Professor Djerassi maintains in the interview, “I could talk about my life for hours but anything besides this poem will be just baggage, perhaps not garbage either, but still baggage.”

Wishing him light travels! We promise to take good care of the baggage.

¹In a conversation with director Georgi Mihaylov, as retold at Professor Djerassi’s memorial service in Sofia.

²We highly recommend the video series on the website www.webofstories.com. The interviews were taken by Tamara Tracz in September, 2005.

³Being a German native speaker, Prof. Djerassi is playing on words here. In German: Dichter (n.) – poet; Gedicht (n.) – poem; dicht (adj.) – dense, compact, thick

The Clock Runs Backwards⁴

At his sixtieth birthday party,
Surrounded by wife, children and
friends,
The man who has everything
Opens his gifts.

Among paperweights, cigars,
Books, silver cases,
Cut glass vases,
Appears a clock
Made by KooL Designs
In a limited edition.
A clock running backwards.
A clock called LooK.

Amusing.
Just the gift
For the man who has everything.

How Faustian, thought the friend,
Soon to turn sixty himself.
What if we do really measure time?

As the hands reached fifty he
stopped them:
Books, hundreds of papers, dozens
of honors,
Not bad, he thought: I like this
clock.

But fifty was also the time
His marriage had turned sour.
He let the clock run on:

Forty-eight years, forty-five years,
Then forty-one.
Ah yes, the years of collecting:
Paintings, sculptures and women.

Especially women.

But wasn't that the time his
loneliness
Had first begun? Or was it earlier?
Why else would one collect,
Except to fill a void?

Don't hold the hand.
The thirties were best:
Birth of work, success, recognition,
Professor in first-rank university,
Birth of his son – now his only
survivor.

What about twenty-eight?
Ah yes – he nearly forgot,
The year of the Pill.
The Pill that changed the world.
No – too pretentious, too self-
important.
But he did change the life of
millions,
Millions of women taking his pill,
he thought.

The clock still regresses,
Twenty-seven years:
First-time father, of a daughter,
In time, his only confessor.
Now dead. Killed herself.
The beginning of his second
marriage.
The first undone.

Early stigmata of success to come:
The doctorate - not yet twenty-two.
The Bachelor of Arts - not yet
nineteen,

And the fallacy of presumed
maturity:
First time groom – not yet twenty.
Backward: Europe. War.
Hitler. Vienna. Childhood.
Stop. Stop. Stop.

The pater familias,
Surrounded by wife, children,
friends,
The man who has everything
Is still opening presents
More paperweights, more silver,
More books, ten pounds of Stilton
cheese,
And one more clock.

Thank God it's moving forward,
Thought the friend,
The lonely one,
Who soon turns sixty himself.
And smiled at the woman at his
side,
The one he had met yesterday,
Who yesterday had said,
"Yes, I'll come with you to Oslo."
And come she did
But not for long.

⁴ *The Clock Runs Backwards and Other Poems* by Carl Djerassi, published in *The Kenyon Review* by Kenyon College, 1986

CLASS NOTES

Former Faculty

Ex-ACS teacher **Matt Brown** and his wife Eleonora (from Sofia) welcomed baby Raya in late September in Washington, DC. Matt taught at ACS in the period 1993-95 after serving in the Peace Corps in Stara Zagora, and later returned to Sofia for an additional 9 years. Eleonora teaches special education in the DC public school system and Matt works for an educational nonprofit.



Matt Brown with little Raya and wife Eleonora



Former faculty members **Kate McKenna** and **Michael Branch** welcomed their second child into the world on October 16, 2015. Elizabeth Beasley Branch, known by her friends and family as Betty Branch, was born in Shanghai, China. Kate and Mike left ACS to work at the Shanghai American School, where Kate is serving as the Vice Principal and Mike is the Head of the English Department.

Kate and Mike send their holiday greetings to everyone at ACS - they certainly miss the amazing school and still hope to return one day!



