

# TRUSTING IN WINTER

John Curtis chuckled when mentioning the Winter Term participant who announced she'd given birth to a cow. Created by the 1954 St. Mark's graduate and centered in a chalet on a ski slope overlooking a picturesque Swiss village, the innovative 12-week Winter Term experience presents 7th and 8th graders with opportunities to achieve meaningful academic and character development in a breathtaking Alpine setting. A one-day apprenticeship during which each student shadows a local veterinarian, farmer, ceramicist, or shopkeeper and gives an oral report at dinner is an integral component of the program. The girl Curtis described had just helped deliver a calf.

"Students at this very malleable age are wondering what life is all about," Curtis said. "They're curious about everything and receptive to learning from new experiences. We can help them form positive attitudes and discover how satisfying it is to be in a place of trust where doing well is encouraged."

Curtis traced his interest in education to summers spent working at Brantwood Camp. "I've always received great pleasure from watching young people reach out and grab onto things that are going to be useful to them in their lives," he said. "My interest in teaching began at Brantwood."

Equipped with a B.A. in English literature from Yale, a master's degree in the same subject from the University of Pennsylvania, and genuine enthusiasm for the fervor with which children interact with their environment, Curtis embarked on his career in education following a stint in the U.S. Navy. After teaching 5th grade at the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia for three years, he was hired to teach 6th grade at the International School of Bern, then called the English-Speaking School of Bern. The school's headmaster had resigned unexpectedly, and the young teacher was appointed to that post the day after his arrival.

Curtis subsequently became director of Buckingham Browne & Nichols Lower School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and teaching headmaster of Commonwealth-American School of Lausanne. In 1988, he became director of Hohliebi Educational Programs in Lenk, Switzerland, and instituted Winter Term. Combining rigorous academics with activities focused on attaining and maintaining good physical condition, each Winter Term introduces 35 boys and girls to life without television, e-mail, and

other interferences that punctuate contemporary life. The program emphasizes trust, cooperation, respect for others, and accepting personal responsibility.

"Students in the 7th and 8th grades are grown-up enough to notice the world around them," said Curtis in explaining his inspiration for the Winter Term concept. "I wondered whether 12-, 13-, and 14-year-olds would respond positively to living a simpler life in which development of character is a primary element. We've found that there seems to be an increased appreciation each year of the opportunity to spend some time removed from the cultural crud that surrounds us and focus on

being one's best self without many of the distracting lifestyle accessories which seem so important at home."

In classes of 10–12 students, Winter Termers study European history and geography, English, art and architecture, economics, meteorology, geology, and the environmental aspects of Alpine preservation. Six weeks are devoted to investigating the Swiss economy, military, transportation and educational systems, and unique cultural contributions. Each student elucidates newly acquired knowledge and insights in a 30-to-50-page "Swiss report" based on class discussions and personal observations made on day trips to Bern, Lausanne, Gruyere, Luzern, Montreux, and Avenches (formerly Aventicum, the Roman capital of Switzerland). Math

assignments from students' home schools are completed before the end of Winter Term, and individual foreign language tutoring is provided. The endorsement of each student's sending school is a prerequisite to attending Winter Term, and personal motivation is key. "We look for kids who are ready to try something different, and the program attracts very interesting, high-caliber individuals," Curtis said. "The similarities and shared curiosities shown by kids from different parts of the world have been a revelation. It's extraordinary how much kids are alike no matter where they're from and it's wonderful to see them enjoying the same things."

Classes are held weekday mornings and on Saturday. Students ski five afternoons a week in groups organized according to ability and taught by Swiss Ski School instructors. "We surround them with teachers and ski instructors who expect them to do their best and who will bump them up rather than put them down," said Curtis, adding that Winter Term has exceeded his expectations.



John Curtis with his wife, Alison, and their dog



The electronic disconnect is itself an adventure. Curtis said, “Most students find that Winter Term is more challenging than their schools at home. They are enormously happy and say they don’t miss TV or e-mail a bit.”

Feedback has been uniformly positive. Parents have told Curtis how much more confident and mature their children are after completing Winter Term, and students have referred to it as “an awesome and life-changing experience.” Citing how students forge close friendships and learn to use time more efficiently as their “most valuable take-away,” Curtis attributed their appreciation and approbation of the program to “the fact that they have taken a risk and have not only survived, but have thrived.”

Despite having retired in 2005 and being designated Headmaster Emeritus, Curtis continues to teach classes in English and current events and to act as a Latin tutor. As dorm grandparents, he and his wife, Alison, who was his date for the VI Form Dance at St. Mark’s, provide an adult presence and cultivate a homelike atmosphere in the farmhouse that is their residence as well as in the girls’ dormitory at the Lenk site.

The Curtises are also directors of the Zambezi Environmental

Education Camp (ZEEC) in Zambia’s Western Province. They have escorted annual student trips to environmental centers in Kenya and Zambia since 1994, establishing ZEEC about nine years ago.

Located in a safe, friendly region in one of the world’s most impoverished countries, the purpose-built facility consists of eight traditional huts, a meeting hall on a bank of the Zambezi River, a kitchen, a dining area, a tree platform, and a campfire site. At ZEEC, high school students from throughout Europe and North America consider such local issues as slash/burn agriculture, hunting and poaching, timber exploitation, the challenge of maintaining an unpolluted waterway, and communities and populations in decline. Students may also participate in a community service project at the local primary school, take game and river safaris, and visit Victoria Falls.

“St. Mark’s was an enormous influence on me,” John Curtis reflected. “*Age quod agis*—Do and be your best—is a very meaningful phrase. I have always tried to do even the grungy little things as well as I can, and I don’t see any deviation between the boys and young men my classmates and I were then and the lives we have lived.”