



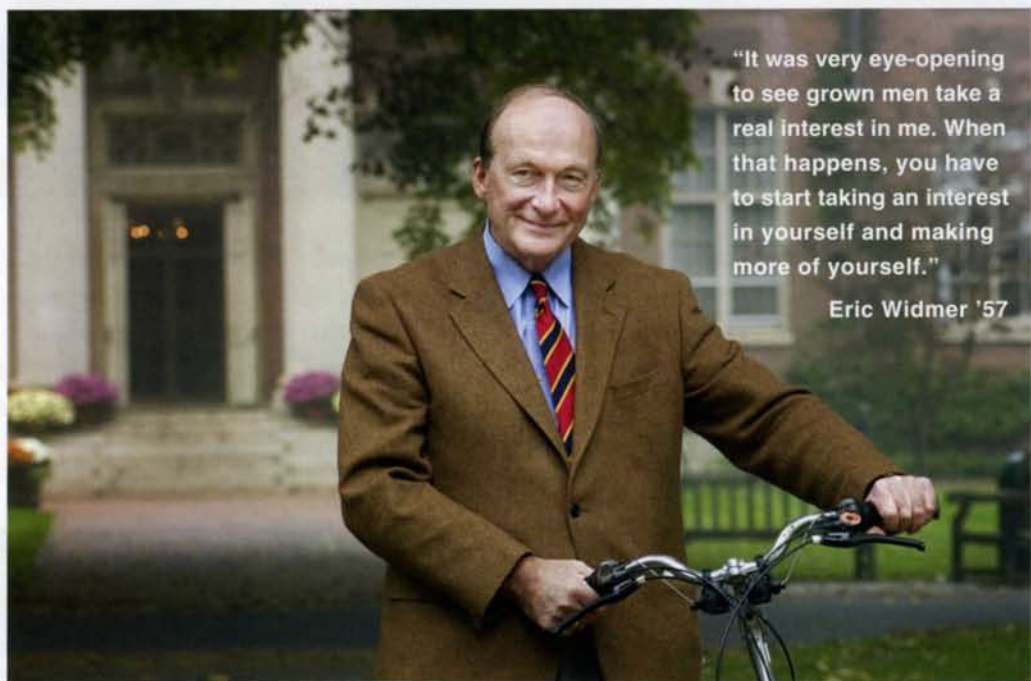
GOING TO THE SOURCE

Deerfield's enduring legacy as a proving ground
for future heads of schools

BY DAVID TREADWELL



In his 1966 classic about the life and legacy of Frank Boyden, *The Headmaster*, John McPhee wrote, “At the moment, the heads of 29 American prep schools are former Deerfield masters or students.” Nearly 40 years later, that tradition of grooming future leaders for independent schools lives on. Why? What is it about the academy that leads so many search committees from so many schools to turn to Deerfield when they’re seeking a new head?



IN THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS, WE began right at the top with Headmaster Eric Widmer '57. When posed the question, “Why does Deerfield produce so many heads of schools?” Mr. Widmer, who will enjoy just one year of retirement as Deerfield’s Headmaster before going to Jordan as the founding Headmaster of King’s Academy, immediately harked back to his own days at the academy. “I was the nerdiest of boys without a lot of self respect, so it was very eye-opening to see grown men take a real interest in me. When that happens, you have to start taking an interest in yourself and

making more of yourself.” Widmer went on to make very much of himself, spending 25 years at Brown, first teaching Chinese and central Asian history and later assuming senior administrative positions. In the fall of 1993, he received a letter from Bob Kaufmann indicating that Kaufmann was stepping down as Deerfield Headmaster and inviting Widmer to apply for the position. “I didn’t throw the letter out,” laughed Widmer, “and then the idea of doing something different began to seem appealing. So the day before the deadline, I sent off a long passionate letter to Deerfield.” Clearly, the



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inspiration Widmer had received *from* Deerfield drew him back *to* Deerfield, the place that first helped him believe in himself.

