

Hyla Alum Blake Harper Takes the Reins



Thirteen hundred students at Bainbridge Island High School know the day has officially begun when they hear the voice of Hyla alum **Blake Harper**. As 2010-11 president of BHS's Associated Student Body (ASB), Blake is in charge of daily announcements over the PA system. He also presides over both student council meetings and ASB executive board meetings, directs school assemblies, and oversees all the effort and details behind major student events such as Prom and Freshman Barbecue.

"When a student face of BHS needs to be represented, chances are it'll be me," said Blake, who graduated from Hyla in 2006. Leadership is one of his passions, and the role of ASB president is, for him, a dream come true. "Being in leadership is a lot of fun. I get to think up new strategies every day to make 2010-11 school year the best ever for the students."

To liven up the school year, Blake is introducing creative ideas such as a staff appreciation week and what he's calling an "entropy week", where students can enjoy random giveaways, "mass improv", schedule switches, and giant games.

"It's a great way to infuse energy into the dull winter months," he said, laughing.

Pursuing passions

Blake applies his energy and leadership to all pursuits in his life. Equally passionate about sports, he is captain of BHS's water polo and swim teams, and last spring, he ran his first triathlon, participating in the race along with Hyla teacher **Kris Van Gieson**.

"I always engage athletically," said Blake, who credits Hyla for first turning him onto both water polo and track. Right now, he's setting his sights on winning a national triathlon championship in college and then "going on to the Olympics in 2016."

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Thoughts from the Head

Hyla's Passion for Learning is Rooted in its Mission and Philosophy

I feel truly fortunate to be able to witness the passion for learning that Hyla students and teachers share each day. I marvel at the creativity with which students depict the invisible parts of themselves in Human Relations. I marvel again watching those same students share three different ways of solving a math problem with each solution revealing new insights into understanding the real world.

Authentic learning happens when we actively engage with the world. It begins with uncertainty about what lies ahead, and sprouts with a growing faith that, in immersing ourselves in the challenge, taking feedback, and acting with integrity, we'll arrive at a new place. That faith—that passion for learning—is something we all share as humans, yet it can be either nurtured or quashed by those around us.

Eighteen years ago, Hyla was an idea in the minds of a handful of teachers and parents who wanted to consciously nurture the passion for learning in middle school children. Today, this passion is alive and well in the lives of 85 students, 20 faculty and staff, and also in the many former students, parents, and faculty who remain inspired by their time at Hyla. In this issue of *The Hylighter*, you'll find it living in the journey seventh graders take with Jennifer and Laura in their archeological study, in our graduate Blake Harper's dedication to his community and to his personal and intellectual development, and in Kris Van Gieson's personal "wisdom project" with a surfboard and bicycle during his sabbatical.

This year, as we delve into our self-study for re-accreditation, we will be reaffirming the foundations of our school: our mission, our philosophy, and a set of goals that we encourage students to pursue through their three years here. I encourage you to go to our website and read them (under "About Hyla"), or dig up an old school handbook. Our philosophy is alive in every classroom, field trip, and performance. It is our blueprint for ensuring that learning remains passionate. I still remember how moved I was reading Hyla's mission and philosophy statements for the first time. When Hyla teachers got together last month to discuss our mission and philosophy, several recalled having the same reaction when they first learned of Hyla.

As you read about the passions of our teachers, students, and graduates, you will see what I mean: passionate teaching and passionate learning go hand in hand.

"Fundamentally, we believe that middle school students are rewarding, fascinating people to work with who have a tremendous capacity to learn significantly in many areas, including self-awareness, independence, relationships with others, and understanding the world. We value the middle school years."

from Hyla's set of Philosophy Statements

Thomas Weber, Head of School



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Academically, Blake is as directed and passionate. This year, he's focusing his senior studies on philosophical questions. Through an independent study course, which he designed, he'll be studying books such as "The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature" by USA born psychologist and philosopher William James, and essays by 16th Century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne. His final paper will identify the commonalities of different forms of transcendence.

"I love these questions about man and our place in the universe," said Blake, who plans to pursue this study in college. He's applying for early acceptance into Middlebury College in Vermont.

