

New Kids on the Block

They made it to UNH— will they make it their first year?

Saturday, April 1, 2006

•
•
•

LAST OCTOBER HURRICANE WILMA was bearing down on the Northeast, with three storms slamming into New England simultaneously. As I drove toward Durham to meet freshmen for this story, 50-mile-an-hour gusts jerked the family minivan across traffic lanes and I mused about wild catastrophic forces either unseen or unheeded, the desire to drive straight, and the nagging sense of feeling Lilliputian-sized in a Gulliver-sized world.



GEORGE BELL '09

HE'S NOT AFRAID TO SAY HE GETS RILED UP SOMETIMES.

Driving on Interstate 95 in a Nor'easter is, in fact, a lot like being a first-semester freshman. I remembered my own experience 25 years ago as a UNH freshman, and it was not pretty.

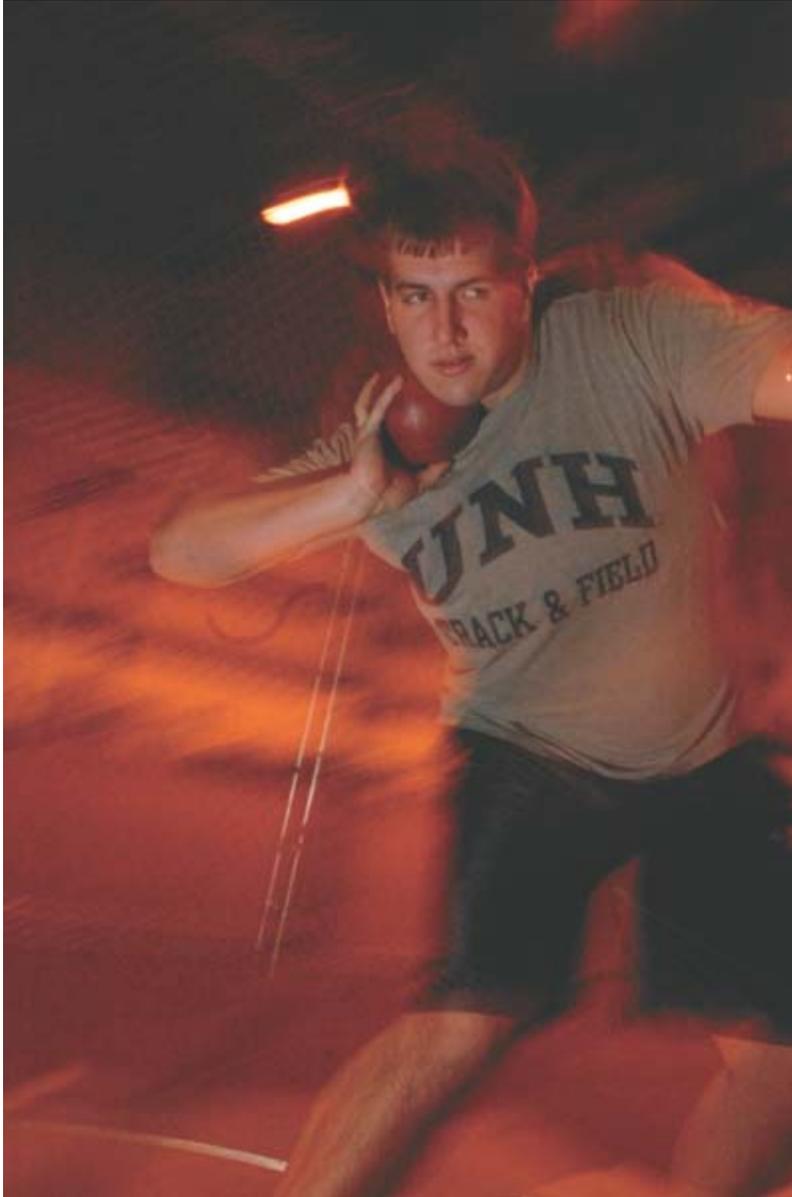
In hoping for the best for my children while quietly recalling my personal worst, I am apparently not alone. A fellow soccer parent told me about her eldest, now a college freshman. "You're welcome to ask my son about his experiences," she kindly offered. "Just don't tell me what he said."

