

January 2021 Newsletter

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Matt Smith's first advisory (1995)

Dear Friends,

In 1995, Arts & Humanities (AH) teacher Matt Smith accepted a position to spend two years at a newly-opened charter school in Devens, MA. It was called Parker. Twenty-six years later, Matt still calls Parker home. For more about Matt's quarter of a century at Parker, read on...



Matt Smith



Thoughts from Matt's students- past and present

What drew you to Parker 26 years ago?

As an undergraduate, I learned about the Coalition of Essential School's (CES) philosophies (including the 10 Common Principles (CPs))

Why have you chosen to stay at Parker for all these years and make it your home?

I continue to work at Parker for many reasons, but the

"Matt guided me and my peers through his teaching, creating a safe and relaxed environment where learning and understanding can go to

and had Ted Sizer as a professor. As I opened my acceptance package from one graduate school program, I discovered a leaflet advertising the opportunity to have an alternative experience where I would spend two years at a newly-opening charter school on the recently-closed Fort Devens army base. The thing that excited me the most was that this new school was going to be founded on CES ideas - so it was a chance to see the 10 CPs in action! I applied for the position, and I was selected to join three other "interns" at the Parker School.

What were the first years at Parker like?

I first attended planning meetings for Parker in the summer of 1995 - and little did I know the adventure I was about to have! The first year was, at turns, exhilarating, exhausting, inspiring, stressful, enlightening, and chaotic. I have never worked so hard, and I have never learned so much. I have always used a metaphor of a train to describe that year, where we were both creating the "engine" (the fundamental ideas and structures of the school) while laying out the "track" (day-to-day and week-to-week plans) at the same time. As we were making thoughtful, democratically-decided decisions about our "engine,"

most important one is the relationships that I am able to develop with students, families, and colleagues. Small class sizes, co-teaching, advisories, PLP conferences, and many other aspects of the Parker program allow me to know students well and to therefore personalize my coaching to the maximum feasible extent. We build community, at advisory, class, division, and all-school levels, on the foundations of trust, decency, and unanxious expectations. I go by my first name instead of Mr. Smith (I don't think I would even respond if someone called me that!), and this represents the personal connections I am able to create with my students. I love the fact that we have advisees and students for two years. This allows me to develop close relationships with them, and their families, and I look forward to seeing returning students again in September. It is also fun to have a group of new students joining the returning students, as the dynamics of advisory and class are different every year. I look forward to seeing how my advisory and classes come together as communities, building upon the wisdom of the returning students and the new energy and personalities of the new students.

What has helped you continue to grow as an educator?

My colleagues.

deeper depths. Even during the most serious and sensitive topics, he diffused any tension and made sure all students felt safe and included. One of the many things I took away from his teaching is there's always room for improvement and clarity - no revision can be a final draft."

-Biskut M., class of 2023

"Matt's support in high school has given me the courage to believe in myself and take direct action to attain my goals. For my senior project, I wanted to hike a section of the Appalachian Trail. Matt gave his unwavering support, which gave me the confidence to embark on a project that has impacted me to this day. Having a teacher like Matt believe in me allowed me to feel like I could accomplish almost anything, both academically and personally. I have never met someone who has such a love for helping others. I am forever grateful for all he has done, and I hope he knows that I would not be where I am if it was not for his help."

-Collin Pember, class of 2017

"One of the best memories with Matt was trying to get the whole advisory into the rope made spider web that was suspended in a tree at Becket. Once we accomplished everyone getting in, Matt told us how proud he was of us and I could see that in everyone's

we would have to madly figure out what exactly we were doing with students the next day.

As soon as we had the next day(s) planned out, we would be challenged with some big picture, philosophical question that would need tending. During that first year, in addition to teaching what would eventually be called "Arts and Humanities," I taught math modules, participated in Spanish immersion week, and supervised physical education (which basically meant making sure no one was seriously hurt during the simultaneous games of basketball, football, and frisbee) in the Sports Arena (that we drove to in an old, red-white-and-blue painted bus).

