

From Putney to Putney (And a Bit Before and Between)

A PORTRAIT OF ABIJAH REED '53

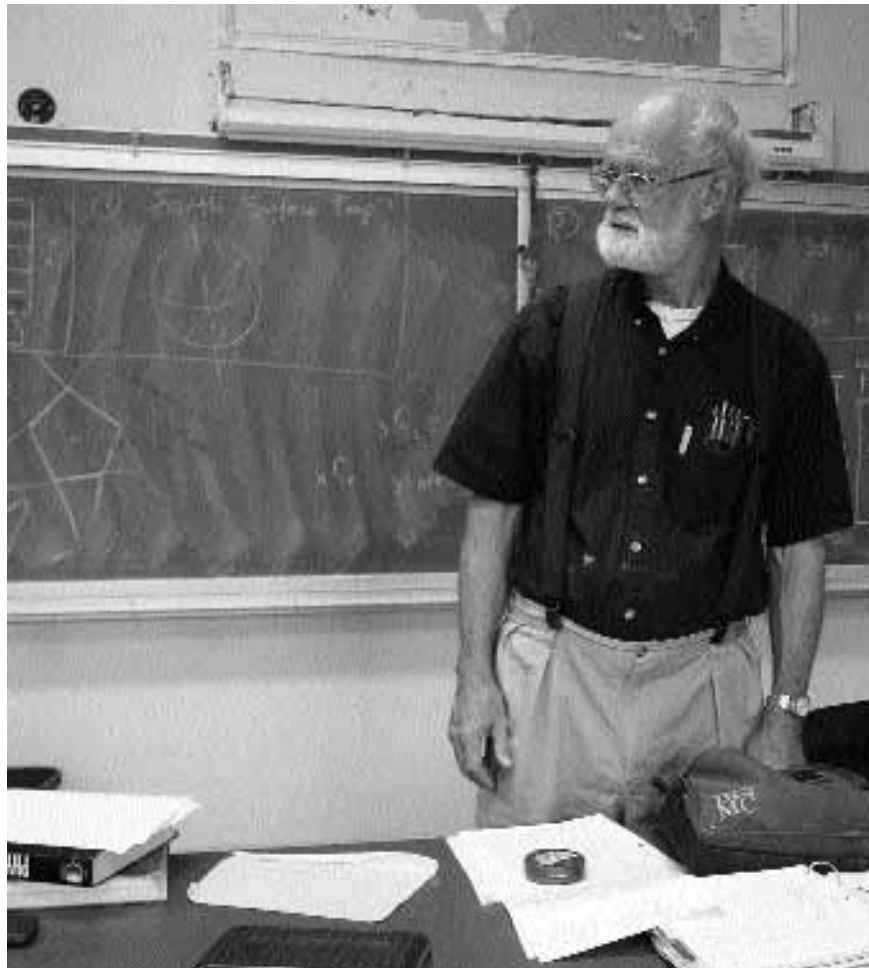
By Matthew Diamante '04

Editor's Note: It took a bit of cajoling to get Abijah to agree that this story would be good for the school and that we should print it, despite his reservations. The man operates in a nearly ego-free zone, which has a lot to do with why we all like him so much. But in the name of keeping you up to date on what we're all about up here, he acquiesced.)

I decided to do a Project Week portrait of Abijah Reed quite by accident upon discovering that I could not participate in his group project of designing a deck for the faculty room. This was, I admit, a weak move on my part: deck or no deck, I should have thought to do this straightaway.

Although I have only been a year at Putney, it has hardly been possible for me or any other new student not to notice Abijah's legendary status. From his venerable beard to his personally modified pocket protectors to his "nerd pack" of math tools to his suspenders and a good deal more, the image he projects is unmistakable. So, too, are his idiosyncrasies, of which but a few include knowing pi to a baffling number of places after the decimal point (65—as a high schooler he knew 200), calculator-aided random-number generating, his constant supply of Icebreakers. . . . He is also known to say on a frequent basis "because that's the way I (or God, or God and I—depending on the day) made the universe" in response to a question about the nature of a mathematical concept.

The intervals at which personal Abijahisms worth remembering present themselves are perhaps analogous to the wavelengths of gamma rays on the light spectrum. When Brian Morgan was not at the assembly during which some friends and I were to run a



Yes, that is a fully loaded pocket protector in the shirt of Math Teacher Abijah Reed '53, who may or may not give you a straight explanation for why it's there. It's the not-knowing that keeps us on our toes.

Lord of the Rings weekend duty skit, Abijah filled in for Gandalf to great applause. When I simply had to go to the Eighties Dance, but couldn't find a p-sub, Abijah volunteered for the dish crew job without being asked. And just this Monday, he counted the number of peas he had put on his dinner plate—233, a Fibonacci number—before eating them.

Who is Abijah Reed? Where is he from? When is he from? The answers to these questions and a few more are to be found within. However, there are other matters, such as his acquaintance with Buckminster Fuller, his children, and some four decades of personal history, that are not discussed much if at all. This portrait, then, is perhaps best described as an introduction to the life of but one of Putney's many wonderful teachers.

