

7-18-2009

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Recommended Citation

Lederman, Leon; Demombynes, Gabriel '89; Truitt, Jeffrey '89; and Marshall, Stephanie Pace, "Dr. Leon Lederman, Gabriel Demombynes '89, Jeffrey Truitt '89, and Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall" (2009). *Oral Histories*. 2.
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IMSA Oral History – Interviews from July 18th 2009

Participants: Dr. Leon Lederman, Gabriel Demombynes '89, Jeffrey Truitt '89, and Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall

Leon: There was a young man that's hard to describe to you. He was 14 years old and it was move in day. And he was standing there all alone and he was looking at all the people moving trunks and so on. And I said "Hi" and he said "Hi. I hear there are a lot of nerds here!" He had thick glasses...he was a proto-typical nerd.

Stephanie: So given all of that, why did you come?

Jeffrey: For me, it was an opportunity to...well...there was really no downside, in a sense, that I just saw this fantastic opportunity to go to a place that would have incredible academics and community. I've always been grateful that the powers that be created this place for people who had essentially special needs in a different way that's traditionally been provided for.

Stephanie: Did you feel, I'm just curious, that you made the decision or did your parents say this a really great place and a great opportunity; you need to go here. We want you to go here. How did that happen?

Jeffrey: I brought home the brochure and actually quit the track team in order to prepare my application and study for the SAT. They were kind of along for the ride; I don't really know if they ever got on the boat.

M: I hear that a lot, that's why I'm just curious.

Gabriel: I think it was the same in my case as well. I think my parents wanted me to come but didn't tell me that because they wanted me to make my own decision. I'm not even sure I made a firm decision to come to IMSA. I sort of applied on a whim. Then I got in and was like, "Well it's interesting, I might as well go." I was away for the summer before we came. Then I thought, "Well I'll go for a couple of weeks and see how it goes." So I never decided not to stay at IMSA or not to go to IMSA. It was very much my intimate, not something that my parents did. And I think if I can put myself in my 15 year-old mindset, I think...I went to a suburban high school, which was a very good high school, but still there it was not cool to be a good student and it was not cool to be smart. And of course I was always a good student, but it was always something I had to keep hidden, and the first thing I felt at IMSA was that it was transformed and everybody was happy to be smart and intellectually engaged and that's what they were here for. So that was tremendous, and even beyond what I had a pretty good high school in suburban Chicago.

Stephanie: So do you have earliest memories?

Gabriel: Well my memory was showing up and seeing the sign that said future location of dormitories. And after that coming in and thinking that it was amazing that we actually did come and then coming in and finding one room with 20 beds. And then another room with twenty desks and another room with 20 lockers. So that definitely stuck in my head, "Well we'll see how it goes."

Stephanie: Many of which was assembled the night before you came by the way.

Jeffrey: I was on the student council the first year. And there was a vote early on to decide the future mascot of the Illinois Math and Science Academy. And I want to put on the spot because I don't know that I got the whole story. The initial vote was not for titans it was for something else.

Stephanie: Rebels.

Jeffrey: It was not approved.

Stephanie: By me. You know that was really...there were so many things to calibrate at IMSA and we had it setup where we had it from a list where you guys were voting. I don't recall that Titans was on the list.

Jeffrey: It was.

Stephanie: But when rebels was chosen I did say no and the reason was I was concerned that it would be misread by the external community and there was so much riding on IMSA. There was so much required in terms of the political, external community which I and others on my team tried to create a barrier between the work that we were doing and the work that you were doing so you were not impacted by the political turmoil and angst which is the world we lived in for a long period of time. And I was...I wanted this to be free and open and the kids voting and OMG now they did. And I did not feel that it would not serve us going forward. And there were a lot of those things where you said this is a state institution so how do we hold the space for the children and be responsible as state stewards.

Leon: Boom, this is magic! You just woke up and got a new job, you are going to create an IMSA type school in California, no that doesn't practically exist anymore, in Montana or Alabama, you are going to start this school and you have a budget and loans, which is embarrassing, a challenge to spend it. What do you do? What do you do?

Stephanie: What would have been a harder question are the conditions, which we started under with no carp loan and no guarantees and not a lot of money and a reduced budget then what are you going to do? Oh I see it's two different questions. Never mind, go ahead.

