

# kaleidoscope

YOUTH INITIATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

SPRING 2014



## ELIXIR OF EDUCATION

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Youth Initiative is the product of decades of thoughtful experimentation. We are always adding a dram of this or a scruple of that, carefully observing the material and spiritual effects of our actions. However, there is one secret formula that we never fiddle with. We can't tell you the exact details of the recipe as it is a tightly guarded secret handed down over many years. Some say its origins lie with the mysterious Conrad Trismegistus, but whatever venerable alchemist can claim its authorship, it is the secret to our greatness. Though we can't share the recipe with you, we can tell you its four basic components. A concoction of students, teachers, parents, and community members is at the core of the transformative experience of Youth Initiative High School. It's how we transmute bricks and mortar and a copy machine and a whole bunch of hand-me-down tables and chairs into a place that can make the mind and spirit soar. In this issue of the Kaleidoscope we'll get a little perspective on each of these four elements. Read on and remember; as above so below.



# FOOD AND SPIRITS OF ANOTHER KIND

by Susan Nesbitt



Among the many amazing things Jane Siemon has done for YIHS over the years, one of the most amazing occurred in 1997 when she began the annual Valentine's Dinner tradition. She organized an event in which the students prepared a delicious meal, served it, and entertained the appreciative diners. From the beginning it was a success and proved to be a perfect way to showcase the talents of YIHS students to the community. What's more, it has become the single largest fundraiser for the school year in and year out.

The general idea behind the Valentine's dinner remains the same to this day, although the venue has changed from the school to the Rooted Spoon, where Dani Lind, chef extraordinaire, creates the menu and leads the students in the kitchen.

In order to successfully pull off a *gourmet* meal, a lot of advanced preparation takes place. The students at YIHS are in charge of most of the work, with guidance from a small crew of adults. The students make calls to local farmers and food producers to ask for donations. They also contact many of the talented artists and businesses in the area to request items for the Silent Auction. They work for weeks to perfect the entertainment, carefully chosen in

conjunction with one of the teachers at YIHS.

Jane Siemon brings her Nutrition Class to the Rooted Spoon and together they lovingly prepare all manner of delectables. They work closely with Dani for two days prior to the event, in shifts of 4-5 students at a time, along with 2 parents. They chop, roll, puree, sift, stuff, knead, and glaze; transforming the raw materials they've gathered into each component of a mouth-watering meal. They transform the dining room, sweeping and mopping, setting tables and placing fresh flowers, candles, and twinkle lights around the room for ambience. Kady Fox, YIHS geometry and science







teacher and an experienced hostess, gives students guidance on how to properly serve the food.

Then they transform themselves; they dress up and shine! During the meal the kitchen is abuzz with students and parents plating and serving food



and cleaning up as the night moves on. Finally, the clean up crew swoops in and makes sure that the entire place is clean and that everything is put back in its proper place. The guests experience a carefree evening with superb food and service and the whole thing looks easy.

Over the past five years I have coordinated this event, which is something like riding a mostly friendly tiger. I am amazed each year (and particularly this year) how students are able to rise and meet (often surpassing) the expectations of the adults around them. It is an example of the community, school, parents, and students coming together to create a beautiful evening for one another. After the last dinner, a woman who had never attended before told me that she will never forget the night; that her meal and the entertainment were some of the most impressive she had ever experienced. Everyone involved has made this dinner more than simply a *fundraiser*; it has become a true community *event* that creates culture and connections in our little town. The feedback we hear is incredibly positive and the best part is, the students are the ones who make it happen! They feel very proud of their work and we feel very proud of them.



# PHASE CHANGE: LEARNING TO BE WHO WE ARE

by Shawn Savio



At 6am Sunday February 26th my wife gave birth to our daughter, Persephone Grace. As anyone who's been close to a birth can tell you, it's absolutely the most beautiful sight: a new wet baby emerging and resting on her mama's belly and the cry which is the first breath. The beginning of life, its raw, unpretentious splendor, humbles us.

Once, we all lived on the inside. Once, we were all newborns. Our parents, even, were once not-parents. Life is a series of phase changes; we are perpetually becoming someone we'd never imagined being, someone we never were before.

Most of us, of course, prefer stability, the certitude that what is will always be. We don't like big changes. Moving houses, changing jobs, losing loved ones, puberty, even childbirth--all come packed with anxiety. Yet, when we reflect on our life, the transitions stand out. They are what help us tell the story of who we are. And fully appreciating them, I believe, helps us tell the story of who we will be.

