

'Thank you all at Vacstuds for the effort you put into making this summer a life-time experience and a significant change in his life.'

I have not received a message quite like this one. Many messages have told me of 'the best time of my life' and I know that these are heartfelt and utterly sincere. But the mention of 'significant change in his life'. This is special.

I know exactly what this parent meant. We received a very shy young man. Slowly, almost imperceptibly slowly, he made contact. Being so close to people day and night, there was an inevitability in this. Being foreign means that no one can really tell if it's your personality or your foreign-ness that makes you different. As everyone is foreign, everyone is different. So someone who is a little different at home will be noticed as such and may be rejected. In our community, it's quite normal to be different. Everyone is accepted for who they are. So this young man found that he was accepted. He gained in confidence from this unaccustomed status. He said to me towards the end, 'I won't be able to talk to people about this when I'm home. No one will understand this.' He was, of course, quite right. The Course is a shared experience that simply does not exist outside the Course's dates and location, except in the minds of those who have experienced it.

'I hope that the confidence being accepted has given you will be what you'll take from this,' was my reply.

Having the board meetings, this year on the theme of 'the developing me', has given me an insight into youth as never before. The great secret of the Course is that one has no history and no one has any preconceptions about you. 'You can be whoever you want,' I tell the children. 'You can reinvent yourself. If you are shy at home, you can be extrovert here. There will be no consequences.'

Some do. We have a boy, with us this summer for his third time, who is just the life and soul of the party - and, if there is no party, he will create one. At home, he tells me, he is quite reclusive.

'You develop on the Course, rather than change,' I say to the children at the board meetings. Generally, this is what happens. But there are changes. For some this is more than a summer of development; these are more than 'days I'll remember all my life'; these can be days of real change.

'A significant change in his life.' What a privilege to be instrumental in this.

'I would just briefly like to say a big THANKS to Vacstuds for offering me the best month of my life. It's only now that I realise how much I have changed (or say developed) and I will never forget this summer. So thanks to the Sports and Social staff, the teachers, the amazing UK REPS and all my friends' (a Greek student); 'Thanks to all for that incredible summer. I miss you! Wish I could turn back time' (a German student); 'This being my seventh year here, I can definitely say that I've grown up in Vacstuds. Vacational Studies has not only given me the opportunity of improving my English, but also of improving my social skills and making great memories I'll never forget' (a Spanish student); 'The most wonderful time of my life, the most wonderful month, the most wonderful people I've ever met! I'm going to wait another year to come back, because here I am living a dream!' (a Portuguese student); 'He has had the time of his life! He thoroughly enjoyed the challenges and huge range of experiences, so many new friendships and for someone so well travelled a surprisingly large amount of new international knowledge of other cultures' (a UK parent); 'Thank you again for keeping the promises and fulfilling our expectations' (a Croatian parent); 'I must say, we had very high expectations for their stay at VacStuds.'

Both the social and language and getting new friends from different parts of the world. Our expectations were met many times. Thank you so much! We got home changed boys. And changed different. Very interesting. And very good' (a Norwegian parent).

I could go on. But the briefest of visits to Facebook will supply many more quotations.

The Summer of 2012 was the best of summers and the worst of summers. It was the best in that everything and everyone worked very well. The teachers, the sports crew, the matron, the caterers, the School staff all did a super job and there were no weak points. It was the worst in that it simply rained and rained for the first ten days. Matt Jamieson was new to the job of Senior Sports/Social Organiser, although back for his fifth year in one capacity or another, and to have to cope with such weather was like learning to swim by jumping from the deck of the 'Titanic'. He coped brilliantly, as did his crew of Sports Organisers Matt Debney (in year three), Lewis Weaver (in year four), Yannick Mol (in year four) and Sports Assistants Aaron Murphy, Arnov Sengupta and James Guest (all in year two). Back as Apprentice as preparation for possible staff applications in 2013 were Tom Dell (for the month), Lewis Hall and Rebecca Cadman for a week or so each. Francis Highton looked after my sons. Piers was high profile around the School as filmmaker and photographer. He created a youtube site for his work.

As Academic Director, Joe Wallis, was back for his seventh summer, ably assisted by Chloe Huelamo, Senior Teacher, back for her sixth summer. Karen Thompson was back for the sixth time as Senior Teacher. They both also helped with office administration. Matron was Rachel Lewis after three years as Crew with Veronica Martins as Assistant Matron back for the fourth time. They, too, helped in the Office.

