

Issue 13, June 2015



# ACS ALUMNI Magazine

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**On the outer front cover:** *Hairspray Jr.* at Arts Fest 2015  
(Photograph by Daniel Lekov)

**Inner front cover:** When roses bloom again, June 2015  
(Photograph by Romyana Mihaylova)

**On the inner back cover:** Dr. Paul K. Johnson and Mrs. Teresa  
Monicken, May 2014  
(Photograph by Daniel Lekov)

**Outer back cover:** Architect Apostolov with the ACS campus  
in the background, Archival Photo



## FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Alumni:

This is the last greeting I will write for the Alumni magazine at ACS. After five incredible years, Teresa and I are moving back to our home in Bismarck, North Dakota. It is time to reconnect with our children, other family members, and old friends. Perhaps the main reason we are leaving at this time is that I am retiring from my work life and looking forward to more flexibility and less responsibility.

Needless to say, our time at ACS has been one of the most influential experiences of our lives. Not only have we had the privilege of leading the most prestigious school in Bulgaria, we have been able to work with talented and hard-working Bulgarian and international colleagues. In addition, it has given us the opportunity to learn more about this magnificent country and to travel throughout other parts of Europe.

A few weeks ago, our final day at ACS seemed far away, now it seems impossibly close. I want to finalize some important projects and pave the way for the new President, we want to say a proper farewell to Bulgarian friends, we want to get to the Black Sea side again for a couple of days, we need to

sort all of our belongings for the movers, and the list goes on.

When Teresa and I accepted the job at ACS, we actually knew very little about Bulgaria or the College. ACS, of course, lived up to its reputation as an iconic school with talented and motivated students. To our delight, we quickly discovered the natural beauty, the layers of history, and the rich cultural traditions of Bulgaria. We are now Bulgaria groupies and sing its praises wherever we go.

ACS has changed over the last five years, I think for the better. We admit more students, which I believe is a good thing, offering more bright Bulgarian children an opportunity to reach their full potential in an educational environment that challenges and stimulates them. We have expanded the need-based financial aid so that students with limited income can also attend ACS. We have improved the facilities and developed a viable plan for the future structural, technological, and instructional needs of the school. Additionally, ACS is accredited for seven more years. The Board of Trustees has added three alumni to the Board, expanding the number of alumni Trustees to four. They have proven to add an invaluable point of view to the Board.

I'm confident that ACS will continue to develop under the leadership of President Richard Ewing. I am also confident that alumni will be more and more involved in providing guidance and support to the College. Teresa and I will continue to be interested in, and follow, the development of ACS and events in Bulgaria.

Until we meet again,

**Paul K. Johnson**, President

# ACS Alumni Magazine

Issue 13, June 2015

## Published by:

The ACS Alumni Relations,  
Development, and Admissions  
office

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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.



Rumyana Mihaylova '05

June 17: one day until my publishing deadline, two days until my 29th birthday, and about a week until my 10th anniversary class reunion... Feeling at a loss for words, I have not written a single line. When my phone rings and the name of Krasi Tomov appears on screen, I suddenly realize that he is the solution to my trivial problem: not because he will sit down to write this article and not because he can push my deadline, but because he encapsulates what ACS has meant to me over the past ten years.

"Svilen told me there is a Tuk-Tam event taking place tonight, do you want to go?" Krasi asks.

"Of course I do!" I try not to exclaim.

If there is something better than spending an evening in the company of Krasi, it's spending an evening in the company of Krasi and Svilen Manchev '05.

While I am waiting for them to pick me up, a strange story comes to mind. I recall a visit to the Samokov History Museum, the guide showing me archival photos and explaining: "The history of photography in Bulgaria starts in Samokov - the first Bulgarian photographers lived and worked here. Every person in town had his/her portrait photo taken. The only exception was a woman with a huge nose - she was so ashamed of her nose that the photographer had to take a photo of her back." The car pulls over and I take the seat next to Krasi, thinking: "That's it! We have seen each other's huge noses!"

I am very good at keeping my distance while staying friendly, and just a few people realize that I have never shown them anything more than my back. My ACS friends have seen my huge nose on days when it is also red and covered with spots. Even if some day I become a great cook, Krasi and Svilen will remember the tasteless-but-oily-shame-on-the-hostess potatoes I baked when I invited them to dinner in tenth grade. Even if Krasi becomes a zillionaire and builds a house the size of the Taj Mahal, I'll remember the boy who wrote a ridiculous and hilarious essay on Peter Pan. No matter how hard I pretend to be a lady, Krasi will show up and say: "You like men that are so bulky they look like gladiators!" Svilen and I spent five years in the same section and led a secret war against each other in our senior year until our friendship was suddenly restored, thanks to Krasi's efforts. The list goes on, but we've almost reached our destination and we have to get off.

"I have an editor's note to write by tomorrow, I expect you to inspire me," I solemnly announce when we head for the club.

"Oh, I have plenty of stories to tell you!" says Krasi and starts sharing his latest adventures that I would TOTALLY tell you about if it were not my duty as an editor to keep inappropriate content out of this issue.

When we enter the club and we are offered name tags, I refuse to take mine. I have been to places where no one knows my name, but this is not one of them. We gather around a table - Krasi on my left and Svilen on my right - and another weird memory comes to mind. The three of us were in the same section in our prep year, and naturally, we opened our time capsule together. Both Krasi and Svilen had left notes in my envelope. Krasi's note said "nothing." Svilen's note said: "something." I was largely unimpressed when I read their messages for the first time, but now, ten years later, I am standing between "nothing" and "something," and I find this to be the most uncertain, but yet hopeful place in the world.

This issue presents you with an opportunity to meet new members of the Alumni community, bid farewell to our leaving Presidential couple, and hear from old friends. I hope it will inspire you to reach out to me with your stories of uncertainty, hope, and special moments.

Now, let me take you back in time one last time: it is the month of May of your senior year. You have your Last Bell ceremony and open the precious time capsules, take your finals for the last time, and before you know it you pick up your robes for the Graduation ceremony, and dress up for the prom. Then high school is suddenly over, and nobody knows much about what follows, with a single exception: all of us are well aware that we will have to experience separation, maybe to a much greater extent than other Bulgarian students. We have learned that we are strong enough and smart enough to face whatever life sends our way, but this does not necessarily make us feel better about the fact that some of our closest friends will be far, far away. I thought I had mastered the art of moving forward and keeping in touch, and leaving old things behind, until I heard Adelina's Valedictory Address this year. Adi taught me that I am still in high school. Maybe you're still in high school, too. Have you recently opened a yearbook?

