



# “The Early Days of a Better Nation”

## A fond farewell for Emily Jones

*I had received the best education money could buy in the United States. And nothing I had learned seemed to be the least bit helpful.*

Emily Jones, freshly graduated from Harvard and arriving to teach in the young country of Botswana in 1981, realized she had a lot to learn. “I didn’t know anything about the world. I didn’t know the map of Africa or anything about economic development. I could tell you all sorts of arcane facts about literature. People in Botswana had heard of Harvard, and they were incredulous, and would good-naturedly say to me, ‘You didn’t *really* go there, because you don’t know anything!’

Unfazed and almost amused by her lack of preparation, she dove into this new experience, and tells the story with the self-effacing laugh we at Putney know well.

[We asked her to tell us more. >>](#)

**W**hen you meet a seasoned educator, it's easy to assume they have always been fully formed, born wise, with an inherent understanding of leadership, teaching, and learning.

What a naive concept. What a short-changing of a person's life experience.

As a teenager, Emily was, in her words, cynical and obstructionist. As a head of school, Emily gave students second chances, saw their potential, and asked them to reflect on their place in a community.

Emily, an eye-rolling, somewhat subversive kid herself, was a head of school unrattled by attitude, whose door was always open. Students felt that.

The time between those two life phases spanned five decades, three continents, deserts, jungles, cultures, six schools, and fourteen time zones. It's a good story.

**F**ounded in 1972 as a world-class, post-apartheid model school for South Africa, Maru-a Pula School in Gaborone, Botswana, grew in that new capital city, with a charter directing that the school have a majority Batswana kids. "Everyone in that country was heading in the same direction," said Emily. Botswana was founded as a multi-party democracy, and still is. "It was so optimistic, so fresh and new, to build this country in the Kalahari desert. And I said, 'Okay, I'll do that.' I literally had to look it up on the map. I had no notion where I was going." The country asked people arriving on a work visa to pass along their knowledge to people who lived there before they left.

Gaborone, which now numbers a few hundred thousand people, was much smaller when Emily arrived. The school

was on fifty acres on the outskirts of the city that now envelops it. "They were building from scratch, which was very cool," remembers Emily. She still laughs when talking about the day the city put up the first traffic lights. "A week or so before that, signs were hung explaining 'What does green mean, what does red mean, what does yellow mean?' The first day they turned them on, the kids all wanted to go see the traffic lights."

Emily had studied U.S. and East Asian history in college, and taught African and European history at Maru-a Pula, learning both the content and how to teach as she went. Because the students were all aspiring to pass the legendarily challenging British exams, students and teachers were on the same team against the system. Compared to a lone, miserable



Emily and Gordon Jones, partners in life and in education



year after college as a paralegal in a big law firm, where an opponent was always trying to undo her work, where stasis felt like the best possible outcome, teaching and working for a common cause hooked her. "Maru-a Pula was really formative for me. It set my belief that a school can have a higher purpose than just getting the kids into college. I got a teaching internship for a year, stayed for four, got married, and discovered that teaching was going to be what I did. I was looking for something that mattered. I was blessed by accidentally falling into it."

Emily also learned a lesson in trust quickly at Maru-a Pula. Her first night in country, at a first dinner with the head of school, he asked Emily if she would drive to pick up his oldest child from a friend's house. "I was driving a Kombi van, on the wrong side of the road, gear shift on the column, two little boys in the car to tell me where to go, in Gaborone, Botswana, in the middle of the night. Pitch dark. I thought we were all going to die. I found the daughter, and we all got back safely." Emily reflected, "That sense of, 'You hire somebody, you just have to trust them to do their thing.' It really stuck with me."

Lessons from Maru-a Pula took root when Emily was in her 20s, and continue today. Seek out a school with a higher purpose, and lead from a place of trust.

**E**mily and Gordon met at a party in Botswana. There on a contract to teach sanitation and build pit latrines in the desert, Gordon shared his love of music with people everywhere he went. Gordon played the piano at that party, and caught Emily's attention. Soon after, her car broke down, he offered to fix it, and there began their life together. Six months after they met, Emily returned to the U.S. to pursue a graduate degree in African history from Yale. Gordon wrote her a letter every day during their year apart as he finished his work contract in Gaborone, then joined her in the U.S.

Years passed. Emily and Gordon taught history and English, respectively, at Taft for nine years. Itching to explore and do something different, they jumped at the chance to start the American Pacific International School in Thailand in the late 1990s. They built from scratch and then led that school, Gordon its front-facing head, Emily writing its curriculum ("over a weekend, in a hotel room"), and serving as both academic dean and dean of faculty. At Maru-a Pula, Emily did her teaching, and others made the tough decisions. Here, that was different. "I found my voice as a leader in Thailand, because I had no choice. We hired young teachers. I was a mom, and a boss, creating the schedule, and teaching people

how to teach, running the whole school. Everyone had to listen. That was the only way it could work."

After three or four years, and with nine-year-old daughter Alice growing up quickly, they relocated to Portland, OR, and Emily began her leadership of the upper school at Catlin Gabel. This school, like the others, fine-tuned Emily's antennae around teacher dynamics, power structures, understanding school cultures, and the ways a head of school can effect positive change. "When I arrived, the upper school faculty at Catlin Gabel were each an island in an archipelago." Simply by starting an advisory program, Emily built bridges between those islands, and gave people there more of a sense of responsibility to each other.

