

Issue 20, December 2018



ACS ALUMNI Magazine

Accredited by



Featuring
Tsvetana Beleva '42
Vanya Angelova
MakerSpace @ ACS
Vladimir Gospodinov '18



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FROM THE PRESIDENT



Dear Friends,

My first meeting with ACS students was a lunch with Student Council representatives organized as part of my visit in late April 2014 as a candidate to become the College's next President. I remember leaving that meeting and thinking to myself: "Wow. If the Board offers me this position, I am taking it." Now, four-and-a-half years later, one of my favorite parts of the job is having small group lunches with ACS seniors, section by section, every fall and spring. I continue to be impressed.

Our discussions during these lunches span many topics, from the immediately topical to the transcendent, from

minor school issues to significant challenges and dilemmas. Earlier this fall I heard quite a bit about mobile connectivity around campus. Other conversations bear on new learning profiles at ACS and the need for greater student choice in the curriculum. Without fail seniors express appreciation for the unique educational environment here that has helped them become independent and critical thinkers. Sometimes our discussions turn philosophical, and occasionally I get asked for advice. I shared with one lunch group recently that there was a time in my life, after I had been through a particularly difficult set of challenges, that I concluded that all I wanted going forward was an easy life. Well, in fact, life is not easy, and would we really be happy if our lives were without challenge?

Of course, there can be moments when the challenges we face seem overwhelming, and I hear sometimes from our seniors that the demands placed on them can at times be too much. As any ACS alum can confirm, making it through the rigors of the ACS program, especially senior year, is no easy task. It can leave one gasping and longing for a life without such challenges, as I did for that brief period as a young man. I explained to those seniors, though, that it did not take me long to realize that no, that was not what I wanted, and that having an easy life, even if it were possible, was not enough. I wanted more than that. I could see the understanding in their eyes as I told this story, and I feel certain that they, too, want something more.

While we rejoice in the completion of the award-winning America for Bulgaria Campus Center, as always there is more work to be done and many ways we need to strengthen and deepen the education we provide at ACS. I discuss such matters with seniors as well and talk about important institutional goals and ongoing initiatives that the College has underway. These include attracting and retaining outstanding faculty and staff; expanding opportunities for student participation in international events, competitions, and performances; continuing with necessary campus renovations; and furthering our work as an innovative school. Seniors are very interested in these conversations and naturally are particularly keen about initiatives directly affecting their own experiences such as expanding ACS student participation in international programs and activities. As I have shared with them as we discuss such possibilities, the school that does not need money has run out of ideas. Rest assured that ACS has not run out of ideas, and we look to our broader community to help us develop additional resources to make plans and dreams about the future become reality.

ACS continues to be a very busy place. With all that happens on campus and throughout our extended community, it is good to remind ourselves, especially at this time of year, of the ultimate purpose behind all of this activity. Always at the core of what we do is to help our growing young men and women develop into strong people and good leaders as well as excellent students. Every time I have lunch with our seniors, I am reassured that we are on the right track.

Sincerely,

Richard T. Ewing, Jr.
President

ACS Alumni Magazine

Issue 20, December 2018

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Petia Ivanova '97

Dear Alumni,

Later this winter it will be 10 years since I returned to my high-school ACS, this time as a member of staff; at the end of spring – 10 years since the first ACS Alumni Magazine came out. The current issue, 20, is therefore an anniversary edition of sorts. So many fascinating people and life stories, so many eventful journeys, serendipities, lessons learned, love stories, and memories treasured! So many reasons to be thankful! And because I have at least a hundred reasons to be thankful to former colleague and dear friend Roumy Mihaylova '05, I dedicate this issue to her, in this way, thanking her for her inspiring leadership and the confidence she instilled in me and everyone on the team she led! Looking forward to many more years of friendship!

I interviewed Tsvetana Beleva, Class of 1942, as part of a year long initiative to connect with all pre-war alumni in Sofia who we regularly kept in touch with. As such, I visited the homes of 8 pre-war alums from the graduating classes of 1938-1944. Unfortunately, four of my interviewees passed since that time, however 2 were able to experience and take pride in their published stories. Their kind words, candid tears, and gratitude meant the world to me. I can't wait for Tsvetana to see her story in print.

The last school year marked 25 years since the school's reopening. Two of the teachers from that first team of enthusiasts are still at ACS, my former Sports teacher Stefka Papazova is still teaching sports and leading a team of 6 other sports teachers, while my Music teacher and choir conductor Maria Angelova has been Deputy Director since 1995. In the second year after the reopening, one of the new teachers who joined the faculty, was my Physics teacher Vanya Angelova. (Another one was my English Language and Literature Lindsay Moran, who makes a special appearance - doesn't she always? - in the Class Notes section of this issue.) I close my eyes, and imagine Vanya Angelova saying (with that cute British English accent of hers) that energy is the ability of an object to do some work. To find out whatever else I recall, and what she has to share about being a Physics teacher at the College for quarter of a century, you'll have to read our interview. Modest as she is, I am simply super grateful she agreed.

I recently read an NYT article on 21st century libraries in the Nordic countries – you know how these always manage to lead the way in terms of innovation, design, sustainability, gender equality, you name it, – but especially education. So, in this article which focused on the opening of Helsinki's new central library, the city's executive director for culture and leisure Tommi Laitio argued that people's uncertainty about technological progress can cause threats to democracy and rise in populism, while high-tech equipment, access to and the possibility to use it, counteracts those fears: "It allows people to experience the future so it doesn't feel so intimidating," he said. Well, dear all, now you can rest even more assured that democracy is safe on the ACS campus and eventually, through our students, beyond it: let us rejoice at our very own ACS MakerSpace, that opened doors at the end of spring and is now officially in use by ACS students. David Yordanov, ACS Makerspace Manager, will be taking you on a tour around its magic spaces and showing you all the high-tech, less so tech, and no tech tools that it boasts. Your imagination is your limit.

And if your imagination, curiosity, and talents are anything like those of Vladimir Gospodinov, Class of 2018, God help you if you need to choose a university major, career path or a place to live. To say that my interview with Vladi has been waiting to be published, patiently, would be a blatant lie, as we both, but especially so, sweet Vladi, kept tweaking and enriching the text of our conversation, - originally held in the end of spring, - all the way into, hm, last week. I am deeply honored and grateful for him choosing to take the mighty brave step of opening up in such a touching way in the course of this conversation. It feels fabulous to know that ahead of him is a life that will be nothing short of well lived.

And do you know what else feels fabulous? As of today, Sasho Tomov, Class of 2004, has joined our team as the new Director of Communications! What a Christmas gift to the College and the Development Office.

As the time of year commands, and because I know you know it will do you good, remember to give back, everyone, pay it forward, spread the love!

My warmest regards,

Petia Ivanova '97

Tsvetana Beleva '42: Laughter Is the Best Medicine

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Tsvetana Beleva owns a strikingly young voice. Talking with her over the phone, I imagined her up and about the whole time, and though she had mentioned staying in bed most of the day, I was still surprised to find her in bed on the grey January day of our interview. But her eyes sparkle and she uses every opportunity to crack a joke, sometimes not entirely appropriate. She drinks a small coffee at 10 o'clock and then moves on to tea for the rest of the day, "because of the high blood pressure." Good thing a College mug is the gift I've brought, as it will come in handy.

Tsvetana, can you tell us about your origin?

My father's family is of Macedonian stock, and my mother's is from the town of Kyustendil. My grandmother Alexandra, a thoroughbred Greek from Patra, named her son, my father, Alexander after herself. Such are the Macedonian traditions. There are three of us cousins named Tsvetana, three Katyas, three or four Kolyos and Hristos, but no other names. Everything revolves back, history repeating itself. At the same time, a Macedonian family is very united.

My grandfather Ivan Belev of Bitola was a courier delivering mail from Belgrade. He had a small restaurant in Bitola, he was a very good cook and had many customers, among them Ottoman pashas. One of his servants slandered him and he was thrown in the Thessaloniki jail, Beyaz kule (the famous White Tower of today). My grandmother sold everything, put the golden coins in a small pouch on her chest and took us to Bulgaria – Sofia. At first they rented a small place on Ivaylo St. It took them some time to get on their feet again. My father, Alexander of course, studied by correspondence to become an engineer in Nancy, France. Our family name, Belevi, was given to us because of our fair-skinned faces and our white hair.



And how did you come to attend the College?

Enrolling in the College was a logical step after I graduated from the American Grade School. There, I had studied alongside another future college classmate, Zlatka Vlaycheva (later Alice Zlatka Litov '42). I recall the first words of Mrs.

Woodruff, the American Grade School principal "Children, never cheat!" When crown prince Simeon was born in June 1937, the grades of all students around the country were increased by one mark. Mrs. Woodruff's comment to that was: "Congratulations on the birth of your crown prince! This has nothing

to do with your grades. Those remain unchanged. We don't compromise!"

Do you still have vivid memories from your time at the College?

Yes, I do. So many memories, actually...



Tsvetana in the 1940 Yearbook

For instance, this one took place somewhere around 1939-40. The German song, Lilly Marleen, had been released. The plot of the one-act play based on the song was the following: a soldier who has joined the army misses his beloved. They arrange for her to come out and meet him one evening. The ironing boards were turned into the barrack fence, each appointed student standing behind a board and holding it. One girl stood up on a chair, holding up a round platter – the moon. The couple stood conversing at the barrack gate. Suddenly, the general comes out. This was my part. I had put on the brown uniform of night guard, had tightened it with a belt to fit and headed towards the two lovebirds. To be more genuine, I

was imitating Mr. Dyakov, the Dean of Boys' School. Actually, everyone knew this, thanks to my successful mimicry. When we finished, thunderous applause burst out from teachers and students. We won first place that Stunt Night. On the next school day during the big break, I was summoned to Mr. Dyakov's office. Stunned, I feared I would be punished. Instead, he welcomed me heartily, saying: "Tsvetanke, you made me look so good! Thank you!" I left relieved. What a lesson on how to take jokes at your expense, if you are intelligent! Teachers and the President were friendly with us outside classes but strict in the classroom.

Mr. Bliss, probably my favorite teacher at the College, recited poems and sang beautifully. He once told me he was watching me because I articulated so successfully and he was trying to learn from me.