—Matthew Diamante '04

Abijah Reed was born John Merriman Reed on Sunday, August 18, 1935 in New York City's Harbor Hospital to Charles Meredith DuPuy Reed and Mary Archer Lord. He was the eldest of three siblings: Anne would follow in two years and Bill four years after that. (Both also went to Putney.)

Charles, born in 1911, had recently graduated from Yale, and was starting a food packaging business with a long-time friend and school-mate. The business succeeded for many years, until it was sold in 1968.

Mary, born in 1908, was a high school dropout and full-time mother. She was always quite close to the children, and Abijah recalls her as being an "excellent" and "supporting" parent. As soon as Bill left for college, Mary, by then around 63 years old, traveled around the world in a steamer. Because she had always regretted not having completed her education, Mary, in 1984 and at the age of 76, enrolled at a local high school, earning her diploma two years later amid a group of loving classmates. (Abijah, however, was bicycling across the country and missed the graduation.)

The Reed family lived in Larchmont, New York until Abijah was nine or so. Life was comfortable and happy. Abijah built the forts, shot the pea-shooters, played the cowboy games, read the comics (he recalls the literary exploits of "a mythical boy mixed up with a

mythical giant" he found while healing a broken leg, bed-ridden for three months), and hung out with school pals. There were no significant or lifelong friends made during this time, however. Instead, he fondly recalls spending long hours making trinkets in his mother's father's woodworking shop, beginning a passion that has not yet left him.

Charles and Mary eventually separated. Although Abijah's first reaction was one of innocent incomprehension (When he asked his mother, "Do we still have to go to Sunday school?" The reply: "Of course not!"), the failure of his parents to reconcile would weigh heavily upon him. The children stayed with their mother and returned to New York City (an unwelcome change from the suburban lands). A subsequent move would bring them near the food packaging business in New Canaan, Connecticut, where Abijah would attend the Country Day School up to the end of high school's freshman year. When the parental separation became final and Mary returned once more to the city, Abijah resisted and remained in New Canaan as a boarder. Charles, an Andover alum, brought his eldest son up to visit that school in the hope that he would enroll there. However, they also visited a place whose campus Abijah "fell in love with on sight," The Putney School.

Abijah started his sophomore year at Putney in 1950 in what is now Old Boys' room 5. His roommate was Steve Watkins, whom he

had known well from New Canaan, and in the following two years he would room with George Yang and Dave Nomland followed by Yang and Steve Addiss. George, Steve and Abijah have remained very close friends ever since Putney, even more so since their 40th reunion in 1993.

Abijah loved nearly all of Putney, from the Friday night Sings (he was the only senior of his class to steal away from the senior dinner in order to attend a final session) to A.M. Barn (a position he held for three volunteered trimesters in addition to his required one). The former enthusiasm inspired him to join the Madrigals group whose Wednesday night meetings became the highlight of his week and generally instilled a life-long affinity for classical music.

Are there darker episodes to be related? "I did some things at that age that I wouldn't do now," Abijah said, cryptically mentioning "one or two Halloween evenings." He fondly recalls the time during senior year when he and his roommates obtained permission to send for a raccoon they would name "Gus." Despite constructing an exterior cage attached to the dorm window, and letting him crawl about the room at night, the pet was "never very domesticated" and eventually broke free during Long Spring. What Abijah did reveal was that during his senior year, he and Addiss ran about the campus one spring evening throwing loud firecrackers into various windows. The Standards Committee sent the two away for a week, and Abijah stayed with a faculty member's family. It was during that time that the acceptance package from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology arrived.

Although Abijah had never distinguished himself extraordinarily in school (he claims to have been "just okay" in middle school math), he nevertheless had a steady interest in the sciences, making the decision to enroll at MIT a natural one. He had a habit of asking for dictionaries and other reference books for birthday gifts and during junior year received a copy of the irresistible *Modern Higher Plane Geometry*.



In His Own Words (à la *Vanity Fair*)

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Living a healthy life among people I love and who love me, and feeling that I am doing a small amount of good in the world.

What is your greatest fear?

Being obligated to ask for money.

Which living person do you most admire?

Dave Arnstein

What is your greatest extravagance?

Probably buying power tools for my shop.

What is it you most dislike?

City life

What is your favorite occupation?

Making things out of wood.

What is your most marked characteristic?

Being a nerd.

What is your current state of mind?

Optimistic.

Where (other than Putney) would you like to live?

Dummerston

Which historical figure do you most identify with?

My childhood hero was Andres Segovia, a classical guitarist.

If you were to die and come back as a person or thing, what would it be?

I don't accept the question because I have such strong beliefs about not coming back in another life.

What is your motto?

Mens et Manus.
(MIT's motto—Mind and Hand.)

What is your favorite song?

J.S. Bach's "B Minor Mass."

Any questions I missed?

I'll tell you one you missed if you promise not to write it down.

On the morning after his graduation, Abijah, while volunteering for A.M. Barn after a sleepless night, was “completely crapped on by a cow” for the first time. Whatever omen this might signify notwithstanding, he would one day return.

