

From the HEAD OF SCHOOL *Than Healy*



Snapshots of Joy

I wish you could sit where I sit. In the hallway outside my office are three framed photographs chosen by Upper School photography teacher Pete Zivkov that I think represent the very best of who we are as a school. The center picture features sixth grade science teacher Jacqueline Botterman with a group of her students learning about potential and kinetic energy by clamping rubber bands around a watermelon. The image captures the moment before the watermelon bursts, and the looks of anticipation and sheer joy on the faces of the students and teacher are a wonderful and accurate representation of what happens daily in



classrooms all over campus. This joy that I feel fortunate to witness is who we are as a school, and it is what I believe makes us distinctive in the world of education today. And because of where I get to sit and the glimpses I am privileged to have into the life of the School, I see this joy all the time.

Looking out my office window, I can see the line of blue tape on the walkway of the Upper School Quad. This painter's tape is the "throw line" for a game invented by a group of enterprising, creative, and hilarious senior boys that involves bowling a roll of painter's tape (no doubt left in the quad after

one of the hugely successful spirit days this fall) down the pathway, taking a hard left turn as the path bends towards the Amanda MacDonald Student Center in an attempt to get it to roll into the student center itself without human interference. Absurdly and ironically named "Tape," this game is indicative of the kind of community-centered application of learning that is typical here at Menlo, and what makes it unique is that it's almost entirely done in the service of ridiculous joy and fun.

The joy of Menlo comes through to me in a thousand different ways as I watch this wonderful School work. It is a brother and sister, a sophomore and a senior, throwing a frisbee together on the quad on an otherwise quiet, nondescript day—a reminder of family and of how it is cool to honor the bonds we share with each other at Menlo. (I wouldn't have dared to even acknowledge my younger sister much less interact with her at my high school for fear of ridicule.) Or the picture that was emailed to me last week of a sixth grade basketball team leaping wildly off the bench in the moment when a teammate scored his first Menlo basket ever—the joy in another's achievement and happiness that is rare in other groups of adolescents but par for the course here at Menlo. Or perhaps it is best symbolized by the amount of spontaneous dancing and singing that I see here on campus. Sure, you would expect

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to see this kind of thing in our fabulous music or dance classes, and I do, but I am talking about the “I am so happy that I can’t contain myself” kind of dancing that I see on my walk to lunch as I pass students heading back to the Middle School for class or the freshman volleyball player that unconsciously dances between points in big games much to the delight of her teammates. This is the joy that permeates this campus on a daily basis and the joy that defines us as a school.

Years before I ever considered joining the Menlo community, I was fortunate to visit as part of a delegation from my former school in Seattle with two department heads I was working with at the time. The palpable takeaway from our visit, something that we discussed for a long time upon our return to Seattle, was the clear joy that existed on the Menlo campus. So when I was granted an interview for the Head of School position here, I took the opportunity to ask where this joy originated—the central question we had debated in our department heads team but had never really answered. Though there were many theories, lots of which included the weather and some of which included the admissions office’s mandate to look for nice kids first and foremost, there was no conclusive, authoritative conclusion about where this joy came from.

School spirit, playfulness, and joy have been in high evidence this year, and many remark that it’s at an all-time high. This is striking given how hard our students work, how many obligations they have, and how busy their lives

are. Yet Menlo continues to be this joyful place. And while it is tempting to credit an unusually strident spirit commissioner in the Upper School or an especially committed group of seniors or some exceptionally spirited classes this year, I think that part of Menlo’s culture of joy is grounded in a tradition that goes back as far as our oldest alumni can remember. My working theory is that this joy is a byproduct of the type and manner of work being done here at Menlo. Philosopher Tom Morris describes happiness and joy as an incredibly pleasant side effect of “work well done in the pursuit of noble goals,” and while I agree, I would make one critical addition: “in a caring and connected community.”

Whether it is the sheer joy of the holiday assembly that happened last week, a reminder of our school community and our commitment to each other; or the image I have in my head of over 60 Upper School students in the Learning Lab on a Saturday morning with Adam Whistler and

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Kathryn Gray and a small host of faculty members who were there voluntarily to help them prepare for their finals this week; or the robotics competition that happened in our gym two weekends ago that featured challenge and frustration but also pride and teamwork; or the great work happening in dozens of classrooms on our campus at any given moment, Menlo is continuously pursuing “work well done in the pursuit of noble goals, in a caring community.” It is thus no surprise that joy abounds.

This fall we were humbled as a community to witness the terrible sadness and tragedy surrounding the loss of alumnus and newly minted school counselor Michael Harris '08. And two weeks ago, I was blessed to attend the memorial service for longtime Menlo School teacher and track coach Lou Yango. At both services, members of the Menlo community spoke to the joy that each man gained from being a part of this place as well as the joy that each contributed. Both men were known for their optimism, positive outlook, faith in their peers and their students, and for their commitment to not taking themselves or their work too seriously—both were truly Menlo Knights. At the end of Lou's service, I had the chance opportunity to speak with an alumnus whom I had never met: a physician who had flown down from Portland, Oregon, to pay tribute to

a former teacher. As for many of the alumni who were in attendance, the stories of Lou's big heart and deep caring were why he felt the need to pay tribute that day. The physician I was speaking to told me that he had decided to spend his life helping others through medicine because of Lou Yango's ninth grade biology class and the indefatigable excitement Lou brought to his teaching of that subject.

This is the tradition of joy at Menlo that our children are fortunate to steward while they are here, and these are the snapshots that I am lucky to witness on a daily basis.

I wish you could sit where I sit and see what I see. I think you would be heartened as I am by the culture that our children get to create and enjoy.

This holiday season I wish you great joy as you spend time with your families, and we look forward to seeing you in the New Year!

Thom Healy

KnightLine is published in .pdf form on the Menlo School website each month, with an email alert including a link sent to all parents. For questions, please contact Alex Perez, Director of Communications, via email at alex.perez@menloschool.org or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