I had read the startling statistics. Nationally, a quarter of all college students leave before completing their sophomore year, and nearly half of this country's Class of 2009 will either drop out before getting their degree, or get it elsewhere. At UNH, the number of baccalaureate students who drop out is 15 percent. This fall, UNH's freshman class hit a record high of some 2,800 students, almost 60 percent of them female. It was

sobering—perhaps a poor word choice—to contemplate hundreds of them exiting Durham by the same time next year."

So, looked at broadly, there is a window to reach and retain first year students. It is a window that is not only small but is exposed to hostilities of all types: chemistry midterms, meathead roommates and inexplicably bad karma.

To UNH's credit, there is increasing recognition of the frailty of the freshman experience and a determination to do something about it. The effort at UNH encompasses diverse resources, including the "Ask a Wildcat" service which offers a virtual advice panel, and weekly dorm discussion groups during the months of October and November involving hot-button topics like sexual harassment, alcohol and academics. Comprehensive orientation exercises, such as dormitory sleepovers, help ease the transition. But newest of all is the effort to engage freshmen intellectually. Intellectual stimulation is something I can't recall during my freshman year, but times, it seems, have changed.



JEFFREY KASTE '09

KASTE IS SO OVERJOYED HE THROWS OUT HIS OVERSIZED THROWING ARM AND COMES WITHIN A WHISKER OF SOCKING THE PERSON NEXT TO HIM.

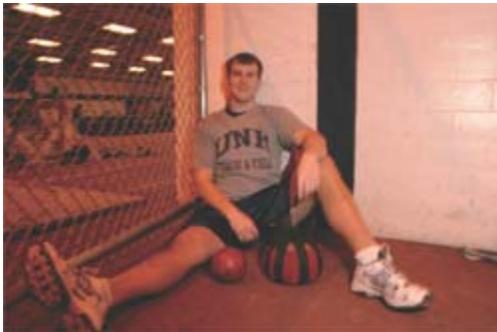
"OOPS, SORRY ABOUT THAT," HE SAYS.

AT A BASEMENT LEVEL classroom in Hamilton Smith, a dark-haired, broad-shouldered New Haven, Conn., freshman named George Bell is standing before his peers, explaining his group's policy for federal oversight on stem-cell research. He cites medical studies and scientific research in summarizing a policy that would ban stem cells for cloning purposes and restrict their availability but would usher in a new era by promoting international cooperation and instructing the National Institutes of Health to fast track research funding.

Professor David Hiley, a former UNH provost and the architect of this freshman-only bioethics class, looks on contemplatively, like Ted Koppel at an ABC town meeting. At the semester's start, Hiley had challenged the students to create a national policy for stem cell research, one of the nation's most divisive issues. The students were asked to confront the question of whether an embryo should be granted moral status. They were asked whether the potential benefits of stem-cell research outweighed moral reservations. "I was on the fence," Bell told me later, "but a big requirement of the class is having an opinion and supporting it."

Now Hiley wants to know if the competing advocacies in the room—there is a moratorium group and a free-market group—are okay with George. Do the free-market anti-governments have a retort? Do the moratorium types want a piece of him? And how about the moral hardliners, what do they think?

"What happens if a new administration comes into office and shuts everything down?" asks Jason Yee, part of the beleaguered moratorium group huddled by the doorway. "Government can't guarantee policy until the people decide one way or the other. We're saying that if we stop and take the time to educate people we'll get a national consensus and it won't matter what the president thinks."



GEORGE: "What if the people don't care?"

JASON: "That's why we're budgeting money to educate them."

Jason looks at George. George at Jason. Stuff is swirling outside the ground-level window. It could be leaves, maybe snow. The bottom halves of bodies slop somewhere in a wind-blown hurry. George and the other 23 freshmen in the room are right here, however, fearlessly in the moment. "Fair enough," concedes George, and the room's collective tension releases like air from a pressurized balloon. The Moratoriums are born again. They high-five, having lived to fight another day.



