

THE TATTOO

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Boarding school isn't what you think

By **COURTNEY COUGHLIN**
The Tattoo

With books such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Dead Poets' Society*, and *Prep* in high demand and the world population pondering the existence of a real life Hogwarts, boarding and preparatory schools are rife for speculation by those who've never attended one.

Let me provide another bird's eye view into a high school experience that remains foreign to many. Everything you think you know about boarding school – forget it. In fact, you can forget almost everything you know about school in general.

Imagine pulling up to a classic college campus, complete with ivy crawling up a collection of brick buildings and, at age 15, knowing that this will be your home for nine months a year, for the next four years of your life. And even as your parents drive away and leave you in your white-walled, jail cell-like dorm room, you hardly waste a moment feeling sad or lonely or confused.

An orientation session of get-to-know-you games has already been squeezed into your schedule, and your roommate, someone you have known for only two hours, leads you down the dorm stairwell and across campus to a gathering of other clueless new faces. Let the journey begin.

As a freshman, your first year at boarding school will be marked by structure and guidance. Sure, you can complain about having to sign in at breakfast six days a week and a 10:30 lights out check, but where else can you sneak out of your room to spend hours in your friend's room down the hall, snacking and gossiping until you hear the footsteps of the dorm monitors outside the door?

When you jump into the closet and hold in your breath with the impulse to laugh hysterically, the thought will dawn on you: so this is boarding school.

Teachers aren't jaded babysitters waiting for their pensions, nor are they naïve missionaries out to save you from yourself and the tribulations of adolescence. They are a group of real people who live with you, coach you, guide you, and know you before you even know yourself – in fact, before you even realize that you don't know yourself.



Liza Carey / The Tattoo

Flora Irving of New York and Courtney Coughlin of Connecticut, both students at The Taft School in Watertown, at a Hawaiian dance last year.

You will discover that your peers actually care about what that person in the front of the room has to say, they do their homework and if, by chance, they don't, they are extremely embarrassed about it.

On every paper you turn in, you write the words "I pledge my honor..." and scrawl your signature, promising that you didn't cheat or help a peer cheat on the assessment, and you look around the room during each test to find that no one has even considered glancing at another's paper or copying answers.

Your ego skyrockets as you glance at your computer one afternoon and realize that you actually have something to say in your Oedipus thesis, or you figure out the baby's true father through DNA coding in a science lab.

Let's not pretend this isn't school, however. Students complain about the amounts of homework teachers assign night after night, with little to no regard for the amount of homework other teachers assign. And when you are sent to your room from 7:45 to 9:45 at night for an open-door, silent, no-Internet study hall, only to be locked in the dorm again at 10:15, life can seem pretty rough.

Cafeteria food, no matter how great the food service is, gets boring and limited when you eat three meals a day, seven days a week, in the same place.

And when you sleep through your first class, get your first failing grade, or find that all your friends are going to Bermuda for spring break, you will call home asking for mom or dad.

You will miss your dog and your pet fish, and no matter how bad your mother's cooking is, you will relish the idea of a meal in the privacy of your own home rather than making the trek to the dining hall and worrying whether that cute senior guy is going to be there with all his friends.

By your sophomore year, you clutch at any form of independence and struggle for any sense of individuality you can reach – while still being cool with your friends. The rules are nearly identical to last year's, and this makes you crazy because now you are much older and wiser, of course.

As the New England winter months drone on, the snow and cold might depress you, and with each falling snow, you have to remind yourself that you can walk to each and every one of your classes, meaning the headmaster will never announce a snow day.

You trudge up to the gym every afternoon for your required sport or extracurricular, whether that be hockey, squash, rock climbing or aerobics. On game days, you pile into the hockey rink or huddle around the squash courts, cheering for friends and socializing with others until you realize that either the dining hall is now open for dinner, or you have hours of homework looming ahead of you.

As your old friends from back home brag about snow days, Jewish holidays, and being able to go out every night of the week, you secretly smile to yourself because you know that you have an entire 10 days off for Thanksgiving, three weeks off for both Christmas and Spring breaks, and your summer lasts from the first week in June to the second week in September.

You also know that while they can go to the movies and visit friends' houses every weekend,

you are spending long weekends with friends in New York City or the Hamptons and regular weekends are marked by organized events on campus such as "hallway miniature golf," a newly released movie every weekend for viewing on the big screen in your school auditorium, live concerts from up-and-coming bands, and dances with '80s, '70s, and toga party themes.

