

From Those Who Have Left Us: An Interview with Former SRPA Students

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As part of our inquiry into what school life was like at SRPA for past students, we interviewed five previous students, who attended the Academy between 1997 and 2014. We asked specific questions about their school life and discussed the individual steps which laid the foundations for their different careers, such as teaching, acting, and midwifery, to reveal that anyone can achieve their goals if they have sufficient support and encouragement, as seen through many generations of SRPA students. Our interviewees included Miss Empson (KS4 director of achievement and mathematics teacher at SRPA), Mr White (deputy head of York house and science teacher at SRPA), Miss Risebrow (trainee History teacher at SRPA), and Liam Hudson and Lucy Traves (head boy and girl of SRPA in 2013).

Each interviewee studied a range of different subjects during their time at SRPA, including Geography, German, Russian, Economics, PE, History, Food Technology, and Drama, all along with the core English, Maths, and Science. From this, it is evident that, despite the many changes to our Academy since our interviewees left, some aspects such as subject choices have remained the same.

Social Life

Our first area of interest was which aspects of school our interviewees enjoyed the most. We found that the social side of school was very popular, and it was clear that each interviewee felt that their time here allowed them to develop vital social skills such as communication and the ability to make lasting friendships. It was evident from the start that the support past students had from their teachers was extremely valuable in terms of next steps after SRPA and in pursuance of their goals. Even though it is not possible for everyone to leave school with a clear vision for their future, many of our interviewees felt as though this did not limit the impact their teachers had on their future. For example, Lucy Traves, head girl in 2013, didn't initially know what career path she wanted to follow, but the incredible science department supported her later decision to enter midwifery. In addition, Miss Risebrow commented on how her history teacher helped her build confidence, and how her English teacher, Mrs Baldwin, was supportive and influential, guiding her development of literacy skills, which aided her in other subjects, such as History. Likewise, Liam Hudson, head boy in 2013, said that his favourite aspect of school was being able to spend every day with his best friend, Mr White, who you may know from the science department. He believes this to be something he took for granted at the time, but he now looks back on it fondly and wishes they could spend that much time together again.

Changes

Next, we inquired into the changes that have occurred throughout the school since each of our interviewees left. Miss Risebrow commented on the increase in female teachers in the history department and how this rise in diversity has been beneficial for the department. During her time at SRPA, she worked alongside three other amazing female history teachers, which was very different to the all-male history department she saw during her time as a student here. In addition, Mr White believes that many things have changed within the school since he was a pupil; from the perspective of a teacher, he believes that the interactions between students and teachers have become more positive. The house teams now are more visible and there is more support for students to access, especially when compared to what was available during his time at SRPA. He also mentioned the difference in how the Sixth Form is run in terms of being allowed to leave the school site during the school day. Due to the academy previously being a joint Sixth Form, Mr White explained that some of his lessons took place at North Kesteven School and some at SRPA. This provided him with an alibi when he sometimes didn't attend lessons! However, he also commented on how the classroom he now teaches in is the same as it was when he was taught physics here as a student, and the layout of the school is essentially the same however the designated areas for subject departments have changed.

Lessons learnt?

As students at SRPA, we thoroughly believe that our time and experiences here have taught us a lot of valuable lessons, both in academic terms as well as more generally about life, and about ourselves. Consequently, we decided to ask our interviewees what they believe to be the best thing our academy taught them. Mr White said that the school taught him to accept opportunities such as trips and clubs, as they have given him experiences that have opened many doors for him. Head Girl (2013), Lucy Traves, explained how our school taught her to always work hard and persevere, as the teachers always pushed her to do well in order to reach her full potential. Miss Empson mentioned that feedback is a vital part of every individual's school life, and you are more likely to achieve highly if you take it on board and accept constructive criticism in order to better yourself. Head Boy, Liam Hudson, said that one of the main things the school taught him was to respect people's experiences and to listen when you are given advice. Furthermore, he also expressed that it is okay to ask for help or assistance if you need it, as this enables you to have a wider understanding, instead of trying to work your problems or worries out alone struggling more in the long run.

As students, we also believe that the amazing teachers we have been taught by during our time at SRPA have made a huge difference and that they have been extremely impactful on our school life. Similarly to us, each interviewee expressed a great deal of gratitude towards their teachers at SRPA, Mr White said that although he was never influenced directly to become a teacher, Mr Parkinson is one of the reasons he decided to come back to SRPA to complete his teacher training and ultimately put him on the path to being a teacher here. Lucy Traves also said how much she appreciated Mr Parkinson and the science department for helping put her on the right track to achieve her goals, which paid off in the long run. During sixth form, Miss Empson likewise realised that she wanted to be a maths teacher and decided to work with one of her old math's teachers, Mr Crossley, on a work experience programme. During her time on this programme, he told her that he believed she would be a good secondary school teacher.

Elsewhere, Liam expressed how the school production of *The Wizard of Oz* in 2012 helped him to realise his interest in performance and the entertainment industry. He was then cast in every production following that until he left and went on to get a First-Class degree in Performing Arts from Cardiff University. For Liam, the school productions were beneficial for giving him the confidence for public speaking and performing which he didn't previously have. Miss Risebrow spoke about how she had dreams of being an Oscar nominee and that when she was younger, she was convinced she would be a megastar. Although these dreams didn't become her reality, she went on to study History at university in Newcastle and decided that she wanted to be a teacher. Even though she did not end up as a movie star, the school supported her path to success and guided her towards her current success.