Happy anniversary, ACS Classes of 2000, 2005, and 2010!

Kind Regards,

Rumyana Mihaylova '05

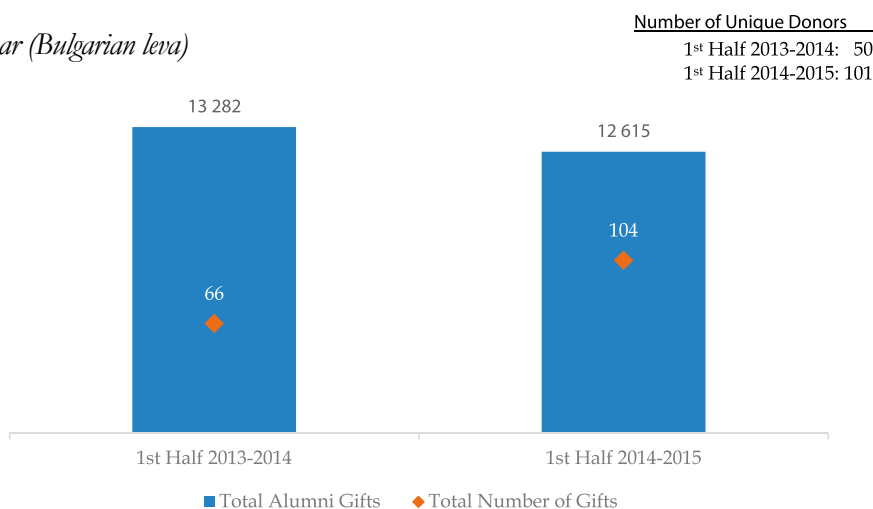
Chief Editor

# ACS Alumni Fund Advisory Committee Accountability Report

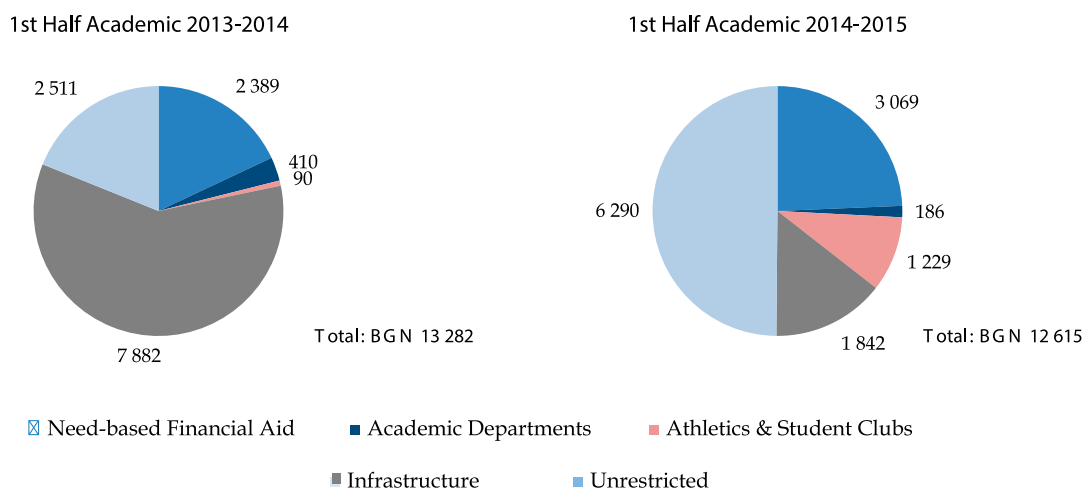
## Quick Overview

1st Half of 2015 Academic Year  
/September 2014 – March 2015/

*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 entered the third year of assisting ACS alumni in giving back to our alma mater. So far in 2014/2015, you raised about 12,600 leva by making 104 gifts. This adds up to an alumni participation rate of 5.4% in the past year, compared to the 5.5% participation rate achieved for the same period last year.

We wanted to give you a brief update of what we have been up to.

First, with the support of the ACS administration, we set up a LinkedIn group for all ACS alumni. The group already includes a third of the alumni body (600+ people) and comprises alumni in all stages of their careers, across fields and geographies. Please feel free to check it out and use it to leverage the great resource that ACS alumni are!

Second, the Class Representatives initiative has been re-launched - there are 19 active Class Reps, who represent 77% of the alumni body. Expect to hear increasingly more from them as they help you keep in touch with each other and with the school.

Last but not least, we have been busy helping with all sorts of other initiatives to help alumni engage and give back - one recent example was the ACS Christmas Soccer Tournament which was organized by ACS Alumni and included current students, faculty, and alumni themselves. About 360 BGN was collected via donations, which was used to buy new outfits for the ACS soccer teams.

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

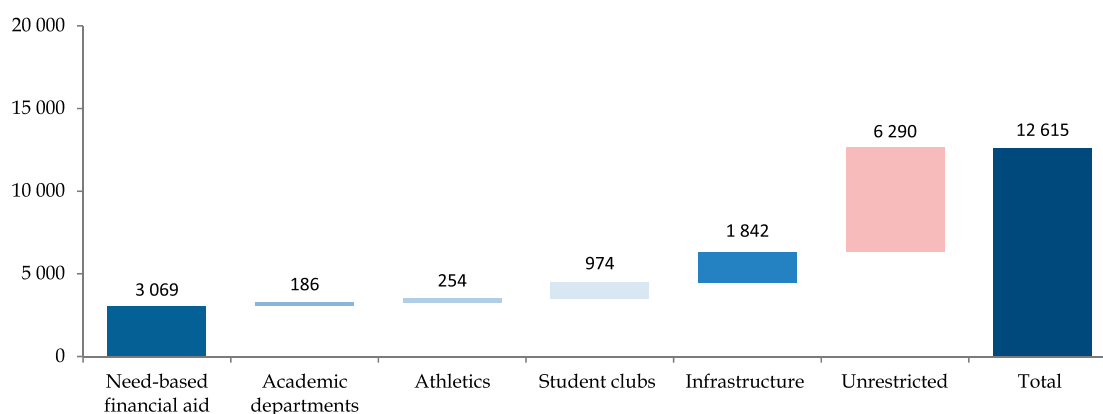
To find out more about our activities, please visit the ACS website, and if you have questions or suggestions for us, please reach out at [alumnigiving@acs.bg](mailto:alumnigiving@acs.bg).

