

Then & Now

the stentorian | ncssm

Then & Now: Jon Davis Graduate of 1988

Why did you decide to come to NCSSM?

I wanted to go to a school where other people were genuinely interested in science and math. I also knew that there would be more access to higher levels in classes that I could not get at my old school. Although I went for academics, it turned out that I learned just as much through social interactions as I did through my class work. I remember staying up late and talking about philosophy, religion and politics with my friends.

What do you remember about your classes and teachers?

Actually, a few of the teachers that I had still work here now, including Joe Liles, Jim Litle, Dan Teague, and Tom Clayton. But of course, back then, Liles had short hair, Clayton had black hair, and Litle had a beard. And my own hair has thinned out a bit. I particularly enjoyed Advanced Photography, Third World Literature, and Embryology & Evolution. A lot of these classes aren't offered now.

For instance, I took Russian with Don House. I learned a lot about myself through my philosophy classes.

When you are a teenager, at 16 or 17 years old, you are so easily fascinated by things you learn. When a new idea came into my brain, it was like fireworks. NCSSM was a

crucible in which my thoughts could burn. When you become an adult, however, new ideas are more like new tools in a well-used toolkit.

What activities did you participate in and what did you do for fun?

My senior year I was the captain of the cross country team. And that year, we were undefeated conference champions. It seems to me that Science and Math students always do better in the individual sports, like running and swimming and wrestling. It's just a common trait of the students here to be really self-motivated and independent. I also got around a lot by riding my bike. One time my friend and I rode all the way to South Square. And of course, Ninth Street was the usual attraction, but to me, it was like Manhattan, so urbane and sophisticated.

What NCSSM traditions have continued throughout the years?

Well, we had a lot of the same events, like Air Band and the T-Shirt Signing Dance.

Except our dances were held in Hunt Lobby. They covered the floors with plywood to keep the carpeted floors from getting

destroyed. Also, we played ultimate frisbee, just like students do now, except we played it on Bryan Lawn. All of the trees added another element to the game, which made

it really challenging.

Is the campus very different from what it used to be?

Definitely. The Hunt Dorm wasn't even ready when I got there. Some students stayed in the Carolina Duke Motor Lodge. It was probably difficult for them to get to

wasn't like that when I was here. I remember when a student brought the first Macintosh to school. We had never even seen a mouse before. We were picking it up and turning it around. Someone said to me, "Hey, look at this. You can actually

throughout the school. Our fish tanks were not populated by nice new computers, but instead by early model IBMs, with green monochrome screens.

Do you think the student body has changed a lot?

Actually, sometimes I look around me and I feel like I am back in 1988. There is just such a diverse group of students at NCSSM. But in that diversity you see some of the same looks: crazy kids who wear sandals all winter, people in cloaks, sporty ones, punks and everyone in between. Just as there are emerging urban legends now, we had them back then. We always heard about a boy who got expelled for shooting an arrow from Hill House. Apparently, the arrow actually injured a construction worker who had been working on the Hunt Dorm.

What did you do after you left NCSSM?

I went to school at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. It was on the other side of the country, but I wanted to see the Pacific Northwest. But after all of the moving around I've done, it's sort of ironic that I have ended up right back here, where I started. Here, I work in the Biology Department and in Distance Learning. Even though I have spent a few years promoting virtual learning communities, I still think there is something fundamentally important about bringing together a small group of very bright students in one place to inspire and encourage each other. That is what Science and Math is all about.



Mr. Jon Davis as a Science & Math student and returning as faculty.

school every day, but at least they had room service and a swimming pool. And of course, we had no ETC or PEC. School assemblies were really held in the Assembly Hall. It was sort of like education as I imagine it would have been in Plato's time, with everyone on the same level, the students in a semi-circle around the teachers, all tightly cramped in this little room. I also remember that the tunnel between Hill and Watts was not in use. We weren't even sure that such a tunnel existed. We only heard rumors that some kids managed to break in and sneak around.

How was technology different from how it is now?

It was completely different. I see that now almost everyone has a laptop, but it

pick up your cursor, click inside a word, and really start typing in the middle of it!" I remember the first laser printer on campus. It was fascinating to see that a document could be printed out, and it didn't even resemble something that came from a typewriter. Oh, and I'll never forget how someone managed to create a gigantic banner of Ronald Reagan using a dot-matrix printer to both scan and print. It was used for the Third East IVIS. Reagan was saying, "Defy the Evil Empire, Come to Third East IVIS."

Also, we had no modern ways of sharing music, so we traded mix tapes. And when it came to chatting online, the closest thing we had was a VAX minicomputer with different terminals located

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my roommate in the middle of the night and trying to study, which was basically impossible, with all the "Oodles of Noodles" and spilt drink.

What college/graduate school did you go to?

I went to UNC for my BS in Biology and then to Harvard, to get my PhD in Plant Ecology.

What was it like looking back at your experience at NCSSM once you were in college?

My experience here really made college, and all future academic endeavors, much easier. I really felt sorry for the people who didn't come here! They really didn't know how to do some of the stuff we learned in the first semester and they didn't have the huge

support network that's offered here. They basically just had to work it out and go through that huge transition on their own.

What was it like coming back to teach?

At first it was a little disorienting. The teachers I had when I was a student here are still here, but now they're my peers: it was a positive thing, but really very confusing. It's great to be back though. I really love my job. People always say, yeah, I must feel like I'm paying back the school for everything it gave me, and I guess I am, but mostly I just love teaching here, and I just consider it a really great job.

How have things changed since you were here?

Well, it's really very much the same as it was when I was

here, but there are also some huge differences. One thing that might not seem like a big thing to you all was that we didn't have cell phones. Every night there were thirty girls all lined up sitting in the hall waiting to use the phone. And almost every night there would be some traumatic experience and someone would be crying, you know, there was just a lot of drama because of that. Maybe it was because I lived on a girl's hall, but I don't really know. It really may not seem that important, but it really made things very dramatic on hall.

Oh, another thing is that Hill actually used to be girls and Bryan used to be all boys. So now that I'm here it's just hard imagining boys living in Hill. We didn't call Hunt "Hunt" either, we called it the New Dorm, and Royall didn't even really exist. It was called Wyche and actually was considered "condemned." People would go and hang out on the porch there all the time.

Of course, also, we didn't

have Super Study, but we had "Morgue Hours" from 8-10 every night, where we just had to be quiet and work. There wasn't a MiniTerm either, actually, it was called "Special Projects" and it was only four days long, and was just an independent project

that we had to present at the end of the four days.

There was no ETC either. We used to have all of our assemblies in the gym and just all kind of crowd in there. Actually, I think before I got there they used to all sit in the "Pit" outside the cafeteria for assemblies. I still get really confused with the ETC being there now; it just seems like it's everywhere you go and it's just

so confusing.

Oh, and of course, you know, there were DAs instead of RLAs, and then we had RAs, which were the same as SLIs.

Other than those kinds of minor things though, a lot of stuff is really still the same.

Like, I know a lot of the people that painted the paintings on the wall. And the same trees are still here; I used to love to go outdoors since I was on the ground floor, and those are still the same trees I used to go sit under.

The funniest thing though, actually, was the other day I was walking into the building and Bobby Jackson, the security guard, was like "Hey little sister." It was just like when I used to be here, and it brought back some really good memories.

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