As a junior, you have shed your underclassman skin to become a new and improved person, with a different perspective of yourself. You may find that your friends and interests are a far cry from what you had envisioned your freshman year, or you may find that you have simply become a more mature you, with a clearer vision of who you are and what you want. Either way, your life is now loaded with more choices that can directly affect what you do with the rest of your life, and more distinctly show your personal interests and strengths.

It may seem as though thoughts of college have been tattooed into your mind, and you may spend hours surfing the web looking at schools. In prep school, not going to college is not an option – not because it isn't allowed, but because no other path seems to make any sense to you.

Juniors have all the freedom sophomores lust after: the freedom to choose courses, to spend time in dorms of friends of the opposite sex, to sleep through breakfast, and to do what they like during study hall.

And although most opportunities are not limited to grade, students generally wait until their junior year to take advantage of options such as spending a semester in Spain or France, applying for a grant to do community service in another country or to attend an arts camp, or to become a head of a club or organization on campus.

As in any other school, seniors work hard and play hard – in fact, harder than any other class.

It is a year of celebration, memories, and also leadership. You stalk around the school flaunting the senior shirt that the class voted on and purchased at the conclusion of your junior year.

Your list of best friends includes faculty members, and you know which rules to bend and how to get away with it. You are assigned an incoming student to advise and wave to in the halls, just to make sure his or her little friends see how cool he or she is for being friends with a senior.

At Halloween, sophomores dress up and imitate your mannerisms and recreate your past by presenting skits with their friends acting as your friends.

By the spring, senioritis has hit in a major way, but not necessarily for the worst as you spend hours sitting and talking with classmates you've never taken the time to talk to.

While juniors, sophomores, and freshmen pore over their books as the sun becomes



Sarah Schoonmaker / The Tattoo

Girls from the cross country team stretch together before practice in front of Centennial, an upperschool girls' dorm at The Taft School in Watertown.

warmer and warmer, you opt for a round of Frisbee golf.

During graduation week, you attend dinner-dances with friends and family, and run through your old dormitories with your entire class, screaming at the top of your lungs and throwing water balloons. You allow tears to flow as you thank your friends and teachers for everything they have done for you and how they have helped you become the person you are, because they truly have.

The terms "boarding school" or "prep school" often conjure up images of boys with short hair and girls with matching skirts, parents who won't be troubled with raising their own teenagers, and families who belong to the yacht club and have seaside cottages.

What I wish everyone knew, however, is that the experiences I have described are not limited to the richest, the smartest, the most beautiful and the most talented.

I recognize it is not for everyone, but boarding school is an opportunity many disregard simply because they don't know what these schools have to offer.

I know this because I'm living it, and my friends are, too. If nothing else, I hope I've inspired you to explore another way of life.

Insider's Guide to High School

This is the third installment of this year's back-to-school advice series. Watch for another next week, and check our archives at www.ReadTheTattoo.com for years worth of scholastic wisdom.

Learning to love lumpy mash

By **CHARLOTTE DAY**
The Tattoo

When I was 12, I left home – I went to boarding school.

For the most part, that's what boarding school felt like. It made me very independent. I started to realize all the unseen effort my parents exhaust to take care of me every day.

I remember in my first year, I watched everyone sob on the phone to their parents. I never really did that because I was used to not having one of my parents with me, so having neither was only a slight variation.

Since moving up in the school, I've noticed that for some people, the homesickness has stopped. For others, myself included, it's worse.

Homesickness is one thing you learn to overcome in boarding school – another is the food.

I'm sure all schools that have cooked food, at least in Ireland where I live, have

terrible food. I think it's because they cook so much at one time it's hard to get it perfect.

After three years I'm finally used to the soggy vegetables and the lumpy mash. In fact, these days I'm of the opinion that lumpy mash is the best kind.

I'm not sure what it's like for those attending single-sex schools, but as our school is co-ed – and very against contact with the opposite sex outside of class – there tend to be some amusing situations.

The rules of where you can and can't go seem to change with every passing teacher – you might be able to go to the bike shed at four o'clock, but you can't at five. This can become confusing.

The younger students, who haven't yet won over the teachers, find this hardest as they struggle to sweet-talk teachers and staff. I'm sure they find it frustrating!

The girls' dorms on the whole are an incredibly civilized place. No one is beaten up, and beds are rarely broken.

This is not the case in the boys' area.

If a first-year student was to accidentally stray into third-year territory, they might struggle to come out alive. Maybe that's a slight exaggeration, but you get the point.