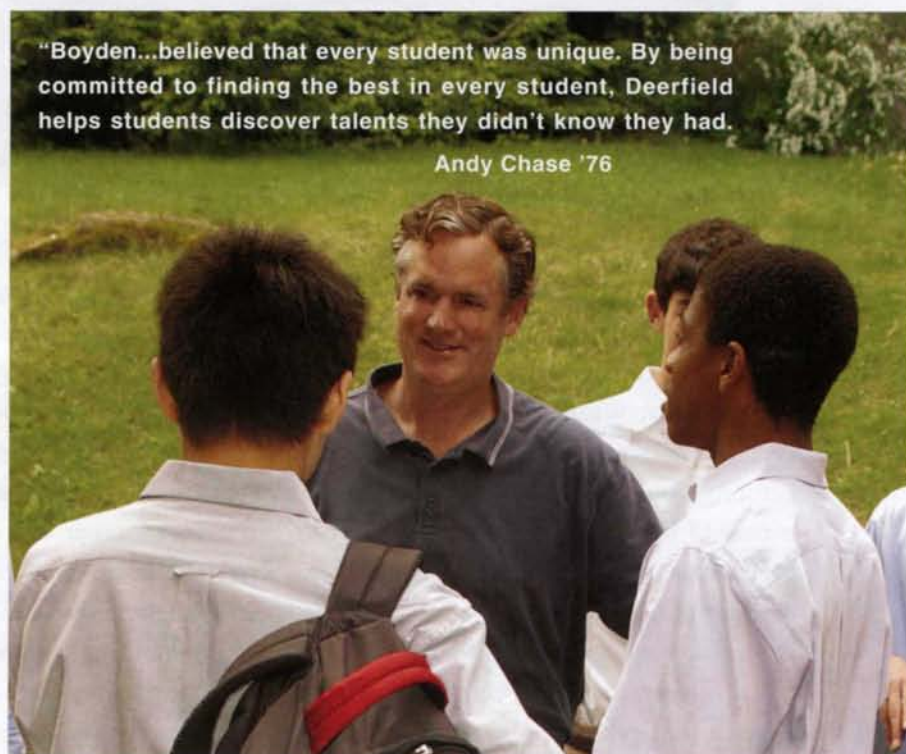
As Deerfield's headmaster since 1994, Widmer emphasizes the importance of a hallowed Boyden-inspired, headmaster-producing tradition at Deerfield: being accessible to students. "Accessibility to students is absolutely established as a guiding principle of the school. We can't reinvent Boyden, but we can learn from the success of those years, and accessibility had a lot to do with it. My door is always open; students are always free to walk in."

It's All About the Students

Eric Peterson '83, who became the head of St. George's School in July 2004, notes that his experience as a Deerfield student carries over into his philosophy as the head of a school. "I can remember being part of a community at Deerfield Academy with a shared educational purpose. And I

can recall teachers such as Joe Medlicott, Alan Fraker, Rick Melvojn being remarkably engaged with students. That ethos harks back to the Boyden years. He's still revered—almost like Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia—but his phrases live on in

the philosophy of the school: 'I need to see the boys every day' 'We must get the whole community together every day.' and 'Finish up strong.' He was right: in the end, it's all about the students. And Deerfield was critically formative for me."



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Andy Chase '76

Andy Chase '76, head at the Eaglebrook School, echoes the same themes. "Boyden knew everyone; he believed that every student was unique. By being committed to finding the best in every student, Deerfield helps students to discover talents that they didn't know they had. Peter Brush (Latin) made me feel very special. Bryce Lambert (English) helped me with my table manners. And because Jay Morsman was so passionate about coaching soccer, my time with him felt very important."

Chase's position at Eaglebrook gives him a great opportunity to do for his students what Deerfield did for him. "I love the challenge of working with middle school boys, turning raw material into something. It's very rewarding!"