Another story I recall was from the 1940-41 school year. Carl Djerassi from Vienna, who later developed the oral contraceptive, joined the school and my class. He spoke German and English, but was somehow placed in a French-studying class. Our French teacher

turns to another classmate to transfer a message to the newcomer: "Ikonopisov, do tell Mr. Djerassi not to swear in class."

A couple of years ago, Carl Djerassi came to the College, attended an official lunch at the College President's house where other classmates of ours – Lilly Ikonopisova (maiden name Zaharieva) and Nikola Alexiev – were also present; they reminded him of this incident and everyone laughed heartily.

On September 20th, the first day of school, we were welcomed in the foyer of the Assembly Hall. Our teachers were standing in a semi-circle, everyone with a pile of their textbooks, we shook hands and they gave us our copy of the textbook, so the school year could officially start. Tests started the first week – no joking around. They kept a firm hand on us but we benefited from this as we got used to honesty, hard work, perseverance, responsibility and reliability. In comparison with today's situation in Bulgaria, I would say we still have a lot to learn, Europeans or not.

I recall having to clean the desks in Mrs. Dodov's classroom but don't recall why; it must have been for a minor misdemeanor. I have always been a good and well-behaved student. My mother was a teacher and it was of great importance to her that I be an exemplary student. Did you know that she had to

pay a fine for sending my little sister and me to non-Bulgarian schools? Kathy went to an Italian one, as my mother couldn't afford two College tuition fees. I received a scholarship, too, because I was an orphan; my father died when I was only 9. My

“My grandmother sold everything, put the golden coins in a small pouch on her chest and took us to Bulgaria – Sofia.

examined him and gave him a four minus (C). Disappointed, Carl turns to our teacher and swears with a few perfectly French 'r's : "Mama mu stara, Mr. Hristoforov..." Terrified, the teacher in question

friend Lilly lost her dad when he was 100 years old; whenever she said “my dad will help me with this,” tears started rolling down my cheeks (*tearing up*). Human destiny! So yes, my cousins were paying my tuition as a way to repay my father who had helped them many times earlier. Yes, the College was expensive, 24,000 leva then, probably 2,400 in today’s currency. There were quite a few rich kids, one was a minister’s daughter, but she had 4’s (C’s), her father’s position was not a reason for compromise; in this respect, it was very fair. I am grateful to everyone, and I mention them in my prayers because I was only met with goodness and they taught me honesty, decency, responsibility and reliability – all things that Bai Ganyo has to master one of these days, not just to brag about being a European and then falling back upon his old Bai Ganyo type of tricks.

Did you have a sweetheart at ACS?

(*smiling*) I may have had my eye on



Vladimir Palankov in the 1940 Yearbook

Vladko (Palankov), you know, him being an excellent athlete like myself, but no, we did not have a romantic relationship. Studying was the most

important thing for me then. But there was at least one romantic couple per class year.

How did you experience the closing down of the College in 1942, your senior year?

We were so lucky that the American faculty stayed on until we graduated. Bulgaria had already declared war on the US, but the older teachers stayed and made it possible for us to graduate. They distributed our diplomas. After that, the College became a foreign language school but something was missing – the atmosphere, I guess, this most important aspect, had changed. Some of the younger students went

“We got used to honesty, hard work, perseverance, responsibility, and reliability.”

to Lovech for its English language high-school, while others stayed here. Some must have transferred to Bulgarian schools, but not our class. I must have been born under a lucky star to have had this opportunity to graduate – and I wrote this to your President – the happiest period of my life was the one spent on the College campus.

You mentioned earlier that discipline was strict at the College, yet it turns out that the years spent there were some of the happiest in your life. Aren’t strict discipline and personal happiness (through freedom) mutually exclusive?

Not necessarily. We had so many fun outdoor activities. Have you looked at the *Bor* Yearbook? We learned so much. (*going through the 1940 Bor*) We are sophomores here. That’s me. “You want to laugh? Go and ask Tsetsa to imitate someone for you!”

How did your life change after graduating the College?

After I graduated, I enrolled in the Physical Education Academy, where I finished my studies in 1946. I was the top student of the class. I started work at the First All-Girls’ High School, where I taught for a year. But what I really wanted to do was study more, and English was my dream. I got accepted to study English Language and Literary Studies, and was a regular student for three years and an external student in the fourth. I was actively engaged in sports, and was even the captain of the female national basketball team. I played volleyball, as well. It was kind of heroic when you think of it – working, studying, and doing sports at a professional level. I completed my English Language and Literary Studies

degree successfully.

Next, I started working in the library of Sovbolstroy, a Soviet-Bulgarian construction company with sites in Madan and Rudozem, among others. The Soviet senior administration members had to study English.

After that, I became dorm supervisor at the English High School in Gorna Banya – many of the students were from outside Sofia – and sometime later I became a teacher.

A couple years later, in 1963, the Ministry of Education made me an offer to move to Ruse, where an English language high school was being founded. That was how I became a founder of the school. My work was strenuous but rewarding. I taught and took care of the students. Six months after I started working there, we invited parents to come visit and see the progress of their children for themselves. One student, Nelly Notova, took over my role as the teacher. She put on my blue apron, her hands all chalky,



The College Girls' Basketball team (Tsvetana is first from right), 1940

Which of your College classmates do you still keep in touch with?

Alice Zlatka Litov '42 has been my best friend for 80 (!) years now; she is in California now, but we write to one another constantly, with my granddaughter sending her emails. Last year, Lilly Ikonopisova and Professor Nikola Alexiev came over to celebrate 73 years since our graduation. We had a great time; it was hard to say good-bye in the end. We sang the College anthem, which I do daily, by the way, and then "Should old acquaintance be forgot..." (Auld Lang Syne). Kolyo is a very good pulmonary disease specialist. He consults people for free; he's a rare idealist, a curious mind interested in everything.

What is your message to our readers?

Laughter is the best medicine. So keep on smiling, everyone!

Sofia, January 2016

exactly as I had done. She examined her classmates. At the end, we sang an American song. The parents were pleased.

My happiest years as a teacher were the years spent in Ruse. My class was outstanding, with the highest GPA. "Mrs. Beleva, how are we ever to repay you for all that you taught us?" they would ask. I was so sad to leave when I eventually had to, on occasion of the construction of our apartment building.

One of my students, Ivan Petrov (John), now living in USA, came to see me not very long ago, and hugged and kissed me. I had good relationships with my colleagues, too; they came to visit, as well. But such is life that everyone grows old; at least I kept my mind as good as intact, thank God. Many have it worse than me; I walk around the flat at least, and until recently I was going out daily, but I stopped after breaking my leg twice. This is an inevitable business.

After the language high-school in Ruse, I started work in the Foreign Language Learning Center close to the Electronica factory. Teachers and university professors, technicians and other specialists were learning English intensively. Our manager did not have much knowledge (of foreign languages). He tried to

criticize me for having studied at the American College. I replied that I was taught only good things – honesty and hard work, never to lie or cheat, not to be ashamed of any work. A person with such qualities would succeed in any society.

After spending 10 years there as methodologist, visiting and assessing other teachers' classes, I decided to retire. I continued teaching small groups of up to 10 people privately. At 75, I stopped all together. I read fiction, translated for pleasure, listened to CNN, and translated the news into Bulgarian.



Tsvetana flipping through the pages of the 1940 Yearbook

Vanya Angelova: To Become a Teacher, You Need a Big Heart

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

Vanya Angelova was my Physics teacher at ACS from 1993 to 1997. Actually, she is one of just 5 teachers who taught back then and still teach at ACS; in Vanya's case this means 25 years of ACS experience. Curiously, she gave me the only 2 (Fail) that I have ever had. It was a small test and I had solved 2 out of the 4 problems but hadn't even bothered to write down the givens for the 2 problems I couldn't solve, so bam! 55% (which would have been a 4+ in my previous school). Well, I didn't make that mistake again, and over the years in Ms. Angelova's classes I managed to open myself to Physics and even keep a solid 5 throughout high-school. My BFF and roommate's super powers were Physics and Astronomy. Whenever she spoke about those trips with the Astronomy Club and Ms. Angelova, I was both super excited for her and envious of that spark in her eye. Vanya (yes, I get to call her that now) and I met in November to talk about the International Young Physicists Tournament, the importance of reading books, and the rewards and challenges that come with teaching Physics (for quarter of a century).



Vanya Angelova and the ACS team at the 2005 IYPT in Switzerland

So, Vanya, it has been over 25 years since you joined the ACS faculty. What has changed over the years at ACS? What hasn't?

Of course things change no matter whether we like it or not and I don't think that change is a bad thing – just the other way around. Sometimes I don't want certain things to change but they do so we have to live with that, maybe sometimes it's for the

better. Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Some things change a little bit, some a lot. Certain things turn upside down, and that's OK.

How did you end up becoming a teacher here?

It was really strange. Actually, I remember walking down Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd. and seeing a poster that said American College

– I think it was something about an exam registration. I went to the given address and asked “Are you looking for teachers who would like to teach in English?” and they said “We're looking for ESL teachers. What would you like to teach?” “I'm a physicist, so I would like to teach Physics.” “It's too early, the first year there's no science taught at the school but maybe next year.” So that

was the first time I came across the College. I had forgotten all about it, until at some point the following year, while visiting with friends of the family, I saw a documentary on TV about the reopening of the College. I wasn't really paying attention to what was on the screen but there was a phone number that I strangely remembered.

I was teaching at another school at that point, a rather unique school in terms of organization and staff but I wasn't very happy there, because sciences were not held in high regard. Besides, I was really trying to combine English with Physics somehow. I don't know why but at that particular point that was really interesting to me. Soon after I called that number and asked them again whether they were looking for people and this time they said "Yeah, of course, just look at today's newspaper, there's an advertisement there." It was the end of April, beginning of May, still early in the hiring process. I decided to apply and in summer I attended an intensive course in how to teach English, and had a couple of interviews with then President Dr. Whitaker. The first time we met, we talked for such a long time, I didn't even think about the time, so he ended up saying that unfortunately we had to stop talking because he had other interviewees waiting. Curiously, we did not discuss until the fall whether I was expected to teach in English or not.

