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Dr. Leon Lederman, Brian Maier ‘89, Kevin Schraith ‘89, and Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall

Leon Lederman
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Brian Maier ‘89
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Kevin Schraith ‘89
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Stephanie Pace Marshall
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

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Leon: IMSA kinda started in 83, 84 and opened in 86, and so there was a lot of starting. What did we do wrong?

Kevin: Everything was right. What could possibly be wrong? I don't know; it's hard to say in retrospect. I mean, certainly you could look at the facilities, the preparations of facilities, but it's one of my most treasured memories coming here, so, I mean, living in those - I was just over at the old 8A, and living in those rooms for 8 or 9 months or whatever it was.

Brian: With 23 of your closest friends.

Leon: Should we have left it that way?

Kevin: I think you should have left it that way, yeah.

Leon: That's not the first time you said that.

Kevin: Hazing for the incoming class would have been great. I mean you have to eventually, now that we're using all of the facilities but....

Leon: The girls with their hair curlers.

Brian: They were behind art and music

Kevin: What was the other one... art, music... and...?

Brian: That was it for them.

Kevin: There were only two dorms for the girls?

Brian: Yeah, they were spread out into like 6As and Bs, 7A and Bs....

Kevin: Yeah, I don't know, I think-the things is, it's probably different for the first class versus other classes, but for us the things that I kinda remember most and treasure most are the places where you really saw the seams, you really saw that it wasn't all figured out and going together. You know, talking to other people in our class we were always like 'It's too bad for the later classes that everybody else got everything together because there's a little less of that valuable chaos. I think that really makes it special.'

Stephanie: Talk a little bit more about that, and then you [Brian] jump in as well. What are the seams?

Kevin: About the chaos?

Stephanie: Well the seams, yeah.

Kevin: Well I think there was a lot of stuff. I mean, I think everybody had a lot to learn about what it means to have a big building where you've got, you know, 200 kids living away from home for the first time. And unfortunately 200 way too creative, way too smart kids, and there was a lot of places where, you know, in retrospect, I mean, even from a lawsuit standpoint: could you ever pull that off?

Leon: Exactly.

Kevin: And I think that there were a lot of lessons learned on the way. I know that my reactions went through the years; we got on to the second and third years –and this is probably just over romanticizing things - It felt like there were too many rules came in, to try to react to probably the chaos and the things now as a parent I would never imagine you would let people do that seemed like good fun to us.

Brian: I remember the second year that we finally moved out to the dorms and you came back in you were still wearing your hat, and you get stopped by a counselor who’d just started that first year and he’s
like ‘what, do you think you’re living here or something’ and I did live here for a year. And so, the informality kind of left, and more rules imposed, but that was probably good.

**Stephanie:** Why did you come?

**Kevin:** Brian.

**Brian:** Ooh, I don’t know.

**Stephanie:** And how did you find out about us, too?

**Brian:** My mother was a third grade teacher and I think she went to a gifted conference, and they were talking about this new school that was starting, and she said ‘Well do you want to go see it?’ And my dad was adamantly opposed to it and he’s like ‘He’s not leaving home so soon,’ but....

**Leon:** Why?

**Brian:** He just, you know, wanted his son to be with him at home and to be part of a family and my mom’s like ‘Why don’t we just go see it?’

**Leon:** It was the leaving home that was the problem.

**Brian:** Yeah, and we came up in the middle of the summer and Dr. Stepien was here, Bill Stepien, but he looked like the janitor at the time. He was wearing shorts and he led us on a tour and it was great and my dad, after that my dad was like ‘Ooh, yea, this would be a great opportunity.’

**Leon:** Shorts! Write that down.

**Stephanie:** For the IMSA way: shorts! We’ll tell the new Secretary of Education: shorts!

**Kevin:** For me I don’t even, I remember being told about it by a guidance counselor or something; I think that’s probably how I heard about it. I remember having the conversation with my parents. I had no idea what I was getting into; I had no idea what sort of a change it would be or what to expect, but I do remember coming for the visit and just knowing this is exactly where I needed to be. And as far as sort of decisions you make during life, this is an easy one to point back as sort of a positive turning point.

**Stephanie:** So what is that knowing? What do you mean you knew?

**Kevin:** It was just had a feeling of fitting. Just like, this is the right place to be.

**Brian:** A good challenge.

**Kevin:** I think a lot of people- I won’t generalize, maybe, and kind of over characterize the whole ‘I was a geek in high school’ thing, but I think a lot of people felt like ‘Wow, this was a place I can fit in.” It’s easy, it’s hard to communicate that without really feeling it, but you kind of get used to not feeling it. [To Brian] I don’t know if you felt the same way.

