

Shad Valley Program

— an alumnus' reflections

by Renée I.A. Mercuri

I laugh, with amusement and satisfaction, when I think back to who I was ten years ago.

There I am—at the top of my class in Grade 11 at a west-end Toronto high school and completely miserable. Although involved in my school community, I was lonely in my interests and my pursuits.

My parents were proud of my achievements, both academically and extra curricular.

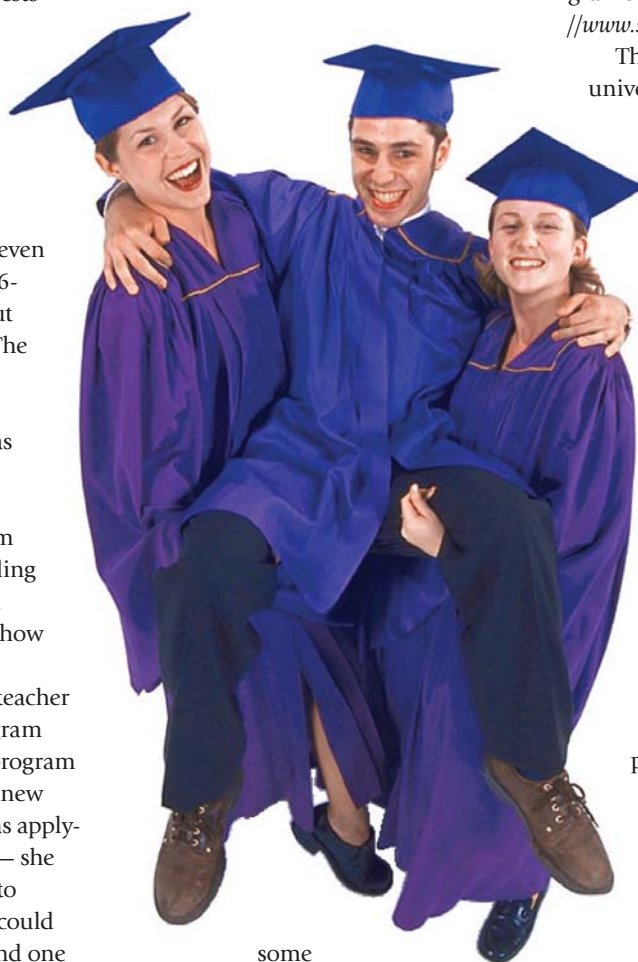
My classmates were proud... of getting away with drinking underage and dating seven people in three months. I was 16-going-on-17. But, I was not about to break into a song from the "The Sound of Music." Ten years ago, the harmonious and uplifting Julie Andrews musical seemed as far from my reality as possible.

I was mostly tormented by who I was, craving freedom from the high school routine and feeling like a geek. I was driven to push forward, so I did. I didn't know how else to be.

Around the same time the teacher for my high school's gifted program invited me apply to a summer program for top high school students. I knew almost nothing about what I was applying for but I trusted my teacher— she was constantly challenging me to challenge myself. Besides, how could I pass up an opportunity to spend one month away from home on a university campus somewhere in Canada? It also crossed my mind that the chances were good that I wouldn't be the only geek at this program known as Shad Valley.

Ten years later, I am 26-going-on-27. I am an aspiring writer and working as a magazine editor at a small publishing company. I have pursued my

life-long interests to travel and become a scuba diver. I am fascinated by the Internet, so I volunteer as an editor and web page creator for an online science publication that is also a community of university students. I aspire to learn to play the guitar, have a family, travel



some more and tackle anything else that I find along my path. I am still a geek but I am no longer tormented by who I am. I have discovered that it's not necessarily about the right thing to do, but about the right person to be.

So what happened in ten years? I grew up and matured, that's for sure.

I experienced a lot—my parents say more than they have in their lifetime. I have constantly aspired to live by *carpe diem*—seize the day. In my mind, it started with one experience that helped me feel better about being on this often tumultuous but gratifying path. After applying to the Shad Valley program at 16-going-on-17, I didn't hold my breath about getting in. But when I made the first cut, all of a sudden, I wanted to make it there.

I did make it to Shad Valley, although it's not an actual place. You can find out more about the program's founding and naming at http://www.shad.ca/art_dereklanesmith.html.

The program happens on several university campuses across Canada.

My program unfolded at Carleton University in Ottawa during the month of July in 1993. Although I arrived at Shad thinking I had walked into summer school for nerds, this notion quickly dissipated. I was engaged in university-level math, engineering, business, entrepreneurship and technology lectures, and workshops. The program turned out to be unlike high school and more like much-needed exercise for my brain.

