

FIRST DRAFT

After the cow's fecal matter had distributed itself in a thick spray covering everything from my belly button up, I wondered, what the heck was I doing here? I wiped my face with the tiny unexposed space on my coveralls and got back to work. "Here" is the Putney School in Putney, Vermont. At 5:13 that morning my alarm had gone off to "It's the Best Day Ever", my ritual morning Spongebob song selected in a futile attempt to cheer me up. Cranky and exhausted, I had geared up with various layers of clothes and socks for the pitch black, 10-degree weather I would brave while trekking from my dorm to the cow barn. It was my six-day a week responsibility to muck out the gutters and clean the stalls. Doing Barn work is a graduation requirement, not so surprising at a school where the smell of cow feces and hay wafts through the classrooms, dorms, and dining hall.

My kindergarten through 9th grade experience was in the Rye Neck public school system. My dad was the president of the school board, which made my attending an independent school somewhat complicated. I loved my friends, family, and home, and was considered a successful student. So "why are you leaving?" people would always ask. Prior to my departure and those first few weeks at Putney, there were often times I doubted my decision. Though a very good school, Rye Neck's teaching model was a traditional, more passive approach, and test prep heavily influenced the curriculum. I had perfected the memorize-to-get-good-grades skill. Ms. Mauer "talking" at the class for 45 minutes while students frantically attempt to write down every word she said before the bell rang was grueling yet unsatisfactory. Due to classes like this one, there was rarely

any time for discussion or deeper exploration. There was the constant reminder by teachers and administrators to “join SADD” or “score high on the Math B Exam” as it would be helpful for college acceptances. Of course I have done things to position myself for college but the fixation was exhausting. In an assembly on my first day of 9th grade, the principal announced, “Now that you’re in high school, you have to focus on getting into college. You all should join a few clubs because you need extracurricular activities for your applications...” I wanted a change, and my parents, thinking nothing would come of it, supported my decision.

A rough first few weeks at the Putney School set the tone for what was destined to be a transformative experience. A not so stoic goodbye to my family, and a roommate from Japan who wouldn’t speak a word to me got the ball rolling. A terrible throat infection that kept me in the health office for days and almost led to minor surgery didn’t help my mood. Tennis was a favorite sport the tennis court was buried beneath the new art building. I was placed into Spanish 4 after completing Spanish 2 the previous year and I found myself in a class of six students, the other five of which were far more fluent than I. It was hard to keep my eyes open after scrubbing other dinner dishes and pots for two hours a day, six nights a week on my first job assignment. After only a few meals, I had had enough of the tempeh burgers and squash lasagna and was craving chicken fingers and french fries. The laundry was piling up. And I had only yet smelled the barn.

I struggled at first with the new style of teaching. I often fondly reminisced about the certainty and ease of memorization, a bit of which would have been a pleasant antidote to the constant demands for critical thinking, problem solving and required active class participation. In classes of around five to fifteen students, teachers are very

open to letting students change the direction of the course. In my Spanish Lit class of five students, we were not happy with the play we were reading for various reasons. We spoke to our teacher Juan and that day we collectively decided to start reading a new book: *Como Agua Para Chocolate*. Regardless of the subject, we are rarely given answers and are always required to solve problems for ourselves. In physics class, before even learning the basics of electromagnetism, Glenn would ask us to figure out why a pith ball would gravitate towards the Van Der Graaf Generator, or why a “wand” charged by the Generator would bend water streaming down from a sink pipe. Though collaboration was often encouraged, on this project and the ones that followed, Glenn directed me to pursue the problem sets on my own. Initially I felt vulnerable and incapable of solving such complex problems. I had never before been entirely on my own and I lacked confidence when it came to my problem-solving abilities. I felt compelled to ask other students for help, but I kept working until I successfully solved the problems on my own. I am now a far more assured problem solver and thinker and I can confidently express my views and opinions. I even built my own Van Der Graaf Generator at the end of the project!

Among so many positive experiences, an unsuccessful candidacy for student representative on the board of trustees hurt a lot, but taught me about how to approach my next run for office... and there will be one! My tennis game has suffered, though I have been able to compete at a high level in many sports that had not even been offered at Rye Neck. After I scored my first lacrosse goal, my teammates informed me, giggling, that the dance I performed after scoring was far more interesting than the goal itself! I certainly couldn't have predicted that I would be known as the school's best female

foosball player either! One of my happiest moments came last year on a Tuesday at around 12:30 AM when our dorm lost electricity in a thunderstorm. Wearing our slippers and wrapped in blankets, all the dorm mates snuggled in the common room, screaming at the lightning, while eating pudding and Oreos. It doesn't get any better.