The Alumni Fund Advisory Committee

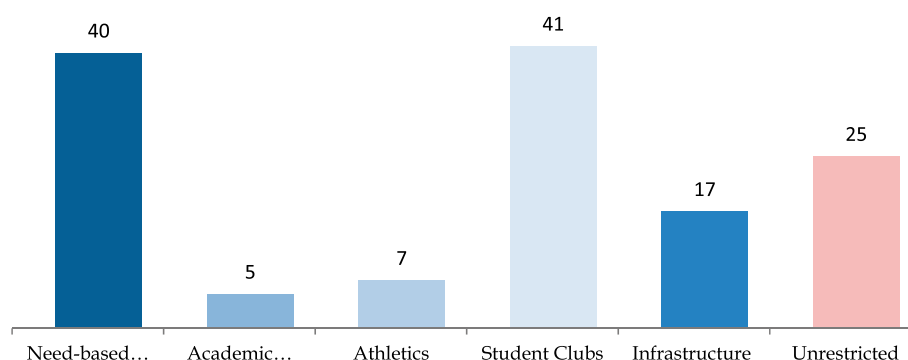
## The Alumni Fund over the Past 6 Months

- ✓ 101 alumni contributed to the ACS Alumni Fund making 104 gifts
- ✓ BGN 12,615 raised and put to work to help ACS and its students
- ✓ Top 3 Classes by Participation Rate: 2003, 2004, 2002
- ✓ Top 3 Classes by Gifts Amount: 2004, 1997, 2003

*Breakdown of Gift Amount by Category (Bulgarian Leva)*



*Breakdown of Gifts by Category*



*'The total is more than the number of individual donations as those are often broken down into different categories.*



# Nora Pencheva '05: On Finding a Fascinating Career Path

Interview by Romyana Mihaylova '05

*Nora Pencheva is an ACS Alumna from the Class of 2005. She holds a B.A. in Neuroscience from Kenyon College, a Ph.D. in Molecular Biology from Rockefeller University, and has currently assumed the position of a Post-doctoral research fellow at the Netherlands Cancer Institute (NKI-AVL), where she is doing research on the deadliest brain tumor. In 2014 the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center recognized Nora for her outstanding academic achievements by giving her the prestigious Harold M. Weintraub graduate student award. Nora's compassion, nobility, and dedication to saving lives humble me. I believe you will be humbled, too.*



Nora Pencheva in her lab in NYC (Photography by Nikolina Kalkanova '05)

## **Nora, how did you decide to enter the field of Neuroscience?**

It all happened a little bit by chance for me. Before starting college, I had no clear idea what I wanted to major in. I was interested in many subjects including math and psychology. Then, during my first semester at Kenyon, I decided to enroll in an introductory neuroscience course purely out of curiosity. The subject was entirely new to me and its interdisciplinary

nature (combining math, chemistry, physics, biology, and psychology) sounded daunting yet fascinating. I had always expressed interest in understanding human behavior, but so far psychology had fallen short in providing me with rational answers as it largely treats the brain as a black box. On the contrary, neuroscience tries to explain how the brain works on multiple levels, thereby bringing up a lot of interesting questions to study. Once I got introduced to neuroscience, I knew this was what

I wanted to spend my time studying.

## **You wake up in the morning and go to a laboratory to face and fight one of humanity's greatest fears – cancer. How does it feel to work in the field of Cancer Biology?**

Cancer biology is a very exciting and dynamic research field to be a part of at the moment. From a biological point of view, cancer is a fascinating subject as by



understanding what goes wrong in cancer cells, we not only give hope for better therapeutic strategies, but also uncover new fundamental principles that govern the cells in our bodies. Over the past few decades, an increasing amount of research has focused on human cancer and we have made progress for some cancers, which has significantly extended the lives of a number of cancer patients. With that said, cancer is expected to surpass cardiovascular disease as the leading cause of death worldwide. Clearly, there is still a lot of work to be done and sometimes it feels very daunting. At the Netherlands Cancer Institute, where the research unit is within the main hospital, I get to see cancer patients in the hallways every day and that makes it all feel very real. If anything, it gives me another level of motivation as well as the responsibility to keep working hard.

### What is the focus of your research?

My research interests have spanned a wide range over the past ten years. Initially, my research was focused on the biological substrates underlying neurobiological diseases such as addiction and autism pathology. In graduate school, I shifted my focus to something completely new to me: cancer biology. There, I studied the molecules underlying the spread of melanoma, which is the deadliest form of skin cancer. After I finished graduate school, I wanted to look for a way to combine my passion for neuroscience with my training in cancer biology. This is how I decided on studying brain

tumors. I am focusing on one type in particular: glioblastoma multiforme. Glioblastoma is the deadliest form of brain tumor that typically affects young adults. Presently, there is no cure and patients are given the dismal prognosis of less than 1 year to live. What makes glioblastoma so deadly is the tendency of the tumor cells to diffusely migrate and invade into the deep layers of the brain, thereby escaping any therapy or surgical intervention. My research aims to understand the basic molecular pathways that make glioblastoma cells so invasive, with the hope that in the future we can design drugs that block these pathways and stop the progression of this deadly tumor.

### Is there a part of the brain that you find especially interesting?



March 19th, 2014. Nora during her PhD Defense at Caspary Hall at Rockefeller University

It is hard to name a single part of the brain as especially interesting. What I actually find fascinating is how the different parts of the brain come together and work in such flawless unison to make us think, feel, sleep, walk, eat, you name it.... If I had to name one part, though, I think the hippocampus is very interesting. Presumably, this is where our memories are stored and lesions in that area of our brain affect our capacity to retain old memories

and form new ones. Interestingly, the hippocampus also receives connections from the amygdala (the part of the brain that deals with emotion) and the olfactory cortex, which could explain why certain memories high in emotion are more vivid in our minds and why sometimes certain smells can strongly evoke a particular memory.

