

Welcome Home, Harry (Henry)

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My six-year old son, Henry, has recently discovered Harry Potter. As we prepare to head back to IMSA for homecoming for the first time that Henry is able to remember, I find the analogy of Hogwarts for IMSA to be apropos for explaining to him where we are going and why. While I am sure many from IMSA have noted the parallels, they're particularly compelling when one could easily pass for a Weasley. I've red hair; I'm one of four kids in my family to attend IMSA, and I had my share of hand-me-down robes, if you know what I mean.

There are other aspects of my IMSA experience that are quite un-Weasley like, however. The Weasleys are an old Wizarding family, but my family is, well, from the Muggle world. I grew up on small farm along the Mississippi, close to where the states of Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri meet. The only people I interacted with on a regular basis who had been to college were my schoolteachers. In Dallas City, many people were hard working, and some were quite bright, but few were educated. In retrospect, I've often thought that it was for the best that I was especially naïve. When I decided in the third grade that I wanted to be a scientist, no one bothered to explain to me how impossible that was, any more than they had done so in response to my earlier stated intention to be an Olympic gymnast. Going to IMSA opened doors for me that I hadn't even known were closed.

Yet it's not easy to pin down what made my IMSA experience magical. Certainly there are some elements that are structural, a direct result of curriculum and pedagogical strategies. Unbelievable as it may be to students currently enduring high school in any form, there are honestly aspects of my educational experience at IMSA that I remember nearly 20 years later. I am

not referring to the simple fact that I know general information that I realize must have been assimilated in that time frame of schooling; I mean I really remember specific class sessions, and expect I will remember for them for the whole of my life, in which I first learned a concept.

How could I forget the experience of recreating in Bill Stepien's American Studies class the US Supreme Court case of the National Socialist Party of America vs. Village of Skokie? Or the excitement of piecing together in John Eggebrecht's organic chemistry course what really happened to Ryan Stallings? Moreover, I have many poignant memories of teachers who changed my life in little ways that they probably didn't realize then or since. David Workman, cleverly saving my pride by trading physics tutoring by him for Unix tutoring by me. Ed Goebel, humoring me when I would brag about getting the MMWR by ftp before he could get it in the postal mail.

Even now if I am frustrated by something that I am working on, I deliberately think back to John Alexopoulos's impassioned argument to my pre-calculus class that any of us could do math. Likewise, I don't think I would have made it through my college studies without the self-confidence cemented by the experience of not realizing until halfway through the semester of the Introduction to Programming (Pascal) course at IMSA that I was the only girl in the class; I had never noticed because Michael Sloan treated me the same way as he did every other student.

I can only hope that I bring to my own teaching a fraction of the energy and dedication that I experienced from so many of my instructors at IMSA. At the least, I think it's fair to say that I picked up a bit of their bravery to try to new

things in the classroom. Mobile technologies, personal response units, podcasting – been there, done that. I'm what the School of Engineering calls an "early adopter."

Then there are all those extracurriculars. Drama Club, Swing Choir, and Club Pseudo were surprisingly good preparation for lecturing to large classes and presenting my research, though I shudder to think of the parodies that my students must sing about me when I remember a few we made up about our IMSA teachers' foibles. My work service experiences with Ron Pine and volunteer efforts supporting computers under Chuck Maddox and Scott Swanson's guidance were seeds for my eventual career as a biomedical engineer.

It seems amazing to recall that I literally didn't even know how to turn a computer on when I arrived at IMSA as a sophomore. I don't think it's that much of a stretch to credit my experiences through the mentorship program at IMSA with laying the groundwork for my record-setting time through my Ph.D. program at Duke. Through the mentorship program [now called Student Inquiry and Research], I was able to get a taste of research by bungling my way through a project in Michael LaBarbera's lab at the University of Chicago. I learned a tremendous amount about the culture of research, such as how to get grad students to give you access to their equipment, which served me very well later in my undergraduate research and subsequently in grad school.

Whenever I start to wonder what madness struck me that I agreed to advise a high school student in my own lab, I think back to Prof. LaBarbera's patience with me, and give it another go. I'll even admit that I've come to respect residential life staff, whom all IMSA students love to hate, through my pathetic efforts to reach out to undergraduates through programs administered by residential life at the University. Their charge is important, if seemingly impossible, and in hindsight, I admire them for even trying. Just so long as I never have to attend Playfair ever again.

When my older sister, Michelle, the first of the Weasleys to attend to IMSA, headed off to the little school on the prairie, one of my uncles opined to my parents that the most important part of the

experience would be the people that she would meet there. Seeing as I met my future husband at IMSA, as did Michelle, it's a bit hard to disagree with my uncle's sage opinion. (Under duress, I'll even admit that I met my would-be husband at Playfair.)

But that is too flippant. In truth, the friendships I formed at IMSA shaped me more than the friendships of any other age of my life to date; I wouldn't be who I am without them. Moreover, the commonalities of the IMSA experience, highly variable though they may be, have been the root of several friendships launched with IMSA alumni who I didn't know well or in some cases at all when I was a student at IMSA. Much as I longed to go to IMSA and enjoyed my time while I was there, the passage of time was necessary for me to appreciate this true value of the boarding school at the end of the long train ride (Amtrak, not Hogwarts Express).

Sure, there were downs as well as ups to my IMSA years, but this is not the place to air our dirty laundry, and a few smelly socks worthy of Dobby doesn't change the fact that taken in total, IMSA is a place of magic. Thus, while there are admittedly some notable ways in which Hogwarts is superior to IMSA, such as the serious lack of secret tunnels and invisibility cloaks at IMSA that would have been very helpful for "illegal intervisitations," I would be delighted if some day my own children were to attend IMSA.

Which is all a long way of saying that when we take Henry back to IMSA for Homecoming in a few weeks, I think I'll quote my favorite movie poster for the Chamber of Secrets, which said, "Welcome home, Harry."

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