KATHLEEN LITTLETON '09

(ABOVE IN HER "REMAKING NATURE" CLASS)

"MY MOM KEEPS TELLING ME TO BE PATIENT, BUT IT'S HARD."

Interdisciplinary, inquiry-driven courses—Hiley's class is categorized as a philosophy offering—aren't new to the university, but the fact that freshmen are sitting in them is. Hiley is among those educators who say that we grossly underestimate freshmen. That the hierarchical stereotype of yesteryear—fumbling, confused, can't find T-Hall—is no longer applicable. They are, as a group, more serious, more determined, and, perhaps, more capable. They are a generation removed from the Boomers and all our baggage. Three generations from the days when Durham newbies were required to wear freshman beanies and "greet upperclassmen with a cheery hiyuh." A national survey of freshmen found that 70 percent disagreed when told that "an individual can do little to bring about changes in society."

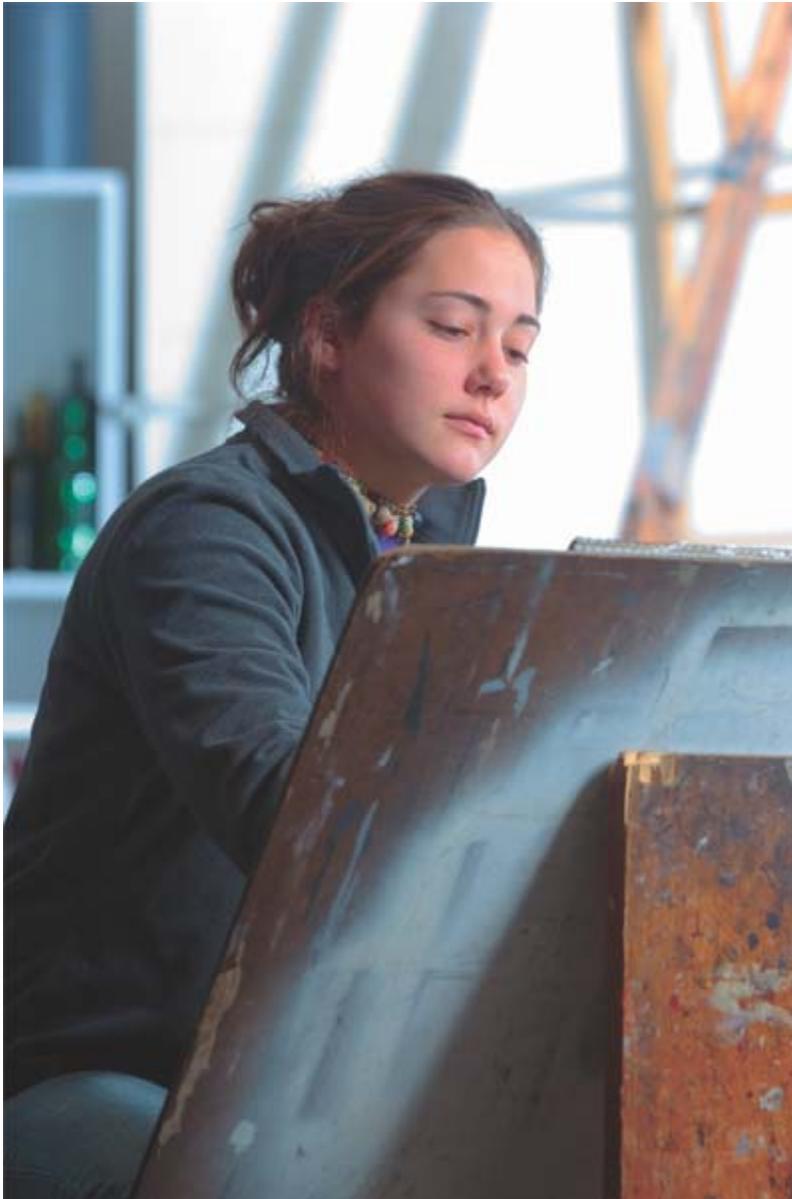
"We've learned that there is a window when students first arrive on campus when they are eager to learn and not yet cynical," says Hiley, "so we're taking advantage of that and really pushing them."