### You are not only one of the brilliant minds of our generation, but also an advocate for gender equality. Do you think it is harder for women to get recognition in the field of science?

I think nowadays it is much easier for women in science than it was 20 years ago and I feel privileged to have had all the opportunities I did. During my graduate training at Rockefeller, I was inspired by a lot of great women scientists and I never really thought about gender inequality. Now that I am back in Europe, I see that there is more gender inequality going on in science and there are very few women in high positions. I think part of the reason is that women here are often more family-oriented. At the end of the day, regardless of gender, results speak for themselves and if you are good, you always get the deserved recognition...eventually.

### Where do you seek inspiration?

I am always inspired by reading about the lives and struggles of past great scientists, who despite all the difficulties, left something behind to be remembered by and helped shape our current understanding of the world.

### **What is the scientific triumph you dream of witnessing?**

It is hard to name a single one. I think finding a cure for some of the debilitating mental disorders (such as Alzheimer's disease, which can strip a person out of his or her personality) will be a pretty big scientific achievement to witness in our lifetime.

### **How is your life in Amsterdam different from life in NYC?**

I had a great 5 years in NYC and it was difficult to leave that special place, but at the end I felt that it would be best for me, both personally and professionally, to experience something new. I had always known that I would come back to Europe eventually to be closer to my family. Amsterdam is much older than NYC, and there is a much stronger sense of history here. Also, the pace of life in Amsterdam is much slower. It was a bit difficult at first to quit my 24/7 working mentality that NYC had ingrained in me, but now I greatly enjoy having a boundary between my personal and professional life. I have found that taking time away from my work actually makes me better at it and the Amsterdam lifestyle encourages me to do so. Also, being in Europe allows me to experience so much more culture and history than the US had to offer and this can be a great source of inspiration!

### **Imagine you had to draw the objects you use in your daily routine. What's in the drawing?**

Bike, computer, microscope,

pipette, test tubes.

### **Share with us one of your favorite photos and tell us what makes it special.**



The beautiful Black Sea at sunset.  
Tyulenovo, Bulgaria, August 2013

Tyulenovo is a special place for me, one of the most hidden, soothing, and romantic parts of Bulgaria. It's something I could not do without, at least once a year.

### **Share with us one of your most precious ACS memories.**



Dam Square, Amsterdam, December 2014.  
Reuniting with Mira Kovacheva '05  
in Europe

I will always cherish my memories from my first year at ACS and my first English classes. I was placed in section 8/7, which was reserved for the students who had no prior knowledge of the English

language. Our first lesson was with Mrs. Struch, a very sweet and kind Canadian ESL teacher who spoke zero Bulgarian. Likewise, we spoke zero English. That first day we did a lot of hand gestures and picture drawing. Our inability to communicate verbally brought us all closer together as we had to use our joint imagination to come up with other means. I never ever imagined back then that I would become as comfortable with English as I am today.

### **What are you grateful for?**

My family, great friends, having good health, and feeling loved. I think that's really all you need in life.

### **Do you have a message to the ACS community?**

I think that young bright minds like the students at ACS should always follow their dreams and passions, while also trying not to fall under any sort of pressure due to their peers, academic competition, or someone else's expectation of them. It is important to enjoy the journey more than the destination itself. It's not enough to simply like or love what you do, but you also need to work hard and relentlessly at it and then the results will come...eventually. Most importantly of all, you should stop and appreciate what you have already achieved before you set your mind on the next big goal. Life is there to be shared and enjoyed with the people close to you. So make some time for that too!

# Dr. Paul K. Johnson and Mrs. Teresa Monicken: “We create our own happiness regardless of where we live”

Interview by Romyana Mihaylova '05

*Since 2010, the year when Dr. Paul K. Johnson joined our community as President of the American College of Sofia, he and his wife Teresa Monicken have given their best to make ACS a more hospitable, modern, and pleasant environment for everyone. Dr. Johnson, who holds a Ph.D. in Educational Administration, has served as President of the American College of Sofia for five years, thus becoming the second longest serving President of the College. Drawing from his extensive experience as a school principal and teacher, Paul K. Johnson took an ambitious step towards renovating the campus by introducing the Campus Master Plan. After a 25 year professional career in audiology and coordinating special needs programs, Mrs. Teresa Monicken moved to Bulgaria to share this venture with Paul and supported the people and programs at ACS in many ways. It is with great pleasure and a lot of nostalgia that I conduct this “farewell” interview with our Presidential couple. I hope you will enjoy it!*



Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Monicken in the living room of Black house

**You came to ACS in 2010, the year when our community was celebrating its 150th anniversary. What are your recollections of this time?**

**Paul:** One of my most vivid recollections is people asking us for our autographs just before

the program at the Bulgaria Hall. We felt like royalty.

**Teresa:** Over the course of the year, we had numerous opportunities to meet some of the older alumni and hear stories about what the school had meant to them and to so many Bulgarians across the country.

It was very impressive to be part of an institution that had such a positive impact on so many lives.

**What do you remember about your first day on campus?**

**Paul:** My first day on campus coincided with the Am Cham 4th of



July party so it was quite memorable. I hung out with Valentin Georgiev, the President of AmCham and the new US Ambassador James Warlick, met Evgenia Peeva for the first time, and met many other dignitaries.

**Teresa:** I arrived in September, two months after Paul came, having stayed to finalize a few projects for my previous job, oversee the moving of our belongings, make sure our kids were happily settled in their colleges, pay final bills, and so forth. So, I guess you could say I felt considerable relief just to have finally arrived! Driving into the campus immediately gave me the feeling that we were lucky to be living in this beautiful park-like setting.

**How has your perception of ACS changed over the 5 years you spent here?**

**Paul:** I take much more ownership in its development now. I feel that I bear some responsibility for all that goes well and all that doesn't. I understand much better all of the processes that must be done well in order for ACS to continue its record of success.

**Teresa:** The ACS staff has collaboratively established a solid groundwork for the future with new technologies, a comprehensive master plan, and improved financial support from entities such as the America for Bulgaria Foundation.

**Do you remember a moment when you felt especially proud to belong to the ACS community?**

**Paul:** Every time I see students performing in sports, performing

arts, debate, competitions or creating a special project that benefits students or other people, I am proud.

