

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

ROHIT AGGARWALA '89  
CHIEF CLIMATE OFFICER AND COMMISSIONER OF THE NEW YORK CITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

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**CREDITS -**

Editor: Courtney Bullock

Editorial Team: Simona Monaco,  
Natalie Edwards

Around School Photographs:  
Luigi Fraboni, St. Stephen's Students

Lead design: Will Gardner (gpm.digital)

Assistant design: Sahar Aktar (gpm.  
digital)







# Note from the Chair of the Board of Trustees

LIBBY MORRIS

**G**reetings, St. Stephen's Community. On behalf of the Board of Trustees of St. Stephens, I would like to share our excitement about the upcoming arrival of Jill Muti, our Head-Elect, to the school community. It is a rare moment when the ethos of a school is matched so perfectly with an individual selected to lead it, but that is the case with Jill. Her commitment to exceptional education, her familiarity with and love of Italy, her dedication to community-centric leadership, and her passion for music, the arts, classical scholarship, and an integrated curriculum highlighting the sciences and math all resonate deeply with what we, as an educational institution, strive to achieve on a daily basis.

Ms. Muti is already actively engaged in the transition process, and you will be hearing from her directly over the course of the months ahead. We welcome her, we look forward to her leadership, and we can't wait for her to officially get started on August 1st, 2022.

I want to express our gratitude to Acting Head Deborah Dostert for her leadership of St. Stephen's during one of the most critical transitions in the School's history. With her four decades of experience, she has not only brought that wisdom to her relationships with faculty, students, and parents but has applied that to guiding the School at an important time.

I am also pleased to announce that the Board of Trustees approved the School's fourth Strategic Plan (SP4). A strategic plan establishes what the school wants



to achieve in the future and how it intends to get there. **Strategic Plan 4: Pillars of Excellence** charts a five-year, high-level course of action for St. Stephen's School, based on emerging priorities and abiding institutional values targeted to meet this moment in the School's development effectively.

The School is fundamentally healthy and thriving. *Pillars of Excellence* addresses some challenges the School faces as it moves to maintain its competitive edge as a global destination of choice in a new era. It is an overall adaptive strategy that can be adjusted or amended along the way as circumstances dictate and according to the programming needs and priorities determined by the incoming Head of School.

The **four overarching objectives** and **thirteen initiatives** in *Pillars of Excellence* address **student boarding, academic excellence, facilities, and**

**financial health.** Some items will entail significant expenditures, but in each case, funds will be set aside in the School's annual budget to cover those costs.

*Strategic Plan 4: Pillars of Excellence* builds upon its predecessor plan (SP3), adopts a multidimensional yet synergistic approach, and is shaped in part by its timing on the cusp of a Head of School transition.

The report, which includes the exciting initiatives Head Elect Jill Muti will carry out over the next five years, will be available soon online.

Now without further ado, we hope you enjoy this issue of The Cortile magazine.

**Libby Morris.**  
**Chair of the Board of Trustees**  
**St. Stephen's School**

## Welcome Head of School-Elect Jill Muti

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*The St. Stephen's community looks forward to welcoming Head-Elect Jill Muti when she arrives in Rome later this summer. For the last eighteen years, Ms. Muti has been the Head of Ashley Hall, a Pre-K-12th-grade independent school for girls serving 685 students. In this capacity, she has managed the budget, staffing, and all aspects of student life and has had hands-on leadership in virtually every dimension of the School's program, including strategic planning and development.*

**A**mong the long list of accomplishments during her tenure at Ashley Hall, Ms. Muti is responsible for having initiated and implemented numerous programmatic enhancements, including STEAM initiatives, the integration of math and science departments, the vision and creation of a global studies program, a successful professional development program, a boarding program for international students, a health and wellness program, among many others. Ms. Muti successfully led three capital campaigns and three productive strategic and master planning processes. She also tripled the School's endowment and created a partnership with Horizon's National, a non-profit that partners with schools to develop summer academic, enrichment, and social-emotional learning programs to serve underrepresented students.

Before joining Ashley Hall as Head of School, Ms. Muti worked at Ravenscroft School, a Pre-K-12 in Raleigh, North Carolina. As Assistant Head, she implemented the School's strategic plan, led the faculty hiring process, created an interim program for the Middle and Upper School, administered all phases of the Fine Arts Program Pre-K-12, and

oversaw design and construction of a \$2.6M dollar Fine Arts Center. She also held the positions of College Counselor, Coordinator of International Programs, Director of Fine Arts Center, and Chair of Fine Arts. Her other professional experience includes being a member of the Adjunct Faculty at NC State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Admissions Officer at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina.

Ms. Muti is also the Co-Director and Co-Founder of Spoleto Study Abroad, a non-profit organization for adults and students to study the arts and humanities in Spoleto, Italy.

A dedicated and innovative educator, Ms. Muti has expressed a deep appreciation for the School's mission, emphasis on scholarship, character education, and community. She has a deep commitment to attracting and retaining an excellent faculty and to professional development. Ms. Muti is an outstanding communicator and administrator who is very excited by the prospect of leading St. Stephen's. She will be moving to Rome with her husband, Lorenzo Muti, an orchestral conductor.

Photo by Julia Lynn









PART I:

# War in Ukraine





# The Fight for Ukraine: A Journey to the End of the Night

BY JEN HOLLIS, TEACHER OF IB HISTORY

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IT WAS A DAY AFTER RUSSIA INVADED WHEN ALEX TEXTED. NOW A SUCCESSFUL ATTORNEY, MY GOOD FRIEND IS UKRAINIAN. IN CHILDHOOD, HE WAS A REFUGEE, ENCAMPED IN ITALY BEFORE BEING RELOCATED TO TEXAS. “REMEMBER THAT THING YOU WROTE ABOUT WHETHER INDIVIDUALS SHAPE HISTORY?” HE ASKED. I HAD TO ADMIT THAT I DID NOT. “I DO,” HE SAID.

Alex and I spent our college years in Austin running a co-op together. We continued in DC, thick as thieves, where both of us finished our post-grad at Georgetown. Over many a sodden 3 am talk, he—soft-spoken and brilliant—provided a hard-nosed corrective to the endlessly critical takes on ‘the West’ that I was soaking up in that humanities department where, research tells us, ideologically liberal professors outnumber their conservative counterparts at a rate of 30 to 1.

Though many elements of the critique I was awash in continue to inform my thought, when skepticism prevails, it comes in the voice of that wise young man

who’d grown up in the utopia I was being sold and found it wanting. That night I texted Alex back that, although I didn’t remember, I’d defer to Otto von Bismarck when he said: “The statesman’s task is to hear God’s footsteps marching through history and to try and catch on to His coattails as He marches past.”

This was not to suggest that Putin was any statesman Bismarck would have conjured but that the causality held. The same idea has lately been put more simply with the phrase: “Cometh the hour, cometh the man.” To try and understand why this terrible war is happening and why it has rallied our sentiment more than any conflict in recent memory, we must dissect both the hour and the man.





СИЯ  
Всё  
запретить  
люди,  
не допустите  
ПРОТИВ  
ЗАКОН И ПАРАДАКО  
ПОД ДИКТО  
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АТ  
ИЯ  
огите  
ТЬ  
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проблема  
Где?  
ГДЕ ЕСТЬ  
СИЛИЕ  
НОСТИ  
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в поисках  
иальные прое  
Подрыв системы  
своими дуками  
Результат  
на первом месте  
остались люди  
живы работа  
рубль пенсии  
рыживать  
От трона до плах  
Зона  
бесплатно  
Беларусь  
сегодня  
продаются  
Где  
Зарплата  
здоровья  
Иновации



## COMETH THE MAN: A TALE OF THREE PUTINS

As world leaders go, Vladimir Putin defies broad consensus, existing in public discourse as a set of theories swirling around a black hole. Roughly, we can speak of there being three Putins:

The first Putin is an ideologue. This is the Putin commentators find if they follow the adage: “when a dictator tells you his plans, listen.” This Putin’s view of Ukraine was announced in his essay of July 2021: “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” and in his speech to the nation on February 21. In both, Putin informed his audience that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people.” This wasn’t a sentimental observation but a historical thesis, which he substantiated along a timeline stretching back to the Viking dynasty of the Kievan Rus in the 9th century. Ukraine was not just Russian, he argued, but the wellspring of the Russian people. Its separateness an invention. Its existence as a sovereign state? An aberration of communism. Putin blamed not NATO, but Vladimir Lenin, who’d set Ukraine apart as a Soviet Socialist Republic, and behind him Khrushchev, who’d expanded its territory.

This may confuse those who speak of a continuation of the Cold War; however, it should be obvious that perhaps the world’s richest billionaire wouldn’t want to revive a communist empire. If we take Putin at his word—or at those of the ultra-nationalist, anti-liberal philosophers he admires—we must acknowledge that the Russia he envisions revives something like a feudal empire, forgotten to modern critics.

The second Putin is ‘crazy like a fox.’ This Putin might agree with what the ideologue said, but he doesn’t live or die by it. The second Putin is the veteran spy, the Machiavellian. He wants us to believe in the first Putin’s sincerity so that he can (to use the phrase lately invoked) “escalate to deescalate”. The second Putin invaded Ukraine and is waving around nuclear weapons in order to scare his neighbors into a position from which he can then de-escalate to his true goal: international recognition of his annexation of Crimea and possession of the energy-rich region

of the Donbas. Advocates of this theory, usually editorialists, perhaps aspiring Machiavellis themselves, point to the siege of Mariupol, where Putin has created a living atrocity in order to secure territory connecting the regions he truly covets.

This second Putin is a little hard to believe in, inasmuch as a cost-benefit analysis of his alleged scheme doesn’t add up. But believers in the second Putin argue that, calculating as he is, the Russian president nonetheless greatly miscalculated the strength of his military relative to that of Ukrainian resistance. Miscalculating or not, the second Putin is the one we all hope to believe in because the last one is:

Third Putin—not ‘crazy like a fox,’ just crazy. This Putin incorporates the ideologue but gone mad from isolation and, possibly, a terminal illness. You will find this Putin in more conspiratorial corners, for instance, on a Telegram channel that claims to broadcast the insights of a secret Kremlin insider. This Putin is engaging in pagan ceremonies and sending his secret family to a Siberian bunker as he prepares for nuclear holocaust. He is in thrall to the apocalyptic vision of philosopher Alexander Dugin, whose neo-Eurasianism envisions an end to decadent liberalism and its replacement with totalitarian empire.

There is a second, more moderate iteration of this crazed Putin. Some American intelligence analysts do

suspect he is sick, possibly enduring cancer treatment (judging by his puffy face and the thirty feet he keeps between himself and visitors), and has gone mad from pandemic isolation. Either way, third Putin, the theory goes, is mired in the illusions of late dictatorship. Having reached the point of such concentrated power that none dare challenge his views, he’s lost the sense of reason or moderation which comes to us only via challenge. He resides in the ultimate echo chamber and is living out a destructive fantasy, ready to take the world down with him if he fails. He may not have the nuclear capacity to bring about a literal apocalypse—the nuclear winter scenario has long been dismissed as fantasy—but the seriousness of his threats has sent sales of potassium iodide pills up 600% on Amazon, rocketed “nuclear” to the top search term in the U.S., and sent bunker sales soaring. Libertarian and paleoconservative elements of the republican party use this Putin and his nuclear threat as evidence of the folly of our internationalism.

Clearly, whether or not Third Putin is real, he frightens us.

Which Putin, or combination thereof, is acting now has real urgency in the present; however, though the nature of such leaders may vary, the existence of men like Putin does not. Thus, to move forward in our attempt to understand how we got here, it may be more helpful to look to the hour that permits him, than the man himself.



## COMETH THE HOUR: A FAILURE OF TIMEFRAMES

In our traditional stories, settings give rise to characters. Poor orphans and handsome princes cannot exist without monarchies and breathtaking inequality. In history, it is not so different. Since we cannot control for the occurrence of monsters, we must try to imagine the deep, dark woods of circumstance that might allow them to become heads of state. Part of our problem over the last decades is that the loudest voices telling us the story of our world have been speaking about worlds of their own making, and the shock we feel at present is, in part, a shock at seeing those so quickly unmade by the real one. The unreality of those false worlds, which rotated on both sides of a polarized discourse, was rooted in the myth of their exceptionalism. Here is what they told us:



#### THE NEGATIVE EXCEPTIONALISTS: NATO IS TO BLAME

To understand how exceptionalism left us unprepared for our world, we look first at a narrative that emerged early on in the war: namely, that the aggression of liberal Western powers—embodied by NATO—had driven Putin to act. Ukraine should have known better, this argument went, than to flaunt her self-determination in front of her bitter ex-

The most prominent proponents of this argument included realist political scientist Professor John Mearsheimer, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, and (when not telling his people that he was fighting Nazis or acting on Russia's right to re-assemble its 9th-century empire) Putin himself.

Three flaws with this argument were immediately apparent:

The first lay with the premise that the success of the West, and the success of Putin, are clearly independent and competing phenomena. In reality, the Cold War polarity that gave rise to NATO is thirty years buried, and Putin is no communist—a thing he underlines when in his abovementioned essay, he blames the existence of Ukraine on Lenin and Krushchev. Nor is Putin competing with his capitalist neighbors. He is president of an oligarchical state that enriches him partly by selling its natural resources to Europe. Western markets, alongside predation on his own economy, have made Putin a billionaire many times over, even if he doesn't flaunt it with weekends in outer space. Where he feels threatened by Western alignment is not in an ideological battle with capitalism but in the obstacle it might pose to perfecting his autocracy.

This brings us to the second problem with the critique: it is morally incoherent, at least where it is leveled by academics like Mearsheimer. This might be

irrelevant, given that moral incoherence is a longstanding feature of human discourse, but it's worth noting for what it tells us about their worldview. Mearsheimer has pushed back against criticism of Putin, arguing that "it's not imperialism; this is great power politics." And telling us that Ukrainian democracy is an American invention. This is a blithe, almost exculpatory position on Russian aggression. But those familiar with the professor's work are bound to wonder about this shrugging fatalism, given his years as an influential critic of U.S. and Israeli foreign policies.

Indeed, one must wonder how anyone who has railed against power deployed by 'the West' without consideration for human rights, cultural autonomy, and popular self-determination is now explaining precisely the same behavior by Russia with a neutral, accepting tone. To my view, this signals the flaw of negative exceptionalist thinking, which trained so myopically on the Cold War target of



the West and on Pax Americana, now via NATO, that it decontextualized the universality of human evil and injustice, perhaps even forgot that these things are not Western inventions. In reality, cruelty, conquest, and injustice don't have a historical time period or address and never did. And any myopic focus is dangerous for the reason myopia always is: its narrowness blurs the big picture. In a clash of timescales, avid critics of the West operate inside a frame that goes back mere decades, maybe a bit more than a century, if the topic turns to colonialism. It confines itself to one locus of power as if that were all that was and ever could be. But Putin, and arguably history itself, are moving on from Pax Americana. And beyond the explanatory value of their critique.

The final problem lies with the evidence: namely, that there's no direct evidence that NATO was instrumental in Putin's decision, particularly in the near term. In 1994 Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for Russian guarantees of her sovereignty. Putin had assurances from Angela Merkel, a key guarantor of whatever West could still be said to exist, that Ukraine would not join NATO, and there's been no movement on that front to contradict her since. On the other hand, Russia has concluded several cooperative pacts with NATO, and it was an open secret that while Ukraine had the 'right' to join, no one in NATO intended to poke that bear. Indeed, the trend over the last decade saw the allies in NATO growing further apart, while the right-wing movements that Putin backs online and finances furtively were enjoying success in challenging Western unity and undermining democracy; by contrast, NATO's funding and activities had been on the decline.

In his New Yorker interview, facing a journalistic challenge, Mearsheimer reached back fifteen years to point to a statement Putin made about NATO aggression as evidence that we should have anticipated this, ignoring that, in the meantime, Russia's president has been securing ever closer financial ties with the EU, and Germany in particular—hardly signaling any growing hostility. One wonders if this 2008 statement was the alarm, why it took fifteen years for the fire to start?

The problems of this 'realist thesis' go directly to our shock, particularly when Mearsheimer claims that smaller states like Ukraine should just forget about self-determination and accept policy assimilation by whatever big, autocratic state is nearby. The queasy-making arrogance of the professor, when he dismisses Ukrainian democracy and care for human rights as nothing more than an American invention, is being challenged, however, with incredible heroism by the Ukrainians themselves. They appear to disagree so strongly with his dismissal of the sincerity of their values that they have held off Russia longer and more heroically than he or any early analysis would have predicted and, at present, are turning the tide. They fight in the face of a preponderant force that may still succeed. But even in that event, those who dismissed Ukraine's national will ought to take stock of their trivialization of it in light of those people who, laying down their lives in its defense, undermine their callous appraisal.

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INDEED, ONE MUST WONDER HOW ANYONE WHO HAS RAILED AGAINST POWER DEPLOYED BY 'THE WEST' WITHOUT CONSIDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURAL AUTONOMY, AND POPULAR SELF-DETERMINATION IS NOW EXPLAINING PRECISELY THE SAME BEHAVIOR BY RUSSIA WITH A NEUTRAL, ACCEPTING TONE. TO MY VIEW, THIS SIGNALS THE FLAW OF NEGATIVE EXCEPTIONALIST THINKING, WHICH TRAINED SO MYOPICALLY ON THE COLD WAR TARGET OF THE WEST AND ON PAX AMERICANA, NOW VIA NATO, THAT IT DECONTEXTUALIZED THE UNIVERSALITY OF HUMAN EVIL AND INJUSTICE, PERHAPS EVEN FORGOT THAT THESE THINGS ARE NOT WESTERN INVENTIONS

## THE POSITIVE EXCEPTIONALISTS: THE WEST WON HISTORY

If the critical side of the exceptionalist aisle left us complacent with its suggestion that the West was the only meaningful power and its predations the wellspring of all that might go wrong, they were aided in this thesis by a second faction of thinkers who agreed that the West was the only meaningful power, while disagreeing with the negative exceptionalist critique. I refer here to those thought leaders who, in the early 1990s, declared with the fall of the Soviet Union that history was officially over; Western liberal democracy had won. Yes, that's right: America won history. Or at least it did in 1992 when esteemed political scientist Francis Fukuyama theorized in *The End of History and The Last Man* that Western liberal democracy was humanity's final and ultimate system. To be fair to the professor, he didn't project this as an immediate utopia—his theory allowed for potential setbacks, even over many years. But the caveats weren't the point.

Backing him up, Thomas Friedman trumpeted the 'Golden Arches' theory of capitalist peace to his neoliberal audience. In simple terms, it said that two countries which both had McDonald's wouldn't fight wars with each other. In its marginally more complex form, it held that the globalized market would create such deep interdependence as to prevent violent rivalries on a major scale. In other words, globalization wasn't a passive state of economic entanglement: the theory held that illiberal governments like those in Russia (and, more critically, China) would be pulled by economic interdependence towards Western practices like democratization, free speech, concern for justice, and human rights.

Now that we had the history thing all settled, what was left for the West was an inward turn, a clean-up job. We could enjoy the prosperity the neoliberal global order would bring to all, safe in the knowledge that capitalism was improving life for the poorest.

Nothing about this casually grandiose exceptionalism should surprise us. Long before she led the world, the United States

had pronounced herself exceptional. Before she even began her journey in the 17th century, John Winthrop described the Massachusetts Bay Colony as the ‘City on the Hill’—a light unto the world, imbued with godly purpose. George Washington spoke of the “sacred fire of liberty,” and the destiny of the government. When she grew westward, driving out indigenous communities, this was no ordinary exercise of power, as many civilizations before had undertaken—this was “Manifest Destiny”. When the United States went beyond her borders, intervening in global politics from the early 20th century, it wasn’t for the petty reasons other nations did so—to enrich herself or increase her power. No, when America ventured abroad, she carried with her the ‘White Man’s Burden,’ a sacred imperative to improve all of mankind. JFK, Reagan, and Obama all at some point echoed Winthrop’s claim during the Cold War and after. Thus it was consistent, at least, when her efforts culminated in her victory over the Soviet Union, that this meant the U.S. had the whole of history solved. In this, and many other ways, for both her critics and her lionizers, the United States, along with an ill-defined constituency called the West, has been given a story out of time.

My point here is not to evaluate the relative goodness or badness of any civilization, nor its degree of exceptionality—a concept which strangely implies that there have been unexceptional civilizations and empires. That conversation has been formulated and revised since at least the 14th century, when Ibn Khaldun put down his cyclical theory of civilizations in the *Muqadimmah*. Rather, what I mean to say is that both the shift embodied by this war and our shock at it, are unexceptional. Put otherwise, I suspect that every order is convinced of its timeless imperative, and everyone shocked by its end. Does the failure of every grand presumption not harrow? Even if not, surely exceptionalist thinking across the political spectrum has helped lead us to this moment by lulling us into a complacency about both the extent and the durability of our world order.





## A PRAGMATIC STAB AT WHY

There is another group of people who put NATO and ‘the West’ at the center of Putin’s thinking. Only they say it was not NATO’s provocation, nor Putin’s fear of Western strength, but rather his observation of Western weakness that spurred him to act. This camp, critically, includes the voices of those who, in their real lives, were obliged to think about the material threat of Russian power in the world and about Putin’s long-term plans: among others, they count Alexander Stubb, former Prime Minister of Finland, and Tine Khidasheli, former defense minister of Georgia.

As evidence that it wasn’t NATO’s threat, but precisely the lack of any such threat, that moved Putin, they point to a cascade of illiberal provocations over the last decade, for which no great consequences were paid. There is the Russian military occupation of territories in Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014; Putin’s material support for Bashar Al Assad as he used chemical weapons in the Syrian Civil War; the ongoing war in the Donbas; the 2018 Salisbury poisonings in England. Going further afield, we see Russia’s key ally in Belarus grounding a RyanAir passenger flight in order to arrest and imprison a young political activist, numbering him among those critics who’ve stood up to Putin only to find themselves poisoned or imprisoned.



AS EVIDENCE THAT IT WASN’T NATO’S THREAT, BUT PRECISELY THE LACK OF ANY SUCH THREAT, THAT MOVED PUTIN, THEY POINT TO A CASCADE OF ILLIBERAL PROVOCATIONS OVER THE LAST DECADE, FOR WHICH NO GREAT CONSEQUENCES WERE PAID.



During these years, rather than face meaningful sanctions from some mythical liberal alliance, Putin, along with his oligarch backers, continued doing deals in the West, and concluded even closer trade ties with China in the lead up to the war—some analysts say to buffer the Russian economy against sanctions ahead of this bigger provocation. Those choices paid off. Through China, Russia has enjoyed a powerful alternative to the condemnation voiced against the invasion of Ukraine by leading nations. At the offset of the invasion, China’s diplomat at the U.N. informed Western journalists that their characterization of this as Russian aggression was not one China shared. The country does not condemn the invasion and has instead echoed Russian claims about biological weapons labs in Ukraine in her closed, state-run media environment. She lately blames Western arms sales to Ukraine for prolonging the conflict.

For those ready to contend with the world as it is, it must be considered that all of this takes place against a backdrop of challenges to democracy, often funded by autocratic states which violate human rights in shocking and large-scale ways, with no harm done to their trade ties with the global economy. As of this writing, Viktor Orban’s expressly illiberal Fidesz party in Hungary has just won a fourth term in power, an outcome most analysts predict will spell the end of Hungarian democracy. Marine LePen is catching up to Macron in the polls. Poland is veering undemocratic. No one needs reminding of what the last presidency in the U.S. brought. Suffice it to say that those who’ve long suspected that history wasn’t over and Western liberalism not the final order appear, unhappily, to have the weight of evidence on their side.



## WHERE ARE WE NOW? MUCH ADO ABOUT THE WRONG THINGS

To a great extent, the war caught us dreaming. In many ways, we continue to. At the beginning of the conflict, there was self-congratulation about the unity of our Western sanctions, initially aimed at the wealth of Russian oligarchs. Every day brought tales of yachts confiscated, and London villas occupied. This emphasis, perhaps, underlined how thoroughly we've bought into our own marketing: a seeming belief that a few rich men losing their toys would shape the course of a war. That our ultimate target to strike at the powerful was a fancy boat. Ironically, these are exactly the sentiments a critic of our decadence would point to as proof of the same. When those sanctions did a predictable nothing, we followed up with the ones that might matter: the ones that lead to bread lines. These are the least fair and the least just. But they may move politics, eventually, if not in any predictable way. If and when retaliation comes, if and when they cost our populations too, they will move our politics as well. As things stand, Putin's popularity in Russia among the people who have neither yachts nor villas in London—in other words, his popularity among the great majority of Russians—remains strong.



PUTIN IS SELLING THIS WAR TO HIS PEOPLE ON STATE MEDIA AS A SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION TO PROTECT RUSSIANS FROM AN AGGRESSIVE NAZI CONTINGENT IN KYIV (NOT FROM NATO, IT SHOULD BE POINTED OUT).

So far in this war, predictions have failed us. There was worry about how the war would play out online: fear that Russian hackers would take vital infrastructure offline in cyberattacks, that deep fakes would remove our grasp on reality itself. So far, nothing of this kind has happened. In the U.S., social media companies took various steps to de-platform Russian state television, or at least de-emphasize its output in search results. However, the contingents vulnerable to Putin's disinformation already disbelieve mainstream media outlets, more or less reflexively. Russia, for her part, has banned the social media platforms themselves, demonstrating an advantage of authoritarianism in this domain. Putin is selling this war to his people on state media as a special military operation to protect Russians from an aggressive Nazi contingent in Kyiv (not from NATO, it should be pointed out). There have been protests in Russian cities, admirable ones, and interviews with Russians condemning Putin. But our own media distorts matters,

in its usual way, by focusing on these perspectives: those of the educated and the urban, a minority everywhere in the world, if everywhere unaware of that. Meanwhile, out in the wilds beyond downtown St. Petersburg, Putin's popularity reportedly stands at around 80%.

While there have been no great shocks in either the weaponization of our online world or in its ability to move people out of their echo chambers, there have been surprises. The two biggest of them on the disinformation front have been positive: first, the effectiveness of pre-bunking by the U.S. government—starting with the announcement of Putin's intention to invade and continuing with the publication of intelligence on several 'false flag' operations. Traditionally, the U.S. government has been guarded with what it learns from intelligence, for good reason. But in a world where state actors are ready to deceive the public, announcing their intentions ahead of time removes some of the power of their disinformation.





The U.S. government put Putin in the uncomfortable position of proving their claims about him right. If this hasn't stopped his bad acts, at least it's made it harder for him to lie about them.

The other great surprise has been Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelenskyy, written off as a lightweight in international politics but now proving himself a hero both outside of, and of, his time. Outside of because he's staking his life on the principle that freedom and democracy are still real enough to die for. He leads his people in undermining the creeping cynicism that seems to be gaining an upper hand in world politics. However, he is of his time in how he leads. Broadcasting from bunkers, he uses technology to speak to the world: its parliaments and congresses, its media, its Grammy audiences, and to his followers on Telegram. If world politics can be moved by an influencer approach, then Zelensky will be the first to have managed it.

That said, it still remains to be seen what difference new media might make in the mix of a major war. On the positive side, social media and commercial platforms, at a grassroots level, have been commandeered to raise money and support for Ukrainians in innovative ways. Airbnb was used to transfer funds to Ukrainians in Kyiv. Local WhatsApp groups organize supplies and sleeping arrangements for the onslaught of mostly women and children fleeing to neighboring countries. The online game Fortnite has raised 36 million euros in aid, and traditional fundraisers are advantaged by the ease of donating from any smartphone. Some of those fleeing bombardment can log into networks and apps that help guide them to safety. These examples show a potential for social media to aid society on the ground, but careful observers tell us that such impacts tend to be short-lived and unlikely to lead to structural change. How war refugees are treated in the long run, at the policy level, remains the domain of

larger, more durable forces. And money raised across all crises and conflicts sees a big bump at the offset of an emergency, when media focus is sharp but dwindles over the long run when our attention turns elsewhere. This is the nature of our prejudice. Social science research tells us that, where events aren't immediately threatening, humans respond with short bursts of empathy, but as crises widen and drag on, and as the number of victims grows, audiences reliably back away. Deep change, then, requires sustained community interest over time and high levels of social cohesion and social capital—trust and investment among individuals within communities—elements that are more harmed than helped by social media.

This downside is evident too. In a moment that cries out for unity and an underlining of common values, social media exercises a prismatic effect on our collective consciousness. Whatever event falls into the online sphere fractures



into different shapes and shades based on the preoccupations of the platform. Far-right leaders and QAnon fit Putin's campaign into their conspiracy theories, their narratives of civilizational clashes. They cast him as a hero of traditional values, even if popular disgust at Putin's violence has forced some of his more mainstream fans (Matteo Salvini, Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands, and Tucker Carlson) to switch gears and perform morality, for the moment.

On the progressive side of the aisle, legions of InstaActivists, are generally well-meaning but often more zealous than informed. Some have used the attention on Ukraine to cry out hypocrisy over a lack of concern for whatever their activism concentrates on. Even those of us who share their interests can see that the comparisons they draw tend to be shaky and ill-considered. More importantly, exploiting the popular sympathy brought out by an immediate crisis in order to shame the public over their lack of empathy elsewhere is not perhaps helpful to the wider cause of justice. Shaming people delivers activists' feelings of righteousness; it is not known, however, for producing solidarity or even a sense of common purpose. And yet the aggravation of activists is understandable because the platforms themselves, in their prismatic effect, fracture the public into smaller cohorts over which attention seekers of all stripes must compete. The stakes are high. The audiences small and easily distracted. Frustration follows.

In a hopeful read, we can look at this war and speculate that an increasing awareness of deep fakes and bots might drive thinking people to seek added layers of verification for their information. The more difficult it becomes to trust internet sources, the more we may need to return to high-quality news, winnowing out spurious Telegram channels, activist uncles, YouTube talk show hacks, and Q. The likelihood of that happening remains to be seen. In the meantime, we must ask how online communication works against us. Ask what we can do about the fracturing of our publics, about the echo chambers alienating us, even as they give authoritarian leaders, who control the media environment, an upper hand.

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## WHERE IS THIS GOING?