With Vaccles to exchange for treats or chocolate, pocket money to distribute, staff duty rotas to organise, children to allocate coach seats to and any number of students to deal with was Tom Goodwin, Course Manager for the fifth time, and much loved by our students.

Teachers were Niko Damianos (fifth year), Bernardo Savill (third year), Thomas Olszewski and Lauren Bickley (second year) and newcomers Michael Gorham, Stephen Chambers, Philip Davies, April Hamshire, Rachael Isherwood and Terry Davies.

Catering was by Mary Hare staff once again. I filmed their work so parents can see the quality. There was something for everyone and one could have eaten very healthily indeed. I had every meal with the students, getting to know them, and was struck how many of them chose the most unlikely combination of foods and made just the wrong choices. I can only say that excellent meals were available at every serving. The kitchen staff once again went to great lengths to make the special dinners, like Valentines and Christmas, very special indeed.

Discos were provided by Pink Elephant. Now that 'health and safety' stop them using their bubble machine and now that the nightly 'Club' discos have such sophisticated gadgetry and talented DJs, I wonder if there is a need to import anyone.

This year's board meetings were held every week and were on the theme of 'the developing me'. I thought this was appropriate for a summer experience which is all about contributing to a young person's development. Once again, our young people were remarkably reflective. Many were able to make an objective analysis of the effect the Course had on them and what they should input to gain the greatest benefit. I was left in no doubt that the new strapline I registered in 2011 is absolutely spot-on.

These are truly 'days I'll remember all my life'. They are also days that can change a life. The board meetings culminated in the Trinity Examination in spoken English taken by 35%. All candidates were graded. We shall continue to offer the examination in 2013. The board meetings also culminated in a Public Speaking Competition won by Christos Giannikos. He also won the prize for Academic Excellence. Angel Sanchez-Cantalejo won the prize for English Speaking. Although only 12, he stood in for Tom in the office. The resemblance was striking.

Our link with The Mary Hare was Ian Frey whose knowledge of the School gave me enormous help from the initial dorm placements to the final storage of our masses of equipment. 'We see you as a major business partner' is Mary Hare's view of Vacational Studies. 2012 was our 30th summer at Mary Hare. Our relationship is rock solid.

And there was me - praising, admonishing, checking, filming and photographing, dispensing justice - once again a deus ex Mercedes, loving every moment, of course, and no longer having to drive across Newbury several times a day.

VACATIONAL STUDIES PHOTOS AND FILM CLIPS

The idea of communicating with parents via photos and film clips of their children having a great time that I introduced in 2009 was continued with the enhancement of trying to show this great time while it was being had, so day and night my computer uploaded onto Shutterfly the daily photos and video clips that were on my EOS 7 and Ixus 310. At the same time, I was filming with my HD video camera for the possible end of Course 'VacStuds 2012 All Over Again' DVD. The response from parents has been very positive and reduced the number of calls from concerned parents. Uploading to Shutterfly takes ages and is not particularly certain, so I have used our Vimeo account for class videos and some longer films.

As in the last few years, wherever I went I was Quasimodo, bedecked in an SLR camera, a digital camera and an HD film camera. I shall carry on keeping parents updated about what is happening.

PASSWORD PROTECTED SECTION OF THE WEBSITE

I put even more information in this section this year. Maybe in 2013, I shall include a list of email addresses.

TEACHING PROGRAMME

This year, more than half the teaching programme was devoted to the film project and the remainder of the time to more conventional teaching often incorporating the interactive whiteboards that are a part of every Mary Hare classroom. The class films have been uploaded to Vimeo rather than Shutterfly. The quality of the films is now excellent. Communication via writing has changed its focus and exchanges via e-mail, text and Facebook are now an integral part of how we lead our lives. I asked that 'relevant writing' be included in classroom activities. This took the form of contributions to the VacStuds Facebook page.

UK REPS

The UK Reps (chosen after a rigorous interview at Norwich School by the Trustees of the Vacational Studies Foundation) were the ubiquitous Marcus Bell, the students' champion Nick Siemons and the hard-working Ellie White with Pippa James. All come on a week's probation. At the end of this week, we decided if they should stay. The awareness of the tenuous nature of their place seems to be a

motivating factor and will be continued in 2013, but the first week will be considered as time 'on approval' and the probationary period will extend for the remaining three weeks, just in case they think their places are secure and they can take it easy.

There will no longer necessarily be four UK Reps. Some of their roles will be taken on by 'Apprentices' and 'Prefects'. 'Apprentice' posts will be available, not only to OK Reps, but also to ex-students with superb English. They, too, may be considered for sports staff posts.