Confidence and capability

The skills to lead and collaborate with his peers Blake said he first developed at Hyla. He points to Hyla's Human Relations classes where he participated in structured leadership development and team building activities, and also the school's class retreats where students are encouraged to adopt leadership roles.

"Kids gain the confidence to lead at Hyla regardless if it's a natural thing for them," said Blake. "The teachers are so good at including this for their goals in the classroom."

Taking the lead

Blake believes it's no accident that three out of four ASB executive board officers this year are Hyla grads. Along with Blake as president, **Larkin Sheldon** is serving as ASB secretary, and **John Murphy** as treasurer.

"Hyla is almost always disproportionately represented in student government at the high school," said Blake, pointing to 2007 and 2008 when ASB presidents were also Hyla grads.

"I can say with confidence that every Hyla grad can take the lead on a group project, execute on any group task, raise his hand and answer in class, and speak with a teacher outside of class. It's part of what makes Hyla kids so successful at the high school."

When asked to recall learning in a Hyla classroom, Blake instantly leaned forward, broke into a smile, and described it this way:

"Fourteen kids who all know each other very well, heads are turning to listen to the next kid or the teacher, and the whole time you're thinking about what you might contribute to this dialogue," he said. "And then you're laughing, smiles are everywhere, and it's happy times. That's how I remember it."



Archeology Brings Students to Deeper Understanding

Many of us can only dream of being archeologists, sleuthing in the dirt and unearthing the secrets of a lost civilization. But for every seventh grader at Hyla, the experience is not only a rite of passage, it's a fundamental way to learn history, science, and culture.

The archeology unit taught by history teacher **Jennifer Williams** and art teacher **Laura Jones** plunges seventh graders over the course of four months into the depths and complexities of culture. It's a sustained and rigorous hands-on learning experience designed especially to stretch and engage the seventh grade mind, involving museum trips, experiential games, research, teamwork, creativity and excavation.

"There are a lot of layers and angles to the learning," said Jennifer. "We want students to discover what influences culture, how it's expressed through art and artifact, and which scientific techniques are used, including carbon dating and analysis, to unearth the pieces and reconstruct the story."

Observation and awareness

In the first two weeks of the course, students learn the "universals" of culture, such as communication, shelter, and also religion, or what Jennifer and Laura prefer to call the "attitude toward the unknown." They also examine how individual traits evolve, influenced by time, environment, and even technology.

"There's a lot of discussion," said Jennifer. "We talk about defined personal space—how kissing on the cheeks is acceptable in Greece but not so much here, and how in some Native American cultures certain kinds of eye contact are disrespectful."

Learning from the Makah

With this new awareness, students head to the Olympic Park Institute for a three-day immersion in history and science. Focusing on the ancient Makah, students observe how culture is created because of its natural environment. They study old growth forest, learn about edible and medicinal plants, and visit the Makah Museum.



"They're really looking for patterns," explained Jennifer, "and learning what makes something identifiable as a Makah artifact, as opposed to Egyptian."

Many artifacts from the Ozette Dig are displayed without written material, which Jennifer said is a learning advantage. "It's great, because the students have to come up with their own observations."

Creating a culture

Returning to Hyla, students dive into one of the most challenging phases of the course: creating their own culture. The class is split into two groups and each group is assigned a "geomorphic template", including climate, land forms and bodies of water.

"We give them only broad details, such as Antarctica in the 1800s or the Amazon

Rainforest in ancient times," said Laura. "The rest they have to create."

Last year, one group's template was the Dead Sea. The other's was Patagonia. Neither group was allowed to know what the other was doing.

"Creating the culture was my favorite part," said eighth grader **Natalie Adams**, whose template was Patagonia. "We had to research resources you could get in the Andean Mountains and then create everything from there."

Working together, students first identified themes for their civilization. Patagonia students settled on "condors," "night," "moon," and "survival." For the Dead Sea, themes were "salt," "mirror reflection," and "circle of life." The themes had to be reflected in every aspect of the culture, including religion, language, economy, family and government.

