

From the  
MIDDLE SCHOOL  
DIRECTOR

*La Vina Lowery*



## Seeing Through the Eyes of an Eighth Grader

Every morning as I walk onto the school grounds, I think about what a beautiful campus we have and how lucky we are to work at Menlo. I get to school early, and when I first arrive, the quad is deserted and the buildings are empty. So, while beautiful, the campus doesn't quite have the magic that happens when the students and teachers are here together. One could say it's a little like an empty magician's hat: there's nothing extraordinary about it until the magician pulls out the rabbit! Once the teachers arrive, ready to start the day, and your children descend on campus full of enthusiasm, playfulness, and excitement, that's when the magic happens.

As I reflect on the past couple of months at Menlo, I realize that most of my time has been spent observing the culture, learning policies and procedures along with traditions, and attending lots and lots of meetings. All good conversations to be sure, but I've really been missing the opportunity to be with the students.

There have been those special days when I was able to watch students work on a

chalk art project while listening to George Winston, Benny Goodman, and Bach—what a joyful moment. I also had the chance to choreograph a number for the Mixed Chorus to the song *Don't Worry Be Happy*, which is my motto for all middle school students!

Coming to a new campus, I was curious about the student experience. What's it like to be a student at Menlo?

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Shadowing a student is not new to schools, but faculty let alone administrators rarely do it. We should all shadow at least once a year. It keeps us grounded and helps us practice what we preach...balance. So I decided to hit the classrooms.

For a day I got to see firsthand what a “day in the life” was like for an eighth grader. The day was engaging and a lot of fun! The students welcomed me as a peer, and the teachers treated me as a student. Unfortunately, I was tardy to my first class, French. After I settled in, I soon realized that French is tough! Students around me struggled with mastering their tenses and verb conjugations. They kept switching in and out of English and French—and sometimes spoke a crazy mix of both. Madame Gullung kept her resolve and firmly steered the class back to the goal of speaking only French. I could see this taking the students a bit out of their comfort zone. As I watched carefully to gauge their reactions, I realized that what Madame Gullung was doing was exactly what we value the most at Menlo: teaching by doing and giving her students a challenging and engaging experience.

Human Skills was up next. If the students were a bit squirmy conjugating verbs in French, they were even more so as the topic of reproduction was introduced. But almost like the wave of a magic wand, Ms. Roshan made the topic accessible, normal, and easy to digest even for the most giggle-prone student. How did she do that? She was able to do it because for the entire semester she has been building student trust. She has demonstrated time and again that she is a person students can come to with tough questions. She lets them know she will listen and treats them with

respect and care in her responses. Ms. Roshan is not alone in doing this. Examples of these powerful relationships can be seen throughout the campus.

Science followed, and the students were kept constantly engaged for a full 90 minutes. I was amazed at how Dr. Hill could keep the class moving from one topic to another. Thanks to his positive and uplifting spirit, the students followed right along. At the end of fourth period, I had a much-needed break for lunch.

After lunch, the students and faculty gathered in the Commons for a celebration of Diwali Festival of Lights. We learned about the holiday’s origin and some of our students shared how their families celebrate Diwali—a true commitment to sharing diversity of cultures at Menlo. After assembly, we were treated to some traditional holiday fare in the quad. Then it was on to clubs.

I had to kick it into high gear cognitively for my afternoon classes, English and Algebra. Taking two challenging core classes at the end of the day is difficult, and this is something we’ll consider as we build our new schedule. In English, my buddy was working on a group video project, and in Algebra, we were reviewing for a test. The teacher

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reprimanded me for distracting my group: Oh the shame! Though the curriculum focus of the afternoon didn't allow me to see quite the same interaction between teacher and students as the morning classes had, I still witnessed fully engaged students creating and revising their work, enthusiastically collaborating on group projects, and honing skills together in practice sessions—more great examples of engagement at work.

Next, I headed out to the tennis courts for P.E. In my enthusiasm to give constructive feedback to two students on another court, a flying tennis ball inadvertently hit me. The student apologized, and I said, "Nice serve!"

Limping back to campus with my buddy, we chatted about her after-school activities and homework. I winced when she told me what time she usually goes to bed. Although I had a meeting after school and did a couple of hours of work at home that night, I kept thinking about how she and other students were still at their extracurricular activities or just getting home and starting homework. How do they do it? This is an ongoing topic that we'll continue to look at closely, but our hope is that our new schedule will help mitigate some of the busyness that our students are

experiencing.

My experience in the classroom showed me that our students have a wonderful attitude—they know how to have fun in the midst of taking notes, shooting their infomercials, or listening to the teachers give instruction and content. I was thrilled to see students engaged in joyful learning.

In the end, I look forward to being part of the wonderful traditions of Menlo School as well as being an agent of change. I am committed to challenging ourselves to continue to ask why we do what we do and how we do it; to be mindful of all types of learners and personalities at Menlo; to find balance between the workload and student life; and to continue to develop habits of the heart and mind in every student.

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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](mailto:alex.perez@menloschool.org) or by calling 650.330.2001 ext. 2330.