Big brother Bobby Branch meets his sister Betty for the first time.



We got some exciting news from **Jennifer Lawrie-Tellis** and **Derek Tellis**, as well: "We are excited to introduce you to Kalina Tellis, born May 19, 2015. We fell in love with the name Kalina when we first got to Bulgaria 10 years ago. We knew if we ever had a daughter that this would be her name. Four years after moving back to Canada, our wish finally came true and here she is. We hope to bring her to ACS and Bulgaria one day soon to introduce her to the people who have given us so many wonderful memories."



Former Dean Tellis and baby Kalina



After leaving Bulgaria in 2012, the **Klempa/Crocker** family (Klockers) moved to the City of Lights - Paris, France - to work at the American School of Paris. Ms. Crocker has continued to teach both 9th grade English and 12th grade IB Literature, as well as take on the 11th grade IB class. Mr. Klempa has been the "stereotypical" social studies teacher, covering a varied array of classes including World History, Theory of Knowledge, and AP Comparative Politics. He was even able to bring his Human Geography curriculum with him to Paris, creating an upper-level course that had not been taught at the American School before (thank you, ACS!). Both of the Klockers remain actively involved in the school community - with Ms. Crocker joining the Advancement Committee and Mr. Klempa coaching girls'

softball. They've even carried an ACS tradition with them across the continent by organizing and performing in the first ASP Faculty Follies show! In the (few) hours they haven't been working, the Klockers have continued to travel and (attempted) to learn French, as well as exploring their new home. However, not every moment has been as magical as one would hope as they have had to support their students, friends, and each other through two terror attacks that have scarred their city. Yet they continue to find joy in the little things, especially their first child, Madeleine Elliott Klempa, who was born in Paris in May, and continues to delight them and make them fall in love all over again every day. This year Ms. Crocker is taking maternity leave to spend time with Maddy, and Mr. Klempa is branching out as a part-time technology integration coach for teachers. Despite keeping very busy, they hope to one day bring their daughter to visit the warm friends of their remarkable former home, Bulgaria.

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Rich Braithwaite and Jaime Johnson welcomed Summit May Braithwaite in May 2015. Big brother Eli is adjusting well to life with a little sister, and this December he'll turn 3. Both Rich and Jaime continue to love working as boarding parents and teachers at Hawaii Preparatory



Adam Klempa, Amanda Crocker, and baby Madeleine enjoying autumn in Paris

Academy (HPA) in Kamuela, Hawaii. Rich coaches the boys' soccer team, which he expects to be a top contender in the state tournament in February. He also loves teaching 9th and 11th grade English. Jaime launched an outdoor program at HPA, which includes backpacking trips, snorkel kayak adventures, conservation work on the island and more! The

program also includes a 3-week expedition in the summer open to all high school students. She still enjoys teaching *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Romeo and Juliet* to 9th graders! They are looking forward to bringing their kids to Bulgaria in the near future to hike the Rila Mountains and swim in the Black Sea.



Jaime, Eli, and Richard shortly before Summit was born

CLASS NOTES

Alumni

Gergana Vassileva '98 wrote to us:

"Hi, I live in Sofia and work for a Spanish company here. Feeling good with the Spaniards ☺ Even if they spoiled my English into Spanglish ☺ I have a lovely 5 1/2 year-old son we call Zari and, all in all, life is moving great! I plan to go to the Christmas concert this year and bring the kid with me; I think he will be thrilled although he has no clue of English. He only "learned" it when I was pregnant and talking all the time to my bosses in English or Spanish, depending on which made it faster to communicate. Accidentally, I put him into a Russian kindergarten, so now he teaches me Russian and refuses to watch cartoons in any language other than Russian or Bulgarian. He watches Star Wars in English just because he has no other choice ;-) Ain't it fun!"

