

The High School View

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Jeff Agnoli peaces out

By EmmaJean Holley

In an age of convoluted questions, Jeff Agnoli's office in the guidance department has the answers pared down to poetry and picture frames. The patchwork on his bulletin board is filled with the simplicity one must ultimately embrace: when the future portends uncertainties that the SAT cannot assuage, he'll offer the Dalai Lama's mantra to unfetter those spinning thoughts. After 39 years of working as guidance counselor and teacher--24 on the Vineyard--he plans to retire.

But quelling fears and smoothing conflicts aren't his only specialties. Although Mr. Agnoli has worked as a guidance counselor at the regional high school for the past 12 years, he also taught English for many years prior.

"The real subject, to me, has always been the self," said Mr. Agnoli. "Education allows a person to bring in their personal philosophy and practice it. The ability to change and accept change, the ability to get in touch with your inner self--these are not formally taught. Education should not be to fill up with information, but to activate one's natural gifts and intelligence."

Mr. Agnoli's drive to impart a wisdom and newness that transcended textbooks manifested itself in his English classroom, where he used literature to help students think critically "These are skills and tools that are always going to be important," he said.

Indeed, these tenets are as relevant now as they were 25 years ago, when Mr. Agnoli taught in the classroom next to English teacher Keith Dodge. "He was innovative," said Mr. Dodge. "He had different ways of approaching things--he was student-centered, student-oriented, and was always about working with the individual. His lesson plans were creative, something he thought of that engaged students in an interesting way."

According to Mr. Dodge, it was this dedication to student engagement that contributed to Mr. Agnoli's success in the guidance department. "He carries the same attitude in guidance that's all about advocating for students," he said. "He's not afraid to go against authority or tradition if he thinks it's right and

for the best. I'm just glad he finally came over from the Dark Side and became a Red Sox and Patriots fan."

Despite his allegiance to regional sports teams, Mr. Agnoli's slant of teaching remained as nontradition-

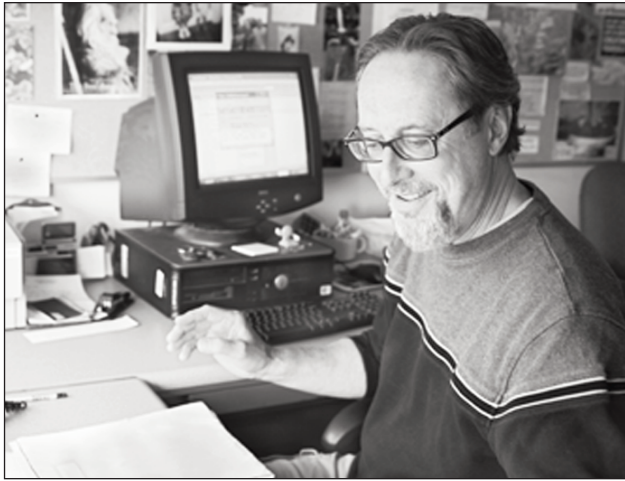


PHOTO BY TRUDA SILBERSTEIN

Mr. Agnoli sits in his office in the guidance department where he meets daily with students and parents.

al as his own viewpoints about education. "He was extremely careful and thoughtful with his methodology," said English teacher David Wilson. "He didn't introduce any lesson or learning concept that he hadn't thought through the foundation of--how to articulate it carefully, how to reinforce it, make it last. He was one of the most thoughtful practitioners of knowledge I've ever worked with. There are not many people out there who put as much thought into presenting a piece of education as he does."

The roots of Mr. Agnoli's career sprawl back beyond the Vineyard. He used to teach at an inner-city high school in New Jersey. He was a reading teacher at a residential home for delinquent boys. He taught elementary school English and was a fourth grade classroom teacher.

"I wanted to work with a broad range of grade levels," Mr. Agnoli said. "But I've always been fascinated by that period between childhood and adulthood. It includes the best of what we associate with childhood--that curiosity, wonder, and connection to life. Now more than ever, it's so important for young people to continue to find life engaging and to participate fully in whatever it is that they do."

Throughout his teaching career, Mr. Agnoli aimed to impart the values of literacy and expression needed to nurture the sanctity of the human spirit. "If circumstances don't intervene, people are naturally

curious, responsible, and intelligent, looking for a way to contribute," he said. "It was true in 1973 and it'll be true in 2013."

After nearly three decades, his favorite part of the job is seeing the progress his students make in both their educations and lives. "It's extraordinarily satisfying to see some of my former students go on to perform important tasks," he said.

