

Founder's Day May 19, 2017

Good Morning Exeter!!

Thank you, Wole, and the Awards Committee for those kind and generous remarks. I am humbled and honored to be this year's recipient of the Founder's Day Award.

I would like to add my welcome to the class of 1967 celebrating their 50th Reunion. As Hammy Bissell, '29, Director of Scholarship Boys and Alumni Secretary, was famous for saying to thousands of returning alumni – "Welcome Home!" It is good to see you and so many familiar faces and friends.

As I was preparing for this day, it was difficult for me to think what I might say. PEA was home for my family for 35 years. In three decades the world has changed and so has Exeter, yet some values embedded in Exeter's DNA remain the same.

My journey to Exeter may be similar to yours -- not a direct path. I arrived in the summer of 1976 and remember standing in the back of this Assembly Hall, along the wall to my left, listening to the Dean of Faculty introduce the Emeriti and senior faculty at the opening Assembly -- what an august setting! The history of each person recognized gave me a better window into the essence of this school. I remember one retired teacher, the former director of admissions, Pike Rounds, was introduced as the Senior Emeritus. He was appointed to the faculty in 1925. It was 1976! ...That was 51 years earlier. I said to myself, "You won't see me on this stage in 51 years." Well, this year marks # 41...

My personal history did not include a boarding school. I was born in Brooklyn, raised in Queens and attended Catholic high school and college. Before coming to Exeter, I held a number of jobs — a page on the Johnny Carson Show (for those students in this room he was the Steven Colbert and Jimmy Fallon of my day). I worked as a sales rep for IBM, was a college registrar, and worked for two boarding schools, one as Admissions Director and the other as Director of Development.

Although I did not report directly to Principal Stephen Kurtz, he interviewed me for the position of Director of the Annual Fund. I entered that interview with some confusion. When I drove into Exeter hours earlier prior to the interview, I spotted a downtown restaurant -- "Kurtz's Restaurant." What? The Principal of PEA owns a restaurant? It did not take me more than a few minutes into the interview to realize that this man was not a restaurant owner, but someone who loved and valued education. He impressed me with the picture he painted of Exeter's culture. *Non sibi* was certainly something he expected to be ingrained in each student and modeled by all adults on campus. I remember him saying he was looking for someone to run the office who could bring a team together to achieve the school's goals. He also wanted someone who was not going to set himself apart from the people he supervised. For instance, he said, "If you want a cup of coffee don't ask your assistant to get it for you; ask your assistant if he or she would like one." Here was the Principal of PEA getting his assistant a cup of coffee! This was not what I had experienced in business or at the other educational institutions in which I had worked. In just a few minutes he convinced me that Exeter would be a good place to work.

As many of you may have experienced, Exeter can be overwhelming. In my first few years I had to work hard to keep my head above water. Despite the pressure -- more often than not, self-imposed — I loved the work, the people and the ability to see that what I was doing made a difference.

Since living at a boarding school is so consuming I could not have done my job without the loving support and understanding of my wife, Pat, and our children, Jill and Craig. We were all involved in welcoming alums, trustees, faculty, students and academy guests into our home. Many became friends and in some cases, part of our family.

Traveling was part of my job; moreover, even at Exeter, working nights and weekends forced me to be away from home when I was needed. My wife stood with me, for she knew when I accepted the position what it entailed. She didn't object to my Exeter obligations even though she carried many of the family responsibilities alone.

Thank you, Pat, for being my partner!!! We share this award together!!

However, our children, when they were young, would not always be so understanding and would frequently throw me under the bus by laying a guilt trip on me — “Remember, you were not there the day I got my braces off”, or “You missed my soccer game when I scored a goal”. Aren't children wonderful? Their recall for such matters was impeccable. Now that they are parents I enjoy seeing the payback they receive from their children!!!! “

As a manager, I discovered that Harkness did not apply to the classroom alone. In the workplace, each colleague contributed a different strength just as students' multiple voices and talents contribute to the table discussion. Some of my colleagues were good at the "big picture" concept; others were excellent in the details. Some possessed computer skills while others expressed themselves better in writing. As a former principal once said, “Education around the Harkness table is not getting the correct answer. That is easy. The real challenge is to ask the right question.” As a manager, I always tried to find the right question to move the discussion to a successful conclusion.