"It was hard at times," testified Natalie. "We wanted to just figure it out, but Jennifer would only give us hints. She wouldn't tell us how to do it."

Bringing culture to life

"We push them to deeper layers," agreed Jennifer. "They can't just create something without explaining why. It has to make sense."

After two weeks of hard work, students head to the art room. Their task is to create pottery, weapons, clothing and other artifacts out of materials authentic to their cultures. Each artifact must reflect the culture's symbols and language.



"When you do it this way it's so much more interesting," said eighth grader **Haylee Derrickson**, who worked on the Dead Sea. "It made me like history."

One of the artifacts Dead Sea students created was a pair of flat, wooden walking shoes, similar to snow shoes. The buoyancy of the Dead Sea, students decided, allowed citizens wearing the shoes to walk on top of the water. Simultaneously, beneath the water, the spirits of the dead walked upside down on the underside of the shoes. The idea integrated both "mirror reflection" and "circle of life."

"They have eureka moments and we all get excited," said Laura. In the process, students learn art is intrinsic to culture. "They see it comes out of culture and that it's part of the world."

Excavation and discovery

Late in November, students head outside to bury their artifacts. Digging pits in the school's field, they place artifacts in strategic positions and sometimes bury them in layers to reflect natural disasters in the history of their cultures. Then, the next day, students dig up the opposite group's artifacts.

"Finding the artifacts was really exciting," recalled eighth grader **Conor Sweeney**, whose dig days last year fell during a cold snap. "We found some really cool glass things and we didn't want to break them, so we used little tooth brushes and tiny shovels," he said. "It really felt like being an archeologist."

Each student takes on two jobs, including measuring grid position and depth, numbering artifacts, sifting soil, and noting layer changes.

"We use the same scientific techniques and tools, right down to the grease pencils, that real archeologists use," confirmed Jennifer.

Reconstructing history

After the dig, students spend a week analyzing what they've found. As they repair and clean artifacts, they note symbols or other clues that reveal what the artifact might have been used for. They decode the language and fill out an analysis form, naming what cultural universal the artifact belongs to and explaining why. In December, the unit culminates in a formal museum show of the artifacts in Hyla's library.

For eighth grader **Kyra Wortley**, the months of work heightened her awareness, not only of past cultures, but also of her own. "It made me think about our culture and how it got to be as it is, and I got a different point of view about what we do," she confirmed. "I learned not to judge other cultures."

"Curious about what this year's 7th graders have created? See the Hyla website in December.



Kris Van Gieson is the fourth Hyla faculty member to take advantage of the school's Sabbatical Program.

With surfing as a theme, Kris traveled to Nicaragua, Oregon, California, and Hawaii between August and October, 2009.

How did you choose surfing as a focus for your Sabbatical?

I discovered my passion for surfing when I was forty. Surfing is incredibly challenging and semi-addictive. It gets you into the wilderness fifty yards from your car, and puts you in the moment like few activities do. It is hard to put into words all of the life lessons that can be learned out there. In recent years, it has been one of my favorite things to share with Hyla students and alumni.

Tell us about a high point of your trip:

The first leg of the journey took me the furthest from home. With Sam Cheadle, Hyla alum **Skylar Vella**, and Steve Neff (who actually taught me to surf), I traveled to Nicaragua to explore the coastline and its many surf spots. I wouldn't have gone alone to Nicaragua. To travel with my own surf mentor and two guys I've surfed with for many years, on Exploration Week trips and alumni surf trips, made for great adventure.



Since teachers have the summer off, why is a Sabbatical program needed at Hyla?

The Sabbatical months are a time to focus on an area of passion that we feel will enhance what we bring to the Hyla community. In addition to time for rejuvenation, my months away felt like a gift of appreciation for what I do and an acknowledgement of my years at Hyla.

What do you feel your Sabbatical gave you beyond time to surf and explore different places?

An unexpected benefit came when I wrote out the Human Relations curriculum to hand off while I was gone. It forced me to clearly articulate what I do in Human Relations, and gave me perspective on how the curriculum has evolved over the years.

