

## **Extra Material from the Fall 2010 Parker Way**

### **‘Parker defanged failure’: Leadership lessons alumni take away**

#### **Jake Yarmus, class of 2006**

Failure. That is the best thing I learned from Parker. That is probably the number one thing that helped Parker turn me into a leader. It led me to seek out failure, so that I could grow, learn and have fun. Mistakes weren’t permanent, and helped people around me know where they could push me best to succeed. It later provided me an opportunity to push myself. My greatest joys were once my biggest struggles. I was a poor writer, now I love it. I used to hold myself while shooting hoops, now I play daily. I used to stumble through Spanish class, now am nearly fluent. **Parker defanged failure, and helped me embrace a life that sought out my greatest struggles to try and overcome them.**

This, however, has led me to my newest struggle, as a first year teacher. Here, I need to be consistent and organized, neither of which is a strength. But more so, I must deal with students who don’t have to seek out failure, they face it daily. They are poor, often illiterate, with no writing or arithmetic skills and often broken or neglectful homes, even as parents work their butts off. So my kids, they don’t seem to need that love of failure—they need a taste of success. But it’s hard to balance, because sometimes, in life, when your whole education has been built around you finding a taste of success, you will only take those roads—and eventually, those roads come to an end. Ask any prematurely retired professional athlete, burnt-out politician or failed writer: They all failed too much and gave up; no matter the initial success, when they met enough failure they said, I am done. I fear that my students are experiencing the same thing, doing the least they can to succeed, but not ever stretching out and embracing failure. This may help them learn the material to go to school, but it will never build leaders. I don’t know what to do. But I am trying, and I am motivated by my love of a challenge, not the fear of what lies at the challenge’s end. Thank you Parker.

#### **Kyle Reeves, class of 2007**

It is strange how sometimes life cycles and certain circumstances present themselves again in a new light. I recently returned to Becket Chimney Hills, the location of my seventh-grade class trip. There, the leadership committee at the University of Massachusetts College of Natural Sciences spent a day working through challenges and ropes courses. All day I had flashbacks to the faces and activities nine years prior, and I kept thinking how in some ways I had already been exposed to many of the lessons intended for our outing. As my seventh-grade self, I had not been actively considering the idea of “leadership,” yet somehow I learned through experience and seemed to just internalize what felt right.

Returning from this most recent trip and examining my development as a leader a little more critically, I have realized that many of the influential moments that I attribute to defining myself as a leader did not come from any proactive or instructive approach that

any one teacher took. (This is not to say that Parker teachers' embodiment of leadership was not critical to learning to be a leader.) **What was most significant was not always what was handed to us as students, but rather what was intentionally withheld.** It is this independence that I believe encourages us to step up and learn to be better leaders. Leadership is encoded into the culture of Parker and manifests itself in how we act and interact. The Habits of Learning, those behaviors that we strive to refine, all feed into our development as leaders. Whether it is finding one's strengths while collaborating with others or expressing oneself through honest communication, I can truly say that every day Parker presents not only its students but all of its community members with opportunities to redefine themselves as leaders.

### **Jason Smith, class of 2007**

Parker gave me the opportunity to take many leadership positions during high school. In the seventh grade I joined the Justice Committee and continued until my junior year. Being in the JC taught me how I can be a leader to my peers. This is something that has carried over into my college career at Clark University, where I have been a Peer Advisor and Orientation Coordinator (OC). I learned through the JC that it can be a tricky dichotomy to hold a position where you need to direct your peers but remain their friends at the same time. The experience I gained through the JC allowed me to direct a staff of 60 upperclassmen and 593 first-years as Clark OC.

I also learned through Parker teachers and philosophy that being a leader doesn't always mean telling others what to do. Sometimes the best leaders are simply guiding hands. Parker teachers like Ruth, J Church, Janice, Terri, and Clay really embody this spirit. As a Café Wednesday host at Parker (and through so many OP's!) I learned how to interact with an audience and be a good presenter. The fundamentals and skills I learned in Parker's little cafetorium came into play at Clark when I emceed the International Gala, Clark's biggest and most attended event. Parker also taught me how to care about humanity on a global scale. Last year I went to South Dakota to volunteer on an impoverished Native American reservation. This spring I am planning on taking a service trip to Bangladesh to meet with and learn from Muhammad Yunus, the inventor of microcredit loans that have helped countless people worldwide.

The leadership, management, and organizational skills I developed and honed at Parker has also allowed me to take other leadership positions in the Clark community with confidence. This year I was appointed to be the director of operations of Clark's Emergency Medical Services. Not only do I lead the campus EMS squad but I have been learning to coordinate and network with Clark police, administrators, and deans as well as local ambulance companies.

During my senior project at Parker I focused on photography. After graduation I was able to turn my passion into a job. I set up a small business focused on providing relatively inexpensive photography and I turned a profit within my first year! The opportunity that the senior project opens up for Parker students is truly invaluable. And I think that is very characteristic of Parker in general – the ways in which students are allowed to learn, in

and out of the classroom, really opens doors and opportunities later in life. To Parker and everyone who makes it what it is, thanks for that.

**Alexis Stoumbelis, class of 2000**

Last year, I was elected to be one of the directors of CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, a grassroots organization that has been working for 30 years to stop U.S. political, military and economic intervention in El Salvador and Central America. I credit a lot of what I have learned about leadership development to my years at Parker, not just my own role as a leader within an organization but how to create an organizational culture where everyone can and should become a leader.

One of the primary lessons I learned from Parker is about trust. **The founders of Parker put an incredible amount of trust in a group of young teenagers to take responsibility for their own learning and to create the kind of school culture that they wanted and needed to learn and grow.** The level of ownership and pride about Parker that we developed as students was a direct result of being offered a significant role in school decision-making from the beginning.

Looking back on the ups and downs of those exciting first years at Parker, I also learned how important it is to balance energetic, creative contributions of new folks (including 13 year olds!) with the wisdom and experience of trusted leaders. This is not always an easy balance to strike! In retrospect, I can see a lot of the hands and voices that calmly but firmly guided Parker in the right direction that I couldn't see as a younger person. Luckily for the students and families of Parker, many of those leaders were there for many years, and some still are.

From Parker's teachers and staff, I also learned that having high expectations for others is key to developing their confidence and skills as leaders—but that it's not enough to just have or express high expectations. It's equally critical to create support systems (academic, personal, and otherwise) to be able to nurture people in their own process of learning, gaining new skills, and exceeding their own expectations for themselves.

At CISPES, we try to live up to a vision of “collective leadership with individual responsibility.” I think that model spoke to me because I was, at Parker, welcomed in to an evolving process of creating a school which came with both opportunities that opened me up to aspects of myself I might otherwise not have known and a high level of accountability and trust that had to be earned. That is a very satisfying feeling, regardless of our age or the work that we do.

**Jonathan Tang, class of 2000**

At Parker, I learned how to revise. A paper wasn't done when we handed it in, it went through a revision or two, then a couple of peer edits, and then another revision, and then a few more versions months later when we went up for a Gateway. I've found that the real world is one massively scaled-up version of this. For Google's recent visual

redesign, we went through literally hundreds of mock-ups, and dozens of functional prototypes. And even after we launched, we continually run experiments and tweak things to make them even better. **Parker taught me that innovation isn't a product that you stamp "finished" on and release to the world; it's a process where you're never finished but just keep getting better.**