It was a great challenge because we had no textbooks. Dr. Whitaker even asked me whether I would like to translate one or find a good existing American one to use. I did not like the way that the things were presented in the existing Bulgarian textbooks, so I chose the other option. It was really hard to find a textbook. Luckily, we had some

international students and one of them showed me a textbook he had been using in his previous school abroad which ended up becoming the textbook we ordered and used over the next couple of years. We

“Everything changes. Nothing stays the same. Some things change a little bit, some a lot. Certain things turn upside down, and that's OK.

got it only in time for the second semester, so the first semester I was preparing short handouts. Some of your classmates asked about those handouts years after graduating. I felt a great responsibility for being the first Physics teacher here. This was the mid-nineties, exactly the time when it was real hard to find equipment and everything really; imagine equipping a Physics lab. A Physics lab is a very expensive thing. We did get some stuff from schools abroad but it wasn't really applicable to our course and the little we could find in stores here was not of good quality. That said, I still use some of those things but I don't think that they appeal to students. Things are very different now and this is one of the most positive changes.

What do you like most about teaching?



The ACS IYPT team at the national round held at ACS, 2004

To see the spark in the students' eyes and also to see how students develop, how they come to think, to see from a different perspective. I'm especially glad when people –students and parents – tell me that they finally saw that Physics is not impossible to study, that they don't fear it any longer, that they started enjoying it, even though some of them never got excellent grades; it's the feeling that they got. That's the most rewarding!

What do you least like about teaching?

Grading the papers. I hate to write really low grades but unfortunately sometimes I have to. I know that for some of the students that would be the thing to motivate them even if that's not the best motivation, definitely not. Students are really grade-motivated most of the time instead of knowledge-motivated.

What are the challenges you face in teaching Physics?

There are many challenges. For example, I feel that the math background of students today is not enough to start building on in Physics. It's as if they can't keep up or understand when you simply manipulate equations. I feel that they are confused, they simply think that

they won't understand just because of that. This is a result of, among other things, the many changes to the curriculum, as well as insufficient time for exercise, including in primary school. Students don't know how to study, they don't know how to organize their time better and I know that this is a priority and one of our goals, but students simply study for a particular assignment, test, quiz, whatever and they forget as soon after. I cannot understand how they can fill their heads with so much stuff for such a short time and then completely forget it.

Well, it's a skill.

It is, but in science it's not a good one. My father used to say that math is like a chain and when you break it, unless you go back and mend it, you cannot continue. When they complain "Why should we remember all the formulae", I always reply "You don't need to remember that many if you remember the concept. If you know the definition for acceleration, then it's very easy to construct the formula, but you have to be able to read behind the symbols, the basic stuff. Do you start with the alphabet each time you open the book?" You see, we need that particular background.

What were your favorite school subjects when you were a student? Was it science from the start?

It was definitely science from the start. I was in fourth grade when I read a popular science book and was fascinated. My father, who was a mathematician, brought home many popular science and math books, and usually I read them before he even suggested that I did. I chose Physics because it's a big challenge. You have to have confidence still, a desire to learn, you have to be curious, to have an imagination. Sometimes I think that the students now are not imaginative enough. I'm not saying

that they are not creative, but when I ask them to visualize something, it's very hard for them. Recently, I heard on some documentary that this is because of not reading enough books. They like everything to be visual. When I was a kid we used to play a game, we just tried to describe something to the others and tried to imagine what's going on. So for example someone says, "I'm walking through the woods; to the right I see so and so, and there's a river."

"I chose Physics because it's a big challenge. You have to be curious, to have an imagination.

Then someone else says, "Okay, I'm coming from your left, I'm crossing a meadow and there's a bridge over the river, so we will meet on the bridge." And we add colors and many other things that you would describe and try to imagine.

So you are suggesting a solution to this problem – reading more books?

Most people say there is no time for books. I cannot imagine that someone would have trouble finding time for books of all things.

Are you currently reading a book?

I am. Sometimes I am reading several at a time. Unfortunately my ability to read a book overnight is not what it used to be, because of the things I have to do here, you know, at work the next day.

What's the life of an ACS Physics teacher like? If you had to say it with one word?

Tough. From the viewpoint of the new curriculum that I am dealing with right now, we are trying to come up with different activities, what to do, certain labs to solve problems. If you stick to the curriculum, students don't get the point. There

are certain committees working on designing the curriculum, and there are teachers in those committees, but some of them either don't want to contradict the authority, the professors from the university, or they simply don't care what happens to the students. The students definitely get confused; it's very hard for them to understand the concept, and sometimes they think they understand but when they have to apply it, they are lost. There is no time for exercise. Actually, the new curriculum asks us to squeeze 4 years of material into just 2 years. You choose a certain profile and if it is Math and Science, for example, you will have enough time for Physics, to deepen and

enlarge your knowledge, but again, you have to build on what you have already studied in the previous two years. It's not easy at all.

Who was your favorite teacher when you were a student?

In Physics, I had 4 different teachers in 4 years, some of them good, some – not good at all. In retrospect, I think that I learned something from each one, so I keep telling students that even if you dislike someone, you learn how not to do things. Thinking about favorites, one name comes to mind, Mr. Robson, my English teacher in high school, in Burgas.

Did you always know you would become a teacher when you grew up?

No. I think I imagined myself simply as a scientist in a research center. I worked at a certain institute but it was not exactly as a scientist, I was doing translations and similar work. I remember that as a kid I read and very much liked a book, where the difference between a professor, as in researcher, and a teacher, was defined with this fable: so, an adult talks to a student and asks them what they would like to become and the student says, "I would very much

like to become a teacher, or at least a professor.” “You are comparing a teacher to a professor?” “No, I’m not. Everyone can become a professor if they put in some effort, read, and do their job, if they’re persistent. In order to become a teacher, you need a big heart.” This is something I keep thinking about.

If you could change one thing about ACS what would it be?

Maybe sometimes we are too ambitious. There’s nothing wrong with trying to be the top scorer but sometimes it’s too much for all of us, students, teachers, and everyone at the school.

What do you most value in your students?

The ability to think, curiosity. I would very much like them to maintain their curiosity towards learning.

What do you most dislike in people?

Dishonesty.

What is ACS to you?

It has been most of my life for a long time.

Your ACS memory that you value the most?

It must be with the International Young Physicists Tournament team, when we were working very hard, day and night, trying to be the best. We went to Australia for a tournament once. It is done in a different country every year. The ACS IYPT team won the national tournament and was appointed to represent Bulgaria for the first time in 2003. We went To Australia in 2004, Switzerland – in 2005, and our last participation in the international tournament, to Korea, in 2007. After that, in 2008, the regulations for how the



The ACS IYPT team at the national round held again at ACS in 2005

national team is built were changed, so that now, a national team is built by students from different schools around Bulgaria. We had a strong objection to this. We still think that when the team members know each other very well, they are more successful. Since 2008, I think only one ACS student has been elected to the team; that was Victor Kouzmanov, Class of 2014, who in the summer of 2013 went to Taiwan and received a silver medal.

So, for the IYPT, we spent 8 years working on really difficult problems, not like the problems that we solve in

the many obligations we have as teachers. It takes strongly motivated students, too, as it’s mostly their work.

But yes, the change in regulations did not bring about the results it was aiming for. Actually, one of the better results, an exception, was in 2013 with Victor’s team, though they weren’t better than we were, say, in Switzerland. The actual international tournament’s regulations also changed a little bit; we used to only get awards, like a diploma, now they get medals – according to the number of participants it is decided how many will get gold medals, how many silver, etc. They were stricter with the prizes.

One of my BFFs, Ira N a s t e v a , Class of 1997, was in your Astronomy

Club. She remembers going on a field trip to an observatory, where everyone slept outside under the starry sky, and you sang them lullabies. Do you remember that?

Yes, on the roof. This was one of the first trips to Belogradchik observatory. I also showed them

“ Some of the greatest achievements of humankind are the modern theories in Physics, the science that tries to answer the fundamental questions about nature.

class or even at an Olympiad. Certain scientists work on these problems for years and years, so the solution of such a problem could be a PhD thesis. I get very emotional talking about this. We stopped because of the change in regulations but also because it’s not at all easy to prepare a team and to combine this with

the constellations and told them the myths about them. That was one of the best times. We had a wonderful time at the Rozhen observatory, too.

Back then I simply asked some very good friends of mine, colleagues from the Physics department at the university, who worked at the Belogradchik observatory, to give us a chance to enter and explore the observatory. One of them even came and talked to the students – he had better experience with the telescopes than me – and luckily enough he likes to talk; he can spend hours talking, and it's very interesting, funny, too. So we went there and it was like a real summer school because we had to take care of our own food and lodgings. I assigned everyone duties – we were in charge of our meals, buying the stuff, cooking. I was surprised that sometimes students weren't willing to share – they thought that whoever brought the food had exclusive rights over it, a really interesting experience. We spent the days exploring the rocks of Belogradchik and this was something that they liked a lot. Maybe right now I wouldn't be so willing to take students to explore the rocks of Belogradchik because their attitude has changed a little bit, they don't hold the respect towards the grown-ups that much now and they think that they can manage, they can take care of themselves, which is not

entirely true, but yes, back then, we definitely did some risky trails. The daily schedule was something like this: you wake up at noon and then you start cooking, doing stuff, you go for a walk perhaps, in the evening we had the lectures, then when it gets dark, which in summer is about 10 pm or later, we do observations on the roof and it's way late in the night when you go to sleep.

I remember one other trip, a shorter one with a larger group of students, to the Rozhen observatory. We've been to Rozhen several times – in the winter, in the bitter cold of February, in November, and during summer, too. I remember one summer night there when it was particularly warm – if you've been there you would have noticed the large telescope there, it's in a tower and there is a balcony that surrounds the tower and you can go there – so many students were actually afraid to get there because it's not real solid, more like a grid, and you can see what's beneath your feet and it's at least 20-something meters above the ground. We spent most of the night in the telescope tower but, of course, towards dawn we were all on the balcony and these same people, who were afraid to go there during the day, were now peacefully sleeping on that grid. Really nice memory!

What's your funniest ACS



ACS Astronomy Club and Ms. Angelova with their sundial, 2002

memory?

The look on my colleague Eric Chehab's face when they visited with us, when my husband brought the computer he was assembling, an old one, he brought it in some plastic fruit basket where we kept it. Eric was really surprised to find out that it worked at all.

