

A World That Does Not Yet Exist

Reflections from a Putney Parent

BY JASON B. PINA



Jason Pina knows schools. In more than two decades of work at various universities, he has engaged in student life, diversity education, and the ever-complicated work of a dean of students. Currently Senior Vice President of University Life at New York University, he is also the parent of two Putney alumni. With his experience, he is uniquely poised to offer insight into what Putney can do for a student, and the impact of this education.

My wife, Shai, and I told each other during Putney's June graduation weekend that this may be the last time we visited The Putney School. It was a sad realization that, after sending both of our children to Vermont for high school, our family's journey may be over. I was so wrong. Beyond our children's education and experiences, we received many gifts as parents, which continue to unfold as our children grow into adulthood.

As I sit on my 14th airplane since my son's Putney graduation, I have many thoughts about the future. My job takes me worldwide and exposes me to many cultures. Some of my summer travel experiences have made me prouder than ever to be a Putney parent. Let me share some of my observations.

Maturity of Thought

I visited San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, and London in June to speak at NYU's summer sendoffs, events designed to bridge our incoming families' time between high school and university. These students are among the 8% of applicants admitted to NYU's Class of 2028. Two everyday observations during these events made me think of Putney.

It won't surprise you that these students were excited and anxious about their moves to New York City. What was missing from many of them was the Putney student's maturity of thought. I observed that confidence of self from my children, Kayla '16 and Myles '24, and many of their classmates. It's not that they have it all figured out, but they are open to new experiences with a sense



of direction and wonderment. A Putney education prepares young people to clarify and interrogate their goals today and tomorrow. Putney students consistently create paths that are true to themselves while staying open to new experiences and re-evaluation. (These are lessons that took me a very long time to develop.)

The second observation was about my son, Myles. He will be starting at NYU in the fall, and he joined me in California for two of these events. I watched with admiration as he connected with his future classmates and their parents. Time after time, Myles was asked about his academic plans. Repeatedly, he did not just state his major, he also shared the throughline from Putney's educational philosophy to his academic pursuits at NYU. Repeatedly, he did not just state his major, he also shared the throughline from Putney's educational philosophy to his academic pursuits at NYU, where he will join a university program that is intentionally interdisciplinary and self-designed. It was a testament to the lasting impact of a Putney education on a student's future success.

A Sense of Hope

Additionally, in July, I traveled to Israel and Germany with some current NYU students. This trip was a culmination of an eight-month program where our students examined human extremism. It was highly emotional to be in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and especially the Gaza Envelope. To see firsthand what humans can do against each other was hard to process. Even in the desert of the Middle East, I couldn't help but think of Putney. Despite what I saw and the stories I heard, I left Israel with a sense of hope. The students I traveled with came from all over the world and had varying views on conflict, but an open mind to learning. Over the week, I observed analysis and complexity of thought that my Putney children exhibited as early teenagers. I am proud that Putney students will interrogate "facts" and develop their own beliefs. As time passes, I hope these young people are in positions of influence in their communities and the world.

The biggest misconceptions about earning a high school diploma in rural Vermont may be what is perceived as missing. The Putney School



Jason's children, Myles '24 (far left and inset below) and Kayla '16 (left, at her Putney graduation with dormhead Sarah Wiles)



cannot be all things to all families, but it beautifully does not try to be. During three or four years, students are asked to buy into a culture that prepares them for a world that does not exist yet. A world that they can create.

From a work program that imbues a strong sense of community responsibility, to the numerous ways students take the lead in constructing their academic journey, students learn skills many adults never grasp. At the end of my week in Germany, I hosted a dinner for our students where we shared appreciation for each other. Most students shared how much they felt "seen" and "heard" by the three leaders. What was meant as a compliment made me feel sad, as these feelings were unique and unexpected to them after three-plus years at NYU and 12-plus years in formalized education settings. In contrast, this "unique and surprising" experience is the norm at The Putney School.

I am amazed and grateful for Putney. As a higher education professional of over 30 years, I have seldom met students with the constellation of experiences and maturity of those at Putney. In many ways, their education is a counternarrative to trends that families worldwide accept. The Putney School is not only instructive for secondary education, but has a thing or two to teach higher education. I hope my colleagues and I achieve a portion of the successes seen in the KDU, Barn, and hallways of Putney every day. ■

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