**Brian:** You felt like, yeah, I didn’t really need to work that hard at my old school; I wanted a new challenge, new direction, and everything that Bill was saying was like ‘Yeah I can do that, it’d be fun, it’d be great, it’d be a good challenge, it’d be a leg up on the competition to get into college, it was a perfect fit.’

**Kevin:** Everybody’s awkward socially there, and for me I loved it. It was a great reset socially for me, the things that I learned, and the way to fit in socially, and how to be comfortable in your own skin. That was where things really clicked, and maybe that was just the age, you know you’re 15,16 and that’s just kind of how you’re developing, but I always have that strong association with school here.

**Stephanie:** So in terms of learning, and how you were taught, and what you were asked to do, what do you remember? What were some of your most important, good or bad, memories, relative to...?

**Kevin:** It seems to me we were given a lot of responsibility early on I remember that. You were given a lot of responsibility to make it or not. You had a lot of, it wasn’t, your hands weren’t necessarily being held in terms of all the assignments you had, all projects you were supposed to do, and how to keep track of everything and how to make those adjustments and from a social standpoint as well, but I do, I mean, I
think, obviously you’re exposed, there was a lot of belief and it seemed like there was a lot of backing behind kinda, behind I would say sort of the scientific method, but you can kind of explore any direction you want, you can take any position you want if you can back it up. You know, if you can substantiate it, if you have a position - I remember some of the best challenges I had...I mean I loved, oh god I can’t remember, I can’t remember her name, a female teacher, English. Blond, Barbara... Babs Taylor I used to call her. I remember, I was never into the humanities and it was always, of course, a lot of kids here it was part of their weak points, but I remember getting the most out of Dr. Clark’s class, Dr. Taylor’s class, because I was kind of exposed to the fact that you could approach teachers that would be accepting of not just like ‘This is the way critics have interpreted these works and this is the way you’re supposed to do it’, but I remember having a lot of fun with ‘Take whatever approach you want to how the work is there and if you can defend it, if you can talk intelligently...’ I remember having, I remember specifically, very clearly, I remember an assignment to interpret [to Brian] what’s the cockroach story...? I can’t believe I’m forgetting all these things. Transformation, metamorphosis.

**Brain: The Fly.**

**Kevin:** Not The Fly, who was the...? Well, all the things that I can’t remember. The guy wakes up and he’s turned into a cockroach.

**Stephanie:** Don’t ask us what we remember!

**Kevin:** Franz Kafka. I knew I it was in my brain somewhere, thank you brain. So the metamorphosis, so he wakes up and he’s turned into a cockroach and I remember having a long and passionate debate about how his little sister next door was actually a demon priestess and she had turned him into the cockroach and having the debate with the teacher and having to come up with, ‘Well, but there’s this part and these little throw away thing in the story,’ But you kind of pick those things and you can have a really very good time with it. There’s no- you can take the accepted approaches for any of that but you can never prove authorial intent; that was always the nice part. The humanities are a little squishier that way. I definitely appreciate that. She gave us a lot of freedom and she gave us support, even when a lot of that approach was just trying to be a little bit of a smart aleck and just have fun with it. But to be taken seriously even in that, and to be given the same responsibilities to defend what you’re saying was important.

**Stephanie:** How do you think about, when you fast-forward to 23 years later, how do you think about who you are now being seated at such a critical time in this environment? Did it matter? Because we’re always asked, ‘so what?’ You heard Dr. McGee say that today. ‘So what?’ Hundreds of thousands of millions of dollars later, why did Illinois need IMSA? So how do you become different? And if so, how?

**Brian:** I think it was a collector’s experience; you read about in the alumni newsletter, all these accomplishments in science and in education that people have done over the years, and you’re thinking: I don’t think it would have come, well, it probably would have come out of a community, or out of a regular high school, but the resources here were so much better that research could be done at a lower level. Whereas it would normally be done maybe at a college level, here it could be done at a high school level. The support, the access to the top notch scientists in the I-88 corridor, I think it really fostered an environment where you really can do whatever you want. Look at some of the accomplishments that came out of this place, what, MySpace, social networking, the first browser. I mean, that’s a huge accomplishment that really got its brainchild here.

**Stephanie:** So, what was fun? Let’s go back to Leon’s question, you know, what did we do wrong? When you think about IMSA, besides all the intellectual stimulation, what was fun? Stuff that it’s okay to tell us. I always shudder about the things that I never knew.

**Kevin:** I feel like I’m in the saintly minority when it comes to having done bad things. I mean, the things I remember with Brian. I remember being up all night playing Dungeons and Dragons. Brian: Cuz he was our hall counselor, or whatever it was....
Kevin: I remember the more innocent evasion of rules; I remember the late night card games. I have a four year old now and I see the same things in her; it’s a lot about learning your boundaries. You’re young adults, you’re being given some responsibility, but it’s still about—there’s that battle with authority. [To Stephanie] You know, you represented a lot of our authority, a lot of our monitoring, I’m sure you know that.