PREFECTS

Students over 18 whom we know can apply to be 'Prefects'. A Prefect will be allocated to different classes by the Academic Manager and will learn English by using it in the classroom and in the film-making process as a 'classroom assistant'. Prefects will also have access to the Crew room. Their bed time will be one hour later than the norm. Students whom we do not know may become Prefects after a few days at our invitation. Students may find being a Prefect a useful addition to their CV.

HOUSE CAPTAINS

Students over 16 can apply to be a House Captain. There will be a male and a female House Captain for each House. They will liaise with the Senior Sports/Social Organiser and take a lead in organising House events. House Captains will be able to use a room in 'the Snug' near the Crew Room with its own TV. Students may find House Captaincy a useful addition to their CV.

APPRENTICES

Former Prefects and UK Reps can apply to be considered as Apprentices. An Apprentice stays for a while working with the Sports Crew to gain experience helping with the Course before applying for Sports. I decide on the viability of anyone wishing to become an Apprentice.

STAFF HELPERS

These posts will be discontinued for a trial period in favour of Apprentices, Prefects and House Captains.

SPORTS 2012

The competitive 'League' matches in a variety of sports with each side dressed in their House colour ensured that the new House system worked well, as did Sports Day. In 2013, I shall request that the House Captains of each House choreograph a dance as well as a performance of the House song.

PARENTS, CHILDREN AND UNREALISABLE EXPECTATIONS

It is important that all parents read this section. The relationship between ourselves and the parents of children in our care is a partnership. We want all our young people to get the most out of the experience. For this reason, I have written a 'Parental Control Condition' into the contract we have with parents. In brief, I say 'We do our best to fulfil our 'duty of care' under English law based on good will and the trust established by your and your child's agreement to the 'rules' as evidenced by the signed 'Agreement and Travel Details' form. If we think a problem is likely to arise, we shall try to contact you before it does so it can be prevented. Nevertheless, if your child's attitude or behaviour is such that we find we cannot exercise the control required to fulfil our 'duty of care', we shall pass responsibility for

control to the parent either by requesting the parent's presence or by telephone contact with the child. If this fails and we decide the child is beyond control, we shall expel.'

Generally we have excellent support from parents. Occasionally, we do not. There is no child who does not accept that they sometimes do wrong, make mistakes or act aberrationally. What children accept so readily is unacceptable to a tiny minority of parents. For their child to do wrong must mean that the child is a victim of circumstance and that someone else must be to blame. Some also find it hard to transfer responsibility for their child to a third party - us - and believe they must provide a constant input. All we ask is that parents leave everything to us, in the knowledge that (i) they will hear if there is a problem, (ii) no news is good news, (iii) we have experience in dealing with children, (iv) their child may make mistakes, (v) we shall try to work with them if the child does make a mistake, but (vi) if what their child does is serious enough for us to require that child's removal from the Course, they must comply at once.

We do what we can to encourage students to learn and use the Course to advantage. We do our best to look after them. We make no other claims. We cannot force a child to integrate. While we provide encouragement, they must help themselves. They will find others who speak their language and they may be tempted to take the easy way. They may come with friends from home. We cannot keep friends apart. They must decide to broaden their international horizons, mix and use English. Parents may make requests, but we reserve the right to place students in what we consider to be appropriate classes and dormitories. The final report we write will be our frank assessment. As the teaching/learning situations are different, it may not be similar to the school report you are accustomed to. The Course is a communal experience. Individual freedom is restricted. Our school buildings are houses in a boarding school - not an hotel. Accommodation, washrooms, etc. are shared. Bathrooms may be away from dormitories. Clothes storage space may be limited. All sorts of compromises have to be made, but for most young people this is part of the fun. We also ask parents to accept that telephone contact with their children, especially in the first few days, is not a good idea. We ask that mobile phones are not brought. We are not being difficult, just putting into practice what we know from experience works. In effect, what we are requesting is a partnership between us based on our expertise and parents' trust in us. What we provide and the parameters of what we permit are in our literature. We act on the assumption that parents and students read it all. If your child is interested in drinking, smoking, going out at night and leading an independent life, please choose another organisation less restrictive than ours. We assume that parents will be realistic about their children. We exercise due control, but they have the freedom to do things that are wrong. If they do, there are repercussions outlined in the 'Notes'. We do what we can to prevent rule-breaking, but if it happens, parents must accept that it is occasioned by their child's free will, not lack of control on our part.