Looking over this year's breakage forms, it seems that no more than two nights pass before a bed, a light, a door, or a window are broken. Man, I'm glad I don't live in there!

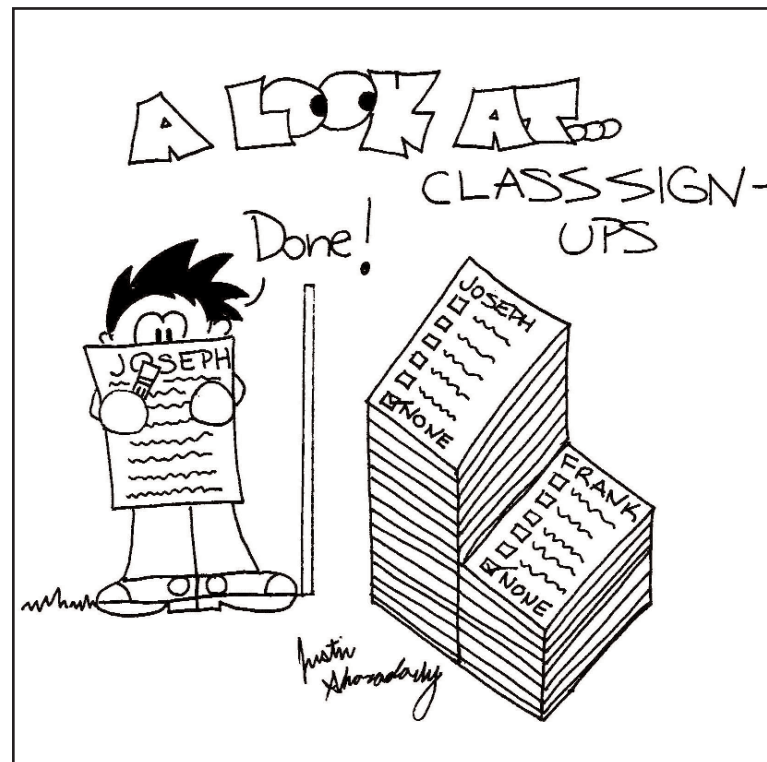
I found the "lights out" time a struggle to get used to.

In first year when you are 12 years old, it is 9:30 p.m. You get an extra 10 minutes throughout the school till you reach fifth year when it goes from an extra 10 to 20 minutes.

When you reach sixth year, it just goes to 11:30 p.m. When I'm at home I go to bed later than that, and I still struggle at school.

But not everything about boarding school is different.

When the day pupils arrive and class starts, you still get the cliques and the sniping as any other school!!



Justin Skaradosky / The Tattoo

One girl, surviving on an island of boys

By **CATIE MOULTON**
The Tattoo

When I was in elementary school, I thought it was unfair that there were always more boys than girls.

When I got to middle school, I realized it was really unfair – because I was the only girl in my classes or in my grade.

I was the only girl because I chose to go to an all boys' school.

To some this might seem odd. My friends' most common response was, "Oh my God! You are like so lucky, all those boys! Oh that is so like heaven!" But they didn't understand.

I didn't go to an all boys' school because I would be the only girl, I

went there because I wanted to go *somewhere*. Not on a date, but to a

private school. Also, I could go to this one for free because my parents worked there.

I eventually figured out that the boys were as intimidated by me as I was of them.

secondary school, or a college other than the local one.

Not that public schools are awful (well, some are), but I felt I would brighten my horizons by going to a pri-

turn away when I walked by or a whispered conversation would end or begin as I passed.

In classes, no one would be my partner unless a teacher required it.

In sports, no one would pass the soccer ball to me or they would call me names when I missed a pass. Sometimes, I would hear nasty remarks muttered as I walked by.

I eventually figured out that the boys were as intimidated by me as I was of them. They were afraid I would show them up in classes by getting better grades, or get on a better team than them in soccer practice.

Their defense against this was to humiliate me.

Once both sides realized that the other wasn't as threatening as they thought, a truce was called.

Once it was called, I got to meet some great friends that I still have even after they've left the school.

For awhile I thought going to an all boys' school was the worst decision that I had made, because I had to deal with so many people who made rude comments, but I think all the painful moments when I felt alone helped me.

I know when to ignore someone and when to protect myself and stick up for myself.

I know how and when to ask for help, something that I didn't do well before.

I also have learned a lot, from textbooks and from people like teachers that I wouldn't have had, if I hadn't gone to private school.

Maybe, just maybe I did brighten my horizons.

Only time will tell.

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