



MEET JEN YOLLES

TEACHER, MENTOR, FRIEND

Tom O'Neill '05 interviewed Upper School Drama Teacher, Jen Yolles, about her two-decade tenure at Beaver. O'Neill is a film, television, and theater actor who got his start on the Beaver stage and attributes much of his personal and professional growth to Jen's teachings.

*W*hen I look back at my high school years, I consider myself lucky. I had incredible teachers who I learned so much from and who helped me grow as an individual.

But there is one determining factor that separates them all from Jen Yolles.

Jen is not only a brilliant instructor, coach, advisor, and director, but she is also a wonderful friend. From day one of freshman drama class, I realized the class was like no other on my schedule -- for that year or the following three.

There was an unmatched energy in the classroom. Jen treated us as young adults, not children. I was appreciated and urged to explore my own ideas, my creativity pushed to its limits and beyond.

This is not to say a lot wasn't asked of my fellow students and me. We wrote papers, took quizzes, and spent hours on homework.

But there were also examinations of the human condition. The understanding of behaviors, the repeated practices for technique, and the investigation of past of civilizations. Jen's class combined psychology, history, and the sciences.

In many ways, it was a class on life.

High school is a ripe moment in a young adult's life when they are on the brink of finding themselves, and Jen relishes the opportunity to help them along the way.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Although a lot has changed at Beaver in the 10 years since I was a student, the core of what Jen teaches -- the fundamentals of being a good performer as well as a good person -- remain the same.

Jen's a stickler for punctuality, 95 percent of life is showing up on time and being ready.

She also believes in "leaving it at the door". Life exists outside her classroom and some days the life of a high school student can be overbearing. Jen acknowledges and understands this but she asks her students to leave stresses and deadlines at the door in order to get good work done.

Jen loved acting and theater but she wanted to do more: she wanted to give back.

Honesty is another big rule. Jen emphasizes the importance of character -- being true to yourself and to those around you is the key to success and being proud of your work.

"Just be a good human being," she said. "That's what I care about."

And then finally, work ethic.

Jen expects the best from her students. And we bring it. I never remember a student being unprepared. Everyone brought their A-game to class and rehearsal.

SET SCENE

Jen first experienced theater fall semester of her freshman year of high school in Avon, Conn., when she happened upon the drama club one evening after school. Upperclassmen in costumes and makeup greeted her, and she found their energy compelling. It was like nothing she had experienced before.

She joined them and immersed herself in theater -- attending drama club meetings, taking drama classes, and auditioning for her first play, *The Birds*. She remembers being terrified during the audition but also having a blast working on the play.

Jen's talents were noticed early on, and she developed a bond with her drama teacher, Ted Guhl, a man with a "wild demeanor and equally wild grey hair."

By junior year, Jen was Guhl's assistant director: By senior year she was directing on her own -- the only student her mentor had ever allowed to do so.

After high school, Jen attended Emerson College in Boston, where she took the preliminary steps to study acting. However, she quickly found herself more interested in teaching. She loved the subject matter but she wanted to do more: she wanted to give back.



By senior year, Jen had attended several teacher assistant workshops and was also teaching middle schoolers at a summer camp -- an experience that didn't always go smoothly. In one of her first classes, Jen was explaining trust games and attempted to demonstrate a trust fall. She crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and trusted her students to catch her -- only to find herself flat on the floor with the wind knocked out of her.

But she picked herself up, brushed herself off, and continued with the class.

Beaver's drama teacher at the time, Carl Menninger, had observed the entire incident, and after class, told Jen, "You handled that very well, and if you ever want to come teach, I'd like you to come teach at my school."

Jen was Carl's student teacher in 1992.

She got to know the students, the curriculum, and the Beaver way, and she realized she related to high school students far more easily than middle schoolers.

The following year, after she graduated Emerson and redirected her energies to getting a teaching license, Jen received a call from Carl telling her he was leaving and that he recommended her to replace him at Beaver.

She crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and trusted her students to catch her -- only to find herself flat on the floor with the wind knocked out of her.

She was young -- only 24 -- but he said she had great potential.

Jen saw great potential at Beaver, too. She liked how the school made the educational process as individualized as possible, and she saw promise in getting to know all her students and their personal strengths and weaknesses.

And the school liked her back: she was hired as the Upper School drama teacher.

She liked how the school made the educational process as individualized as possible.

Jen directed the fall play, and that winter, began her tradition of doing one original work per year -- a work written completely by students.