The MIT years of 1953–57 were happy ones where Abijah “didn’t take much advantage [of the school’s full spectrum of educational opportunities but rather] concentrated what I loved and didn’t on what I didn’t.” He spent much of his free time during the weekends (“more time than I should have,” he now says) visiting Addiss and other friends down the road at Harvard and romancing the Putney girl he been “going around with” in senior year, Susan Plaut. Homework was abundant, often keeping its victims up until 1 or 2 A.M., but to Abijah it was always a manageable load and rarely unreasonably difficult. He failed chemistry due to a lack of interest despite having memorized the names and numbers of each element, and switched out of a planned electrical engineering major to a mechanical engineering major because the principles of electric current and voltage didn’t much agree with him. “A lot of [MIT] was fun,” he concludes, adding a story of how a bout of roughhousing broke his glasses frame and caused him to walk about for several weeks with the nose-rim taped to his forehead. Although he enjoyed his undergraduate years, Abijah never felt such an “allegiance” to the school as he had for Putney.

Abijah and Susan married a week after his graduation, and over the next few years had four children—two daughters and two sons—of which the eldest and youngest are now working at Putney. (That marriage was dissolved in 1984. Abijah subsequently married Dorcas Gray ’64.) During this time, he put his major to work at Polaroid developing

camera machinery, IBM engaging in early computer software programming, Polaroid again programming computers and resolving mechanical issues of shutter releases, Applicon conducting computer graphics studies and finally GCA producing semi-conductor silicon machinery. After “failing to survive the (approximately) 10th layoff from GCA” followed by a two-week stint at a similar company, Abijah and Dorcas decided to escape city life and moved to Putney, so that Dorcas’ children (Megan ’96 and Ethan ’00) could attend Putney as day students.

If there is one event in this 40-year span of fast-forwarded Abijah life that demands recognition here, it is his name change. When his daughter Leslie was in high school, she led a project with her siblings to research the history of their home, and found that the original owner had been an Abijah. Our Abijah gradually began to phase out the “John” and replace it with “Abijah” in the interest of uniqueness and character, and legally changed his name in 1974, dropping the “Merriman” altogether. It was also discovered at that time that Abijah’s half-uncle’s great-grandfather had borne that name as well, and had therefore established a welcome precedent that did much to appease the mild dismay of Abijah’s mother.

Abijah and family arrived in Putney town in 1993, 40 years after he had graduated. He considered teaching math at Putney for the ’94–’95 school year, but his application was rejected in favor of an experienced educator. (“In hindsight,” Math Department Chair Joe Holland says,

“of course we should have taken him.”) So while Dorcas worked at the Brattleboro Retreat, Abijah stayed at home and divided his time between carrying out household tasks and trying to generate an income through wood-working. Cabinet making and the occasional commissioned hammered dulcimer, however, eventually “failed” in the economic sense.

The Putney School registrar soon contacted Abijah and, by 1996, he was the math tutor of some six or seven students. He was working as a woodworking teacher in a Hinsdale, New Hampshire school that fall when Director Brian Morgan called to offer him a position to replace a teacher who was unable to continue. “I thought about it for about one and a half seconds,” Abijah quips.

He began in January of 1997. Although he had never imagined as a child that he would be a teacher, much less at his old high school, the switch from part-time woodworking (which he connects to mechanical engineering) to mathematics educator “didn’t seem odd.” Abijah had been slightly concerned going in that explaining the same simple algebraic and geometric concepts over and over wouldn’t be very stimulating or exciting, but found to his pleasant surprise that the work is greatly “satisfying.” Little preparation or review was needed to be able to present the lessons, but he did become acquainted with some low-level mathematical concepts he’d never had occasion to study before.

At the request of an administrator, he began an entirely new pursuit of cidermaking, a popular afternoon activity. Abijah also runs woodworking courses over the summer and sings with the school chorus during the year.

A though the Putney experience of today is of course different from that of 1949 (“Putney and I were founded the same year,” he points out), Abijah maintains that today’s Putney School and its student body are more the same than different. There have been cultural shifts brought on by new technology and growth (he had about 180 schoolmates while a student), but many of the traditions are still in place and people still “love it more than they don’t love it.” He didn’t recall any currents of foreboding or pessimism about the school’s future half a century ago and certainly doesn’t sense much worry now, the usual business of budget and admissions aside. While he says that it is “hard to know” what sorts of changes the new building and the other future matters will bring, he is optimistic, holding that Putney peoples’ “underlying love of the school” will exceed any difficulties.

As for himself, Abijah feels very much at home. He posits that the “explosion of population and culture has not been caught up with evolutionarily [in terms of] megalopolis life,” and considers The Putney School community about right in size and spirit. “As long as I have my marbles,” he says, “I’d like to teach here for an indeterminate number of years ... until I’m either thrown out, can’t do it, or die.”

“To be realistic, there will come a time when I retire.” But that day is not in the foreseeable future: “I feel very alert and healthy right now.” 