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The greater implications of this conflict are plain. History is not over. Economic interdependence isn't the great liberalizer—indeed, it can encourage liberal democracies to look away from systemic human rights abuses, corruption, and attacks on democracy, in order to keep supply chains running smoothly. Right now, big European states continue to pour billions into Putin's coffers, effectively funding the continuation of the war in Ukraine in order to keep their heating on. This should not shock us. We have known for some years that the world was not trending freer and that we were paying, for our goods, into illiberal orders. But looking at these dynamics honestly, we can say that because of them, power isn't shifting away from the West; it has shifted, if not decisively. Globalization makes the world more multi-polar by making power, leverage, more diffuse. This is not big news to those who've been paying attention; it's merely the first time the shift was too big to look away from.

Thus, the anguish we feel is not only born of human empathy, it comes as the discomfort of waking to truths that contravene the myths that have safeguarded our complacency. It is no longer a given that those who value self-determination and human rights, however imperfectly implemented, will be on the winning side or even constitute a majority. We must reckon with the fact that our new media landscape does not reliably provide platforms for the dispossessed: that they are equally well suited to delivering government surveillance to people, as to giving them a say. And where they do give everyone a voice, we must ask how to make those voices lift as a chorus, rather than distract as cacophony.

The deep shock that people feel around Ukraine signals, above all, the end of our illusions. If we choose to awaken, it must be to abandon the license we took, within those illusions, to look away from the trajectory of our world. To abandon the schools of thought that have dominated over the last decades and acknowledge that history is still very much in play and that there is much more to it than great power politics. It is towards that more that Ukraine's bravery points us, and to which we must find our way back.





**Jen Hollis**, Guest Contributor and former teacher of IB History at the School for several years, returns to the classroom this September. Please join St Stephen's in welcoming her back to the community.



# Ukraine: Facts at a Glance

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BY ASLAN STEPHENSON '25

## 2014

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### CRIMEA

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**I**n March of 2014, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed a region of Ukraine called Crimea, which Russia believed belonged to them. It was annexed through a Crimean parliament vote, followed by a 97% win referendum. The annexation, however, is still widely disputed by Ukraine and the International Community. (NPR) It remains the only time a European nation has used military force to seize territory since World War II.



# Current Conflict: Economy

## RELiance ON RUSSIAN ENERGY

Any war impacts the world's economy, but Russia's war in Ukraine has economic effects that significantly impact Europe because of its reliance on Russian energy. "In 2021, the European Union imported 155 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Russia, accounting for around 45% of EU gas imports and close to 40% of its total gas consumption." (IEA) That's almost half the total energy consumed in Europe last year; it takes more time for countries to replace that much power without causing harm to everyday life. By contrast, the United States relies more on other countries and its own resources for natural gas. This crisis has hastened the need for governments to find ways to switch to green, renewable energy, which would untether Europe, in particular, to Russia and have a less destructive impact on the planet.

## SANCTIONS IMPOSED ON RUSSIA

NATO and the European Union sanctions have been in place since 2014. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the following have been added:

- Travel ban on Russian state-owned airline Aeroflot
- Ban and/or phasing out of Russian imports, especially gas
- Targeted sanctioning of oligarchs with ties to Putin, including seizing assets (yachts, houses, cars, etc.)
- Banning major Russian banks from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication). SWIFT is a system that allows banks to communicate globally with each other for messages and transactions. In this case, Russia has created an alternative, but experts have deemed it not to be nearly as good or valuable as SWIFT.

## DEPARTURE OF MAJOR COMPANIES FROM RUSSIA

Several well-known brands have also cut ties with Russia, such as:

- McDonald's, Burger King, Starbucks, Ikea, Nike, Airbnb, Procter & Gamble (Tide, Bounty, Head & Shoulders), Gillette, Johnson & Johnson
- Apple, Nokia, Samsung, Spotify, Google, Microsoft, TikTok, Netflix
- BP, Equinox, TotalEnergies, Exxon, Siemens Energy, Shell
- FIDE (International Chess Federation), FIFA (International Football Association), Formula 1
- Heineken, British American Tobacco (One of the biggest cigarette makers worldwide), Canada Goose
- Boeing, Airbus, Toyota, BMW, Mercedes, Volkswagen
- American Express, Mastercard, Visa





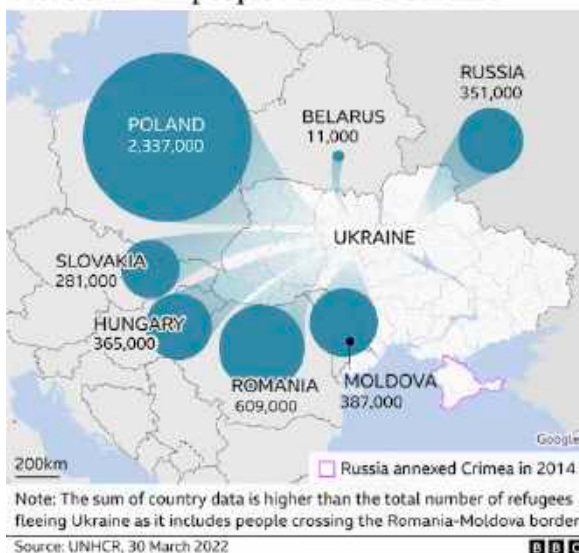


## REFUGEES

The current refugee crisis is most likely the biggest test for the European Union since its creation. Navigating its way through this emergency while still reeling from the economic throes of the coronavirus pandemic is an enormous task. Europe has had its fair share of needing to accommodate people searching for asylum. The most notable was the 2015 Migrant Crisis that saw more than 1.3 million refugees arrive in Europe, mainly from Syria. (UNHCR)

Italy has also adapted to migrants seeking asylum from North Africa. However, the current Ukrainian refugee crisis is on the order of a situation not seen since the Second World War. Ukraine is a country of 44 million people, and four weeks into the war, more than 4 million people had fled the country. More than half to Poland. (BBC)

### More than 4m people have fled Ukraine



## CHINA, INDIA, AND THE GULF STATES

These are the countries that have not yet condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. China has extensive ties to the West and, at the same time, very close ties to Putin, so it has not condemned the war but has remained neutral. The West is worried that China will help arm Russia even further and allow it to circumvent sanctions, which have had a direct impact on its economy.

India is the country walking the tightest rope. As one of the most populous nations outside of China, it is considered a very close ally of the West. Still, like Israel, India receives a lot of its defense equipment from Russia; it is under the most pressure from the US and the West to condemn the invasion.

The Gulf States are the source of gas that Europe has been going to, attempting to secure deals and start importing gas from. Up to now, the Gulf States don't seem to be making it easy for the Western countries.

## TECHNOLOGY AND FAKE NEWS

Technology plays an enormous role because it documents the war instantaneously on various platforms. It is also helpful in recording war crimes, which will be used later to hold perpetrators to account. But because the war coverage is so diffuse, it has promoted certain countries—Russia and China—to impose censorship.

Russia banned many Western news outlets and imposed a new law that bans what they deem as “fake news.” (BBC) China has banned and removed content that promotes a Western media view of the war in Ukraine.

## WEAPONS

The chart below provides some perspective on the imbalance between the military power and arsenals of the two countries:

	Ukraine	Russia
Active personnel	198,000	900,000
Reserve personnel	900,000	2,000,000
Armored fighting vehicles	3,309	15,857
Aircraft	132	1,391
Helicopters	55	948
Submarines	0	49
Spending	\$4.7B USD	\$45.6B USD

Source: US Military, RAND Corp, 2022  
Notes: 2020, Russian Military Spending includes  
Militarized Internal Security (2020)

## SUPPORT FROM NATO ALLIES

NATO has not entered the conflict since Ukraine is not a NATO member. Putin has threatened war with the West if NATO intervenes. However, individual NATO countries have provided the following military support to Ukraine:

- Anti Tank Missiles
- Anti Aircraft Missiles
- Helmets
- Ammunition
- Technology
- Weapons
- Among many other things

## NO-FLY ZONE

A no-fly zone is something President Zelensky has been asking for for a while. It calls for the patrolling by NATO of the airspace over Ukraine and not allowing Russia or Ukrainian aircraft to fly in that airspace. A no-fly zone would drastically help reduce Russian attacks from the air, where they have a distinct advantage. NATO has so far ruled this out because it would directly involve NATO shooting down Russian planes, which would place them in direct conflict with Russia. (New York Times)

## WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

There are no easy answers to this question; however, if the West can continue to ramp up its military support of Ukrainian troops and sanctions against Russia lead to the destabilization of the economy and government, then perhaps an end will be in sight to this war. In the meantime, it will continue to test Europe's ability to reduce its reliance on Russian energy and, at the same time, manage a widening refugee crisis.





# Disinformation is the Story of Our Age

BY ELIZABETH NYE DI CATALDO, LIBRARIAN, AND DIRECTOR OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

“

*Disinformation is the story of our age. We see it at work in Russia, whose citizens have been led to believe the lies that Ukraine is an aggressor nation and that the Russian army is winning a war against modern-day Nazis.”*

Barack Obama, at the Disinformation and the Erosion of Democracy Conference at the University of Chicago on 6 April 2022, queried, “imagine how any of us would process information if we are not getting, seeing, anything else?... It is difficult for me to see how we can win the contest of ideas if, in fact, we are not able to agree on a baseline of facts that allow the marketplace of ideas to work.”

Recent events in Ukraine have underscored yet again the impact that intentional misinformation and propaganda have during times of political unrest and warfare. The news is full of stories of state-sponsored false facts and disinformation, as well as severe limits on access to information not just within Russia and Ukraine but widespread actively across the global infrastructure of information, thanks to the ease, speed, and breadth of the Internet. While it is common to use rhetoric to convince people of a threat, challenge, or benefit, it is also common in battles, invasions, and insurrections to create justifications for one's best interests, shifting death counts or destruction or blame in whatever light pushes forward those interests. But in today's world, in which so many have the ability to document what is happening in front of them and potentially share it, such claims can be investigated by many more trained eyes, and it is crucial that we are all critical consumers of the information deluge that we now receive.



The Kremlin has a long history of managing and manipulating information and its dissemination both internally and globally, as do many other seats of government around the world, but has used draconian measures to limit reporting on the situation in Ukraine from its own citizens. Just a week into the invasion of Ukraine, new censorship laws were passed, making it a crime to deviate from the Kremlin narrative with threats of up to fifteen years in prison. The government forbade calling the attack on Ukraine a “war” or “invasion,” claiming it is a “special operation,” and forcefully shut down news outlets. “There is no room for independent journalism in Russia,” said the editor-in-chief of the last independent media outlet in Pskov, Denis Kamalyagin. International agencies from CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera, and others suspended reporting from within Russia to protect their staff, and on 28 March, Dmitry Muratov, winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize as editor in chief of the independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta announced it would suspend publication until this “special operation” in Ukraine ends, after receiving its second warning from Roskomnadzor, the Kremlin’s media censorship agency. Access to social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok, which carry news in opposition to Putin, has been cut off, either by the companies or the government, although some Russians are able to get news through VPNs. Many young, post-Soviet era Russians have fled the country for the West as more restrictions are put in place. “Putin doesn’t want them, either, dubbing self-exiled Russians a ‘fifth column’ that is working to undermine their homeland. In a televised address, Putin condemned Russians with a Western mentality as “national traitors” who cannot live without “oysters and gender freedom.”

Since 2008, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine has shifted from a strategic partnership to Russia attempting to delegitimize Ukraine’s government through claims of rising Ukrainian fascism and neo-Nazism, protecting Russian speakers in Ukraine from genocide, and fears that Ukraine would join NATO. From the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014, through years of increasing disinformation and rhetoric to the Russian population, Putin’s government has internally controlled the image of Ukraine, allowing him to justify on 24 February 2022 the “special military operation [with the goal] to protect people who have been subjected to abuse and genocide by the regime in Kyiv for eight years. And for this, we will pursue the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, as well as bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.”

The recent atrocities against civilians in Bucha, potential war crimes as defined by the Geneva Convention, were declared fake news by the Russian press. Ukraine was accused of staging the scene once the Russian army withdrew, although satellite imagery shows bodies strewn in the streets in the same positions, some with hands tied behind their backs, during their occupation of the city.



A claim on Twitter that US military-funded biological warfare laboratories in Ukraine had been discovered spread quickly across media on 24 February, even though they were diagnostic and biodefense labs.

Subsequent coverage from Fox News that the status of the biological work was irrelevant as they could be used as weapons was picked up by the Russian news and quickly received over a million views on just one Telegram post alone by the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti.

On 10 March, Twitter and Instagram posts with the same image and similar language from Russian Embassies falsely claimed that a photo of an injured pregnant woman leaving the ruins of a shelled maternity hospital in Mariupol was fake.



How do we as consumers discern what is real in an age of DeepFake videos created using Artificial Intelligence and Instagram posts of images that can be altered with simple phone apps available globally? And more importantly, how do we help our students become better-informed users of content when they are barraged with media and messages from unknown sources?

At St. Stephen’s, we spend several weeks in the Core 9 class talking about the validity of what we see online, implicit and explicit bias, why it is important to pause before reposting, how our information can be narrowed from our search history known as the Google bubble or filter, and how to determine if claims are true or not. After the events of 6 January 2021 in Washington, we talked about the value of a free journalist corps in a democracy and reiterated the need to consult multiple news sources. We also discussed who has the right to limit someone’s free speech and if we thought it should be left to social media companies.



Librarians used to teach about website evaluation by examining the site itself for clues, but after following a course for teachers and examining the materials from the joint MIT-Stanford University Civic Online Reasoning project, we have introduced Lateral Reading. Our students now see a claim, question its validity, and immediately go online to see what other sites are sharing about the same information. It works if it's a news story, an historic document, an interview, anything that conveys information. Students applied this to assignments on fake Covid news as well as political issues and were surprised at how seemingly believable claims could be debunked quite quickly. It has added more value to their critical analysis of media they are deluged with throughout their day.



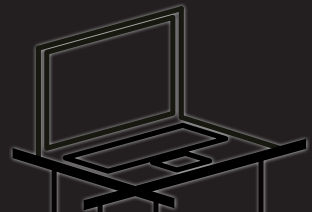
One of many fake news items Core 9 students found and reported on during a unit on Fake News in 2020-2021.

#### How to verify the news you see:

- **Pick several verifiable and appropriate news sources, and check their reporting against each other. Do not get all your news reporting from sources with a similar political slant or agenda. Some suggestions:**
  - US: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *CNN*, *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, *National Public Radio (NPR)*
  - IT: *Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *RAI News*
  - UK: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *BBC*
  - *Al-Jazeera*, *Reuters*, *Associated Press News*, *ANSA*
  - NOTE: the US, UK, and EU, YouTube, Twitter, and other online sites have blocked access to the two major Russian government-sponsored News Channels, *RT News* and *Sputnik*.
- **Use fact-checking skills, asking questions such as:**
  - Who wrote this, and what are their qualifications?
  - Do they have verified status indicated by a blue checkmark next to their name on Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook?



- What motivated them to write this?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What do they hope their audience will take away from this?
- Do a reverse image search on Google
- **Check fact-checking sites online:**
  - MediaBias/Fact Check checks for both bias and factual information
  - FactCheck.org from the Annenberg Public Policy Center also partners with Facebook to combat viral fake news
  - PolitiFact from the Poynter Institute
  - See "How *The New York Times* Verifies Reporting on the Ukraine War" 11 March 2022, Updated 1 April 2022



# Deepfake

# Putin's Mind: A Psychological Assessment

OPINION BY EMMA JANSEN '24

With Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine, Russia's rise towards autocracy hit a new high. He has threatened any country attempting to intervene with dire consequences, which some fear may include the use of nuclear weapons, during this full-scale military invasion.

Some have stated that Putin's reasoning is entirely legitimate, that it is the result of a planned brutal reality about global politics and an attempt to consolidate his strength at home. Others say his actions are desperate, rash, and overreaching and that they are the result of his profound psychological defects.

Putin shows no sorrow or regret for his unethical acts and the terrible consequences they have on innocent people. He also refuses to take responsibility for unfavorable outcomes, and he usually blames others if or when anything goes wrong.

These characteristics show that Putin has a "strong man" attitude which can be categorized as having "red" behavior. Someone who is in this category is generally someone aggressive, impatient, controlling, and powerful. This is all based on simple psychology and how to understand human behavior. According to Thomas Erikson's book, *Surrounded by Idiots* everyone can be categorized into four groups, or colors: red, blue, green, and yellow based on their behavior. People categorized as red are natural-born leaders, bold with ambitious goals. Blue are analytical and organized, yellow are social butterflies, and green are selfless and relaxed.

Putin is by most seen as an autocratic and authoritarian political leader, which means he is more likely to make major choices on his own. He is also more task-oriented than concerned about his people's overall well-being. Another tell-tale trait is

that he establishes a psychological barrier between himself and others, which he does in part by using punishments and threats. Based on such characteristics, many would imply that he is actually less competent and less easily understood than many with whom he works.

It is important to take Putin's signs of such dark personality traits seriously. Conventional tactics of diplomacy and negotiations cannot be presumed to work. Autocratic leaders with dark personalities frequently deny the need to listen to others or resolve conflicts. On the other hand, display of authority is seen to be a show of strength and more effective.

According to research on narcissistic leadership, delivering honest criticism on behavior, such as calling out a lie, can help keep such leaders in check. However, this should not turn into a public humiliation, as this may quickly escalate the situation.

Naming and shaming unacceptable behavior can also assist in making it apparent that such people, in this case, Putin, will be held accountable for his violations of local and international human rights. While one might imagine that an autocrat would be unaffected by such calls, research reveals that leaders in pure autocracies are frequently more vulnerable to such criticism than leaders in democracies or mixed regimes. This could be because their public image is extremely important to them.

We must acknowledge the distorted results of the psychological control that

Putin attempts to impose on his people. For example, he tightly controls public information in order to instill, on one hand, fear and doubt in the Russian people about foreign entities and 'enemies of the state' while, on the other hand, glorifying himself and his regime's achievements. Many will eventually support and endorse such authoritarian leadership for their own safety and security. Those held accountable for an autocratic regime's violence and corruption – and found guilty by a court – leave the burden of rebuilding to the guardians of a responsible civil society. If and when this occurs, the world community should demonstrate solidarity rather than anger or prejudice to avoid the type of fear that keeps brutal dictatorships in power.

Autocratic political leaders jeopardize international stability. We won't be able to stop them from forming or coming to power, but we can use our understanding of how they work to limit their disruptive potential and take different actions. In this case, Europe is learning that their dependence on fossil fuels and slow move to greener and renewable energy sources is and has been heavily supporting the Russian economy. Therefore, keeping Putin in a position of power and restricting Europe from significant counteractions.





# When Will It End?

BY UNNAMED SSS STUDENT

A chill ran down my spine on February 24th as I watched the invasion of my home country in absolute horror. Many said it wouldn't happen. It did. Our president, Volodymyr Zelensky, appealed to the Russian people in a last-ditch effort to stave off the inevitable in those early morning hours in late February. "You have been told that this flame will bring liberation to Ukraine's people. But the Ukrainian people are free. They remember their own past and will build their own future," he reasoned. "They tell you that we're Nazis. But how can a people that lost eight million lives to defeat the Nazis support Nazism? How can I be a Nazi? Say it to my grandfather, who fought in World War II as a Soviet infantryman and died a colonel in an independent Ukraine." His pleas mere echos in the wind; three hours of later, bombs struck their first targets in my native land. Today, much of my country stands in ruins.





The pain runs deep. The fear, the anger, the sadness—all compounded by Vladimir Putin's lies—or “fake news.” How much of the Russian public is still in the dark about the war crimes committed in their name? I know there have been protests, but a swift crackdown has silenced most dissent, and the threat of a fifteen-year prison sentence at the outset of the war has made independent and foreign broadcasters close shop. Now there's only one stream of consciousness, and that is from the Kremlin. Neighbors report each other to the authorities if the official version of the “special military operation” is questioned. The war continues. Journalists and pundits speculate what terror Russian troops might unleash at one of Ukraine's nuclear plants. Is another Chernobyl possible?

I have witnessed Ukrainians fight for democracy. In recent times, I have seen our sacrifice and know what we have endured throughout history in an eternal struggle for our sovereignty. We have been under Russian subjugation for at least three centuries. Soviet policy in the 1930s turned to Russification, a form of cultural assimilation in which non-Russians were forced to give up their culture and language for Russian culture and language. By 1932 and 1933, my great-grandmother, who had seven siblings, lived through the Holodomor, or Terror-Famine—a man-made famine exacerbated by the policies of Josef Stalin. Only three of my great-grandmother's siblings survived. An estimated six to eight million people died from hunger; nearly five million were Ukrainians. Our culture, history, poets, creators, scientists, food, language—all

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**“I AM SURE I WILL DIE SOON. IT IS A MATTER OF A FEW DAYS.**

**IN THIS CITY, EVERYONE IS CONSTANTLY WAITING FOR DEATH. I JUST WANT IT NOT TO BE TOO SCARY.”**

stolen, practically wiped out as if we had never existed. How dare anyone say we are brothers. Please don't insult us like this. Even in the face of Russian aggression in 2014, we stood firm during our Revolution of Dignity. We ousted Viktor Yanukovich and overthrew the Kremlin's puppet government. We instated a democratically-elected president—Volodymyr Zelensky—a president of the people, a modern-day hero. Our president stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukrainian citizens to face this current Russian aggression against incredible odds.



We cry out for help.

The world watches.

Western nations fear outright military support will signal an escalation of the war. As I scroll through image after image on social media of the carnage Russian tanks and missiles have left across towns and cities throughout Ukraine, I can't help thinking that these sanctions feel more like a drop in the ocean.

And though they are mounting against Putin and his oligarchs, to a Ukrainian eye, the vast majority of the Russian public stands motionless and inert. We can probably thank the falsified Russian version of events and the ever-present fear of a long-forgotten Soviet state for the censored voices and controlled lives. On the other hand, we know that this aggressive stance is not new. Russia has initiated wars and intervened in conflicts for years, and the Russian public has done little to stop the government.

Chechnya.

Syria.

In Russia's invasion of Crimea and the Donbas region in 2014, Russians supported the annexation. Their

prolonged silence has only emboldened Putin. And here we are today. As Russia continues destroying our way of life, millions of Ukrainians, primarily women and children, have fled to an unknown and uncertain future. Men—husbands, brothers, uncles, cousins, have stayed behind to fight. The Russian public is just as much at fault as their leaders. Russian leaders and citizens should all have to pay a high price for this carnage.

There is a genocide occurring in my country.

Citizens are *the* target.

I have lost count of all the children who have died. People worldwide react, expressing concern, but I'm sorry, “concern” doesn't quite match the despair I feel. I want to scream so everyone hears. Don't they realize that I have no clue if my family is still alive? I wonder what has happened to my cousins, who are just two years older than me, and my uncle, who joined the Ukrainian military to defend our land. Doesn't the world realize that my house was bombed, that we have lost our money, and that others we know have been killed? Don't they know the daily psychological dread of a chemical weapons attack? I am perplexed when I hear that Russians are “salty” if we say we despise them. Is that too strong an emotion for our politically correct world?

Putin has said that he believes “Russians and Ukrainians are one people, one nation...” and that “when these lands that are now the core of Ukraine joined Russia...nobody thought of themselves as anything but Russians.” Let me answer that with a quote from a woman in Mariupol:

“I am sure I will die soon. It is a matter of a few days.

In this city, everyone is constantly waiting for death. I just want it not to be too scary.”

Does this reflect “we are one?” When will the world do more to end this ruthless violence and mass murder of the Ukrainian people?

When will it end?



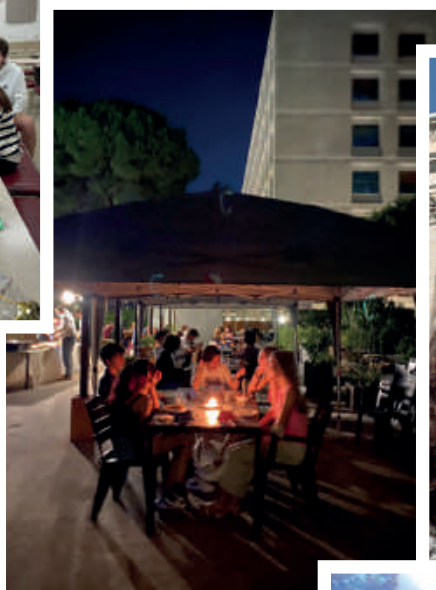
PART II:

# Around the School



# Boarding

Holiday dinner  
& weekend  
activities





# Boarding

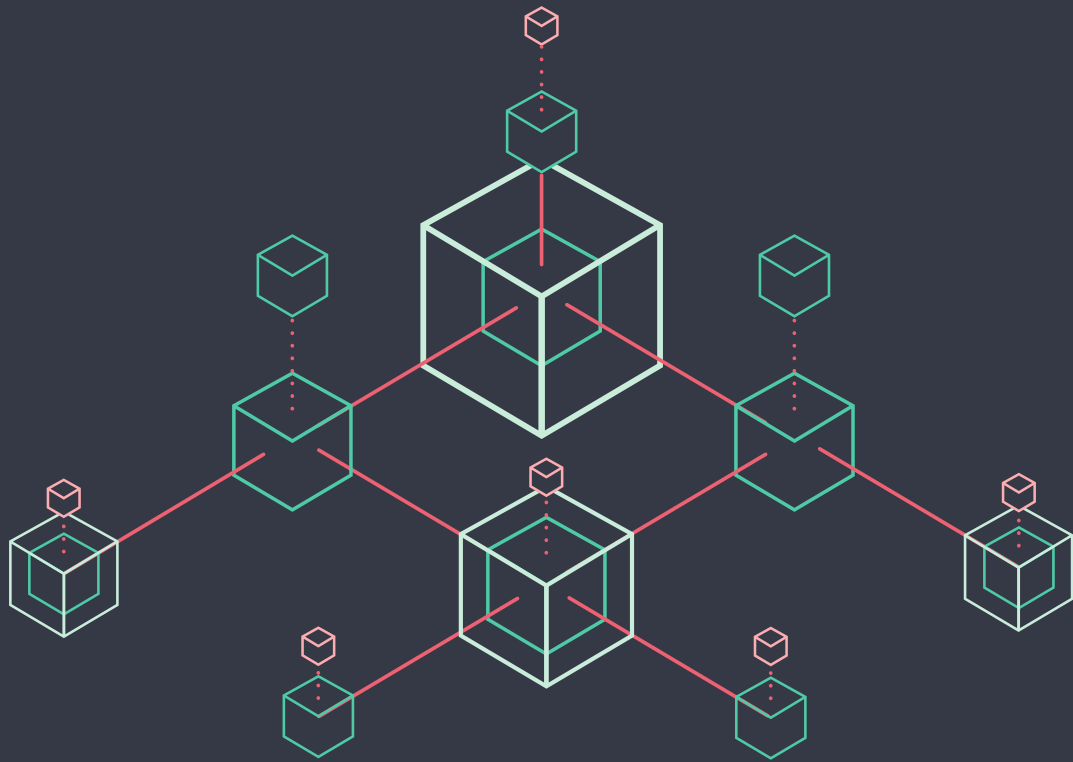
Lago Albano  
& Fall trips







Field Trips  
& CAS



PART III:

# Technology Today





# The Blockchain

BY EMMA JANSEN '24

Generation Z is growing up in a technologically advanced world. Even though we are supposed to know the latest technology and advancements, many things you read about are still unclear and confusing. To those of us who are interested in learning about Artificial Intelligence (AI), how the internet is structured, and the basics of programming, we may think we have an advantage, but there is so much effort and knowledge being put into creating these mechanisms, that even the original creators don't know the true potential or implications. We read a lot of hype about Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotic Process Automation (RPA), 5G, or the Internet of Things (IoT) as the next new, big gamechanger, but alongside that is another concept called the blockchain. The name is not very descriptive or intuitive, so there is no wonder many do not really know what it is and why in recent years, it has gained significant appeal worldwide.

## WHAT IS BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY?

Before going into detail about the blockchain, it might be easier to start by clarifying what it is not. Many people are likely to associate the meaning of blockchain with Bitcoin. In reality, Blockchain is a wholly new and separate technology. Bitcoin is, in fact, only one of the products of its potential. The blockchain's distinctive way of recording and transferring information finds much broader applications beyond cryptocurrencies.

In a very simplistic way, we could say that the blockchain is a method to organize a series of events to guarantee the integrity of data in order to make it easy for a group of people or companies to agree on it. In other words, as the name implies, the blockchain is a sequence of blocks chained together and distributed among the users. According to Kendall Little, a New York-based journalist covering personal finance for NextAdvisor, "A blockchain is a type of distributed ledger. Distributed ledger technology (DLT) allows record-keeping across multiple computers, known as "nodes." Any blockchain user can be a node, but it takes a lot of computer power to operate. Nodes verify, approve, and store data within the ledger. This is different from traditional record-keeping methods, which store data in a central place, such as a computer server. A blockchain organizes information added to the ledger into blocks or groups of data. Each block can only hold a certain amount of information, so new blocks are continually added to the ledger, forming a chain." (<https://time.com/nextadvisor/investing/cryptocurrency/what-is-blockchain/>). There are different types of blockchain. Permissionless blockchains are part of the public blockchain, in where no permission is required to join and interact with. On the other hand, a permissioned blockchain is private. It is closed, and only those authorized by the network administrator can join.

## KEY FEATURES

The key features of blockchain technology—immutability, security, and transparency—have added significant value to several sectors. While we cannot define blockchain as a cost-cutting technology, undoubtedly, its adoption has the potential to bring efficiency gains. Although blockchain's adoption is not immune from challenges, including investment, education, and data standardization, there are several advantages it can bring to a project, including reduced operational risks, increased quality process, a higher level of transparency, and simplification of revision activities. In fact, blockchain applications allow the full visibility of transactions and the execution of shared rules on the ledger for the automatic matching of information. This applies especially in a setting where multiple organizations operate in the same industry, for example, in use cases developed by a consortium where a group of peers, leveraging a common governance, collaborate to define rules and the technology development.