Regrets?

Although a lot of people would advise you to never have regrets, we were curious to uncover whether any of these past students would have done anything differently during their time as a student at our school. Each of the interviewees said that they possibly should have listened more during their lessons, especially between the years 7-9. As well as wishing she didn't end up in trouble for chatting or being removed from lessons by Mrs Mather, Miss Empson noted that she wishes that her outlook on maths was more positive and that she could have agreed to sit the Intermediate Paper, due to her high ability in mathematics, instead of dismissing it. She also wished that she listened to her teachers more as that would have helped her a lot more when it came to completing her degree.

Miss Risebrow had a similar view, wishing that she focused more on her studies and to what her teachers had to say, rather than on who did or did not fancy her peers!

Scandals!

To end our research on a hopefully amusing note, we asked each interviewee if they could recall any ‘scandals’ from their school days. Although you may be surprised to hear this, throughout our interviews, we learnt that Miss Empson was quite the trouble-maker alongside her classmates. In response to this question, she recalled the year 11 leavers day prank that was pulled by her classmates. However, before we continue, Miss Empson wanted us to make it clear that she was ‘*absolutely, positively, and definitely, not*’ directly involved in this scandal and was only ‘*guilty by association*’: the headteacher at the time had a pond of fish which he adored and as part of an end of year prank, her classmates decided to put dishwasher tablets and washing up liquid into the pump of this pond, which led to the removal of the entire pond. It was unclear what happened to the fish, but it does not seem as though their lives ended pleasantly.

In addition, Mr White remembered the time when he was suspended in year 7. A group of students offered other students fruit shoots, yet little did Mr White know, these did not actually contain fruit shoot juice, we’ll leave it up to your imagination to decide what these may have contained! Despite him being unaware of the contents, this ultimately resulted in him being suspended for two days! Both Mr White and his best friend at the time, Liam, claimed that they were both mostly well-behaved. However, Liam recalled the time that he was over an hour late for sixth form as he had overslept, making him late to doing his paper-round, and therefore late to school. He was supposed to have drama as his first lesson, with a teacher who was known to be very stern about punctuality, he had previously seen her make people wait outside if they had been a minute late to the lesson, let alone an hour! He recalled how she turned around and looked at him with a glare he had never seen before and the only rational answer he could come up with was “Sorry I’m late, I set my alarm for 7:30pm not 7.30am”. It turned out that this excuse worked as she just chuckled to herself!

Although less scandalous than previous stories, Miss Risebrow and her peers often enjoyed playing matchmaker with different teachers, setting them up and guessing their relationship status. Often, people would assume that two teachers were in a relationship just from seeing them have a single conversation in the corridor. She also remembered the time she was asked to do her top button up by one of her teachers to which she pretended to do up and let out a sarcastic ‘oopsie’, letting go of her top button once he had walked past. Little did she know, Mrs Hughes had seen her and asked if she would like the other teacher to know what she had done. Miss Risebrow explained to us that she had never felt so embarrassed in her life and was expecting to be severely told off!

Words of Wisdom

Finally, we would like to leave you with some kind words of encouragement from each former student. Although each of the past students we spoke to had different life paths and goals, they all started out at SRPA, and we thought that they would each be able to offer beneficial advice to current students. For this question, we decided to include the entirety of each answer, as everyone offered valuable words of wisdom.

Liam Hudson: “I remember hosting my last full school assembly in summer 2014 before heading off to university and the last thing I said to the entire school was: “my Dad has always told me, ‘your school days are the best days of your life’, and I always thought ‘no chance’, but as I finish my school journey I can 100% say that I agree with him. Your school days are the best days of your life so enjoy every single second of it because before you know it it’ll be over. Appreciate all the knowledge your teachers have to share and learn everything you can not only

academically but learn everything you can about yourself, who you are and where you want to go. I would still stick by that as the best bit of advice I could give to anyone.”

Miss Risebrow: “The advice I would give is to just be friendly. I think we sometimes forget that we are all human and we all have lives outside of school, it’s good to separate the two. Also, if you make a mistake, learn from it and move on.”

Lucy Traves: “Go with how you feel and pursue the things that you are interested in and spark your inspiration. That’s what I did and that’s what led me to being successful, never let anybody say that you can’t do something. Also don’t do anything you don’t want to do; you don’t have to follow what everyone else does. For me, I went to university three years after everyone else in my year. I learned a lot from working first and it helped me to solidify exactly what it was that I wanted to do. I think you should do what makes you happy, if you do that, you’ll succeed.

Mr White: “I know a lot of people hate school, but they don’t realise the opportunities that school gives. My biggest advice as a teacher is to take all of the opportunities you get because if you don’t take what’s offered, it may never be there again.”

Miss Empson: “Do what makes you happy and don’t always follow the crowd. Remember that everything will always be okay in the end.”

We would like to thank you for reading our contribution to the Jubilee celebrations. This experience has been very informative, eye-opening and most of all enjoyable. Interviewing past students, some of whom are our teachers, has led us to view our own experiences, and our teachers, in a different light. We are very fortunate for all the opportunities and experiences SRPA has offered us. We would like to thank Dr Kissane for leading this fantastic project.