



# ACS ALUMNI MAGAZINE



*Issue 26, July 2025*



## **ANI KODJABASHEVA '08**

Dr. Krasimira Chakarova

In Memoriam: Ani Ivanova

Rali Chorbadzhiyska '15

Kaloyan Dimitrov '25

Nikoleta Stoyanova '25



The American College of Sofia

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# CONTENTS

**2 From the President**

**3 Editor's Note**

**4 In Memoriam:**  
Ani Ivanova (1968-2024)

**8 Rali Chorbadzhiyska '15:**  
Fiction Expands Our Collective  
Understanding of the Human  
Experience

**12 Ani Kodjabasheva '08:**  
Anything You Want to See in This  
World, with a Little Support, You  
Can Create in Your Own Town

**18 Dr. Krasimira Chakarova:**  
Passion for Physics,  
Heart for Students

**24 From ACS to the Frontiers  
of Science**

**28 Kaloyan Dimitrov '25:**  
I Dream of Pushing Technology  
Forward

**32 Nikoleta Stoyanova '25:**  
Appreciate the Present,  
Work towards Your Dreams

**Outer front cover** – Ani Kodjabasheva '08  
at the office of The Collective, September 2024  
**Inner back cover** – Commencement Ceremony  
**Outer back cover** – Ostrander Hall, May 2025



# FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Alumni,

As I was reading the varied and impressive stories included in this edition, I was reminded of a question posed to recent Nobel Laureate Sir Demis Hassabis given the breadth of his achievements, “How do you pick the problems you work on?” He responded that the problem itself was never the end but, rather, a means to an end. Our very own Dr. Chakarova expressed this sentiment beautifully,

*When you make a step forward, you open a door, then the next step. I’ve seen students smile and flourish. And it’s not that they will become physicists. This is not my goal. Science expands their understanding of the natural world.*

This is true for science and is equally true for all pursuits. ACS is a community of scientists, artists, mathematicians, dancers, economists, and writers who contribute to the world by seeing the world and being in the world that, as Ani Kodjabasheva ’08 described, is “...always in the making.” I would like to think and truly believe that such perspective is a legacy of the ACS experience. We continue to be a community that values learning and pushing personal and disciplinary boundaries. We are also a community that creates space to “champion” for this experience to be as true for ourselves as it is for others, like Rali Chorbadzhiyska ’15.

Nikoleta Stoyanova ’25 shares her ACS journey and the journey ahead as one that “unravels all the time” and is a journey she works hard to be included in the company of her passions. It is her message that strikes me:

*Perfect happiness? Perfect happiness is to find peace with yourself, not think about the future or the past, and be in the present moment. I think about the future and what’s next too much. It’s always the next thing. This makes me disconnected from the present moment. ...Not to forget where you are now, that you have achieved a lot already, and be happy about what you have now. Because it’s not little.*

ACS isn’t a little, it’s a lot. It’s a lot that takes a great deal of effort. It is through this effort that our

students find out who they are and who they want to be, for now, in ways that continue to require time and thoughtful intention. Kaloyan Dimitrov ’25 met his ACS experience with a type of required commitment that speaks to forging one’s path: “When I set my mind to something, I see it through – or I realize it wasn’t the right goal in the first place.” In the end, it is not only about what one knows but how one has chosen to grow.

Through these stories and as alumni you will likely see yourself. Not necessarily within the passions or the presented professions, but rather in the values the experience at ACS encouraged and the life accomplishments these experiences invited. These values are rooted in our identity and carry forward through our current students and their teachers.

In just a few months, we will welcome the future Class of 2030. Through their stories and those of our other classes, we step forward and open doors to see what’s next. Thank you for continuing to join us and for finding ways to contribute to our future. We are here for the same reasons we’ve always been here: what we do together matters.

My best,  
**Emily Sargent Beasley**  
President

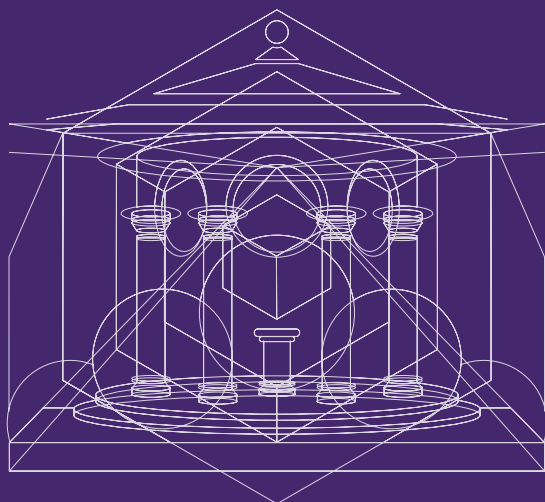


Petia Ivanova ’97 and Emily Sargent Beasley, July 2025



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*Published by:*  
*The ACS Development Office*

*Chief Editor:*  
*Petia Ivanova '97*  
*p.mironova@acsbg.org*

*Editors:*  
*Gergana Yaneva '10*  
*Iva Hadzhiyska*  
*Aneta Stefanova*  
*Elitsa Staneva*  
*Georgi Metodiev*

*English Language Consultants:*  
*Laurel Zmolek-Smith*  
*Jan-Gordon Zagaya*  
*Emily Sargent Beasley*  
*Sarah Skaggs*

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annually for the alumni of the  
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We welcome all readers' feedback,  
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Dear Alumni,

This issue of the ACS Alumni Magazine, a project I started back in 2009, feels especially close to my heart – it's the last one I will be working on. After 16 wonderful years and 26 issues, I am preparing to leave the College and Bulgaria. What an incredible journey it has been. I've treasured your stories, your connections, and your inspiration. Thank you for sharing your stories with me – and with each other.

For Issue 1 in June 2009, I had the privilege of interviewing two dear former teachers: Kalinde Webb, whom I credit with teaching me about feminism, and Bill Fisher, my first true creative writing coach. Even ten years after leaving ACS, neither of them seemed to bear any grudge for having to read through pages and pages of my journals and the stories of my teenage crushes. Such were ACS teachers – patient, open-minded, and always there. In the current issue, you'll discover that this spirit remains unchanged.

We begin with a tribute to someone truly special, whom we lost last fall: Ani Ivanova, ACS math teacher for 30 years. Ani touched countless lives and left a legacy that will never fade. To all of you whose lives she shaped and inspired – may you continue to live fully and meaningfully, carrying her spirit forward. I am deeply grateful to those who have reached out with ideas to honor Ani's memory and keep her legacy alive.

This issue also celebrates the remarkable journeys of our alumni. You'll read about Rali Chorbadzhiyska '15 and Ani Kodjabasheva '08, whose passion and dedication continue to inspire us all. Meet two of our newest alumni, Kaloyan Dimitrov '25 and Nikoleta Stoyanova '25 – young trailblazers whose energy and vision promise a bright future. We also catch up with Dr. Krasi Chakarova, ACS Physics teacher for 31 years and a true legend, whose lifelong commitment to learning embodies the very spirit of ACS.

You'll also discover The Science LAB fundraising campaign, featuring incredible alumni contributions in science. Our alumni have pioneered breakthroughs in fields from medicine to cosmology, showing just how far an ACS education can take you. Let their stories remind us all of the power of community – and what we can achieve when we come together.

If you have a moment, I'd love to hear from you: which story from these pages moved you the most? You can reach me and the team at [advancement@acsbg.org](mailto:advancement@acsbg.org), talk to one of us in person at the upcoming alumni reunion on July 25, or share your thoughts in the comments under the alumni magazine post on ACS's social media page of your choice.

Thank you for being part of this journey with me. Starting and editing this magazine has been a privilege and a joy beyond words. I look forward to watching the ACS alumni community grow, inspire, and continue to make a difference. Now, with great excitement and full confidence, I pass the alumni magazine torch to my brilliant teammate and fellow alumna, Gergana Yaneva, Class of 2010 and Director of Advancement. Here's to the next chapter – may it be as inspiring and impactful as the last.

With heartfelt gratitude and warmest wishes,  
Petia Ivanova '97

# IN MEMORIAM: ANI IVANOVA (1968-2024)

## *Alumni and Faculty Remember Ani*

*Memories collected by Petia Ivanova '97*



*Ani Ivanova joined ACS in 1993 at the age of 25, beginning a teaching journey that would span three decades and touch the lives of countless students. From her first days at the College until 2023, when illness forced her to step back, Ani's dedication to her students and her craft never wavered. She was more than a teacher – her patience, empathy, and guidance made her a mentor long before the term was coined. As a student in her classroom from 1993 to 1997, I rediscovered my love for math thanks to her encouragement, patience, and skill. Later, as her colleague from 2009 to 2023, I came to know her as a true friend. Deeply saddened by her loss, we invited those who knew Ani to share their memories. Below are some of the heart-felt tributes from alumni and faculty whose lives she so profoundly enriched.*



### **Nick Mazing, Class of 1997:**

We didn't deserve Ani. By and large, we were rude, unruly, wild, and disrespectful. Yet, despite this, she didn't just give us her best – she gave us the best.

It took me decades to fully realize the depth of her impact. Years of excelling in math-heavy undergraduate and graduate classes – where I didn't just know the material but understood it well enough to teach it – made me appreciate her even more. Years of being comfortably fluid across quantitative concepts at work. And now, as a parent and the Chief Math Homework Explainer in our family, I still solve and explain problems. The COVID years only reinforced how good she was: I spent hundreds of hours in Zoom math classrooms with teachers from the U.S., Russia, Ukraine, China, Armenia, and Uzbekistan. The time spent in Ani's classes is truly the gift that keeps on giving, decades later.

But Ani was more than an exceptional teacher. She was human, approachable, and refreshingly direct. I spent years sitting in the front row, right across from her desk, which was just like ours. I can still smell the markers and hear them squeak on the whiteboard. I can still hear her switching between English and Bulgarian to ensure the concepts stuck.

Imagine, if you can, the Fall semester of 1993. We were her first class at ACS. It must have been October, the day after her first parent-teacher meeting. She walked in, came up to me, lifted her chin, squinted her eyes, and victoriously said, "майка ти е македонка, а?" ("Your mom is Macedonian, huh?"), referring to the region they were both from. She had formed a bond with my mom the night before, and her message was clear: I had to behave better. Maybe they'll find each other in heaven.

We didn't deserve her, but we are forever grateful for her, long after the markers have dried and the whiteboard has been erased. Rest in peace, Ani.

### **Vassil Dichev, Class of 1997:**

I see the picture in the Facebook post first, and involuntarily I smile – a sea, a cloudless sky, and Ani smiling. Then I read the news and something tightens in my chest. I feel an irrepressible urge to walk to the next room. I come back and read the news again – no, I didn't see wrong. My wife asks me what's going on. I need a moment before I can muster the strength to answer.

At first, I'm surprised by how upsetting this news is to me. I haven't seen or spoken to Ani in years. But when

I think back to my school years, she was always one of us – from the bridge games she was willing to join in to the fact that many students shared many things with her much as a friend. Her warmth and empathy for our problems helped a lot of people come to love math – or at least stop hating it. So when my son enrolled in ACS 3 years ago, I was disappointed that Ani had decided to take a break that particular year. I was hoping that she could teach him, too, and that we might see each other at a parent meeting. Alas, it wasn't meant to be.