## USE CASES

In light of its characteristics, it is not surprising that the blockchain has great appeal in the financial sector. Many of these applications—for example, Bitcoin or cryptocurrencies in general—tend to solve key business challenges, such as matching the quantity of money or assets exchanged with what the records state and identifying discrepancies. As an example, the Italian banking sector has successfully pioneered the use of blockchain/Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT) with a new application, Spunta Banca DLT, for straight-through processing of interbank reconciliation. As we learn from the technical provider R3 in its use case about the Spunta project published on their website ([https://www.r3.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Spunta\\_Corda\\_CS\\_R3\\_Digital\\_2020-copy-1.pdf](https://www.r3.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Spunta_Corda_CS_R3_Digital_2020-copy-1.pdf)), “Historically, the reconciliation process for interbank transactions in Italy, known as spunta in Italian, has been notoriously complex. With multiple parties involved, the task of identifying and addressing inconsistencies has historically been hampered by a lack of standardization, the use of piecemeal and fragmented communication methods, and no “single version of the truth.” As a result, resolving mismatches in transactions has been a labor-intensive and time-consuming process. For decades, these shortcomings have meant that the need to reconcile transactions with other banks has been a significant headache for financial institutions in Italy and Europe.

These issues made the spunta process an ideal candidate for automation through blockchain technology to automatically detect non-matching transactions using a shared algorithm, standardize both the process and the single communication channel, and provide a comprehensive view of the transactions among the interested parties.” However, leading industry players are exploring solutions for a variety of other sectors besides finance. One interesting case is the IBM Food Trust, a consortium of growers, processors, wholesalers, distributors, manufacturers, retailers, and other stakeholders in the food chain. This platform enhances transparency and accountability for each step of the food supply, connecting users through a permissioned, permanent, and shared record of food provenance, processing data, and shipping details.

Blockchain is complex and technical, as we have seen above, but clearly has the potential to truly transform the way we do business. However, the design and launch of a blockchain/DLT project require a broad view of aspects that impact the planning and the development of the new application. It is an exciting and relevant subject that I hope our school will soon introduce to its students. Understanding and mastering the fundamentals of this technology will be key both for those like myself who are genuinely interested in this and other new technologies and those who will need a foundation to ready them for higher education and work in the future.



# For the Love of Crypto

MATTEO TORRALBA '24

“

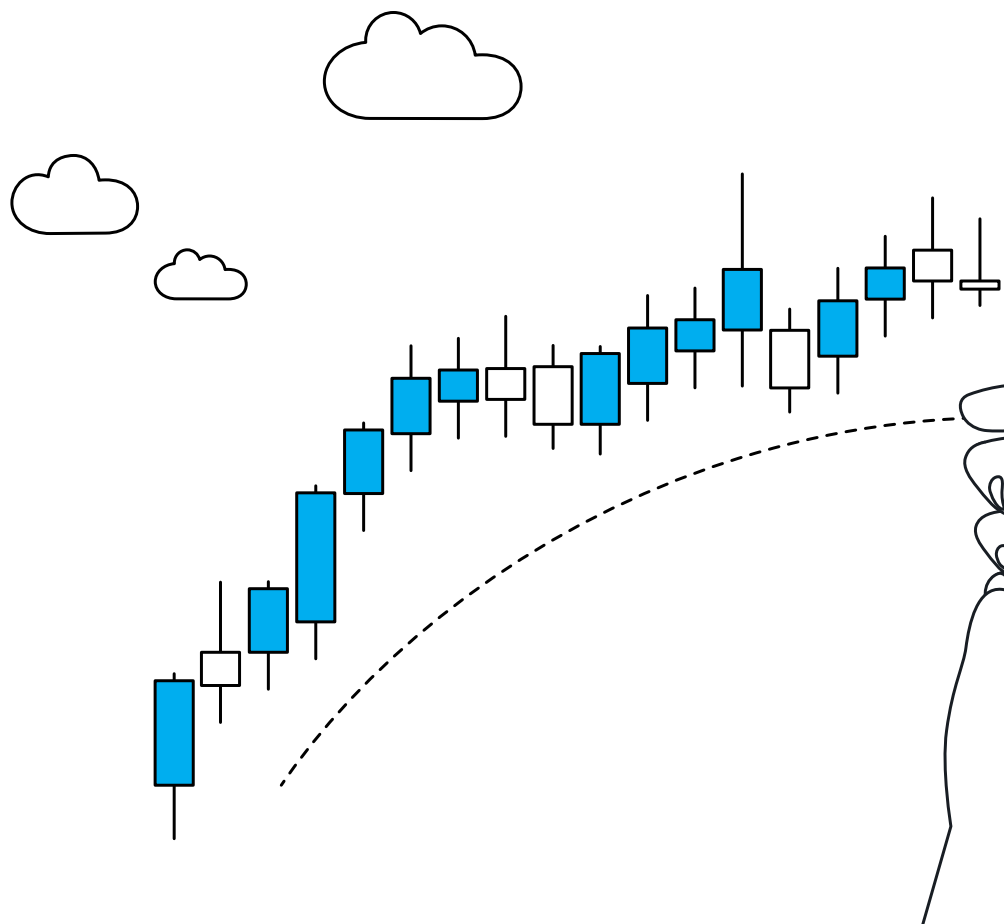
CRYPTOCURRENCY IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST INVENTIONS. HOWEVER, THERE IS A LOT OF FALSE INFORMATION ABOUT IT. FOR MANY, IT REMAINS MYSTERIOUS AND SOMETHING NOT WELL UNDERSTOOD. BECAUSE OF THAT, MANY PEOPLE CHOOSE TO STAY AWAY FROM IT, BELIEVING THEY WILL LOSE A LOT OF MONEY. BUT IS THAT REALLY THE CASE?

Cryptocurrency is a digitally-encrypted, decentralized medium of trade. Unlike traditional fiat currencies (e.g., the U.S. dollar or the Euro) regulated by central banks that establish monetary policy and execute currency price stability, no central body administers and maintains the value of cryptocurrencies. Instead, these responsibilities are decentralized and dispersed extensively among cryptocurrency users over the internet via blockchain technology, which acts as a secure log for transactions, enabling the buying, selling, and transferring of digital assets.

So what are the advantages of cryptocurrencies? And how many are there? There are more than a few. The most popular ones are Bitcoin, Ethereum, Cardano, Solana, and Shiba Inu, but there are over 10,000 cryptocurrencies on the market now, each with its own unique set of characteristics, which include their proclivity for abrupt price increases (and decreases). Prices are determined mainly by the supply of coins from miners and the demand for them from buyers. And these supply-demand dynamics can result in substantial profits. The main advantage of crypto is that though you are taking a significant risk, you have the possibility of high rewards. Take the price jump for Ethereum last year, which nearly doubled from July to December, providing a massive payoff for investors who jumped on board at the appropriate moment (N. 26 Bank).

Another considerable advantage is that, unlike the New York Stock Exchange, which operates five days a week from 9:30 am until 4:00 pm, cryptocurrency trades on hundreds of exchanges around the world, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This makes it easier for investors to reap the rewards of perpetual price fluctuations (N. 26 Bank).

As economies around the world see inflation rise, cryptocurrencies may offer investors a buffer against rising prices. Since crypto isn't connected to a specific currency or country, its value reflects worldwide demand rather than, for example, national inflation.



While extolling them for their virtue, cryptocurrencies are not without their significant perils. They have proved to be a precarious or risky investment, as they can quickly descend to terrifying lows. Because of this volatility, crypto is not yet considered a reliable long-term investment.

Another major concern in the crypto realm is its severe scalability problems. Cryptocurrency providers acknowledge this is a problem, with Ethereum developers claiming that the blockchain has hit "certain capacity restrictions" that slow the rate at which transactions may be completed.

Security is also another factor to consider. Cryptocurrency exchanges have been subject to hacking, phishing, and other malicious attempts. Wallet owners also have the added challenge that if they

lose their private key (an individual key that controls access to your funds), they risk losing access to their crypto assets without a backup or alternative way to recoup them.

Many crypto experts believe that 2022 will be a bad year for crypto and that there will be a crash at some point. However, they also say that the underlying technology will continue to improve. Once that happens, we will most likely see a reduction or resolution of most of these issues. Their prediction: cryptocurrencies are the future and will increase in value in the next ten years (Browne).

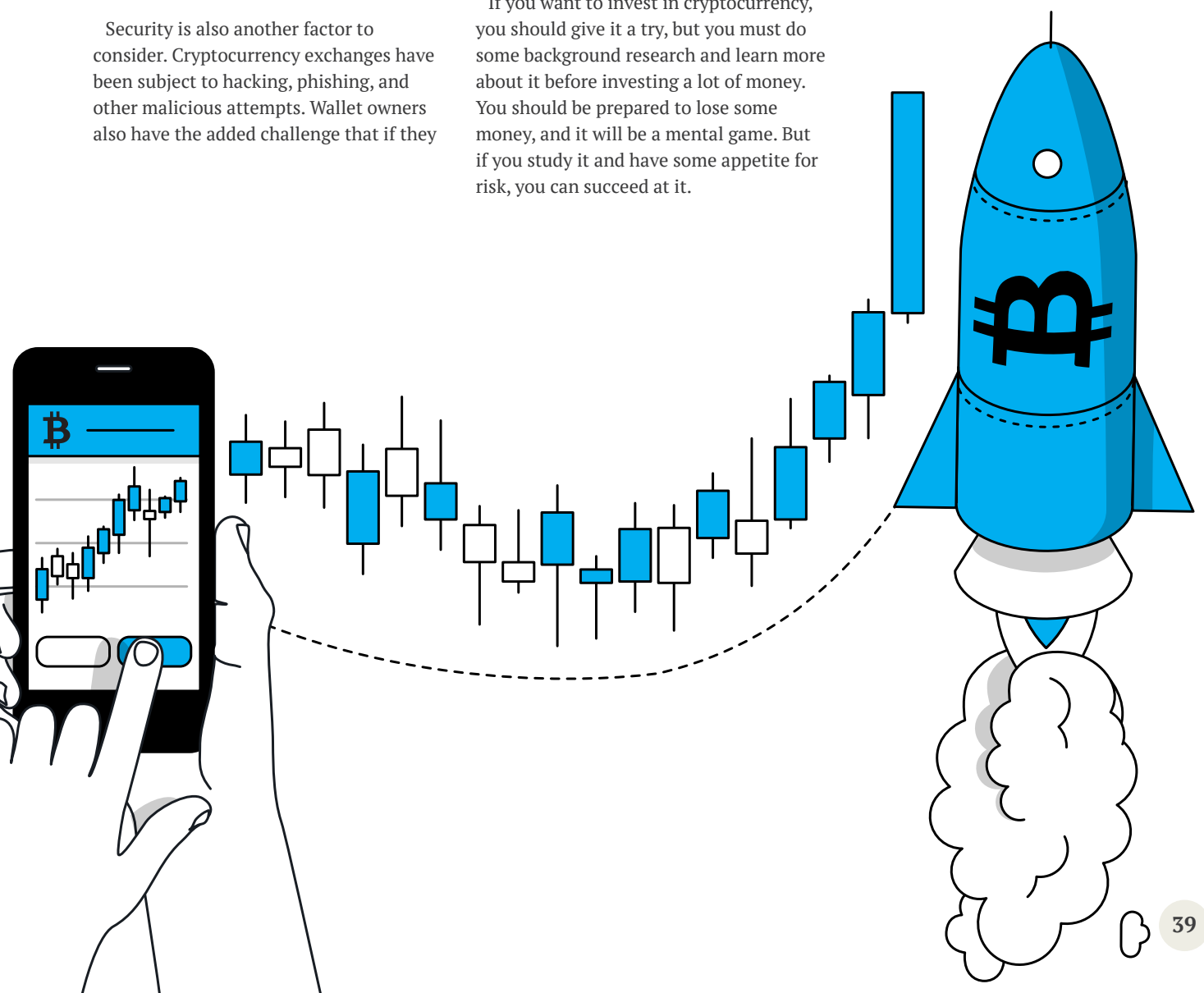
If you want to invest in cryptocurrency, you should give it a try, but you must do some background research and learn more about it before investing a lot of money. You should be prepared to lose some money, and it will be a mental game. But if you study it and have some appetite for risk, you can succeed at it.

#### Citations:

Browne, Ryan, *CNBC*. 22 Dec. 2021, [www.cnn.com/2021/12/22/top-predictions-for-crypto-in-2022-from-bitcoin-crash-to-regulation.html](https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/22/top-predictions-for-crypto-in-2022-from-bitcoin-crash-to-regulation.html). Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.

N26 Bank. 17 Jan. 2022, [n26.com/en-eu/blog/pros-and-cons-of-cryptocurrency](https://n26.com/en-eu/blog/pros-and-cons-of-cryptocurrency).

Accessed 30 Mar. 2022.





# I'll Have an NFT, Please.

BY FRANCESCO SAVIOTTI '23

**I**n the last couple of months, interest in NFTs has skyrocketed. If you haven't heard of or know anything about this latest craze, the concept is relatively simple. NFT stands for Non-Fungible Token, which is essentially a virtual or digital collectible (e.g., art). If you are to buy a particular NFT, that means you are the only certified holder of it. It's a pretty cool phenomenon.

## ARE THERE ADVANTAGES TO HOLDING AN NFT?

Holding an NFT gives the owner certain benefits. These advantages vary depending on the NFT owned and the project it comes from. For example, I own 3 Jailed Baby Ape Club NFTs, and by having them, I have access to a chat where only verified holders can participate. I can also play a P2E (play to earn) game, I have access to free personalized clothes, and I automatically have access to parties with all the holders, like the one I was invited to in Los Angeles. NFT creators generally have several giveaways, and NFT holders are automatically entered in those giveaways. The more you hold, the more likely you are to win.

## ARE THERE ANY RISKS IN INVESTING IN AN NFT?

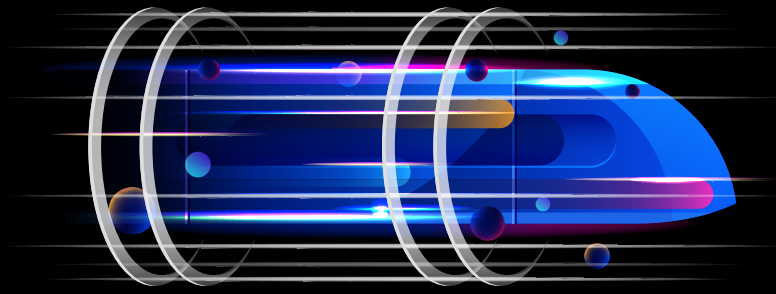
NFTs are not without risk, however. Unscrupulous developers will sometimes sell their NFTs through their website at a specific price and then invalidate those sales or transactions to buyers who are unable to reclaim the money from their virtual wallets. In a nutshell, buyers have been duped into investing in projects they were interested in or believed in, only to have their investments stolen from them and the developers vanish.

## YOU'VE LAID OUT A POTENTIAL PITFALL, BUT ARE THERE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS?

There are plenty of successful projects. A project called Clone X - X Takashi Murakami is an example, with 18.6 thousand NFTs held by 7.8 thousand different people. Their floor price (cheapest possible NFT to buy) is 6.595 Ethereum (€14,196.62 as of 22 January 2022)-- a pretty steep floor price. Judging by this price, this indicates that it is a very successful project. It was predicted to skyrocket in 2040. When the developers announced a collaboration with Nike, it gained popularity, and more people started buying their NFT. Not only is the

value of each single NFT very high, but the creators are also able to deliver some unique and never before seen merchandise that only holders are eligible to buy. Adidas and Prada have also partnered to launch their own collection of NFTs and exclusive merchandise that only holders will have access to. Car manufacturers like Lamborghini are planning to create NFT projects. They have released some information on what they are preparing, but they still haven't clarified what the holder's benefit is going to be. I bet it will likely be a pretty sweet deal for the holder.





# New Technologies on the Horizon

BY FRANCESCO SAVIOTTI '23

**B**lockchain technology offers many exciting possibilities in various industries—from finance and law to music and fashion, and we've read a few use cases in this chapter. Below, you'll find a few more technologies that are my top picks that I believe we should keep an eye on for the impact each has the potential of having on human welfare.



## NEURALINK – THE BRAIN-MACHINE THAT INTERFACES TO CONNECT HUMANS AND COMPUTERS

Invented by Elon Musk, Neuralink is poised to revolutionize the healthcare industry. Here's how it works: A microchip, which functions like a computer, is implanted in a patient's brain. The patient can essentially connect to the internet and search for information as they would on a laptop; only they can do so through their thoughts. Neuralink has also shown efficacy in helping paralyzed patients move again. My prediction: Neuralink will soon be slated for human trials.



## HYPERLOOP – THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORTATION

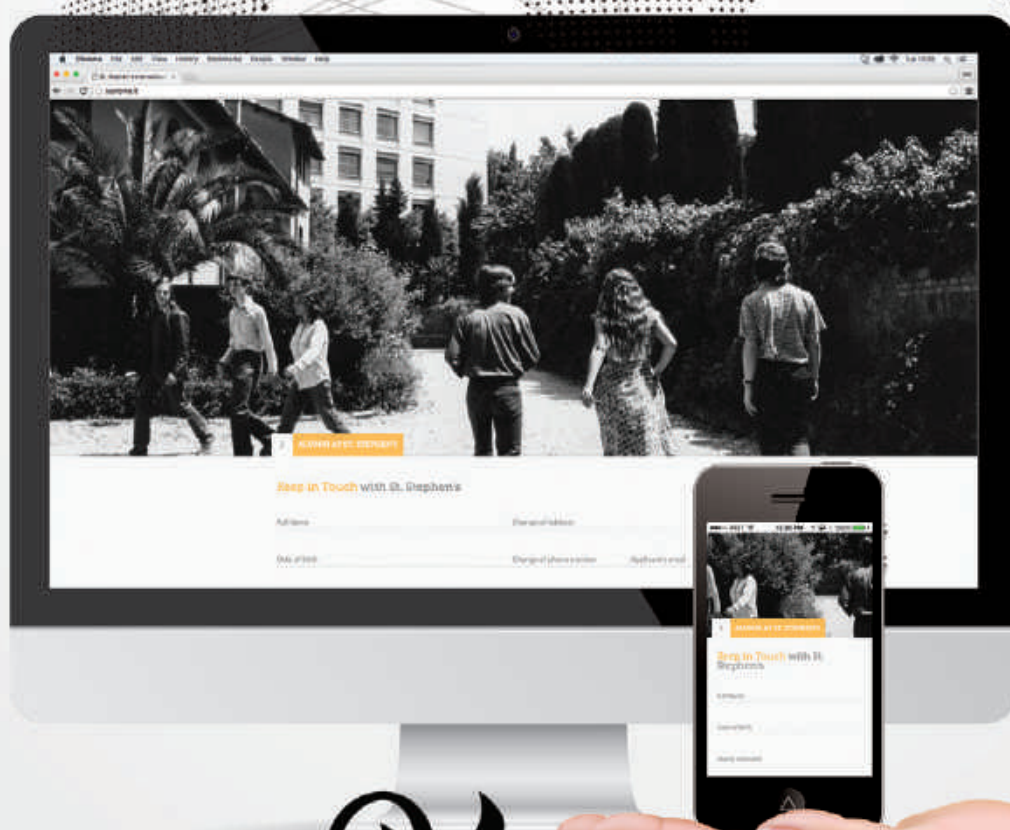
There's been a lot of buzz around this company, and its potential is continually growing. The word is, it's the future of transportation, and here's why. Another Elon Musk invention, Hyperloop, will most likely replace trains in the future as it is designed to connect two major cities through a large tube. Known as a magnetic levitation train, it will operate in a tube with all the air taken out so there won't be any friction. Inside the tube, there will be a capsule with an approximate capacity of 30 people. Engineers have estimated that Rome-Milan in the Hyperloop will take just 30 minutes, compared to a standard train which takes approximately three hours. Without friction, the capsule can reach an astonishing speed of 1200 km/h. This will benefit climate change, and it will also make travel more accessible and efficient.



## PROJECT MOSE - VENEZIA

Project Mose is a flood barrier for the city of Venice. Its technology consists of mobile gates that prevent rising tides from flooding the city by isolating it when the water rises. It has been tested and used a couple of times. Since its installation in 2020, it has protected many of the low-lying areas of the city, particularly Piazza San Marco.





# Keep in Touch

It's never been easier to keep in touch with St. Stephen's alumni community. Simply update your details on our home page at [www.sssrome.it](http://www.sssrome.it)

[www.sssrome.it/keep-in-touch](http://www.sssrome.it/keep-in-touch)





PART IV

# The Dr. Helen Pope Lyceum





# Scientific Methods in Archaeology Lessons

BY ESME LUNDIUS '10, ST. STEPHEN'S ACTIVITIES COORDINATOR, BOARDING DEPARTMENT

During the last week of March, the 9th- and 10th- graders engaged in a presentation followed by an interactive session related to archaeology and the sciences. With the collaboration of the science teachers at St Stephen's School and Inge Weustink, classics teacher and Director of the Lyceum, I was able to create a crash course into all that is archaeology. I am currently working as the activities coordinator in Boarding but will also work closely with the Aventus Minor Project (AMP) this coming season. I am a St. Stephen's alumna (Class of 2010) and hold an MSc in Forensic Archaeological Science. I am in the process of completing a Ph.D. in Egyptian Archaeology. I have had the opportunity to excavate at numerous sites, including Sant'Omobono in the center of Rome, Sais in the Egyptian Delta, and a northern Roman site in the UK. Throughout my academic career, I have been trained in the scientific methods used in archaeology and have designed courses related to the practical sides of excavation and laboratory analysis at university. I have always



loved teaching archaeology, especially to first-year students, since they are always very eager and curious about the discipline and its multifaceted approach. It is, therefore, an incredible opportunity to work with younger students and perhaps inspire a potential career in archaeology. I was drawn to it as a student since I could never really decide what my main career aspiration could be. I was very artistic in school but was a devoted history student and loved biology. Archaeology has allowed me to

combine my interests into one field, and I have never had to give up on one of my passions.

Over the next few weeks, students will partake in workshops designed to introduce them to a range of fundamental scientific methods used in archaeology in preparation for the opening of the AMP season in May. Techniques were discussed in relation to archaeological material and how results are interpreted, especially concerning the context in a forty-minute interactive presentation followed by various group activities. The role and purpose of excavation, techniques developed for the analysis of human remains, and artifacts were introduced, and their significance explained. However, these aspects only represent a fraction of the full range of archaeological data available. This data concerns environmental archaeology, such as soil analysis, taphonomy, and the importance of animal and plant remains. This evidence provides a further dimension of data, from individual sites to a broader landscape. To remotely map and identify sites

“

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED TEACHING ARCHAEOLOGY, ESPECIALLY TO FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS, SINCE THEY ARE ALWAYS VERY EAGER AND CURIOUS ABOUT THE DISCIPLINE AND ITS MULTIFACETED APPROACH.

IT IS, THEREFORE, AN INCREDIBLE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH YOUNGER STUDENTS AND PERHAPS INSPIRE A POTENTIAL CAREER IN ARCHAEOLOGY.

and discover sub-surface detail using geophysical techniques is vital to understanding a site. Laboratory-based techniques such as dating methods, ancient DNA, and isotopic analysis were briefly touched upon to provide key data related to dating events and processes, examining diet and mobility, and answering questions related to human genetic history. The teaching aims to equip students with a basic repertoire of techniques and tools available to archaeologists to interpret the past. The group activities included resolving the mystery behind a mass grave at Sant’Omobono, deciphering the use and significance of an ancient Egyptian artifact, as well as interpreting complex data regarding the isotopic analysis of Norse invaders on the island of Orkney. Time permitting, a few more practical sessions will be scheduled in May in collaboration with the sciences. There will be an opportunity to do some practical work in the lab, such as excavating a simulation of an archaeological site and identifying organic remains in the soil. I am very much looking forward to collaborating closely with the AMP and putting the students’ newly acquired archaeological skills to the test!





# The Aventinus Minor Project:

## An Educational and Community Archaeology Project

INGE WEUSTINK, CLASSICS TEACHER AND DIRECTOR OF THE DR. HELEN POPE LYCEUM

LEARNING ABOUT HUMAN  
SOCIETIES-  
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

These are exciting times at St Stephen's, especially for the Dr. Helen Pope Lyceum: we are about to embark on the third season of the Aventinus Minor Project, and we will finally 'break ground'!

The Aventinus Minor Project is a research, educational, and community archaeological excavation on the grounds of Santa Balbina right behind our school. The project is directed by Professor Elizabeth Wueste of the American University of Rome (AUR) and is a collaboration between AUR, St Stephen's School, and the Istituto Santa Margherita (a home for the elderly), and the Soprintendenza Speciale Archeologia Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Roma. There is also an Advisory Council consisting of members connected to St Stephen's School and AUR that supports the project by playing an active consultative role, utilizing its members' experience and involvement in the community to benefit the project.

The first two seasons of the project consisted of preparatory work involving bibliographical research, topographical studies, a non-invasive survey using remote sensing and drone photography that resulted







in GPS mapping, the creation of a GIS database, archaeological field illustration, wall stratigraphy, and interviews with locals. The upcoming season which will run for six weeks from the middle of May till the end of June, will finally involve excavating. The location of the exact trenches has been identified by the AUR specialists and approved by the Soprintendenza based on the GPS mapping. If you are interested in finding out more about this, please take a look at the first Aventinus Minor Project publication that saw the light in February. It is an article outlining the details of the GPR results of last summer. The article was published in the peer-reviewed journal "Remote Sensing".

Besides being an archaeological excavation that is academically rigorous and scientific with a research plan that aims to answer specific academic research questions, there are two more components to the Aventinus Minor Project that are of equal importance: education and community.

#### EDUCATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Last year, St. Stephen's students learned about archaeology and the Aventinus Minor (the "Smaller Aventine"), the hill our school is located on, from AUR intern Giuliana Trinchieri. Giuliana taught about the history of archaeology, archaeological methods, stratigraphy, and the topography of the Aventine and the Aventinus Minor Project. She took the City of Rome 1 and 2 students in their grade 9 and grade 10 history classes on field trips to explore the neighborhood. This spring, we are again fortunate to have an AUR intern, Ana Sofia Meneses, who is introducing our students to archaeology, cultural heritage, excavation and survey techniques, the history of the Aventine, and, of course, the Aventinus Minor Project. As a summative assessment for this unit, the students will create podcasts about the history and archaeology of the Smaller Aventine, the hill's cultural heritage, and, more generally, about archaeology

as a science and its myriad related fields. These podcasts will be published on the soon-to-be-launched Aventinus Minor Project website. Ana Sofia will also be our first contact during the field trips to the archaeological site with our students in May/June.

A second educational experience that we have added to the curriculum this year are workshops by Esmeralda Lundius. Esme is a St Stephen's alumna (SSS 2010) and our Boarding Activities Coordinator. She is an archaeologist and Egyptologist by training. Elsewhere in this Cortile magazine, you can read an article from her hand about her workshops on scientific methods in archaeology, both the theory and the practice, in the Science 1 and 2 classes.

In addition to the freshmen and sophomores who take part in the Aventinus Minor Project through lessons and workshops in their history and science classes, three juniors will be involved in the project as well this year. Marko, Phoebe, and Thomas expressed an interest in staying involved because they understood what an incredible opportunity the Aventinus Minor Project offers to get to know the Aventine better—both the history and archaeology of the hill and the current community inhabiting it. They will also be able to further polish their research and writing skills and become more knowledgeable about proper excavation techniques and applied sciences in archaeology.







## COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY

In the UK, community archaeology is defined as ‘archaeology by the people, for the people, and about the people’, and it is quite common nowadays. This type of archaeology is not widespread yet in Italy, and that is why it is so important and exciting that it is one of the three pillars that the Aventinus Minor Project rests on. It is designed as a community archaeology project so that it will not only benefit scholars and academics but everyone who wants to learn about the history and archaeology of the Aventine and, through material culture, about past human societies: St Stephen’s students and their families, St Stephen’s alumni, AUR undergraduates in archaeology and classics, AUR alumni, people living on the Aventine (including the elderly at the Istituto Santa Margherita) and anyone who is interested and would like to be part of it.

The really interesting part of this is that in the most recent scholarship on community archaeology, there is a heavy focus on community identity. According to Sweeney, the concept of the community seems to be vital to the way we understand human societies, both past and present, and the way we might want to shape future human society.

Giving our students the opportunity to reflect on this will be a powerful experience. Through public outreach, we can present the archaeological findings to non-archaeologists. This will happen at open days during which people can visit the archaeological site, by means of presentations or exhibitions in a public space, through visits to local schools, etc. In some cases, community archaeology projects are even offering fully-fledged outreach programs.

With the Aventinus Minor Project, the sky’s the limit. Whether one looks at the scientific side of this urban archaeology project or at its educational or community components, it is a project brimming with potential. Over the past two years, it has grown so tremendously that it can be daunting at times to imagine where we will be a few years down the road (but daunting in a good way!). I can only say that on a personal level, for a classicist who all throughout high school hesitated between studying classics or archaeology, the Aventinus Minor Project is a dream come true. And as a teacher that is part of a group of invaluable colleagues, both at St Stephen’s and at AUR, that is stewarding the project; it was something that kept me going during the difficult moments of the pandemic. Let’s continue developing the Aventinus Minor Project for the benefit of all.

### Before you turn the page...

The Aventinus Minor Project is entirely donor-funded. Donors are affiliated with The American University of Rome and St Stephen’s School.

To support the Aventinus Minor Project, please contact our Director of Development:

Allison Kemmis-Price  
([allison.kemmis-price@ssssrome.it](mailto:allison.kemmis-price@ssssrome.it))



PART V:

# Celebrating the Core Value of Creativity

BY MOIRA EGAN, TEACHER OF CREATIVE WRITING

**C**reative Writing Teacher Moira Egan is extremely pleased to introduce these pieces by students in the Spring Semester's Creative Writing Classes. A wide and wonderful gamut is represented here, including works inspired by works of literature or students' artwork, the classic yet fun form of ovillejos, and beautiful translations from the Hindi and Chinese.





