

FOUNDERS' DAY SPEECH – RICHARD S. AARONIAN, MAY 19, 2023

Thank you, Betsy and Bill. Whoa, this is all pretty overwhelming. The last person to say so many nice things about me was my mother.

It's wonderful to have all of you sharing this day with me: students, former colleagues, trustees, members of the Awards Committee and alums from the classes of '68, '73, '78, 2013 and 2018. And, of course, it's wonderful to have my family here: my wife, Peg; son Eric and grandson Lane; along with other members of the Aaronian/Vreeland clan.

Being up here today is quite frightening. I've been on this stage before – for opening assemblies, faculty follies and other occasions. But this is even more stressful than introducing Jane Goodall – yes, she did speak here. And all this attention does not fit my philosophy: Keep a low profile.

Those who know me understand my passion for birds and ornithology. When Betsy called to tell me I was receiving this award, it was hard to find the appropriate words of gratitude. And then when I learned the date of this assembly, I said to Peg, "Wait, May is the peak of spring migration." I am tagging along with ornithology field trips this spring. (A special shout out to Formats A, B and D ornithology classes. Wasn't the Plum Island trip great?) I called Chris Matlack who teaches the class and he told me it was not a field trip day – so here I am with you.

More than 60% of my life has been spent at Exeter, and Peg has been by my side as we lived in Amen and Bancroft, and after 18 years in a house on Elliot Street, back into a dorm – Williams House – for a final year. In addition to her own career as a writer, editor and public TV broadcaster, she was there when I was giving extra help, coaching hockey, on dorm duty or at committee meetings.

Family shaped my life. My parents emigrated from Armenia in the early 1900s. My father came with his mother when he was nine to be reunited with his father, who had been working in the textile mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to earn money to bring his family to this country.

They left Armenia before the 1915 Genocide but my mother and her family did not. They arrived in 1923. My mother said they had been sheltered by German missionaries but would not speak of atrocities she may have witnessed as a young girl.

In retirement I have had time to volunteer with Peg to help refugees in Manchester get settled in this country and I often think of what my extended family experienced when they arrived.

English is not my first language; I spoke Armenian until I went to school. In those early years my Armenian-speaking Aaronian clan lived in side-by-side triple decker tenements in Somerville, Massachusetts, which today is one of the trendiest Boston suburbs. We were in the middle apartment, grandparents lived above and other relatives below. My sisters and I were expected to work in the neighborhood grocery store my father owned in a diverse Cambridge neighborhood. In addition to my classmates at school, our customers introduced me to a world outside my Armenian bubble.

We moved Medford when I was six, and I am a proud Medford public school product. By the way, its proper pronunciation is *Meffa*. Just ask Dave Bohn whose father was on the staff at Medford High School.

It was there that John Bradley, my enthusiastic, knowledgeable high school biology teacher – with an ever-present cigar in his jacket pocket – gave me the confidence and encouragement to study biology. My love for the subject actually began earlier, in the neighborhood woods and pond as well as on my cousins' farm planting and picking vegetables with them in the summer.

I was the first in my family to attend college and my brother-in-law, Gene Putnam, guided me through the process. It was at the University of New Hampshire where I was introduced to ornithology and marine biology and later, when I was working on a master's degree, I noticed a 3X5 index card on the department office door.

That card changed my life and led to a 49-year career at Exeter. It read:

HALF TIME BIOLOGY TEACHER WANTED – WOMAN PREFERRED
PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY

Enrollment in biology had increased and the school had recently gone co-ed. The Science Department – and all the departments – were looking to bring women teachers into classrooms.

I had just turned 26, had only a few months of teaching experience, but not knowing any better, applied, at least for the experience of an interview. Fortunately – for me – it was late in the hiring season and this was only a part-time position. I got the job.

I knew nothing about boarding schools, but teaching small classes and coaching were appealing. The only thing I knew about dorm life was being an RA in my college dorm – but, as I said, I was surrounded by relatives growing up, so how challenging could it be living with 40 students in a dorm? I hope I didn't give too much bad advice during those years in a dorm, when we did not have the support of a professional counseling staff.

