



VanDamme Academy Newsletter



October 2009



Inside

VanDamme Academy Presents
Music Appreciation,
continued

2

Letter from a VanDamme
Academy Graduate

3

Director's Teas

4

CTY Teacher Recognition
Nomination: Mr. Black

5

Recess Photos!

6

VanDamme Academy Behind
the Scenes

7

VanDamme Academy Presents: Music Appreciation

Two years ago, Mr. Travers introduced art appreciation into the VanDamme Academy curriculum. Like the name suggests, the purpose of this course was neither to teach students the history of art nor to train them in the production of art. Rather, his goal was to help them learn to deeply, sincerely *enjoy* or *appreciate* art.

Toward that end, Mr. Travers teaches students how to look at a painting or sculpture. He demonstrates to them that *looking* is not automatic—it is actually an active-minded, methodical, purposeful process. Students learn to do a “reading” of a work of art: noticing and cataloguing all the details, making connections and generalizations about what they observe, comparing and contrasting their observations with other, similar pieces, arriving at a basic theme of the work, and finally, connecting that theme to their own lives.

This process integrates perfectly with the VanDamme Academy literature curriculum, for which the process of analysis is much the same. And indeed, Mr. Travers often makes a point of finding artworks that reflect the values and characters presented in the novels students are reading for literature.



VanDamme Academy Presents: Music Appreciation (continued)



This year, Mr. Travers has introduced music appreciation into the junior high curriculum.

In music appreciation, students listen to a short composition with a definite emotional tone and are asked to describe the scene that plays through their mind in connection with the music. I witnessed one of these classes, and the results were remarkable. First, though the scenes they recounted varied greatly from student to student, the commonalities were fascinating to note. Second, the students' writing was delightfully uninhibited—this assignment really allowed them to be creative free spirits. Lastly, I was moved by the variety of ways in which their performance on the assignment reflected their education overall: the compositions were articulate and eloquent, they often related to great scenes from history or literature, and they showed a capacity for a deep and meaningful connection to art. Listening to Mr. Travers read the students' work aloud while the music played, I was moved to tears.

Here are some samples of the students' writing about Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings." I recommend that you listen first, and then read.

"A wave comes onto the shore, bringing a man to his home town. He is dead. Memories flash of his life as the procession leads him to his grave: his wedding, his first born son, his captaincy. Nothing is banal any more."

"An army has just defeated their enemy. However, their greatest hero has fallen. It is raining, and everyone is crying, especially the hero's family. The hero had hugged his family right before he was shot. It is pitch black except for one light that is shining on the hero."

"Trees are swaying in the forest as the flowers are slowly blooming. They twirl at the sun's powerful heat. One day, they suddenly shrivel up. Kids are staring down at their once beautiful flowers, depressed and heartbroken. The trees begin to shrivel. The pinecones open up to let new seeds be planted."

"I see a boy walking up to a large building in New York for the first time and he can't believe its size. He is amazed and his mouth is ajar. He goes into it, and he is riding up in the glass elevator. He has reached the top; he looks at the view and yells happily off into the city. He is overwhelmed. He feels like a small sand in the desert."





Letter From a VanDamme Academy Graduate

In September, I received this lovely letter from a VanDamme Academy graduate currently attending Sage Hill for high school. I am proud both of the content and the form: both reflect the quality of her education.

Ms. VanDamme,

It has been about a year and a half since I left your school, and I wanted to write you to thank you for all that I learned in my two years there, and congratulate you on the beautiful new campus.

It has come to my attention lately, when completing homework, going to museums, speaking in public and going to class every day at Sage just how much I learned at your school. I comment on this so often that my parents suggested writing a letter to you about it, and I agreed.

From the art interpretation skills I learned from Mr. Travers, to the inconceivably large amount I learned in Mr. Lewis's writing, math and history classes, to your literature classes which fostered my (continuing) love for European literature. Even while writing this email Mrs. O'Brien's grammar lessons come to mind.

Teachers often comment on my writing and analytical abilities and class participation, and each time I know how much of that I owe to the brief two years I spent at your school. So again—thank you, and my best wishes for a wonderful school year on a great new campus.

Sincerely,
Alexa McElroy





Director's Teas

We are pleased to be bringing back an old tradition of "Director's Teas": opportunities for Miss VanDamme to present some aspect of the VanDamme Academy philosophy or curriculum to you the parents.

Miss VanDamme will inaugurate this tradition on Friday, October 23rd at 8:30 AM. The first topic will be "The VanDamme Academy Writing Curriculum." In this talk, Miss VanDamme will discuss the writing curriculum as it starts in the Montessori classroom and progresses all the way through her own junior high writing classes. She will discuss both *how* the children learn to write (from the formation of sentences, to paragraphs, to essays) and *what* they are asked to write about (how the topics integrate with the rest of the curriculum). She will also discuss some of the principles taught in writing class that make it clear that to learn how to *write* well is to learn how to *think* well.