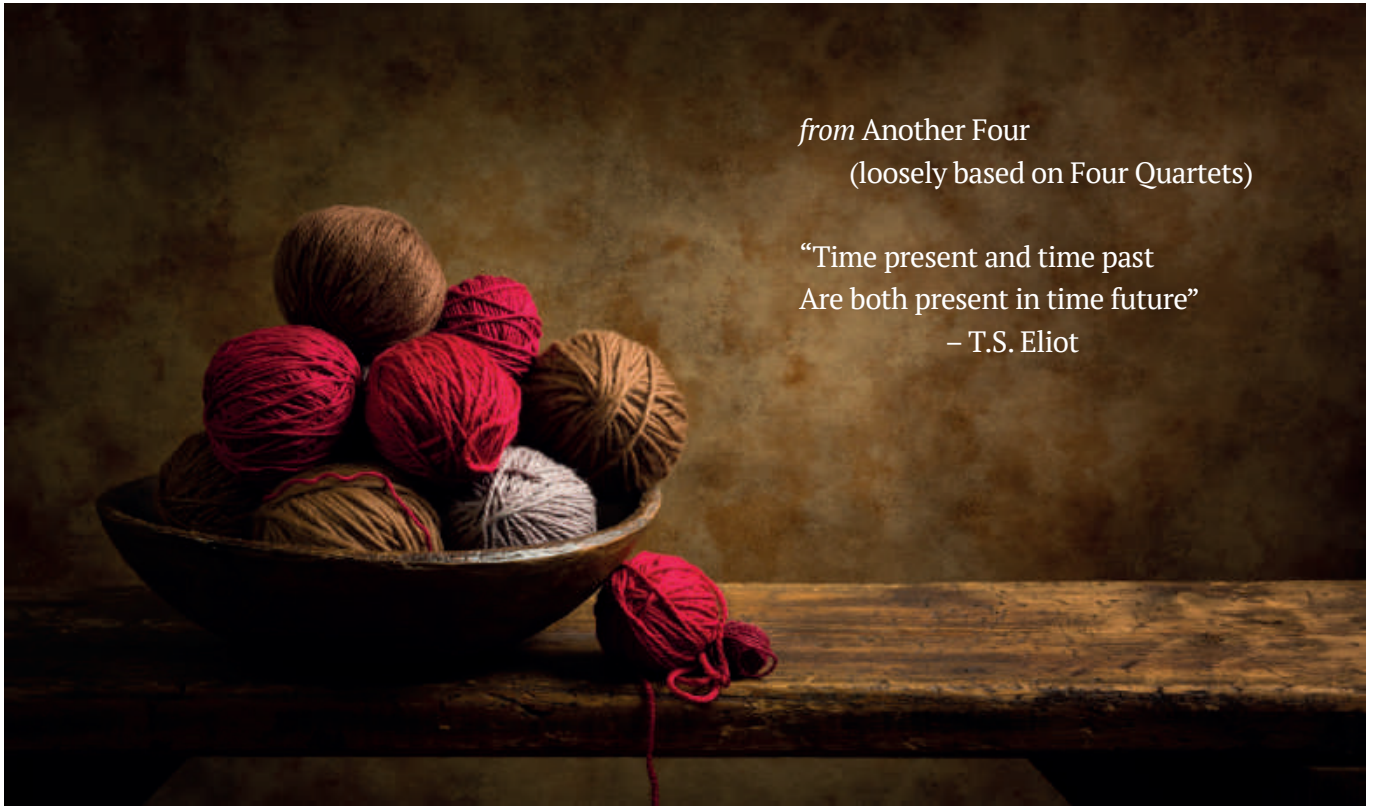
## “AFTER”

FEATURING WORKS INSPIRED BY  
OTHER LITERATURE, VISUAL ARTS,  
OR SIMPLY THE SENSE OF ... AFTER.



# Quartet II: A Painting

RAPHAEL H., CLASS OF 2025



*from Another Four*  
(loosely based on Four Quartets)

“Time present and time past  
Are both present in time future”  
– T.S. Eliot

The threads of millennia are woven  
Walking balls of yarn and dust meander along their  
crumbling bridges  
Into the dark beyond  
The needles they carry drag through the ether at their  
feet  
And new bridges appear  
Crossing the gap between death gained and life lost  
Throw yourself into the gaping mouth between and find  
purpose

I will guide you down through the void  
We will guide you all  
Bring your hands, bring your skills, limited though they  
may be  
And as you fall, for you will forever, until forever ends  
Weave a tapestry

Come, observer, for the writing on the wall spins words  
Listen to the crying, the screaming  
Breathe in the fumes and the pungent smell of time  
future’s victims  
Let your mind rest on the fact that you are already one of  
them

Read it through your tears  
Warn the wrinkled sword,  
the brain, of what has been  
Hold the walls of time past, keep time present from time  
future  
Where, in the waves of null, Ilun presides  
Keep her close to your heart, or lose your organs  
Have them ripped from your chest, consumed by the  
ones who drill in the dark  
And blind more than the eyes with the fiery light  
Not of heaven, no, that creature was burnt at the stake  
the day speech died  
And the day the words were written  
On the crumbling wall, riddled with bullet holes, on a  
cold, bright april morrow,  
Where the clocks strike Thirteen,  
And times past tick on.

So before you go,  
Toss me a thought  
Because I’ll stay by your side, my dear child.  
And always will.



# Mending

ILARIA C., CLASS OF 2022



a golden shovel  
after "Separation"  
- W.S. Merwin

I weave your  
presence into a red quilt,  
absence  
of mind. Have you eaten? Has  
the sky rained and gone?  
I am finishing the crimson,  
through  
with ruby. Do you need the quilt,  
or me?

# Storm

NATALIE S., CLASS OF 2022

After Harmony at Last by Luna dB,  
Class of 2022



They sit hand in hand in the sea  
of clouds colored purple

Waltz on these puffs  
that burrowed deep into your  
head  
like pleasant cobwebs

Nothing outside

The red queen sits in her purple  
basins  
with fire hair  
She steams the puffs  
that water

Funny how she  
shields us from the storm

Fire trails  
gold drops fall from the sky

I meet you at duskbreak.

# Two Lovers, Two Minds

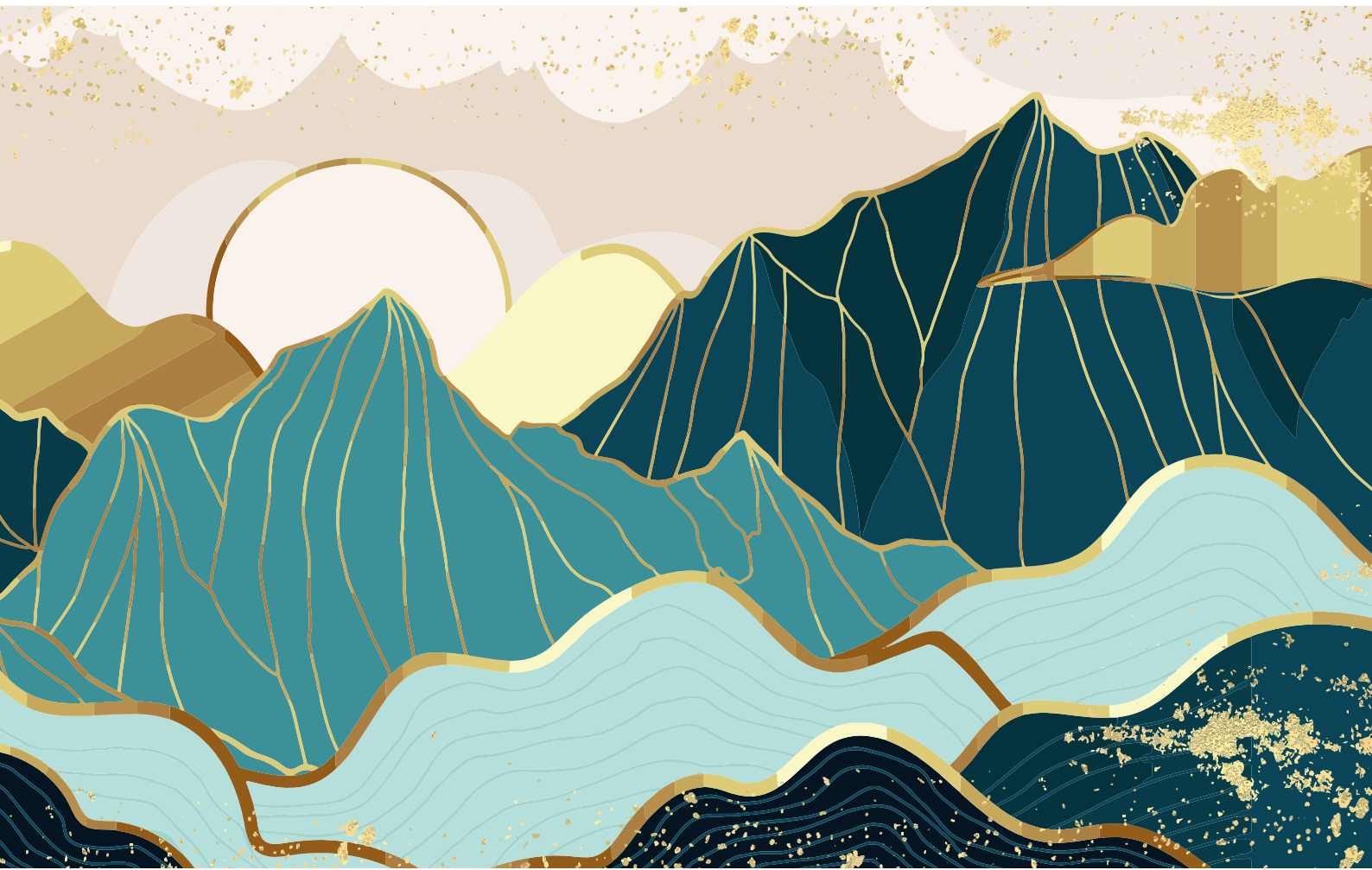
FLAVIA T., CLASS OF 2025

One bench, one bridge, one bed,  
we share physically.  
Our eyes fighting desperately to  
look at each other,  
Our hearts not letting our hug  
go, their arms wrapped tightly  
together.  
Trying to hold each other's hand,  
only to be divided by the sweat  
that builds up.  
Your silhouette dominates your  
melancholic features.

**Do we really love each other?  
Or have we lost our touch in  
affection?**

The sound of our footsteps  
creating their own conversation,  
filling up the silence that lingers.  
Devoting our time and pleasure  
to the people we love,  
But sadly, we happen to not be  
any of those people.  
The wind howling our names  
through the ditch, the void  
which we have created ourselves.  
Not even cupid can solve the  
misery that lies secretly,  
For our spirits have awakened  
and chosen to part.





# Perfect, American English

SOPHIA T., CLASS OF 2025

Because there is such thing as sacrifice,  
the woman will dream  
of gold mountains & swelling hills  
& bright little hopes. Heimong she says,  
the land across the ocean will have  
good food & good opportunities and  
most importantly  
people who look just like her. *Danhai*  
she will say later,  
longing for pearl river deltas &  
wishing she were not a yellow duckling swimming  
in a pond of ugly, hating swans for  
*Keouidei* she explains,  
speak perfect American English  
and she  
does not.

American English,  
is a language of humiliation  
if you have an accent you are dumb & if you use your  
mother tongue you are dumb &  
if you are different in any way you are dumb & suddenly  
the woman, who was—is—very smart  
is suddenly very, very dumb.

*Deemgai* she asks,  
do foreign words weigh like foreign rocks & the act of  
reading books drift  
so far out of her closed, reaching palms. The woman is  
not lonely  
foreignness is common, racism more so—  
but *keouilum* sometimes  
why her own daughters do not want to talk like her & are  
ashamed  
to eat what she eats & go where she goes.  
The woman now dreams  
of pearl river deltas & mud-eating catfish &  
mountains that shine like jade rather than gold. Yet,  
she remains, *awzidou* she says,  
for there is such a force as family and  
because there is such as a thing,  
as sacrifice.



“

## ¡OVILLEJOS!

THE OVILLEJO FORM IS CREDITED TO MIGUEL DE CERVANTES. IT IS A FAVORITE AMONG STUDENTS AND CREATIVE WRITING TEACHERS, INCLUDING ST. STEPHEN'S SCHOOL'S OWN MOIRA EGAN. MS EGAN HAS A RULE, AS A MATTER OF FACT, THAT SHE NEVER ASSIGNS A WRITING PROMPT UNLESS SHE HAS DONE ONE OF THEM HERSELF. INDEED, SHE HAD NEVER WRITTEN AN OVILLEJO. INSPIRED BY SOPHIA'S TACO TUESDAY EXPLOVILLEJO AND A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF "GIOVEDÌ GNOCCHI," SHE FINALLY WROTE HER OWN OVILLEJO (OR GNOVILLEJO), WHICH APPEARS BELOW.

A FORMAL EXPLANATION FROM SOPHIA T.S.: "AN OVILLEJO IS A SPANISH POETIC FORM THAT IS MADE UP OF 3 RHYMING COUPLETS AND A FINAL QUATRAIN. THE LONGER LINES ARE 8 SYLLABLES. THE LAST LINE OF THE QUATRAIN CONSISTS OF LINES 2, 4, AND 6 (BREWER, WRITER'S DIGEST). WHEN I TRIED TO WRITE AN OVILLEJO, I ACCIDENTALLY ADDED AN EXTRA COUPLET! MS. EGAN ENCOURAGED ME TO GO WITH IT, AND SHE CLEVERLY CAME UP WITH THE NAME 'EXPLOVILLEJO.'"

# Explovillejo on a Taco Tuesday

SOFIA T.S., CLASS OF 2024

Tuesdays go all the way to six  
The clock ticks,  
But the hand inches, takes its time  
I write a rhyme  
Then through hunger, my mind  
wallows  
On tacos,  
And I look on what I have done  
For fun  
My explovillejo is done  
And I am happy now, not tired  
For I have accomplished to what I  
aspired  
The clock ticks, I write a rhyme on tacos, for fun.



# Gender Neutral

SARA H., CLASS OF 2023

Chase a word hopping down  
a page,  
bird in a cage  
flies far from grammatical  
rules  
*How cruel!*  
This bird escapes tradition;  
Vile ambition,  
You fly without my  
permission.  
"What's the bird's name –  
what word?" you say  
I present to you the  
pronoun "They"  
Bird in a cage, how cruel;  
vile ambition





# The Expedition

DEREK M.B., CLASS OF 2025

A long and arduous expedition up Mount Gill;  
but they will.

A storm is coming, it almost seems impossible to go further.  
Never!

They will persist and succeed! It will really set the tone when they  
reach home.

They will be awarded with trophies polished in chrome.  
The mountain looks all so beautiful in its might,  
and the storm seems to be clearing out of sight.  
But they will never reach home.



## Gnovillejo

(AFTER SOFIA T.S.)

If it's Thursday, it must be gnocchi.  
Is it hokey?

Oh, come on, they're so delicious.  
I love dishes

that seem to have a mission,  
that reflect tradition.

Prior to Friday's fishy inanition,  
enjoy this carb-load, born of religion,  
served with pesto, sugo — even pigeon.

Is it hokey? I love dishes that reflect tradition.





# Longing Thoughts, Silent Night

LIXUAN D., CLASS OF 2024

*This is a translation of a poem written by  
the Tang Dynasty Chinese poet Li Bai (701-762CE)*

静夜思

【唐】李白

床前明月光，疑是地上霜。

举头望明月，低头思故乡。

Shimmering and twinkling, spilling on the window sill, the moon.  
Is it a frost jacket for the floor, newly made, by the moon?  
I can't help but raise my head, towards the moon.  
How bright, outside the window, up in the sky, shines the moon!  
Deep in thought, I bow my head, away from the moon.  
Longing for my homeland, distant, like the moon.

# कायनात

*Poem originally written by Gulzar  
in Hindi:*

कायनात  
बस चंद करोड़ों सालों में  
सूरज की आग बुझेगी जब  
और राख उड़ेगी सूरज से  
जब कोई चांद न डूवेगा  
और कोई जमीं न उभरेगी  
तब ठंडा बुझा इक कोयला-सा  
टुकड़ा ये जमीं का घूमेगा  
भटका-भटका  
मद्धम खकिसली रोशनी में!  
में सोचता हूं उस वक्त अगर  
कागज़ पे लिखी इक नज़्म कहीं उड़ते-उड़ते  
सूरज में गिरे  
सूरज फिर से जलने लगे!

# Universe

*Translated into English (from a  
website):*

In a billion years, when  
The sun's fire dwindles  
And ash blows across its surface  
When the moon will no longer  
wane  
And the land not rise  
When like a cold, burnt-out  
piece of coal  
This earth revolves, lost in its  
gyre,  
Trailing a dying sepia glow  
I think then  
If a poem written on a piece of  
paper  
Was to waft along  
And perchance land on the sun,  
The sun would ignite again!

*My rendition:*

# When the Moon Will No Longer Wane

UMA S., CLASS OF 2024

The tears that skim your face, shimmer when  
You glance upon the  
mystic, marvelous, moon.

Trying to find or will,  
that peace of mind, which no  
-one else can offer you any longer.

You know what they say;  
the light is ever brighter when the crescent wanes.





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PART VI:

# Celebrating St. Stephen's Faculty

LUCY CLINK, 2-D AND IB ART TEACHER

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**Where are you from, and what brought you to Rome?**

I'm from Arlington, Virginia, right outside of Washington, D.C. I came to Rome as a graduate student for the second year of an MFA program at the Tyler School of Art, which has a program in Rome where I still teach, actually. So I came to do an MFA, and then I went back to the United States. I came back to Italy, and shortly thereafter, I found a job at St. Stephen's and Temple University. So I've worked at these two jobs for many years.

**You have been teaching drawing and painting at St. Stephen's for 35 years; that's an incredible commitment; congratulations. What has kept you coming back every year?**

Honestly, I never imagined I would have any jobs anywhere for that many years. And I have to say, it wasn't always a hundred percent, sometimes it was seventy-five percent love and other times it was less, sometimes it was more [laughs] but let me say that it won out as a great place to work with a friendly and intelligent community, a fantastic art department, a beautiful

physical space, and the greatest thing, as a teacher in the art department, was that we were left alone to teach as we liked and that was a tremendous freedom. The students were always pretty enthusiastic, plus extremely interesting and intelligent. They're teenagers, so they can get out of hand and go wild and rebel and all the rest. And so they should, but mostly it was fun, and that's its own reward, and then they get involved, and you get involved, and that's it.

**Did you know from a young age that you wanted to become an artist?**

I mean, it is the kind of thing that you know. I remember in my neighborhood in Arlington, I had a little pack of friends, and we would go out, and I would give them drawing lessons as an 11-year-old! What a nerve! What did I know? Not much, but they liked it. Through high school, I always did art and then applied to an undergraduate school with a great art department at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. And I just was happy, I just really felt I was lucky in that way to always love art, you know?



Small Works  
2019-2020





**It sounds like you knew right away.**

Yes, I mean, there are many other things I love too, but it never occurred to me to do anything else really as a profession. I have always loved looking at pictures and making pictures of all sorts. So that was nice.

**On the subject of your art, your oil paintings, works on paper, and mixed media art feature many landscapes and interior scenes; what is it about natural and domestic landscapes that attract you?**

Certainly, the landscape around Rome and also, as an artist, I like to work from direct observation. There were plenty of places around Rome and in some gardens where I could go and paint and set things up and then leave them there and then come back the next day and do those kinds of projects, and I would also work from my balcony. I like the observational, and that's sort of linked to photography, another part of the picture-making business that I am involved in. Photography is really just looking and thinking about composition and light. And then, of course, my art is informed by countless numbers of other artists whose work I adore from just about any century. When people say, "well, who are your favorite artists?" Then I say, "which century?" So, [my practice] is informed by love of art and informed by the place I live.

**It sounds like your art has been very much informed by living in Rome.**

Yes, and there's also the light and the color. Those things seem like the standard-issue answers, but once you start down that road, you're endlessly fascinated by it. That certainly was the truth for someone like Morandi.

**I love Morandi...**

He's a tough one because people who are maybe not in the business at first, say, "so what, there are a bunch of pots." But it's this sort of love of looking and the little nuances and bits and pieces that can take a lifetime to really understand—both for him as an artist and maybe even for us as viewers.

**That's a beautiful way of thinking about Morandi and this idea of dedicating one's life to the study of a single object or group of objects in his case. I have to ask you, since you brought up the light in Rome, do you feel as an artist that Rome has a light that's different from other places?**

I think the truth is that the Mediterranean in general and certainly the south of France and Provence and all those places have a beautiful light, but then you get to the North, in the Nordic countries, and there are great painters there too. I think wherever you are, you find that thing that suits you, but I have to say, the light is different here. When I go to Arlington, and I paint there, it's different. Here, the days are long; the sky is often clear. I was walking here today, and I'm looking at the sky; it's midday, and I'm thinking, "it's so high contrast. How can it be so high contrast? Why is it like this?" So there's a general appraisal in looking at the landscape, the buildings, the architecture, and if you go south, to Puglia, where the white buildings are so beautiful against the blue sky, the light is different.

**You're right; the light in Rome creates this incredibly high contrast.**

I would say it does. It's so thrilling. Italians are so funny, especially Romans; when it's a rainy day, they take it as a personal insult.



**I know exactly what you mean. So, remaining on the subject of Rome and thinking back on your time at St. Stephen's, were there moments that helped you grow or inspired you to see something differently?**

I can't say there's any one particular thing, but I have also to say that over the long arc of time, after teaching a long time, it's sort of funny when you get ready not to teach anymore because you feel like you've suddenly understood it. And that may be true with many things in life. I think, being older, I've tried to be





more patient, and I've tried to say, you know, these are young people and, especially with what we've been through in the past couple of years, they really need to relax a littlebit. So I had to sort of monitor my strictness and my desire for everyone to get to work and do the job because these are young human beings who really are more interested in each other than anything else in the world at the moment. So it was a kind of learning curve of patience, but it wasn't one specific thing. You kind of grow along with your students. I'm sure you feel that too.

#### **Absolutely.**

When you're younger, it's tricky because they kind of want you to be a peer, but you're not the peer, although you look young, and you have to stand your ground and make sure that you have authority. It's kind of a game of "who has the authority," and I think with young people, especially this age and especially with these students, you know, they know a lot, they're very smart, and they will let you know what you made a mistake, and I'll say, "thank you. I appreciate that." [Laughs] And I didn't always; I wasn't always like that.





“ YOU KNOW I’VE ALWAYS SAID THAT THESE ST. STEPHEN’S STUDENTS I’VE HAD OVER THE YEARS DRAW MUCH BETTER THAN ANY UNIVERSITY STUDENT FROM THE GET-GO

**That’s hard to do. Of course, we are constantly learning from our students. I wonder, what is the most unexpected thing you have learned from a student or group of students?**

I think the most unexpected thing I learned was that they want to do it their way when it comes to the visual arts. You know, you say, “no, draw it this way or always draw the whole form and then try it this way,” and a lot of times you make them do it because you know that’s the right approach, and they’ll go back to their own approach. So I respect that, even if I don’t always agree but with them at this age, I’ve learned to allow them to have their way sometimes. I get my way sometimes too. It can’t be all, “I’m the teacher, and you have to do it this way.” I have to respect that; everybody’s kind of idiosyncratic about these things. [As a teacher] you try to find the way into where they feel like they can do something because it’s a form of empowerment to say to them, “that’s pretty good what you did, and it’s not what I would have advised.” And that’s hard to do.

**And you, as the teacher, can be surprised along the way.**

You know I’ve always said that these St. Stephen’s students I’ve had over the years draw much better than any university student from the get-go. They have a natural skill in drawing. I don’t know if it’s because they’re more relaxed or they’re still young enough that they’re not inhibited so much, but they have a real sense of drawing that some of my university students don’t have.

**In your thirty-five tenure at the school, I can’t imagine it has always been easy, especially these past few years with the global pandemic. Have there been moments when you have doubted whether education was the right path for you, and if so, how did you move past that doubt?**

Well, yeah, sometimes I thought, why am I doing this? You know, there were days when I would think, “this is just like pandemonium.” I would joke and say, “this is riot control. It’s not teaching,” and there were times when I would have to send some to the Headmaster and that kind of stuff, so yes, there were those moments, but on the whole, I have enjoyed it.

**What accomplishments from your time at St. Stephen’s are you most proud of?**

That’s a hard one. I’ve had shows here; I won a few fellowships and those moments when I could do the work-life balance. One thing in the Art Department that is different from the other departments is that there was always this idea that you could have a part-time job that you’re very devoted to--and I have been all these years--and still have time for your own thoughts and your artistic life to exist so that in itself is an accomplishment that that balance has been maintained in all the years that I’ve taught here and I assume it will be maintained for my colleagues because we all love what we do and we’re happy to teach but that balance is important.

**And I imagine being an artist makes you a better teacher.**

Well yes because I’m thinking about; what happens with the students is that I’ll work on something and then say, “I’m gonna try this out on them” or “let’s try these materials” and we work through it together. Then as we’re doing it I’ll say, “We should have done it this way,” but I think all people do that in teaching, that’s not particular to art. You have a class of fifteen students who are all doing variations on a theme and that is very exciting to see that type of collaboration.

**And on the subject of your art, I was wondering, how has teaching at St. Stephen’s and the experience of living in Rome influenced your artistic production?**

That is almost impossible to quantify. I kept saying I was going to move to Naples or even Venice, I wasn’t gonna leave the country, but you know, I thought I might go to another town but I think it was just so lucky that I landed here and, it wasn’t like a life plan, but it kind of presented itself when I was in my late twenties and I thought, well, why don’t I just stay here? And one thing led to another and you know, and even students would always say, “why did you come to Rome?” And I’d say, “well, I was a graduate student,” and they’ll say, “oh, well you must have fallen in love with an Italian and gotten married,” and I would say, “no, I didn’t, I mean I had boyfriends but I didn’t get married until very late in life.” It’s kind of funny; that’s not why I stayed.

**Everyone always assumes it always has to be an Italian man!**

That’s an old-fashioned idea, isn’t it? I guess that’s still floating around in your generation too.



**It is. It's as if no one believes you can fall in love with a country.**

You know, for all the bureaucracy, all the things that go wrong and drive you nuts, and all the rest, it's so worth it. You can get on a train and go to Venice, you can go to Capri, it's just such a privilege. So that has been a huge influence, constantly photographing it, painting it, drawing it and it's never finished. So, yes, Rome has had a huge influence. It's a kind of collage of many years of experience and it's hard to say precisely what it is; I would never be able to say that and that's why I love Morandi. He taught and he was a very good teacher. He had three sisters that took care of him and a close-knit circle of friends but he didn't really go anywhere. I love the idea of him being there, with his work.

He had a circuit that was pretty small, even physically, I mean he would travel, but not much. I love that idea and, in a way, I came to Rome and sort of did that. I didn't really expand out and travel to other places. I go to Washington, D.C., but I'll go to see the Italian paintings at the National Gallery. How perverse is that?

**That's exactly what I do every time I go home to Washington, the first thing I do. I had never really thought about it before. That is pretty funny.**

"Gotta go see the Italians!" --As if I hadn't gotten enough of them just living here. So, the influence and the joy and love of it have been immense.

**Could you share a piece of advice with our graduating class of 2022?**

They are so wonderful; I've had many of them as my students over the years. I don't have any big lofty advice but I have all the simple old-fashioned grandmotherly advice, which is: "give everybody the benefit of the doubt." We all say that's a good idea, but it's really a good idea. Try to wait 24 hours before you react or send the email about something that upsets you. Practice common courtesy. If you can give your seat up or smile at someone or help out in some way, that common act of kindness or courtesy is powerful. See how you can make the moment a little bit better for someone else. Also be kind to yourself, that's all. They already have been given lots of advice and they have the education and the ability to get on in life and enjoy it.



PART VII:

# Our Life Online



# The Wonderful World of Gaming

BY FRANCESCO SAVIOTTI '23

In gaming, there are several social and emotional advantages. Although online games are a form of entertainment, with the support and guidance of parents, they can help children develop creativity, cultivate relationships with friends, and improve strategic thinking. Gaming can also help children develop the perseverance to achieve their goals, increase resilience and improve their communication skills so that they know how to respect the views of others. Immersive games require strategy and problem-solving skills to win and require players to remember and absorb a lot of information. Playing these types of games frequently can help improve children's short-term and long-term memory and help the brain process information faster. In addition, the game can capture players' imaginations and help them focus on specific tasks. Fortnite and Roblox are good examples.

## COLLABORATIONS

Fortnite often partners with other gaming platforms, such as Halo and God of War, to increase user experience. And sometimes, Fortnite is used by other sectors, such as the music industry, for the same reason. I've experienced a live concert of the American rapper Travis Scott on the platform. These collaborations are also called crossovers. In Fortnite, there have been many of these crossovers with Marvel, DC Comics, Star Wars, Marshmello, Ariana Grande, Ferrari, and others.

## INNOVATIVE SCHEMES

A cool innovation coming to the gaming industry is facial recognition. 3D scanning and facial recognition technology will allow platforms to create a portrait or life-like character of yourself in the game world. You will be able to create a custom Avatar that looks just like you or transfer your own expressions to other digital creations. Most importantly, the Intel® RealSense™ 3D camera allows developers to scan seventy-eight different points on the face to create games that adapt to gamers' emotions. For example, a few grimaces on the game screen means that the system will immediately reduce the difficulty of the game.

## DISADVANTAGES

Although online gaming has many benefits for young people, it is important to be aware of some risks that may affect their health. Games can help children feel part of a community, but they can also give young people an out or a sense of escape from the real world. If there is no guidance on what games to play, children may face risks, such as bullying or game addiction in some extreme situations. Some kids may have been told by their parents never to talk with strangers online because they might be dangerous, and this is wise advice. On the flip side, I have heard more than one story where people have met in online video games and become close friends. After years of playing together and never seeing each other face to face, some have actually met in person and become best buddies. There's even a story of a married couple who got to know each other through a game called Rocket League. When it comes to gaming, the bottom line for kids is to use common sense and seek parental advice when necessary.





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PART VIII:

# Sports at St. Stephen's

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# Why Exercise is Critical for Maintaining a Healthy Mind

BY ALEXANDER CARBON '22

Exercise, be it aerobic or anaerobic, is generally perceived as a positive activity to partake in; yet what does the science say when it comes to its effects on mood, mental health, and general well-being? Before we tackle this question, it is important to define mental well-being, which, in a clinical setting, can be determined through the use of biomarkers in conjunction with analyses of behavior and symptoms. Mental disorders such as depression, alongside anxiety and other conditions, have been particularly prevalent during the Covid-19 pandemic, with rates of depression increasing by up to 25% worldwide (World Health Organization). Depression and anxiety, which cause a “persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest” (Khan), have been attributed to imbalances in certain biomarkers as well as psychosocial factors, those being mainly the monoamine group

of neurotransmitters (dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin) and stress hormones such as cortisol and alpha-amylase (Humer et al.). The influence of lifestyle factors, including diet, stress, and physical activity, have been studied rigorously in the scientific literature, with the current consensus pointing towards an abundance of benefits attributed to exercise itself.