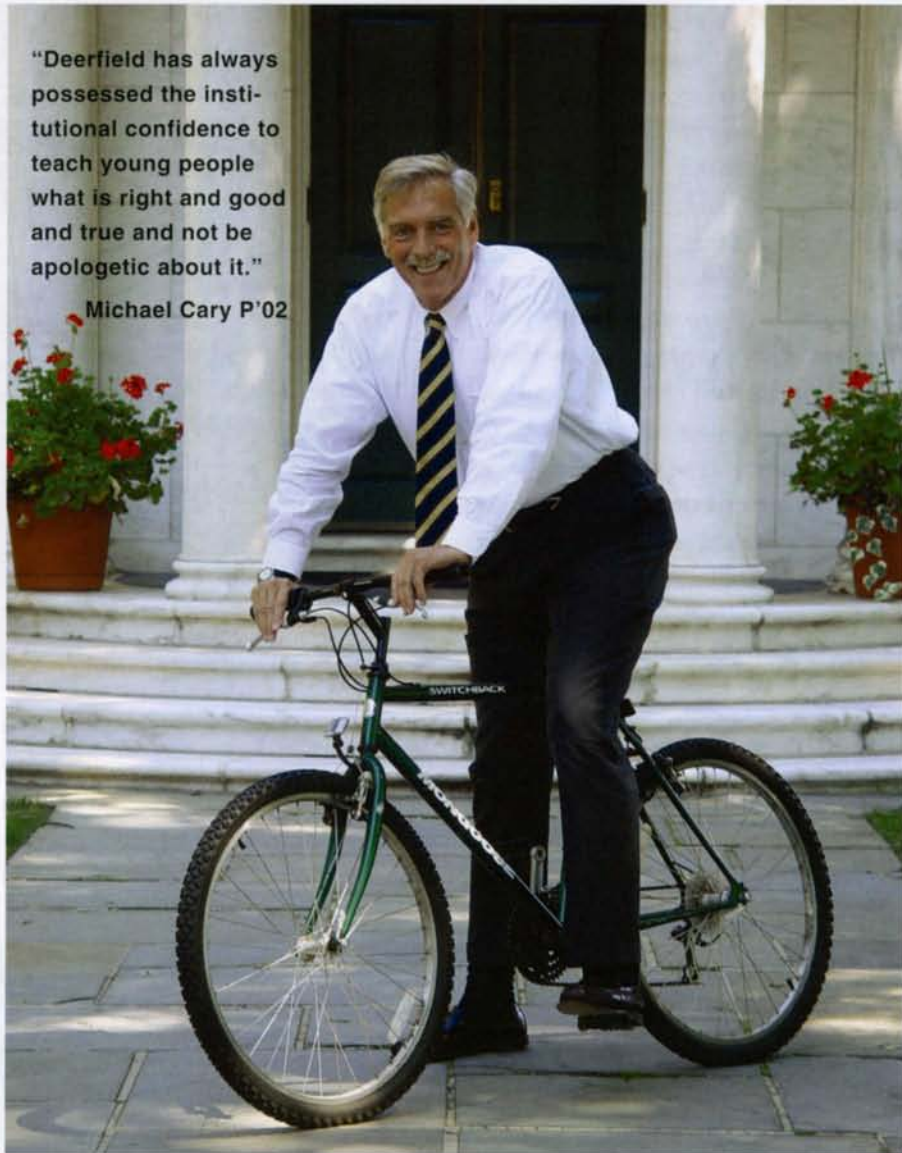
Incidentally, when Andy Chase assumed the reins at Eaglebrook School in 2002, he continued a remarkable family tradition: his father and his grandfather had each served as the head at Eaglebrook.

Teachers at the Heart

Michael Cary P'02, currently the head of the Yellowstone National Park Foundation, spent 18 years at Deerfield as a teacher (English, history, philosophy and religion) and administrator (dean of admissions) before going on to serve as head at the Lawrenceville School. Cary theorizes that Deerfield's record of attracting superb teachers ultimately breeds good heads of schools. "Deerfield finds teachers willing to lead young people on the athletic fields and in the dorms as well as in the classroom. And Deerfield expects a lot of teachers as well as students. Once hired, we were expected to be great teachers and masters. Fortunately, we had great role models all

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Michael Cary P'02



around. That environment instills confidence, but not arrogance."

In writing about Frank Boyden's Deerfield, John McPhee wrote, "From early morning until late evening, his faculty's lives must constantly touch the boys' lives—at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, in the classroom, in organized study periods, in club activities, in athletics."

"We're faithful to that tradition," notes Eric Widmer. "We call upon our faculty to do everything here. They learn early on what the job involves."