But Ani left a trail. Ani touched thousands of students and changed them. She taught them to be patient yet demanding of themselves. And all these people will never forget Ani.



### **Katerina Kormusheva, Class of 1997:**

For me, Ani Ivanova was the most unforgettable teacher for our class of 1997. The most vivid memory I have with her is from a trip she took with us, the students considering applying to the American University in Bulgaria, to Blagoevgrad, her hometown. It must have been a weekend, or a similar busy travel day, and we took a train from Sofia to Blagoevgrad, seats were overbooked, and we had to stand in the hallways. During the entire train journey, she stayed with us in the crowded, dirty, noisy, rattling train compartment corridor. She told us a lot about the town, introduced us to her brother, who was studying at AUBG, offered insider trips about locations in town, and gently refused any invitation to take a seat, when seats started to become available. That was Ani: always positive, always approachable, genuine,

more like an older sister to us than a teacher. I think if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't end up choosing AUBG, and of course all other things that life brought following this path, wouldn't have happened. Thank you, Ani, you will always be in our hearts.

**Eva Tzokova, Class of 2007:**

Ms. Ivanova, or Anichka, as we would usually refer to her between ourselves, was my favorite teacher in ACS. Kind, smart and knowledgeable – it was always a pleasure to be in her class. She would never stress students, even during exams – she would walk around and without saying too much, gently nudge anyone who was stuck in the right direction. I have great memories of sitting in her class with my best friend, and am so sorry I didn't get the chance to see her in recent years. I hope she knew how much she meant to so many of us.

**Annie Andreeva, Class of 2007:**

Dear Miss Ani, thank you for always believing in me. I was never good at math at school and yet you were my favorite teacher. You always wanted to motivate me and that made a huge difference. You've definitely touched the lives of many of us...! May your kind and sincere soul rest in peace! We will miss you!

**Hristo Papazov, Class of 2017:**

I went to many math competitions with Ani Ivanova for the 5 years I was at ACS (2012-2017), and she was a great presence to have around. She took us to the International Young Mathematicians Festival in Sozopol five times. The photo was taken in Lovech, 2013, when we went to the math tournament of the language schools – also something we did five years in a row with Ani. I am currently doing a PhD in AI in EPFL, using my math skills all the time.



*National Math Competition for Language Schools, Lovech, 2013*

**Darislav Dikov, Class of 2017:**

A mathematician with a gentle soul and a big

heart. She believed in the power of love and care and inspired her students to strive for the top.



*With IB Math Students of the Class of 2017*

**Nikolay Dimitrov, ACS Math teacher since 2019:**

It was 2019, and I had just joined the math department. Like any new recruits, we were called in early to be introduced to all the applications that are used at ACS, like Gradelink, Engage, Google Classroom, Overleaf, and Moodle. I was in a complete stupor as I was seeing everything for the first time and wondered how or if I would even be able to cope. One sunny day Ani walks into the teacher's lounge, with her characteristic smile, leaves her stuff on the desk, looks around, turns to me with "You must be the new colleague" and we start talking as if we've known each other forever. Thanks to her, I managed to acclimatize very quickly and I would even say imperceptibly. She was my mentor, and she gave me a lot of valuable advice – on student approach, lessons, and classwork structure; she went over my tests and told me what was good, what should be changed, and how to best go about changing it. Unfortunately, with her illness, we saw each other less and less. I looked forward to the beginning of each school year because I hoped she would be back and I was sad when that didn't happen. I comforted myself by saying "It's okay, she'll be back next year, you push this one out, Ani's taught you how". When I won the Teacher of the Year award in May 2024 I thought to myself that Ani played a significant part in me being who I am today. I hope she is in a better place!

**Raya Gigova, ACS Sports teacher since 1993:**

Ani, how can I write about you in the past tense, when I always feel you when I pass by your room on the first floor of the Math Building. Last I remember, they repainted it a pale purple, per your request. That purple – our favorite purple. And when I'm in your room I remember your posters about Spain, Gaudi's fanciful buildings, and math, of course. It's all you – the color purple, Spain, sun, sea, laughter, and that cheerful glance of yours. And how you loved, laughed, and joked with the students. All the memories of time spent with you, in college, the two



ski camps, the faculty sports activities after school – aerobics, basketball, the parties for Halloween and Christmas, so many memories.

Ani – wonderful human being, beloved teacher, true friend. I like to say that every man goes with the times they lived in. This way, I find it so much more bearable to accept that someone has passed. I will always cherish the warmest memories of you, Anichka, my first close and true Friend at ACS. May you always be remembered!

With love,  
Raya



*On a trip with colleagues Krasimira Chakarova and Raya Gigova, 2017*

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**Todor Penev, Class of 2002**

I bow down to the bright memory of Ani! We are left with the fondest memories of an amazing teacher and person. She will always be with us – and we in her classes.

**Ana Milanova, Class of 1997**

May there be light and lightness where you are, Ani! I am sorry you had to go so early. Know that you are leaving a bright trail of memories in the minds and hearts of so many people. Sincere condolences to your loved ones!

**Milko Pavlov, Class of 2002**

A unique human being and among the most talented teachers I have had! She knew how to motivate us and demand the best of us, at the same time always finding time for a friendly conversation and life guidance! With her, we had the most unforgettable classes filled with knowledge and lots of jokes and banter! We won't forget you. I hope you are in a better place, Ani. Thank you for everything and for the path you showed us.

**Yana Punkina, Class of 2002**

I refuse to believe this! Ani has saved me a thousand times. I remain forever indebted

to her. She was an amazing, amazing human being.

**Kariane Ouellet, former ACS teacher**

It breaks my heart to hear of her passing. Ani, thank you for the time you were such a positive force in my life, when everything else had seemed to drag me down. Rest in peace!

**Bogomila Traykova, Class of 2009**

Thank you for the kindness and the meaning you gave me!

**Desislava Davis, Class of 1997**

Rest in peace, Ani. You have touched and brightened so many lives, including mine. We will miss you very much. Sincere condolences to your loved ones.

**Lindsay Moran, former ACS teacher**

Goodbye, my dear friend. You will be missed by so many. Your memory is a blessing to all of us who knew you.

**Milena Velez, Class of 2002**

Such sad news. Ani will forever remain one of the most amazing teachers and people for me. Safe travels, Ani, we will miss you endlessly.

**Petia Ivanova, Class of 1997**

A bow down to you, lovely Ani. Your warmth, kindness, and dedication made math bearable and at times unexpectedly enjoyable for me. I will always remember you! May your soul rest in serenity and sunshine!

**Ralitsa Dimitrova, Class of 2002**

My favorite teacher! I am grateful to have had the opportunity to know her and for all she taught me, far beyond the world of math. Rest in peace, Ani!

**Mihail Georgiev, Class of 2016**

I can't believe this. Wonderful person, great teacher, mentor. So, so sad.... We will miss you!

**Nikol Kralimarkova, Class of 2017**

A huge loss. Lovely, sweet, tough Ani, rest in peace.

**Veronika Koykova, Class of 2002**

So very sad. She remains one of my most important teachers, someone who grew up with us and became a friend after we graduated. Sincere condolences to her family.

**Stefan Hubanov, Class of 1997**

I bow down to the light you left behind, Ani! You were so brilliant in life, rest in peace now!

# RALI CHORBADZHIYSKA '15:



## *Fiction Expands Our Collective Understanding of the Human Experience*

*Sometimes, you encounter kindred spirits in the most unexpected ways – often after narrowly missing each other a few times. I somehow did not meet Rali while she was a student here from 2010 to 2015, even though I was working at the College doing alumni relations. We both held a deep admiration for literature teacher Garrard Conley, who was writing his autofiction book *Boy Erased* early in the morning before classes, as we later discovered. To me, he was a colleague and a friend; to Rali, he was her creative writing teacher. However, it took another nine years for our paths to properly intersect when Rali's mother came across an alumni magazine at the Alumni Corner during Arts Fest 2024. "Would you like to hear about my favorite alumna who is working in publishing in the UK?" she asked. "Absolutely," I replied, leading to an online meeting between Rali and me where we discussed books, life, and everything in between. Some highlights from that discussion follow. Additionally, we were honored to have Rali visit ACS in December 2024, and give a fascinating talk on careers in publishing to interested students.*

*Interview by Petia Ivanova '97*



**Can you share in brief your journey after you graduated from ACS? What about your journey into the publishing industry? What inspired you to pursue a career in this field?**

My journey after ACS led me to London where I studied a BA in English at King's College London and then an MA in Publishing at University College London. In the meantime, the flats I changed outnumbered the years I spent in the UK and I had completed close to eight different internships before getting my first role in publishing.

I have always loved reading, and as a kid I realized I wanted to be involved in making decisions on what books are available to people. But the role of an 'editor' crystallised when I met Garrard Conley at ACS and took his creative writing class. He was generous enough to share his publishing experience with us as an author. When I saw the edits he was receiving, I knew I wanted to be that person – a cheerleader and an expert in editorial work and author support.

**Have you faced any significant challenges in your five years of trade publishing experience?**

My publishing career journey hasn't been as straightforward as I originally imagined. After completing my degrees, my first role in trade publishing – which includes everything you see in bookshops, as opposed to academic or educational textbooks – was a temporary contract in the Rights team at Penguin Random House. It was more of a sales job and I did well there for a year and a half during the pandemic, but I kept pursuing editorial roles nevertheless. That was until an editorial application worked out, and I became an Editorial Assistant in the prestigious poetry department at Faber and Faber, covering a maternity leave. The nature of this contract meant I was looking for a new position within the next year. This brought me to Canongate Books, where I assisted editors with my dream books – literary fiction, titles from authors from Africa and the diaspora, as well as narrative non-fiction. I also read short stories for prizes in my spare time. This continued for about two and a half years. However, progression at Canongate or elsewhere was very competitive, and the financial constraints of living in London were pressing on me. Inspired by a friend who left traditional publishing to become a freelancer, I decided to do the same! Over the last couple of months as a freelancer myself I have been involved in projects I was only dreaming of, such as editing novels, providing manuscript consultations, and organizing literary events.

**When working with authors, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, what do you enjoy the most? What do you find most difficult?**

What I find most exciting about working with authors from underrepresented backgrounds is the wealth of new information I learn about other cultures and, as with all books from all authors, the diverse human experiences they share. A particularly fascinating project I worked on was *Black Ghosts* by Noo Saro-Wiwa. Noo is a British-Nigerian travel writer who went to China to explore the lives of African migrants in the People's Republic and her perspective is like no other. For example, she writes of Chinese women who speak English with Nigerian accents because they learned the language from their immigrant husbands.

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*To be a good writer or a good editor, you need to be a good reader first.*

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What I find the most difficult about working on titles by authors from underrepresented backgrounds is trying to convince traditional publishing that those narratives work and can have a wide readership. To publish a book, you need editorial passion, as well as the enthusiasm of colleagues from marketing, publicity, and sales. People are not always confident that they know the target audiences well enough to sell to them. This is why I believe in the importance of representation within the publishing business, and most of all, the importance of curiosity!



*Graduating ACS, 2015*

**You are passionate about championing underrepresented voices. How do you identify and support these authors in your work?**

Sometimes voices are underrepresented because of the industry's levels of accessibility. Therefore, I strongly believe in writing prizes and looking for talent where the entry point has been democratized. In the UK, there are agents dedicated to finding underrepresented talent. Some strategies for achieving this include traveling, being able to read other languages, and understanding various contexts, including writing in English as a second language.

