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Princeton Class of 1978 Foundation
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Dear Members of the Class of 1978 Foundation,

I don't think I can adequately thank you for supporting my summer internship at the East Harlem School at Exodus House (EHS). I have never had a more enjoyable and fulfilling work experience. As a direct result of my time at EHS, I am pursuing jobs in teaching immediately after I graduate. To prepare, I am taking a course in the program for teacher preparation here at Princeton. I am also focusing heavily on teaching opportunities that would allow me to pursue a master's degree and to become fully certified to teach in public schools, where I want to work.

I started this summer with the knowledge that being a teacher would help me become a more effective administrator. While I am still very passionate about a future career in school leadership, especially in urban settings and "turn-around" schools, I am no longer thinking of teaching as mainly a stepping stone to get there. On the other hand, my experiences teaching at East Harlem taught me to think of teaching as a *very* valid end unto itself.

EHS allowed me to teach very small classes of middle-schoolers in math and economics. I also co-taught a history class and helped lead soccer drills and games when the students went to gym class. I was responsible for writing lesson plans (either alone or with a team of interns) for every academic class I taught, but one really stood out. I am an economics major, and the joy I felt teaching economics to five middle-schoolers is something I never would have expected – and something that now I don't want to do without! I had maximum flexibility to teach the class the way that I wanted to, and there is something so amazing about starting out to share something with students and then seeing them get really excited – and proficient – at it! I cannot take even close to all the credit, though – I was very lucky that the summer program director assigned me five students who were already inclined to like a subject like economics.

My afternoon economics class was the highlight of my days at EHS. None of the students had a very strong economics background, so we were all moving together through new material, and they were very excited to explore ideas that, as I told them, even many college students don't understand. I designed a game to keep the students interested and simultaneously to help me assess whether they understood the concepts or not – they loved it. It was like Taboo – I divided the students into two teams, and a student had to get his or her team to guess the word on his or her card without actually saying it. If they guessed it, the team got a point. If not, the other team got to guess. This meant that I got to listen to sixth-graders explain concepts like "supplier" or "interest" in their own words – and I knew if they were "getting it" or not. And for the kids, it meant that they got to show off their own knowledge, work as a team, and engage in some friendly competition. The day that Noah finally pronounced "economist" correctly was the first day that I felt that "yes!" feeling, but there were more to come.

Then one day Donaldo, my only seventh-grader surrounded by sixth-graders, explained to me why – in his own words – a new business might want to rely on a combination of debt (loans) and equity (stocks) financing, instead of just debt alone. What seventh-grader can do that?! My seventh-grader could – and that was the moment where the joy of teaching was overwhelming – that “yes!” moment was when I knew that I was going to teach as soon as I could find a job!

My summer was definitely not all “yes!” moments. I learned a lot about how little I know about managing larger classes, and I gradually learned – by trial and error! – the importance of starting out with very strict classroom rules that can be relaxed (instead of starting out with a lack of rules and trying to impose some order when necessary). I realized how little I knew about writing lesson plans, and I saw how very tiring teaching was going to be. I got better at dealing with unruly students, but I still definitely don’t have it down. So far, my course in teacher preparation has already opened my eyes to things I never imagined, and I expect that with more training and experience, I will get closer to being a good teacher (I can’t wait).

In addition, my experience was somewhat less than stellar when it came to the independent research that I had planned to do for the school. Unfortunately, though the school did want me to perform research, communication about this project between me and the program director was not ideal. I got better throughout the summer at working through this, and by the end of the summer, I had provided a final product that I believe was helpful to the school (an annotated guide to supplementary reading materials).

Finally, one last memory to share: EHS had a “friends and family” day, during which interns were allowed to invite guests to visit us. I was so fortunate to count among my guests my father (Dan Gecker ’78); one of my faculty mentors at Princeton, Don Dailey (who wrote a letter of recommendation to your committee); and Don’s summer research intern. They were all very impressed with the school and were delighted to have the chance to meet staff and students there. And for me, the highlight was listening to my dad, who was also an economics major, answer questions from my economics students. I had told them that he was in business, and they had lots of questions about that, but they also asked questions that drew on what we’d talked about in the class – for example, Samantha asked why security is so tight at the New York Stock Exchange, and Donaldo asked whether there are different types of mortgages. Listening to my dad teach these kids in the same patient voice he’d used to explain things to me and my little sisters reminded me that even if I eventually move out of teaching and into administration, I don’t ever have to stop teaching.

Again, thank you for the single best work experience I have ever had. It was both exhausting and exciting – and it was not only enjoyable but quite literally life-changing.

Sincerest thanks,

Alexandra H. Gecker ’12



P.S. Interns were encouraged to invite friends and family to visit on July 19. This photo from the event was included in a “thank you” email that EHS sent afterwards. From left to right: My mentor, Dr. Don Dailey; my father, Dan Gecker '78; me; Don's summer intern Isabel Vordzorgbe '13. (The three at right are another intern, Travis, and his mentor and her daughter.)