Seniors are at the cusp of such a phase change. They are outgrowing their high school days and preparing for what lies on the other side. But, as anyone who's been a Senior or been around one knows, this is a stressful time. I remember stepping into my Senior year feeling low-level dread about what I was going to do after graduation mixed with an overwhelming sense of wanting the year to be over already. Of course, it only got worse, as fall turned to winter and soon spring, the interminable wait rapidly coming to a close. So at this point, three weeks before the start of spring, leading up to the Senior Project Presentations (yikes!), Youth Initiative High School held its final 12th grade English block called "The Arc of Life."

## The Arc

The class design was simple: experience the stages of life and reflect. We met with a midwife and a biologist to discuss the beginning of life; we met with 4 moms and their babies to talk about infancy; we went to a day-care and pre-school and observed toddlers; we visited 1st grade to see the height of childhood and 7th grade to see its fall; we locked down and watched *The Breakfast Club*, adolescence par excellence; we mused on the meaning of marriage and work with two panels of adults; we interviewed folks at a local nursing home; we spoke of suffering and the meaning of tragedy after reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel; we spoke of dying, death and life with two members of The Threshold Care Circle. At each of these stages students wrote about their experience and posed questions.



Just look at this partial list of their wonderfully unanswerable questions:

When do we start having a personality? Does the birth experience affect the life of the child? Do babies feel or only think? When do you know you are a boy or girl? When do we start to have long-term memory? Why do we bully each other? Why do kids get bored so fast? When do we start to become self-conscious? Can you die





young and have essentially completed your life? Why are 'tweeners so awkward? Can you still be a child when you are an adult? Do some people skip life stages? Is adulthood marked by age or by experiencing certain things? How do you know that you want to spend the rest of your life with a person? What changes as you enter old age? What in someone's life causes them to become open to or unafraid of death? Is there a biological reason for falling in love with a certain person? What would you do with life if you decided not to marry and have kids? How can you take responsibility for your mental and spiritual health and make sure you don't go downhill when you hit old age? People say death is scary, but everyone seems peaceful when they go--why? Is reincarnation possible? Do people live their lives differently based on whether or not they believe in an afterlife?

Questions, I think, are key. In three weeks we could only scratch the surface, but the questions that arose can and will motivate years of inquiry and learning.

### **Why we are who we are**

The first half of the block--from birth to adolescence--called on students' memory; it's familiar territory. Seeing kids building imaginary towers, they remembered their own blocks, their own fantasies. Even the babies and toddlers, who are beyond the reach of memory, inspired students to reflect on their upbringing, their parents, and the family stories told about their childhood. At this point, when the past met the present, I asked the students to answer the question, *why are we who we are?*

We broke into three teams--Nature, Nurture, and Destiny--and each team put together a 10-15 minute presentation. Teams drew on their personal experience and current research in psychology, sociology, and genetics. Team Nature reminded us of our biological core, the "inner wiring," which leads us to look, act, and interact in a certain way. Team Nurture explained how our environment--our parents, peers, and social groups--influence our choices and core beliefs. Lastly, Team Destiny questioned the validity of the Nature versus Nurture argument, casting doubt on its current dominance, while presenting two images of Destiny: The first that people have the power to define their own paths, in spite of their natural endowment or upbringing, the second that there is a design to life, that certain things are meant to happen to us for a reason, a reason beyond normal human understanding.

Our conversation spanned the two-hour class, with so much more left to be said. Each team added answers and a new level of complexity. I thought: yes, genes, as we are increasingly coming to understand, play a huge role in shaping us. Biology provides us our potential and our limits. But, the activation of that potential depends so much on our social milieu, on the opportunities and people we encounter. Yet, with destiny, I have to wonder: why do we meet the people we meet? Why do we fall in love? Why are we sometimes drawn to follow foolish dreams? Where does our ability to make decisions come from? Where does this sense of myself, my identity, come from?

For students, this debate was more than academic: it gave them an angle on themselves. Why am I who I am? The essays they wrote after this 3-way debate showed tremendous strength. Students with tragedies in their past struggled over believing that what had happened to them was meant to. Students acknowledged their debt to their families and communities. Students saw their own uniqueness and their own power to affect the course of their life.

*(Continued on page 6)*



## What the future holds

The week after the end of the Arc of Life course, I watched the 10 seniors give their Senior Project presentations. They stood confidently in front of friends, family, and community and shared their passions. These adolescents were doing something central to being an adult: they were manifesting their talents and interests, taking responsibility for the expression of their calling. I couldn't help but feel like a father, proudly sending off my children into the world.