**Teresa:** Throughout the years, Paul and I have lived our lives with the belief that we create our own happiness regardless of where we



Faculty Follies

**Teresa:** It's difficult to isolate only one specific moment because there are so many. But, on several occasions and at different functions in Sofia, Bulgarian parents I've met have told me they hoped their child, or children, would have the opportunity to attend ACS one day. This speaks volumes about people's respect for ACS and makes me proud to be associated with this school!

**What is the greatest challenge you have faced since you arrived?**

**Paul:** The admission exam during the spring of 2011 only had 354 applicants. It was obvious that something needed to be done about our student admission process. We changed many aspects including advertising strategy and scheduling of information sessions. This year we registered 457 test takers.

live. So I knew that, no matter what, I would find my happiness here. But, perhaps my greatest challenge was giving up my license for practicing Audiology, a profession I'd practiced for over 25 years. I missed my professional identity. However, I found other interests and creative outlets and, now, I'm quite thankful to have had this opportunity to develop a sense of self that is quite separate from my work identity.

**What would you consider your most meaningful legacy project?**

**Paul:** It has to be the organization to build the new Campus Center which has required fund-raising, hiring consultants, and reviewing plans. This project came out of the master-planning process during the school year 2011-12. We hope to break ground during the summer of 2015.

### What do you think should be the top priority for ACS in the years to come?

**Paul:** One priority recently identified might be to reach out to areas outside of Sofia. We have always had students from greater Bulgaria, but I think by establishing some interesting programs in cities outside of Sofia, we might be able to interest students in those areas to study at ACS.

### Is there something you'll truly miss about life in Bulgaria?

**Paul:** Actually, there are many things I will miss. One of the best things about life in Bulgaria is that one is never very far from a beautiful, interesting, or historical location.

**Teresa:** I will miss so many things! First, I think I will just miss hearing the sounds of the students on campus: their laughter, musical rehearsals, chatting as they run (or walk) the path during physical education. I will also miss Bulgarian cuisine, the fabulous wine, exploring side streets downtown Sofia, the mountain villages, the spa towns, and the numerous historical sites (and did I mention the fabulous wine?). Mostly, though, it will be the people I will miss and the many friends we've made here. The Bulgarian people have made this such a wonderful experience for us!

### Share with us your favorite family photo from Bulgaria and tell us more about it.

**Paul and Teresa:** This photo was taken at Rila Monastery. We love taking visitors to some of the iconic locations in Bulgaria, but particularly



Paul and Teresa at Rila Monastery

to Rila. Their reaction is typically one of complete and utter awe. It's just so majestic and beautifully situated in the mountains. It's truly a highlight experience for anyone who comes to Bulgaria. We have many fond memories of our visits there.

### How would you title the next chapter of your life (wishful thinking is recommended 😊)?

#### Paul and Teresa's New Chapter

**Title:** Five Years in Bulgaria Results in Amazing Opportunities for Bismarck Couple! Is There No End to Their Happy Rewards?

### Do you have a message to the ACS community?

**Paul:** My message is not to take your success for granted. Once you stop working to be the best, you stop being the best. You need to continuously improve.

**Teresa:** When the day-in-day-out routine bogs you down, it's easy to lose focus of your purpose. Never lose sight of the ACS mission! You are the hope for the future of so many families in Bulgaria.



Dr. Roger Whitaker presenting Dr. Paul K. Johnson with a token of appreciation for his service to the College, Graduation Ceremony of the Class of 2015



## Adelina Ivanova '15: Valedictory Address

*Adelina Ivanova was this year's president of the Debate club and the Hands on Chemistry club, chief editor of The Fountain magazine and captain of the girls' Volleyball team. She was also a member of the Red Cross club and the Russian club, and part of the International tutoring program. Outside of the College, she is interested in creative writing and has several awards from national competitions. Adelina is the recipient of the Bulgarian Language and Literature Department award.*



Adelina Ivanova '15 receiving the Valedictorian award

Ladies and gentlemen, honorable guest, dear teachers and fellow classmates,

Firstly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude that you are here today to share this celebration with us!

The truth is that it was very hard for me to write this speech. I came to see that it was hard not because I am supposed to deliver it in front all of you, but because I realized I cannot talk meaningfully and concisely about high school. I just can't.

I can't because I am still in high school.

I still have all of you around me, the faces that I am so used to, I still revisit ACS almost every single day. I still turn to the guidance of our teachers whenever I feel lost, and I



still look up for their approval and support when I present a solution to a challenge. I am still dreading the traffic on Malinov boulevard, and I still have nightmares that I have forgotten one of my numerous assignments. I am still hoping to have yet another one-mile walk with my friends and discuss the pressing issues of the day, like who is called to visit the Dean's office

I believe that to be able to synthesize and comment on something, you must be distanced from it. I am not distant from ACS or you. I am still in high school.

Perhaps now you are eager, almost impatient, to throw your hat in a few moments, to have the comforting sense of your diploma in hand, and to be officially done with high school. And that is perfectly normal. We are all waiting to see what lies in front of us. We are all children of the future.

However, are all that ready to leave?

I realized that I cannot talk about high school not only because I am still in it, but also because in the back of my mind I am afraid to leave it. I am afraid to leave all the known emotions, the friends and habits I just described and to just jump into the unknown. And I am secretly hoping that it is the same for at least some of you.

I was dreading all the Lasts, with a capital L. The Last class. The Last all school meeting. Even the Last final!

One of the most emotional moments for me as the end of the school year was approaching for us, seniors, was another Last - the last

meeting with my favorite Debate club. The fact that we travelled to competitions together and had to deal with stress and intellectual challenges beyond the ones ACS had already scheduled for us, but also the fact that we learned, succeeded and grew together, made us more than teammates – it made us a family.

My involvement in this club helped in a lot of ways, but most importantly, it truly inspired me to be the best of myself and always strive for more. It taught me hope and desire to help others grow in a way that nothing else could – things I will be carrying with me wherever I go.

As a parting gift, the club members have prepared a video for me, sharing their thoughts on our time together. I feared this meeting a lot, because I was scared that after it I won't be a part of this club anymore. I won't be part of the family.

Their words made me think differently. Thank you, guys!

