

OLIVERIAN

A school as unique as its students.

Latest News from Oliverian

Finding Your People: How Stress Creates Socially Resilient Adolescents

By Will Laughlin, Head of School

Late in the decade that brought us Blade Runner, the Space Shuttle, Back to the Future, and the International Space Station, a company called Space Biosphere Ventures built a 200 million dollar self-sufficient outer-space village—right here on Earth! It was called the Biosphere 2.



The project was supposed to demonstrate the Edenic potential of man-made "vivariums" for future interplanetary living. It was equal parts science lab, fantasy theme park, and hippie commune. While the elaborate glass structure still exists, it's now just a giant greenhouse for botany experiments and was almost demolished in 2007 for a shopping center. In other words, it failed.

One big problem involved the trees. At first they grew very fast. It was great. The saplings seemed eager to prove that this artificial world was even better than the real one! Then they fell over. Later research identified the problem: trees need wind. A good and regular buffeting, in fact, is what produces the stuff of strong trees—a cellulose and lignan-enhanced material called reaction wood or stress wood. Stress wood allows trees to stand firm while retaining just

enough flexibility to bend instead of break when the wind blows hard. Flooded with light and water, but protected from real-world winds, the Biosphere 2 plants were precocious as saplings but weak as trees. They never matured.

At the beginning of every school year, as students move into new dorms and adapt to living with each other, we see a lot of what group dynamicists like to call "storming*." Social winds blow pretty hard during September and sometimes well into October. As students work to find their place in a shifting community, they may fumble with boundaries, develop untenable crushes, annoy each other, isolate, ingratiate, argue over the remote control, clique, get their feelings hurt, and regress a bit. Like a grove of Oliverian saplings, they get blown around a bit.

Particularly for those kids with an entrenched history of social struggle, it's tempting to intervene too early, blocking the very winds that-with the right coaching and support-are necessary to improve social skills and resilience. So, like skilled arborists, we do well to lavish our students with light and water, aka love and support, while also allowing the social winds to blow.

Allowing adolescents to fully experience their social struggles generates both the data and, most importantly, the desire necessary to benefit from our help. For adolescents who are not in crisis, that help should come mostly in the form of curiosity, coaching, and encouragement. This is a challenging discipline with young people we care about. We don't want to see them struggle. But we do want them to become strong.

*Tuckman's Stages of Group Development

"I'm Oli!" Alum Sofia Jacobs '14 moves on from Oliverian to find college happiness

Q: Sofia-where have you been since graduating from Oliverian in 2014?

A: I am psyched to be in my junior year at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) working toward a dual civil engineering and design degree. I plan on continuing into graduate school for architecture and urban design.



Q: What led you to enroll at Oliverian?

A: Well, I was at Stuyvesant High which is a magnet school in downtown NYC. Stuy High is very competitive, with 3,200 students from all over the city, all trying to get into the same 10 or 15 colleges: Yale, Harvard, Cal Tech... I really liked it there, but felt a complicated combination of pressure at school, not being prepared emotionally, while struggling with anxiety and depression. I could handle the workload, but when the pressure grew, it got to be too much. I didn't get along with many people before Oliverian; I didn't have a lot of friends. And that didn't help when school pressure started to build.

Q: What happened when you came to Oliverian?

A: Things didn't totally click right away for me. I was disorganized, struggled with executive functioning, didn't make a lot of friends, but I met some wonderful staff and found people who cared about me. I really appreciated the small dorms and small classes. It was a comfortable and safe environment for me to get to know people at a different level than before. I found quirky and open friends and it finally felt safe to be goofy. We found weird places to stargaze, built snowmen, and just rolled down the hills for fun. Once I got comfortable being myself around other people, it made it easier to focus on school life and academics.

Q: Have you been able to "find your people" and feel connected with students at RPI?

A: It has been soooo much easier for me to make connections with people at RPI. I finally have the confidence to find my people and work through social anxiety. After Oliverian, I've realized that there are a bunch of other people out there that feel the same way I do. I feel connected and have found people here that are just as nerdy

about music as I am through the GZ Club, which is a venue that puts on concerts every other week.

Q: How was your first year transitioning to college?

A: I was never close to dropping out of college my first year, but definitely was worried a number of times! I sure hit a lot of moments when I was stressed and not happy, but I got through it and become stronger. Knowing that I have friends that I could fall back on really helped me pull through the tough times. Outside of academics, I have fun and do a lot of activities that keep me connected with other like-minded people and learning about other things and the world.

Q: What do you miss most about Oliverian?

A: Oh wow, I really miss the smell of campfires, walking outside and seeing the stars, and being so close to nature. I absolutely miss the people and staff, and being able to take life at a slower pace. And where else can you earn school credit hanging out in the woods with FJ, cutting down trees?!?

Oliverians show their true colors!

Oliverian joined the "happiest 5k in the world," a Color Run in Burlington, VT. The Oli color crew geared up and were ready to run. While some did actually run the entire race, others chose to casually walk the course and get doused in colorful powder. After the race, everyone joined in the dance party and the Oli crew even made an on-stage appearance! Please visit our [Facebook page](#) for more pictures.