I went home and kissed my toddler son and my baby girl. I kissed them for all the wonderfully exciting and nerve-wracking life phases they have yet to traverse. I kissed them for who they are. In the dark I hoped for the chance to see who they become.

Lord knows what's coming our way in life. And lord knows that sometimes what does come our way seems to make no sense. But what was reaffirmed for me in teaching this class is that we have a responsibility to recognize and make meaning in our life. The phases yet to come require our active participation, our striving, our hope. We are not, as Fitzgerald said, "boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Rather, we are sailors, borne on shifting tides, with a rudder and a sail and a purchase on the stars.

# TRANSMUTATION: TURNING HARD WORK & CREATIVITY INTO GOLD

*Students have had a remarkable fundraising year. With two months left of school they have reached their \$13,000 goal. What follows is an interview with three students--Max Goldberg (Freshman), Kate Buche Pattison (Senior), and Sarah Corbin (Freshman)--about what they've learned from this year's efforts.*



### ***How do you get each other motivated?***

**KBP:** Usually at Student Meeting. We help each other out by talking about what's coming up. We ask if people need help organizing this or that event. We talk about new ideas for how we can make money. Then a person or a group of people will volunteer to organize it--scheduling a meeting, getting input, making up a sign-up sheet, or whatever needs to be done.

**SC:** There needs to be at least one person that's excited, then they can get their friends excited, then the excitement just kind of spreads.

### ***How do you organize your events?***

**SC:** It is really good when we do a fundraiser to have at least one upperclassmen and one underclassmen,





because you have a new person with new ideas and someone who is more knowledgeable.



**KBP:** This year, for instance, I organized the Valentines Silent Auction, which is something we do every year so there's a way to do it, a protocol, and a to-do list. There are other things that we've never done before and it's all new territory. You have to make it up as you go along.

*Some newer fundraisers this year, like the "Bill and Ted's Excellent Musical Adventure" from Jam Band class, the "La Strada Circus" performance from Circus Arts class, and the Haunted House Coffee House, were big.*

**MG:** Having the Halloween Haunted House and Coffee House was a good idea. Last year when we were in 8th grade, we thought about doing a Haunted House when we got to YIHS. So that's where that idea came from! It turned out to be a good idea.

**KBP:** We, teenagers, are the main consumers of our events. So if we can think of something that we want to go to, then probably other people will want to too.

**SC:** Yeah, coffeehouses are for us and for our friends. But I know that a lot of different people from different schools come to them as well--LaFarge, Kickapoo, Viroqua. Some of those people have even transferred here.



*How much do you consider the Matching Gift Donors?*

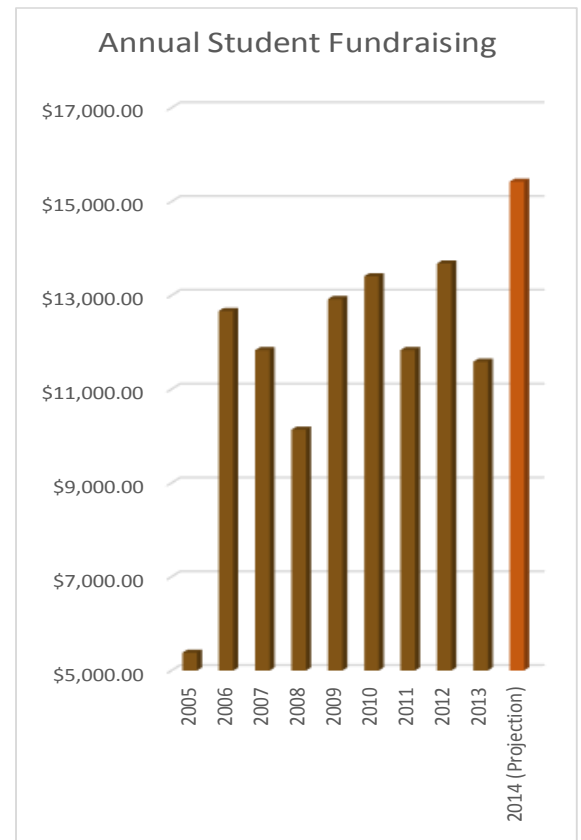
**KBP:** They are in the back of our mind, but we're mainly focused on meeting our goal. Of course, we are aware that because of the Matching Gift every dollar is worth more. So it makes it more important to reach the goal.