It makes sense. This is what the founder of Shad Valley, Dr. Derek Lane-Smith was aiming for when he created the program: "I wanted to create an environment to motivate kids to stretch themselves, to get near their full potential and to experience the job and freedom of real intellectual flight."

I confess though I slept through many of those "intellectual flights" in lectures. Living on campus included staying up to all hours. It's not surprising we experienced sleep deprivation. Shad brought together a cultural and religious mosaic of 50 of Canada's most motivated young talent and immersed us, 24 hours a day, seven days a

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week for one month, in constant challenge and discovery. Along with lectures, recreational activities were organized and artistic pursuits were encouraged. I turned my cello-playing on its side and took up the bass guitar in a band with three other Shads. I tried line-dancing, Tai Chi, fencing and experienced Canada Day in Ottawa. Every single day was packed with stimulation for both sides of my brain and my body. Shad helped me feel like anything was possible. When I finally gave into my urges to write, soon after I returned home from Shad, I realized I had tapped into my passion and decided I could make a living from doing what I loved.

But, still, I don't think I've put my finger on what made Shad such a life changing experience for me. I spoke to Mary Dever, National Director of Development with Shad International,

and she offered me her insights into the program. "What I see Shad doing is developing the next generation of innovators who are going to drive the country forward," she told me. "Shad is providing this forum for students to come together and really understand what contribution they can make and what a difference that makes."

But, there is still more to it. I've worried at times after Shad that the program was elitist—that only certain people could go there, who had both the good application and the money to experience what I did. It turns out Shad is now able to offer scholarships and bursaries, the latter for those who demonstrate a need. There have never been restrictions on who can apply although obviously, not everyone who applies attends the program.

What I have discovered, personally, since completing the program is that it's

the spirit of Shad that touches so many people, in and outside the program. Every Shad "survivor" goes on to join new communities in their careers and social life, producing a ripple effect. The best part is that ripple can come back and touch you. The vibrancy of the Shad alumni network allows this spirit to continue to burn long after Shad. When Shad International, the organization that runs Shad Valley, sent out on my behalf an email seeking feedback from alumni on their impressions of Shad for this article, I received over 140 replies in less than four days. Some of these replies came from fellow Shads at Carleton in 1993, but the vast majority were from Shads I don't know, some older and some younger than me from Shad programs spanning the last twenty years. All of them were eagerly interested in telling me how this common experience influenced their life and how strongly they felt about the program. I realized because of this response it is the spirit of community that I remember best about Shad. Ever since Shad I have sought out communities where I could feel like I belonged, where I could collaborate instead of compete, grow instead of conform.

Phil Ferguson attended Shad with me at Carleton. He replied to the email request. Today, he is married and pursuing his Ph.D in human spaceflight at MIT. I grinned when I read that. Phil, like me, had dreams of becoming an astronaut. "Shad Valley lit a flame in me that has been growing ever since," he writes in his email. "I remember Juan (Salinas, program director, Shad Valley Carleton, 1993) used to say that early in our Shad program, he would look out into the lecture hall and see a room full of sparks. At the end of the month, he saw a room full of fire." Looking back ten years, I can still see that fire burning. **BWC**

*Renée I.A. Mercuri currently works as the editor of Our Kids Publications Ltd. (www.ourkids.net) in Toronto and volunteers with the online science journal, the Journal of Young Investigators (www.jyi.org). To find out how to get involved with Shad Valley visit www.shad.ca
Editors Note: BWC will be working with Shad Valley to produce a CD that will raise awareness of this incredible program, from the perspective of the alumni.*

What would you do?

This is a moral/ethical dilemma that was once actually used as part of a job application.

You are driving along in your car on a wild, stormy night. You pass by a bus stop, and you see three people waiting for the bus:

- An old lady who looks as if she is about to die.
- An old friend who once saved your life.
- The perfect man (or) woman you have been dreaming about.

Which one would you choose to offer a ride to, knowing that there could only be one passenger in your car.

Think before you continue reading.

You could pick up the old lady, because she is going to die, and thus you should save her first; or you could take the old friend because he once saved your life, and this would be the perfect chance to pay him back. However, you may never be able to find your perfect dream lover again.

The candidate who was hired! (out of 200 applicants) had no trouble coming up with his answer.

I love this, I may actually use it sometime for an interview situation.

He simply answered: "I would give the car keys to my old friend, and let him take the lady to the hospital. I would stay behind and wait for the bus with the woman of my dreams."

Never forget to "Think Outside of the Box."