We played games with the students to explore ideas of governments, rules, and cooperation, and used this unit as a springboard for writing the Parker Constitution (which, with several revisions and amendments, still is a foundational part of the school). We were a community of about 100 middle schoolers and adults, holding our year-opening three-day-and-two-night retreat in the old army barracks, operating in a windowless building, holding weekly Community Meetings in a conference room, and

I have learned so much from them over the years as we have collaborated over curriculum, engaged in meaningful professional development work, and interacted at the photocopier. I know many other teachers who work in other schools, and when they talk about faculty meetings, they do it with frustration, boredom, and malaise. That has never been true for me at Parker, as I look forward to collaborating with my colleagues, whether those meetings are with the entire faculty or various planning groups that I am a part of. Whether it is discussing the philosophical underpinnings of our assessment system, addressing issues of race and inequity, tuning curriculum plans, or playing bonding games, I look forward to working with my colleagues, knowing that I am going to learn something from the experience. My colleagues have been the greatest influence on how I have evolved as an educator.

What are the benefits of teaching in a mission-driven school?

Another reason I love being a part of the Parker community is the fact that we are a mission-driven school. The Common Principles are much more than posters on the walls of our classrooms. Whenever we need to make a decision, we rely on the CP to provide guidance and wisdom. For example, the tenet of "less

faces, they felt accomplished. Matt has a way of always making others feel more confident not only about themselves but also in their work."

-Alison L., class of 2022

"Everyone's minds think through problems a little differently, so I think we're all used to "translating" those thoughts when

communicating ideas to others - but something's always lost there. Working with Matt was always enjoyable because I rarely felt the need to say my ideas in a way that was different from how I thought them. Coming to Parker, he understood my thinking in a way that was entirely new for me, both in an academic and personal sense. It was a truly outstanding introduction to the Parker way of doing things."

-Jonah B., class of 2023

"Thinking back to my time as Matt's student, I'm reminded of how he always created an environment for listening. He of course would demonstrate active listening, nodding his head to show you that his wheels were turning along with you, but there was an expectation that in order to solve the problem or question I brought forth to him, there was a give and take. It was always a collaborative approach to listening to his students. This was the tone set from the beginning

using mismatched furniture (including the always-coveted "comfy chairs") in the classrooms. The early years of Parker were often overwhelming. But, now, I can look back and know that I couldn't have had a better, more immersive experience in terms of experimenting with and then identifying what effective (and not-so-effective) teaching and learning can look like.

is more" affects curriculum design, "student-as-worker; teacher-as-coach" directs instructional practice, "democratic practices" informs how we create classroom norms and uphold them through the year, and "trust, decency, and unanxious expectations" inspire how we interact with students individually and as a community. Since everything we do at Parker is informed by the CPs, the CPs become part of the life blood of the community, infused into every aspect of the program. The sense of shared purpose and vision unites adults and students into a committed, motivated, and caring community.

I am forever grateful for that unassuming leaflet that arrived in my graduate school acceptance envelope. Because of it, and the path it sent me down, I have had the privilege of working at Parker for over 25 years and to have grown up as a person and an educator in this uniquely essential community.

because he treats students, from 7th to 12th grade, as an equal. His ability to dissolve the traditional hierarchy between teacher and student meant that for so many students he became something more, a mentor. As a mentor, he cultivated honest inquiry in his classroom through genuine investment in his students' curiosity, which strengthens a student's ability to rely on their own critical thinking and come to a solution through conversation."


-Lily Hayward, class of 2011

"Matt Smith was my grade 12 advisor and our advisory had nicknamed him "Papa Bear" throughout the year. From daily games of cornhole to the invention of spoon wars, that advisory was one of my most memorable years! Matt Smith truly loves Parker and that belief in the mission really comes through in each interaction that you have with him. There isn't just a single memory that I can share with you all - but rather, a feeling of genuine gratitude and appreciation for Matt's willingness to bring community together and to always be present with each individual interaction he has with every student. I'm fortunate to have been part of Papa Bear's advisory and to have Matt as a lifelong mentor."

-Suji Yi, class of 2013

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The image shows a circular logo on the left with a green background and white text. The logo features the number '25' in a large, stylized font. Above the '25' is the word 'CELEBRATING' in a curved banner, and below it is 'PARKER' and 'YEARS' in another curved banner. The years '1995-2020' are written in small text between the '2' and '5'. To the right of the logo, the school's name and address are listed in a dark font.