What do you consider as your most marked characteristic?

At some point at the beginning of my ACS career most of the students said I am the most patient person they knew, which is very strange because actually I'm not patient at all. In fact, that's also a comment that comes from a lot of my colleagues; it seems that we have very different perspectives.

What inspires you?

I find Physics very challenging, and maybe that is one thing. Challenging, not only in terms of how to relate the material to the students but also, I'm still really, really surprised by how genius comes up with a particular formula. I like to tell stories about the history of Physics and how certain phenomenon was investigated by different scientists and how they came up with the explanation or their hypotheses of something. I think that some of the greatest achievements of humankind are the modern theories in Physics because it's actually the science that tries to answer the fundamental questions about nature, about how and what governs nature. In order to understand Astronomy better you definitely need to know Physics better. They're so interconnected, it's hard to separate one from the other. Looking at the sky and looking at an atom, they're so much alike.

How do you like to spend your free time?

If I have free time, depending on what particular amount of free time we're talking about, I'd spend it reading, enjoying music, – depending on the mood it will be classical or jazz, rock or folk, the type of real ethno folk from different countries – hiking, another passion of mine, or traveling. I try to do that as much

as possible. I definitely like to go to places to which I have already been and I enjoy a lot, you know, it's just like reading a favorite book twice. When I was young we used to go to a mountain hut close to the place where I lived. Actually, my favorite time of the year was autumn, the parade of the leaves. I know most of the tree and grass types, I can tell edible from poisonous plants. At the first green school I attended, there were two things I was asked to do: one was to identify plants and the other was to help organize an orienteering activity for everyone.

What's your greatest fear?

Losing my passion for teaching.

Do you have a favorite journey – metaphorical or real?

There are many journeys I've done, many I remember, and they are very, very different but one of the latest comes to mind. It was a journey with my daughter and her friend in Hungary, North Eastern Hungary, on the border with Slovakia. We visited a very interesting place, a bath that was in fact a cave and there were many interesting structures there created by the water inside. There was even a star dome – with the constellations inside the cave – it was great fun – and there was also music and different lights that shine on the water and on the structures.

So beautiful! Very special, unique indeed! On that same trip we visited another cave, one of the largest caves – it was amazing! When I came back I was surprised to find out that there is a similar place here in Bulgaria, very similar to that bath cave, that has just been discovered somewhere in the Rhodope mountains. I hope that at some point it will be open to visitors, as well.

When and where were you happiest?

I'm not a fan of that question, so I'll answer in a different way. There is not one particular moment that I

would choose but I have seen really wonderful things and if you ask me when I was most surprised, I'd answer that I was surprised to enjoy the midnight sun for a week. I have fond memories of that, in Lapland, Sweden, far beyond the polar circle. I really want to go back there but this time for the Northern light, but I'll have to do that in winter or in autumn at least – not that I'm afraid of cold per se, but getting older, one gets spoiled and doesn't deal with cold that well.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

It would be something family-related, like Christmas at home with the family.

Coming up! Is there anything that you regret, that you would do differently if you could go back?

Again, I can think of many things and still I don't know how and whether finally I would be able to decide how I would change something. Maybe it's the different situations that shape our views and who we are.

“When I meet my former students it is as if there is no time lapse – we get together and we can talk the way we used to before.”

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Maybe to be a bit less sensitive because it seems on the outside I don't appear sensitive but on the inside it's very different.

Do you follow your former students' success? Do you know who among them went on to do something in the field of Physics or Astronomy?

I try to stay in touch but I'm not a great fan of social media. I need one-on-one contact. When I meet my former students I ask them



Catching up with former students from the Class of 1997 at their 15th reunion, 2012

about different things. In many such meetings it is as if there is no time lapse – we get together and we can talk the way we used to before.

Does Physics have an explanation for that?

I doubt that, simply because that's a very different nature. But maybe Physics has something to do with our interaction just because there has to be, there's always some awe about Physics shared. Or maybe it's because of something that we did together.

Sometimes I feel as if time has stopped and I can scold them or do something that I wouldn't normally do with other people. But of course I am really, really pleased when I see they are successful or I still see the spark in their eyes.

What's your message to ACS alumni?

I haven't filled in a yearbook for a long time now but I remember that some of my favorite messages that I wrote to leaving ACSers were “Shine on, you crazy diamond!”

MakerSpace @ ACS

Text by David Yordanov¹

An increasing number of educators are launching school makerspaces all over the world. Making, they believe, boosts and celebrates creativity as one learns how to do new things through hands-on work, human interaction, and experimental play; making is active learning. Makers say “If you can imagine it, you can make it.” What one needs is a place to turn one’s ideas into actual stuff. Enter: makerspace, a space where students can gather to create, invent, tinker, explore, and discover using a variety of materials. Find out more about ACS’s own makerspace, the Student Computer Innovation and Fabrication Institute (SCIFI), this exciting new addition to the ACS campus, located on the lower floor of the new America for Bulgaria Campus Center, as described by the person who runs it today, quiet and amiable David Yordanov.



My curiosity and strong belief that education is a lifelong experience have led me to become a part of ACS and to writing this article in my capacity of Makerspace Manager at the College. I am passionate about technology, cycling, and rowing. My learning motto: “If you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.” I graduated from the Technical University in Sofia with a major in Electrical Engineering and have professional experience in several large tech companies. For the last year or so I was helping out a fabrication lab, which became involved in the development of the ACS SCIFI facility, which ultimately led to my current role at the College.

But the story of SCIFI began before that, before me, over a year ago. A round of applause to all of the ACS staff who took part in the initial stage of this project but especially to Albert Mitchell and Christian Youngs, whose continued hard work and tireless efforts made it all possible and also inspired me to join the team in the fall.

So yes, a makerspace is a collaborative work space inside a school, library or separate public/private facility for making or fabrication, learning, exploring, and sharing, that uses high tech to no tech tools. These spaces are open to kids, adults, and entrepreneurs and have a variety of maker equipment

including 3D printers, laser cutters, computer numeric control machines, soldering irons, and even sewing machines. A makerspace however doesn’t need to include all of these machines or even any of them to be considered one. If you have cardboard, Legos, and art supplies, you’re in business. You can even create your own makerspace at home. It’s more of the maker mindset of creating something out of nothing and exploring your own interests that’s at the core of a makerspace. These spaces also help students acquire critical 21st century skills in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). They provide hands-on learning, help with critical thinking skills, and even boost self-confidence. Some of the skills that are learned in a makerspace pertain to electronics, 3D printing, 3D modeling, programming, robotics, and even woodworking. Makerspaces are also fostering entrepreneurship and are being utilized as incubators and accelerators for business startups.

There have already been some amazing success stories that have come out of makerspaces to date. Like the innovative Halfbike, sprung from the only - well, until our SCIFI came along - makerspace in Bulgaria, the SmartFabLab. The Halfbike gained huge interest in a crowdfunding campaign a few years ago, eventually becoming the most sold vehicle on the famous US Kickstarter platform. Curiously, ACS alum Bogdan Kurtev ’04, is currently part of the Halfbike team.



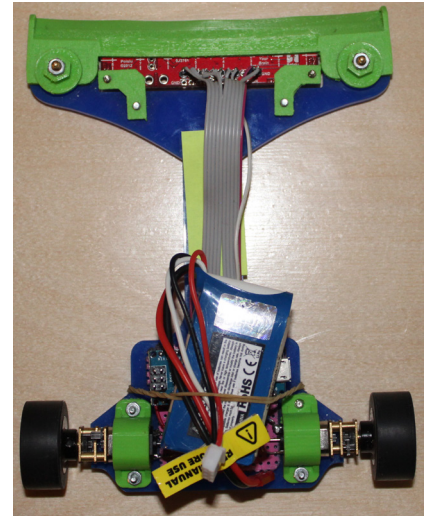
The Halfbike

¹ Christian Youngs and Al Mitchell also worked on this material.

Electronics and Robotics Lab



Students in Ms. Chipanova's Physical Computing with Raspberry Pi elective



Small line following robot with a laser cut chassis (blue) and 3D printed parts (green)

Our Electronics and Robotics lab was the first section of our makerspace to open its doors to students for regular use. In the lab, you won't see - at least not for now - large robotic arms that can lift whole cars and reproduce a masterpiece weld countless times. What you **will** see are the two most popular development platforms for learning electronics and programming: the Arduino and the Raspberry Pi. Combining electronics, programming, and some mechanical parts, we get robotics. And the beauty of these two platforms is the ease of learning, the sheer massive size of educational materials and projects, as well as the awesome community from all over the world that is ever willing to help. Combined with the other facilities at SCIFI, the students' imagination is the only barrier. Innovative Technologies with Electronics club and Physical Computing with Raspberry Pi elective are already using the lab.

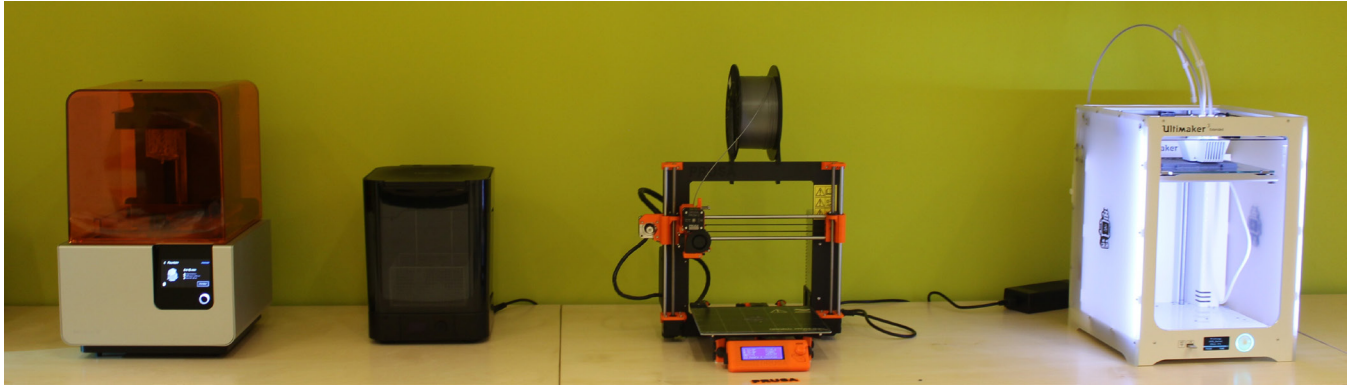
Audio - Visual Studio

If we can have a robotics lab why can't we have our own news channel at the College? Well, actually, now we can! The AV Studio will be used for many projects aside from the student news station Phoenix News. The focus here is to allow students, with these interests, to capture and edit high quality audio and video for streaming and broadcast. There are many ACS students with interests both in the professional audio and video equipment, and in standing in front of the camera. Gaining a deep understanding of the hardware and the processes involved in making a high quality production can enhance a lifetime hobby or possibly lead to a career in the field. The AV studio student team is eager to support the College's numerous events and projects. Imagine how with the help of a green screen, a student doing a science project and talking about Saturn through post processing, could add Saturn as background. The essential skills to choose from at the AV lab are acting in front of the camera, working with the hardware, and editing - crucial! - the production with the help of available quality software.