I also had time alone to process my life and my career after fifteen years at Hyla. For three weeks, I rode my bike with surfboard in tow along the Oregon coast, camping and surfing. It was mid-way down the Oregon coast that I realized I wanted this sabbatical to mark the midpoint of my teaching career at Hyla. The trip gave me lots of time to think and reflect. I find I do some of my best thinking when I am in motion. So, given the gift of time away, I came back even more committed to and appreciative of this school and community.

To read more about Kris' Sabbatical journey and to see more pictures, please visit the Hyla website.

The Mission of Hyla Middle School

is to create an educational environment in which middle school children are intrigued with learning. This environment is founded on close, caring connections between teachers and students that encourage students to respect and value themselves and others. In this environment, we provide a strong academic program that develops competent, self-reliant problem-solvers. Beyond academics, we strive to help students grow as individuals with integrity.

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Class of 2006

Rachel Acker is a freshman at Colorado State University, studying environmental engineering. She played in the world ultimate frisbee championships in Heilbronn, Germany, representing Israel and was on the US championship team representing Seattle. **Rachel Balas** is attending Evergreen State College, studying anthropology and history. She started to develop her passion for history in **Jennifer's** classes. **Kaitlin Barr** is attending the University of Washington. She is very interested in biology and the sciences. She picked the University of Washington because of all the different classes

and subjects they offer. **Maddy Brachvogel** is attending St. Mary's College in Moraga, California. **Tag Brown** is playing in the Wind Symphony at Washington State University and is a member of the Cougar Marching Band. He was elected finance director of his dorm and recently picked up a part time job doing tech support for the campus library. He has his sites on becoming a RA in his dorm next school year and hopes to travel to Europe this summer with some high school friends. **Kiren Caldwell** is attending The George Washington University in DC, studying mechanical and aerospace engineering. **Beau Donnan** is attending the University of

Washington. **Ginger Glendinning** is attending DePaul University in Chicago, majoring in digital art. **Phoenix Glendinning** is attending NYU in New York City, majoring in music composition. **Peter Julian** is getting ready to start at Santa Barbara City College, CA, in January. He is interested in marine science and has taken up free diving. **Claire King** graduated from Phillips Academy June, 2010. She is currently a freshman at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY (the same school as her sister Abby, who is a senior this year). **Morgan Marler** is attending Seattle University. She lives in the Global Awareness dorm, is engaged in community service and exploring the possibility of becoming a teacher. In addition, she continues to shoot portraits and pursue her love of photography. **Wesley McClain** is a freshman at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. He continued to develop his interest in art during his high school years and took classes at Gage Academy in Seattle during his senior year of high school. **Zach Morrow** is a freshman at UC Berkeley and loving it. **Cole Rabinowitz** is a freshman at Boston College, majoring in political science. He met the Governor of Massachusetts recently and may set up an internship. Cole loves Boston and all the opportunities offered among the varied schools and cultural facilities, and of course the Red Sox. **Nolan Schuetz** is attending CalMaritime in Vallejo, California.

He is living on the 500-foot training ship Golden Bear for the first half of the year and is enjoying the challenge. **Tom Sellers** is a freshman at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, and loving it. He's pursuing entrepreneurship, improv and soccer. **Neal Shaffer** left recently with a friend for London on a one-way ticket. He's taking a gap year and hopes to travel to as many countries as he can, as long as his money holds out! England, Ireland, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Morocco? **Clair Smith** is attending Western Washington University. She will be studying in their honors program. The plan for now is to study for pre-veterinarian status. **Annie Taylor** is attending Colorado College. She is on the varsity cross country team. **Sean Willerford** is a freshman at Middlebury College in Vermont. He can't believe all the great classes there are and is going to have a hard time picking a major because it is all so interesting!

We were unable to get in touch with all of our 2006 alums, but we wish all of our alumni well in their post-Hyla pursuits. Please stop by to visit if you are in the neighborhood. We like to see you!

Follow Hyla Middle School on Facebook to stay connected and hear about what's happening on campus.

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Parent Admissions Night

Wednesday
January 12, 2011
7:00-9:00 pm



Family Admissions Open House

Sunday
January 30, 2011
3:00-5:00 pm