The support for underrepresented voices should be continuous and evident in budgeting adequately for campaigns and promotion, for example. It is not enough to sign an underrepresented voice as a token debut author on your list. It is about a long-term investment in their creative development, about offering advances that are on par with so-far-traditionally published authors. I also believe in support in terms of positioning to make sure the work is reaching a wide readership because if something is set in Bulgaria, for example, it doesn't mean it will only be relatable to Bulgarian readers. Reading and writing fiction, to me, is about expanding our collective understanding of the human experience. I believe publishers have a responsibility to provide various perspectives the opportunity to be explored and heard in respectful ways.

**How do you envision the future of literature in terms of inclusivity and representation?**

As I mentioned, I think literature should intrinsically be inclusive and representative of a wide spectrum of experiences. My hope is that publishing professionals and the readers both embrace their own curiosity to make narratives available. In a divided world I hope fiction can promote empathy and create desire among people to connect.

**What advice would you give to aspiring editors or authors looking to make their mark in publishing? Are you an aspiring author yourself?**

I am not an aspiring author, but I want to be the best champion out there for aspiring authors and publishing hopefuls, as well as junior publishing professionals. In my experience, to be a good writer or a good editor, you need to be a good reader first. So, my advice to anyone who aspires to join publishing in any capacity is to read widely and with curiosity. I am also a strong believer in giving credit where

credit is due so if you read something and you like it, try to let the world or the person who created the work know in some way. It's good publicity for them but also a chance for visibility for you. And a chance to make a good impression based on a genuine connection.

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*In a divided world I hope fiction can promote empathy and create desire among people to connect.*

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**Looking ahead, what are your professional goals within the publishing industry now that you are a publishing freelancer? Are there specific projects or initiatives you're excited about?**

My reason for leaving full-time employment was because I realized I thrive when there is a challenge and, also, I recognized that I needed a new challenge. In the first couple of months of going freelance, I have made so many new connections and gone out of my comfort zone, for instance by learning more about taxes and joining TikTok. I'm enjoying editing on my own, providing manuscript consultations to authors, and I am organizing and chairing a book launch for Farah Ali's literary novel *The River, The Town*.

My goal for the future is to continuously find projects that will allow me to use the things I'm good at, reading, editing, author care, and making connections between people, while developing personally and professionally. If you want to follow me alongside my journey, I've also created a



Visiting ACS, 2024





*With author Lara Haworth, 2024*



*With author Sally Oliver, 2022*

dedicated Instagram account, @reading.rali, to act as my professional and creative portfolio.

### **What is Reading Rali currently reading?**

I am currently reading the new manuscript from an already published friend, Sally Oliver. She wrote *The Weight of Loss* which is a novel about a woman who loses her sister and subsequently her mind and her freedom. It's an honor to read Sally's latest manuscript before it's even gone on submission to editors yet. This one also has a female protagonist and touches on the theme of grief but it's more about a mother-daughter relationship, transgressions, and getting closer to the scary depths of one's consciousness.

### **How has reading books for work impacted your personal reading habits, if at all?**

When you work in books, everything you read is part of your professional capital and your own positioning on the publishing job market. This has



*ACS Careers in Publishing talk, 2024*

sometimes put pressure on my reading choices but I am never shy about enjoying rom coms or thrillers. I am sure it is even more true for people with more publishing experience than me that reading a really good book can make you jealous that you weren't the one to publish it. But I also believe it's true that we are always happy for the author and for the readers that it got published in the

first place.

### **What was your favorite class at ACS or a teacher you will never forget?**

My favorite class has unsurprisingly always been English Literature. From Amanda Crocker in the ninth grade to John Stephens (who once commented in his feedback on my notebook, 'You do realize you have other subjects?' after I had transcribed and analyzed many more pages of *Macbeth* than necessary), Amos Van Die, and Garrard Conley (whom I often credit for my editorial ambitions) have all been the best teachers I could ask for!

### **What were your academic and your extracurricular strengths at ACS?**

Academically, I have always been good at essay writing, both in English and Bulgarian. I really enjoyed Spanish and was probably the most annoying classmate in those classes because I was constantly trying to practice speaking. I was part of the choir for a good four years and was involved in dancing in various capacities throughout, including running my own hip-hop club one year.

### **What subject would you add to the curriculum if you could?**

Finances. I think, stereotypically, some people are naturally inclined towards math and I am not one of them. But finances are so important in life, from the personal to the business level, that receiving basic training in understanding taxes, savings, and investment could be a game changer for the future success of students no matter their 'natural inclinations'.



# ANI KODJABASHEVA '08:



*Anything You  
Want to See in  
This World, with a  
Little Support,  
You Can Create in  
Your Own Town*

*When Ani and I arrange to meet in the space that is home to The Collective, I can hear a conviction in her voice that the place will impress me. The Maria Luiza Blvd. address doesn't say much to me, so I let that conviction of hers guide me; I rarely have off-campus meetings, so I welcome the opportunity to do something different somewhere different. When I enter the loft on the top floor of the building and a little later step onto the U-shaped balcony that surrounds it, I am stunned. The whole of Sofia is in front of me, the central part at my feet, and the horizon stretches from Vitosha to the Balkan Mountains. Later, Ani will mention the importance of physical space, how it creates connections. In this space, which they are using with the permission of the district municipality in exchange for first renovating it, regular training, design workshops, exhibitions and meetings like ours take place. On the whiteboard, I see a monthly calendar – a long line dotted with events and locations in Bulgaria. "Everything is always in the making," is one of the first things Ani shares with me.*

*Interview by Petia Ivanova '97*



**So, Ani, what have you been up to since graduating from ACS back in 2008? You studied art history at Vassar, Oxford, and Columbia University – impressive! Were you drawn to art and its history while at the College?**

Mm-yeah, you could say that after ACS I started studying and then I felt like more and more studying, earning one diploma after another. I kind of got into that groove, learned how to be a student and then a research scientist, until at some point I had to stop myself and wonder what I was doing and what I was really meant to be doing.

My interest in art and design came while I was an ACS student. My family had nothing to do with culture and art. As I had moved from Ruse to Sofia, I found what I saw in the capital super inspiring. Attending Sofia Design Week was one such experience that left a super strong impression on me. Now, I like to think of The Collective as the next generation of designers following in the footsteps of the Sofia Design Week team. We are even working with some of them now.

I discovered my hometown of Ruse and its culture a bit late through our work with The Collective there. We met a lot of great people from the independent cultural sector with whom we still collaborate. I felt like I had to travel halfway around the world to truly see my birthplace. But I guess that's how it goes sometimes, the hard way.

At ACS, I was in the humanities profile, literature being my favorite subject. I even wrote poetry. I would occasionally go to a gallery with classmates – I remember the Red House, which used to be a vibrant place for culture and art. All the exhibitions and cultural events there seemed magical to me. The very idea that you could create something new, change your environment – I hadn't seen anything like that in Ruse. It's not that it didn't exist, I just wasn't aware of it.

Our BLL teachers would take us to the theater. I have vivid memories of Petya Rousseva, Rashel Baruch, Nina Rumenova, and Vanya Dimova. I took Romyana Rangelova's creative writing elective class. Before that I didn't know there was such a thing at all. All these teachers instilled a feeling that culture is something living, you don't just look at it in the textbooks and learn about it, that there are people out there who create it. When the teacher herself is an artist – Petya Rousseva was a playwright and an Icarus Award winner even then – we were in an environment where people were doing things, where

we were doing things, instead of just looking at what someone else had done somewhere else. Instead of a boring education, an active education, learning by doing – that's what I remember from my literature classes at the College. The assignments they gave us were very exciting in that department. I remember my very first homework assignment in eighth grade. It was supposed to be a reading log for the required summer reading books, only this time we had to say what we thought about the books, a very novel idea to me at the time. There happened to be one book I didn't like very much, but since the assignment was to say what I really thought, I did it, of course, with argumentation. And Mrs. Rumenova had liked that text and her comments were positive. Then in the later grades, 11 and 12, we had an assignment to make an anthology of works that were important to us, our own anthology. I really appreciated the creative atmosphere.

With my strong interest in literature, when I entered the world of visual art, I encountered a yet new type of magic, it was indescribable. Along with the exhibitions at the Red House, I remember seeing design objects and installations around the city. We would walk around downtown and see on the street events happening, interventions visible. I was very impressed by a temporary installation on Slaveykov Square, where the French Institute is now. It was an empty building back then and in it – this super magical atmosphere with lights, temporary materials, and furniture.

**I wonder if you are tempted to live and work somewhere where there are many more people like you. A place in the world that more people associate with design than Sofia, like Berlin, New York or Copenhagen.**



*Ani at The Collective's office in downtown Sofia, 2024*

I've been to places like that, places with more prestige. You do what you have to do, what's expected. However, I felt that the context was very

important and so were the people you work with. Say you're in a famous place, so what? Sometimes, it even has the opposite effect. If a place is so famous for design, things are bound to sort of stand still at a certain point, much like the cycle of life – there's the turbulent development, when you create and create. It was like that in Berlin, a culture that was alive and very much part of people's lives.

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*Creative energy began to pour, a feeling that anything was possible came about, or at least that something was possible, that we could make change, do it our way.*

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In New York, there was a standstill. I lived in Manhattan, near the university, where those pursuing their Master's and PhDs were housed. I guess it is not just the location, but also the moment in time, and the environment you're immersed in. Not to imply that there weren't places in New York where there was more experimenting and creating going on, places that drew me much more than those with framed art. New York City also has a history of super tumultuous creation, back in the '70s and '80s: when the financial crisis with its derelict buildings coexisted with a thriving music scene and art scene, with Patti Smith and her friends living their best creative lives. That's not what I came across though.

Here in Sofia, I was inspired by things like Design Week, if no masterpiece, still something new that was changing the environment, paving the way for more such things to happen, for more people dare to try something new, something that had the potential to become a regular thing, a thing that lasts... or stagnate, obviously depending on all sorts of external factors, including generational change. It is great to see good examples from all over the world of what's possible and let your imagination run wild even more. Mere studying what has come before is not for me though. I'd rather be in an environment where we're doing something, here and now. Sometimes being in a place off the beaten track has an advantage. That's what happened in Berlin. Artists purposely went there at a time when the city was a cold wasteland, set right on the Iron Curtain, with a lot of problems, a place far from ideal. Gradually,

it grew into a magnet for artists, one after the other. Creative energy began to pour, a feeling that anything was possible came about, or at least that something was possible, that we could make change, do it our way. That's what I felt as The Collective was coming about. It is extremely valuable to work in your own context, to respond to what you know so well and see in front of you.



Eventually, the history of architecture became my major and the subject that interested me the most, probably because it always exists within a context. In architectural design you always work with what you have at hand. You are looking at what is possible, not what is ideal. I find that very curious. In practice, it leads to more creation and as a result, to more beautiful things. Yes, there is some ideal case that we can think about on an abstract philosophical level, but it's quite another thing to see clearly what is in front of you and work with that, with the people, the materials, the finances you have – that's how things happen. Otherwise, we are just sitting around whining, "Ah, if things had only been different. See, I don't have this or that." Well, no, you don't but here is a different place, and yes, there are some things missing, but there are others at hand, and they, too, are valuable.