Let me put it into context. Ours is a new, exciting and active environment. Parental control appears absent. Our students are a long way from home, without the constraints and responsibilities that tend to check behavioural excess. No doubt there is also the desire to impress one's peers. They may call it 'being carried away'. Whatever the causes, occasionally a few of our students may indulge in behaviour that is simply anti-social. If they get caught, they may feel they have little to lose. Protected by this feeling that no one of importance will ever know, I am aware that some students have broken our rules and even the law. All students come to us after a 'letter of recommendation' has been written about them by their school. To remove this feeling of anonymity and to encourage students to take responsibility for their own actions, we write frank reports to parents. We reserve the right to send the

writer of the original 'letter of recommendation' a photocopy of any correspondence we have with parents about children in our care.

We have also noticed that some parents encourage children to break our rules. Henceforward this will constitute a breach of contract. I write more about this under 'Mobile Phones'.

CONTACTING STUDENTS

The students who adjust best are those whose parents phone them only on the two 'Telephone Sundays'. If these parents wish to know how their child is adjusting, they phone the Course Manager and ask.

There are some parents who feel they must speak to their children frequently. We ask parents who must speak to their children outside 'Telephone Sundays' to phone the payphone after 21.00, not our School Office number. We cannot search for children in a large building and campus. The payphone may ring unanswered. A student may answer it. If so, that student can be asked to search for a student. That student may or may not comply with the request.

MOBILE PHONES/ELECTRONIC GADGETS

Mobile phones are not useful in the context of the Course. The time young people spend with us develops their sense of independence. They need to be able to cope with small challenges on their own. An immediate call home at the first sign of a problem delays the growing up process that is a part of the Course. The only time a phone is useful is when a child is away from the school. We allow mobile phones to be used only on trip days. In line with UK Government Education Department advice on the possible health hazard for young people of microwaves near the developing brain in an enclosed environment, we do not permit students to use mobile phones freely inside the school. We prefer that a mobile phone is not brought. Any mobile phone brought must be kept in the office. We accept no responsibility for loss of or damage to mobile phones that are brought. Any mobile phone kept other than in the office will be removed for the duration of the Course. We shall treat in the same way as a mobile phone, a laptop computer and any device that uses a wi-fi connection.

Our restrictions on mobile phones are clear and in our rules to which parents have given their signed agreement. Just as parents have trusted us for 40 years to provide exactly what we describe, we trust parents to abide by the agreement they have signed. We have found that some parents have told their children not to hand in mobile phones or have given them a second phone to keep hidden. We cannot discipline children for the actions of parents who undermine us. By the same token we cannot accept responsibility for children who selectively break our rules at the request of parents. We consider this makes it impossible for us to exercise our duty of care. We shall consider this a breach of contract and request that the child be removed.

ENGLISH LAW

I state on the Application Form that this applies. There is nothing sinister about the inclusion of these words. We are de facto in loco parentis in the summer. We accept responsibility for looking after a large number of other people's children. We take this responsibility seriously. Parents trust us to make wise decisions. Sometimes, however, we receive requests which we consider unwise. For example, we are asked to let children be unaccompanied by staff when we consider they are not responsible enough

to be unaccompanied. Children feel that, if they ask their parents to request something from us, we must comply with a parental request. We are the ones closest to what is happening. We know what a prudent parent would do and would not do in certain circumstances. Legally, we are expected to fulfil the role of a prudent parent - no more, no less. Sometimes we do not agree with what a parent is asking us to do. We shall use our discretion in all matters. Under English Law a parent may not sign away a child's rights. This includes the child's right to be protected by adults. We shall do what we think is right for the child. This is why I state that English Law applies.

THEATRE VISITS

Most students request a visit to the theatre. There will be a limited number of tickets for each of three shows. A 'theatre ticket request' form will be in the password-protected parents' section in May. Tickets will be allocated in the order the scanned forms are received.

PROPERTY

We ask that valuable items (including expensive clothes) are not brought. All items with a used re-sale value over £40 must nevertheless be listed on the 'Valuable Possessions' form. At the end of the Courses we send back every named item of property left behind. Un-named items are also returned if we have a good idea to whom they belong. We can keep items in our office on request. While they are safer in our office than elsewhere, we accept responsibility only for items stored in our safe. Items given to us for safe-keeping are kept in our safe for the duration of the Course and are not removed at any time. Property not in our safe and lost other than when in the student's possession on a trip is not covered by the Insurance policy we include as part of the Course Fee. We accept no responsibility for mobile phones.