HILEY'S "REMAKING NATURE" IS part of a new "Discovery" curriculum geared toward freshmen. And while there is some grumbling around campus that every class at a university should be stirring, provocative and oozing with gravitas, the point is that for the first time freshmen are being addressed with tailor-made courses meant to get them up and running. The courses at UNH and other major research universities stem from a ground-breaking national study called the Boyer Report, which found freshmen were being herded into too many lecture halls and not enough small, innovative interdisciplinary courses.

At UNH there are a half dozen such offerings, to be increased gradually until there are enough for every freshman to take one. A course fetchingly titled the "Secret Lives of Words" asks students to probe the architecture, evolution and mechanics of language, delving into "the ways in which new words are coined, how they become established or die, and how they change over their natural lives." Professor Rochelle Lieber's class may be the only one in existence that routinely asks students to pucker their lips, jockey their tongue and engage their uvula to make syllabic noises. "I told you we'd be making odd noises in this class," she says. Distorted faces and barnyard sounds predominate.

On another day, a different variety of howls erupts when Lieber disassembles the wonderful world of slang and its infinite originality when it concerns the human body.

The Discovery, or "inquiry," classes, are a work in progress, but one unassailable plus to such courses is that freshmen don't feel like freshmen. "If college really works for you, you learn not to be embarrassed to ask dumb questions," says Judy Spiller, associate provost of academic achievement and support. "The last thing a freshman wants to do is stand out by asking a dumb question. Inquiry-driven courses make it OK to ask anything."



Ideally, students feel like fully functioning, decision-making members of the UNH community, no strings attached. George Bell fits that description. He unabashedly loves Hiley's "Remaking Nature" class and has been an enthusiastic participant in class and

out, posting regularly on the class's Blackboard Web site. He's careful not to get personal, but he's not afraid to say he gets riled up sometimes.

While the majority of UNH students are undeclared and wish to live in housing with a roommate or two, Bell says he wants to be what he's always wanted to be, a reef biologist. In true contrarian form, he elected a single room in Hall House, an outdoor-education-theme mini dorm. "I'm not going to lie and say it isn't isolated," says Bell, who found himself on the southernmost edge of campus. "But I wanted to get settled and do well before I started messin' around."

He says he's getting what he wanted from college: a lively exchange of ideas and exposure to new things. In his first three months he will argue on the behalf of government-regulated stem-cell research, downhill ski for the first time, and organize and lead a group of his mini dorm cohorts on a trip to the Boston Aquarium. "I know I'm going to fall a lot," he says, when we talk about one of those first-time experiences, "but I'm OK with that."

Up until this point, both public and private colleges in the United States had largely followed the European tradition of educating upper-class young men for the clergy or the professions. In the mid-1800s there was a growing national movement to incorporate science into the curriculum and open access to "the industrial classes." Even spiritual leaders like Boston's most prominent minister, William Ellery Channing, preached the gospel of agricultural education. Thompson clearly had been following the national debate, reading political tracts in his armchair, and forming his own opinions.

OF COURSE, THE CURRICULUM offerings are only a small part of the first-year experience, though administrators are trying hard to make it a bigger part. There are questions of where to eat, Friday night parties, primo work-study jobs, knowing somebody at the Gables—and there are hiccups. There are goodbyes to parents, hellos to roommates, freedom, freedom, freedom. Decisions that get made aren't always good. In the first month at UNH last fall, 110 students were arrested, mostly for underage possession of alcohol, or, for students 21 and older, violation of the open-container law. Five freshmen were booted out during that same time period.