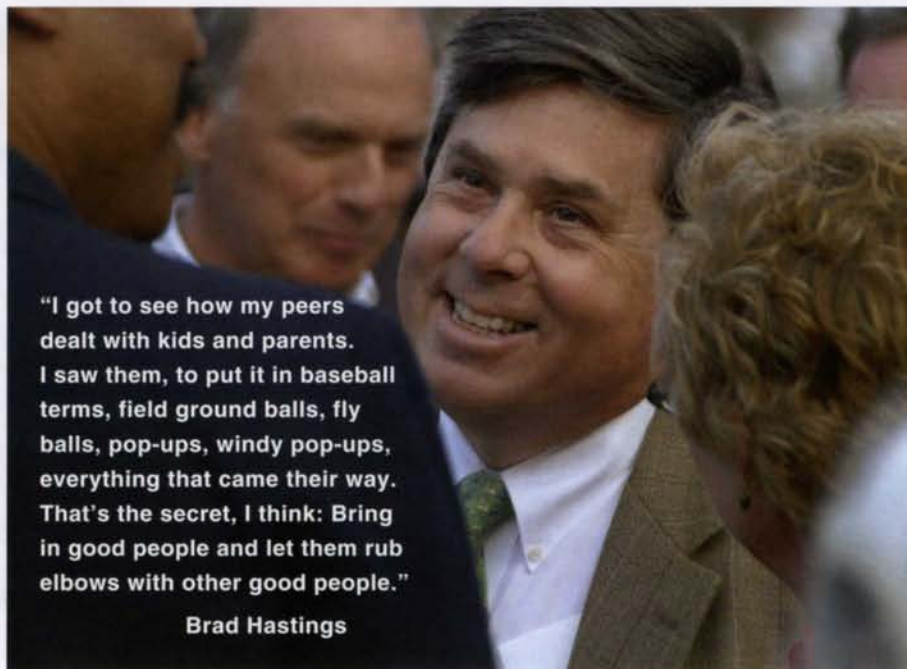
Michael Cary felt well prepared to lead Lawrenceville after spending so

many years at Deerfield. "I knew about teaching and I respected teachers, so at Lawrenceville I never had to ask a teacher to do something I hadn't done myself. And even as a head, you never forget that you're still a teacher. While I hadn't raised a dime before going to Lawrenceville, I had worked in admissions, which is really a narrative function, like fundraising."

Learning from Your Peers

Being around good teachers breeds good teachers. "When I was brought to Deerfield as dean of students at

age 29,” says Brad Hastings, the head of the Pomfret School since 1993, “I knew I was joining one of the best teams. And it was terrific to be a backbencher, watching Bob Kaufmann work with the board, parents, and staff. As dean of students, I learned how to help students deal with pressures and stress. And I got to see how my peers dealt with kids and parents. I saw them, to put it in baseball terms, field ground balls, fly balls, pop-ups, windy pop-ups, everything that came their way. That’s the secret, I think: Bring in good people and let them rub elbows with other good people. And I’ve certainly applied the principles I learned at Deerfield to my position at Pomfret.”