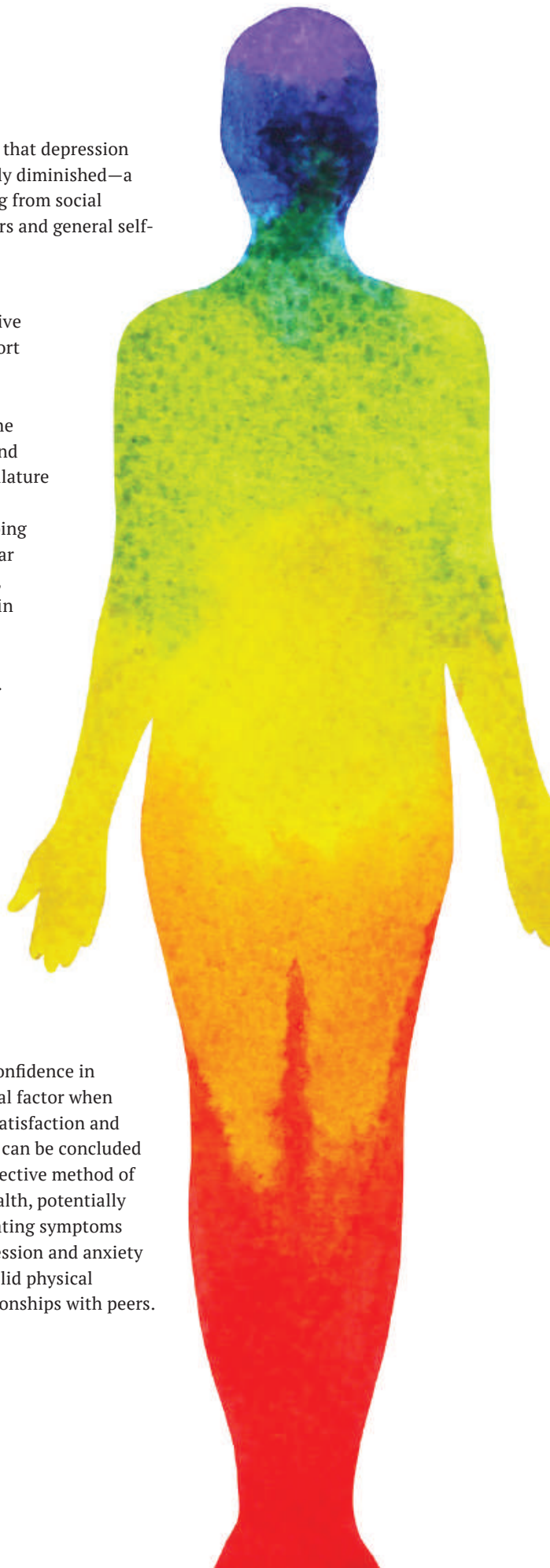
Physical activity adopts two main forms: aerobic exercise (cardio) and resistive anaerobic exercise, which puts more stress on the musculature and induces hypertrophy (muscular development/growth). Both forms of activity have been demonstrated to positively affect the aforementioned biomarkers, with steady-state cardio showing particular benefits regarding cardiovascular biomarkers and modulation of monoamine neurotransmitters. The dopamine

(DA) and serotonin (5-HT) systems (commonly referred to as endorphins or “feel-good chemicals”) have been shown to upregulate during exercise (Lin and Kuo), resulting in a general improvement in mood and well-being. It has to be noted that overtraining can, however, cause adverse effects due to this upregulation, as overstimulation of these systems results in long-term downregulation and thus exacerbation of negative symptoms. Regarding exercise’s influence on the norepinephrine system, the literature suggests potential anxiolytic effects (Sciolino and Holmes). The long durations of stress endured by the body while performing exercise cause temporary elevations in cortisol and norepinephrine, which results in adaptation, a protective mechanism that is efficacious at reducing the effects of anxiety (Lin and Kuo). Furthermore, when it comes to team sports or collaborative exercise, studies in young



athletes demonstrate that depression and anxiety are greatly diminished—a result likely stemming from social connections with peers and general self-improvement.

A final note when considering the positive mental benefits of sport is the physiological benefits attributed to sustained practice. The energy expenditure and recruitment of musculature in exercise are highly beneficial for developing a strong cardiovascular and muscular system, potentially resulting in body recompositions if supplemented with proper diet and sleep. The necessity for athletic performance in sports may be a motivating factor for adopting positive lifestyle changes, which aggregate the improvements in biomarkers and thus mental well-being. Lastly, an improvement in body composition is likely to increase confidence in an individual, a critical factor when considering general satisfaction and happiness. Overall, it can be concluded that exercise is an effective method of improving mental health, potentially diminishing or mitigating symptoms associated with depression and anxiety while developing a solid physical foundation and relationships with peers.



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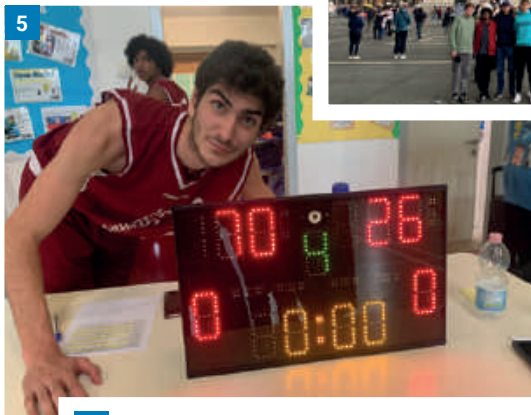
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# Sports lens



## Basketball Home Game Against St. Georges

(images 1 > 3)

## Basketball Tournament Milan 2022

St. Stephen's boys basketball went undefeated in Milan!!

3 straight wins.

Scores: 34-24, 49-26, 70-26.

(images 4 > 6)

## Mediterranean Cup 2022

Congratulations to the boys and girls soccer teams on their second place elite gold in the Mediterranean Cup. Congrats also to Pietro DP and Annie T. top scorers of the tournaments.

(images 7)

## Running (images 8 > 10)



# The Fire Inside Me

BY CLOTILDE CITRANI '23

I frequently question what people are passionate about. And, I mean like insanely in love and an ardent passion towards a sport, music, subject, person, or anything; a kind of passion that lights a fire inside you. This concept of passion is something to be proud of. If someone is able to love something to the point where it becomes a passion, they should be really satisfied and proud as it is not easy. When it comes to committing to someone or something, difficulties, struggles and frustrations are bound to occur with the process. People can be torn down so simply that it is hard sometimes to stand up again.

When I think about a good feeling, something I'm passionate about, the first things to pop up in my mind are the emotions I feel when I'm at the rink, and I slide on the ice with my skates. The freedom when I vault on the ice is something indescribable. Figure skating has been, especially in the past year, fundamental for handling the lonely days of quarantine. It fulfilled me physically and mentally during such a difficult time. When you see someone skating, it seems so easy, as if the skates do everything, while it is the exact opposite when training. It's difficult to find the perfect poise of the subtle blade on the thin ice, but, as always, when you put your best effort into it, you reach some

goals which set you up for new, even more difficult challenges. Sports help challenge yourself and reach unthinkable goals; this is what I learnt from ice skating. It is hard always to be motivated to continue, especially when something turns out to be harder than expected, but with constant effort, you can achieve everything. It is always a great sensation when you manage to do something you have been trying to do infinite times; it makes you feel great.

Skating is a very demanding sport, to say the least. Skaters have to be perfect in every sense. Every move, every spin, every jump must be perfect, potent, gentle, and well-performed all at the

same time. Skating is not only physically strenuous; it is one immense mental game. The terror of falling can hold even the most qualified skaters from trying to launch their jumps, but at the same time, a thing that truly motivates me is getting up after a fall because, from that, you learn and understand how to improve. This sport made me realize how much I love challenges and the adrenaline of the risk. It has also shown me dedication is key to anything in life because if you want something that bad, you can work hard enough to achieve it. Skating is my passion, my deep love, my impulse to do the impossible, my struggle, and my beloved place to be. That is what makes a passion so hard to find.








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PART IX:

# Mental Health

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# The Impact of the Pandemic on the Mental Health of Adolescents

BY LUISA NANNINI, LCSW  
HEALTH AND WELLNESS COUNSELOR

Psychologist Erik Erickson in his theory of psychosocial development, posits that between the ages of approximately 12 and 18, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity and explore their independence. Adolescence is a period during which one is trying to figure oneself out and find a collocation for oneself in the world. This is often achieved through some level of exploration, experimentation, and sometimes transgression and risk-taking. Adolescents start to assess aspects they wish to incorporate into their identity and aspects they prefer to leave out. This developmental stage is also characterized by a sharper separation from parents, caregivers, and family; the peer group becomes the main point of reference. At the end of high school, many adolescents leave the family “nest” to continue this journey of self-discovery. Perhaps, they can define themselves for the first time less against the expectations or in comparison with their parents, siblings, and other family members

Adolescents require their peers to accomplish their separation-individuation task. The pandemic and its consequences – lockdowns, closures, social distancing, isolations - forced adolescents back into the “nest” and severely limited their contact and socialization with peers. Adolescents had to devise creative ways of being together while being apart, transform “social distancing” into a physical but not social distance, and maintain a sense of community while apart. If we think of the human body as a canvas upon which many of the explorations, discoveries, and conflicts of adolescence play out, adolescents had to find other spaces and avenues on or through which to leave their mark and express themselves, sometimes leading to an overuse of social media, smartphones and the internet.



The pandemic uncovered the fragility and vulnerability that mark this stage of psychosocial development, including the fact that adolescents are still developing positive coping skills and the ability to process difficult circumstances. It also exposed the infinite resilience that youth across the world possess and the ability all human beings have of reinventing themselves and adapting. For some adolescents, this time at home, away from peers and school, was a welcome respite from the gaze of their peers, the effort, awkwardness, and social anxiety that permeates their face-to-face interactions. Their computer screens provided an extra layer of protection, a comfortable shield or filter, which afforded them the freedom to finally interact with others in a more uninhibited, casual, and relaxed way. For others, school may represent a sort of refuge, and not having the physical, tangible, concrete in-person contact with peers, teachers, and the school building caused them to feel lost and disoriented. Some adolescents may have struggled more than others with the lack of routine and structure. Not being able to participate in public life and engage in activities outside of their homes caused many feelings of fear, frustration, sadness, anxiety, anger, and loneliness. Studies have shown that social connectedness, i.e., meaningful social interactions and supportive close relationships with family and peers based on trust and communication, engaging in positive and healthy behaviors like physical activity and healthy sleep may have functioned as protective factors for adolescents during the pandemic; while coping strategies such as video games may have served as a risk factor for negative mental health outcomes” (Cohen et al., 2021).

For parents whose jobs involve frequent traveling or long hours away from home, the pandemic may have provided an opportunity to strengthen their bond with their adolescent children but also gave more room for tension, conflict, and friction. In many cases, the mental health of adolescents was impacted by an increase in family and parental stress, with caregivers juggling working from home and homeschooling, facing job and financial insecurity, and other stressors brought about by the pandemic.

Youth and adults alike had to contend with individual and collective grief and loss (and in some cases, trauma), brought about by illness and death and the loss of a world as we knew it pre-COVID. Our assumptions, illusions, structures, routines, and habits were all being tested, and first and foremost, the illusions of safety, control, and certainty that allow us to navigate, somewhat seamlessly, a messy, chaotic world. As Andrea Hussong, professor and associate director of clinical psychology in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, reminds us, the pandemic reshaped development: “The COVID-19 pandemic is both a shared and a personal experience. Development is not so much delayed by the pandemic but reshaped by it. Rather than asking high school seniors to “go back to normal” — which returns them to their sophomore years — we need to ask them and the systems that serve them to recognize their new developmental path. Our work, in many ways, is charting that new developmental path, the risks and benefits that may come with that path, and the ways to support youth resilience and thriving as they travel that path” (Hussong, 2021).

For many, the pandemic provided a harsh reminder that we are owed and guaranteed nothing. This reminder has perhaps made it even scarier than it already is for many teens to venture out into the world and envision their future. “Concerns over the future, social isolation, a sense of limbo, and lack of control all contribute to what one London-based psychotherapist coined a mental health pandemic” (Kwai & Peltier, 2021, as cited in Beal, 2021, p.237). The pandemic lay bare deep political, social, economic, and racial inequalities. For some, however, it has also provided the

time and space to assess or reassess what is really important to them, the values they would like to be guided by, and what can be done away with. Perhaps, for some adolescents, it has been an opportunity to find more balance in their life, slow down, engage in hobbies, have some of the educational pressures removed, relax and get some much-needed rest. I am hopeful that it has allowed adolescents and their families to “declutter” and “recalibrate” their lives and make space for what really matters to them. In this way, the pandemic may have actually been of service to the natural, universal, and essential developmental task of building a sense of self—a task whose beauty lies in its imperfectness and the fact that it can never be completed.



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# To Thyself Be True

The importance of surrounding yourself with healthy people is knowing you are fine just by yourself if you don't find them

BY EMMA LEGALLE '23

Everyone knows the phrase, "You realize you truly love someone the moment that you lose them" well, I believe that the moment we are truly alone, we realize how much we desire and need great people by our side. When I say alone, I do not mean being physically by ourselves, but those moments in which you feel immensely lost and lonely even in a crowded room of people talking and laughing. In those moments, which sometimes, unfortunately, might not be so instant but might last days, weeks, months, or even years, you feel how much you crave healthy people and feel it in your soul. But what do I mean by this word, healthy? Is it somebody who has good values? Someone who does not drink, smoke, or abuse substances? Somebody who eats healthy? I'm referring to spiritually healthy people who profoundly connect to you, and their internal wellbeing is reflected in their choices. Because yes, there are individuals who are temporarily spiritually sick, there are no bad people, especially at this marvelous young age, where we learn, make mistakes, and discover. However, there are people who are bad for you, and the moment we realize this, we grow.

To thyself  
be true



In most cases, how we discover this is often extremely painful—sometimes we realize that it can be a best friend, a person we care about or have known for a long time, who is actually bad for us. You recognize that these “friends” are spiritually sick and probably in great pain. Perhaps they are insecure, angry, afraid, or anxious, and those traits are reflected in their behaviors which hurt others; that hurt you. They, of course, deserve the opportunity to heal, or sometimes, just to grow. But the time required for each of us to mature is not a straight line. Some people develop earlier than others. That does not make them better; they are merely at different stages of their lives. They also have the right to be who they are in that moment; they have the right to take the time they need to improve and become a better version of themselves, but without damaging you or bringing you down with them, because you, instead, have the right to feel like you are ready to be you.

What's more, there's truth to the adage that we become who we surround ourselves with. And you do not deserve to feel lonely or like something is wrong with you when you are in a room filled with people who are supposed to be your best friends. If you thought that the most challenging part was to come to that realization, you are wrong because I have been stuck in the stage where I was fully aware of how toxic the relationships in my life were but did not do anything about them. The hardest part is actually to let those people go. By doing that, you are putting yourself first, which may seem very strange and

unusual behavior for us, having always been conditioned to put others' happiness before our own.

But, the moment you do, you become sincere to yourself and the people surrounding you; you are doing them a favor, especially if that relationship makes you feel poorly. In that case, you are doing something natural and spontaneous, letting them go, and even if they do not realize that at the beginning, you are pushing them closer to becoming a better version of themselves. After that, an astonishing feeling will rise with that immense and expected pain, and it is a sentiment of relief. At first, you will almost feel guilty about that, but then you will understand that this was the right thing to do because you will be free. You might be alone, but you will feel lighter and unburdened.

So, if there is something that I want for you, dear reader, to get from this article, it is not to be afraid. Do not fear taking that step, no matter how hard or scary it might seem. Because that loneliness after “breaking up” those friendships will be necessary for you to rest and heal from that courageous action you took. And from there, I promise it will only get better. When you stop being afraid of losing someone that is not good for you anymore, you stop being afraid of being alone; you stop being fearful of going out of your comfort zone and getting to know people that actually inspire you. You become stronger and attract the healthy people to you, who will be your medicine in the hard times.





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PART X:

## Service Tributes

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# Supporting the Children of Idjwi

BY DR. HELEN POPE, FORMER CLASSICS TEACHER AND DIRECTOR OF THE DR. HELEN POPE LYCEUM

“

*“Providing a meal at school is a simple but concrete way to give poor children a chance to learn and thrive.” WFP*

Education has been my life and my passion. I have taught for more than four decades - small children, university students, adults, refugees, but mostly teenagers, and mainly at St. Stephen's. I consider myself very fortunate. My decision (taken at the age of 11) to live in Rome has brought me immeasurable riches. My thirty-five years at St. Stephen's gave me the opportunity to teach what I love in the city I love, plus many valued friendships. A chance meeting with Kizungu Hubert, the director of an orphanage I met in 2009 in war-ravaged Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), gave me a new purpose and direction to my life, but education has always remained an essential part of it.



I have returned just now (in March) from a two-week visit to the DRC, my twelfth trip in fourteen years. Covid took two away. I spent several days on Idjwi island on Lake Kivu, where I visited the poultry project, which students and faculty of St. Stephen's got off the ground some years ago. I checked in on our Agriculture for Pygmies initiative and the new Primary School, Idjwi Island Leadership Academy (IILA), established a couple of years ago by a Canadian colleague, Vicky English Pearson.

Some background about the island: Idjwi, also known as Africa's Forgotten Island, has been practically untouched by the conflicts that have taken place off and on for years around it—fighting in eastern Congo and genocide in Rwanda. It is the second-largest island on the continent. Idjwi is situated between

the two countries, is home to roughly three hundred thousand people, and is considered one of the world's poorest places; the average life expectancy is one of the lowest globally. One Harvard study put it at 26 years. Food insecurity has become critical with the doubling of the population in the past 25 years. Over half of the population does not have enough to eat. Malnutrition is one of the principal causes of death on the island. (HSPH, Harvard)

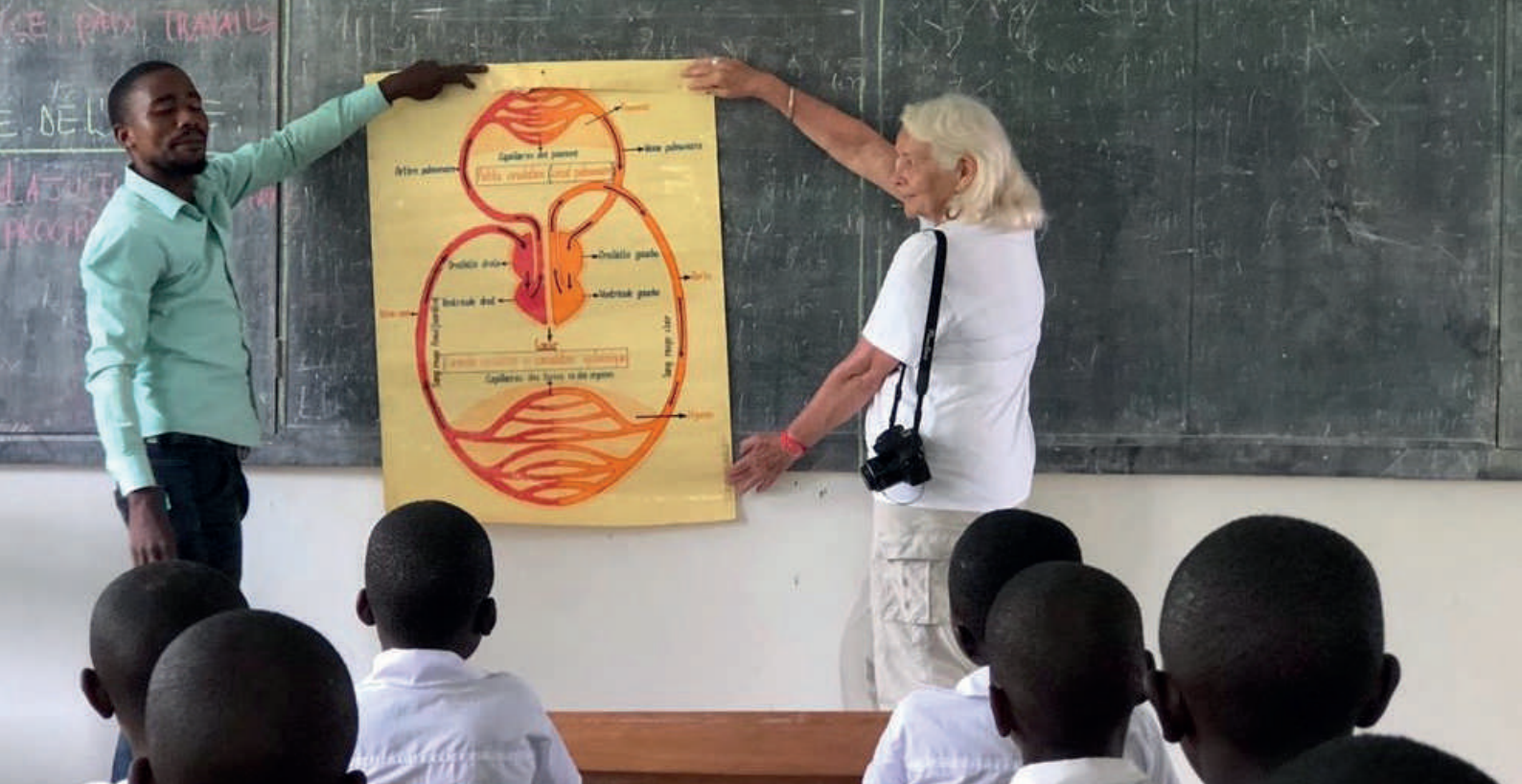
Alberto, my Neapolitan partner in Congo projects, and I received a tumultuous welcome to the school as we arrived by boat. Four hundred children, teachers, and locals crowded the shores to greet us, exploding with friendliness and warmth. As we approached the beautiful, new, solid, brick school amid the throngs of dancing, singing, laughing

kids, I thought back to my first visit to a school on Idjwi many years ago – kids with threadbare clothes, dirt floors, no desks or school equipment, holes in the walls (*see photo above*). How different this was! What an outstanding contribution to the life and the future of Idjwi.

I sat in on classes, and I observed the enthusiasm and sheer joy of the kids as they competed to give the correct answers. I admired the dedication and energy of the teachers, and I was deeply impressed by all that I saw. I felt proud to be part of this wonderful educational venture.

But then, as I spoke to the Headmaster at the very end of my visit, I learned that many of the children who live at some distance from the school must get up





at 4 am, walk up to 8 kilometers, have lessons from 7.20 am to 2.50 pm, then walk 8 kilometers home, arriving around 5 pm. None of the children or teachers have anything to eat or drink during this period. Some of the pygmy children (there are now 43 enrolled – a remarkable achievement) are often so weak from malnourishment that they do not have the strength to walk the distance every day.

Though Idjwi's people live in relative peace and stability, they are desperately poor. Nearly 3,000 die each year from preventable causes, but the island has received little attention from the international community (HSPH, Harvard).

We are now investing in the education of the children of Idjwi. To do that most effectively, we must also invest in their nutrition.

“

NUTRITION AND LEARNING GO HAND IN HAND. SCHOOL FEEDING HAS POSITIVE EFFECTS ON ALL ASPECTS OF SCHOOLING – ENROLMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND PERFORMANCE.

(UNESCO/WFP)

And so I am seeking support in order to provide a simple daily snack for these children, so they will be strong and make the most of the education they are being given. They are the hope for a better future.

“

WELL-DESIGNED SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMMES HAVE DEMONSTRATED HIGH RETURNS IN FOUR IMPORTANT AREAS – EDUCATION, NUTRITION, SOCIAL PROTECTION, AND LOCAL AGRICULTURE – ALL OF WHICH TRANSLATE INTO HUMAN CAPITAL GROWTH AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

(WFP)



Buying food would cost around \$7.50 per month per child, but I am exploring more sustainable possibilities – building a bakery adjacent to the school, vastly increasing our poultry and agriculture project next to the school, sourcing local markets on Idjwi.

Contacts or information regarding school feeding programs would be most appreciated. We are looking to raise 30,000 Euros.

If you are able to give a donation of any amount at all, I would be so very grateful. 100% of all donations go directly to the project – I personally guarantee it.

You can donate through this site

<http://supportingidjwiisland.com/> or

[fondazionecariellolocorbino.org/sostienici/](http://fondazionecariellolocorbino.org/sostienici/)



# The House Whose Name is Love

## La Casa di Andrea

BY ANNIE JACQUET, TEACHER  
OF FRENCH AND SUPERVISOR OF  
THE REACH OUT STUDENT CLUB /  
ASSOCIAZIONE ANDREA TUDISCO



The Andrea Tudisco Association and Casa di Andrea is a non-profit organization (ONLUS) financed solely by donors. Its president, Fiorella Tosoni, established it in 1997, and it has been furnishing support to families whose children are suffering from serious diseases and various cancers ever since. *La Casa di Andrea* provides shelter, food, and recreational activities to these children and their families, who have spent months and years battling illness. Most children are awaiting further treatment, such as bone marrow transplantations, prostheses, and surgery. All children at *La Casa di Andrea* are referred to as *fiorellini*—little flowers. Volunteers frequently stay with the children throughout the day and night and often accompany them to the hospital. They also cook, garden, and play with them, which frees up their parents, who are able to stay together and offer support to one another.

### THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Navigating such difficult circumstances in regular times is challenging enough, but the pandemic only exacerbated these difficulties. At the pandemic's height, families weren't able to leave *La Casa di Andrea*, and there were lengthy delays for much-needed medical care and access to treatment. When children were admitted to hospital, only mothers could enter for a short period.

Clown therapy behind glass and via Zoom continued at the center and in hospital, as children wore protective gear to minimize their exposure to the coronavirus and other dangerous pathogens as much as possible. There were also struggles at the center as donations slowed to a trickle. All St Stephen's was able to contribute were drawings to add some bright cheer for the children. The proceeds from our regular activities, like bake sales and other in-person events, were halted due to the pandemic. Nor were we able to schedule visits on weekends or during the summer months as in years past.



### RECEPTION OF UKRAINIAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

*La Casa di Andrea* has welcomed fifteen young cancer patients from Ukraine. In addition to their illness, these children are reeling from the shock of war. Leaving their fathers and brothers behind and losing their homes have had a tremendous psychological impact on them and their mothers.

I have visited them with increasing frequency, although we are not entirely out of the pandemic. It is difficult to communicate because of the language difference. However, their resilience is evident. Despite incredible odds, the will to carry on is undeniable. Through the smiles of a wonderful, beautiful two-year-old girl who has leukemia and is undergoing chemotherapy in day hospital, I witnessed this. She did not want to let me go as I brushed her hair. We had already formed a bond in a matter of moments, a beautiful sensation that can only really be appreciated once you experience it.

I hope these families will be able to stay for six months so their children can receive the care they so desperately need. Expenses at the center have increased significantly: in addition to providing food and clothing, there are costs for medical personnel—psychologists, clown therapists--and maintenance costs, such as electricity and gas—both of which have skyrocketed overnight.

As always, *La Casa di Andrea* needs the help and support of all of you. May this center full of so much love continue to power forward.

Contact: [annie.jacquet@sssrome.it](mailto:annie.jacquet@sssrome.it) for more information





PART XII:

# The Arts Collective

# Book Review: *The Giver*

BY LOIS LOWRY. HARPERCOLLINS  
EDITION 2014.

BY VITTORIA GIUSTI '22

“

THE NOVEL, *THE GIVER*, IS A FANTASY INTENDED FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES. IT IS AN EXCITING STORY FULL OF TWISTS AND TURNS. BUT ABOVE ALL, ESPECIALLY IN THESE TIMES, IT PUSHED ME TO REFLECT ON THE PAIN BROUGHT BY WAR AND HUMAN BRUTALITY.

**T**he story takes place in a fully-controlled society, where everything is pre-established, and nothing is left to chance.

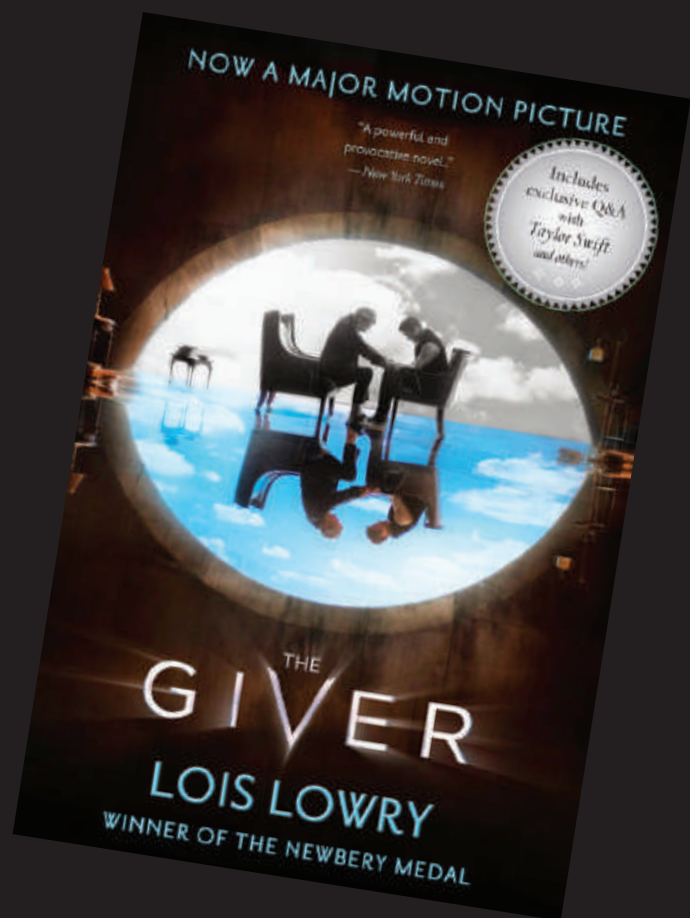
Emotions like love or pain are gone, no longer remembered, and human instincts, like desire, are appeased. People do not know colors, fear, risk, or even atmospheric changes. Everything is firm and pre-established by a "Community" that controls everyone's life. As soon as a child is born, they are observed for some time. If they are considered too weak, they are "released," made to fall asleep so as not to wake up again. Then, there is the assignment of the child's name and the family unit to which they will belong. There is no individual difference; everyone grows in the same way as the others. At one year, babies become one, then two, then three, and so

on. Every year, there is a ceremony during which children officially become one year older. At every age, they receive something, such as a soft toy for the little ones or a bicycle for the older ones. When a child turns twelve, however, they are assigned the work they will do for the rest of their lives. This is what happens to Jonas, the protagonist. But he receives an important task: that of becoming the "receiver of the memory" of humanity. This means that everything that others do not know, such as cold, heat, pain, etc., will be taught to Jonas by his predecessor, known as "the Giver." The Giver, now old and tired, transmits memories of mankind to Jonas: snow, rain, the burning sun, but also war, fear, and death. Many of these memories are painful, causing physical pain. Jonas, therefore, begins to change his way of seeing the world and society, which has always been his home. Now, this world no longer appears to him as before. Things that previously seemed normal to him, such as "being released," now seem like horrible atrocities. He decides to oppose the state of affairs and look for "Elsewhere,"

a place that is not defined nor clear what it is. Maybe it's a very distant place, or it's death. Jonas escapes into the night, along with a little boy named Gabriel. Gabriel has been a guest at Jonas's house for some time; he was destined to "be released." Jonas decides to save him and take Gabriel away with him. The two set off on bicycles and travel at night to hide and rest during the day. After several days, the landscape around them begins to change, and, finally, the two reach a snowy mountain, beyond which there is a "world" as we know it and as Jonas has known thanks to the memories of the Giver.