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Zornitsa Lilova '98 got in touch, too:

"Hello everyone. I've been living in Connecticut, USA since I graduated from ACS. I came for college and stayed after I started working. I recently joined Vodafone Americas in September as a Senior Manager of Data and Information Management. I'm married and have 2 wonderful boys – Andrew (4.5) and George (1). I'd be happy to reconnect with any ACS alumni in the area!"



Zory Lilova '98 with her husband and their two boys

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We hadn't heard from **Veselina Kracheva '06** in a while, so we were glad to get her update:

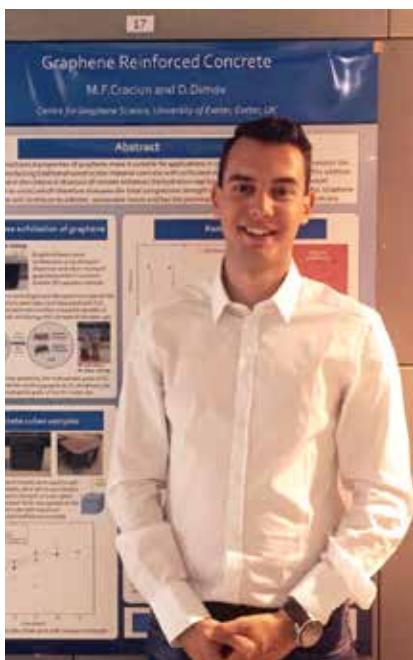
"Hi everyone, long time! I've been very busy over the past year or so, leading a team to compile a comprehensive analysis on the

economy of... Kenya :) Africa is the place to be these days, so here I am. I just launched my report on November 23, so I'm adding a photo where I'm introducing one of the first copies to the Deputy President of Kenya, H.E. Hon. William Ruto, who is then handing it to the Minister of Tourism, Mrs. Phyllis Kandie."



Veselina Kracheva '06 with Deputy President of Kenya (left) and Kenya's Minister of Tourism (middle)

In 2015, yet another ACS alumni student won a prestigious award in his undergraduate degree. **Dimitar Dimov '11** completed his BEng in Civil Engineering at the University of Exeter, UK, with stunning success. His bachelor's thesis "Graphene Reinforced Concrete" ranked him first out of 140 students in his class and he won the Phillip Booth prize in Engineering for the best individual project work within the department. Shortly after, Dimitar was invited to attend Nanotech France 2015, the International Nanotech and Nanoscience Conference and Exhibition in Paris, where he was the only undergraduate student to present his research during the poster sessions. Attracting well-deserved praise and recognition for his achievements, Dimitar has now been invited to pursue a PhD in Nanoscience straight after his BEng, making him the only student in his department to receive such an honor.

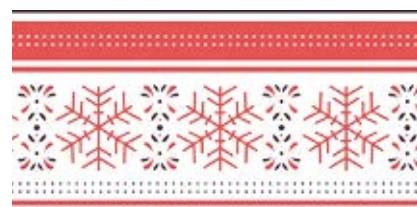


Dimitar Dimov '11, winner of the Phillip Booth prize in Engineering



Aysel Kucuksu '11, winner of the TARGETjobs Undergraduate of the Year Award

Aysel Kucuksu '11, was announced as this year's winner at the TARGETjobs Undergraduate of the Year Awards, an annual competition which aims to find the best undergraduates in the UK. After successfully overcoming the six-stage selection process and competing with 630 people for the same prize, Aysel won a VIP Trip to Brussels sponsored by EU Careers. A Law graduate, Aysel has nonetheless decided to compete in the Languages category of the competition because of her passion for learning them (she currently speaks five). With a Master's degree on the horizon, Aysel is now looking forward to a future career in which she would be able to combine her love for languages with her pursuit of achieving equal access to justice for all.