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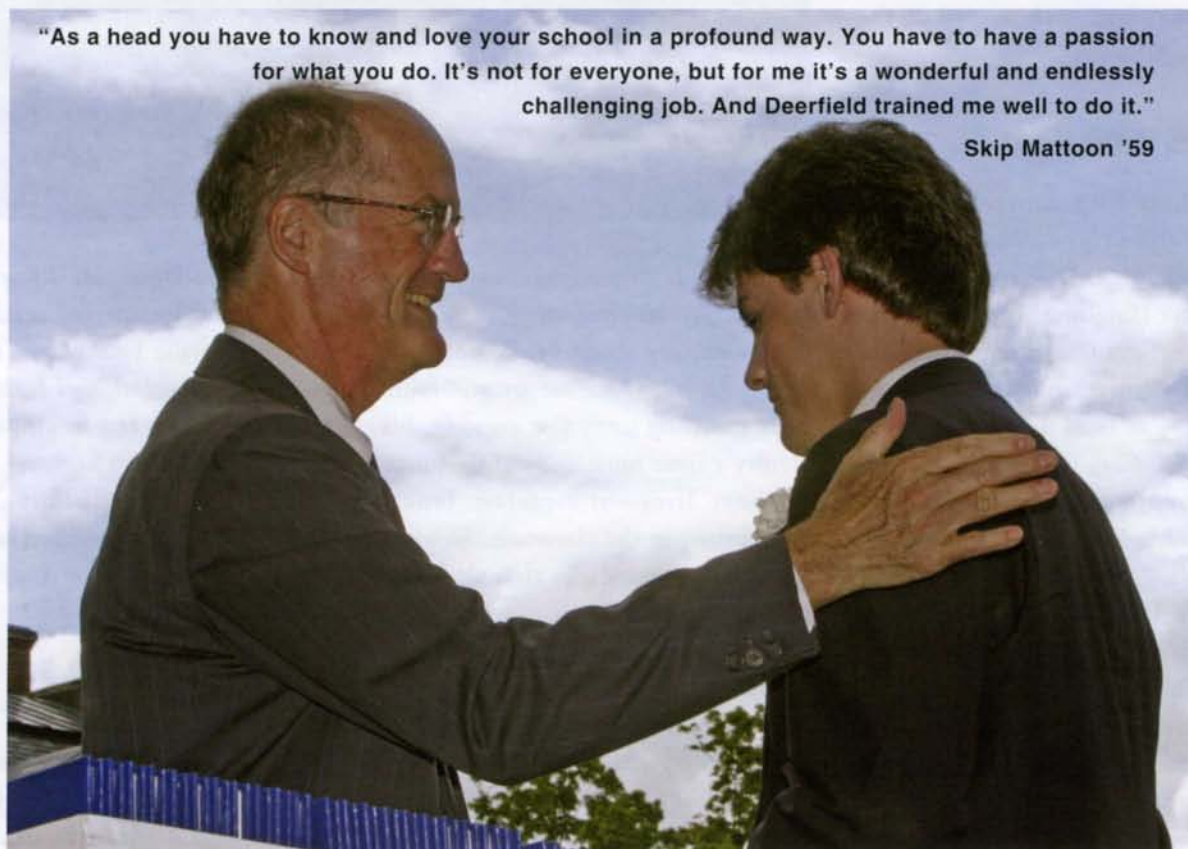
Brad Hastings

Up to One’s Eyeballs

Skip Mattoon '59, who spent 14 years at Deerfield as dean of faculty, learned lessons at Deerfield that translate well

