

OLIVERIAN

A school as unique as its students.

Latest News from Oliverian

How to Teddy Bear

Message from Will Laughlin, Head of School/CEO

Almost immediately after our wedding over twenty years ago, Beth and I were on the move. We moved from San Francisco to Colorado to Tokyo to LA to Costa Rica in our first few years of marriage. My work as a trouble shooter for education and mental health companies and Beth's as a marketer took us all over the US, Asia, and Latin America. We loved it. But we soon discovered that the tradeoff for our life of adventure was a permanent state of emotional dislocation. By the time we began to settle into one place-making friends, finding a routine, unpacking our boxes-the trouble I'd arrived to shoot was shot and we were on to the next gig. It was a thrilling and expanding way to live; we were fed and housed by Tajiks who had never seen westerners, recruited by the Japanese mafia (we said no...very politely), tracked by Taliban snipers, chased by a crocodile, and on and on. But along with the thrill of motion, there was a constant edge of loneliness that we knew we'd have to address if we were to avoid personal and/or marital meltdown. We both recognized that my own insatiable appetite for adventure belied a hypersensitivity to transitions. Each move caused me enormous anxiety, making me edgy, angry, impatient, and-Beth will assure you-intolerable.



So to simultaneously preserve our lifestyle and evade relational

catastrophe, we adopted a set of practices designed to accelerate the process of feeling at home in a new place. We now call these practices "teddy bears" because they serve the same purpose as a child's teddy bear during a sleepover in an unfamiliar place-to create an instant sense of home away from home and ward off homesickness. A teddy bear is any strategy that helps make home a portable concept.

Our teddy bears included unpacking our moving boxes and decorating our home during our first week in a new place. We brought a few of the same pieces of artwork and décor with us wherever we went to help us quickly claim a new space as our own, as our home. Another effective, if expensive, teddy bear was to find a restaurant within walking distance of our house and become regulars, eating dinner at the bar in order to maximize the social opportunity and build a quick sense of community (think, "Cheers," where everybody knows your name). I ate so many hamburgers at one such restaurant, in fact, that "The Will Burger" eventually appeared on their menu. That signified a lot of hamburger eating. But it was worth it. To this day our strong Boulder, Colorado network mostly traces back to Restaurant 4580.

Beth and I are not the peregrinators we used to be (thankfully), but we still use this concept of teddy bearing (the verb) to help us manage and accelerate transitions-small or large. When we travel or go to a relative's home for the holidays, for instance, we unpack and put our stuff away immediately; then we set up work space and take a walk to explore our surroundings. Time and tub permitting, Beth lights a candle and takes a bath while I go for a run. If it's a family event that might trigger some stress or conflict (hey, families are families, after all), I meditate, say a prayer, and sometimes do a little guided visualization. These and other teddy bears help us get our bearings and feel at home quickly, wherever we happen to be.

Oliverian's mission is to help students find their place in the world-wherever in the world that place may be on a given day, or month, or year. By the time they become Oliverians, most of our students have experienced a dizzying amount of transition, whether back and forth from one parent's home to the other's, one school or program to another, or one peer group to another. For all their experience with

transition, however, most aren't very good at it. In that way, they're a bit like me. In that way, they're a bit like most of us. That's because change and transition are not really what we are designed for; most organisms and systems-including people and families, respectively-automatically seek homeostasis, not change. But change, as the saying goes, is the only constant. This truth will become acutely evident to our students as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood and from high school to college and independence.

So before every holiday or break, we encourage our students to consciously practice the art of transition as they move from school to home and back in a very compressed time frame. There are many ways to do this, of course, but we recommend starting with the most obvious one-an actual teddy bear. To that end (and with a little help from our friends at Vermont Teddy Bear) all of our students have been equipped with their own personal transition coach. His name is Oli Bear and he is soft and cute and listens well. Oli Bear's job is to remind us that with the right mindset, a little practice, and a soft teddy bear, we can find our place anywhere. Happy Holidays. Please visit our Facebook page for more pictures of Oli Bear.

Using Math to Build Confidence

Kelly Sweeney uses math to build confidence in students as they're challenged outside their comfort zone.

Q: Kelly, can you tell me a bit about where you were before Oliverian, and what led you here?

A: Well, I studied mathematics and inclusive education at



Nazareth College and completed my MS degree in educational

technology at the College of St. Rose. During college I spent time studying in Sydney, Australia, and also taught in Wales, UK where I was exposed to experiential approaches to learning. I arrived here at Oliverian four years ago, without knowing what the boarding school lifestyle would mean for me as a teacher. I was fortunate to find Oliverian, a place where I could bring unique approaches to learning math and passion for fitness and nutrition to students in a boarding school atmosphere. Here, I am able to see our students from a different "angle" than if I only saw them in the classroom, allowing for a more meaningful connection. There are many alumni that I still keep in touch with and they will always be a part of my life. I feel like I belong here and am privileged with this unique opportunity to connect with our students not just as their math teacher, but also as a friend and mentor.

Q: Why Math?

A: I have always enjoyed the challenge that puzzles present, along with the strong sense of achievement you feel once you've solved the puzzle. I view math in a similar way, where there is a single right answer, and although it may take a lot of trial and error to finally reach the end, the feeling that is produced makes the struggle completely worth it. As many of my fellow 'Oliverians' know, I have a healthy competitive spirit, which ties into my excitement for a challenge.

