

Anna McCarthy – Reflections on a Remarkable Woman

Elise: Good morning, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Elise Adib-Samii Riegel, I grew up at Suffield Academy as my parents taught here for 35 years. More than that, I am an alumna, former faculty, and now currently a proud parent of a Suffield student. It is my great honor to be here today with Mr. Lowe, a cherished colleague and mentor, to share reflections on our dear friend, Ania McCarthy.

Andy: We grieve the loss of an amazing person...

Elise: We grieve the loss of an irreplaceable colleague...

Andy: We celebrate the life of a great teacher of the community

Elise: We celebrate the legacy of a generous, courageous woman

Andy: I first met Anna in Leningrad, in the Soviet Union – I think in 1986, on one of Suffield's joint Academy-Loomis Chaffee student trips. A close friend of mine who was the main leaders of the trip took me to her apartment one evening, a non descript high rise on the outskirts of the city. He prefaced the visit by telling me that this person I was meeting, Ania, was brilliant, and often in the company of equally bright and interesting people, some of them dissidents. And he told me that I would meet her daughter, Sasha, and possibly Ania's father, a well-known scientist...there were others there in her small apartment, intriguing figures surrounding her, but Ania really made the biggest impression on me that evening. At that time, I could not have possibly guessed that she would end up leaving the Soviet Union for the United States, not least for a teaching job at Suffield Academy, but miracles happen, much owing to the urging and support of Mrs. Riegel's mother, Amparo Samii, a Language Department superstar and legend at Suffield at the time. Amparo, we thank you for your efforts and the gift of Ania to the Suffield community.

Elise: I first met Anna in my parent's kitchen during a trip home for Thanksgiving sometime in the early 1990s. My mother and Ania were gearing up for a long night of advisor comment writing, which I came to learn was an elaborate ritual played out a few times per year, involving copious amounts of coffee, robust debate about national politics,

updates on children, discussion of which Latin American writer would appear in the Spanish curriculum, and then, only around 11 pm or so would they be ready to hunker down and write. On that particular evening I was home, I agreed to help them edit their comments, but I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Whereas my mom was the model of efficiency, Ania spent hour upon hour that night, agonizing over the right phrasing, the right grammatical structure, the right sentiment. I came to learn that she wrote all her comments this way...with the belief that children are fully aware of which adults genuinely know and understand them. How adults speak about a child matters, for every time a teacher puts pen to paper about a student, it's an opportunity to either build or lose a child's trust. I would remain on this wild comment proofing ride with them for the next few Thanksgivings, and it ultimately cemented my deep respect for Ania's authenticity and insight as an educator.

Andy: What immediately struck me about Ania was her unassuming and unpretentious, yet highly engaging, personality, traits that would never cease to endear her to me and to many others, across the next thirty years. Her English was flawless, her intellectual reach clearly impressive, but, most importantly, her way of connecting to people in the here and now, jumped out as quite remarkable. Over the next thirty years, these first impressions were to be continually reinforced, and indeed, strengthened.

Elise: What immediately struck me about Anna was her worldliness. She was a Russian through and through who could recite obscure 18th century Russian poetry at the drop of a hat, but also loved her Cuba Libres and Celia Cruz, and cherished American individualism. She was a remarkable figure in the lives of so many international students at Suffield, precisely because she could navigate cultural distinctions effortlessly. She had a profound appreciation for the many gifts Suffield's international students brought to campus, and masterfully helped them cultivate a blended identity. She believed that the diversity which stems from vibrant communities *within* vibrant communities both nourishes and strengthens its members.

Andy: When Ania first came to Suffield, she made fast friends with many colleagues, and soon, in her inimitable, low key way, gained a

reputation for clear thinking on all fronts, pedagogical insight, fiercely, yet carefully and reflectively fashioned opinions, and expert management of the classroom and other enterprises on campus in which she soon immersed herself. While worldly and accomplished beyond her years, she never projected any sense of specialness, but special, she was!

Elise: When I first came to Suffield, I was fascinated by Ania's wide fan base from all corners of the school. In the simplest terms, Ania had the remarkable talent of meeting people where they were. No judgement, just come as you are... as a student, as a colleague, as a friend. Her level of comfort with you, wherever you were in life—in your studies or your career—was disarming, endearing, and empowering. I learned quickly she was a fiercely loyal friend, and in an intimate and intense community like Suffield where tensions invariably arise from living and working so closely with one another, Ania never took sides. Rather, she gave people something much more valuable—the gifts of undivided attention and uninterrupted time.

