

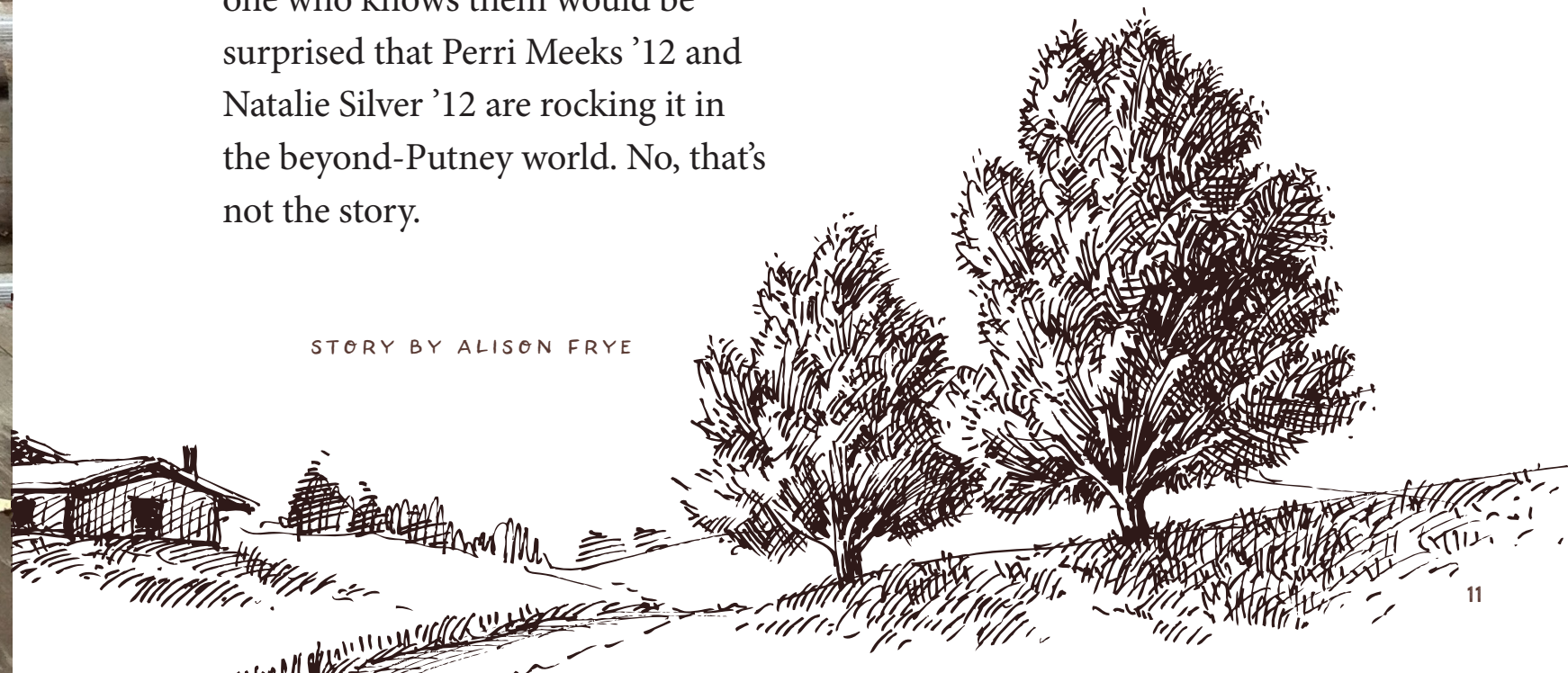
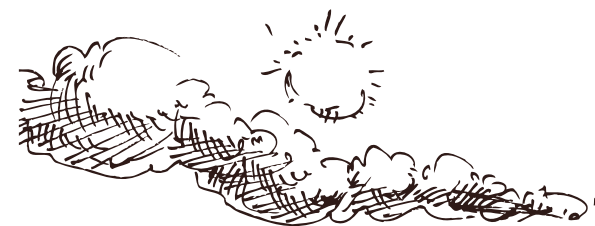


NATALIE
SILVER '12
AND
PERRI
MECKS '12

TWO ROADS CONVERGED IN A WOOD

Two former Putney students excel in careers as young adults. It doesn't sound like breaking news. And no one who knows them would be surprised that Perri Meeks '12 and Natalie Silver '12 are rocking it in the beyond-Putney world. No, that's not the story.

STORY BY ALISON FRYE





Nor is the story Arms Cabin, nestled up Gray Lane on the far edge of Putney's campus, where as seniors Natalie and Perri cemented their friendship, skated up icy hillsides and spent cozy weekend mornings listening to Bob Dylan records, the cabin life a reward for the hard work they had put into Putney.

What's the common thread?

THE HURRIED, harried school administrator trope belies the impact of the work—that connection and credibility are born and nurtured in the small moments when a student comes to your office, and you open your door and you listen. Perri, recently hired as dean of the upper school at Brooklyn's Poly Prep Country Day School, welcomes those visits and the conversations that follow. Students call her Miss Meeks. "Miss Meeks!" Her work requires taking attendance and other humdrum administrative machinery that makes a school function. College counseling, disciplinary work, and community building also fall under her umbrella.