Stephanie: I know that.

Kevin: You had a set of kids that were, there were certainly elements among the set of kids, that were very intent on not conforming and I think that was a very interesting lesson. I think I learned a lot about how to be, how to live my life in a way that makes sense without being concerned about conforming. And I think a little bit; it’s not always a healthy environment to be the outlier; it’s not always a safe environment. I don’t want to say it’s necessarily safe, cuz lots of people got in some trouble here, from being on that, or from feeling like they had to be the outlier among the outliers. That’s dangerous too. But it was, I dunno, for me personally, the most important thing, more than educational, I mean, I think, it’s hard to gauge that, it’s hard to see that, well, what would I have known if I’d gone the way with public school, and what, would I be taking college classes in high school and just having a different experience? But, I always treasured the self-confidence it gave, living alone very early. I know it’s tough for a lot of people, it was tough in a lot of ways for me, but I feel like it definitely made a big deal in me becoming who I am and being comfortable in who I am and what I’m doing. It’s very humbling to look at the alumni newsletters and seeing who’s doing what or who’s done what. 20 years on, it makes you look and try to figure out which milestones you’re going to use to compare yourself. At least I’m not the 0.3% in jail even if I’m not the 0.3% with a Nobel Prize. But, I remember that very well.

Leon: It’s not easy to find someone like me who says to everybody, shows everybody, that it’s not so hard.

Stephanie: What, getting a Nobel Prize?

Leon: ’That’s a Nobel Prize winner? It can’t be that hard!’

Kevin: You give us hope.

Leon: That’s my role.

Leon: Could IMSA be a non-dormitory school?

Kevin: A non-residential school?

Leon: Residential versus non-residential.

Kevin: I would be very sad to see it be non-residential.

Brian: Yeah, because most of my fondest memories were when, like the weekends when a lot of the kids would go home. It would be Kevin, and the guys from the Quad Cities, us guys from downstate Champaign; that’s who was here on the weekends. It was your family, really.

Kevin: The magic of this school, I mean, obviously academics are going to be good and that’s what’s going to be the easiest things to point at and say, and I know all the outreach programs, and all this stuff’s that official, but the places that seem to make the most difference to me were kinda the, I talked about the seams, it’s kinda the places in between. It’s all the, I mean, the memories of snow days, right? Where snow covers everything and nobody can go anywhere, nobody can come in, and we’d be filling that time, you know, and finding a place to fit in.

Brian: The snow football games, and yeah.

Stephanie: Did you feel restricted by some of the intentional rules? Like, and here’s what I’m thinking about, no cars, no TVs in your room, IMSA’s—we’re not gonna offer football. Those kinds of things that for that age group so many kids are saying ‘Oh my god, I just can’t wait till I drive. And football is a high
school thing, everybody goes, from cheerleaders, and television. So I mean, those intentional things. Did you feel a sense of loss, or you wanted to push on different boundaries?

**Brian:** I think back in the mid-80s, I don't think TVs in your room were a big thing back then. We had one or two in the house. The only on the cars, I would think, I lived three and a half hours south, if I could have driven here, handed someone the keys, and then taken it and driven back it would have saved the seven hour round trip every, once a month.

**Kevin:** It was five hours for my folks, but yeah, they definitely had to suffer. It built a little bit, it created a little bit of a tension, not tension, cuz I don’t remember it negatively, but it created sort of a difference between the downstate and the more local folks. There were certainly, I’m sure you know there were local folks who had cars parked in residential neighborhoods not too far. I remember my last month before graduation my dad let me bring the car up and park it off-campus, and you’d wonder off and go drive. Kids are going to find a way around all those things cuz you want to. The TV was never a problem. Gosh, now if you had Internet access you got Internet access to any video you want, when you want it, so it almost doesn’t make a difference. I remember I had snuck a TV into my room in the dorms for my Commodore 64 computer. I didn't rouse any rabble. I mean, and I’m sure now, access to computers, I mean, we had the computer labs; it was a little bit of a limited resource.

**Kevin:** If I were going to say anything for perpetuity it’d be to show gratitude for the opportunity to be here. For being able to have my life changed the way that it has and to express hope that it can continue. I would love to see. I’ve got kids who are getting into school now, in California, god that state budget's in a mess, but to imagine that there could be a non-private, available, in a theoretical meritocratic manner, school that would be able to provide that kind of experience and that kind of environment to my kids if they were in a position where they needed it, that would be incredible. I would love to see the idea expand.