Headmaster 1965-1977
Michael Choukas Jr. ’46
A WILLINGNESS TO REACH THAT SHAPED THE FUTURE OF VERMONT ACADEMY

Recently, I had the pleasure to visit with Headmaster Emeritus Michael Choukas Jr. ’46 and his wife of 62 years, Nita. Mr. Choukas has experienced Vermont Academy as a student, alumnus, teacher, and coach—culminating in his iconic Headmastership from 1965–1977.

During our conversation, husband and wife often looked to one another to check a fact or color a detail. Their mutual respect and support was evident as we looked back to when they guided Vermont Academy through a pivotal era in its history—partners in their commitment to help kids and to the lives they had made for themselves in Saxtons River.

What brought you to Vermont Academy as a student?
At Hanover High, I concentrated more on sports and other extracurricular activities than I did on academics—with predictable results. At the end of my sophomore year my father, who was a professor at Dartmouth, decided I needed a change. He knew Headmaster Larry Leavitt and, as a result, I ended up at Vermont Academy—still a sophomore!

Wasn’t your son, Michael, valedictorian at VA?
Yes, he was.

You must kid each other about your high school careers.
I don’t know that he actually knows all that. I never brought the subject up!

How did you come back on the faculty of VA?
I got out of the Marine Corps in the fall of 1953 and took a job at Millbrook School, coaching hockey and running a dormitory. Larry Leavitt heard I was there, and he offered me a position as a math teacher and hockey coach to start in the fall of 1954. By then, Nita and I had two young daughters. We lived in a two-room apartment on the second floor of Alumni Hall. Our kitchen consisted of a sink, a small refrigerator, and a hot plate. At Christmas, the boys on our floor gave us a toaster oven, probably so Nita could turn out goodies for them at a faster rate. I am sure there were those on the faculty who had known me as a student and wondered how Larry Leavitt could have hired me!

Nita laughs. Yes!
What made Vermont Academy special?
We were good at helping students who were underachieving in their previous school realize their full potential. Our belief was that success in one area of a student’s life spilled over into other areas, notably academics. Because we were a small school where everyone knew everyone else, these successes resonated. My goal was for Vermont Academy to become the best small boarding school in the country.

What is the ABC program?
“ABC” stands for A Better Chance. The program started in the mid-60s to bring disadvantaged students (mostly, but not exclusively, students of color) to independent schools. Our first ABC student was Trudell “Butch” Guerue, a Sioux Indian from South Dakota. He came to VA as a junior in 1964, Headmaster Larry Tuttle’s final year. In those early years—prior to whichever boarding school they would attend—ABC students went to indoctrination programs during the summer at either Dartmouth, Williams, or Duke. The Dartmouth program was designed and run by Charles Dey, a dean at Dartmouth. “Butch” Guerue attended the Dartmouth session where Larry Leavitt learned of him and personally sponsored his coming to Vermont Academy. Guerue later was honored as Vermont Academy’s 39th Florence Sabin Award winner.

Did you have a connection with Charles Dey prior to the ABC program?
Charley was a class behind me at Dartmouth, and we knew each other through athletics. His brother, Bill, was a class ahead of me, and he later became my Director of Admissions and eventually the Assistant Headmaster.

“Vermont itself offered a way of life and mindset that I enthusiastically embraced, and VA was a window into that world.”
— BILL HOSLEY ’73

REACH

“The most wonderful experience in working with young students is to penetrate what often seems impenetrable—their world—and to enter, not as an intruder trying to mold, impose, and reshape, but as a friend with something of value to share.”
— MICHAEL CHOUKAS JR. ’46, Quoted June 1968

Left: summer of ’68 artist at Vermont Academy

Michael Choukas ’46, Nita Choukas, Dr. Robert Watts ’73
September 2013
**REACH**

“I have come to know Vermont Academy as a school characterized by able faculty, skillful leadership, and spirited students. More important, however, is my admiration for Vermont Academy as an independent school with a willingness to reach.”

— Charles F. Dey, Dean, Tucker Foundation Dartmouth College. Quoted June 1976

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What led to your decision to participate in the ABC program?

It was under Larry Tuttle that we admitted our first ABC student. I felt it was important to expand Vermont Academy’s participation. These were challenging times in our country. The Vietnam War was increasingly unpopular, a counterculture was brewing among young people, and most importantly, the African American community, spurred on by the inspirational rhetoric of Martin Luther King, was protesting. Most of the protests were in cities that had no direct effect on Saxtons River, but Nita and I were concerned and determined to do whatever we could.