After several years of working in college and graduate admissions, college counseling, and running an educational non-profit in New York City, Perri's work now draws on her strengths and allows for a day-in, day-out focus on the student experience. Her voice echoes what we strive for at Putney as she speaks with clarity about her value-driven approach: "A lot of our work is trying to speak reason to people whose brains aren't fully developed yet. My approach is to get students to think more slowly and more critically about how behavior has impact. My wanting to change the world has been a smaller, person-by-person piece. That's well connected to what I was interested in at Putney."

Natalie, whose throughline since Putney has been politics and organizing, spent the better part of the last two years running Becca Balint's Vermont campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives. In a state that usually leans left, and against a strong primary candidate in Molly Gray (daughter of Bob Gray '57, granddaughter of Ed and Mabel Gray), Natalie held the power to shape the campaign's message and culture.

She sees herself as one of many Putney-made stewards of the world, whose task is to become useful members of the global community. As a political organizer, she works in earnest for eight or ten months at a time, a fully immersive exercise in intense teamwork toward a common goal. And in Vermont, her home state, she has found a corner of the world where she can have an impact. "My theory of cultural political change is that the small stuff is the big stuff. I am trying to effect political change because there are policies I think need to shift, but I think it is almost equally important to change political culture. The way I run my team feels Putney-esque. We value kindness as much as we value performance. You have to treat people with respect. You have to communicate clearly. You have to be a team member first. In politics, valuing kindness above competition is a radical thing. But as we all know, you can't survive in a small community if you're an a**hole."

TWO TOPICS notably changed the tone of our conversation: the power of community, and the harsh reality of bigotry.

Said Natalie, "I first realized at Putney the importance of female friendship, and the start of that was living in the cabin with Perri." Perri echoes an appreciation of this community: "There's something really special about having friends who knew you before you were all of yourself." Moreover, she reflects, "I was super odd, but I was embraced for that. I can think back to that feeling of being loved by the community for being myself. When I am in situations being pushed off of where I hold myself, I know that it's not something innate about me. I learned that from The Putney School and its feeling of community."

As all students do, they shaped the culture at Putney. It was a time of gutsy, strong women—as is always true at Putney—living in the most rugged cabin, leading the barn, setting new standards for academic reach.

Both speak of what we call Type 2 fun. Doing AM Barn as a ninth grader, the walk to Arms Cabin in the windy winter darkness, a frozen stack of firewood . . . the memories that make you groan also make you proud. Perri remembers dealing with the winter cold in the uninsulated cabin. "We covered all of the windows with blankets. It was like living in the 1800s. It was so dark. It was miserable, and it was wonderful, because we *wanted* that cabin."

Natalie and Perri at age 18 contemplated their futures and their big dreams. They each fed the fire to keep the other warm. Natalie visited campus last fall to talk to our students about how her current career started while she was a Putney student, doing summer work on Peter Shumlin P'09, '10's run for governor. When walking to visit the cabin, she felt the familiar pang. "Walking back to the cabin at night, getting to Gray Lane, and thinking 'Yep, we're home.' I still feel that way on Gray Lane, when you see the bower of trees on the way up to the cabin. It's really special."

Both realize that navigating the professional world requires maturity and persistence. Sadly, even in the idealistic circles of progressive politics and non-profits, sexism and racism lurk. Natalie, a petite blonde who advocates fiercely for her candidate, has heard the B word more times than she can count. "I've had to pretty aggressively

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claim my own space. We read and hear about sexism or hostility toward women in male-dominated fields, but when you experience it, it's a whole other beast. I can't overstate the role and presence it's had in this experience for me." Still, she says with a defiant glint, "I know that it's coming from a place of others' insecurity, and I'm probably doing a good job if people are hatin' on me."

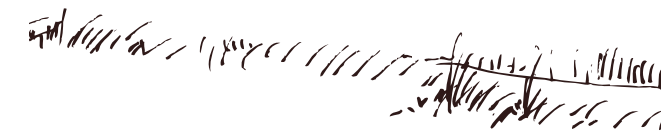
Perri has felt the extra sting of sexism and racism, been shut out of committees, left out of conversations, been undermined, and told there's no room for her at the table, so to speak. She recognizes that it rears its head

when she's doing her job the best, advocating for students, questioning inequitable policies. Unflappable in her commitment, she says, with conviction, "Learning that when you are a highly competent person, to stand in your power and not let others bully you and push you around is very much something I learned at Putney."

NATALIE AND PERRI left Putney in the rearview ten years ago. They stand now in the early years of their professional careers, having felt the blows of bigotry but also feeling deeply rooted in their belief in themselves and their value systems.



Natalie, left, with Becca Balint (middle) and Julia Barnes, advisor and friend to the Balint campaign; Perri hard at work that matters in New York City.



The story is two women standing in their power. The story is values and community. In their hard stretching of themselves, rendering service, and combating injustice, Natalie and Perri reflect back to us our best hopes for what a person's time at Putney can teach, and the power of those lessons as our students go into the world and chase their dreams.