**HAPPY
HOLIDAYS**

**GREETINGS FROM
THE ACS ALUMNI
RELATIONS OFFICE**

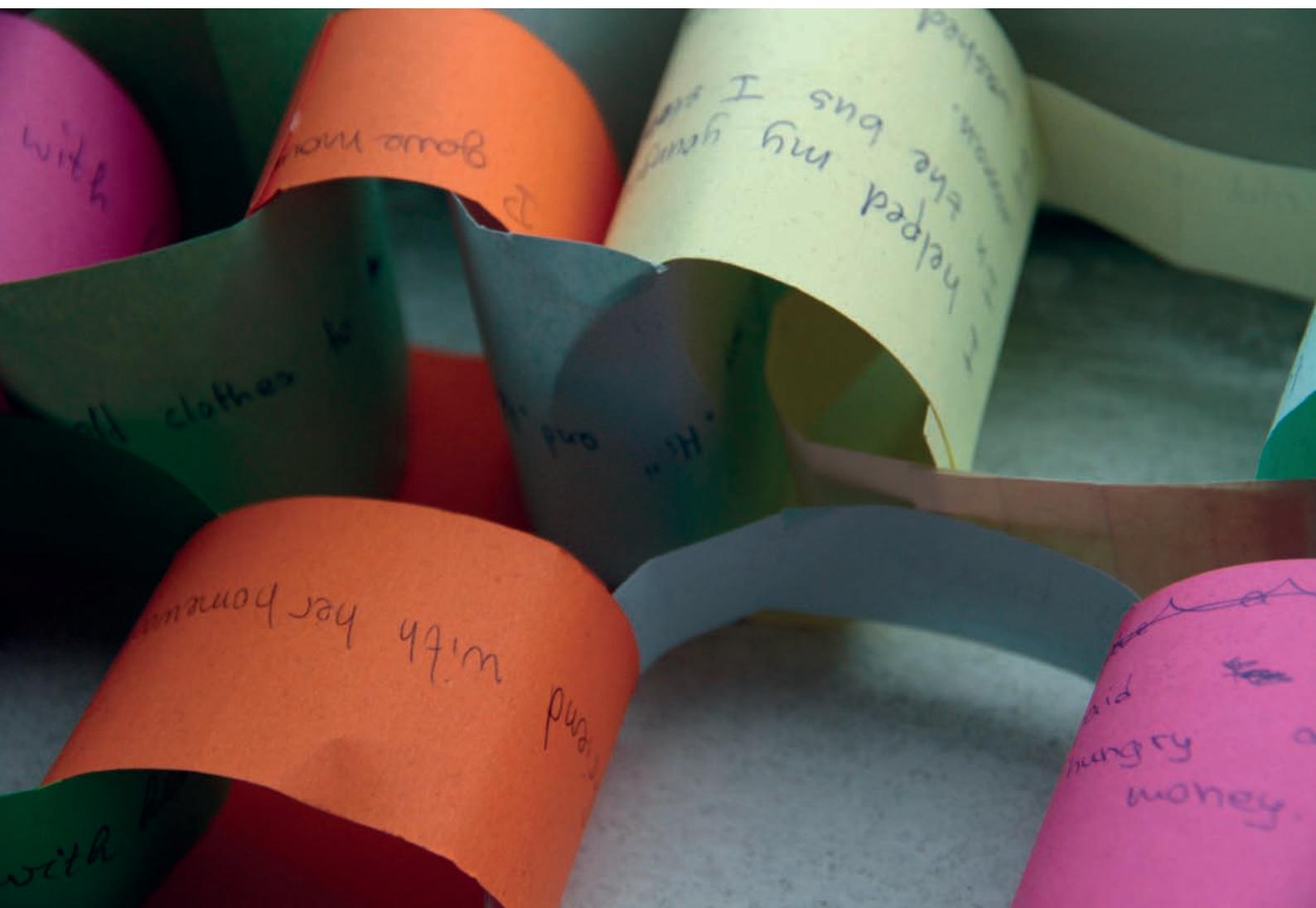






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