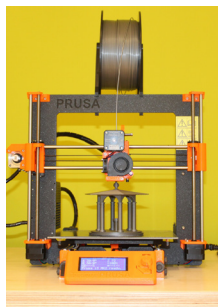
3D Printing and Computer Aided Design (CAD) Lab

Welcome to the realm of 3D printing and CAD! Thanks to the magic of a 3D printer you can imagine a model, draw it on a computer (with the help of CAD software), and in just a couple of hours you can hold the model in your hands. 3D printing is pushing the limits of our technology, from creating the until recently impossible, nozzles for the largest turbo jet engine, to printing a pizza on the International Space Station, or titanium implants for injured people.

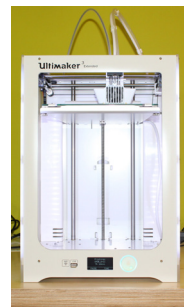


3D printers

At ACS, we have three 3D printers, the Prusa i3, the Ultimaker 3 Extended, and the Form 2. The Prusa is the budget workhorse, though that's not all it is. It can reproduce itself as all of the orange parts are 3D printed and with the help of a laser cutter, only the electronics will need to be bought for the replica. The Ultimaker is a reliable state of the art machine that is faster and more capable than the Prusa. But they are both from the same family, the Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM) family, which basically means that the material, a solid polymer extruded as a long wire and then wound onto a roll, is the hero at work. The Form 2 on the other hand uses a liquid photopolymer and, with the help of a precise laser, solidifies the model upside down layer by layer.



Prusa i3



Ultimaker 3 Extended



Form 2

The Laser Cutter

The computer numeric control (CNC) laser cutter is a dangerous machine in the wrong hands and a powerful tool in the right ones. It has a powerful 100W CO2 laser tube that produces the laser and then goes to the cutting head through a set of reflection mirrors and lenses. The material under the laser could be different kinds of wood, plexiglass, leather, and fabric among others.



Students from the CAD club laser cutting their designs

Student Workshop

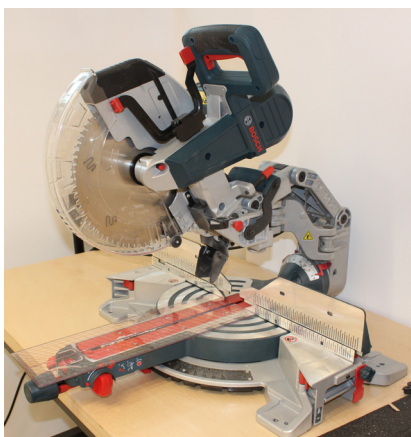
The Student Workshop is a more general purpose workshop that is used with larger groups of students making posters, assembling, gluing projects, and other SCIFI related projects which utilize the Chromebooks that every ACS student is supplied with. The four machines in the workshop are the thermoforming machine, the vinyl cutter, and the two sewing machines. The vinyl cutter is a rather small computer controlled machine that can cut really intricate designs and it could be used for making posters and stickers. The thermoforming machine with the help of heat and vacuum can create a copy of an existing object, making it ideal for a higher volume job. And, of course, there are the sewing machines. One is standard, the other is for leather. The students from the Cosplay Club already love them.



Thermoforming machine

Fabrication Lab

This is the kingdom of the most dangerous tools at SCIFI. But fear not, the safety of our students is our number one priority, which is why we are developing the most robust and thorough safety procedures based on the expertise and experience from facilities around the globe. The Fabrication lab at this point is accessed only in the presence of teachers that have experience using power tools. The table saw, the miter saw, and every other machine capable of cutting, drilling or sanding are the best possible quality and heavy duty product of Bosch. The core idea of the lab is to fill the gap between the realm of digital tools and good old fashioned hand-held tools. The only computer controlled machine is the small CNC mill. Large objects could easily be created at the lab. Currently, Biology teacher Bernie Hoffman is initiating a project whereby special tables for growing different cultures are to be created.



Bosch - Miter saw



Bosch and Dremel Tools

SCIFI is yet to become fully utilized. This first year, we will be using the spaces for clubs and electives mostly and of course they will be available for students who want to tinker, do some additional projects or just explore the space. Our plan is to eventually open the space to the whole ACS community. As educators we are eager to implement some of the possibilities of our makerspace within the curriculum so that every ACS student can experience the technologies first hand. Because you do not always know if you will like something before you actually try it and we are hopeful that among our students there are those that will become lifetime makers or choose a career path, which they may trace back to their ACS SCIFI experience.

Stay tuned for inspiring student projects to come out of all these unique spaces within our makerspace, and mark your calendars with the Tournament of Minds (TOM) challenge, hosted by ACS March 21-24, 2019. The participants in the challenge will be looking for solutions to everyday life problems for people with disabilities. How meaningful and exciting!



Carbide CNC milling machine

If we've sparked your interest and you have some questions, by all means, send us an email at d.yordanov@acsbg.org.

Vladimir Gospodinov '18

and the Stars in the Night Sky

Interview by Petia Ivanova '97

During his five years at ACS, if he wasn't in the musical – usually one of the main roles – Vladimir (Vladi) would be in the English Drama or Classical Concert, or both. Little did I know when I asked him for an interview in March 2018 that we will end up talking about so many things beyond the performing arts – like artificial intelligence, but also taking that giant step to being open about who you are in front of community, friends, and family. Thank you for sharing, dear Vladi, and may the stars always guide you on your chosen path!

So, Vladi, tell me what the life of an ACS senior is like for you. What are you up to these days?

Well, besides juggling tons of homework assignments, projects, and studying for tests, I'm also regularly going to piano practice. Did you know that I learned to play the piano in 9th grade here at ACS? It's actually kind of a funny story. When we studied music notation in 8th grade with Ms. Karnolska, we had to play these very, very short and simple songs on the piano. However, I actually managed to epically fail that, as I couldn't understand how to read sheet music (yeah, I got a 2 on the assignment). At the same time, though, I also fell in love with classical music, which kept bugging me about my failure, so in 9th grade I asked Ms. Genkova to teach me how to read music and play the piano. We sat down together in front of the piano and she explained the whole notation system to me and taught me the basics of piano performance – and from that moment on, I started teaching myself. I'm actually quite happy with where self-tutoring has lead me: I've learned to play various pieces by Shostakovich, Rachmaninoff, Chopin, Satie, Piazzolla, and Oskar Schuster. I played a prelude by Chopin at the Classical Concert this year and was also one of the MC's – a dream of mine ever since being an MC at the Christmas Concert, Arts Fest, and in the Musical.

But apart from all this, being a senior also has to do with being hopeful



Vladi performing Astor Piazzolla's *Invierno porteño* at the ACS Classical Concert, 2016

about the future and realizing you're at the end of one important journey and the start of another. You're burnt out and tired, but also hopeful and looking forward to university, which is going to be new, mesmerizing, and more fun, because you'll be studying subjects you yourself have chosen and have the freedom to do whatever you want with your life. We are all looking forward to going to a new place, meeting new people, and setting forth on the most wonderful journey of our lives yet.

You mentioned looking forward to studying what actually interests you at university. Do you know where you're going next and what you will study?

Yes, I do. I'm going to the University of Pennsylvania, where I'll be studying simultaneously at the College of Arts & Sciences and Wharton, Penn's famous business school.

As far as my major goes, I'm actually planning on getting into a dual degree program, the Roy and Diana Vagelos Program in Life Sciences and Management, which prepares students for professional development in a variety of fields: everything from scientific research related to genetic engineering and medicine to working on the innovation, creation, marketing, and distribution of biotechnology, as well as a career in medicine and/or healthcare management, all of which interest me. I've yet to

choose what exactly to specialize in, but I'm thinking of doing biology, neurobiology, or neuroscience for my life sciences track, and healthcare management and policy, business analytics, or statistics for my management portion. Maybe I'll choose neuroscience, because I'd also cherish the opportunity to work on the development of artificial intelligence. AI could aid us in almost any field, but most importantly in healthcare, medicine, engineering, and research, which is why it's so important to invest in it. I want to work on a lot of projects of major importance. I want to help with the betterment of humanity and the planet and I want to help guarantee a better, brighter, safer future for both. GE, biotech, and AI will undergo tremendous development in the near future, as they're in fact still babies. I believe they could further the progress and evolution of our species, as well as aid us in conquering other planets, which is something we'll need at one point or another.

My more specific interests are psychiatry and linguistics. Chomsky is one of my personal heroes for numerous reasons, but most importantly because he first directed our attention towards the concept of universal grammar. This theory postulates that our capability to learn language, regardless of whether it is our native language or a foreign one, is an innate human ability that is distinct from human cognition and has roots deep in our genes. Essentially, Chomsky proposed that language has a biological basis, in that part of our DNA codes for a set sequence of grammar rules. I believe this could explain why, for example, someone from South America could learn Chinese and why someone from Ireland could learn Arabic. Since we're born with a basic knowledge of human grammar, our minds are able to recognize patterns of this

grammar in every human language, allowing us to learn more than one language. If a gene or gene sequence codes for such a thing (i.e. if Chomsky's theory holds true, which has been the case so far), locating and decoding this gene or gene sequence could potentially help us understand language, language acquisition, speech perception, and cognition far better. This, in turn, can yield a much greater understanding of speech disorders, which are just some of the symptoms of many mental illnesses. A greater grasp of their nature along with a founding code that could be used as a starting point when comparing the genetic codes of various speech disorders can help us not only diagnose mental illnesses much more precisely, thus allowing us to treat them more efficiently, but also pick up symptoms as early as possible so as to prevent the unthinkable.