I saw that I will never be excluded from the family. I will always be part of it simply because it will always be part of me through the inspiration and direction it gave me, and through the endless happiness building it brought to me.

So, you may ask, why am I telling you this?

I am telling it to you because this story made me overcome my fear of graduating. Of facing the unknown.

You know why?

Because I am still in high school. And I will never leave it.

And guess what? Neither of you ever will.

When we throw our hats in a few moments, we will still be in high school. We will still be in ACS. We will not leave not because we are afraid to do so but because our legacy will always remain, years after we have received our diplomas. The legacy that ACS has given to us - our skills, friendships, our sense of community - but also the one we have given to this school, too. Even if we have inspired just a single younger student, even if we have started just one new tradition, then we are accomplished. And our legacy will stay.

I want to leave you with this thought. Wherever we go, we never leave completely, for our actions and the consequences of our presence remain. We never leave completely because we always dedicate a part of ourselves to this place. To this time of our lives. Wherever you go, you leave your legacy.

Now go and make it one worthy to remember!

Thank you and congratulations, Class of 2015!



Left to right: Irina Angelova, Katrin Andreeva, and Adelina Ivanova;  
Class of 2015

# Veronika Georgieva '98: On Life in Japan

Interview by Romyana Mihaylova '05



Cherry blossoms viewing at a park in Tokyo

**Could you trace the events that lead to your decision to move to Tokyo and do a Ph.D. in Japanese?**

I have always had an affinity for studying languages and wanted to pursue a career in linguistics. I was especially interested in languages that are not from the Indo-European language family. They presented more of a challenge because they were not so similar to the three European languages I had already studied in school. After graduating from the College, I entered the Japanese Linguistics Department of Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski", so going to

Japan seemed like the next logical step. Furthermore, in order to teach at university level, a Ph.D. is a must. What could be a better place to pursue a Ph.D. in Japanese linguistics than a Japanese university?

**What did you expect to find in Japan upon moving there? What did you actually discover?**

I expected people to live in tall buildings like skyscrapers and eat a lot of fish and seafood. The second expectation turned out to be realistic, but the first did not. Houses and apartment buildings are pretty much the same height as in Bulgaria, but smaller.



Seafood Japanese adore - shrimps with sweet beans, a culinary dream or nightmare

**Can you think of a story you have witnessed in Japan that has stricken you as fascinatingly different from the stories you were used to before going there?**

I met a woman who told me the story of her life which was quite fascinating. She started a small

cosmetic company in Kyushu (the small southern island of Japan). Her company eventually grew to be one of the top three cosmetic companies in Japan, with over 4000 employees and 200 shops all over the country. When she retired, she took all her savings, properties and assets belonging to the company, and divided them equally among her employees. She said that thanks to their hard work and effort she had acquired the money and that it belonged to them. Her family supported her decision completely. I was really impressed how she decided to share her wealth with the people who were directly responsible for it, instead of just keeping it all for herself (which is what unfortunately happens all over the world).

**Do you think life in Japan has changed you? If yes, in what way?**

I became more confident in myself and my abilities. Living on my own, being completely financially responsible for my life and coping with everyday life challenges on my own without depending on anybody but myself was the experience which changed me the most. Although this quote is not about Tokyo originally, I think it fully applies: "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere."

**Take us through a typical day of your life.**

My schedule is very different from day to day. Sometimes, I wake up at 6 am and leave my apartment at 6:30. At 8:00 I arrive at the university where I teach, have breakfast and prepare for my classes. I teach two or three classes, prepare lesson



Cherry blossoms lightup at night

plans or class materials, check assignments, or discuss classes with other teachers. I leave at 6 P.M. and get back home around 7:30. On other days, I teach private lessons and have only one or two classes a day. I used to go to a coffee shop or library and work on my Ph.D. thesis or publications on those days, but now that I have graduated I am free to meet friends or go to new places around Tokyo.

**What is the most interesting place you have visited?**

I must admit that the most interesting place I have visited is not in Japan. It is Venice in Italy. It is extremely beautiful – every building and street is magical. And there are no cars. In Japan the most beautiful place I have visited is not one particular place, but all the parks with cherry blossoms when they are in bloom in March. Walking, surrounded by hundreds of white trees, watching the petals fall like snow and make a white carpet on the floor is the most beautiful scene I have seen here.

**Is there something you miss about ACS?**

I miss my classmates and the teachers. I am very grateful to have Facebook, so I can stay in touch with them. Also, I miss having all the free time to go out with friends that I had when I was at ACS. At

that time I thought I was busy, but it was nothing compared to my schedule right now.

**Could you share with us a vivid memory from your ACS years?**

I was part of the drama club and worked in the productions of *Grease*, *Hair* and other musicals. I remember the excitement before the show, putting on the costumes and make-up, the exhilaration of performing on stage. It was quite fun to be somebody else, even if it was just for a few hours a day. I guess this experience in the drama club helps me a lot now, especially when I have to teach a class or give a presentation at a conference in front of a few hundred people.

**What are your plans for the future?**

I am planning to work at a university in Japan for some time and then in a few years go back and teach in Bulgaria.

**Tell us your biggest dream.**

My biggest dream was to get a Ph.D. and teach at a university. Now that that has come true (I just graduated in April and have been teaching for a few years already), I still have not decided what my next dream will be.



Graduation day March 26 with the president of Waseda University (on the left) and my academic advisor (on the right)



# *Student in the Spotlight*

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## **Radosveta Gencheva '15: Balance is About Taking a Small but Courageous Step Towards Other People Even When You Fear Their Judgement**

Interview by Rumyana Mihaylova '05



*Radosveta Gencheva from the Class of 2015 describes herself as “an eclectic collection of interests and hobbies, curious to know more about any subject even if it’s just for the sake of knowledge.” She is the founder of the Healthier Lifestyle activity at ACS, and has attended the ACS Choir, Hands on Chemistry, Tennis, and Vinyasa yoga classes. Radosveta is among the students who have dedicated time to teaching Bulgarian to international faculty and has been a prominent member of the Friends of the German Culture Club. On top of that, she has always been on the President’s list. “I like to compare the different “truths” different people and cultures have without trying to search for “the one truth,” says Radosveta when I ask her to share something essential about herself. Meet one of the newest members of our alumni family.*

### **What are your dreams made of?**

I usually remember some of my more vivid dreams when I wake up. They are a mixture of crisp lines and smudged silhouettes, of blinding light and pitched darkness, of chaotic images, of conversations, of music, of my wishes and my fears. Now for those other dreams... The dreams about my life are made of some form of egotistic compassion, of trying to help others in order to feel good about myself. My dreams also rely on the power of knowledge in its purest form, in its absoluteness, not the knowledge that has to be sold or bargained to continue existing.