Q: What does this "challenge" look like in your classroom?

A: As much as I appreciate that there is a single correct answer, I also recognize that there are various routes in reaching that answer. In class, I introduce students to different methods in finding an answer, and let them follow whichever path comes naturally, depending on their understanding of the material and their learning style. I am constantly trying to excite and motivate my students toward reaching that final answer so that they can feel the powerful sense of accomplishment for themselves. I live for the "ah-hah!" moments in class, especially after a period of struggle and hard work. Watching a student finally see all of the pieces of the puzzle falling into place is incredibly rewarding. This is when their confidence starts to build and crystallize upwards as they have a renewed sense in their ability. Many of our students arrive with the belief that they are unable to

perform well in school; however, they can shift that self-perception here at Oliverian, and it's amazing to witness.

Q: What kind of student do you think works best at Oliverian?

A: The student who does best here just wants to be him or herself without feeling judged by others. Here at Oliverian, they can be silly or quirky or weird, and still feel comfortable in their own skin. What these students need is a safe place to be themselves, or learn about who they really are, without worrying about trying to fit into a certain mold.

Q: How do you support various learning styles in the classroom?

A: Well, for one thing, our small class sizes certainly help my ability to cater to various needs. Most of my classes have four to seven students, so each student can get the kind of support they need. I can challenge those more advanced students, and I can also afford to spend time with students who require extra support. Additionally, I often incorporate peer tutoring in the classroom. In our tight knit community, there really is no stigma attached to peer support.

Q: Do you have other responsibilities at Oliverian outside the classroom?

A: Yes, I do, which is one of the things I love most about Oliverian because this is where the real connections develop and grow. One night a week I am on respite duty in the girls' dorm. This evening role gives me a chance to work with individual students during study hall, and also allows me to get to know students outside of simply, math. I enjoy getting to know them in a real and down-to-earth kind of way. Living on campus and working respite significantly helps me build rapport with my students, which has positive effects in the classroom. This rapport helps me motivate and engage students during class, and makes me easily approachable outside of class—students aren't intimidated to come ask me for help when they are struggling with something.

Q: What do you love most about Oliverian?

A: The sense of community, definitely. I truly cherish Oliverian's warm and caring community. Beginning with my first campus visit, I immediately felt a sense of love and support among faculty and

students. Four years later, and it continues to blossom as more and more young families become a part of Oliverian. I think it is special for our students to have that sort of family environment here.

Q: Do you have a role model?

A: Yes! My mother is one of the strongest and most hardworking women I know. Looking back, I don't know how she and my dad raised four crazy, busy girls, making it look easy. Three years ago my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. After the initial shock and fear, I became less worried because I knew if anyone could fight breast cancer, and beat it, she could. She has always been my inspiration and continues to be, especially after overcoming this disease. To show my support for breast cancer awareness and research, I am participating in Avon 39: The Walk to End Breast Cancer in Washington DC at the end of April. I am walking the 39.3 miles alongside family members who have fought and are still fighting breast cancer. My goal is to raise \$1,800 and beyond. Visit Kelly's fundraiser page.

Q: When are you most at peace and serene?

A: I find peace through outdoor physical exercise. I feel most at peace when I hike to the middle cabin on campus and take in the scenery in this place that I call home. The fact that I can go out my back door and hike a mountain and explore the trails anytime of the year is one of the best aspects about living and working here. I expose a lot of our students to fitness as well. I teach a weekly spin class at the local gym and usually bring a group of students along. During electives weeks I lead a physical, adventure-based class because I like to get students active and learning about healthy lifestyles. I try to encourage healthy habits and emphasize how important fitness and nutrition are to sustaining a healthy and happy life.

Transition Prep Plan for the Holidays

Getting students ready for home



Working with our students to continue practicing the tools they've learned at Oliverian, the counseling team developed a transition prep plan as a way for our students and their families to enjoy quality time together over the holidays. Through workshops conducted earlier in the year, the counseling team identified an opportunity to provide an added layer of support for students and their families over holiday breaks. Parents expressed anxiety leading into the holidays and these workshops allowed our families to share their concerns with each other and for the counseling team to listen to their needs in an open and supportive forum.

In response to these workshops, the counseling team created an exercise for families to identify areas of stress, anxiety, and how to recognize early signs of familiar patterns of behavior in their children. The counseling team then used this feedback to facilitate discussions with families related to preparedness, productive emotional responses, expectations, guidelines, and the importance of patience and acceptance. To alleviate generalized anxiety, families and students were asked to openly label their worries and talk about specifics that make them anxious over the holidays. The Oliverian counseling team also provided practical parenting tips, and traps to avoid to better navigate the break and to ensure a fun, happy, and healthy holiday.

Exploring Synesthesia

Students find comfort outside their box

Students in Bessa and Brett's Exploring Synesthesia class are inspired to reach beyond their familiar art and music forms to



forge new personal territories in order to create inspiring works of art. Synesthesia is the condition in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. A certain smell often conjures a specific memory. Music frequently invokes certain colors, shapes, or images to play in the mind. Oliverian students explore synesthesia using the musical/visual art connection by listening to music typically out of their familiar genre and allowing the sounds they hear to inform the artistic decisions they make.

There is no other school like Oliverian in the world.

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