Scott Chesney, associate vice president for student affairs and director of residential life, says that in his 20-year experience these numbers are commensurate with most schools UNH's size and aren't out of the ordinary. He adds, somewhat unnecessarily I think, that the freshman misdeeds from my era were much more pathological. "This is a good time," he says, "but now as then it's all about choices."

Kathleen Littleton, a Baltimore-area native who stood out as one of the leaders in Hiley's class, is hampered in Durham not by the coursework or socialization headaches, she says, but the feeling she is not doing enough. At home in Maryland, she worked at an organic food co-op, was active in numerous community groups, and was a 4-H club officer with responsibilities for the well-being of numerous sheep and pigs. At UNH she finds it distressing that she has so much time on her hands after classes and hasn't figured out a way to contribute to the causes she believes in. She almost wishes professors talked more, classes lasted longer, because then she could ignore how trackless she eels. "My mom keeps telling me to be patient, but it is hard," says

Littleton, who is dark-haired and deceptively casual appearing with a hand-woven "hippy" shell choker. "I really beat myself up."



*OMER AKTAS '09
(ABOVE, WITH ROOMMATE JEFFREY KASTE '09)
HE GREW UP IN A FIRM MUSLIM HOUSEHOLD WITHOUT SOME OF THE
CUSTOMARY DISTRACTIONS LIKE, SAY, CABLE TELEVISION.*

Jeffrey Kaste's choices are the kind the dean's office likes to hear about. A freshman from Timberland High School in Atkinson, N.H., Kaste is goal-oriented, bright and disciplined. He has managed to master time management in a way that most of us never will. He has a slate of early morning classes, a short lunch break, then track and field practice for much of the afternoon. He hasn't missed either a class or a practice. In the evening he studies, but rarely, he says, past 11 p.m. He appears the gentle giant—

mammoth-sized in a de rigeur collegiate outfit of hooded sweatshirt, ball cap, carpenter pants and iPod. "I haven't been homesick or anything," he says. "I've only been down once really—when I got a C minus on a German exam. I moped around for a day, then talked to the professor and straightened myself out." The only thing freshmanlike about Kaste is his aversion to walking (he chose Williamson Hall but fantasizes for the proximity of Stoke).

Watching Kaste in Lieber's "Words" class is like watching the freshman you wish you were. He is front row, engaged and energetic. When a classmate two seats over completes a strenuously syllabicated guttural sound, Kaste is so overjoyed he throws out his oversized throwing arm to knock knuckles and comes within a whisker of socking the person next to him. "Oops, sorry about that," he says.

Kaste's roommate comes from the same high school, but finds himself grappling with more typical freshman problems. Omer (pronounced O-mar) Aktas, a chemical engineering major, doesn't take care of himself as well, loses focus and has struggled to find his groove. They couldn't be having two more different experiences. When I make arrangements to meet up with Aktas, he blows me off. Now that's the sort of thing I would've done. When we do meet up weeks later, he has the sniffles and confesses he has just blown off calculus.

He shakes his head and says first semester has been a "real kick in the back of the knees." The transition hasn't been easy. He is shy, a self-proclaimed mama's boy who grew up in a firm Muslim household without some of the customary distractions like, say, cable television. His voice barely rises above a whisper and he has a sweet, affectionate smile that makes you want to root for him. "I was studying the other day for a big exam," he says, "when I suddenly found myself doing things on the computer and plugged into music and it was like, 'Hey, wait a minute.' I had to shut it all down."

The sheer volume of freedom has thrown him for a loop. On a personal level he has held the line: He doesn't drink or smoke, in accordance with his religious principles, and he will do practically anything to keep his mother happy, including allowing her to decorate his room with cloud pillows and flower blankets. But he loses time to computer games and tends to have trouble when it comes to exams, never having developed good study habits and being a little too bull-headed to change easily. In his first calculus exam, he walked in with confidence and walked out with a 45. His programming midterm wasn't much better. "I didn't study for either." He shrugs. "I never had to in high school."