### **What is the biggest challenge you have faced in your life?**

The biggest challenge is more of a deep belief I have held which has been an obstacle in certain life situations. It lies in the process of learning and realizing that not everyone’s opinion about me matters, that success isn’t about being able to state your possessions and awards, but about being able to state your contentedness that you are doing the right thing with what has been given to you.

### **Has someone taught you a lesson you will always remember?**

I think this is a lesson taught by “life” because I have had a few instances in my high school career where it was completely valid: by learning enough and diving deep enough, you can maintain your interest in any subject area and this is most easily inspired by people who share their knowledge and experience with enthusiasm and who are truly devoted to what they do. Almost always they have the clear sense that they are doing this in order to serve

others and this is what makes their lives meaningful.

**I remember you telling me that Scott Fitzgerald’s “Gretchen’s Forty Winks” is among your favorite short stories. Tompkins, one of the characters in “Gretchen’s Forty Winks,” is so focused on keeping his life balanced that he experiences a nervous breakdown. Have you ever experienced the irony of life?**

My experience with the irony of life has had quite the opposite effect on me. As a third or fourth grader I vividly remember thinking that music and especially singing were areas of life that I would never get involved in as anything more than a listener. As a sixth grader I started establishing a very profound connection to classical music, through which going to concerts turned into a way to spend quality time with my mother. While refining my taste for music, I entered the

College and started attending various extracurricular activities. At some point I decided that the time had come for me to start singing and, for once, to try and be on the “other side” of appreciating music, so I joined the ACS Choir. It was actually months later that I realized the irony in all of this. But this made me exalted because it was proof that with a little courage and a lot of hard work, what I had considered to be impossible could become reality.

**I find your interest in targeted genetic treatment fascinating. Please tell us what provoked it, how it developed and whether you are planning to pursue it.**

I can't say that there is a single thing which provoked my interest in Genetics and Genomics: I think it's more of a logical progression of what we studied in Biology 11 and an online course in Biology I took last summer. The MOOC I took was Introductory Biology but its focus was on Genomics. Genomics is the field that observes the bigger picture at the intersection between Biochemistry and Genetics, as well as between different viewpoints of analysis. This is achieved by analyzing both a single component of the organism and a whole organism missing a single component. The professor of the online course was brilliant because he not only explained the material in detail, but also brought students to the cutting edge of science by talking about the newest methods and developments in the field (like building TALEN proteins which bind to particular sections in DNA and start turning on the transcription of the genes at these sites). His lectures resembled narratives and were structured so that students could be put in

the immediacy of the problems scientists have faced through the years and the experiments they have devised to solve them. By the end of the course it was impossible to not retain my interest in this subject. This year I did my own research on the topic by adapting it to papers I had to write in Civics and English. This gave me a chance to look at how exactly targeted genetic treatment can save lives and improve the quality of life for millions of people. It is a therapy relying on gathering and sharing enough genetic data from cancer patients, for example (it is with cancer that the hopes of making huge progress in treatment are the highest), analyzing the specific mutations that cause the cancer in each individual and devising a set of up to three drugs which target the current cancer-causing mutation and the existing ones which are likely to cause cancer once the first mutation is dealt with. Small but still significant progress has been achieved in this field with the development of the Gleevec drug generations which target some forms of leukemia by “repairing” the biochemical pathways cancer has blocked. The thing is that patients experience relapses after up to a year, which is caused by those other pre-existent mutations that now cause another “break” in the system which needs to be repaired by another drug. So the aim of the therapy is to prevent relapses from occurring, which to me is a revolutionary approach to medicine replacing the “one size fits all” methods. It is only natural that implementing targeted genetic treatment is a difficult task, requiring the joint efforts of scientists from around the world, but the prospect of being a part of such a team and bringing targeted

genetic therapy closer to its practical use is exhilarating.

**Tell us about a song/melody that has a special meaning for you.**

I consider my formal introduction to chamber music as the first time when I heard a live performance of Schubert's quartet “Der Tod und das Mädchen” (Death and the Maiden). The performance was brilliant and touching, but what brings me back to this piece three years later is the message and the ingenuous way in which it is presented. The quartet was inspired by a poem and is almost considered to be program music. In the poem a young woman is on her death-bed and sees Death, as a horrible apparition made up of bones, coming to her. She is paralyzed with fear and pleads with Death to go away and let her live. Instead of really proving to be the merciless and terrifying thing that comes and takes one's life away, Death sits by the woman and holds her hand. Death tenderly calms her that she will now only go to sleep and be at peace, that there is nothing to be afraid of. This is a very rare representation of Death in Western culture, which I find more akin to Buddhism and similar Eastern belief systems. The reworking of this into music and the display of the contrast between the horror of death and the calm acceptance that everything is transient, while self-ironizing and doubting itself through the form of the tarantella dance, is what makes the string quartet really special.

**What do you love about yoga?**

For me yoga evolved from a way to spend time with my mother when I was twelve to a part of my daily life.

Yoga is more than physical practice; it is a mindset, an attitude towards the self and the surrounding world. It is about learning to fine tune the body and the mind, not to exactly control them but to rather not allow them to take irrational control over us. I love the feeling of contentedness after a yoga class, of wholeness, of a connection to something very deep inside, to the core of who I am. I love the way yoga has made me more aware of my behavioral patterns, of my repeated mistakes and the fact that everything started from awareness of the breath. I'm fascinated that yoga truly believes that once problems are made evident (not in the sense that someone comes up and tells you what they are, but that you yourself are able to fully grasp them on your own), their solution is the easiest thing there is.