What about performance arts? You took part in the ACS musical in 8th, 9th, and 11th grade and also in the English Drama in 10th. Do you plan on taking up acting again?

I really wanted to be in the musical this year, too, but I knew I wouldn't

“Being a senior also has to do with being hopeful about the future and realizing you're at the end of one important journey and the start of another.

have enough time to do justice to the role I'd be given. I'd also really, really wanted to major in acting and literature ever since 10th grade, but after a lot of thinking – and *overthinking!* – I finally realized you don't necessarily have to study either at university if you wish to devote your life to them. I still feel kind of sad about all this, because both have been so near and dear to me over the course of the past few years that I'm utterly unable to imagine my life without either of them. But hey, there are going to be



Vladi as Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray* JR, 2015

clubs and electives at university, too, so I'm definitely going to indulge my passion for both once I get there. I could also always pursue a professional career in acting and/or literature simultaneously with all the other things I want to do. Perhaps it might be hard to combine my scientific aspirations with my love of acting, but I can definitely combine them with my passion for literature and writing.

You've played many different roles, including a woman once. Is there a role you dream of playing?

Yes, I played Edna Turnblad in *Hairspray* in 9th grade – an unforgettable experience.

Frankly, there are a lot of roles I'd like to play: Pippin in *Pippin*, and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in *Jekyll and Hyde*; Jean Valjean and Javert in *Les Misérables*, and Death in *Elisabeth*. Oh, and Alexander Hamilton in *Hamilton* is, of course, a must for me.

What are your favorite books?

Lord of the Rings by Tolkien – I read it when I was 10 years old. Before reading it, I abhorred reading. I had

loads of book lists for my Bulgarian literature classes, but I never read any of those. My mom and dad were desperately trying to motivate me to start reading – with short stories, novellas, books – but none of it ever worked...

... Until the right book came along!

Yes, until one summer day when I was 10, my mom tossed the book – the first volume – to me on my bed and said, *Read this, you're gonna like it*, and I replied, *No, I'm not, it's a book*. I read it in Bulgarian, it was Lyubomir Nikolov's translation; he is to this day one of my favorite Bulgarian translators, he's absolutely amazing. I fell in love both with Tolkien's language – even though many people find his passages to be too descriptive and boring – and with the fact that such a complicated plot was created by one single person. Literature has held a special place in my heart ever since.

Once I started reading, I became a huge fan of fantasy and sci-fi books – I still am, though I rarely read any of those anymore. Nevertheless, I value and appreciate them, because they let me explore my own imagination. They showed me that things could and can be otherwise, that things could and can appear and be in a different way than they do in our life and world, that I can come up with my own things, ideas, and plot lines.

Another favorite book of mine is *Wunderkind* by Nikolai Grozni. The author's actual name is Nikolay Grozdinski and he is a really interesting fellow. He graduated from the National School of Music in Sofia, after which he left Bulgaria in 1992 to study in the U.S. He then went on to become a Buddhist monk in India, where he shaved his head and lived for a few years. Next, he spent about 10 years in the States where he wrote and published most of his books, in English. He eventually came back

to Bulgaria a couple of years ago. I read *Wunderkind* in 10th grade, I think, in Bulgarian, even though he'd originally written and published it in English. I chose to do so, because the translation was his own and was more of a complete re-writing and improvement, according to the author himself, of the English original than simply a translation.

The Incredible Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera is the other book in my current Top 3.

“I want to help with the betterment of humanity and the planet and I want to help guarantee a better, brighter, safer future for both.”



Compulsory senior photo, 2018

Who is your hero/-ine?

Tolkien! He was amazing both as a person and scholar: he knew so many things on so many different topics; he could speak close to or even more than 20 languages; he had such a busy life, yet he still managed to teach English and Anglo-Saxon literature among other things. In my eyes, he is one of the pinnacles of scholarship and academia. His life

and work are part of my inspiration to go into historical and comparative linguistics.

Also – my family. My parents have helped me so much and I doubt I'd ever have achieved all of this without them, their help, and their sacrifices.

Tell us how you and your family chose ACS.

My mom found out and told me about the College. I was really skeptical at first because I've always loved my hometown, Burgas. Besides, all my friends were there and I knew I'd be sad if I left. But then I checked out the ACS website and read a lot about the school. I liked the fact that it was different from what I'd been used to. I felt that attending ACS would change my life for the better and that it would set me forth on a very interesting journey, one with an unexpected end.

Indeed, what a journey it's been!

In spite of the many tests and assignments?

Oh, they're part of the journey. You can't have light without darkness, ease without hardship.

If you could change one thing about the College, what would it be?

I'd love to see a working digital test and homework board system implemented at ACS where every teacher inputs his/her tests and assignments for a particular day so that all teachers can see what their students have for that day at any point. I imagine such a system would allow for a much more efficient distribution of assignments and consequently give ACS students more time to ...sleep.

What about school in general?

I'd like to see the government put more stress on the pre-professional aspect of school. Students should have much more freedom in crafting their own curriculum than simply being able to choose from a handful of profiles. Liberal arts all the way! Despite that, I'm a bit skeptical about

whether the new education reform is actually going to work specifically here, in Bulgaria, considering the tremendous amount of work the government still has to do to improve schools and universities in our country.

What do you consider your greatest achievement?

I think my greatest achievement so far is being accepted to one of the institutions I've only dreamt of attending, namely Penn. Some of my topmost choices in the US were Brown, Dartmouth, and Penn and I was also really excited about applying to Yale-NUS in Singapore. At the end of the day, I was accepted to Penn and Yale-NUS, but I chose the former after much deliberation and even being given the spectacular opportunity to visit Singapore (it was divine there!) and Yale-NUS' campus.

I actually had interviews for all four of these universities, though, two of which were with ACS alumni Georgi Klissurski '10 (Dartmouth) and Stefan Yordanov '08 (Brown). My interview for Brown was really funny: our meeting was scheduled to take place at *Confetti* and as soon as I started telling Stefan more about myself (in English) and mentioned Burgas, he interrupted me (in Bulgarian) with *You're from Burgas, too?* and it just so happened that we came from the same neighborhood, neighboring blocks, too. That was so hilarious and so unexpected!

How many languages do you know?

I speak Bulgarian, English, and German. I can kind of read in Greek, French, and Russian. Swedish, too, though I've forgotten most of that.

What inspires you?

The unlimited opportunities the future holds for us, the stars in the night sky, and the fact that we all are essentially nothing but stardust. Van Gogh is my favorite painter and *Starry Night Over the Rhône* is one of my favorite paintings. Indeed,



Vladi with classmates from the Class of 2018 on prom night

I sometimes go to the balcony at night just to look at the sky and contemplate. The night sky, the stars, and the moon always make me feel alive.

A lot of the people I interact with on a daily basis also inspire me and I look up to many of them, as I'm constantly surrounded by intelligent, smart, and amazing individuals. Lots of people have had a tremendous impact on who I am – both as a

“The night sky, the stars, and the moon always make me feel alive.

person and in terms of my interests and abilities – where I want to be eventually, and what kind of person I aspire to be.

How do you like to spend your time?

I love being in the great outdoors, hiking, going out on walks in the parks of Sofia, and just generally roaming about the city. I also love spending time with friends and meeting new people, reading and writing, listening to music and playing the piano. Learning – but definitely *not* studying. (laughs)

What is the biggest challenge you have faced in your life so

far?

Just like everyone else, I've had my fair share of trials and difficulties – some internal, others external. The greatest challenge I've ever faced in my life so far has to do with self-acceptance, so it's been a very, very long and particularly difficult *internal* struggle. Fortunately, however, I'm glad to say I finally won the fight a few years ago, back in 10th grade.

Ever since I was 4 or 5 years old, I've known that I'm different from other boys. I've always been more emotional than what's commonly perceived to be the extent to which boys can – I'd even say *are allowed to* – be emotional. I've never liked watching and playing football and basketball, you know, “typical” boy stuff, although I love ice hockey. I've never managed to quite comprehend the obsession with cars, motorcycles, and knives. Instead, I've always had a thing for the arts – literature, theater, acting, drawing, music, you name it – and I've always been greatly focused on the beauty of the surrounding world.

When I was 4 or 5, I didn't know the meaning of the word *gay*, but I knew I felt one way towards girls and a completely different way towards boys. The environment I grew up in,

however, made sure that I perfectly understood that it's not okay, that it's not proper, that it's not good for two boys to have feelings for one another and to be together. I was also a believing Christian – although I've been an agnostic for the past maybe 10 or more years – so my childhood environment also made another clear statement: it's sinful to have feelings towards another boy if you yourself are a boy.

As the years were passing by and I was learning more about myself, I realized I could never ever be more than just friends with a girl, because I could never ever have more than just friendly feelings towards her. I finally understood what the word *gay* means and I finally figured out I'm *gay*. That was a huge problem for me, because I'd been raised with the mentality that homosexuality is wrong and gross, that gay people are mentally ill and are sinners.

I felt disgusted with what I am. I hated myself. I felt like an animal. I thought I was crazy. I thought I was sick and in need of a cure. I even thought I should commit suicide and rid the Earth of something so sick, gross, and perverted, because people around me would keep saying that gays should be killed. Yes, I did contemplate suicide quite a few times because of the fact that I'm gay, but I never attempted it, because I was too scared of the pain, not for any other reason. I'd constantly hear straight people talking about themselves as being “normal” and this distinction – normal vs. others, where the word *normal* exclusively denotes a heterosexual orientation, making it impossible for gay people like me to ever be normal – along with words such as *педал* and *педераст* among others forced me to attempt to change myself. The most painful part about all this was knowing that I could never succeed in such a metamorphosis, no matter how hard I tried, simply because such a fundamental transformation is impossible. Knowing that made me hate myself even more, because I

knew I'd have to spend the rest of my life being what I am and I simply could never imagine myself being okay with that.