In The Collective we believe in starting from what we have instead of giving in to nihilism and whining why it is not otherwise which is a very counterproductive practice. It's interesting to work with designers because they are people who don't like talking, they like doing: if someone starts talking a lot, at some point the designers get fed up and



say "OK, let's do something" and something starts taking shape and is tested in practice. Designers avoid philosophizing. While it's important to have clear values and a clear idea of what you're doing, it's also important to start somewhere.

The Rivers of Sofia was the first and most vivid example of this. It's easy to say, "Change is hard work. Things are so layered and so silty, literally and figuratively. It will take decades to fix Sofia's sewers. Who's ever going to start it? It's not going to happen." There hasn't been any meaningful change since the stone troughs of the canals were built in the 1940s. It was, back then, the largest and most important infrastructure project aimed at keeping rivers from spilling over so that the city could grow.

Now the goal is quite different. While it was about channeling the rivers back then, it is about preserving the biodiversity of nature now, having it accessible to the people in the city, thinking about nature-based solutions and looking for a way to keep the rivers in their natural channels. And to make the already created stone channels more accessible, something that did happen during the festival. In a silty situation of the type "This is how it is around here, it's been like this for over 70 years" you don't give in, in spite of all the talk about how it's not possible and in spite of the abstract plans that will never be implemented, you go ahead and do something.

I joined the Rivers of Sofia after the first edition of the festival, done by the bravest enthusiasts in the autumn of 2020. It was literally three people and their parents, friends and family who helped with whatever they could: resources, manual labor, and hauling. The budget was paltry for a festival, a little help here and there from friends and a few sponsors. Artist friends created and donated works. So, something good appeared pretty much out of nothing. Sometimes you just make your way by doing. Doing brings about more energy. People see the result and say to themselves, "Something is

happening." It is visible, it can be shown. Moreover, people are happy to be coming together. Even for this simple exercise of seeing what we do have, under our nose, instead of looking for things missing, comparing ourselves to something else better, seeing what is not without seeing what is.

When working with students on events and design initiatives, we start with an active looking exercise: we go to a place, perhaps a place they usually avoid or haven't thought about at all – like some of the more neglected riverfront areas in Ruse, for example – and we start looking at it together. We ask questions such as "What do you see? What impresses you?" This is part of the creative process. Seeing clearly what is there, really seeing it, and then asking yourself why it's like that, imagining how it could change. Starting from a specific place is great, that's how things work in the end. Whether for building communities, urban planning, democracy or active citizenship – first we have to come together in physical space.

Another thing to keep in mind is we were the first generation to really grow up with and on the internet, which has influenced us in making us more passive. We often sit alone, look at our screens, and sulk. In contrast, when we come together in physical spaces, we open up possibilities. An energy emerges that is much more than the sum of our individual energies. New ideas are born, and things happen. This is participation, democracy, citizenship. It's so energizing when we come together with young people and we can pass along the idea that they can change their environment quite literally.

In fact, that's exactly how I met Martin, the founder of The Collective. I was part of a working group for students and other enthusiasts interested in the river festival; we were invited to share ideas on how the festival should go forward and we worked on concrete proposals. Later, some of those ideas were incorporated into subsequent editions of the festival and various urban environment intervention projects.

*Rivers of Sofia, 2024*





In 2021, we started working with young people even more purposefully; this became part of our main activities and takes place in more cities now. This calendar year, we held workshops in Gabrovo; last year, in Ruse we worked with students from local technical schools who have the relevant skills. It was super interesting to look together, to see in a new way, and to think how it could be different. The students came up with ideas that we built together literally with our hands and then the results of our efforts stayed there for the summer, visible. This way we shortened the urban development cycle slightly, which usually takes years.

**Do you have a favorite project, festival or intervention, as you say, that you've been involved with?**

The project involving the young people for Rivers of the City – Ruse edition was very close to my heart. They were directly involved: they came up with designs and then the place on the Danube riverfront was reshaped based on those designs. To see 20-30 young people realize that not only do they have ideas that they can work on together, but that they can execute them, see something totally different, and then have thousands of people from the city come to admire this place that they have transformed – amazing! At the end of the program, some of them shared that they felt like they had found their craft.

**How do you see the role of ACS in your life path so far?**

It's been a great start and has awakened my curiosity about many things. We've been super lucky to get a good education, travel the world, and see wonderful places and great things. We're scattered though – some of us in the States, some in the UK, some elsewhere. My personal experience felt a bit like a disconnect when I suddenly had to go so far away, in my case to the US, after I had just established this connection to the culture of the city here. We're now rebuilding the lost connection, it feels like starting all over again. Even though I'm in the same places physically that I used to go, they're different. The network of people I interact with is different. I actually don't know many alumni that are not from my own class or neighboring classes. Dimiter Kenarov, ACS Class of 1999, is an exception; I'm a big fan of his work and admire everything he does, but I can't think of any others right now.

But yeah, everything has gone great since I came back, things have started to fall into place. We're living in a somewhat miraculous time – peace in our country, we're able to create freely, imagine all



*Rivers of Ruse, 2022*

sorts of beautiful things and create them. I hope we never lose that.

Our organization has a strong mission, we want to make our corner of the world a good place to live for everyone, to show more people, especially young people, that they are full citizens of their city, of Bulgaria, that their ideas can lead the way, and they can be what they have dreamed of. Because the reality in Bulgaria, especially in some parts of Bulgaria, for example in the north, like Ruse, is that many of the young people can't wait to leave their hometown, to go somewhere else where they



will actually have the opportunity to develop, be themselves, and achieve something. Then there's my generation, many of us did leave, many now coming back.

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*We want to show more people, especially young people, that they are full citizens of their city, that their ideas can lead the way, and they can be what they have dreamed of.*

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At The Collective, we want to create opportunities, we want to launch this idea that anything you want to see somewhere else, actually if you hang in there a little bit and with support from your peers, your classmates, others, – and there are others, creative organizations, what have you – with a little support you can literally do anything you want in your town. The hunger is there, the desire is there. So many people flocked to the Ruse event, to this place, for months. We were amazed, too. We don't do things with the idea that they are a one-time thing and then move on. We want to build something that is sustainable, that is our future, and attract young people to this idea, to this common future. All in all, it is a very serious and long-term undertaking. That said, we do temporary and short-term interventions, as well.

**But even with the short-term ones you seem to show people what can be done in the long term,**

**share ideas, plus there are the regular festivals you organize...**

That's right. The Ruse festival and the events in the other towns where we've set foot have become annual.

**And what's coming up in your event calendar next?**

We are hosting a conference in connection with Rivers of Sofia on November 15. Before that at the end of October we will be doing a youth workshop for community development. Then the development hackathon for some of these interventions that you see on the white board. We are now discussing which one or ones to work on. There is no shortage of ideas – we are currently looking at a couple of new places we have not been to yet.

**I can think of one place you haven't been lately – at ACS. It's not quite up your alley, but it's such a nice and special place.**

Yes, the area lacks green spaces like the ACS campus. The complicated access is stopping me. While I lived in the neighborhood for a couple of years, or when I was working on a project in the Business Park, I often said to myself, Hey, I'm two steps away, why don't I go to the College, but then I thought how I have to call in advance, how they'll check my documents at the Ministry of Interior gate like at a border crossing, and I lose my enthusiasm. I find its history and how times and different eras affect spaces very interesting though, so I will be coming.



Ani at ACS giving a talk on community building and urban design, 2025



# DR. KRASIMIRA CHAKAROVA:

*Passion for Physics,  
Heart for Students*

*With over 30 years of teaching experience at the American College of Sofia, many of which were as Head of the Science Department, Dr. Krasimira Chakarova is an integral part of ACS's scientific legacy. Known for her firm standards, patience, and passion for challenging those students who come with a love of physics equally with those who must overcome their fear of Physics, Dr. Chakarova is an inspiration. In 2023, she was voted Teacher of the Year by the graduating class. Her dedication has left a lasting impact on generations of ACS students and colleagues alike.*

*On a tired afternoon at the end of the school year, our conversation lasted twice as long as planned. It was easy to be drawn into Krasi's stories and insights.*



## How did you first get involved with the American College of Sofia?

It was a coincidence as some things in life tend to be. I was out of work in the summer of 1994. Back then, before the internet, job announcements were scarce. It seemed like the only jobs officially published were those for secretaries. One of my former colleagues, who was then working at Sofia University alongside my husband, mentioned to him that this new school, The American College of Sofia, was looking for a lab assistant.

I came to the College campus at the end of August and was interviewed by Chemistry teacher Eric Chehab and Biology teacher and Science Department Chair Kathryn Davis, both of them, as I found out later, amazing teachers and colleagues, young – I believe Eric had just graduated from Harvard – and very qualified. We had a short conversation and I got the position as a part-time lab assistant.

It was a memorable first year at ACS for me, trying to equip the lab while there was no company on the market offering any lab supplies. I had to go to places and look for supplies left from closed companies, previously owned by the state. In addition, we would often borrow instruments from Sofia University.

In that first year, I really got excited about being a teacher. I was in every single Chemistry lesson with Eric Chehab. He was doing many demonstrations, many practical hands-on activities, and I was there helping him. One time, his sleeve caught fire but luckily no one got hurt. We used to go out on the field next to the science building and do experiments with fire and lava outside. Students were so fascinated.

Half-way in the school year, I heard that there was a job opening for a Physics teacher. I applied and as part of the process, I had to prepare a lesson and be observed by the President, Dr. Art Charles and the Science Department Chair Kathryn Davis. I was offered the teaching position starting the following school year, 1995-96. And this is how my teaching career started.

My father was a Physics teacher early in his career, before moving to university, and I had seen many students at my house growing up. It was not teaching I was fascinated by though, it was Physics. I dreamt of a research career but life is life, it has its ways. I almost opted out of taking the teaching certificate

which was an optional part of my university education. I didn't want to be a teacher but my father insisted, You never know, he said. Looking back, I'm so grateful to him, because teaching turned out to be pretty much my entire career and my passion.

And teaching at ACS, it was really like a different world, a real community, teachers and students having great communications. Classes were a bit smaller back then. We were very tough on them, on you. In this culture, with these wonderful students, no wonder I was so enthusiastic. I have changed a lot since, of course. It's not the enthusiasm that I have lost, my goal has changed. My focus is different. I want to show every student, even students who say they hate Physics or they don't understand it, especially them, that Physics is not impossible and how nice it feels when you start getting things and you see the wonders of Physics, how that motivates you to learn more and understand more. When you make a step forward, you open a door, then the next step. I've seen students smile and flourish. And it's not that they will become physicists. This is not my goal. Science expands their understanding of the natural world.

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*I want to show every student, that Physics is not impossible and how nice it feels when you start getting things and you see its wonders.*

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## So that's what kept you here all these years, 31 years since 1994?

Yes, it is the community and the students, the spirit of the school that keeps me here.

## Looking back, what are some of your most rewarding moments as a teacher?

I will never forget finding out that some of my junior students had gone to the President Dr. Charles to inquire about introducing Physics as an academic profile at ACS starting a year earlier, in junior year – it used to be senior year only at that time. I felt both flattered, motivated, and proud. And it worked.