Leon: As far as you know you have no obstacles you do have, we should make a realistic system of American public that sees education in a different way. If you don't teach creationism you are not a real school for example. There are attitudes in this country that are going to oppose what you want to do as people opposed the existence of IMSA. But as a school now, this is what I want to concentrate on, is what is the ideal school system? This country is desperate for innovation and to have innovation you need education. So you are playing an important role in the future of the nation.

Gabriel: But my sense is that the greatest value to a place like IMSA is probably not what happens with the individual graduates of the school but what happens with the school as a model and laboratory for other schools,

because I think the problem is not with schools like IMSA but with the rest of the educational system. And I know IMSA does some things on the line of this, but those outreach efforts to send faculty out to send students out or bring in teachers or students from other schools to experience IMSA, I think that is crucial. I think, in my view that is the most important role for a place like IMSA.

Gabriel: I definitely think in my whole life I've had this experience of intellectually inquiry, I'm not sure I would have that if I hadn't been through IMSA. I'm sure I would still be successful doing something well, but I'm not sure the breadth of intellectual experience I've had with IMSA because my experience was strong across the board it wasn't just in the sciences, just in the mathematics. I had a fantastic English class, which opened my eyes to literature, wonderful social science professors, Dr. Hollister and Dr. Stephan, and I think they made more of an impact on me than the sciences, but I came away with a scientific mind.

Stephanie: So we used the phrase here "the IMSA way" and it's sort of hard to get your mind around what that means, but if a state tries to not to create another IMSA, but the IMSA way which is the design of how we do what we do. Imagine if it was available to the every one of the 16,500 school districts in the country never mind the 50 states. But the way that we teach and the orientation to inquiry and the relationship between teachers and kids, can you help us define the IMSA way?

Gabriel: Well certainly things you have touched on. I remember in Hollister's class we visited a cemetery as part of a history project. He was encouraged us to look into the history of Chicago, and that was something that wouldn't have happened at a typical high school. It wasn't specifically what we learned on that trip but it was the notion that a cemetery could be historical, an object to historical study. That is something that we carried forward in everything we did.

Gabriel: We should mention briefly the student paper experiences, because I was involved in various incarnations of the student newspaper, we first started off Naomi Geltner worked with us verbatim, we had a few issues with that. I'm not sure of the timeline; I think it was the end of the first year that we put that together. A group of maybe 5 or 6 students and then I think it was in the second year, we decided we weren't happy with the Verbatim name partly because the logo, which I think Naomi helped us work on, the v was written to look like a square root sign. So people would call it the "square root of erbatim." So from the very beginning we were seeking a new name. So the second year, I think, we searched for a new name, we had a desperate search and I remember we had, there was a very early Internet system we had hooked up with the University of Illinois. It wasn't the Internet, it was pre. We had a network where we put up a post on one of news groups that we were looking for a name. Someone from the U of I group suggested we do something with the name Prometheus, that time we had the titans as our mascot. Thinking about the different names of the titans and Prometheus is one of the titans, so we settled on the Promethean as the name of the re-launched newspaper. And Jeff worked on that.

Jeffrey: I think he said why don't we use one of the gods. I think I looked through some different gods that we would be able to use and I found that Prometheus gave fire to mankind.

Gabriel: I think somebody suggested Prometheus bound. I think that was the first suggestion, but I'm willing to give you credit. I wanted to tie in the early use of newsgroup. And we had a few issues with the Promethean and then we had a stark competitor from another group of students called the Acronym. And the acronym has persisted and unfortunately the Prometheus has died a quiet death.

Jeffrey: We were the sanctions anchor and we were funded the second year because the first day of the year, Gabriel and I sold subscriptions to all the parents and we got funding for the paper for throughout the year, but my prose for enterprising and he started selling square inches to students to advertise for his paper so hats off to him. On that primitive billboard system. Were you involved in the Middle East peace conference? We had this primitive modem system and so all you would try to do is to arrange some conference.

Gabriel: It was actually designed so that a group of students would have a role as one party in the Middle East peace talks. So one group was the United States, one group was Israel, and one group, unfortunately ours, was the PLO. I remember in the official announcements that there were a few times that there was a PLO meeting in the cafeteria. I got some inquiry from somebody in the administration saying "what is it there's a PLO faction?" And that was done through this very slow modem.

Jeffrey: It was very primitive and it was pre Internet so you wouldn't know if they didn't want to participate in the peace talks or if they didn't just get the message.

Gabriel: And maybe that's how it is in real life too.