HEALTH & EHIC

All students are entitled to free emergency treatment under the Medical Insurance policy included in the Course Fee *for illnesses or accidents that happen in Britain*. EU and EEA residents are entitled to free treatment under the National Health Service for illnesses or accidents that happen in Britain. *Pre-existing conditions are not covered by our insurance. No one (not even an EU or EEA resident) is entitled to free treatment under the NHS for a pre-existing condition unless they have an EHIC (European Health Insurance Card)*. EHICs were introduced on 1 June 2004 and are available from Social Security or Health Department offices overseas. If an overseas Social Security or Health Department office states that an EHIC is not needed because free treatment for a pre-existing condition is available for anyone in the EU or EEA on a short stay, that advice is wrong and the office should contact the Department of Health on +44 20 7210 5318 for confirmation. If they have a pre-existing condition and do not have an EHIC, students should have their own medical insurance.

LOST LUGGAGE

New arrangements for hand baggage mean that more cases are lost by airlines than before. We shall continue to help students who arrive with no luggage to buy necessary items, but as the contract the airlines have is with the passenger (not ourselves) they will not refund the cost to us. We shall inform parents what has happened and take the cost from pocket money. The airline will then reimburse the parent who will, we hope, have topped up the pocket money.

EXCESS BAGGAGE

The economy class limit is 20 kilos. Airlines insist that luggage over 24 kilos is put in a second suitcase (which must be bought) and then there will be an additional charge of £100. Students must, therefore, bring less than 20 kilos of luggage.

BEFORE AND DURING THE COURSE

Parents are welcome to contact me on any matter. In July and August I can be anywhere. For practical reasons, therefore, it is best to make contact with me during the Courses on my mobile phone +44 7717 007 007 or, if it is to find out how a child is, the Course Manager is best placed to give this information on +44 1635 244 221.

AFTER THE COURSE

Please feel you can contact me about anything connected with Britain. For example, parents ask for my advice on continuing their children's education in Britain. I am happy to help. No charge! I see this as a natural extension of my work with young people. Students ask for information, sometimes ten or twenty years later or more.

VACATIONAL STUDIES TRADE MARKS

Our logo and the words Vacation Studies and the names of some of the schools we have used have been registered as trade marks. We have no connection with any other organisation - whether with a similar or dissimilar name and programme.

THE JÖRG WEISE ASSOCIATION

This exists to encourage international understanding. Every year, we have students who make an exceptional contribution to the international aims of the Course or who are internationally-minded. These may like to consider joining the Association. Details are at www.vacstuds.com/JWA.

GIOTTO

This enables our students to keep in touch with friends from when they were students with us and to make new contacts for social or professional purposes. Details are on www.vacstuds.com/GIOTTO.

VACATIONAL STUDIES FOUNDATION

The Vacation Studies Foundation was registered as a Charity under English Law in January 2000 to assist talented young people. Details are on www.vacstuds.com/FOUNDATION.

H.T.W. MUCKLEJOHN

My father, who was Company Secretary from the founding of Vacation Studies until his death in 2003, was a great support to me. In his memory, the Jörg Weise Association has donated in perpetuity a full Scholarship which I am able to award when I come across a young person who would benefit from our Courses, but cannot apply for financial reasons. If you know one, tell me.

VACSTUDS ON FACEBOOK

is for those connected with Vacational Studies to continue to relate to us and to each other.

VACSTUDS ON TWITTER

exists because it can exist, but I have yet to be convinced of its worth for us.

VACSTUDS.COM IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Vacstuds.com is our 'shopwindow' and main medium of communication. All our 'literature' is there. There is no point now in our printing anything on paper, especially as information can be updated in seconds. We expect all parents to have internet access and to check the 'Latest News' section at vacstuds.com for the latest news and links to the information we produce. We occasionally send e-mails to everyone and ask that vacstuds.com is included as an allowed address so that messages from us are not seen as spam.

MY THANKS

...to all those who trusted with the care of their children this summer. It is a privilege for me to meet some of the most personable, intelligent and charming young people in the world. and to know that, since 1973, those who have been through the Vacational Studies experience can say that these are 'days I'll remember all my life.'

AND FINALLY...

For those who are interested, my second book about my adventures ('And Then There Were Three - Expanded Edition' (ISBN 1903933730)) was published in June 2006 and is available inter alia via www.amazon.com. I have put the entire text on www.andthentherewerethree.co.uk. A third book will appear when I have finished writing it.

IGM - Autumn 2012