

A Tribute to Paula Hamp (Class of '78)

The other day, after thirty-seven years of teaching at West Jr. and West High, Paula Hamp asked a secretary where she should put her letter of resignation. The secretary, distracted and dutifully engaged in her job, said, "Oh, just throw it in the bin with all the other stuff."

For someone who's life has been involved in the Westside community as either a student or a teacher for nearly 40 of the 48 years that the school has been around, it's not just another thing to throw in the bin.

There are some, like Paula, who have been in that building on the hill at 2001 Casselman, who have so fully embraced the Westside community that once they're not there, you cannot help but think of them when you enter the space they used to inhabit. For instance, when I walk into the West High gym, I think of Coach Hinrich. When I walk into the old Social Studies wing and see room 216, I think of Mr. Flom. And when I go to the pool, I think of Mickey Olsen and Paula Hamp.

Not wanting to see Paula leave West High so unceremoniously, I thought I'd write something from my perspective about this amazing woman—who has given so much time and energy to our community.

Meant For Water

When Paula was four years old, her dad took her to the swimming pool for first time. Instead of a more gradual introduction to water with some confidence-building back floats and head bobs, Paula's dad abruptly pushed her into the deep end of the pool. Somehow, in that moment of underwater chaos of flailing legs and arms, Paula didn't find the experience all that terrifying. It may have been a sign:

Paula was meant for water.

Just as little incidents in life can say a lot about one's life, this incident of being thrown in the deep says something about the whole way Paula has approached life. When she has felt in over her head in chaos, Paula has found a way to not only survive the chaos but she has also found a way to be thankful for those moments down in the depths.

Moreover, in that foreign world under the surface that some find terrifying, Paula has found transcendence. She says, "When you're under water, just open your eyes and look up at the light. You can see God from down there." Not everyone can do that. To some being under water is nothing more than being a place where there is no air. The pressure of the depths squeezes down on the ears. In all, for many, it's a place to avoid.

But for Paula the water is a home. It is a medium for prayer. It is place to click away the miles in a Zen-like state of mindless meditation. It is a place to simultaneously be herself and overcome herself. It's a place she is thankful to have been thrown into. Which gets at the gist of her story, at least for me, which is a story of grit and gratitude in the midst of pain.

Chesapeake Bay

Once while she was in an airplane looking down on Chesapeake Bay, she said to a friend like a true swimmer, "I want to swim across that someday."

She did.

And she did it in 51 degree water.

Sorry, I have to pause here and talk about 51-degree water. Yes, it's something that she actually swam across Chesapeake Bay, but I'm amazed that she got in the water in the first place.

They say that the most lethal conditions for hypothermia are often not subzero temperatures. Rather most often the trouble people get into in the outdoors, happens when they are stuck in the rain with temperatures in the low fifties. Being fully submerged in 51-degree water is no small thing—especially when you're facing five miles of open water.

Humans aren't really made for that kind of water. That is the world of aquatic animals. While other mammals may live in even colder water, they have also had millions of years to develop things like blubber and oily water-repellent hair. To just jump into a world like that and enter into the realm of cold aquatic things with lots of bare skin, without the aid of wet suits and scuba gear, takes faith or and grit.

So there she was, showing up at the edge of Chesapeake Bay, standing on the shore of her dream. No doubt, this girl from the Mid-west looked around and noticed that all these coastal people had wet suits. And there was Paula in her swim suit—arms and legs bare to the harsh open water. Being the only one without a wet suit, is the kind of thing that may keep some on the shore saying things to themselves like, "I'll get a wet suit and do this next year."

But Paula had built a life time of swimming. That is to say, Paula had many years where she became used to being un-comfortable in the water. She had showed herself that she could overcome discomfort. So after coating herself down with Vaseline at the suggestion of someone in the race, Paula took that leap of faith—she tossed herself in the water.

And she did what she does—she swam. However, it wasn't as simple as swimming in a straight line across the bay. The currents pushed and pulled on her and made her veer off course. Not only was it a matter of extra distance due to the veering off course, but she also had to fight a strong current. And she not only made it across, but she did it in a remarkable overall time of two and a half hours in spite of the zig zags, the current, and the cold.