Sure Barn was not exactly what I wanted to be doing at 5:30 every morning, but it is a great accomplishment. I had originally thought I would just be happy it was over (which trust me, I was) but I had not expected to feel the pride and satisfaction in completing this job. Not many other people I know can say that they lived through months of 5:30 AM poop shoveling duty! I am up for any new academic, work, leadership, or sports challenge with one important caveat: I will not regularly arise at 5:13 the shovel... in the morning.

FINAL DRAFT

After the cow's fecal matter splattered me from my belly button up to my nose, I wondered, what the heck am I doing here? The day began at 5:13 that morning when the alarm had gone off to my ritual morning SpongeBob's "It's the Best Day Ever," a futile attempt to cheer me up. Cranky and exhausted, I geared up with various layers of clothes and socks for the pitch-black, 10-degree weather I would brave while trekking with fellow Putney A.M. crewmembers to the barn. It was our responsibility to muck out the gutters and clean the stalls, in addition to milking the cows and feeding the chickens. We were providing food for our school, and while "barn" may not have been what I wanted to be doing at 5:30 AM, it proved to be satisfying and fulfilling. I learned the value of physical labor, and after working every morning in the barn for three months, I experienced a sense of dignity in knowing I had made a meaningful contribution to my community.

In addition to gaining arm muscle and a true sense of accomplishment through barn work, being a student at Putney has also enabled me to become a more confident problem solver. Rye Neck, the school I attended prior to Putney, employed a conventional teaching approach, and test prep heavily influenced the curriculum. I had perfected the memorize-to-get-good-grades skill, and in ninth grade, I realized I wanted more discussion and depth in my classes. When I first arrived at Putney, I struggled to adjust to the analytic expectations and required class participation, but over time, I found these practices to be far more stimulating and engaging than those at Rye Neck. A typical example of Putney's unique approach to academics was my physics class, where our teacher Glenn encouraged us to set the textbook and Internet aside and take full responsibility for coming up with answers. One problem set involving electromagnetism asked us to explain why a pith ball would gravitate towards the Van Der Graaf Generator, or why a "wand" charged by the generator would bend water streaming down from a sink pipe. When I joined a group of other students to decipher these complex questions, Glenn suggested I work entirely on my own. As the only one singled out, I was nervous, but also flattered that he believed I was capable enough to find the solutions. After hours of patience, persistence, and experimentation, I conquered the problems. For the remainder of the year, I enjoyed the process of independently solving problems and even went on to successfully build my own Van Der Graaf Generator. The constant probing and critical thinking at Putney have made it much easier for me to calmly tackle challenges in any subject.

Living with a varied group of young women at Putney has also been an invaluable experience, and I now feel I can get along with almost anyone. I appreciate that in any environment where people are forced together, interpersonal conflicts are unavoidable. My first roommate wouldn't speak to me. Though from Japan, she was fluent in English and was obsessed with her boyfriend. I would ask about her life back home, her relationship, and how to decorate our room, but I never got an interested response. When

she left mid-semester, I was disappointed that we hadn't connected, but a great girl from Scotland moved in, and we immediately established a relaxed friendship. I gave her enough room to breathe, and she reached out to me. I now live with fifteen very different girls who hail from Korea to Spain to various corners of the U.S. One sews her own clothes, one regularly interpretively dances in the common room, and another loves to sample everyone's food in the refrigerator. These dissimilarities have contributed to an enriching living environment, and the family-like closeness that has evolved was the result of hard work from all of us. I have often had to choose my battles, respect people's boundaries, listen and be open to persuasion, and more than occasionally vent to my parents. My distinctive bond with these girls has been incredibly rewarding. Last spring our dorm lost electricity during a thunderstorm in the wee hours of the morning; wearing our slippers and covered in blankets, all the dorm mates snuggled in the common room, screaming at the lightning while eating instant pudding and Oreos. Life doesn't get any better.

After three years at Putney, I am better equipped to navigate and enjoy many of the challenges that lay ahead. I have learned that physical work can be satisfying, and that when I literally or figuratively confront "poop," I must make the best of it. I can effectively tackle demanding problems, and I know how to work and live with diverse groups of people. Putney has definitely paid off.