Andy: Anna was unselfish...she put others' interests and development first. An example of this that always amazed me is seen in the case of her beloved daughter, Sasha. When it came time to decide on Sasha's secondary school choice, Sasha could have stayed at home and gone to Suffield or Loomis tuition free – a pretty nice dilemma to have. But was either the best fit for Sasha? As hard as this must have been to do, Anna urged Sasha to consider Exeter – living away from home, and no free ride there. Exeter it was. And then it was Yale, and then law school, and much more achievement after that for Sasha. Their bond, that between Anna and her daughter Sasha, was ultimately strengthened, not weakened, by this choice, But it took a strong and incredibly unselfish mother to offer to her daughter a choice that would launch and nourish a rich life for Sasha 150 miles from home during the school year.

Elise: Anna was resilient...she weathered difficult personal circumstances patiently, honestly, and gracefully. An example of this that always amazed me was how she cared for her beloved father, Boris, in the last two decades of his life. She was the sole caretaker of a remarkable man who lived well into his 90s, did not speak English, and was beset by various afflictions including sight loss. While Ania would

express concern about her father's health, she never complained. In essence, she had two full-time jobs and she did both with great affection and dedication.

Andy: In Ania we also find blended the endearing qualities of humility, honesty, and genuineness at a remarkable level. She could be brutally honest in her opinions and judgments, and sometimes even a bit caustic in a very Russian kind of way, but these takes on life she propagated seemed always to hit the mark. Her humility was seen in her always taking an intense interest in the person or people with whom she was engaged, rarely communicating anything about her interests, pursuits, expertise, or achievements. It never seemed to me that these traits were forced or ingenuous, purely Ania's natural orientation to the community and larger world.

Elise: In Ania we also find blended the endearing qualities of playfulness, creativity, and intuitiveness at a remarkable level. Her instincts as a teacher were incredible. Well before schools like Suffield ever formally acknowledged learning differences, Ania had developed an impressive toolkit of strategies to help students who found traditional classroom learning both difficult and uninspiring. A classic Señora McCarthy story involves a young man who was an exceptionally antsy student in her Spanish II class—constant movement, difficulty focusing, a real distraction to others. One day this young man showed up to class, and Ania could tell it was going to be a tough day with him, so much to his surprise, she took his Spanish book, tossed it right out the window of her 4th floor classroom in Memorial, and told him to run down and retrieve it. He looked at her a bit confused, said ok, and ran down, grabbed the book, and ran up those four flights as fast as he could. When he returned, she asked, are you ready for class now? He smiled and said “no...actually...can I do that again?” She took his book, tossed it out the window, and he ran down and back again. But this time when he returned, he sat down at his desk, took several deep breaths, and settled right into the class. And from that day on, anytime he showed up to her class feeling restless or unfocused, he (or his classmates) would toss his book out the window and run the stairs. Lovely, isn't it? How her empathy helped this young man simply and playfully develop a coping skill that ultimately fostered his own self-care and self-reliance.

Andy: Over the years, Ania's contributions to the Academy community built a legacy of immeasurable, yet palpable and substantive impact. Yet, as already mentioned, this was always fashioned in an understated, hardly visible way, perhaps by Ania's conscious or unconscious design, so as to have those she touched believing that they were largely responsible for their successes, largely obscuring Ania's contributions. She commanded enormous respect among the faculty, without ever having to be anything but herself, in earning it. She was a natural, and a kind of low lying, ubiquitous force on campus. Often overlooked is her role as international student advisor, which meant being first in line in helping nearly one fifth of our student body navigate their lives here many thousands of miles away from home. Few could have managed this role so ably and conscientiously.

Elise: Over the years, Ania's contributions to the Academy community were varied and profound. In addition to leading the language department, mentoring colleagues, and advising and teaching hundreds of students, Ania was a highly decorated head coach of riflery. Since 1991, her varsity teams amassed an impressive win/loss record of 213-53, along with 10 state championship titles and 4 league titles. Perhaps more impressive is that she and her beloved friend and assistant, Brett Vianney, coached complete novices to an overall JV record of 56-2 to date. Since so many riflery coaches tend to be outdoorsmen and hunters, Ania seemed a very odd fit. So naturally, our conspiracy-loving students deduced she had to be KGB. Of course, Ania found this hilarious and did very little to squelch this rumor.

Andy: It is difficult for us to bring our comments to a close. We are only touching the surface of this extraordinary woman. She has touched many of us deeply, and helped us all to be better people, While she has left us, her legacy will long endure, her inspiration remains with many of us, and our memories of her will light and guide our and Suffield Academy's future.

Elise: It is difficult for us to bring our comments to a close. Ania was indeed my most cherished mentor and an extraordinary friend. She encouraged me to love the messiness of working with adolescents and to respect the unpredictability in learning. She showed me that teaching

is an optimistic act and a powerful vehicle for being countercultural, for it allows you to help children find their power and voices when society might devalue them. And finally, she inspired in me a deep gratitude to this community for being home to such a uniquely gifted, remarkably gentle, incredibly loving woman.