Pulling herself out of the bay, with all its heavy ebb and flow, rise and fall, choppy cold chaos, imprinted something in her. It was perhaps another moment of transcendence that came out of the depths of something hostile and chaotic.

The long-view victory of something like that is a quiet inner thing. The sum total of that kind of victory is how it affects the inner voice of a person. After all that self-inflicted challenge, Paula's inner voice probably told her, "You can!" And of all the talk that goes on in life, perhaps none is more important than our self-talk--the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Paula's story to Paula was certainly shaped by this experience. It was no doubt empowering. But that self-story didn't come cheap. It came through a lot of risk, faith, and grit. And now, she has something no one can take away—a story like that of herself to herself.

To deal with something as large and difficult as Chesapeake Bay, and to come up with transcendence, involves something bigger than pipe dreams on a whim. It involves a very unpopular word—discipline.

After being thrown in the deep end at age four, Paula continued to throw herself in. After some twists and turns that involved being told that she couldn't afford college and she should consider applying at (an essential type job like at) K-mart, Paula landed a full-ride swimming scholarship as a D-1 athlete at the University of Arkansas. On an interesting side note, the person who recruited her was the famous football coach Lou Holtz. Paula's swimming eventually led her to nearly qualify for the U.S. Olympic Swim Team Trials. She missed it by a hundredth of a second.

Paula really didn't have much time to be devastated about that, because shortly after that she received news that her dad had passed away back in Sioux City. She didn't have any money or a car to get back to Sioux City. Someone offered her a plane ticket. When she got to Sioux City, she was told her dad was in the hospital. She was confused. She thought her dad had passed away. He hadn't. So when she got to the hospital she was happy that she was able to see her dad. Her dad said, "I knew you would get here and you'd have a great big smile when you did."

Paula found some good in getting thrown into the chaos of a dying parent. While many might be very angry at the person who falsely told her that her dad had died, she saw it as an opportunity.

How?

She explains that finding out that he was still alive helped her show up super happy. Had she known the truth, she may have showed up at her dad's dying bed full of sadness. Instead, the way this had

turned out, it helped her come in the room smiling and full of gratitude that her dad was still alive. She said that is was a great way to see her dad for the last time.

Also around that time, the swim team scholarship was reduced at Arkansas. Fortunately, she was still able to finish college as a D-1 swimmer. But it was no longer a full-ride scholarship.

She returned to the Westside, where she spent the next 37 years teaching and coaching. Her coaching story involves, among a lot of other good stories, helping a blind girl swim a straight line. The relationship she build with this girl, eventually led this athlete to success in the Paralympics in Greece. Paula could coach a blind swimmer because Paula can basically swim blind. After a lifetime in the pool, she is able to know where she is in the pool—literally with her eyes closed. So it is not surprising she could coach a blind athlete.

Ultimately, I can't write an essay that encompasses what Paula has meant to the Westside. I can only write about how she has affected me. Ultimately she helps me to know there are people who can get thrown in the deep and come up grateful. It helps me to know that there are people who can dream ridiculous things like swimming across Chesapeake Bay. There are people who can jump in that cold miserable water. People who can be pushed off course but still finish. It helps me to know there are people who routinely get up early. Year after year. Trudge out in the snow. Jump in cold swimming pools, do a mile just for a warm up—with closed eyes. And pull themselves out of that pool. Show up in the classroom and invest in kid's lives for 37 years.

I need that. Not as a how to. Because honestly I don't know how you can swim a mile just for a warm up. And I may never know what it's like to jump in that kind of cold Chesapeake water and knock out five miles of swimming while fighting ocean currents. But what I need is to know that these kinds of ridiculous things are still possible.

Paula's work at West High is not a random paper tossed in a forgotten bin. Her life's example and work at West High sticks out as an example of the possibilities that are still in this world.

Her retirement is not an 'Oh just throw it in the bin" moment. To someone who has lived a life going into the depths, looking up with eyes wide open and finding transcendence shining through, the West High community says,

THANK YOU!