These original plays teach students how to collaborate and how to create. They're a form of therapeutic escape -- a way to manifest ideas, thoughts, and concerns going on in one's personal world.

During my time at Beaver, the winter plays were certainly the most remembered -- and the most controversial. The casts were dealing with a lot in their personal lives and we produced work that came from within us.

THE (MANY) RECRUITS

My first encounter with Jen Yolles was my 8th grade winter semester.

Jen had just seen Riley Manning '05 and me in an improv show and we must have shown some promise as Jen bum-rushed us at lunch while we were grilling toast for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I will never forget -- she came right up to us and told us she hoped we would audition for next year's Upper School fall play, *Our Town*, and that we should also sign up for freshman year drama.

Of course we felt honored, and in the years to come, Riley and I worked very closely with Jen. I participated in 10 high school plays; Riley participated in about 13.

I've heard similar stories of Jen recruiting students.

Patrick Carroll '00 transferred to Beaver his sophomore year, and had done one play at his previous high school, but otherwise was a mediocre soccer player and a lacrosse enthusiast.

By the end of his first semester at Beaver, he had been enthralled by Jen's fall production of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and eager to enter the school's drama world.

Shortly thereafter, Patrick was asked to audition for a regional call for Wes Anderson's second film, *Rushmore*, which were held partly at Beaver in Jen's classroom. Patrick had acted only once before but the impression he gave in that audition sparked a lifelong relationship with Jen.

By the following semester, Patrick had been cast in the fall play, *Inherit The Wind*. After Beaver, he earned a BFA at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and has landed several TV spots, starred in Brian De Palma's *Redacted*, and most recently starred on Broadway in the original cast of *Good People*.

And it's not just actors who Jen impacts.

After an Upper School play, Stacey Berman '05, then still in the Middle School, wandered up to the balcony of Bradley Hall and accidentally interrupted a tech meeting.

Instead of being asked to leave, Jen -- who was conducting the meeting -- looked Stacey in the eye and introduced herself.

Stacey expressed interest in the show she had just seen and Jen put her right to work, entrusting Stacey to run the ticket box, with all the money from that night's ticket sales, back to her office.

The following year, Jen asked Stacey to co-design *Our Town* with Phoebe Sullivan, another costume designer a few years ahead. By senior year, Stacey had costumed almost every single production put on during her high school career. And while not all of them had been directed by Jen, Jen always advocated for Stacey.

In addition, Stacey designed every promotional poster for Jen's shows. This was a big deal. Those show posters were some of the more interesting and widely anticipated esthetics on the school walls.

Since then, Stacey has pursued a career as a costume designer for theater and film. Stacey's more recent work can be found in the film *Electric Children*, which is now on Netflix.

These are just two of Jen's many students; just two stories of her recruiting and unveiling talent.

Some others include:

- **Ilan Bachrach '00**, who most recently participated in Under The Radar Festival at the Public Theatre
- **Drew Shane '98**, publicist for Conan O'Brien
- **Emil Hewitt '04**, of *Emil & Friends*, signed to Cantora in the U.S. and Kitsune in France
- **Fedna Jacquet '06**, actor currently getting her MFA at Tisch
- **Will Van Dyke '02**, musical director, most recently for the Tony-award winning *Kinky Boots*

Jen's the reason I was prepared for a conservatory training program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. I know I would not be the actor I am today were it not for Jen.

TWENTY YEARS (AND COUNTING)

Jen's the reason I was prepared for a conservatory training program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, where I received my Bachelors in Fine Art. Jen told me I could make a career out of my craft and she also helped me prepare my application and my audition.

And I was not the exception -- she does this for any student that wants it.

Beyond the audition process, I knew how to listen, how to dissect a script both analytically and on a human level, how to meet my professors' expectations while still keeping my individuality, and I had been prepared to work professionally in a rehearsal process. In fact, I still use her character development exercises when building characters.

I know I would not be the actor I am today were it not for Jen.

Through her 20 years at Beaver, Jen has built long-lasting relationships. She can go almost anywhere in the country -- from Los Angeles to New Orleans to New York -- and meet up with a former Beaver student or colleague.

Jen appreciates the acceptance of culture and the ever-evolving sophistication of Beaver, and she feels honored to have been allowed to take risks and think outside of the box with her teaching.

I often thought I paid extra closer attention to Jen than other students since I always knew I wanted to be an actor. But it's become clear that is not the case.

Jen makes an impact on all her students. She helps make them the people they are today.

- Interview and Article by Tom O'Neill '05