In the fall of 1966, we admitted our first African American students, freshmen Carl Banyard ’70 and Carston Pratt ’70 and sophomores Braxton Cross ’69 and Ken Sauls ’69. In 1967, Layton Grant ’69, a white student from Washington County in Downeast Maine was our next ABC student. Then we began to add African Americans who did not come through the ABC program. Lynwood Herring ’70, Bernard Hoyes ’70, Bill Tibbs ’71, and Robert Watts ’73 were among them. Tibbs and Watts later became trustees of Vermont Academy.

Nita has cited the art program in the summer of 1968 as one of your greatest decisions. What was its significance?

In addition to it being the first use of VA’s facilities for an outside summer program, it brought a large number of minorities to a virtually all-white village. John Torres, a well-known black sculptor, approached me with the concept of taking kids talented in fine arts from the inner city and bringing them to a summer program with professional artists to develop their portfolios in preparation for college admission. Torres had a grant from the Ford Foundation and wondered if VA would be interested. The board was mixed about bringing in 85 city kids over the summer. I pointed out what was going on in our country. There were riots in many cities. Detroit was burning. Washington, DC was burning. Baltimore and Chicago. We decided to do it. As soon as word got around Saxtons River, there was much negative outpouring.

Nita chuckles. Oh, God.

Some of the leading citizens of Saxtons River were very upset at the decision and made all kinds of waves and even threats. Nonetheless, The Art Students League of New York came. It didn’t take very long for the town to come to the realization that they were pretty good kids. Opinion changed. At summer’s end, there was an art exhibit and most of the town came. It was a defining moment.

Nita: It was wonderful.

How was faculty affected by the sweeping changes in the 60s?

Up until the early 60s, there was never any question about values. If a kid did something wrong, everyone knew he did something wrong, and the only question was what the discipline would be. All of a sudden, you’re in a faculty meeting and young teachers are saying, “Is what he did really wrong? Think about where he came from.” Then you had the old faculty saying, “He did this and has to be disciplined.” I had to juggle this, and, of course, I had my own opinions.
What was the Jersey City Project?
It was conceived in the Tucker Foundation at Dartmouth where Charley Dey had become Dean. The thought was that the ABC kids were so few in number in any one prep school that they weren’t able to talk and share problems with peers. Their idea was to put enough kids from the same city into a school where they could psychologically reinforce one another and share a common bond in their experiences. Charley Dey proposed the Jersey City Project to me.

Was it a difficult decision to participate?
Very. The idea of the Jersey City Project was that ten kids would come their junior year and ten more the second year, all from Jersey City, where Dartmouth maintained a presence. That’s a total of 20 minority students from the same city in a student body of 160. What would the impact of that be? I had to think long and hard about that. I knew it was controversial. Ultimately, we decided to do it.

What was the impact of the program?
When the Jersey City kids joined the African American students already at VA, a critical mass was reached, and the Black Student Union was formed. They began to articulate issues with the administration and the white community. It was a wake-up call for us. Like most colleges and secondary schools, we had assumed that these kids would be so grateful for the opportunity we were giving them that they would be model students. We weren’t prepared for them to question things and didn’t really appreciate what they were going through—coming into a white institution that was so unfamiliar and scary in so many ways. I give the kids a lot of credit for working together in a democratic way so their voices could be heard. Together as a community, we made a lot of progress.

What led to the decision to bring back coeducation in 1975?
Times were changing fast, and the changing role of women in society was an important part of that. Also, kids coming through grade school were thinking coeducational. Families from CT, NJ, and NY were moving to southern Vermont, and they were accustomed to coed. I was sure there was going to be a need, and if VA didn’t fill it, another school would.

“I truly enjoyed my years at Vermont Academy. I loved my life there—the students, the faculty and staff, the faculty children, and my many friends in the village.”

— NITA CHOUKAS, 2014

You set a foundation for an inclusive VA community that endures today. Did you envision the long-reaching impact it would have on the school?
I wasn’t thinking about being inclusive. Helping kids was what motivated me. I did think it was important to have kids of different backgrounds to educate one another. Understanding that everyone in a community comes from a different place, with different outlooks, is an important lesson to learn.