Is it all true? What will happen to Jonas and Gabriel? Are they safe, or is it just the beginning of a life full of difficulties? And what will change in the Community? Will Jonas ever go back?

I recommend reading this book because it is both thrilling and fun and because it opens peaks of reflection on how hard it is for humanity to find a good way to avoid wars and suffering in the world.





# Book Review: *The Plague*

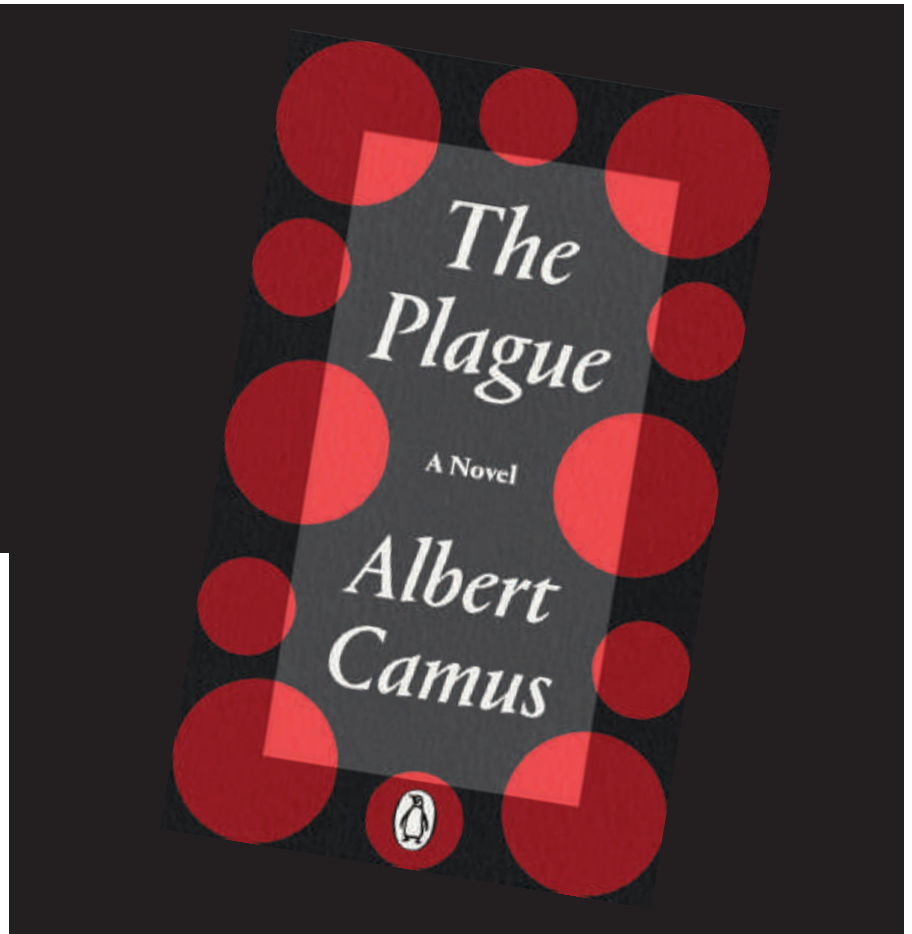
BY ALBERT CAMUS

BY BENEDETTA BOSCO '22

My English class has been reading and studying the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus. Throughout the book—centered around disease, sickness, and consequent suffering—we observe the plague's 'chillingly rapid' progression throughout the city and its psychological, social, and emotional effects on those living through it. In class, our teacher often asks stimulating questions, usually open-ended, to encourage a greater analysis of the text. For instance, he asked us to consider in what ways we get sick? What are the meanings we can derive from sickness and suffering? What lessons can we learn? And so on.

As I reflected on his questions, I realized the parallels between the events in *The Plague* and the current pandemic. The plague devastates the town of Oran, where the story is set. It also has a dire impact on those not directly afflicted by the disease. As the town's citizens struggle to cope, there's a collective loss of control and a sense of urgency to live in the moment. We see this playing out now in real life. We observe how an outbreak can provoke a shared panic and fear among the masses. And we witness how much we have in common with others as we learn to cope with isolation and uncertainty.

*The Plague* also offers a compelling allegory, not only for life in Nazi-occupied France during Camus's time, but the societal 'plagues' and hardships we as humans face in our daily lives. For example, social injustices and inequalities such as racism and sexism, to name just two complex issues.



The book underscores the media's decisive role in shaping and guiding public opinion and how fear-inducing stories lead to mass hysteria. One of the main characters states at one point that "gossip exaggerates everything." In contrast, we have seen present-day media coverage that is responsible. We have also witnessed the damage caused by the surge of imbalanced reporting and fake news about the pandemic.

One aspect that is indicative of the period in which the book was written is its male-centered narrative and perspective, with all the main characters being men. Though Camus does include female characters, with the most significant or relevant ones being Dr. Rieux's wife, his mother, and the French journalist (Rembart's lover), he plays directly

into concepts of power dynamics and societal biases. The women are always defined around the relationship with the male characters and can be considered peripheral at best.

The citizens of Oran are represented as a small, enclosed society. The choice to depict them in such a way leads the reader to experience a greater sense of tragedy, drama, and perhaps even suffocation as the events unfold further in the novel.

All in all, I thought this to be an incredibly eye-opening and compelling read, made even more fascinating by the parallels it appears to have with the world's situation today. I would recommend this book to anyone intrigued by these similarities or who would simply enjoy a book that talks about such topics.

“

THE PLAGUE ALSO OFFERS A COMPELLING ALLEGORY, NOT ONLY FOR LIFE IN NAZI-OCCUPIED FRANCE DURING CAMUS'S TIME, BUT THE SOCIETAL 'PLAGUES' AND HARDSHIPS WE AS HUMANS FACE IN OUR DAILY LIVES.

# Film Review: *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

BY LUCA VANDERSON '22

IMDB RATING: 7.5



“

CAN YOU GUESS  
WHAT EVERY WOMAN'S  
WORST NIGHTMARE IS?'

*Promising Young Woman* presents the exceptional and engrossing story of a woman who enacts revenge on people who had been involved in an incident of sexual assault in previous years. The film is directed by Emerald Fennell and stars Carey Mulligan and Bo Burnham as the main characters. It is no wonder that *Promising Young Woman* won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay: the story is shocking, suspenseful, and unfolds in a way that keeps the viewer on the edge of their seats.

The film hinges around issues of responsibility, consent, feminism, but it has as its underlying root a true, deep, and supporting friendship between two young women, indeed, full of promise, Cassie and Nina. Nina, who met with an untimely and unjust end, is present throughout the movie, despite not appearing in it: she lives in the words and actions of Cassie, who will exact merciless revenge with a deep sense of justice for herself, Nina, and all those millions of women taken advantage of, disrespected and mistreated. Warning: this film is suitable for ages 16 and above due to coarse language, violence, drug use, and sexual assault.

Protagonist Cassandra Thomas spends her nights pretending to be intoxicated in order to teach a lesson to men who claim to be 'nice guys' but are quick to commit non-consensual sexual acts when protected by the woman's lack of self-awareness. However, a 'simple storyline' like this belies the deep secrets that are slowly revealed throughout the film. As it gradually becomes clear, the reason for Cassie to behave in such a manner is the loss of her dearest friend Nina, who committed suicide after an incident of sexual assault involving male undergraduate students. In fact, Cassie and Nina were not only close friends but also university medical students, and Nina, in particular, was top of her class. As it turns out, the promising young woman of the title is not only Cassie but also, or maybe mainly, Nina herself.

The film presents rather dramatically the reality of gender inequality, its extreme consequences, and how patriarchal society oppresses women into stereotypical roles and still pushes them away from equal opportunities. Carey Mulligan immerses herself into the world of a woman who falls behind her broken ambitions, unable to 'move on' from the death of her friend, holding onto a menial job well below her capabilities, and facing objectification, street harassment, and sexist comments in her everyday life. The reality is, Fennell's construct of Cassie's unfortunate life can be associated with many women in modern society. They are observed, stalked, and most of the time pointed out by their physical appearance.

Cassie is often seen as seemingly intoxicated, getting picked up at a bar by a guy who insists on bringing her home to 'relax.' As they enter his house, he lays her down on his bed and begins to undress her. When Cassandra suddenly reveals her soberness, the man is astonished and frightened. Cassie performs these acts due to her fondness and remembrance of Nina; it can be seen as a form of justice. Fennell focuses on two aspects here, consent and virtue. Instead of taking advantage of the woman to satisfy his bare sexual appetite, the moral act is to either help the woman or make sure that she is safe. What this film highlights is that when atrocious acts are committed towards women, there are excuses or justifications such as 'we were both drunk,' or 'she was asking for it.' It is important to educate others on what to do when they are faced with situations like these; *Promising Young Woman* has certainly demonstrated an effective way of spreading this useful information.

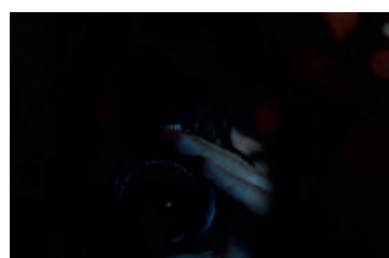
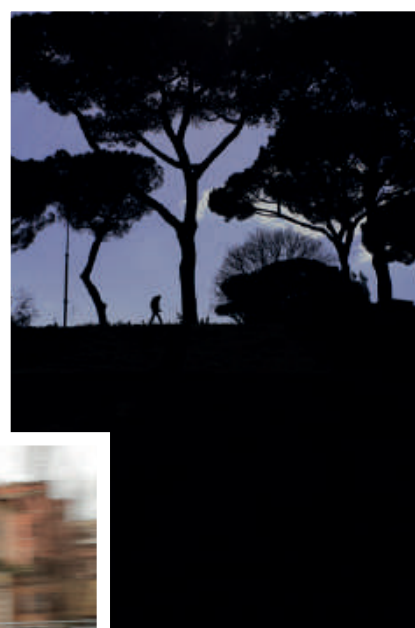
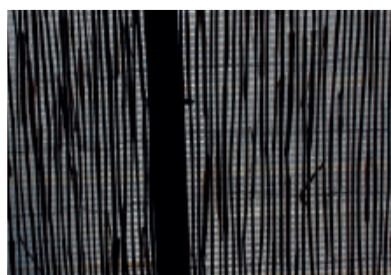
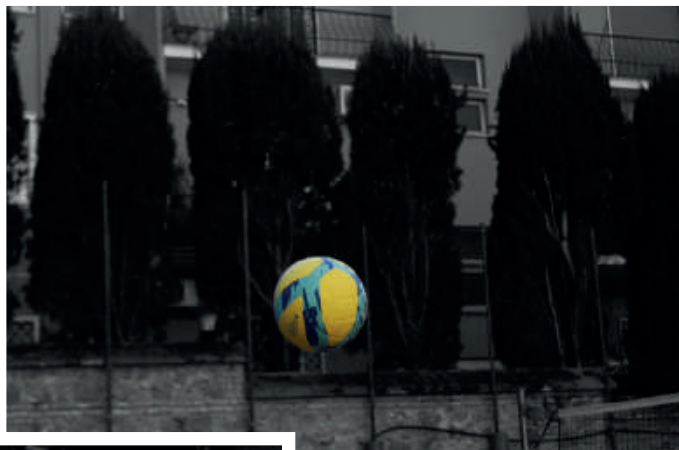
## Final thoughts

Personal Rating: 8.9

The cinematography, acting, and cast choices are astoundingly original, believable, and striking; however, the best part of this film is the extreme and unprecedented story itself. *Promising Young Woman* promises to become a cult movie classic.



# Digital Arts Gallery





Spring emerging



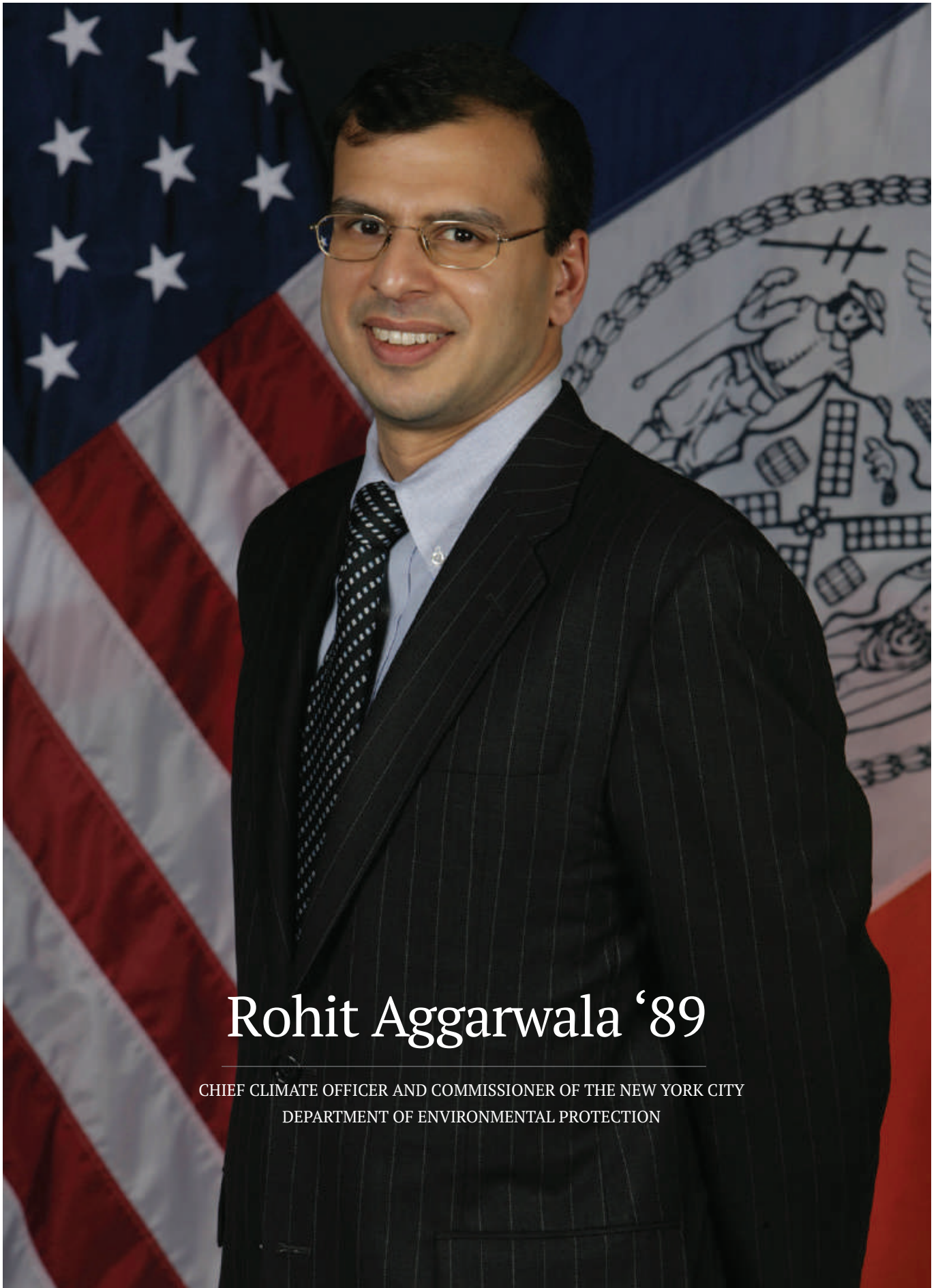


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PART XIII:

# Alumni Spotlight

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## Rohit Aggarwala '89

CHIEF CLIMATE OFFICER AND COMMISSIONER OF THE NEW YORK CITY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION



**Where are you from, and what brought you to Rome?**

Well, I'm from New York City originally, and prior to going to Rome, I had been living in White Plains, New York, just north of New York City. My father spent his career at the United Nations, and for three years, he was managing a program that was funded by the Italian government, so they wanted the program to be run out of Rome. So he was temporarily attached to the world food program while he was running it, even though it was a UNDP project.

**How long were you at St. Stephen's?**

Three years.

**And that was from ninth grade through eleventh grade?**

That's correct.

**Could you describe what your experience with St Stephen's was like, or maybe share what some of your favorite memories are?**

Well, St. Stephen's was amazing. It was, in many respects, the defining experience of my entire educational career, the culture of the school being at once so broadminded and at the same time so rigorous, which was really exciting and very new. I had come out of a relatively traditional, high quality, but nonetheless, traditional public school experience in the United States, and even though I didn't do the IB, so much of what the IB requires and stands for permeates the school. So that was a significant part of the experience. And the school's innate multiculturalism was interesting. I grew up in a multicultural family and did a lot of traveling prior to that, but on an everyday basis, having something akin to the St Stephen's community is still relatively unique.

**Yes, it's quite rare to have such diversity of backgrounds and lived experiences in one small school. Do you trace the roots of your career in environmental policy to your time at St. Stephen's, and if not, when did that passion develop for you?**

Well, I started out as an Urbanist, and that's what led to me becoming an environmentalist. I was always interested in cities but living in a city like Rome and especially living in the center and going to school in the center of a city like Rome certainly made me think very differently about cities. So yes, I could certainly trace some of what I do to that experience. The core of everything I do is related to cities, while the environmental component of it really has to do with thinking about the long-term challenges that cities face and realizing fairly early on the relative importance of climate change to the future of all of the world's cities. I trace that awareness back to a course I took in college where I happened to take a class with one of the founders of climate change research; it was an elective to meet a [graduation] requirement. So I didn't seek it out as much as I was finding a class that I was somewhat interested in to deal with my science requirement, and I took a class that introduced me to climate change.

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HOW AND WHY IS ROME DIFFERENT FROM NEW YORK AND DIFFERENT FROM OTHER CITIES I HAD BEEN TO; WHAT MAKES CITIES UNIQUE? WHAT MAKES THEM TICK? ALL OF THOSE QUESTIONS, I THINK IN PART, ORIGINATED FROM WANDERING AROUND DIFFERENT NEIGHBORHOODS IN THE CITY.”

**So, if you don't mind, let's backtrack a little bit: how did you become interested in urbanism? What led you to study that in college?**

Well, some of it is simply the extent to which I grew up loving New York City as an experience. I did not like living in the suburbs, and what was especially amazing was moving to Rome at that age, to a safe city with good transit where you can have the city to yourself and be completely independent. To have that opportunity, at that age in a place like Rome, is just amazing, where you have 2000 years of history all jumbled together, and the kind of exploration that my friends and I were able to do together just made me really interested in what makes this all work. How and why is Rome different from New York and different from other cities I had been to; what makes cities unique? What makes them tick? All of those questions, I think in part, originated from wandering around different neighborhoods in the city.

**That makes perfect sense. Rome and New York could not be more different in some ways. It must have been an interesting contrast to be immersed in as a teenager and see what did and did not work. Since you were, of course, recently appointed as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, you have said that making progress on climate requires not only good policies but also incorporating resilience, decarbonization, and environmental justice into daily city operations. I wanted to ask you specifically about the environmental justice piece and how you're approaching that in New York because I think it's something our students would find particularly interesting.**

Well, first of all, it's early days, and one of the things I think I certainly would not have appreciated when I was in high school is how much effort has to go into figuring out what kinds of changes are going to be most effective when you're dealing with either a large organization or a large city. So we're still in the first hundred days of the Adams administration, so I wouldn't tell you that we have everything figured out by a long shot, but I think the overall approach is, number one, it's simply about being conscious. I mean, one of the biggest issues with environmental justice is the extent to which it stems from a long history of simply not being aware of it. Some of it intentional and a lot of it unintentional but a byproduct of deep issues in society, and so the first thing we can do and have to do is be cognizant of the neighborhoods where environmental justice issues are in the city. It's also about making sure that, just as you would check yourself when you're making a decision to ask yourself, "Hey, wait, is this having a differential impact when it comes to gender, or does this have a differential impact when it comes to income," you also want to make sure that you're asking yourself with almost every decision you're making, "does this have a differential impact when it comes to environmental justice? How does this decision impact different neighborhoods?" Unfortunately, the reality is that one of the reasons that you have lots of so-called obnoxious uses in what we would call "environmental justice neighborhoods" has to do with property values because that's usually where you can find lower-cost property but getting the lowest price of the property for obnoxious use is not necessarily consistent with the right approach from the public's perspective. And so again, I think the first thing is a screen. The second thing is being more proactive, and I'm quite proud of the



fact that it was Mayor Bloomberg who was the first mayor of New York who recognized environmental justice as an important way to look at policy. One of the things that he always did was to think about establishing citywide standards and efforts to bring the entire city up to certain standards. And what you inevitably do then is you focus on those areas that are falling behind.

For example, we had initiatives around trees, sidewalk trees, which are an important amenity. They're important for urban cooling, et cetera. We basically embarked on an effort to put sidewalk trees everywhere in New York where the geography could handle it. You know, there are lots of sidewalks in New York where the sidewalks are, in fact, hollow because there are subways underneath, there are cellars underneath whatever, so you can't put a tree everywhere. But we started doing maps to figure out where they were and where they were feasible. It's no surprise that there wasn't a very big sidewalk

tree gap on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, but there were lots of places in the South Bronx where nobody had ever put sidewalk trees in. And then there's a third approach, which is not so much about setting a standard but actually thinking about neighborhoods that have traditionally suffered and fallen behind. And there are many ways to address issues in those neighborhoods. Under the last mayor, there were efforts to target cooling infrastructure in neighborhoods that have traditionally suffered environmental injustice, and I think we'll see some of those kinds of things continue and get enhanced. Again, I think it starts with just knowing what we're talking about. And so there's an effort right now that the state of New York is doing that will identify what the "official EJ neighborhoods" are for the state, and the city will adopt those, and it's the kind of thing that just makes sure that you have the policy infrastructure to incorporate [these considerations] into every decision.





**I love the sidewalk trees example because I think that's something especially our students will understand and relate to. These trees can make such a difference for cleaning the air and noise pollution, and so on. Now, is there a biggest environmental threat facing New York that you're focusing on and if so, do you feel like this is something New Yorkers are informed about and preparing for, and if not, why not?**

Well, I think it's clear that the major environmental threat facing New York is climate change. There's no question that [this is the major threat] for most cities, maybe not for a handful that are in truly terrible shape with respect to air quality but in New York, where our air quality is not what it should be, it is still so much better than in most places, and our drinking water is fantastic. Here in New York City, we're a coastal city, we have more than 500 miles of coastline, and a huge portion of the city lives in areas that are low-lying and therefore subject to coastal flooding. We are coming up on the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Sandy, which, as I think much of the world knows, flooded large parts of New York City and took out a power plant that served Manhattan below 34th street, leaving them for nearly a week without power and killed 40+ New Yorkers. Sandy demonstrated the risk that we face from sea level rise and greater storms which bring coastal flooding. Just last year, we suffered the after-effects of Hurricane Ida, which dumped historic levels of rainfall on us. We had nearly twice as much rain in one hour than we'd ever had before in the city's recorded history, and as you might imagine, none of our infrastructure was built for that. We had people who literally died in their homes because they live in basement apartments that were flooded in a matter of moments. So that's a huge challenge. And





then, what is, to a certain extent, less visible is actually the biggest threat to New York's health, and lives from climate change is heat waves. Heatwaves kill more New Yorkers than flooding, which is likely to be true going forward, even in a world where we have more frequent and more intense storm activity. We don't notice it as much because we don't think of it. It's not as visual, but we have seen the numbers going up over the last decade. It started a bit during the Bloomberg administration and got more attention during the de Blasio administration as the world became more aware of the rise in temperatures that was shaping summertime temperatures, and that's actually the biggest health risk to New Yorkers from climate change. And then there are also gonna be some challenges to our water supply. Our water supply will become more complicated. It's not an existential threat to the city, which some cities around the world are facing due to climate change, but it requires us to think differently about our long-term water supply.

**So you have made comparisons between New York and other cities. One thing that comes up when I discuss urban sustainability with my students in my Core 9 class, for example, is that so many of these "green cities" around the world are in Europe. I always come across the same names, cities such as Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Berlin, and one thing I wonder is why is Europe so ahead of the curve on greening their cities? Why aren't the greenest cities in the world in the United States, and are there best practices that work in Europe and that U.S. Cities like New York can adopt?**

Certainly, I think it's a combination of things. On the one hand, it has to do with the period in which many European cities urbanized. The modern, urban form of a place like Berlin or a place like Copenhagen really got put into place before the advent of the automobile, which is, of course, not true when you think about Houston or Phoenix or even the

vast majority of the urbanization that has taken place in places like India, China, and Africa; Delhi, of course, is a city with a 3000-year history but frankly until the 1960s Delhi was a relatively small city, and so part of what you have is populations that grew very fast during a period when large portions of the population owned a car, and that shaped the urban landscape, and that's actually true about Rome because so much of Rome's growth over the last 50 years has been outside the GRA and it makes Rome actually a more auto-dependent city than New York, which is, for a European city kind of an embarrassment, to be honest. The second, which also relates to Rome, is just a relative lack of investment in transit. So New York's an outlier in the United States, having preserved and resurrected its transit system while many American cities got rid of theirs. Many Asian cities took a long time to have their transits systems expand in line with the population. The other thing that has happened as you look at the cities of Asia particularly is that





we see how a massive population growth led to planning that often underinvested in park space and other aspects of greenery in Asia. So in Europe, you have the perfect mix in many cases of good urban planning of moderate but not hyperdensity and good transit and land use, and that's not just a function of parkland or anything like that because there are lots of American cities that we wouldn't think of as being particularly green, for example, that have lots and lots of park space, like Kansas City has tremendous parks, but it's a sprawling auto-dependent, mainly suburban metropolitan area. So anyway, that's the quick overview of why European cities tend to be ahead; the final thing I'll point out is, compared to the rest of the world, European cities, especially the cities of Northern Europe, have had a tradition of really high-quality municipal governments and I think that [makes] a big difference.

**That's really fascinating. Staying on the topic of the work you do studying cities and shaping environmental policy in New York, I wanted to ask you what you enjoy most about your current job?**

Well, I'm only five weeks in, so it may be premature to say, but being able to work on creative solutions to important problems on behalf of the public in a place that is my home, you couldn't ask for anything better than that.

**And, reflecting on the arc of your career thus far, what would you consider to be your greatest achievement professionally?**

So thus far, I think of three things that I've done that are significant. One is a set of laws that we enacted that I was the driving force behind in New York, which was the first ambitious set of requirements to require existing buildings to become more energy efficient; a package of laws passed in 2009 called the "Greater Buildings Plan." And then the other, which I was not solely responsible for but played a significant role in, was the banning of dirty heating oil in New York City, which has had a measurable impact on our air quality. And then the final significant achievement was when I was at Bloomberg Philanthropies, where I was the lead on a grant where we gave 50 million dollars to the Sierra Club to attack the U.S. Coal industry. We closed more than 200 coal-fired power plants.

**Wow, that's pretty awesome.**

**Looking back on your career for a moment, would you say that it's been a relatively straight path for you in terms of getting to where you are today, or do you feel that you've been tested along the way in achieving the goals that you've set for yourself and if so, could you talk about what some of those challenges have been and how you have been able to overcome them?**

That's a really deep and broad question. I can't imagine that many people have a career that follows a linear and untroubled path. I guess I've always tried to focus on solving problems that are important and where I think I have a particular contribution to make, and this constant search has led me to the various things I've done; many of them have been opportunistic in the sense that you can't plan for opportunities to arise, but you can create your own luck if you are doing work on things that you care about and doing good work for people. That's how opportunities come your way, and then you have to be smart and nimble enough to take them. Probably I'd say the biggest challenges I've faced have been in a couple of the cases where I wasn't able to take opportunities that presented themselves, and that's always a disappointment, and then places where I thought maybe I was going to be able to make a contribution and I didn't for reasons that might have been beyond my control, or maybe I just couldn't figure it out, and then you feel underutilized which can be frustrating.

**Are there any important lessons you have gleaned from your own experience that you can share with our graduating class of 2022?**

Always be willing to talk about stuff you're passionate about because you can find opportunities to have an impact in circumstances that you would not expect. And so, when you meet somebody, if all you do is make small talk, they'll never know what you actually care about, and you never know, but that person might be in a position to either make the change you'd like to see happen or bring you in some way and allow you to make the change.





# Varun Baker '01

CO-FOUNDER & MANAGING DIRECTOR FARM CREDIBLY

**Where are you from, and what brought you to Rome?**

That's a good question. I think, like with many SSS students; it's complicated. I was born in Brazil to a multicultural family. My mother is from India, and my father is from Jamaica. I got the opportunity to be in Rome because my father was doing some research in mathematics at La Sapienza.