Justine DeOliveira was one such student. Now a regional high school Spanish teacher and World Language department chair, she was one of Mr. Agnoli's freshman English students. "He was always positive and supportive," she said. "He really got into connecting with students through the content that he loved." But Ms. DeOliveira has a slightly different standpoint--she's known the maestro since she was five.

"I became best friends with his daughter, Alicia, in kindergarten," she said. "Since then, he's been like family. He taught me how to throw a football around in the backyard. Often, he would be gardening while we played outside. But in all the years I've known him, he's never been anything but a great role model, a great teacher, and a great dad."

"When he applied for the job and I asked him why he wanted it, I re-

member he said, 'I want to make a difference in a different way,'" said Michael McCarthy, director of the guidance. "I thought that, in and of itself, was demonstrative of why he wasn't your typical applicant. He had a background in English and more desire to reach out than he knew what to do with."

Mr. Agnoli continues to serve his students. "I really got into marine biology this year, and I found a summer internship at the Woods Hole Aquarium that I was interested in applying for, and they required a few letters of recommendation," said junior Sammi Chaves. The applications were due two days later. "Just my luck," said Sammi. "So I immediately contacted Mr. Agnoli in a panic, hoping that he could write me a letter. He did and I'm so grateful--it was an amazing letter." Sammi's acceptance status is still pending. "But without him, I wouldn't even have had a shot," she said.

Junior Sam Oslin said, "I remember last year, Mr. Agnoli figured from my English grades that I liked reading, so he called me into his office just to talk about books. I left his office that day with a list of books to read that have since become some of my all-time favorites. It's that level of genuine interest Mr. Agnoli has that separates him from the masses."

"It's all about giving people the tools to lead meaningful lives," Mr. Agnoli said. "But that's not something that can be measured over the short term, or even through objective instruments like standard-

ized testing."

"The greatest thing about Mr. Agnoli is that he cares more about his students than he does about the rules," said junior Sam Oslin. "I'm not saying that he's ever let me do things I'm not allowed to, but he tries to make the rules work with his students' lives rather than make his students' lives work with the rules."

Mr. Agnoli's insights and discoveries have contributed to a vast reservoir of knowledge. "He knows everything," said guidance counselor John Fiorito. "He's one of the most well-rounded people I know because he's so well read and so current with the world. When I go to talk to him, I can't wait to discuss politics, music, sports, or education. He really does know a little bit of everything--actually, probably a lot of everything."

But Mr. Agnoli's cache of cross-curricular wisdom has lent him humility rather than pomposity. "He doesn't come across as a know-it-all," Mr. Fiorito said. "He's soft-spoken. He listens to people. But his conversations are passionate. He's brilliant in a way that's not in your face about it."

Looking ahead, Mr. Agnoli is excited to spend time with his grandchildren. "I'll miss what I've enjoyed on a daily basis for decades. But at the same time, I'm excited to enter a period that will present just as many opportunities to grow."

Glancing back on decades of such growth, Mr. Agnoli said, "I like to think I achieved what I set out to do."

Linguine contest heads to overtime

By Lily Bick

Freshman Gordon Moore's bridge, constructed from a pound of pasta, won this year's linguine bridge contest by never cracking--even with 1,500 points of steel plate piled on top. The bridge's final breaking point will be determined later this week when it will be tested further. The contest was held on Monday in the Performing Arts Center.

The bridges, constructed only of linguine pasta and Elmer's glue, were subject to a few restrictions. Bridges could not be over one pound and had to hold at least 25 pounds.

Students in some of math teacher and event organizer Ken DeBettencourt's math classes learned about bridge-building during lectures, then were set free to build their



PHOTO BY DYLAN BROCKMEYER

Freshman Charlotte Potter watches as her pasta bridge collapses demolished under 200 pounds of weight.

bridges at home in pairs or individually. "I just wanted to start a project that was fun for students and applied their geometry," said Mr. DeBettencourt. "But the main thing is it's just a fun project."

Freshman Samantha Potter, who built a bridge, said, "You really had to think about what you were doing and place each piece of pasta in the exact right place for it to be helpful."

The contest benefits the education of students in several fields, rather than just math. Said science teacher John Nelson, "I think Kenny puts great energy and great excitement into it. I think it's great for kids to compete in engineering competitions."

Second and third place prizes went to Patrick McCarthy and Toron DeLuz's bridge, which held 1,125 pounds and Jacob Pertile's bridge, which held 675 pounds.