Reflecting on Emily's time at Putney, and her notable accomplishment in establishing the Putney Core, the school's innovative set of rubrics and assessments to guide and evaluate the student academic experience, Director of Admission John Barrengos said, "Emily has been able to crisply and clearly understand and make a case for progressive education for this school, and is the driving force behind bringing the school's progressive philosophy from outside to inside the classroom. You don't manage this faculty unless you

have raw, powerful instincts. Emily's work has been artful. She has talked to the faculty from their standpoint, and by doing so, she's led this group forward without their knowing where they were going. There was no question of faith because everyone trusted her."

Emily and Gordon, having traveled the world and lived abroad for years, created a home that welcomed everyone, everywhere they went. Endlessly generous, they hosted students, sponsored students, used their connections to help young teachers find exciting jobs, cooked meals (Gordon doing the cooking), took students on college visits, even trips to the mall. Their home was a hostel and a refuge. They went into the world, and tried to teach all of us how to be connecting human beings, to be generous and leave our self-importance behind.

**W**hich brings us back to teenagers. Looking through fifteen years of photographs, a notable theme emerged: Emily's soulful playfulness. Her quiet nature, deep voice, and uber-busy schedule might hide the fact that Emily's work is rooted in her belief in teenagers, and her keen interest in what interests them. Her eyes light up when she talks

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Coined by Alasdair Gray, inspired Dennis Lee's poem, "Civil Elegies"

about a student's project week, the life trajectory of a student she taught in the 1980s, or a failure-upon-failure-then-success story.

It's impossible to work at a high school and not reflect on yourself as a high school kid. "Teenagers are teenagers," says Emily. "I think about what mattered to me in high school and try to look back on that." Emily worked on a beef ranch in Colorado summers between her high school years at Milton Academy. "Milton asked nothing of us as students and gave us no way to be useful. My boss at the ranch was like Pete Stickney [Putney's farm manager], and he had a wonderful wife who also ran the ranch. I got to drive the tractors and do all sorts of things they didn't think 15-year-olds knew how to do. I wanted nothing more than their respect."

Emily knew even then that teenagers wanted to be allowed to be adults, and to do things that mattered. "That's why Putney was so appealing to me." Every person has an obligation to make the community work. "That juxtaposition I saw as an adolescent, between wanting to be useful and being trusted as an adult in the summers, and then getting back to school and being thought of as just a student, and we're here to teach you and you're done and that's it. It was really powerful in terms of how I thought about education after that."

Again, Emily's eyes light up when she talks about that piece of her experience. Putney's kids "go out of here remembering that they worked really hard, and it was really important." Even though idealism looks different than it did when Emily was a teenager, or when she started working at Putney, the students here remain idealistic. "Kids are still earnest about the world and who they want to be in it. They're not cynical. They want the right things. It's not all about them. In any given ten minutes, it might feel like it's all about them, but it's not. Putney graduates are doing a lot of different things with their lives. It continues to delight me."

## "The real keel of The Putney School is the fundamental beliefs. They keep us moving forward, from tipping over."

Emily's gentle guidance—rather than a heavy-handed rule—shows itself in small moments. A picture captures the joy of this community under Emily's leadership, the 2012 senior class throwing a surprise party for Emily—just for fun—at her home. Students milled about in her backyard, enjoying the view of the orchard, awaiting her arrival. Her surprise and joy at seeing them, and their delight in having done something nice for Emily, are on full display in that image. Or a student on a snowboard, careening down a hand railing into the road that runs through campus. "You may want to think about where you're riding." No scolding. Emily asked this student to think, "This might not be the best place to do this." Lift your lens, look around, think about it.

Fifteen years is a long time. What will Emily take with her about her Putney experience, what lessons have left their mark? She answers clearly, immediately: "The real keel of The Putney School is the fundamental beliefs. They keep us moving forward, from tipping over. They are brilliant, and enormously useful. They cause us to be able to steer. For me, that's been a lifeline. They're right in front of my face on my bulletin board. I look at them and think, That's what we're trying to do. They're timeless."

Ever the student, and known for being thoughtful and intentional, Emily recognizes that Putney was a story waiting to be written for her. "I think of myself as a fairly cerebral person," she says. "I think about stuff and I analyze it. And yet, the only two decisions in my life I made entirely instinctively were going to Botswana, and coming to Putney."

When Emily arrived at Putney, she hung this quote on her office door: Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation. "That's exactly where I was," she says, reflecting on where her life as a teacher began at age 22, in Botswana, then an aspiring democracy.

As we turn the next corner here, we consider that quote. Is The Putney School's unconventional, brave history only the start of the book? The school moves forward, built on a foundation of trust, and now imbued with Emily's open and genuine curiosity about teaching, education, and people. How long is Putney's story? Are these still the early days?



Emily dove into the Putney experience, from work day, to calligraphy, to human foosball, to an outdoor, winter Sing in the first weeks of Covid (with her dog, Millie).