*What's the most fun have you had doing fundraising?*

**SC:** I think doing "Bill and Ted's Excellent Musical Adventure" was the most fun.

**MG:** Me too.

**SC:** It incorporated one of my favorite things to do which is music and we also got this huge fundraiser out of it. It wasn't one of those events with 3 people planning it; everyone had to be a part of it. The whole school was working towards it. The band, the performers, the costumes, and the teachers-- everyone was involved. We get to show the entire community what Youth Initiative is about, while doing this great thing for our school.



(Continued on page 8)



***The Valentines Dinner is our largest fundraiser. What makes it work?***

**MG:** The music!

**SC:** Everyone working hard towards one goal. I like that when everyone is contributing it ends up being this fantastic event. The teachers, parents and students all worked hard and it showed that night.

**KBP:** That's the thing; there is no one most important part. Nobody could have done that by themselves. But with

by Henry Hundt

# THE QUINTA ESSENTIA OF A YOUNG MAN



*After graduating Youth Initiative High School in 2009, Henry Hundt attended Cornell College where he graduated cum laude with a double major in Art History and Religion. Henry has been working at YIHS in the new Teacher Development Program in hopes of restructuring and promoting the position after its first year of implementation. Henry has been involved with various teaching and development projects for the school.*

There is a unique mixture of roles played by each element in the YIHS laboratory. Occasionally, these roles can evolve and grow as individuals move from the

greater community to the faculty, to the parent body, or the administrative team, and the result

is the creation of a new or repurposed ingredient, an alloy of sorts. Often these composite elements bring the necessary innovation to the task at hand. When I was entering my senior year as a student at YIHS, I had two alumni and three family members as teachers. As I became an alumnus and moved down a path that has now led me back to teaching, I have given those foundational experiences much more weight, hoping that they will give me insight as I prepare in the evening for the events of the following morning. These are my thoughts on the school as I have almost completed the YIHS cycle—Student, Alumni, Teacher—and how they have helped, or hindered, the alchemical process of transformation in which I am currently engaged.





Over the last few weeks I have been working with a few students during their independent study in art by helping them explore difficult questions, such as what it means to be an artist, and how to orient yourself to your artwork both now and in the future. One text that lent us some insight into what it means to be an artist, and in this case specifically a painter, is James Elkins' *What Painting Is*. An artist, art historian, and art critic, Elkins saw a problem in how the general public and professional art critics approached painting. The artist was being left out of the idea of art and the process was being passed off as a formality. It was leaving young painters without any starting point, having to make leaps and bounds purely through the passion of their own creative process or with the chance maestro who is able to orchestrate growth in the artist. So, he set out to



write this book about what it meant to paint, and what it meant to give your life to the art. To do this, he needed a new vocabulary, the vocabulary of the alchemist, because he was working so far outside of the traditional vocabulary of the scholar.

Early on, Elkins points out that the alchemist, like the artist, is an investigative practitioner in the science of transformation. Specifically, the artist, like the alchemist, is attempting to develop “a language for thinking *in* substance and process” rather than the critic or historian of art who never enters the studio, never “feels the pull of paint on their fingers.” If you have ever stood before a vast white canvas or a freshly tilled field, the fear of the unknown can overtake you. With both paint and seed, perhaps you, like me, feel like Noah standing and waiting for a dove to return with an olive leaf in its beak.

Like art and alchemy, the educational process of YIHS also works through a similarly transformative science. The classroom acts as that same laboratory for teachers, who are also practitioners, rather than just critics or theorists, in the science of change. Both students and teachers begin the class as separate entities, looking to tell and be told. Students understand that they know less, the teacher thinks that he or she knows more. However, the goal of a class is to bring both parties into union, causing the student to look firmly into the heart of the subject without fear or self-deprecation, and for the teacher to accept as fact the true transformative ability of the intellects sitting before him or her. Through trial and error, painting and repainting, a picture finally begins to take form. In the class the picture comes in the shape of a question: the teacher asks a question, it is taken by the class, doled out, traded, passed around and returned, as a golden object; a philosopher's stone.

During my participation in the Teacher Development Program this school year, I have been moving steadily from a critic or theorist of education (or perhaps better described as an engaged observer) towards a practitioner of education. As I continue to make forays into teaching, I understand that only over time will my taste in educational excellence become one with my artistry in the classroom. This disconnect—the same that affects the critic and the artist—can only be remedied by practice. Engage in making art and you will eventually make art that you believe is worthy of public and critical opinion.