I tried to convince myself that I'm straight on multiple occasions between 4th and 8th grade, as well as during the first semester of 10th grade when I even had a

“If you don't love, respect, and appreciate yourself for who and what you are, you'll never lead a good and happy life.

girlfriend, which was my last attempt to change myself and the moment I finally managed to accept and love myself for who and what I am, however clichéd it might sound. Somewhere towards the end of my first semester as a 10th grader I could finally say to myself *Yes, I am gay, but there's nothing wrong in that. I'm not sick, I'm not perverted, and I shouldn't feel bad*

about that, because it's perfectly normal. What ensued was the beginning of self-love, self-appreciation, and self-respect – feelings I'd never known. Talking to Ms. Zmolek-Smith, Ms. Hood, Mr. Conley, and Garth Greenwell, as well as other people like me, greatly helped.

Fortunately or *un*fortunately for us, the only person we truly spend our whole life with is none other than our own self. If you don't love, respect, and appreciate yourself for who and what you are, you'll never lead a good and happy life. You'll live in a nightmare. Finally accepting the fact that being gay *is* okay had a huge positive impact on me in countless ways.

What do you most value in your friends and what do you most dislike in people in general?

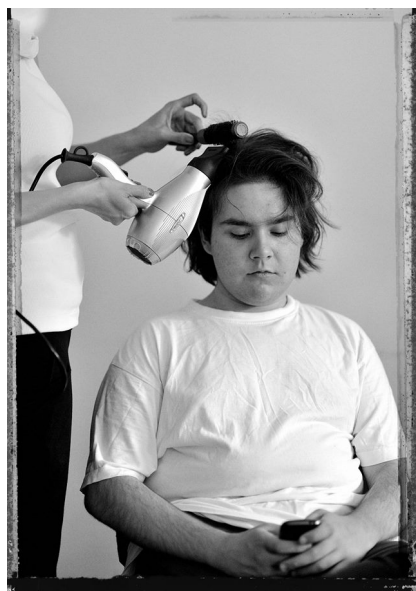
My friends are great people: they're loyal, caring, and honest. I've been betrayed several times by friends before and sometimes it's been really hard to cope with that. I've learned



Vladi as Amos Hart in Chicago, 2014

my lesson, though, and I've come to appreciate a good person when I see one.

I dislike hypocrisy, dishonesty, lying, talking behind people's backs, and not being kind. One of my favorite



Vladi getting his hair done for Hairspray JR., 2015

sayings is *Treat people the way you want to be treated*. I think a lot of people should work on that.

What is your most marked characteristic? Is there anything you would like to change about yourself?

I'm funny, outspoken, and loyal – *loyal* if I have to choose just one. You can only really know this if we're close enough, but I've always tried to give my best when it comes to my relationship with my friends and I don't plan on changing that. I might have to work a bit on establishing a firm boundary for myself, though – there are moments when you just have to say *no* to others for your own sake, no matter the reason.

I tend to talk a lot, too much sometimes and yet, too little at other times, as confusing as it may sound. Performing every year at ACS bolstered my confidence and made me talkative and outspoken, but sometimes I still don't voice my opinion – when I indeed should – just because I'm worried about other people's possible negative reactions

or what they might think about me.

What is your idea of perfect happiness? Your happiest moment?

I see perfect happiness as being surrounded by the people you love, doing the things you love – and loving yourself, too, because I don't think you can ever be truly happy if you don't love yourself.

I can't really pick only one moment and say, 'That's when I've been happiest, but I'm glad to be able to say that there have been numerous spontaneous little moments of being content and happy with who I am and where I am in life.'

Is there anything that you regret?

There are a lot of things I could've done but haven't or could've done differently, but I don't regret doing the things I've done the way I've done them, because I see it as a chain of interconnected actions. All the things I've done are one whole that's shaped me into who I am now. Regretting one thing would mean regretting everything that followed, too, regretting who and where I am now, which I don't at all, so... (*shrugs laughing*)

What is your greatest fear?

May I answer with a quote? It's from *Impromptu*, a movie about Chopin and George Sand's affair. These words by Sand always pluck

at my heartstrings when I hear them: "I'm not full of virtues and noble qualities. I love, that is all. But I love strongly, exclusively, steadfastly." My greatest fear is falling so madly, strongly, crazily in love with someone and not being loved in return. I also fear not being with the people I want to be with and not doing the things I want to do.

What is your favorite journey?

Despite the fair amount of sleep deprivation that is a marked characteristic of attending this school, I can unhesitatingly say my favorite journey is my ACS experience. It's honestly the best thing that's ever happened to me so far not only because of the teachers and educational system here – both of which really change a student's perspective on academia by immersing one into the curriculum in a way that most other schools are incapable of – but also because of the clubs and activities you can join while at ACS.

Indeed, I've always loved biology, but I'd never even considered genetic engineering as a potential professional path for me until 11th grade when we actually studied genetics in biology class and had a super interesting genetics-related assignment that I think we wouldn't have had in a public Bulgarian school. We basically had to throw a bunch of sticks with letters in the air and then write down a code with the letters



At the Experience Yale-NUS Weekend with other admitted students, including fellow ACSer Karina Gencheva, 2018

we'd see face-up. Then we'd have to use this code to determine whether our baby dragon (yes, DRAGON) had inherited a dominant-recessive, dominant-dominant, or recessive-recessive pair of genes and how that would consequently alter its physical appearance. Frankly, it was a very simple assignment, nothing special really, but it was great fun and succeeded in showing us that every part of us, right down to the smallest one, depends on our personal genetic makeup.

The clubs I've participated in and the tutors and mentors I've had here over the years have shaped me the most, because even though the time spent in after-school activities is much less than the time spent on the academic side of ACS, all the people I've met because of my extracurricular activities – especially while playing the piano, being in the musical, and leading the hiking club – have had a tremendous impact on me and have prepared me for the real side of life beyond ACS.

What would you like to take with you from your ACS experience and what would you gladly shed?

I'd gladly leave all schoolwork behind. I'll have more and harder assignments at university, but at least they'll be only in subjects I myself

have chosen to study.

I want to remember both the good and bad experiences, because both have contributed to who I am now. I also want to bring with me everything I've learned from all the people I've met here.

What is the most important skill you learned at the College?

Being open to new experiences, new ideas, and new people.

Where would you most like to live?

Somewhere in the US perhaps: Chicago, New York, or Boston – but also somewhere in Western Europe: France or Germany. I've never been to France, but I have this very romantic idea of the country that's been stuck in my mind for as long as I can remember. Also: Australia and maybe Toronto! And Singapore now that I've been there and have seen how wondrous it is! But there's really no place like home, so I hope to spend a couple of years back in Bulgaria after I graduate from university.

What's your message to former and future ACSers?

To alumni: I'm so jealous you got to experience this before I did. All the

doors that opened, all the journeys you could embark on, and all the possibilities to make a change where it matters...

To newly accepted students: Never stop believing in yourselves, remember that the future can always be bright if you work in that direction, and never forget you have the potential to change the world. Oh, and please try to get some more sleep before the end of 8th grade.

Our spring interview finished here but while working on this issue in November, especially for you, we contacted Vladi again to get a quick midyear college freshman update from him:

At the end of my first semester of college, I'm even more eager to go into the life sciences. In fact, I'm actually considering attending medical school after I graduate. I've come to realize that the intersection of healthcare management, patient care, and scientific research is becoming increasingly important due to problems stemming from technological and medical innovations and our rapidly changing environment. For example, as our life expectancy increases, so do the cases of age-related illnesses. Furthermore, global warming means the permafrost is melting, which could release deadly viruses and bacteria we've never seen before and are consequently unable to battle. I'm considering pursuing an MD-PhD program, which would allow me to become a physician scientist, and work both directly with patients and in the sphere of basic, translational, and clinical research.

I've also vowed to remain true to my artistic passions and love for the humanities and social sciences. I took a course in Proto-Indo-European Languages this semester, and in the spring, I'm going to take a course in Old English Language and Literature, an advanced course in German, and I'm also starting Hebrew. Hopefully, next fall I'll start Korean, Japanese, or Chinese, too.



Prom with classmates and Mr. Youngs, 2018

CLASS NOTES

Faculty

Sarah Grimesey and **Eric Lenze** met at ACS where they both taught, Sarah – ELL (2011-2015), Eric – History (2012-2015). They got married in the summer of 2015, just after leaving ACS, and here's their latest update:



Sarah, Eric, and little Martin

“Martin Charles Lenze was born September 18. He is a smiley, enthusiastic infant and he can't wait to someday travel to Bulgaria. Hope all is well!”



In November, favorite ACS teacher of many, ACS ELL teacher (1994-95) and book author **Lindsay Moran**, visited Sofia and while just some of her former students were here and available for the catch up, she was happy to give her recollection of that get-together plus look back and go over the years in between, too, in her hilarious, witty way:

„Twenty-four years ago, at the age of 24, I moved to Bulgaria - a tiny Balkan country about which I knew nothing, except that it had been part of the Eastern Bloc, which naturally intrigued me. I had been hired by Dr. Roger Whitaker – whom I'd met at an overseas teaching job fair in

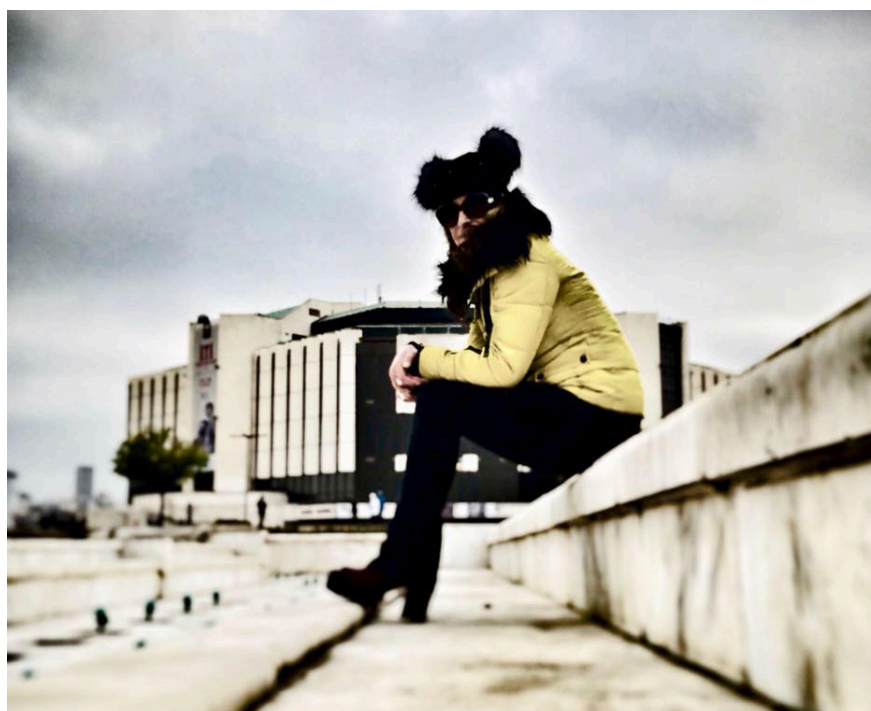
Cambridge, Massachusetts – to be the English language and literature teacher at the newly reopened American College of Sofia.