I learned so much from all my colleagues. I won't identify you by name, but many are here today and know who you are. So thank you.....

THANK YOU..... For all the help you gave me over those many years!

Now as a senior citizen, I realize life teaches us important lessons:

Lesson #1 --Words and actions matter, even small ones!

This story comes from David, class of 1955. He entered the Academy as a 13-year old, knowledgeable about boarding school life thanks to his uncle who had attended Exeter years earlier. He was having a difficult time fitting into the fabric of the school and was on the verge of leaving. One night he was outside his room in Dunbar Hall at 11:00 p.m. Bob Bates, English

Instructor and Dorm Faculty, discovered him roaming the halls. In the 50's, if you were out of your room at 11:00 p.m., you were going to face some disciplinary action or even a possible train or bus ride home.

However, Mr. Bates asked David, "What's the problem?" David replied, "Can't sleep". "I can't either," said Mr. Bates. "How about coming into my apartment so we can chat?" David told me this story when we first met. As a 50-year old man he carried the memory of this evening with gratitude and appreciation for what Bob's act of kindness meant to him. When I returned to campus, I shared the story with Bob but he had no recollection of the evening. He probably performed this act of kindness hundreds of times in his career.

A small gesture of support or a kind word can have a lasting effect, greater than one might ever imagine. So too, harsh or careless words, spoken in haste, might have the opposite effect. Words do matter!

Lesson #2-- A time to move on or stay?

After my first four years at Exeter I was thinking about taking a college position. I shared my plans with Steve Kurtz who always had good advice. In this case, it was simple -- "Follow your own path", but he added a caveat, "When looking at new opportunities don't trade up for salary and title and down for quality of institution". I gave it a lot of thought and realized Exeter's ranking among boarding schools was much stronger than the college recruiting me. Since then, I have seen friends and colleagues make moves for the wrong reasons and in some cases have regretted their decisions.

As good as Steve was at giving advice, our interactions were not always joyful. One time Steve went to New Jersey to visit an alum. Upon his return to campus he wanted to send the alum and his wife a thank you note after spending the evening in their home. He lamented he could not remember the alum's wife's name. I quickly replied: Edna. He sent the letter off immediately and two weeks later he received a reply.

Steve's secretary called, alerting me -- he had received a terse letter from the alum blasting him for not remembering his wife's name. She warned me, "He is on his way up to your office." I scrambled through the files to find her name, Elizabeth! I had been close! Edna was Elizabeth's mother's name. What was I going to do? Steve had just appointed me head of the office.

Minutes later Steve marched into my office. Not seeing me at my desk he called out, "Where are you?" I replied, "Over here." He said, "Where?" to which I answered again, "Here". Upon the second exchange and still not seeing me, he turned around and stormed out.

Steve did not see me because I was hiding under my desk. Assessing the situation, I knew I had to face his wrath at some point. At that moment, I had a flash of genius. I decided to put on a white construction helmet I had in my office closet to be worn at ground-breaking events for building projects on campus. I placed the hat on my head and walked to his office to take my punishment. Upon seeing me he wanted to know why I had the hat on. I told him, "I know you are going to give me grief; I want to deflect the pain." He laughed and that was it.

Years later, Steve returned to campus for the opening of school assembly. He remembered the fiasco with Edna and said, "I was ready to fire you, but you made me laugh."

Let's come back to this Assembly Hall in 1976.

I am reminded of what Exeter was then and what it is today. It is not the buildings, the library, playing fields, the endowment or the trophies, but an extraordinary group of people who make up the Exeter family.

The Emeriti and senior faculty sitting on this stage in 1976 were links in a human chain. Their experiences and stories connected them with the past, as well as adding to the school's stories for those coming thereafter -- a narrative worth celebrating.

As you students leave this place to find your own path in life, don't forget to come back and share your stories and experiences with your friends, classmates and teachers. You might not return soon, but at some point it will be the right time. I urge you to make the journey. You will find it rewarding and fulfilling.

And when you do, let the voice of Hammy Bissell greet and envelope you.... "Welcome Home."

Thank you!

James M. Theisen