**Can you describe your experience at St. Stephen's? What are some of your fondest memories of that time?**

At St. Stephen's, there was an intensely unique merging of cultures that I'm very grateful for experiencing. I have such fond

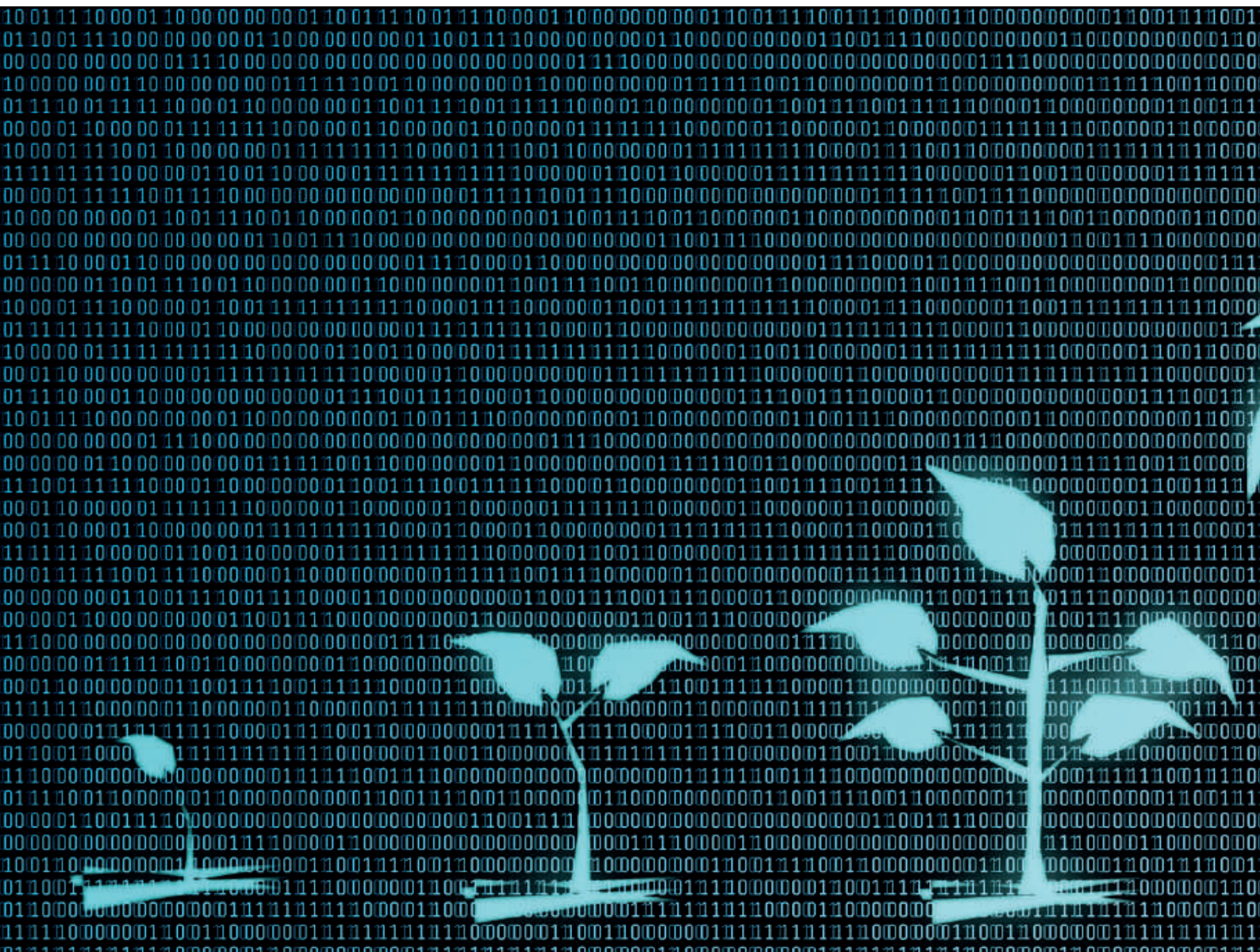
memories of high school that to describe it in a few sentences is a challenge. I'd say I had many life-changing experiences. My fondest memories are best shared in conversation over a beer. There were endless opportunities to just enjoy life in a style only Rome can provide. I remember one day it started snowing—that was pretty magical. The top moment though, was when Roma won the Scudetto.

**Before founding your current company, Farm Credibly, you were applying technology to solve agricultural issues as co-founder of the Slashroots Foundation, where you tackled issues such as the theft of crops and livestock from farms in Jamaica. To where do you trace the roots of your passion for agriculture?**

I grew a deep appreciation of fresh food and ingredients thanks to my time in Italy, but my interest in agriculture is probably due to my upbringing in Jamaica, where there is a rich history of farming. Honestly, if you eat three times a day, thank a farmer. My passion really comes from a desire to solve interesting puzzles. Agriculture just happened to be the right rabbit hole for me to venture down.







**Your company, Farm Credibly, leverages blockchain technology to provide access to loans for unbanked farmers in Jamaica. How did you come up with the idea of bringing blockchain to Jamaican farmers? Could you explain how Farm Credibly works and how it has impacted the lives of Jamaican farmers?**

Yea, so the idea grew in part from my experience in working with farmers ten years prior, but really Farm Credibly came together as the winning project at a hackathon that was sponsored by IBM and a commercial bank in Jamaica. Two things happened: one, we were

looking specifically for use cases related to blockchain technology, and two, we started looking at problems from the point of view of lenders and creditors. That was in 2018. Since then, we've moved beyond alternative credit scoring to looking more at getting our farm funding platform going. Most of our effort is focused on finding farm funders within the Caribbean diaspora who want to contribute to the region's food security through crowdfunding. The impact we want to have on farmers is to improve access to finance through the use of technology and to allow more people to have a stake in food production while they also earn.

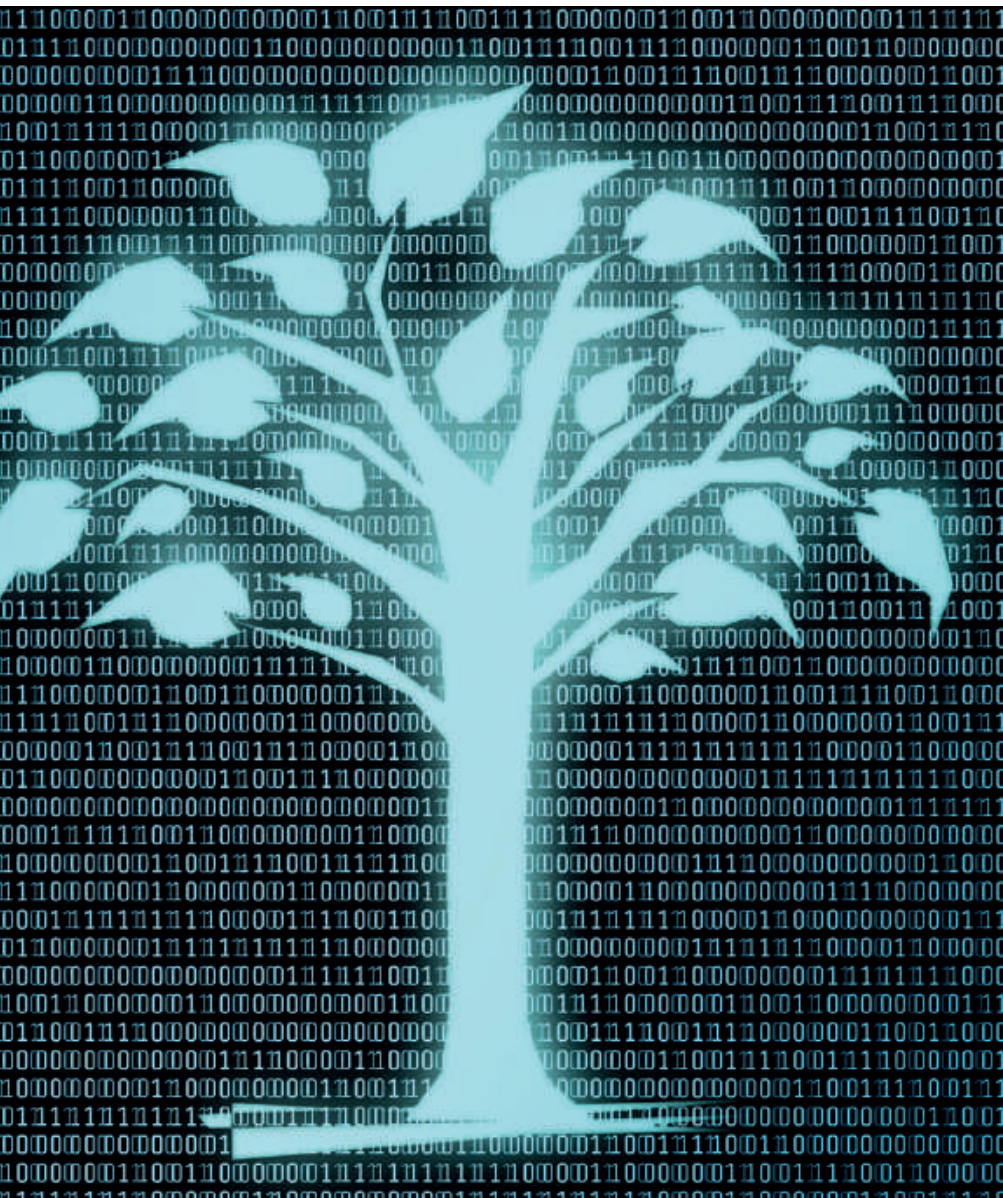
**Do you think the Farm Credibly model could be applied to other industries in Jamaica and/or to the agricultural sector in other countries?**

Yes, to both. A lack of access to finance impacts more than just farmers, especially in developing countries where large amounts of SMEs are underserved.

**What do you enjoy most about what you do?**

I like pretty geeky stuff. Right now, we're playing with NFTs that change based on weather data.





The idea that we have tools at our fingertips that can change the realm of what's possible is crazy, right? Well, Farm Credibly gives me the opportunity to go beyond this by connecting this work to very tangible outcomes that matter to people and leave us all better off.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement, professionally or personally?**

I'm not sure if this counts as a personal achievement, but I'm a Dad, so I'm proud of my kids.

**Would you say it has been a relatively straightforward path for you in terms of achieving the goals you set for yourself, or have there been some twists and turns along the way? If so, could you share what some of those challenges have been and how you've overcome them?**

Hahaha, that's a good one. Straight paths are all artificial. I'd say there is no failure, only feedback. Failure has become a part of my process, and this is very common. The biggest challenge to overcome is to understand that failure is not the end of the story unless you make it that way. BB King said it best when he said, "If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all."



**What are some of the most important lessons from your professional experience that you would like to share with the class of 2022, our next generation of St. Stephen's graduates?**

Well, one I just mentioned: don't fear failure, fear not trying. Here are some others:

- Play nice.
- Never look back in regret — move on to the next thing.
- Be willing to change direction (role, industry, company) to find your happy place.
- Find a mentor.
- Identify your interests.
- When you make a commitment, keep it.
- Network.
- Form relationships.
- Create a schedule.

These next few years will be some of the most important in setting your future trajectory so work hard, but don't overthink college.





## Rachel Nicholson '06

DIRECTOR, VISITOR ENGAGEMENT AND RESEARCH  
AT THE NELSON ATKINS MUSEUM OF ART

**Where are you from, and what brought you to Rome?**

I grew up outside of Boston, Massachusetts, in a suburb called Newton. I went to a school called Buckingham, Browne, and Nichols (BB&N) in Cambridge. BB&N has a longstanding semester abroad program, and they offer a few options of where students can go both in their sophomore and junior years. St. Stephen's was one of those options. I was the youngest of four kids, and all of my siblings had graduated high school and left the house, so I was desperate for an adventure and to not be the only child in the house. So I studied abroad at St. Stephen's for one semester, my junior year of high school.

**Can you describe what your time at St. Stephen's was like or share any particularly fond memories?**

What drew me to the program was that it wasn't a specific study abroad program. The other programs were programs where a group of 20 students as a cohort all together have an experience. I liked that St. Stephen's dropped me into an international high school along with some international students studying abroad, but mostly I was going to high school with a group of kids who lived in Rome. And so that was exciting and also really nerve-racking. I didn't speak any Italian. I remember showing up and being overwhelmed by the number of languages the kids spoke. Coming from the States, that was not a part of my high school experience. I took my first art history class in Rome with Pamela Christie. That is certainly a very fond memory. We would go on field trips every Wednesday, and that was how I saw so much of the city because she got us out into the city to visit places that I would not necessarily go to as a teenager. I had freedom and independence for the first time in a tangible way as a 16-year-old in Rome. I recall being able to adventure, explore and have a sense of independence in the city.

**That's a good point; I remember having a similar experience when I first came to St. Stephen's as a boarder my junior year, and I had never had so much freedom to explore a city. And then, of course, you came back to St. Stephen's after you graduated from Vassar College, and you were my art history teacher when I was a student. What drew you back to the school?**

St. Stephen's was incredibly formative for me. To be 16 years old, living in Rome, being independent, and falling in love with a subject was eye-opening and exciting. I was an Art History major in college. I credit my first class at St. Stephen's as a primary reason I work in the arts. So then I went to college, and many people at my college studied abroad during junior year. I realized I did not want to study overseas because I didn't want to give up a semester at my college. I felt I had already had that when I was 16, and I knew that I wanted to live overseas the next time I went abroad. That was a big piece for me. I was interested in education, and I loved St. Stephen's. Rome gets in your bones, and it's hard not to go back once you've lived there.

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ST. STEPHEN'S WAS INCREDIBLY FORMATIVE FOR ME. TO BE 16 YEARS OLD, LIVING IN ROME, BEING INDEPENDENT, AND FALLING IN LOVE WITH A SUBJECT WAS EYE-OPENING AND EXCITING. I WAS AN ART HISTORY MAJOR IN COLLEGE. I CREDIT MY FIRST CLASS AT ST. STEPHEN'S AS A PRIMARY REASON I WORK IN THE ARTS.

**Was it strange for you to return to your former high school as a teacher? Yes. I know exactly what you mean—having you as my art history teacher inspired me to study that subject and come back and teach at St. Stephen's when I graduated from college.**

It was incredibly strange. Number one, it was weird to be a young teacher, I was 23, and I was teaching seniors, and they would say to me, "you're not that much older than us." And I would tell them, "wait until you get through college and then come talk to me" [laughs]. I had a lot of insecurity about feeling like the youngest person. I remember running into one student on one of my first days as a teacher, and the student looked at me and asked, "are you new? Do you need a tour?" So it was strange, and the funny thing was that some things had not changed from my time as a student while other things had. The bar, for example, used to be run by students. So there was a kind of familiarity with the place, but it also felt different to see it from the other side.

**Wow. I had the same experience when I came back to teach. Let's talk about what you've been up to in recent years. This past March, you were a panelist in our current "Future of Art" alumni panel. During the panel, you discussed the Interpretation Team's project of rewriting the permanent collection gallery labels at the Nelson Atkins through a harm reduction lens. For those who did not attend the panel, could you share why you decided to do this and perhaps share an example of how you rewrote a particular label and how the community received the new label?**







So this project came about in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the protests erupting all over the U.S. after the murder of George Floyd. There was this big cultural moment in the summer of 2020 when many institutions and a lot of people were having conversations about racism and whiteness in a way that hadn't previously been present in the general dialogue. Museums were called out in those conversations for a good reason. We are generally pretty white institutions often founded on a colonialist legacy, so we have a lot to reckon with and account for. It was also the summer of 2020, the height of the pandemic, budgets were slashed, we weren't doing programs or exhibitions, and everyone was trying to figure out, "what exactly is our role and how do we respond?" So my team, the Museum's Interpretation team, came up with this idea to discuss the question, "what do we mean by harm and how can museums do harm?" with our curatorial colleagues. We asked ourselves, "how is it that labels in our institution might misuse language or assume knowledge or write from a certain perspective?" "Are we ignoring people's histories or ignoring their identities?" In many museums, the labels have been on the walls for twenty years, and they are outdated in terms of language and the stories we tell. So we started a project with our curatorial colleagues where we identified, "what are the stories we want to tell? What kinds of subjects come up in Art History that we should address head-on, and what are we missing from our galleries that might make

people feel misrepresented?" And then, we went about identifying labels and rewriting from there.

The project is ongoing; it's a work in progress. We have a broad collection: East Asian, South Asian, Native American, European, Modern, Contemporary, African, Photography, et cetera. There is a work in our Native American collection by a Lenape Delaware artist, a native woman, and the label opened with, "this work of art by a Delaware woman was made in Kansas." And then, it goes on to talk about the significance of the work, and we realized that in this label, we mention her being in Kansas but nowhere in the galleries do we talk about the forced removal of indigenous people from their land by the U.S. government, which is how a woman from a Delaware tribe, on the East Coast, comes to be in Kansas. This is a shared history of many native people in the United States. It was almost like we had hinted at that history but then not said anything, and we realized that we were erasing a specific, violent history associated with these artists. Hence, we rewrote that label to talk about forced removal and why this artist would be in Kansas, and then we discussed the object's significance. So that is one example, and it's important to acknowledge that we're not condemning these objects or the museum. It's about making sure people's histories are recognized because often, the stories that we tell in museums are white people's stories, and we don't look at other groups.



**Has the rewriting of these labels led to more extensive conversations at the Nelson Atkins Museum or in the Kansas City community?**

It has. At one point, I gave a presentation about this effort to our Strategic Leadership Team. Our Head of Design emailed me the next day and asked if I would present to the Design Department because he thought this might have implications for how we think about accessibility, who we're including, and what we write in our marketing materials. So that was exciting. It has also informed many of the exhibitions we've put on in the last two years. We did an exhibition about the early history of the Nelson-Atkins during our first 20 years of collecting. The trustees of this museum were three white men who frankly did not know much about art, and they engaged experts to help. One of those men was named J.C. Nichols. He was responsible for creating racially restrictive housing covenants, which segregated Kansas City and were then used by real estate developers across the United States. We still see the effects of this practice today. Redlining. So, for our exhibition, we had a panel to acknowledge his legacy in this city and his connection to the Nelson-Atkins. I think that was a big step for us to address that head-on and be transparent. As the pandemic eases and budgets get a little bigger, we're all looking forward to gallery reinstalls and how we might push this forward. It has become a framework that has helped us think about and discuss exhibitions in a new way.





**It's lovely that the museum and the wider community have supported this new approach. To continue this discussion of your work at the Nelson Atkins, could you share what you enjoy the most about your job?**

"Interpretation" is everything that helps you understand the museum's content, and it involves working with curators to make their content relevant, accessible, and engaging. I always say that I think I have the most fun job at a museum because I get to think about, "why did these objects matter, and what is their relevance today?" We get to be super creative with the ways we do that. For example, we launched a podcast this winter: "A Frame of Mind," which was a new way to think about interpretation outside the galleries and how we tell long-form audio stories. Check us out where you get your podcasts!

At heart, I'm an art historian, my BA and my MA are in art history, and I enjoy learning about art history and working in a large museum with a variety of collections. Here, I get to be a generalist. Every single exhibition I work on, I'm learning about a different area of art history, and I think for me, coming out of graduate school and deciding to go into the museum field, I didn't want to be a curator or an academic because I didn't want to specialize. My current job lets me not specialize but still constantly be learning, and it kind of feels like taking many art history courses at once whenever I am working on an exhibition.

**That makes perfect sense; I love the idea of being able to learn new things constantly. So, my next question is broad but feel free to answer however you see fit: what would you say has been your greatest achievement thus far, either professionally or personally?**

I think it's so hard for me to say because there have been these big goals that I have worked towards. I find it hard to step back and think about my achievements. One very nerdy achievement comes from when we started a project on harm reduction, and my boss suggested that I write about the process. So I wrote four blogs and didn't know if anyone would read them, but within the museum field, they went viral [laughs], and all of these people started reaching out. Curators from other museums wrote and asked,

"can you talk to us about this?" And then the nerdiest part is that there is this woman, Beverly Serrell, who wrote a book called "Exhibit Labels," and she is the museum label person. If you work in museum interpretation, you know her name, and I got an email from her saying, "can I talk to you about this? And would you be willing to write a case study for my upcoming book about this?" That was a very exciting achievement for me to realize that our team did work that other people cared about.





**That's incredible. Congratulations. So, now that you have shared the best moments of your professional career, I have to ask you, has it been a straight path for you in terms of achieving the goals you set out to achieve, or has it been more of a winding path and if so, could you talk about what some of the challenges have been and how you have moved past them?**

My mom always said, "life is only a straight line in retrospect." I've always kept that in mind. I can trace

a straight line for you, but it has not felt straight along the way at all. I graduated college without a job and moved to New York. When I first contacted the previous Head of School about working at St. Stephen's, there was no position available, but I kept hounding and being like, "do you have something for me now?" If I hadn't done that, I think things would have gone in a different direction. I came out of my MA program having no idea what I wanted to do.

I found the interpretation position

in Philadelphia, not knowing what museum interpretation was. But I'm glad that I fell into that. Philadelphia was great in many ways, but the work environment didn't suit me at the end of the day, so I applied for a job at the Nelson Atkins, not knowing anything about Kansas City or really anything about the museum except that it had a great collection and education department. I came out here and was blown away. I moved to Kansas City knowing absolutely no one [laughs], having no connections here, and thinking, "this just feels like the thing I'm supposed to do." So I think challenges for me have often been about taking risks and pushing myself to do something. It may not be safe, but I should try it because it's worth trying something new. I even remember when I lived in New York, and I got the job in Rome, and my family said, "you know, you have a job in New York, and you have friends there; why would you leave all of that?" And my response was, "why not? I'll move back to New York if it doesn't work out." And I think that's how I felt about Kansas City; if it doesn't work out, I'll leave. It's important to be open to different possibilities.

**This is so great for our students to hear because they need to know that most of us do not have it all figured out when we graduate from college, let alone when we graduate from high school. Is there a piece of advice you could share with our graduating class of 2022?**

Well, some people at 18 know what they want to do but keep yourself open to every opportunity available to you because things will come along that you may have never expected. So don't close doors too soon and along those same lines, talk to as many people as you can about what interests you, what feels exciting, learn about what different jobs are out there, and what various opportunities are out there. I've learned that most people if you could call them, they're willing to talk, and St Stephen's has a diverse alumni network, so use that as a resource!







Brian McKenna '00

MUSIC PRODUCER

**Where are you from, and what brought you to Rome?**

Well, working backwards, I was brought to Rome because my mother remarried a Roman man when I was 14. So, right in the middle of my high school career, I was brought over to Rome to live with them and attended St. Stephen's for a brief period of time. I didn't technically graduate from St. Stephen's because I went back to my high school in Cambridge, Mass., to finish up. So, I am from Cambridge, and my tenure in Rome started by virtue of my mother being remarried.

**How long did you stay at St. Stephen's?**

I was technically there for a semester, but as I'm sure you hear from everybody, the friends I made and the connections I made there have lasted my entire life since. So, the period of time I spent studying at St. Stephen's doesn't justly represent how the experience I had there became a part of my life that has never gone away, luckily.

**And this is the beautiful thing about our community. Some come for four years, some only for one, some for a semester, some for only a trimester!**

No doubt a common thread shared by international students is the difficulty in relocating – at that time, the move was against my wishes. It was not something I wanted to do. I was very tight with my community in high school. I ran track. I was one of the top runners, a state championship athlete, and my music endeavors had started well before that. So I was deeply ingrained in the culture of my high school experience in Cambridge, and it was a great one. And so when I had to go to Rome, I was not happy about it. But in retrospect, it was one of the greatest experiences of my life, hands down.

**Can you describe your experience at St. Stephen's? What are some of your fondest memories of that time?**

The first thing that happened when I got there was meeting one of my dearest friends to this day, Cynthia Baker. I remember walking through the Cortile to the staircases on that first landing, where I met this girl who looked straight out of SoCal and was just so friendly and warm. And I was like, "oh, cool." So I started talking to her, and I immediately realized that she knew everybody; she attended St. Stephen's from 9th grade until graduation. Cindy was the first person I met, and we had so many great times together throughout my semester at St. Stephen's. And when I went back to visit Rome after returning to Cambridge, which happened every several months thereafter, I always visited Cindy and my other friends. The experience I had at St. Stephen's was such a lovely, warm experience. And the academic rigor opened my eyes to so much stuff that I was previously unaware of—for example, Mrs. Christie's art history class. She was such an inspiration to me. To be able to study art history in Rome was mind-blowing. It was incredible to be able to simply walk out the door and see exactly what we were studying in the books. I had never been exposed to that before. I had traveled a little bit prior to living in Rome, but I'd never in my life seen anything quite as old. In Boston, we pride ourselves on our history, but you're looking at George Washington's history, you're looking at things that are just a few hundred years old at best, and then to skip over to Rome and study things that are centuries old and being able to touch this stuff, that was just incredible.

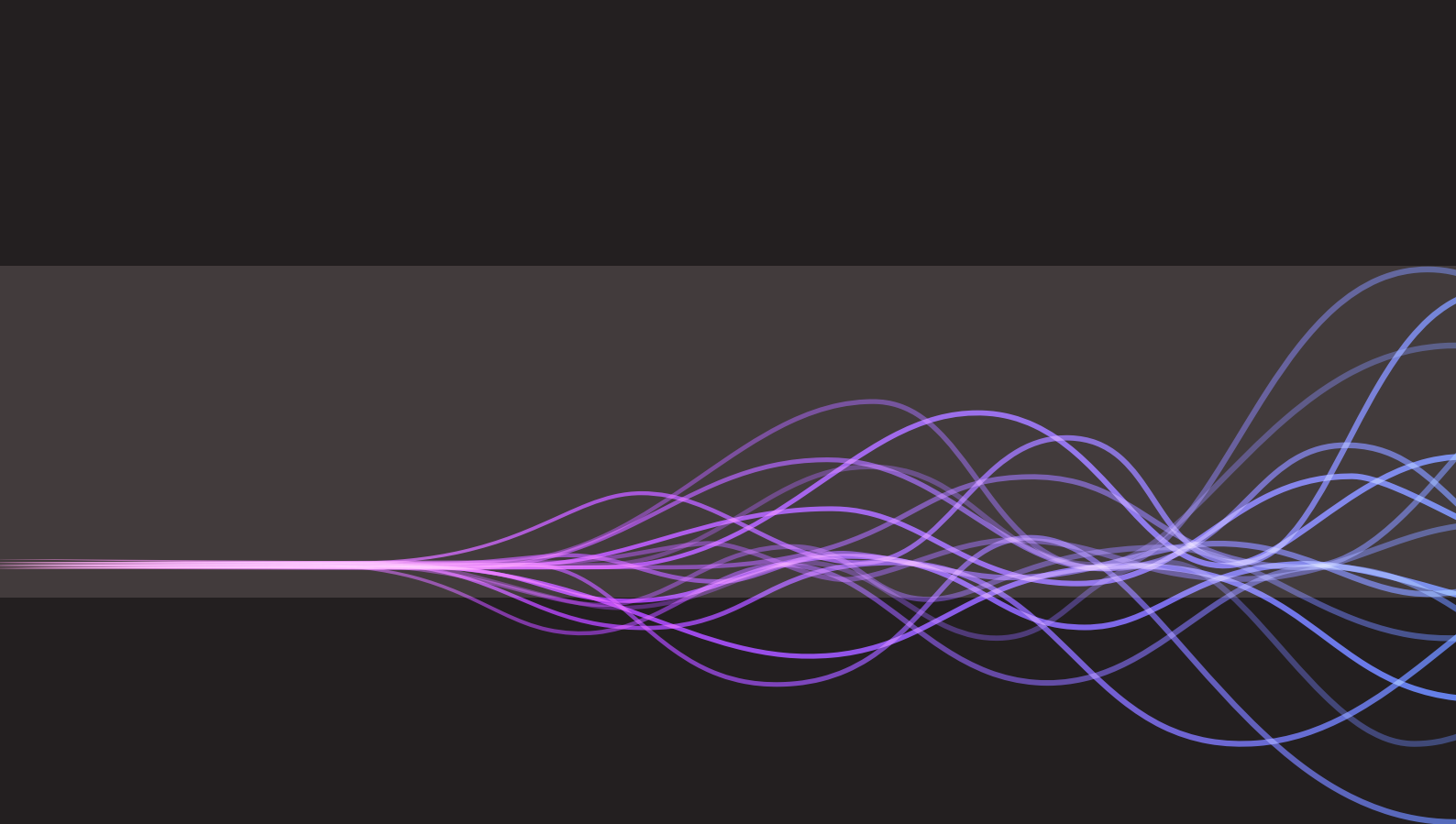
**Did your time at St. Stephen's prepare you for your career as a music producer?**

I would say that in my time at St. Stephen's, I learned certain interpersonal skills tied directly to planting yourself in a different culture that have been very helpful. Music-wise, I had a great time with Trevor Pilling, who I used to gig with. He's a phenomenal jazz pianist. He was a physics teacher at St. Stephen's at the time. So, yes, my time at St. Stephen's definitely prepared me for my career as a music producer. I would certainly say that the multicultural atmosphere there and the need to adapt to different types of people were very helpful.

**Your company, BtOVEN MUSIC, which you founded in 2009, has provided the scores for various films, tv shows, commercials, and video games, as well as produced music for a host of artists from Katy Perry to Kelly Rowland to Sarah Charness. Your company has worked on some really diverse projects, from music for the horror film, Clown to Toyota Prius and Cover Girl commercials. So, working across these diverse industries, how do you find the right music? What's your process when a new project arrives? Do you have a research and experimentation phase; what does that look like?**

That's a great question. The work I've done and the work that passes through my studio is so varied from project to project. The common thread is simply recognizing how the music we're commissioned to create and the production thereof should sound. So it's really a question of being ingrained in the pro audio world and fusing an understanding of various genres and types of music and seeing them through to their maximum potential. The important part is that my history in studying and performing music is quite varied between styles of music. And that has been very helpful. I've had the opportunity to train in a lot of





different types of music. So, how do you find the right music? Well, most of the time, we're directed through some form of creative-brief by clients. It's really an interesting space to work in because I've got my own taste in music and my own preferences for certain types of music, but I'm in a service industry where you're hired to help. There is a certain artistry to it, but it's not such that I'm typically given carte blanche to decide what is coming out of the process; it's a collaborative process during which I work with clients, help them brainstorm, help them find the right sound and ultimately produce their projects.