These were such enthusiastic students, they took part in the Minyo Balkanski Physics Competition – in French – and got medals, too! Some of them went

to study in France. Nadia Dozova, Class of 1998, comes to mind, who is now a university professor at the Pierre and Marie Curie University in Paris.

Back then we didn't have the advisory system with the small groups of a dozen or so, which has its advantages and disadvantages. Instead, teachers were section supervisors of students we also had classes with. Sometimes we saw this group through a big chunk of their course of study at ACS. This way, we could see them grow and maybe even think we played a part in their growth. With advisory, the advantage is students meet different teachers and we meet different students and it encourages the students' independence, it develops them as individuals. Our students are amazing. They were always amazing, sometimes I think now they're even more amazing, navigating this complicated new world and super intensive life with technology. It's a struggle and we are here to help.

At first we didn't have a Physics lab at all. My colleague Vanya Angelova had started the design of one with some external help. I joined the effort when I started at ACS and with the help of a grant from USAID, we finished it. Today, so many years later, the lab is not in good shape. We lack storage space: it looks like everything is poured into those two main cabinets. But still, we have started from nothing and little by little, we have built some sets for experimental work, which was something the students really appreciated. Our school was an exception in Bulgaria to have a Physics lab, you know, we were really privileged.

With the lab in place, ACS students started to participate in the International Young Physicist

Tournament (IYPT). It started with Vanya and I being invited by the Ministry of Education and Science to be on the jury because of our English skills in addition to Physics. Once the two of us got acquainted with the competition, we wanted our students to compete, too. We really liked the format, with real research, a direct opponent, and including presenting, reporting your investigation, working in a team – things we are traditionally strong at here at the College.

We had the needed instruments here and we could work on projects to apply with. We still had to go to Sofia University, when we needed to use more sophisticated equipment. These IYPT experiences were memorable indeed. But because of them, we never had a winter break. We spent the whole break here in the lab preparing for the state qualification round for IYPT. Then the actual international competition was held over summer. Our school's team kept qualifying for the national round year after year and as a result, representing the country abroad in the international round.

In 2003, we went with two teams to the national round in Shumen, one team of ACS seniors and one of ACS juniors. And the senior team won. Then we decided to form a mixed team of seniors and juniors and we proceeded to the international round in Uppsala, Sweden. In 2004, again the ACS team ranked first in Bulgaria and we represented the country in Brisbane, Australia. This marked the first time the IYPT was held outside of Europe. I must here give our huge thanks to all who helped us and provided financial support: ACS Board members Gipson family, parents, and companies. With time, the organizing committee here in



*With The Little Bang project team, that won gold at the national round of IYPT, 2020*



Bulgaria got uneasy and started changing the rules, so as not to have the same school, our school, represent Bulgaria every year. With the new rules, they would form a representative team with students from different schools and towns, which had its advantages but one main disadvantage: that the students didn't know one another. They only met up and worked together the last couple of days before the international competition. Our students were working hard for the national round, won it, and then only one of them would advance to the international one alongside students they didn't know, while the rest of the ACS students on the team, who worked just as hard, felt disappointed. In 2013, Victor Kouzmanov '14 was part of the representative team of Bulgaria, and came back with bronze. Last time an ACSer became part of the national team was Nikolay Mitev in 2019. Nowadays, we don't prepare as a team but some students do take part in the national round of IYPT individually or in teams of two to four.



*In 2014*

As you know, our Science Fair is similar in that students work on research projects, presenting them and competing. And then there is FISSION, as started in 2016 by Misho, Ivana, and Tsveta after

they went to the 2015 Science and Engineering Fair in Vienna. You see, that year the two winning projects from the ACS Science Fair competed in the Vienna fair. Tsveta, Misho, and Ivana's project "Sun Protection Efficacy" competed in the Health and Human Behavior category, while Nikita, Venezia, and Boris's project "The Maze Robot" competed in the Engineering and Technology category, both winning in their categories and the Maze Robot winning Best Overall Senior Project!

A funny story comes to mind related to this trip to Vienna. I went with them as their supervisor. For the sun protection project which explored cosmetic substances used in UV protection, Misho was bringing along a bottle of a chemical. On our way back, he was instructing all of us about liquids and rules, drink up, you can't take that with you, he would advise people left and right. Then, his backpack gets scanned, and guess who forgot to put the bottled chemical in his checked-in suitcase. He was stunned, he blushed, he didn't

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*Science is a practical area of human knowledge. Doing something yourself, seeing how it works – this is a memory for life.*

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think something like that could happen to him. The customs officers asked what it was and when he answered, A chemical, they were horrified. Luckily, he only had to throw it out, it didn't lead to bigger problems. It was not unproblematic as it was borrowed through another student's parent, working in a cosmetics company and rather expensive but yes, it was in the name of science.

**Do you know if many of your students have gone on to work in Physics or maybe even teach Physics?**

Some of my former students have become teachers or university professors in the field of science, yes, though I am not aware of any in Physics. Part of my philosophy is that the world doesn't need millions or even hundreds of thousands of physicists. Engineers – yes, interdisciplinary, modern professions. Science in general will always be important for the life of people. Most of our students in the science profile really have gone on to pursue science in university, as well. I mentioned Victor Kouzmanov

'14 earlier: he studied Physics in Cambridge and Mathematics in Oxford afterwards. Many became engineers. Iglia Atanassova, Class of 2011, was a Physics profile here at ACS. She became a science teacher after taking part in the Teach for Bulgaria teacher training and is now a principal in a state school here in Sofia. These are the rewarding moments for a teacher.

**How do you think your students would describe your teaching style and you, as a teacher and as a person?**

My students have shared with me that my enthusiasm for Physics and for teaching is visible in the classroom. That it is obvious that I like what I do. I am emotional sometimes. I do a good job explaining things. I love experimental projects and I like the project-based learning that ACS has adopted, so I introduced in 11th grade this component with experimental projects where my students do practical stuff. When they graduate and return later this is the thing they always remember best. They did it, it's theirs, it is the best way to learn.

The ACS maker space SCIFI was created for this purpose: to allow students to be in touch with real science and science technology, to experience a combination of things, because just as in life, it's not just strictly chemistry or strictly physics.

**What would your second major be if you were to choose one in addition to Physics?**

Art. There is art in science, and beauty.

**You said you observed all the classes of Chemistry teacher Eric Chehab in your first year. Are peer observations still a thing? In general, how do teachers keep developing professionally?**

Peer observations are still a practice. They used to be compulsory and now more of an optional thing, but I have always advised every new teacher, in those years I served as the Science Department Chair, to do peer observations and enter not only classes on the subject they will be teaching. It is so interesting to watch the students, your students, in different situations in different subjects. In the years before structured professional development with procedures and meetings, peer observations were the way in which we exchanged ideas. Some twenty five years ago, we were not so many,

and we had really personal connections beyond the professional. And after one such faculty meeting where I spoke about introducing assessment of students' group work as a skill, I received a handwritten thank you note from the President Mr. Persky. Today, group work is a standard part of the grading system. And not just at ACS. Sometimes it feels like everything new in education in our country starts from ACS.

**If you could change one thing about school and education, what would you change? What about at ACS?**

At ACS, we need more lab space. Science is a practical area of human knowledge. It's not just solving problems. Problems really develop your abstract thinking. But doing something yourself, seeing how it works – this is a memory for life.

**Will more lab space allow you to do more labs than you can do currently or does that depend on the Ministry's curriculum?**

It depends on the curriculum to an extent but you can always find ways to incorporate more lab work in class, even in a regular lesson. When I show my students a demo that is interesting, something like an optical phenomenon, magic of sorts or give them a hands-on activity or a challenging question, this is stimulating critical thinking and students appreciate this immensely. For that you need lab space and a lab technician, time to plan and materials.

**What advice would you give to new teachers or students considering a career in science education?**

Being able to offer emotional support to students is key nowadays. My top priority is to help the students who dread or say they hate Physics. Just to show them that it is not impossible, that it is even pleasant when you understand something. This is my advice to teachers, just be patient and support, support, support. This doesn't mean that you are not strict as a teacher. It means give everyone a chance, give them your best, and it will work.

As per advice for students considering a career in science, our students are multi-talented, I'm amazed. While I can't make a robot, I work with students on robotics projects and we find common grounds and language. This is something that the school enables. Very important, we as teachers do not just test and grade students. I wish students



knew to work on organizing their time better as to regularly work on each subject instead of studying mostly before tests. One of my goals is to decrease lecture time and increase work in the classroom where students use different sources: artificial intelligence, textbooks, everything.



With team FISSION 2017

### **Are textbooks being updated to be more hands-on?**

The voluminous original English-language textbooks that we use at ACS are written with many more details and examples than the tiny Bulgarian ones. Students on the other hand, want everything synthesized, everything SparkNotes, quickly, quickly. So, I strive to do more individual or group work in the classroom, so most of the learning happens here, while I teach and am able to explain.

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*This is my advice to teachers, just be patient and support, support, support. Give everyone a chance, give them your best, and it will work.*

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Young people nowadays have a different way of processing information and if they just read the material for five hours the night before the test, this is not enough. It's just a waste of their intellectual effort. It's totally different to hear or read something, then read it once again, maybe you discover that you didn't understand something, you inquire about it, someone explains and it stays – so simple. But they don't have the time, so we have to focus on this during regular classes.

Time is never enough. We have so many events,

great events, but they leave us with less time for classwork. Same is true for exam week, which is in fact a week and a half. Fortunately, we have the best students, so you can balance, put them together with the best teachers, and it will work.

**It seems to me that you have to be a good-hearted person guided by strong internal values to become a teacher nowadays here and in many parts of the world. Then you can inspire others who admire you to join the profession, creating a positive ripple effect.**

We have to hope. It is a social process. You can't make a one day change. In Bulgaria, education overall has been deteriorating. Students don't have the solid background they used to have 20-30 years ago, they don't have the study habits and that's a problem. They have memorization habits, because this is how they have gone through our educational system, heavily reliant on private tutoring. I've always hated private tutoring, as a student and later, as a parent, too. There is no peer interaction, no teacher motivating the students; the process there is giving them patterns, teaching them how to take certain tests, how to respond to the questions, so the grownups approve the answers. This is not education. So, at ACS, we help students break these patterns and learn in a new way, acquire new learning habits, and new meaningful skills.

Every student who returns here as an alum says that in the university, they feel comfortable, after graduating here.

I had an interesting conversation a month ago at Arts Fest. This couple started talking to me, asking me about the history of the College. It turned out that their daughter will be in eighth grade here next school year, while their older daughter Yoana Lazarova graduated in 2018. She was a great student, not a Physics lover but I remember her very well. She received one of the special awards when graduating. She worked in my class, really enthusiastically and so did many students who were not Physics lovers. This is my reward. Those who love science, who are ambitious, they get their medal – good for them. It's their achievement. Those who don't love science but do well in my class, this is special.

**Thank you for your part in all students' achievement, Krasi. You are amazing! Stay this way!**

# FROM ACS TO THE FRONTIERS OF SCIENCE

*Stories Collected by Gergana Yaneva '10*

At ACS, curiosity is part of our DNA. In this special feature, we asked alumni who've built careers in science to share their journeys in their own words. We asked them two questions: If you had to explain what you do to a curious 10-year-old, how would you describe it? and What inspired you to pursue a career in science and how did your time at ACS influence your path? Their answers offer a window into the wonder of discovery, the power of education, and the lasting influence of our shared school experience.