As you might imagine, Exeter was a very different school in 1971. That year 15 teachers were hired: six women and nine men—but the Science Department remained all male. Some of them, in fact, had been hired before I was born. The first woman science teacher, Lynda Beck, arrived the next year. Today the department consists of 17 women and 12 men.

The Thompson Science Building (now the John and Elizabeth Phillips Student Center) had well-equipped labs but no Harkness tables. Faculty had to share classrooms, thanks to increased science enrollment. Thirty years later—when I was the senior member of the department—we opened the Phelps Science Center. I loved seeing the smiles on the faces of students and alums as they stopped to look at the aquarium and whale skeleton. It's hard to believe furniture can make a difference, but with Harkness tables in every science classroom we were finally like every other department at the school.

But back to my very first year here, when unlike some of you who arrived at Exeter brimming with self-assurance, I felt like a fish out of water or like the Stellers Sea-Eagle who found its way to Maine, miles from its home in northern Japan and eastern Russia a few years ago. I had a lot to learn. When I was not in class, I was busy trying to keep up with my students. As if that wasn't enough, I was given a section of accelerated biology to teach in the second semester.

Even though I didn't know anything about Harkness teaching, I learned so much by visiting classes of colleagues like Peter Greer, Carole France and Dave Weber. I will always be grateful to have been surrounded by so many amazing colleagues.

Unlike the faculty who had known Exeter as an all-boys school for decades, the transition to coeducation was not an issue for me. One of the few non-problematical issues that first year.

I got through that first year thanks to another mentor, Andy Polychronis, who also taught biology. Whenever I couldn't figure out how to make a difficult concept understandable or how to use a lab effectively, he was always available. Like John

Bradley (but without the cigars), Andy was non-judgmental and never made me feel I shouldn't be asking what might appear to be a basic question. His example served me well when students came to me not understanding a concept. Andy Polychronis made me a better teacher.

I had been at Exeter only a few years when my much-senior colleagues approved my proposal to introduce marine biology and ornithology. For me, field courses are an extension of the Harkness table and lab bench. I wanted my students to see, hear and feel biology by observing organisms and their behavior in their natural habitats rather than only reading about it in a textbook.

Dorm life introduced us to both boys and girls in our first five years. Amen was a boys dorm for the first two, and we are still close with a number of the boys who came in as preps in 1972.

Then in 1974, Amen became a girls dorm and we were introduced to a group of intrepid young women who faced myriad challenges as the school became more fully coeducational. It couldn't have been easy to be the only girl in a class or to be asked for the "girl's point of view".

It doesn't surprise me that we have a special relationship with members of those early classes of the 1970s. And it's sobering to think that I was not even 10 years older than the seniors at that time. In fact, I have always felt we grew up together and learned a lot from them in the classroom, in the dorm and on the ice.

Coaching hockey for 26 years led to many long-lasting friendships. I enjoyed watching players work hard to improve, look out for one another, and find joy in practice and competition. For me, being on the ice with my players offered a welcome change from class and grading lab reports.

I want to leave you with a few of things that make me smile as I think back on my years at Exeter:

- listening to you at the table help a classmate understand a difficult concept
- watching your face when you understand that concept
- listening to you recall a single play from a hockey game many years ago
- sharing a view of a Baltimore Oriole in bright sunlight feeding on apple blossoms
- having an ornithology student ask for a pair of binoculars as a graduation gift
- sharing your pride when you identify a bird on your own, maybe from its song
- watching you watch barnacles feed or a sea anemone live its life
- taking staff and faculty on birding trips

- living for a year with my family in St. Andrews, Scotland, thanks to PEA's generous sabbatical program
- teaching biology alongside our son, Eric for three years and watching him evolve into fine biology teacher

And some of my hopes for you:

- that you find your own Gene Putnam, John Bradley, Andy Polychronis and not be afraid to ask for help when you need it
- that you will tell those teachers, friends, staff members how they helped you or your friends
- that you tell them when you hear good things about them
- that you find something to be passionate about
- that you see a North Atlantic Right Whale before they are no longer with us
- that you will help protect our environment in whatever ways you are able

And, most importantly, I hope you find something on a 3x5 inch index card—or the digital equivalent—that will change your life in ways you could not have ever imagined

Thank you