Sunrise from Beklemeto, a great place to practice yoga

### **Teach me something about balance.**

Perhaps I'm neither the best example of a balanced person nor the best teacher, but here is what balance means to me. Balance in general (this does go very physically and literally with the so-called balancing yoga poses) is about having anchors and being able to move freely, to almost float lightly at the same time. It's about understanding that freedom is the freedom from desire,

not from constraints. I have found myself losing my balance when I forget to stop and think about the bigger picture of what I'm doing and why, when I allow myself to be taken up by the "assembly line" of life (go to school, earn good grades, go to college, earn good grades, go to graduate school, get yourself the highest paying job possible), by what is generally expected of everyone. But naturally balance isn't only about being passive and taking a step back: it's about taking a small but courageous step towards other people even when you fear their judgment.

### **Tell me a fictional short story.**

His Tuesday at the office was finally over; this reminded him every day of his naive childhood dream to become a sailor, inspired by the bedtime stories his father used to tell him. Beaten-down, he took the bus home, thinking over the terrible argument he had had that day with his boss' secretary over something he couldn't recall at the moment; hearing her shrieks, seeing the sly smiles on his colleagues' faces as they passed by his cubicle later that day. He had his dinner as usual and went to bed earlier, the sly smiles still before his eyes. Finding himself on the bus, he looked at his watch to see it was a Tuesday, the same one. Startled, he looked around after something black crossed his peripheral sight: it was the most horrid monster he could imagine, with holes for eyes and skin covered with scurvy lesions. He dared not look at it as it took its seat next to him, but somehow he knew exactly how it looked. As he walked on the street and in the office, he kept his face down, knowing for sure everyone he passed by looked

like this; he knew the secretary looked like this as she shrieked at him, his colleagues looked like this with their sly, condescending smiles. Without wanting to, he started looking up from the floor as he passed by his zombie-like colleague, feeling her gaze on him, afraid he would actually see... something... he feared... Hearing himself scream, feeling the pulse in his head, the sweat on his sheets, he woke up to find the sun rising and his watch indicating it was a Wednesday already; he was afraid to go to the office and find monsters but when he finally got there, he ventured to look straight into the eyes of the secretary, straight into the eyes of his colleagues, and found there beauty and depth, and calmness as they passed by him, greeting him warmly.

### **Do you have a message to our alumni?**

I really don't like to preach, so you can replace the pronouns yourself accordingly: what the college has taught me and what I hope to be able to put into practice in "real" life is taking advantage of the opportunities available wherever I am.



With my mom, hiking around Vitosha, aka quality time



# CLASS NOTES

## Former Faculty

Three years ago my daughters Emma and Katya Fisher received the *Harry Potter* film collection as a Christmas present. I had read only *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* years earlier. I became intrigued with the storylines - especially that of Severus Snape - and then decided to read all of J. K. Rowling's famed series.

The ending to Harry's story inspired me to create a new character, Clarissa Black, the younger sister of Sirius. Clarissa enters Hogwarts after the events of the third book, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. My tale, *The Clarissa Black Effect*, starts there, and takes things in a new direction - though some events overlap with the original.

Fanfiction has been around as long as people have been telling stories: from Milton's epic retellings of the *Bible* to *Wicked* and *Sherlock*, fanfiction has given characters and plot arcs new life.

The years my husband, Bill Fisher, and I taught at ACS (1993 - 99) inspired part of my plotline. Clarissa Black spent some years studying magic and mysticism at Troyanski Manastir (one of my favorite places in the world, and the site of our daughter Emma's christening). Clarissa has an assistant at Troyan, Iva Zaharieva, who is named for

one of our beloved students at ACS (Class of '97). Clarissa's knowledge of the Bulgarian language also plays a key role in the storyline - but you'll have to read the novel to find out how!

The book can be found on the website Archive of Our Own ([archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3353987/chapters/7337588)), with this link:

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/3353987/chapters/7337588>

Or, you may simply search *The Clarissa Black Effect* on the website (under the pen name KCWebb). To read, you have to first accept the maturity warning (there is

some adult material in the book, and violence that is typical of the *Harry Potter* series).

I cannot earn any money from this endeavor: as a fanfiction, the setting and most of my characters are the intellectual property of J.K. Rowling. Of course, if Rowling (or Hollywood) were to come calling for a future *Harry Potter* book or film about Clarissa, I'd be thrilled!

This summer, Bill Fisher and I are working on a new crime fiction novel together. We will keep our ACS friends posted!

**Kalinde Webb**



Kalinde with her International Students on their last day of high school.

Left to right: Eric Richter (Germany), Hannah Anzboeck (Austria), Kalinde Webb, Ida Warming (Denmark). Oh, and a cardboard cutout of Severus Snape!

# CLASS NOTES

## Alumni

We started the ACS Christmas Football tournament three years ago, after participating in a couple of similar tournaments organized by alumni of other Sofia high schools. It seemed strange that such a close knit community as ACS had never thought of organizing any sport events for its alumni, so we decided to have a go. Christmas was the perfect time to make that happen as most people were home for the holidays, wherever they lived in the world.



The initial idea behind the tournament was to simply get together and play some football with people who hadn't seen each other for months, if not years. Last year, though, we saw the opportunity to help the ACS donation initiative and we offered each participating team the opportunity to contribute a certain amount which would then be used by the school's sports department. We were glad to raise more money than we expected, but most importantly it was good to see the ACS



community brought together, especially when commemorating the life of Mr. Karadjov whom we all knew well from our years at the school. Of course, the event was only possible because of the people who participated as well as their positive, enthusiastic and hassle-free attitude throughout the whole day.



Overall, the tournament has evolved from about 40 participants in 2012 to more than 80 last Christmas (both students and teachers). Ever since the end of the first tournament, we have known that this would turn



into a recurring event because of the high interest shown by each Class that we reached out to. We now have the opportunity to turn it into something greater than a casual get-together and any ideas for this year's tournament are welcome and much appreciated.

**Daniel Strahinov,  
Class of 2008**



On June 1 Hristo Popov '01 traveled to Lisbon to receive the Monde Selection Quality Award for BRITOS beer, produced in his small-scale brewery in Veliko Tarnovo. BRITOS won the gold in its category of more than 3000 products from over 80 countries. Hristo Popov's brewery BRITOS became the second fastest developing company in Bulgaria in 2012 and received the Investor of the Year Award in 2013. We congratulate Hristo on his impressive achievements and wish him success!

**ACS Alumni Relations,  
Development and  
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# ACS ALUMNI Magazine



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