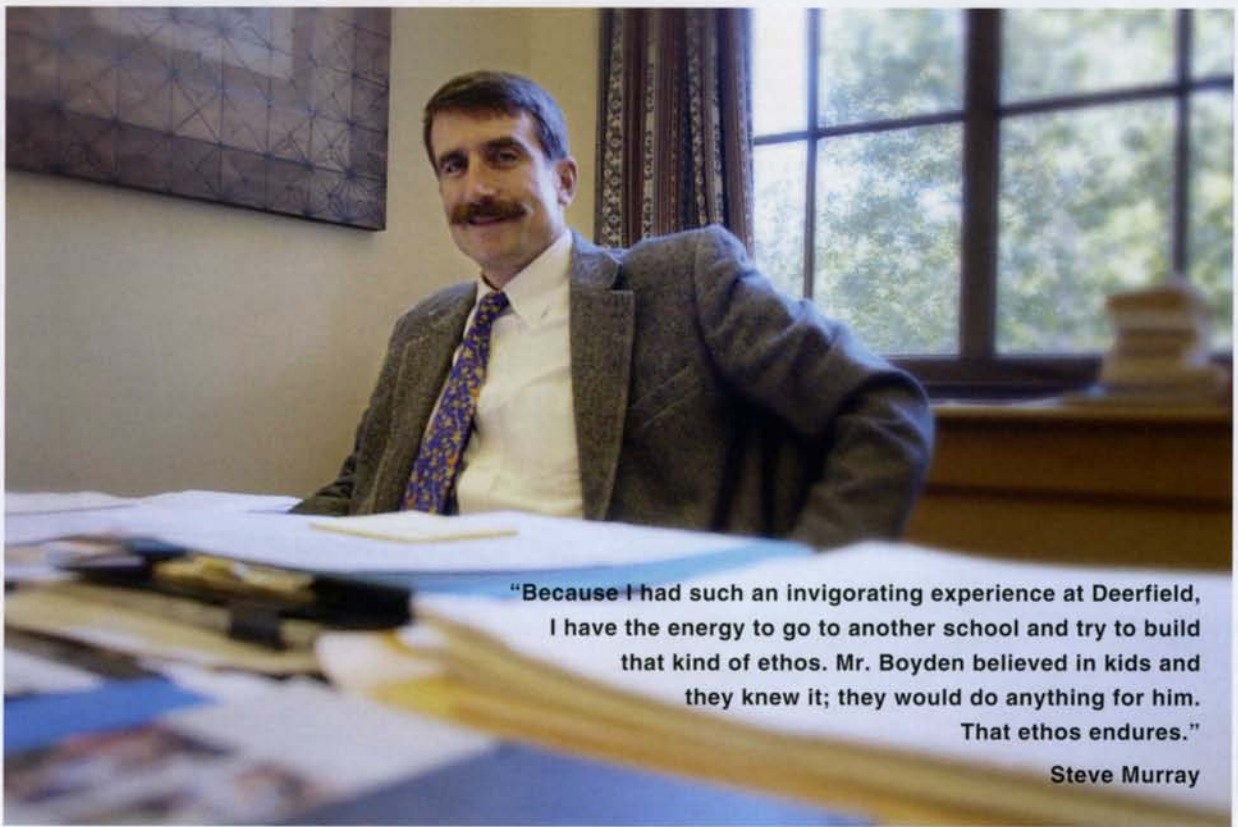
to the Hotchkiss School, where he’s been the head since 1994. “I was up to my eyeballs at Deerfield: serving as dean, teaching, coaching, living in the dorm, and serving on committees. And

my wife taught English the whole time. But I loved it. As a head you have to know and love your school in a profound way. You have to have a passion for what you do, because you’re living



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Steve Murray

among a community of students and faculty 24 hours a day. Know it, understand it, surrender to it. You must be willing to take a stand on key issues. You need a tolerance for stress and ambiguity. And, of course, you must have a sense of humor. It’s not for everyone, but for me it’s a wonderful and endlessly challenging job. And Deerfield trained me well to do it.”

Principles at the Core

Although Deerfield has changed over the generations, the core principles have held fast. As Michael Cary says, “Deerfield has always had a strong sense of what it stands for. ‘This is what we are. This is what we do.’ You *know* that Deerfield was there long before you got there, and it will be there long after you leave.”

Yes, those core principles endure. Work hard. Value the community. Celebrate success. Be good citizens.

Respect others. Keep it on a high level. Prize individuality. Be honest. Be fair. Be kind. Be good sports. And, yes, with another bow to Frank Boyden: “Finish up strong!”

As Cary notes, “Deerfield has always possessed the institutional confidence to teach young people what is right and good and true and not be apologetic about it.”

The Deerfield Mystique

Most recently, Steve Murray, academic dean and associate head at Deerfield, continued the Deerfield-as-proving-ground tradition when he was chosen to head the University School in Cleveland, beginning in July, 2005. “There’s a mystique about Deerfield, a sense that ‘They know what they’re doing.’”

Murray’s experience in various administrative capacities convinces him that there’s muscle behind the mystique. “There’s a long tradition of

closeness between adults and students, of teachers being in kids’ lives through all kinds of emotions. Because I had such an invigorating experience at Deerfield, I have the energy to go to another school and try to build that kind of ethos. Mr. Boyden believed in kids and they knew it; they would do anything for him. That ethos endures. What’s *essential* about Deerfield is impervious to change. What is good and right about the place is as good as it’s ever been. The legacy still looms large.” ■

A Final Word on a Personal Note: After finishing the research for this piece, I took a run through the fields around campus and, at the end, around the track. As I completed my last lap, I heard the words of a track coach to a student that suggest that Deerfield is still Deerfield, that the legacy does, indeed, endure: “Believe in yourself, you’re doing great!”—D.T.