SO MANY OF THE AILMENTS of freshman year do sound familiar—time honored in fact—but there is a new vocabulary. "Sexile," for example. This is defined as the unlucky roommate (almost always a freshman) who finds his or her dormitory door locked one day because of an intimate liaison taking place within.

The phenomenon of instant messaging has given rise to "emoticons" and "assicons," which are undeniably part of the cyber freshman experience. If your child or grandchild calls one day having received (_?_) you would want to offer quick assurance that he or she is not, in fact, a "dumb ass."

High-tech equipment, so promising, has not helped the misunderstandings that sometime arise between freshman roommates, says Aaron Koepke, the hall director at Stoke. There is a tendency not to confront roommates face to face, he says. Now, more often than not, the aggrieved zaps a parent with an enraged IM or cell call. It is a

tendency that hall directors would like to see less of. "Back in your day I doubt you were in touch much at all," says Koepke, as we tour my old digs at Stoke Hall.

He's right. There were no phones in the room, no computers. When my roommate Brad made me a sexile within the first 24 hours, I didn't call or message anyone. And when Brad borrowed my cross-country skis without asking, I simply wrote him the meanest note I've ever written a human being. No e-mails, no IMs, no calls. We're best friends to this day. The point, Koepke says, and what he keeps hammering to students, is this: "Did you even talk to your roommate?"

To the many alums who have lived on one of its eight floors, the building we're in—Stoke—is a monument, testimony to the kind of attributes you might associate with your first few months: grit and survival. Koepke tells me that today's residents believe they have found the places in the building's infrastructure where, according to the rumor, explosives would have been planted to implode UNH's most famous "temporary housing unit." Yet it survives, without adornment. Other dorms have orbited into the freshman experience—Alexander is for undeclared freshmen only; Williamson and Christensen are all freshmen too—but somehow Stoke can never be replaced.

This year there are roughly 400 freshmen residing in Stoke. Through a window I see a student tour group being rushed past on its way to the new dining experience at Stillings. I understand. The Stoke mystique is hard to explain. "It isn't for everybody," Koepke confirms, and then pauses. "But you know what's funny is how the parents of many current students want to come back and visit. They come through all the time."

"IT HAS BEEN A LONG DAY," says Vania Crevier, when we meet for the first time at Holloway Commons. It's 11:30 a.m. and I laugh, figuring she's being rhetorical. "No, really," she protests. "It's been a very long day." Crew practice began in the dark at 5 a.m., team breakfast at 8, class at 10. After meeting with me, it's on to a grab-and-go sandwich, strength training, a cardio workout and homework. And it turns out she hasn't slept since Sunday. Technically she's working on a 72-hour day. Long indeed.

Yet she appears none the worse for wear. Looking at her and listening, you get a sense of what Bette Midler must have been like as an 18-year-old. She is outdoorsy looking, rosy-cheeked and spirited in the extreme. In every way imaginable, she defies the stereotype of freshman as wallflower. Her first-year experience is the stuff from which advice books are made. "The first week was fine," says Crevier, a native of Ketchikan, Alaska. The trouble started in Week Two when she tried to take up skateboarding and ended up in the emergency room at Wentworth Douglass Hospital in Dover. When her parents visited campus for the first time, only 10 days into her collegiate career, they saw their child—whose given name means "God's gracious gift"—in bandages from head to toe. They also noticed that her blonde hair was dyed brown and her left nostril was pierced with a gold stud.



*VANIA CREVIER '09
THE TROUBLE STARTED IN WEEK TWO, WHEN SHE TRIED TO TAKE UP
SKATEBOARDING AND ENDED UP IN THE EMERGENCY ROOM.*

But the saga didn't end there. Crevier's foot swelled with infection and at some point 20 days into her freshman experience she swears she heard doctors murmuring, "We might have to amputate." She also had some other "freshmanesque" issues with hall neighbors and a few transitional difficulties. "Being from Alaska I had never really heard African-American as a term and in one of my classes I used the word 'black' and it was like a whole hush went over the class. I had no idea what I'd done." Also, where she grew up, people said "Uff da." "You'd get punched or tackled in football and it would be, like, 'Uff da!'" Crevier's contributions to the "Secret Lives of Words" class have been an eye-opening experience for all, including the professor.