From 1994-1995, I taught 9th grade English to the 100 students who would form the first graduating class in decades (1997). As luck would have it, Dr. Whitaker also was looking for a chemistry teacher at that time and hired my college boyfriend and fellow Harvard graduate Eric Chehab. “Mr. Chehab,” as the students would come to know him,

sets with no swings, seesaws missing the planks of wood where a child might sit.

As most of the American teachers did at that time, we lived on the grounds of the College in villas that just a few years prior had housed the Bulgarian secret police. It was a weird, almost spooky, setting. The campus was overrun by packs of stray dogs that would howl through the night.

At that time, there was both a water



Lindsay in Sofia, 2018

left a job teaching at the prestigious St. Alban's School in Washington D.C. to follow me to Bulgaria.

At first, neither one of us was impressed. We arrived in Sofia and found a rather grim depressing landscape of Soviet-style blocs amid barren fields and concrete, and children's playgrounds that had been stripped of their wood, and so were more like metal skeletons – swing

and a power “regime” in Sofia – water once a week, typically, depending on where you lived in the city, and power on two hours and then off for two. In November, we somehow pulled off preparing an elaborate American-style Thanksgiving feast for our Bulgarian colleagues – no easy feat with only stockpiled water and sporadic gas and electricity.

The charms of Bulgaria soon began

to emerge, however. Mr. Chehab found a local team to play rugby with, and I started hanging out with Bulgarian rock climbers, visiting the country's climbing hot spots and becoming (necessarily!) proficient in the language. We took night trains to and from the Black Sea. We skied Bansko and Borovets, and visited Rila, and drank wine in the caves in Melnik. We were invited to the homes of our Bulgarian colleagues and experienced the warmth and hospitality and tidiness initially belied by the exterior of those ugly blocks.

But Bulgaria was revealed to us mainly through the personalities of our students, who were unique yes, but unified by one shared trait – intellect. I had arrived in Bulgaria with two Ivy League degrees and would go on to meet some beautiful minds at the Central Intelligence Agency, where I ultimately embarked on a wholly different career – but no one I've met through the years compares to my Bulgarian students in their creativity, drive and thirst for knowledge.

They also were just funny as hell. Mr. Chehab and I would compare notes

at the end of every day as to amusing observations one or another of our students had made.

One would think thirteen or fourteen-year-old kids – most of whom had never left Bulgaria – might be provincial or close-minded. To the contrary. They were wise. As I led the students through Shakespeare and William Golding and Ernest Hemingway and Maya Angelou and George Orwell and Virginia Woolf, there was no subject or literary text they were unable to

“No one I’ve met through the years compares to my Bulgarian students in their creativity, drive and thirst for knowledge.”

grasp. I often found myself deviating from the prescribed English textbook because the questions for consideration were not nearly challenging or provocative enough for this “tough crowd.”

Our students were also savvy – they knew when I showed up for class unprepared. Lucky for me, they were also forgiving and happy to wing it along with me as sometimes

we talked or wrote about subjects as simple as the social differences between high school in the U.S. and in Bulgaria. I tried to impress upon them that no matter that they were growing up in a tiny, poor country, their dreams could be big, and their lives were already rich. Suffice it to say, very few American kids had a place like Popa on Graf Ignatiev where they could meet and have face-to-face quality time with friends, even if it was doing nothing at all. This remains true today.

At the end of the school year, Mr. Chehab and I returned to the United States so he could attend medical school at Stanford. But I was secretly plotting my return to Bulgaria by myself, which I did in 1997 on a Fulbright Scholarship. Simply put, I had fallen in love . . . with a country. Years later, I would again come back to the Balkans (former Yugoslavia) in the capacity of an undercover CIA operative, a role that – remarkably – was not nearly as fulfilling as being a teacher had been. During that time, I visited Bulgaria more than once – in both a professional and a personal capacity. (But no, I was not a spy when I was teaching at ACS, a rumor that spread when my memoir *Blowing My Cover* was published in 2005.)

It's been nearly 25 years since I first set foot in Bulgaria and on the grounds of the College. Last month, I had the pleasure to come back. Much has changed in Bulgaria, and with my students – many of whom have left the country, gone to Western universities, embarked on ambitious careers or pursued personal passions, been married or divorced, and have had children of their own. During my brief stay over American Thanksgiving, we were able to arrange – using the alumni page on Facebook – an impromptu get-together with former students **Petia Ivanova, Anguel Hristanov, Dobrina Vassileva-Tosheva,** and



Lindsay Moran and Eric Chehab at the Graduation of the Class of 1997



Catching up with Class of 1997 alums in 2018

Alumni

A lot has happened since the last update we got from **Gergana Manolova** '12. She received numerous awards for both of the companies she co-owns and manages. The View Restaurant, located in central Sofia, received recognition for being one of Sofia's favorite restaurants and was awarded for serving the most original dishes. Her wine brand Augeo Family Estate earned 7 medals from international wine competitions on three continents and now the two kinds of whites and two rosés, as well as three of the red wines are medalists. In Gergana's view, the successes are due to hard work and dedication, characteristics shared by all ACS alumni and current students.

Georgi Benev. It was wonderful. We ate pizza at Forno Cipollini and then went to Bar Flip Flop for a few rounds of drinks. On a whim, I texted Mr. Chehab and mentioned I was with some former students and we would love to FaceTime him if he was available. Sure enough, some five minutes later, my phone flashed and it was he, Eric Chehab, calling from Key West where he was vacationing with his wife and two teenage sons. We all clamored outside to escape the noise of the bar, and in the rainy Sofia night – thanks to technology that didn't exist some two decades ago – chatted with him live and in person, and in a bathing suit no less.

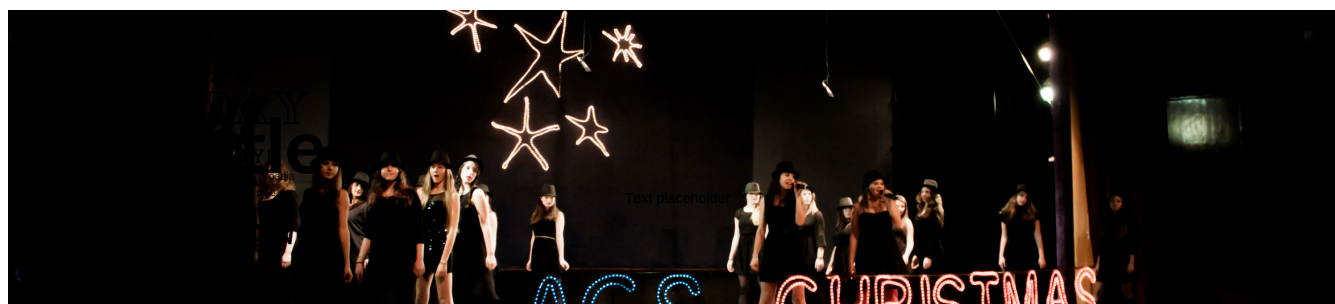
I have two sons myself now, and one, Jesse, is thirteen – the same age many of my students were back in

1994. He actually reminds me of one of my smart, sassy, ever-questioning and curious Bulgarian students. My own boys have heard so much about Bulgaria, that Shep, my younger son, asked me once, "Wait, are WE Bulgarian?!"

I can say with certainty that my ACS students were individually and collectively the most remarkable people I've ever met in my life. I loved and love each and every one of them. Through the years, and more so now thanks to social media, I've heard from many of them about what an important impact I - and the other pioneer teachers - had on their lives. I wonder, however, if they know how much I (we) valued, and learned from, THEM."



Gergana at The View



Happy Holidays from the ACS Development Office!

Support ACS

Dear Alumni,

With each passing year our community grows stronger. You are now leaders in various sectors: business, entrepreneurship, governance, culture. You are charting your own paths in life and contributing in so many ways to the development of society. You have always played a part in ACS' past and future success and we invite you to join our annual Giving Clubs and make an investment in the life of the College and its students. Our Giving Societies help alumni and friends of ACS to share their personal success and lead a new generation of students towards an outstanding educational experience.

You can join one of the following ACS Giving Societies:	
The President's Club	gifts over 10,000 BGN
Friends of ACS	from 5,000 BGN to 9,999 BGN
Dr. Floyd H. Black Giving Club	from 1,000 BGN to 4,999 BGN
ACS 25 Years in Renaissance	from 250 BGN to 999 BGN

Your contributions form a living endowment that goes directly to the heart of ACS, supporting students, faculty, and the environment in which they study and work. The members of the ACS Giving Societies take advantage of special opportunities to engage with the College throughout the year, including events and receptions, as well as unique access to programs and activities at ACS.

For more information, or to join our friends and supporters, please contact Georgi Metodiev (g.metodiev@acsbg.org) or visit our website.



Nora Hesse

Class of 1997, Dr. Floyd H. Black Giving club

"I donate because I believe ACS should remain a school for gifted and bright young people, not just for the privileged. And because I would like to support the students that were in the same situation I was."



Yana Karadjova

Class of 2003, ACS 25 Years in Renaissance Giving Club

"11 years into my professional career I still get almost daily reminders of how much ACS has given me. And I still think, also daily: "What would have my life been like, had I not gone to ACS?". I have taken in plenty of knowledge and skill in my time there and it only seems fair that I give something back. Besides fairness though, I see it as an investment into our common future - building a generation of young people who are motivated, have a strong moral compass, and feel empowered to pursue their dreams and ambitions. To me, this is taking us one step closer to a better world."