**DARINA SPASOVA '05**  
**Senior Director of Pharmacology,**  
**Replicate Bioscience, Inc.**



Inside the castle lives a powerful team of guards and knights called your immune system. Their job is to protect the castle from invaders – like viruses, bad bacteria, or anything trying to make you sick. My job is to study these guards and knights and understand how they work together to prevent disease. I'm kind of like a coach for them, helping

them get stronger and smarter. Understanding how they work helps us make vaccines that can prevent deadly illness. A vaccine is like a wanted poster or a training mission delivered to the guards before a real battle. It shows them what the enemy looks like and teaches them where the enemy's weaknesses are and how to fight it – without anyone getting hurt. So, when the real invader tries to sneak in, your guards are trained, armed, and ready. I'm like the general or the wizard, inventing new technologies that can teach your guards how to recognize and remember these invaders. I use something called self-replicating RNA. Self-replicating RNA is one of these training missions that I show the guards, but it's special because it copies itself again and again inside the castle, making it easier to spread the message faster and farther – so even the guards in the far-away towers get the warning before the invaders come. So, my job is to understand how the castle's defenses work, to write the training manual and design the missions, and to help the knights fight better and remember better.

I've always been curious about biology. As a child, I wanted to be a doctor, but during my time at ACS, I became especially interested in how different organ systems work together. I was lucky to have teachers who recognized and supported my curiosity. They encouraged me to ask questions, even the ones they didn't always have the answers



to, which gave me the confidence to keep asking questions throughout my life and career. It was in 9th grade biology, and even geography class, that I first realized how much I enjoyed trying to understand how things in nature and in our bodies work – not just how to fix them when they're broken. That's when I knew I wanted research to be part of my future career.

### KONSTANTIN KARCHEV '15

**Researcher, Scuola Internazionale Superiore di Studi Avanzati (SISSA)**

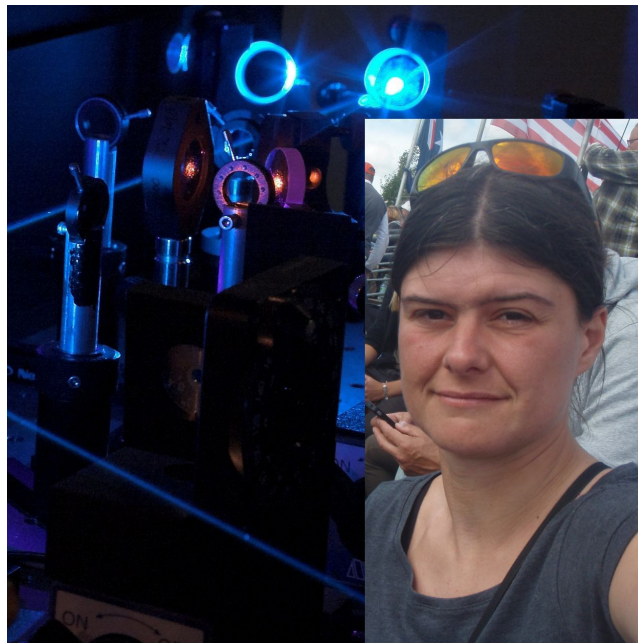


I'm a cosmologist, so I study how big and old the Universe is, how quickly it's expanding, and whether it will keep growing forever or eventually collapse in a Big Crunch. To do that, I train artificial intelligence systems to analyse data from the biggest ground- and space-based telescopes and draw precise, reliable, and verifiable conclusions from them. I also really like creating pretty and informative visualisations.

I've been interested in the night sky ever since I was a kid, but what prompted me to devote myself to physics and astronomy "professionally" were the national competitions and olympiads in these subjects. And while solving intriguing problems and performing surprising experiments under pressure is already rewarding enough, I remember much more fondly the experiences I shared with the other young scientists from the ACS teams while preparing for the competitions, travelling around Bulgaria, and celebrating our successes (and failures) once the rankings were out.

### NADIA DOZOVA '98

**Maitre de Conference,  
Pierre and Marie Curie University**



I use physical and chemical methods to study the reactions of biomolecules like proteins and RNA. More precisely I use light to observe these reactions at very short times (millions of millions of times shorter than one second). A good analogy is to say that it is like making a movie and slowing it down to see exactly what happens at the molecular level.

My parents and all their friends are scientists, so I have always been surrounded by researchers. It allowed me to see the good and the bad aspects of a career in science and to decide that this is what I wanted to do. Of course, being at ACS helped a lot with my decision because all of the science teachers (biology, chemistry, physics, math) helped me acquire the foundation necessary for envisioning a future in research. I would like to thank all of them, because they all contributed to getting me where I am now and especially to making me work at the interface of different scientific fields. I would particularly like to thank my physics teachers – Vanya Angelova and Krasimira Chakarova, because they were instrumental in getting me to pursue higher education in Physics. Even though I quickly bifurcated towards chemistry, I never fully forgot my original scientific background as I consider myself a physical chemist.

**POLINA KEHAYOVA '97**  
**Scientific Director, Harvard University**



Currently I am the Scientific Director of the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology at Harvard University, which means that I no longer work in a lab. I'm responsible for figuring out what are the most exciting directions in biology that our department should be focusing on and doing what needs to be done to make sure we are successful in building a vibrant science community. In practical terms, I work on selecting the new faculty who join us each year (this past fall, we received 476 applications for one spot so the choice is super hard), I advise students and postdoctoral fellows, I teach some classes. Right now, a lot of work goes into finding ways to maintain research in the context of being attacked by the US federal administration and losing a lot of our funding. But going back to the 10-year old explanation, maybe I'd say that if you have a school, someone needs to constantly reevaluate what's important to teach and find the best teachers. I am that someone.

I can honestly give ACS 100% of the credit for choosing a career in science. Growing up, I was mostly interested in arts and music (which I continue to love and practice), and it sometimes still surprises me that I ended up becoming a scientist. Looking back, there were two experiences in high school that led me on the

path of scientific discovery. The first one was taking organic chemistry. To this day, there's nothing that has ever made as much intuitive sense to me as organic chemistry. I found myself in a new place where I somehow immediately spoke the language. The experience was exhilarating and it unlocked a curiosity to learn that I had rarely felt before. The added bonus of organic chemistry is that it seems like magic – but it's magic that is made of logical steps that you can understand, reproduce and predict. The thrill of this realization has never left me! The other experience was my introduction to the concept of evolution. This was another time in which one single concept powerfully brought into focus much about the living world around me. Looking at life through the lens of evolution brought a tremendous sense of satisfaction back then and it still does now. So I guess this is how I ended up being a scientist by profession, but one who still has a deep love and appreciation for the arts, which is what I spend most of my free time on.

**YORDAN PENEV '11**  
**OB/GYN Resident Physician, MaineHealth Maine Medical Center**



I am a doctor who cares for women during pregnancy, childbirth, and in treating diseases of the female reproductive system.

I was always drawn to Biology and ACS facilitated an environment where I could surround myself with good friends who shared this interest. The school additionally provided continuity of mentorship



with amazing teachers who helped me develop my interests both inside and outside of the regular curriculum. I followed that interest into undergrad where I discovered I also love working with people and hence the combination Biology + People = Medicine.

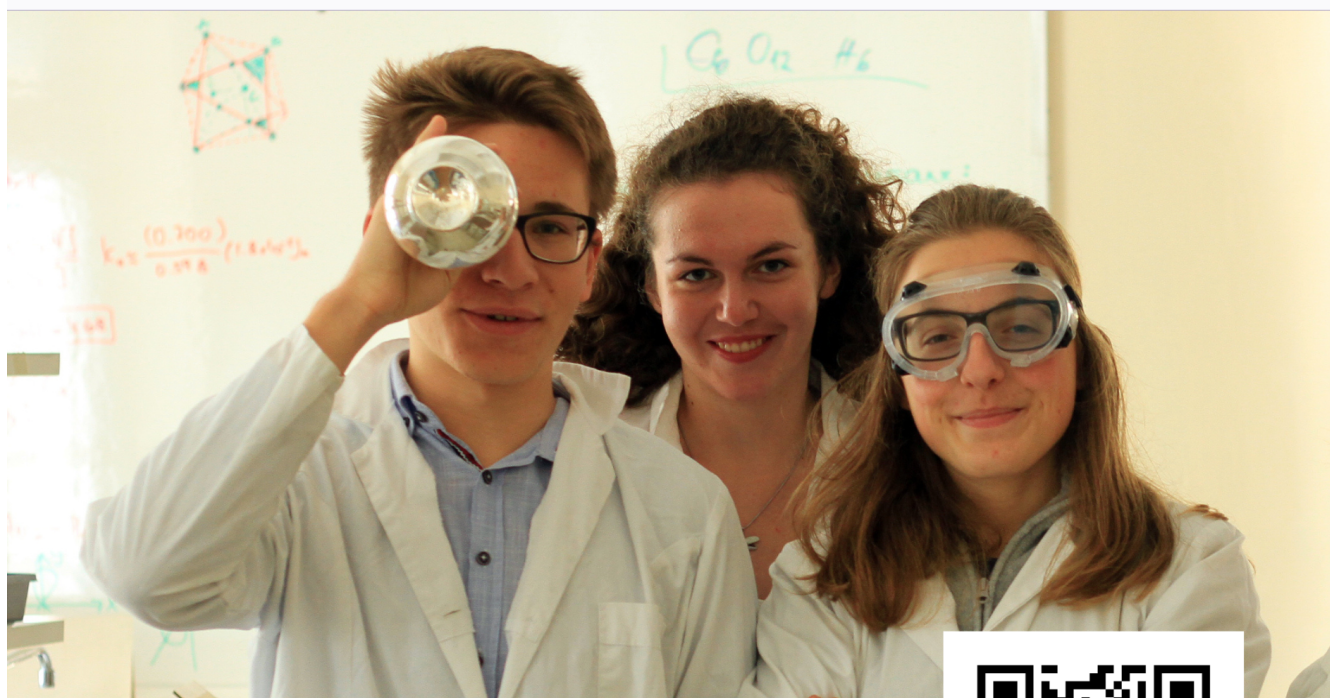
Honestly, one of my favorite memories was when in the middle of 11th grade as part of the AP Biology

elective, Ms. Bouton and Ms. Howell asked us why we liked Biology. Somehow I had not bothered to think about answering the question before and it was eye-opening to see the diversity of motivations around the room, from humanitarian idealism to sci-fi curiosities to depict the human body as a machine. All goes to show that science is and can be a very unifying field for people from all walks of life

This feature is part of The Science LAB fundraising campaign, which aims to expand opportunities in STEM for ACS students by enhancing the school's science facilities. Together, these efforts reflect the power of science education - and the lasting impact of investing in young minds with curiosity, courage, and the drive to explore the unknown.