In fact, Crevier is the rare UNH freshman who can say she has played football on tundra, logrolled for prizes and was trained to shoot a rifle in elementary school. "In eighth grade we went on a survival training exercise where they dropped us in the forest with a match and a tarp." So, she is Alaskan and different...wheelchaired (for a time) and different...and a teetotaler and, well, very different. She's also a devout Christian and lives in a single room in a dormitory full of freshmen. She was, in short, a statistic waiting to happen.

But when I meet with her in mid-November I find nothing of the sort. She's still going to crew and is on track with a double major (guidance counseling and English teaching) and double minor (psychology and theater) completely under control. She's still recovering from her skateboarding wounds but has kept her commitment to crew. She is just back from taking a week off school to help her brother through a family crisis (which is why she hasn't slept for a few days, to make up all the work she missed). She recently found out from an orthopedic surgeon that she's missing a piece of her knee, which may hamper her in continuing to play soccer, hockey and log roll. She is taking pills the size of hockey pucks to help regrow the missing stuff. Finally, she expects to hear shortly whether she won the part of the narrator in the UNH theater production of "Into the Woods."

All this and Crevier—I kid you not—looks like she's the most blessed person on Earth. "I love it here," she says. She likes going a million miles an hour, thrives on it actually. She admits she blew it with the nose ring, disappointing her parents, but she adds that she managed to come up big when she was able to truthfully answer that, no, she did not get a tattoo as well. She has stayed true to herself while grabbing the university for all its worth.

And while putting a person like this—social to the umpteenth degree—in a solitary room might be the ultimate stress, she's even figured that out. "I rent it out sometimes for people who need privacy," she says. "So I make a few dollars and I get to stay with friends." Told that more freshmen could be enterprising like her, Crevier smiles and says she also does laundry. Her clients to date include the entire 3B floor wing of Christensen.



VANIA CREVIER

MY LAST VISIT to campus comes days before the students scatter for Thanksgiving break. Crevier, Kaste, Bell and Littleton are doing well. The latter has found the Campus Ministry Waysmeet organization, which links volunteers with the local people and institutions that need them. She is confident that the piece of the puzzle that was missing has been found and that she will soon be happily buried in extracurricular projects that will make her read more, think more, and most of all, give more.

When I see Aktas, he is in the final stages of a studying binge with high hopes of mastering his calculus and programming exams the next day. He explains that the reason he didn't go to calculus before is because he didn't want new equations to mingle with the numbers just stuffed in his head. In other words, it was a strategic blow off of class.

He has started to develop study skills and is increasingly reaching out to people who have offered to help. While observing Ramadan—the annual dawn to dusk month-long fast—he manages to roust himself early enough to fuel himself with a Pop-Tart.

Later, after the fall semester is over, I check in with him one more time. Aktas reports that things are looking up, that he studied for all his exams and did much better than he thought he was going to do. He's looking forward to the spring semester and is excited about the mix of courses he has signed up to take.

Omer Aktas, I'm here to report, is hanging tough. Freshman parents of the Class of 2009, rest easy. The kids are all right.

Todd Balf '83, a former senior editor for Outside magazine, writes for Men's Journal, Fast Company and other publications. He is the author of two books, The Last River: The Tragic Race for Shangrila, and The Darkest Jungle: The True Story of the Darien Expedition and America's Ill-Fated Race to Connect the Seas. He lives in Beverly, Mass.

ALUMNI



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.

The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).

Email us: unhtoday.editor@unh.edu.

[MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION](#) [CONTACT US](#)

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds

UNH Today • UNH Main Directory: 603-862-1234

Copyright © 2021 • TTY Users: 7-1-1 or 800-735-2964 (Relay NH)

[USNH Privacy Policies](#) • [USNH Terms of Use](#) • [ADA Acknowledgement](#)