# YIHS BOARDING PROGRAM: HOW DO YOU LIKE THEM APPLES?

by Dave Hibbard Rode



*"I am grateful to have this amazing opportunity to learn and grow at Youth Initiative. It has changed my life and I have such a wonderful family here now."* - Namthip Nilawong, Senior



*"Having students from all over the world has enlivened and challenged all of us to see a wider perspective and forces us to think outside the box. It broadens our local context."* - Shawn Lavoie, Faculty

*"With a new person living in our house, it asks us all to be more thoughtful about how we relate to one another in our home. It makes us more conscientious of how we support each other."* - Lars Bergan, Host Family and Faculty

Some of you may be like me; I see metaphor in most aspects of life. We live in a world of objective language which values the concrete and literal over the figurative and subjective. The boarding program at Youth Initiative is subject to this same treatment. It is established, solid, a thing which is concrete enough to present to the world. There are numbers to defend this: A 233.33% increase in the number of boarding students from 2012 through 2013, from 3 to 10: Boarding students make up roughly one-fifth of our student body: They come from Thailand, Korea, Rwanda, Germany, Mexico, New York, Salt Lake City, Philadelphia, Chicago and we have applicants from over a half-dozen other countries and many regions of the United States as well. There are over 30 families who have expressed interest in hosting a student: We have a set boarding fee, procedures, health insurance requirements, documents, plans, etc. However, this way of seeing the boarding program lures us away from considering what it really is, at its core, which is something much more relational than fixed. Our boarding students bring languages, foods, styles, and entirely different ways of seeing and relating to the world. They bring a new, diverse dynamic to our student body, classroom discussions, their host families, and our wider community. In other words, this concrete thing, this program with goals and objectives and plans, turns out to be more than just a thing. It is a process that is transforming our school and community.



The boarding program can be understood through the image of a little apple tree atop a meadowed knoll. In this image our community is the ecosystem. An ecosystem is the concept of relationship, of edges, of interacting energies and synergies which create a more complex and resilient whole. The essence of our community is not the Co-op, or Main St., or the ridges and valleys. It is the qualitative cohesion of our place, each other, our ideas, and all the millions of edges and relationships which are birthed and







held by our desire to belong to one another.

Parents are the tree itself and the wind that blows through its branches. Deeply rooted, upright, willing and able to weather storm, a tree allows itself to be settled so that forests may be made and seeds may fall out of the sky like rain and take fruit. Moving, sweeping, revealing, carrying seeds to fertile grounds, the wind blows so that trees may be strong and seeds may fall far from



home in a way that is not sad. Trees uphold and wind creates movement.

Like the flesh of a fruit the faculty is nourishing, juicy, immediate. The flesh of an apple holds rich possibility which will nourish not only a seed, but many other visitors who happen to pass by. Faculty holds itself not above students but around, alongside, next to. There is new life within these walls. Our aim is not to control but to empower. We are successful if we have made ourselves unnecessary to our students' learning. Here is the key to the flesh of an apple--it is in service to the seed and must let go before that which it holds has room to grow.

And finally, our link to the future. Students, like seeds, are energetic, intense, bursting--the purpose of the fruit. The hope of many futures all in one place. Of course, it is equally valid to say that the purpose of each seed is the new fruit with which they will feed others, and the new tree which will support an abundance of life, and the ecosystem which is nourished by the added complexity of another vibrant life.

It is not a stretch to imagine that being a place in which students from afar can become grounded in themselves is a great service to those students as well as to the fabric of our local, cultural ecosystem.

We at Youth Initiative live in the edges--adolescent as adult, student as teacher, teacher as student, teacher as community, parent as community, community as teacher, community as student--and our health lies in the quality of these relationships. Either-or constructs begin to disintegrate over time. Local or boarding student? American or Mexican? Rural or city? Native English or native Korean? We are simultaneously recognizable to each other and also different. As Michael Pollan puts it in *Omnivore's Dilemma*, "Either-or is a construction more deeply woven into our culture than into nature, where even antagonists depend on one another and the liveliest places are the edges, the in-betweens, or both-ands..... Relations are what matter most."

This is what our boarding program is about at its deepest level: increasing the complexity and diversity of the relationships amongst students, faculty, parents, and our larger community, simultaneously celebrating and dissolving our differences as humans in one of these "liveliest places." We are all a part of the boarding program's growth and health, just as we are all a part of each students' growth and health, and that of our community as well.



Art by Penny Zinky & Althea Evans





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