# The Science LAB

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# KALOYAN DIMITROV '25:

## *I Dream of Pushing Technology Forward*

*Interview by Petia Ivanova '97 and Gergana Yaneva '10*



*With Pchelichka, 2024 - Photo Petar Komandarev '27*

*A young man who truly wears many hats, Kaloyan has made an indelible mark on the ACS community. As chairman of the makerspace committee of the ACS Student Council, president of the Robotics Club, and captain of the ACS Phoenix – the first Bulgarian team to compete in the prestigious international robotics competition FIRST in Turkey – he has shown remarkable leadership and vision. Beyond his technical pursuits, Kaloyan is also a passionate member of the English Drama program, having participated in all its final productions over the past five years.*

*An aspiring engineer with a deep belief in the power of interdisciplinary knowledge, Kaloyan often draws inspiration from nature. His impressive portfolio includes a research paper on swarm robotics inspired by ant behavior, the design of a robotic bee to help combat declining bee populations, and the creation of an affordable robotic dog for educational purposes. In recognition of his outstanding achievements and contributions, in 2025, Kaloyan, who is a recipient of the Polansky Scholarship, was awarded the Science Department Award and the Floyd Black Award. One afternoon in June, we had the pleasure of sitting down with Kaloyan to learn more about his journey, his inspirations, and his vision for the future.*



**How was senior year at ACS? Anything special that you think you're going to remember, like a particular challenge or a lesson learned perhaps?**

I thought senior year would be easier than junior or sophomore year, so I was a bit surprised at first. Then again, this is ACS, so I should have expected it. *(laughs)* A good rule is not to let go of the reins until you have your diploma. I'm joking, of course – it wasn't a big issue. I was busy with university applications and finishing other activities, making sure they were passed on properly to future students. I should have prepared better, but overall, it turned out well. In the end, all's well that ends well – that's senior year for me.

**You didn't even mention the English Drama program and the FIRST Robotics Competition. I guess these two projects contributed a lot to the busy senior year that you had.**

I have been part of the English Drama program since I started at ACS, and I have been involved with robotics ever since the club was founded three years ago. Both activities hold a special place in my heart. I feel I have grown significantly through my experiences in both, and I hope they continue to inspire and transform me as profoundly as they have so far. To me, these two pursuits represent the core of my ACS experience and have been the most influential in shaping the person I am today, five years later.

**Do you know where you're going next?**

Yes, I'll be studying at Yale, which I'm very proud of. From what I've heard, the environment there is quite similar to here, so I expect it will be both a step up and something familiar. It feels like a natural continuation of the five years I've spent here.

**Do you know if you are going to join a drama program there?**

I hope so. I want to give myself some time to settle in first – new country, new continent – and see how everything falls into place. But after that, I'm really hoping to continue acting, at least as a hobby.

**How and when did you first start acting?**

I actually did some drama before joining ACS, but only for about a year, and it wasn't the most enjoyable experience due to some challenges at my previous school. The story of how I got involved with the ACS drama program is quite funny. Between lockdowns, during a brief period when we were back at school, a friend of mine mentioned that the English drama club needed more boys for casting

because the membership was unbalanced. I hadn't even heard of the drama program before, but I thought, *why not give it a try?* From the very beginning, I really enjoyed the experience – the people, the organization, and of course, the incredible final productions each year. I like to think of it as love at first sight, though it's also something I could have easily missed.



*Shakespeare in Love, 2023*

**And what about your interest in natural sciences? Is there a particular field or topic that excites you the most?**

I'd say engineering, as it's an umbrella term that truly encompasses my interest in the natural sciences. While this interest dates back long before ACS, it was here that I genuinely discovered engineering and realized it's where my true passion within STEM lies. Previously, I struggled with the purely theoretical approach to natural sciences; something always felt incomplete. There was a lingering doubt about whether that was truly what I wanted to build my life around. Discovering engineering, and the gratification of seeing my creations work, made everything fall perfectly into place.

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*Working on a robot for weeks or even months, and finally seeing it move exactly as intended. The satisfaction from that moment is incomparable.*

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**So will you be studying engineering at Yale?**

Engineering is the plan, yes. I haven't officially declared my major yet, since I'm not required to do so until after the first couple of years. But for now, that's the path I intend to follow. Of course, things can always change, but that's where I'm headed at the moment.

**How did you learn about ACS? How did you end up choosing ACS?**

Back in seventh grade, my family and I started exploring potential high schools where I could continue my education, as I wasn't entirely satisfied with the school

I was attending at the time. I took the admissions exam and felt that I did quite well. Then, I remember attending the open house event, and everything just seemed to fall into place. The strong emphasis on the SCIFI workspace really stood out to me – that was the deciding factor. A few months later, I found myself here at ACS.

**With so many academic interests and extracurricular activities, how do you like to unwind or relax?**

I really enjoy sports. Although I haven't had many opportunities to play here at ACS due to my busy schedule, I make sure to engage in various sports during my free time. It's my favorite way to blow off steam and recharge.

**What makes you happy?**

I touched on this earlier, but I believe that experiencing any kind of success – no matter how big or small, regardless of the area it occurs in – is an incredibly gratifying feeling. It genuinely makes me happy on a personal level to see the final result of my work. A common example is working on a robot for weeks or even months, and finally seeing it move exactly as intended. The satisfaction from that moment is incomparable.

**You've completed your education now, high school and earlier stages. How would you ideally like education to be different? Is there anything you would change, if you could?**

Actually, unlike many people, I believe education is already quite well-structured and organized. That said, I think there could be a stronger emphasis on helping students discover and pursue their passions. For example, student clubs play a big role in this. When I first arrived at ACS, especially during the COVID lockdowns, it was really challenging to find and engage with clubs because of the disruptions. Thankfully, things have improved significantly since then, with more active clubs and better opportunities to get involved.

However, I do think the system for discovering clubs could be enhanced. The club fair is helpful but could be more effective. One of the unique strengths of ACS is its vibrant club culture, which is better than that of many other schools, but there's always room for improvement. Strengthening this aspect could help students explore potential career paths earlier and start working towards their goals sooner. Even many upper-grade students still struggle with choosing the right university degree, which is natural, but improving how students are supported in this process could reduce that uncertainty earlier on.



*FIRST Robotics Competition in Turkey, 2025*

**Aside from your Yale education, what are some goals or dreams you are particularly excited to pursue in the future?**

I tend to think long-term about my goals. First and foremost, I am focused on completing my education, as I believe it provides a strong foundation. Ultimately, my dream is to start my own engineering firm – essentially a startup – where I can innovate and make a meaningful impact.

**I recall you had startup-worthy ideas back in ninth grade.**

Well, they weren't quite there yet – it's still a work in progress. But I'm committed to improving over the coming years. Ultimately, in about a decade, I hope to be surrounded by people who share my passion for engineering and to build a company that genuinely creates innovative products, with a very clear goal of pushing technology forward.

**Imagine you are interviewing ACS graduates as potential employees for your company. What would it mean to you if a candidate showed up for an interview and mentioned they graduated from ACS?**

I think it would give me an immediate sense of the kind of person they might be, which is valuable. But it wouldn't immediately seal the deal. I honestly haven't thought about it; this seems a bit too much in the future, even for me.

**What's the most impressive, exciting, or exotic place you've ever visited, and is there a place – whether metaphorical or geographic – that you aspire to go?**

Honestly, I haven't traveled as much as I'd like. One of the most exotic places I've been to was Azerbaijan, where I attended an event connected to the European Youth Parliament, which I was briefly involved with. Although it's geographically close and culturally familiar, it felt quite exotic and exciting to me. As for the future, I'm not big on making lavish travel plans. I don't necessarily have a destination in mind that I want to visit, so I might put traveling on hold for a while.



**Is there a particular skill you developed at ACS that you believe you might not have gained if you had attended a different school?**

The obvious answer is time management. I've learned to navigate tasks more effectively, even after procrastinating until close to the deadline. While it's not the ideal approach, it's a useful skill in its own right. I've experienced the most significant personal growth in public speaking and articulation – areas I wasn't very confident in before. ACS and the drama program really helped me improve how I express myself in front of others. Compared to peers from other schools, I've noticed ACS places a strong emphasis on presenting and speaking in front of others. That focus is unique and has been incredibly valuable for me – and from what I hear, it will continue to be useful in the future.

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*ACS places a strong emphasis on presenting and public speaking. That focus is unique and has been incredibly valuable for me.*

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**During your time at ACS has there been a student who inspired and motivated you to improve?**



*With Momchil Kolev '24 and the robot Sharo*

Absolutely. I had a very trustworthy partner, Momchil Kolev, Class of 2024, with whom I collaborated on most of our engineering projects. We presented together at science fairs and participated in the FIRST Robotics Club. He graduated a year before me, and we'll soon be reunited at Yale, which I'm really excited about. I'm incredibly grateful to him. He's been the most impactful student I've had the pleasure to work with at ACS. Working alongside him pushed me to improve significantly. Honestly, I've learned more from him than from some teachers – not

that it's the teachers' fault. Meeting him here has been a turning point; in the few years we've worked together, I've achieved and grown more than ever before, largely thanks to his influence.

**Do you have a life lesson for new ACS students – something that would help them make the most of their experience here? What is one piece of advice you would give?**

I touched on this earlier when I mentioned clubs. One of my biggest regrets is that I wasn't actively involved in clubs until 10th grade, aside from English drama. Maybe because of COVID, I found it challenging to discover and engage with clubs early on. I even tried joining some that turned out to be inactive, which was a frustrating and uncomfortable experience. This delay made it harder for me to integrate into the ACS community initially.

However, from 10th grade onward, I really made up for lost time and embraced everything ACS has to offer. It's encouraging to see many 8th and 9th graders now getting involved with clubs early, and I believe they're truly making the most of their time here.

So, my number one advice is to dive into extracurricular activities as soon as you can. Academics will naturally fall into place, but it's up to you to seize the other opportunities that will enrich your experience and help you feel connected.

**If you had to choose three words to describe yourself, what would they be?**

I've never been great at answering questions like this honestly, but I'll give it a try. The first word that comes to mind is intense. It's not always a positive trait, but when there's pressure – like a looming deadline for the robotics club – I tend to get really intense. I'm not sure it always comes across in the best way, but I like to think my intentions are good.

The second word might sound a bit cliché, but people often describe me as determined and goal-driven. When I set my mind to something, I see it through – or I realize it wasn't the right goal in the first place.

The third word is a bit harder to pin down. I've tried a lot of different activities, and I'm glad I did. Maybe curious fits, but I prefer to think of myself as a polymath, it's Greek and means having a wide range of interests. I enjoy engaging in diverse activities and exploring different fields at the same time.