**The way you describe it, music production sounds very similar to consulting.**

Yeah, consulting and project management. I'm not always the one writing music for everything; I also oversee and collaborate with teams of other producers and engineers, composers, musicians, etc. And that's

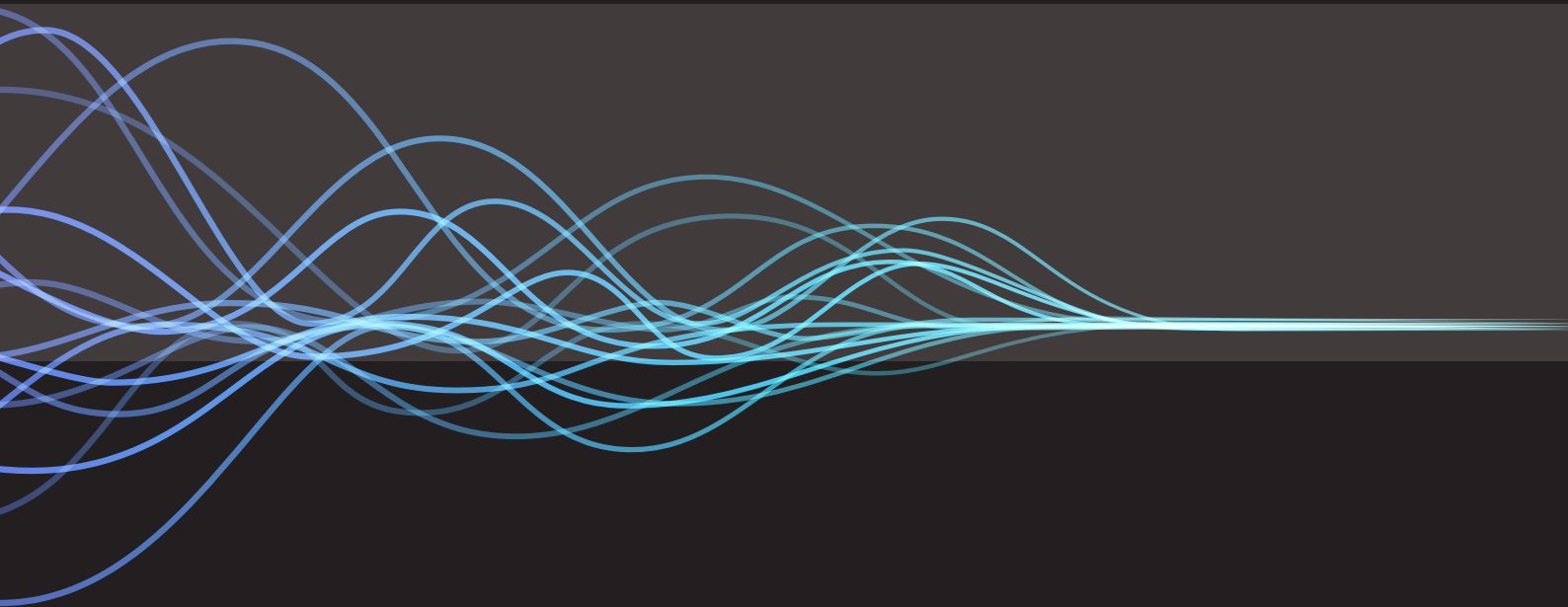
a skill set I was able to develop mainly through my work in the jingle industry, writing music for ads. I started my career in New York City with an internship at a jingle house, which is vernacular for a production company that composes and produces music for TV and radio commercials. And through that process, I was able to cut my teeth, so to speak, in an extremely high-performance environment, with some of the best people in the business, some of whose names you might not be familiar with, but that's because they were behind the scenes for so many other projects that you are familiar with; which refers back to your prior question because when I saw how much you can be exposed to, from a workflow standpoint, by being behind the curtains, as opposed to in the limelight, that was really the major turning point in my career. That was when I decided that I would rather be the guy you go to for help as opposed to exploiting a career of a limited scope and timeframe as an artist because it gives you access to more work and a greater diversity in your work. So, the word "consulting" that you used is very accurate.

**So being a producer gives you this opportunity to experiment and do different things compared to being a full-time musician.**

Correct.

**So this leads really nicely into my next question about your music: I know that you play the drums, and I don't know if you also play other instruments, but I was wondering specifically how you got into drumming; I saw online that you've also taken courses in African drumming. So, why the drums?**

Well, I started the violin when I was four or five and piano when I was about eight, and then maybe a year or two after that, my father, who was a musician, bought me my first drum set. When I started playing the drums, it was as if something clicked, perhaps even love at first sight. My dad was in bands and worked in production throughout my childhood. So I was backstage a lot already while growing up. And it turns out that



on my father's side of the family, the McKenna side, my grandfather was a drummer during the Swing Era, and my uncle is a heavyweight rhythm and blues drummer in the rock tradition based out in New Mexico. Of course, I wasn't alive in the Swing Era, and I didn't meet my uncle until I was in my mid-teens. There was something about starting to play drums that felt right. The exposure I had to the West African drum and dance tradition is actually something that started in high school through a network of academic programs in the Boston area. I was lucky to attend the Berklee College of Music during summers when I wasn't in Rome, and that was a truly awesome experience on a lot of levels. I began studying West African drum and dance there, and then I went to Wesleyan University, which has one of the premier academic West African drum and dance programs in the world. Some of the top dancers and drummers from Ghana have a very close relationship with Wesleyan and historically have run that program. So I was very lucky

to gain that exposure; I didn't seek that stuff out so much as it perhaps found me. I was lucky to be in these places where the programs were strong. I do play other instruments; I play guitars, keyboards and arrange for strings and horns. I also occasionally dabble in work as a lyricist and singer for various projects. That's an important trait as a producer, to be able to sing because it helps you communicate to vocalists you're working with and oftentimes gives you a sort of secret weapon during the process of executing a project where there are certain things to be filled out in the end because you can do it yourself instead of having to call singers back or arrange background vocals and that sort of thing.

**That's such a unique program and a cool opportunity to be immersed in another culture. I wanted to ask you, related to this topic, in addition to the U.S. market, your studio has also produced soundtracks for the Spanish and Italian markets. Do you find that you**

**have to change your approach when working outside of the U.S.? Is there music that works for a cartoon in the U.S. that would never work in Italy, for example?**

You know, that's a really good question, and I'm not necessarily sure that the international aspect of these different clients is what differentiates the approach as much as their personalities. What varied clients are used to is the difference. And so, I don't know that I would change my approach, but it's true that clients who are in different countries expect things in a certain way. So, why do people base themselves in New York City? In New York, there's a certain cache around creative industries, and there's a benefit to being based here and learning from the people here. There's a certain sort of swagger and allure to what the city has to offer. So, ultimately, I would say that it's important not to change up the approach but rather to stay true to what we do because that's what is sought after.







**The New York brand; that's what your clients look for?**

Yeah. And to be honest with you, most of the "Spanish" work I've done has actually been more for the Latin market here in the U.S., which is huge. There are many productions that are launched from square one in Spanish and not retroactively translated into Spanish, especially in this day and age. The demographic of Spanish speakers in the United States has never been bigger, and it's only growing. It's a huge industry. And as for the Italian clients I have, I was very lucky, through a network of folks I have here in New York, to be introduced to a phenomenal client called "Rainbow" that's based in Loreto. I've had a wonderful opportunity to build with them. In fact, we're just coming to the end of a series called "Summer and Todd." The music that works for this particular series, as it's based on a farm, is more rooted in the Western, North American tradition. It took us the better part of about a year and a half to develop the direction for the music. This ties into one of your earlier questions because I worked very closely with Rainbow to identify what type of music they wanted. And naturally, what we landed on was something sort of in the Bluegrass tradition, sort of like Mumford and Sons meets Looney Tunes plus some traditional bluegrass stuff thrown in.

**That sounds like fun.**

Yeah, it is fun because they wanted something with a certain pop appeal, but that also made sense for a farm. At first, they started out not wanting anything too specific, like bluegrass music or banjos and that sort of thing, but it just made sense, and we ended up there. And so, to your point about working on certain things that might fit the Italian market or rather certain things that don't work for the Italian market that do work for the U.S. market; in

this case, they chose music from the U.S. tradition. This is a well-established company that has been around for a while, and they've got some phenomenally talented composers, but my feeling is that what they could get from us would feel more authentic on some level. Music is like a language, and you're brought up with certain cultural sensibilities surrounding how it flows, how it sounds, the rhythm of it, the slang, the nuances, and you can't really learn that unless you were brought up in it. Now, you can simulate it by all means and even to a degree that is maybe indistinguishable at times or too difficult to differentiate.

**But it's not the same.**

It's not the same thing.

**What would you say you enjoy most about the work you do?**

What I enjoy most about my work is that it's different every day. Even if I work on a series or projects that extend over long periods of time, they're always different. And that's one of my favorite things; apart from loving what I do on a base level, I get to do something different every day. And for that very reason, it's exciting to come to work; it's exciting to face the challenges that await me. Sometimes they're more daunting than others, and sometimes they're just straight up a pain in the butt. However, it's fun to do different stuff. I am a creature of routine; I wake up early, I work hard, I cook for myself and my family always, so I'm not someone who is all over the place per se, but it's fun to not have to show up and do the same exact thing every day. It's also, to a large extent, having control over my schedule. I have two daughters, a one-year-old and an eight-year-old, so to be able to get hang time with them is the most important thing in my life.



Another thing I enjoy most about what I do is the flexibility to drop them off at school almost every day and oftentimes pick them up as well. My hours can be very long, so I'm not always able to do both, but it happens more often than not. And that's huge. That's a big part of why I love and enjoy what I do.

**That's really nice. I understand what you mean about valuing variety in your work. So, either professionally or personally, what do you consider to be your greatest achievement thus far?**

Sure. My greatest achievement personally is my family, without a doubt. I love my wife dearly. We just celebrated our 14th wedding anniversary. We were married very young, and our kids are our greatest achievement. There's nothing like it. I feel so blessed because I've also learned in my age and wisdom that the act of procreation isn't quite as easy as they chalk it up to be in high school Sex Ed class, where it's made to sound like stopping off for gas or ordering takeout like it's just that easy—especially as you get older. And to address my greatest professional achievement, I'd say it's having my studio because that encompasses all of the rest of the bits and pieces. I've been able to build out a certain amount of business and bring in some of my favorite people, very talented individuals who I've built relationships with over time who work on projects and creatively contribute to things that go through my studio. And that's as short as I can make that!

**And staying on this theme of the personal mixed with the professional, if you had to look back to the time that has passed since you left St. Stephen's and built your career, would you say that it's been a straight path for you in terms of achieving the goals that you've set for yourself or do you feel like you have taken some twists and turns? If so, could you talk about what some of those challenges have been and how you've been able to move past them?**

I don't think that anybody achieves much of anything without trials and tribulations. I've definitely not had a straight path to where I am now, and it doesn't necessarily continue to be a straight path either. To specifically refer to some of the biggest tests and challenges, one would be when I lost the man my mom married, who brought me to Rome, Mario. He was a great man and had a profound influence on my life and unfortunately died when I was in college. He was diagnosed with cancer that was unexpected, unknown, and progressed very quickly when I was about 18 years old. I was 19 when he passed, and that was the biggest life challenge I ever had because it was new to me at that time. Unfortunately, as we all age, the concept of losing loved ones becomes more familiar, but that specific event, when I was a senior at Wesleyan, was a true heartbreaker and very difficult to deal with in many ways. But it also set me up to be even further motivated. Then a few years ago, my biological father passed away as well, who, as I mentioned earlier, was the one who introduced me to the world of music and production. Coping doesn't necessarily get any easier, but more familiar. Perhaps the uptick to losing someone is that you realize your own mortality and how little time you have to achieve what goals you have in front of you. And since then, some of the greatest challenges have been the moves I had to make to break into this business. I started out in the city working as an intern, making no money, so I had to hold down an extra job to see through my plan. And that was a lot to handle in my early twenties. Nobody made that easy. That said, I did have people help me, and without their help, I wouldn't be here by any means, but then there were the folks in between who, perhaps out of insecurities or spite, made things very difficult. And to get through some of that and just believe in my own talents and abilities at a certain point in time was a huge challenge. Perhaps even still to this day, you know, there's nothing better than a healthy sense of doubt or fear, and certainly self-reflection. In order to truly have confidence in yourself, you need that ability to self-reflect.

**And to have a healthy dose of humility, perhaps.**

Yeah, exactly.

**Are there any important lessons from your professional experience that you could share with the St. Stephen's graduating class of 2022?**

It's important to trust and believe in yourself above all else because if you don't believe in yourself and trust yourself in making difficult decisions that impact your future, your career, all aspects of your life, that's where the true loss can take place. That's where you won't achieve your goals. And to feed off of your own fear is something that I think is very powerful. It's only natural to be concerned and wonder, "Is this gonna work? Is this gonna happen?" If you become complacent and don't honor that sensation of "what if," and if you're not occasionally a little pessimistic, and if you're not able to acknowledge when you're up against something, you'll have difficulty finding the drive you need to get through major challenges and surmount them in order to find and achieve your full potential. You just need to trust yourself and believe in yourself. And that might be misconstrued as being overconfident or not acknowledging what you need to help yourself to develop further, which is why I bring up the point about fear. One thing informs the other. I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of folks who have found themselves in a place that they aspire to would agree. Maybe there are some hot shots out there who just win every time. Some fear and some struggle are likely going to be involved. It's important to learn from your mistakes as well.

"The Alumni Spotlight series is directed by **Natalie Edwards '14**, teacher of City of Rome I, Core 9, and member of the Boarding Faculty. If you're an alumna/us interested in sharing your story please contact us at [alumni@sssrome.it](mailto:alumni@sssrome.it)"



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PART XIV:

# Alumni Stories

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# Visiting Sully Plantation, Visiting Family Secrets

BY SARAH FLEMING '71

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I stood in the thick green grass, looking at a slave dwelling at Sully Plantation, Chantilly, Virginia. The cabin was built to replicate one that had housed the people my ancestors enslaved. It was a hot August day in 2021, 95 degrees with Virginia's drenching humidity. I heard the loud chorus of crickets, the leaves shifting in the nearby copse, felt the heat in the breeze.

I grew up knowing I was related to Robert E. Lee. He was my first cousin, five times removed. My father spoke of how proud his father had been to be the grandson of a Lee. Another relative wrote a book about our ancestor with very little mention of the family's enslaved. At the same time, we all knew that slavery was an abomination, but we never talked about our part in it. How did we reconcile these opposites from one generation to the next? How much emotional energy did it take to suppress the knowledge of terrible wrongdoing? Does this explain our family history of depression and anxiety?

My fourth great grandfather and Robert E. Lee's uncle, Richard Bland Lee, served in the U.S. Congress as Northern Virginia's first Congressman beginning at age 24. Two years later when his father died, Richard inherited 29 people and 1500 acres at Sully Plantation, near what is now Dulles Airport. The enslaved were listed by name and market value. There was John of Henry (or Henry's son), valued at 80 pounds, Sam the Blacksmith, also 80 pounds, Nancy of Prue (or Prue's daughter), 20 pounds. There was Old Dewey, said to be "of no value," and 25 more men, women, and children. Over the next 24 years, Richard bought and sold many, many more people. For example, in 1806, he sold a man named Natt, aged 19, for \$349. Later that year, he bought Rachel, her child, and "their increase" for \$220.

After too many bad loans to his profligate brothers, Richard had to sell Sully Plantation to his cousin, Francis Lightfoot Lee. I have to assume more enslaved people were sold then to pay off other debts. Some enslaved were taken by the Lees, first to their new home in Alexandria, then to Strawberry Vale (near present-day Tysons Corner), and finally, by 1815, to the District of Columbia. In 1840, 13 years after his death, Richard's wife reported owning twelve enslaved people. Two were adult women who probably came from Sully with her, but the rest were children under the age of ten. Who were they? Were they related to the two enslaved women or adopted when their own parents were sold away? What happened to their fathers?





Where did the others go over the years, sold, or given away? Called property, but, actually, human souls: mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, babies, grandparents, friends, and lovers; relationships not honored or protected by the grisly maw of slavery.

Weighted down by this legacy, I wandered around outside the slave cabin. I moved my feet in the grass to avoid the red ants that wanted to nip at my sandaled toes, and I kept an eye out for rat snakes, like the one curled up in the rafters inside the quarter, awaiting the rodents that come seeking food. My feelings were as uneasy as my shifting feet and wary eyes, alert to the next gut-punch, the next proof of my ancestors' cruelty, evidence of the trauma they visited on generations of their enslaved people and their descendants, and upon their own white descendants.

After my Sully visit, I flew west to Arizona to celebrate the first birthday of my grandson, Richard Bland Lee's sixth great grandson. His older brother, Donovan, was four, the same age as Isaac, whom Richard Bland Lee sold for a shilling in 1791. I imagined my grandchild being led away forever by a stranger, and I was frozen, eyes filling with both horror and tears, knowing I would have been impotent ever to nurture or protect him again. I was shocked at how disconnected I had been from a reality always facing enslaved people.

My son James had told Donovan that I had visited the family plantation at Sully. Donovan must have asked some questions because James told me the subject might come up. Even so, I was not prepared when Donovan asked, after bringing me a story book for us to read, "Were the Lees bad?" I searched for a way to start the conversation about these horrors in a way that a four-year-old could grasp.

"Yes," I told him. "They were very bad to force people to work without paying them." He understood at once. I wondered if I were being a coward, not giving him more information. I wanted to be honest but not traumatize him with the whole story. I have the white person's privilege of being able to moderate a conversation that Black parents don't have when racism intrudes on their lives.

After my visit to Arizona, I reflected that maybe this is how the harms done by slavery are eased. Could this little grandson be the start of healing the damage caused by generations of enslavers and their oblivious descendants? Could the conversations that have begun to happen among my sisters and brother, cousins, children, and grandchildren finally break the pattern of denial?

Since beginning this writing, I have found a Black cousin whose Black ancestor was sexually exploited by my white ancestor. We can assume she was forced into the relationship, as he exercised his will upon her by virtue of his "ownership" and her inability to refuse. Despite this history, my new cousin has been warm and welcoming, and we do genealogical work together.

My ancestors did great damage to many, yet I remain hopeful for a future where Donovan and future generations continue the work of uncovering and acknowledging the past. Doing so can only make us all stronger.

The whispering leaves at Sully, the crickets screaming in the heat, the red ants eternally searching, and the snakes waiting, remind me of what is yet to be discovered. My family story will continue to unfold and will now be a more truthful one.



Sarah Tarr Fleming is a member of *Coming to the Table*, a mother, grandmother and retired psychotherapist. She lives in California.

She is collecting information about her family's history as enslavers to share with her own descendants and with those her family enslaved. She is also looking for ways to heal wounds through new relationships, memorials, and reparations.

Sully docent Beth Sansbury's book, *"Searching for Sully's Enslaved"* published in 2020 provided invaluable information for this story.

Finally, thank you to Allison Thomas (CTTT Pasadena) for her editing skills. She is a brilliant midwife.

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# Science Stories for Grown-Ups

BY GUILIA SEBASTIO

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EVERYTHING ENDED WITH  
A BOOK.

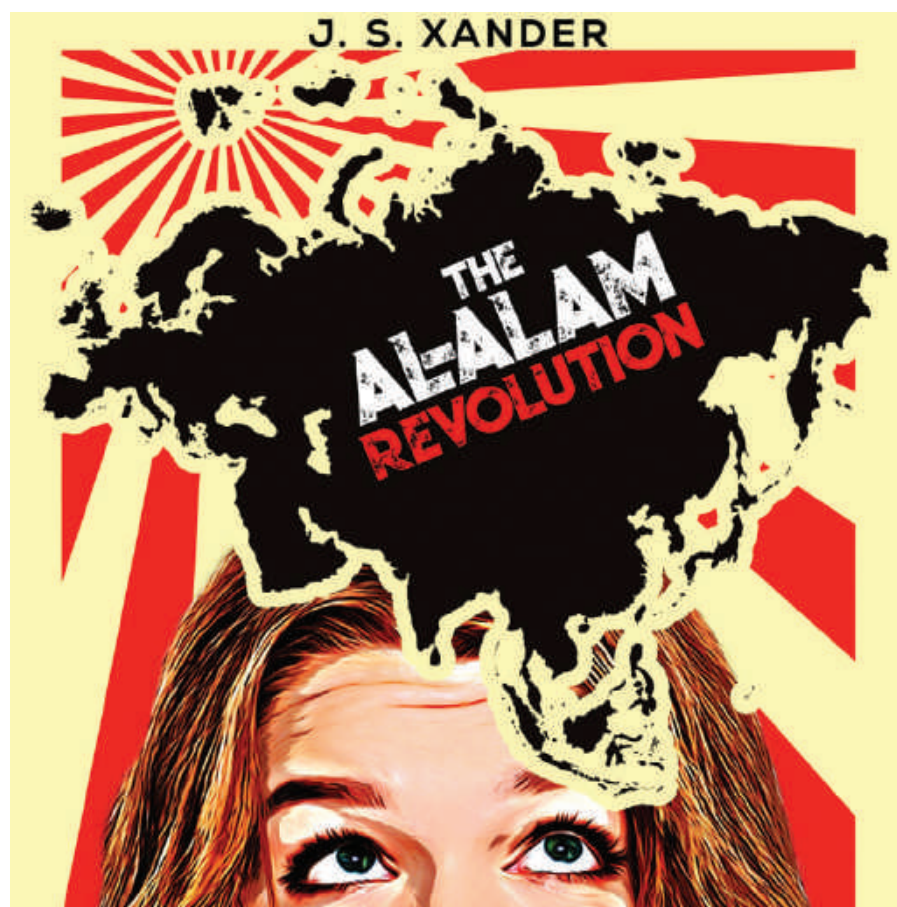
NO WAIT.

EVERYTHING STARTED  
WITH A BOOK.

Five years ago, I was living in rural Ireland with little more than sheep for company. My boyfriend lived in another country and I had left my university friends behind. It was a lonely time. One day I took it in my head to begin to write, with the primary objective of passing the time. At first, the words came out at the lethargic pace of a sleepy sloth. This was how my book started, in its highs and lows.

When Covid arrived I had made another move, to Brussels. A new country with new potential doors, that were all sealed shut by the pandemic. Loneliness was an ever more present companion in the corners of my quiet, empty apartment. I began to think of old friends. Amazing people I had met at university, at school. As I thought of them, my book expanded, falling onto the page in a flurry of words and fond memories.

At one point, one book wasn't enough, the ideas kept coming. The pressure to write released in bursts of short stories. I was inspired by my friends. My past. My job as a chemist. I took to social media under



the pen name J. S. Xander. Once I entered social media I had to ask myself a very fundamental question, because, on social media, you must present yourself with a personal brand. So I asked myself what is my brand? What do I stand for? I am a Chemist by background, a writer, and actress by passion. I was writing “Science stories for grown-ups,” and in this, I discovered something about myself. Who I am. Scientist and Artist. Two conflicting sides, or sides that are theoretically conflicting, that come together.

Writing has been a process of discovering myself and who I am. More importantly, however, it has been an act of reaching out to others. I published my first novel in November 2021 and dedicated it to the friends and family who taught me the world spins in more than one direction. It is a story of friendship and culture with a hint of terrorism. When I published, people from across my sphere of life reached out to me. I have been reminded of the power that a story has to help you connect with those around you.

The “Science Stories for Grown-Ups”? They developed further because of another bond in my life. I reached out to an old friend. A great artist. Someone who had walked with me through the flames of the University of Edinburgh Chemistry course. Together we molded the stories further and this summer will debut our first Science Communication show at the world-famous Fringe Theatre Festival in Edinburgh.

It started. It ended. It's somewhere in the middle. It would not have been possible without my friends. Keep your friends close. In this era of messy, superficial communication try to make real connections with others. Your classmates can be your greatest source of inspiration. The people you are close to already and the people you still haven't gotten to meet and spend time with. You never know, what magical, amazing endeavors you can accomplish with the might of your community behind you.

As you ponder on that, I hope you can enjoy a short science story.

## SILENT NIGHT

Frank the water molecule lay on the blades of grass. It wasn't the first time he was in this situation. After multiple centuries on earth, Frank had been almost everywhere and done almost everything. He even knew the names of most objects. Unusual for a molecule. Only old hats like Frank had the ability to comprehend the patterns of bonds and emissions of light that made each object unique. That was why Frank could recognize the patterns of phosphorus, nitrogens and carbons emitting green wavelengths of light underneath him as GRASS.

At the beginning of his existence, only glimpses and pieces came from the world, however, over time the puzzle had come together to give him a clear picture. In particular, he had learnt a lot when he once spent three years in a dusty water bottle that had fallen behind a cupboard of a middle-school history class. It had been illuminating. Centuries of existence had flowed into each other, settling as pearls of knowledge.

So he lay on the grass. His previous posting had been a beer bottle, but he'd accidentally been dropped on the ground. Warm rays of light were coming from the sun and Frank knew what would happen soon.

Sure enough! A few minutes later the light started filling him with a vibrant energy. Frank felt the bonds keeping him close to the grass weaken as he started to buzz! With a few shakes, he was off!

He floated up into the air.

It was a familiar journey and the sky was waiting.

Winds pushed him around through their cool breeze.

Time passed.

After quite a while, Frank resigned himself to this being one of the longer trips in the sky.

The world merged below, emitting light and heat from its various surfaces.

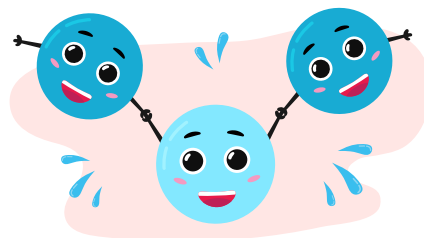
Floating along, Frank arrived to a space in the sky with a more than average number of water molecules, along with other particles and molecules in the air. The breeze turned him and with immense glee, he recognized an old friend, Walter! He had known Walter from his time in the middle school water bottle. They'd enjoyed many spirited discussions over those three stagnant years.

"Hey, Walter!" Frank yelled out to his old pal.

The breeze slowed. The temperature dropped. A large number of water molecules were just hanging around. A dust particle stood between Frank and Walter, so Frank made his way over. It was a perfect place to just chill and chat. Walter took his queue. They latched onto the grainy surface.

"Frank! How long has it been!" Walter seemed thrilled to see him. They aligned their bonds, oxygen to hydrogen, it was the way water molecules would interact, so their charges were well paired. The temperature dropped some more.

"What was your last posting?" Frank asked after having told his tale of the beer bottle.



A chill was setting as they moved further up. Walter and Frank relaxed on the dust particle. Other molecules followed their example. Now Walter had a stranger on his other side who had also aligned himself to Walter's bonds. As the air froze, more and more water molecules clumped along the dust particle. A crowd of oxygens and hydrogens was forming in perfectly aligned hexagonal structures. Unperturbed, Frank and Walter chatted away.

Crystalline hexagons were forming all across the sky. Their agglomerate became heavier.

Gravity doesn't appreciate anything above a certain mass to be airborne. Unless it has wings.

The snowflakes started to fall.

Frank knew when the pull of the earth started to take effect, instead of going up, their particle started to go down. He paid it no mind. It had not been his first time as a snowflake. Instead, he kept on asking his friend about his travels. Where had he gone after spending a year in a rose? Was the rose he was part of given to anyone interesting? Walter was even older than Frank, he had the wealth of millennia of stories with a young spirit! Always ready for the next adventure.

Their snowflake meandered downwards, taking them towards earth at a steady pace. Walking in the air. Floating in the moonlit sky.

In the descent, the snowflake started to take a more unique form, modified by its encounters along the way. Frank was knocked by a nitrogen molecule and slightly turned away from Walter. It was disappointing as it put an abrupt end to a thrilling conversation. However, he knew the life of a water molecule was filled with the unexpected. He sighed comfortably after the catch-up with his friend. Lulled by their slow descent.

The world below was getting closer.

White and silent. Trees already covered by a dusting of other iced water. Snowflakes, so similar and so different from Frank's own.

Frank was happy. He had met an old friend. What other gift could he ask for?

It was a peaceful night.

Before they landed he glimpsed a lit window. A family sitting together. A tree lit up inside.

They slid slowly on the ground. Cushioned by more of their brethren. Their bonds fitting together with other water molecules like the embrace between loved ones.

Bonded in unique crystalline forms, Frank interlinked with other waters to cover a piece of the world.

In their carpet of white, they dreamed, a silent night.

SCIENCE STORIES FOR  
GROWN-UPS



# The Small World of Serendipity

BY EDOARDO PARIANTE '15



**T**his story is equal parts chance, serendipity, a small world, and the St Stephen's community.

I am a musician and young entrepreneur, and when I was based in London, I was searching for ways to build connections. I wanted to grow and establish myself and my company in the world of discography. I decided, therefore, to attend my first music industry showcase festival in France, which, much like an industry fair, is a key place to build your brand and grow your network. I was there alone, at 19 years of age, speaking with incredible artists like Wyclef Jean, Mark Hoppus, and Daddy Yankee.

I was a little lost, and looking to make connections, so I decided to attend a speech about the importance of management and law in the new deals brought forward by the digital market for artists. I waited until the end of the speech to try to talk and exchange cards with one of the speakers, who promptly

said, "Wait, I have an Italian colleague you should meet!" Later that day, I met Fabrizio Catalano for a long chat.

We sat down at a café and began talking, and after a couple of standard questions like "where are you from?", "Rome, which part?" etc., we finally arrived at: "What school did you go to?" and the answer was "St. Stephens" for the both of us. We were both shocked! We started talking about teachers, siblings of people who might have known both of us, and all sorts of topics. We were blown away by the irony of how something so niche and industry-specific brought us together and how a school based in Rome facilitated a connection between two Italians currently living in London but spending a week in France for work.

We also discovered that we had attended the same elementary school in the Castelli Romani area and had shared almost every teacher, though we had an age difference of more than ten years.

When we returned to London, we continued to meet up. I kept Fabrizio up to date with what my company was doing, and he provided useful tips and information as we grew.

Since the fair, Fabrizio has been a great point of reference and ideas, helping us and mentoring me with the company until covid, unfortunately, took me away from London and made our connection slightly harder. When I started working at St. Stephen's and presented the recording studio project to the school, Fabrizio was one of the first people I called. And every time we speak, we still can't believe that this connection happened.

As a student, I always believed that the community was the most valuable part of this school, especially in a setting like Rome. Now I have proof that even with little to no odds in your favor, St. Stephen's will find a way to connect you across the world.





# THE CORTILE 2022

## ROME

ST. STEPHEN'S SCHOOL  
VIA AVENTINA, 3 ROME 00153, ITALY  
PHONE: +39 06 575 0605  
EMAIL: [ADMISSIONS@SSSROME.IT](mailto:ADMISSIONS@SSSROME.IT)

## NEW YORK

ST. STEPHEN'S SCHOOL,  
244 FIFTH AVENUE, SUITE 2296,  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10001  
EMAIL: [ADMISSIONS@SSSROME.IT](mailto:ADMISSIONS@SSSROME.IT)

[www.sssrome.it](http://www.sssrome.it)