The teas will also offer you the parents a formal opportunity to ask questions about any aspect of life at VanDamme Academy.

If there are topics you would like to see discussed at future teas, please submit them to Mr. Steele at mrsteele@vandammeacademy.com.

We look forward to seeing you on the 23rd!





Johns Hopkins
Center for Talented Youth (CTY)

Teacher Recognition Nomination

This year, Grady Williams nominated Mr. Black to be recognized as an exceptional teacher who nurtured his academic talents. Congratulations to Mr. Black on the honor of being nominated, and to Grady for a great nomination essay.

The ordinary math teacher has thirty pupils and he teaches all of them the same thing with no special attention towards any of them. Mr. Black is different. A student in Mr. Black's classroom does not have to worry about getting lost in the crowd and not getting the attention they need and deserve. Mr. Black's math class has 15 students: 15 students who walk into math class excited, knowing that they are about to learn an engaging new lesson and leave without fear of any confusion in tomorrow's lesson. At VanDamme Academy, Mr. Black has been my instructor for Algebra 1/2 and Algebra. I am now in 8th grade and he is my instructor for Geometry and, concurrently, preparation for Algebra 2.

Math class often brings confusion and frustration: confusion at why you are learning lessons beneath you, or frustration with concepts far too advanced for you. In Mr. Black's math class, improper differentiation is not an issue. Any and every lesson you complete has been professionally prescribed to meet your needs. Three different books are currently being taught in Mr. Black's 7th/8th grade math class. Each pupil in each book is progressing quickly and efficiently. It is so refreshing to be in a math class where your voice is heard, your needs are met, and there is no worrying about whether or not what you're doing is right for you.

It is always a bummer when your math teacher is not qualified or doesn't know what he's talking about. This is not a concern with Mr. Black. He obtained his BA in mathematics from Texas A&M in 1996 and his Master of Art Degree in Pure Mathematics from the University of California Santa Barbara. Mr. Black's initial teaching opportunity came as a teacher's assistant charged with calculus sections at UCSB. For the Long Beach Unified School District he taught gifted students algebra, geometry, and trigonometry, and statistics and algebra at Golden West Community College. A confusing concept is not so confusing with professional advice and coaching from Mr. Black.

Math teachers can be unqualified or could be teaching you concepts that will never help you. Mr. Black is completely qualified and teaches you the things you need to be learning. He also finds ways to relate the logic he teaches us in geometry to real life. In our latest class, he told us about an experience he had while surfing. While riding a wave, another surfer ran into the side of his board, knocking him off the wave. The other surfer confronted him, saying "Dude I've been out here for like 20 minutes! That was my wave!" Mr. Black calmly responded, "People's sense of entitlement is baffling. You're saying minutes equal waves?" The other man stuttered and then walked off. The man later returned and apologized to Mr. Black.

Please consider Mr. Black as a talented and a committed teacher who always teaches his students the necessary concepts for them to succeed.



Overheard at VanDamme Academy

Really, we don't make this stuff up!

MR. STEELE: (*consoling a tearful student*):
What's wrong?

STUDENT: It's only a half day today and
we don't have school Monday!

MR. STEELE: Oh, I know, I wish you could
come and we would still have classes.

STUDENT: I don't want to leave. I wish
this was like Hogwarts. I want to sleep here
and stay here on weekends.

MR. STEELE: We will be back on Tuesday!

STUDENT: It feels like the world is over!



VanDamme Academy Behind the Scenes

One of the things I enjoy most about the school is the always active, collaborative dialogue that goes on among the teachers. Between staff meetings, teacher training, chance encounters in the hallway, and out-of-school gatherings, we are always communicating and always trying to improve. Periodically I will send teachers a "Thought of the Day." To give you a glimpse of our behind-the-scenes dialogue, here is an example.

Building Good Spelling Skills

An important means of reinforcing good spelling skills is to correct the mistakes students make in their own work and ask them to rewrite the words, spelling them properly. This reinforces the lessons they are learning in spelling class, and gives particular attention to their own, personal difficulties in spelling.

The standard procedure at VanDamme Academy is to write a little circled "sp" above the misspelled word (in the children's notes or assignments) and to write the correct spelling next to the word or at the bottom of the page. When the work is handed back, the child should (whenever possible) be given a few moments to erase and rewrite the words correctly. (I have been having mine rewrite the words in blue pen, to indicate that they were words that had been misspelled.)

Correcting their spelling in *all* their work is crucial to their individual improvement. If a child is a chronically poor speller, and it would take too much time to correct all his spelling mistakes—I leave it to your individual judgment how many he should correct at any given time. We don't want to let mistakes go, but neither do we want to overwhelm them and distract from the task at hand.

And to the educators who say those red marks give the kids low self-esteem, I say nonsense: only if we plant in their heads the idea that it should. Otherwise, they know they are here to learn, and they take corrections as a matter of course!

So, let's build their self-esteem by correcting all their errors, and making them competent, confident spellers!

Happy Teaching,

Lisa VanDamme