**It is never too late to learn a new word. Thank you, Kaloyan.**



# NIKOLETA STOYNOVA '25:

*Appreciate the Present,  
Work towards  
Your Dreams*

*As someone who regularly highlights student achievements, I have often recounted Nikoleta's accomplishments over the past five years. During her educational journey at ACS, supported by the Inez Abbott Giving Circle, she has consistently stood out – as a silver medalist at the National Young Physicist Tournament in both 2023 and 2024, Ambassador for a Day at the British Embassy in Bulgaria, president of the Muzeiko Volunteering Club and the Women in STEM Club at ACS, and head organizer of the FISSION International Science Festival 2025, among many other accomplishments. An avid dancer, Nikoleta has actively participated in the school's Dance Program, most recently taking part in "Queen: The Show Must Go On."*

*Nikoleta has been an exceptional ambassador for our school, leading campus tours for prospective students, volunteering to teach astronomy to children in grades 3 to 5, including in her hometown of Kazanlak, representing Bulgaria at MILSET Expo-Sciences International in Puebla, Mexico (2023), and taking part in numerous interviews for the media. At her Commencement Ceremony, she was honored with The Margaret R. Sanders Award for Student Life – an accolade given to a student who has actively engaged in diverse extracurricular activities and fully embraced the opportunities offered beyond the classroom. This award could not have gone to a more deserving individual.*

*Well-rounded, industrious, and a true leader, Nikoleta has been a true pleasure to know and collaborate with. I was honored to spend the afternoon on the day after her graduation in conversation with her, on a bench by the Fountain, discussing her ACS experience and her exciting plans for the future.*

*Interview by Petia Ivanova '97*



**Congratulations on your graduation, Nikoleta! Looking back at your senior year now, are there any moments that stand out?**

Every day of senior year was special in itself. We tried to appreciate the moments we shared as a class and tried to make each day special. For me, what stands out the most is FISSION. I was one of the four organizers this year, and it was my senior project, so I put a lot of effort and time into it with my peers and the FISSION Club members. We had many sleepless nights, of course, but at the end of the day, it was probably the best edition ever, the 10th anniversary edition. I'm very proud of what we achieved, so this is the highlight of my year. Graduation was a highlight, too. I had very nice moments with my section, as well. I think we were the only section that organized a weekend away. We went to Samokov, a town filled with ACS history. We went to the old columns and took a class photo there. It felt like a full circle moment, from 8th grade to 12th grade, a very nice experience to have one last time and to share with your classmates. Senior year felt shorter somehow. It was packed with events. From college applications at the beginning, straight to preparing for prom and all the exams that we had during the year.

**At ACS, you were part of the dance program. How was it to combine this passion of yours, dancing, with the academic pursuits and organizing FISSION?**

Well, I've been dancing my whole life, since I was five. I danced ballet at first, then I transitioned to hip-hop. After I came to ACS, I couldn't find time to go dancing outside of school, so I joined the dance program. This turned out to be one of my best decisions. I've been part of the program since Grade 8, dancing every single week. I'm very grateful to Miss Nedelcheva, who is so passionate about teaching us to dance beautifully and to create something that will remain with the audience, as well.

**Was there a challenge that you faced this year and overcame and that taught you something important about yourself?**

FISSION was a great challenge, of course, mainly because we had to follow a timeline for completing the project and we couldn't extend the deadline. College applications were the most challenging part of the year though. Not so much because of the work that I had to do, writing essays and CVs, because it's something that we are used to here.

The hard part was to maintain your mental health during this stressful process but I think I managed well. But at the end of the day it's very fulfilling when you see the results from the whole process. I was accepted during the early decision cycle to one of my dream universities, Brown in the United States. I am thinking of studying mechanical engineering, because it's something that relates to physics and mathematics which I've always been good at and enjoyed, so I am hopeful.



*The organizers of FISSION 2025 with past organizer Desislava Markova '24 (middle)*

**What is your most vivid memory from ACS that you'll take with you?**

Well, there are a lot of things that I'll remember for sure. But I think 8th grade in particular was very different from anything I had experienced before, it's something unique to ACS and I will remember it forever. The ESL classes with Miss Ivanova will always stay with me. You see, I struggled with English at the beginning. I had only basic knowledge from my previous school. So, imagine me standing in Miss Ivanova's classes where I had to put so much effort. She's one of my favorite teachers to this day because she taught me how to work hard. And she showed me that actually I can go from zero to where the others are. I ended up with the second-highest grades at the end of the year. This will stay with me forever.

Additionally, the activities that we had during her classes, diverse and fun. Probably the online lessons were my favorite part; we had to always be on time with the clock, no matter whether we had internet or not, an excuse for many people. We had to celebrate March Madness during online lessons,

which was something very special compared to what those before and after us experience. But of course, we dressed up and it was a lot of fun, everyone at home, everyone taking photos of this grid full of masked heads including Miss I.

**What is your academic passion: natural sciences, math or physics specifically?**

My mother is a mathematician, so I think that was the origin of my interest in math since childhood. I started going to math competitions in the first grade but with time, physics grew a little more interesting to me than math. I started going to physics competitions. Then, I found astronomy to be even more interesting to me than physics. I started going to different competitions, Olympiads in physics and astronomy. Eventually, I realized that combining all these sciences might be the best choice. I started going to a different type of competition, such as where you create scientific projects ahead of the competition, you work on them for a year or more, and present them in front of the jury in the end.

I went to the first competition of this kind in eighth grade. It was online, because again, it was the COVID times. One of the jury members, who was from the Sofia University Faculty of Biology, noticed me and emailed me after the competition, telling me she was interested in us working together. I wasn't ready back then, but a year later, I contacted her and we started working together.

**So, it was you, an ACS 9th grader, and this Sofia University professor, then?**

Yes, Assoc. Prof. Margarita Kouzmanova is from the Biophysics and Radiobiology Department of Sofia University. We were working together with some doctoral students from Sofia University. After that, I worked on individual projects for some time. At the end of 10th grade, I had an idea about my biggest project to date, the Agrophotovoltaics project. I contacted her to ask her to help me get access to some labs at Sofia University to do my experiments there. Probably this was the moment that I decided that my interest lies not in physics or astronomy or math but in a combination of all sciences, as something that would make my projects more valuable and more impactful. I did these experiments there to complete my project, and then presented it at many competitions. Among others, I went to the Vienna Science Fair with Dr.

Chakarova. After that, I competed locally, and in one of the local competitions, I was chosen to represent our country in Mexico at the International Science Fair there. And the project allows for building on it and further research and development, so I plan to continue with it at the university.



*Representing Bulgaria at MILSET Expo-Sciences International in Puebla, Mexico (2023)*

**How do you unwind and have fun?**

Having fun is something that I do on weekends. I like to play tennis a lot, and I'm very passionate about watching tennis as well. I'm a Novak Djokovic fan. Other than that, I love photography. I joined the photography club here and made great friends in this club, spanning all grade levels. That was really cool. I started shooting at some events, even outside of school. I also played the piano with Ms. Vodenicharova for some time in the 10th and 11th grades. I love this about ACS, here I could try everything, literally. In my free time, I love to hang out with my family, friends, and travel to my hometown, Kazanlak, which is something that I really try to do more often now before I leave for the United States.

**Who helped you the most to get where you are?**

A lot of people helped me and continue to help me, but first and foremost, it was always my family. Then the teachers, who are a big part of my success. I mentioned Miss Ivanova, then there was Dr. Chakarova, whom I went to meet in 8th grade before we even had Physics classes. I went there for help with one of my science projects and she was so happy and helpful. Ms. Ninova, who taught me History in 10th grade. I'm not as passionate for



Humanities as for natural sciences, but she made me love history, especially Bulgarian history, so I'm very grateful to her, as well. And so many other teachers here and the staff members who always supported me along my path. It's a combination of my efforts, their efforts, and the help of the school, as well.

### **Will you continue dancing at Brown University?**

Actually, I wrote about dancing in one of my essays. At Brown, they have a very well-developed dance program. And they built a new dance center recently, so I'm very excited to go and see and dance there. They have all kinds of dance activities, as most American universities, but modern dance is what I'm interested in now. I will certainly follow my passions there – science, dance, volunteering – I'll continue all of those there, hopefully on a bigger scale and to a greater impact.



*Performing in The Wall, 2023*

### **How would you describe yourself in three words?**

Hardworking, passionate, mmm, crazy. "Hardworking" first. But everything I do is driven by passion. I think it's very important during high school to follow your passion rather than what others think might be good for whatever benefits, say your college application. Looking around me, it was those who were passionate about what they did that achieved their dreams. And as per "crazy," I'm always up for anything, I like experimenting, and I often get out of my comfort zone.

People who don't know me well expect me to always be at home studying, but that's not me. I'm a combination of many different things.

### **If you were able to change one thing about yourself, what would you change, if anything?**

There are a lot of things, certainly. I want to be punctual. See, I was late today for this interview.

I'm always late. I always find something more to do in the five minutes before I leave. And then I'm running to catch the bus, the metro, you name it. I don't want to do this at university.

### **Was coming to ACS an easy choice for you?**

Yes, definitely. I learned about the school quite late compared to other people here. I think I was in sixth grade. My mom read about ACS on the website, liked what she read and we decided to join an open house day on campus. Once here, I was certain this is where I wanted to be. The atmosphere, the campus, the people above all. The 11th grade students who led the campus tours were so passionate, so genuinely happy to be here, so positive about everything, about life. I immediately knew I wanted to be like them one day and show the school to interested students five years later.

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*Looking around me, it was those who were passionate about what they did that achieved their dreams.*

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### **And you did. Though you didn't wait five years for that, did you?**

Yes, I started leading campus tours in 9th grade.

### **Do you regret anything or wish you had done anything differently?**

I tried to make the most of my time at the College and try new things but surely, I could have tried even more clubs, even more activities. I regret that I didn't play the piano more. Playing an instrument brings me a lot of joy. But some major regrets, I don't think I have them. We should be grateful for what we've achieved rather than regret what we haven't, we can't achieve everything.

### **What's your favorite journey, a real or a metaphorical one, one you've been on or wish to do in your life?**

I think life is the journey that unravels all the time. The most interesting so far has been my moving from my hometown Kazanlak to Sofia with my family. I will be eternally grateful to them for taking such an important step: they left their jobs, my grandparents, who were used to having us there,

and moved because they knew how much I wanted to study here. At the beginning, it was very stressful for me because it seemed the other students knew one another from before or were friends even while I was alone. Now I have a lot of friends though, it just took some time.

Now my journey will take me to the United States which has been my dream, you know, where I will meet people from all over the world. Brown is nicely situated near big cities – Boston is an hour away and New York three hours away – while not in one, so one gets to experience campus life, as well. I love being in a new environment and creating new friendships and contacts, so I'm very excited. I can't wait to go there because each time I go to a new place I have this whole new wave of motivation to start working on new projects.

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*ACS showed to many people that they are good at something they didn't realize before.*

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#### **Your idea of perfect happiness is...?**

Perfect happiness? Perfect happiness is to find peace with yourself, not think about the future or the past, and be in the present moment. I think about the future and what's next too much. It's always the next thing. This makes me disconnected from the present moment. When I go to the States, and leave my family behind, I will surely feel I should have appreciated each and every moment

with them, each moment here more. It feels as if we started thinking about our future all the way back in 8th grade. Okay, maybe it was the end of 9th grade, but since then, I've always thought about the future and I don't like it. To live in the present and to appreciate each moment, of course while at the same time working towards your dreams and your goals. Not to forget where you are now, that you have achieved a lot already, and be happy about what you have now. Because it's not little.

#### **What advice would you give to younger students who want to follow in your footsteps?**

To you lower grade students out there dreaming of studying at ACS, I would say "Do not forget that you are students in the first place and work hard towards your dreams. I think that's a very important step for you to start making those changes to your schedule and be consistent with studying. If you do, studying at ACS where you have to put in effort every day wouldn't feel like such a dramatic change, at least that is how it was for me after working hard in seventh grade.

As per students who are already accepted or studying at ACS, I would urge them to stay open to new experiences and try as much as possible to take all of ACS in, go to different clubs, experience the performing arts, join whatever group or activity that they like, and get out of their comfort zone. ACS showed to many people that they are good at something they didn't realize before. Believe in yourself, cliché as it sounds, work hard and appreciate everything you have now.



*Receiving the Margaret R. Sanders Award at Graduation 2025*









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