
Non Sibi for Life

Three alums answer the call

by Sarah Zobel

Non sibi, one of the most important mottos impressed upon every Phillips Academy student since Paul Revere engraved it on the school seal in 1782, is a concise reminder to think beyond one's self. And while countless PA students and alumni incorporate the concept of *non sibi* into their lives, others have gone so far as to establish it as the tenet underlying their life's work.



NON
SIBI



In Villarica, Tolima, Colombia, Christine Balling '86 and members of El Equipo Non Sibi de Colombia make their way to the front of their "March for Peace" parade, organized by the community as part of the Non Sibi playground's inauguration activities in March 2013.

Ellos son *non sibi*

It was a well-timed e-mail that gave **Christine Balling '86** the idea to import *non sibi* to western Colombia. Today, Balling and her group of teens known collectively as *El Equipo Non Sibi del Tolima* travel to villages separated by mountain ranges, building playgrounds, hosting youth summits, and bringing toys to younger kids. It's all part of Fundación ECCO, which Balling established to engage youth in the democratic process while teaching them to be leaders.

Colombia certainly has had its share of troubles, with the government mired in a half-century-old confrontation with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), although the two sides currently are brokering a peace agreement. Balling, a native of Lee, New Hampshire, had spent time working in the finance and tech industries in Manhattan, as well as doing some screenwriting in Los Angeles, before moving to Colombia a half-dozen years ago. Touring as an assistant in a Senate campaign in the department of Tolima in 2009, she was approached by members of a youth group who wanted to talk about some much-needed improvements to their mountain

village, Villahermosa. It's accessible only by a four-hour ride on a bumpy single-track dirt road, and for starters, they said, there wasn't even a safe playground. Balling was unsure at first how she could help, but on the long drive to the village she suddenly recalled that just the day before she had received an e-mail from Andover about alumni *non sibi*-based projects.

"I was rumbling down one of those scary roads, and it just sort of clicked," says Balling, who then easily convinced herself that "maybe building a tiny little playground up there" was feasible. Community service was nothing new to Balling, who had served as a candy striper in

a Boston hospital during her years at PA, as a Big Sister to a young Dominican girl in Harlem while at Barnard, and as a Red Cross volunteer after Hurricane Katrina.

Her one requirement was that the Villahermosa youngsters use the democratic process to decide where to install the playground, so it wouldn't just be a "one-off gift." With kids as young as 6 participating in the decision-making process, a location was chosen; residents of all ages pitched in to clean, paint, and construct the new playground. A designated inauguration day included the installation of a specially built wooden sign engraved with "NON SIBI."

Piggybacking on the success of that project, Balling brought a group of Villahermosa teenagers who'd been involved with the playground construction to a town farther south in Tolima a couple of months later. There, they taught a new group of kids how to do the exact same thing: site and build a playground. Those teenagers then did the same in another village, and so on. To date, Fundación ECCO has been behind the construction of 11 playgrounds. For the youth involved, it's also a chance to get to know peers from another part of Tolima they otherwise never would have met.

Participants, who keep in touch via a private Facebook page, collaborate on other activities as well, wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with the words *Yo Soy Non Sibi*—"The kids care for them like they're a uniform," says Balling—while organizing medical brigades, peace marches, and youth leadership and democracy summits near each new playground. The most recent summit, in November 2013, was held just as the Colombian government was beginning negotiations with the FARC; participants established a mock advisory committee. The conflict, says Balling, is very real to the majority of them—some have family members in the FARC while others have been displaced by the

turmoil. The summit gave them a safe place to discuss the issues.

"For these kids, it was extremely significant, because no one had ever asked them what they think," says Balling.

Another venture was Operation Non Sibi, a joint project with the Colombian Air Force, Army, and police. Participants, including Balling, traveled by helicopter to Santiago Perez, a village in southern Tolima, where they delivered to peers 1,000 soccer balls (all labeled *non sibi*) and 1,000 teddy bears.

The foundation's only employee, Balling says the bulk of her funds go to transporting program participants; she has received some funding from USAID and from private donors. Her goal is to find the funding to keep the foundation operating and to keep growing the network of young people, some of whom have been with

"At the end of the day, it's the kids doing it themselves. They own it."

—Christine Balling '86



Balling and her young team gather in June 2013 to inaugurate the new Non Sibi playground built in Morales, Cauca, Colombia.

her since the beginning. Many of the kids have branched out, undertaking their own *non sibi* works and raising any associated funds needed. One group repainted their village's paved soccer field; another put on their T-shirts and lit 1,000 candles in their town's center to celebrate Día de las Velitas (Day of the Candles).

"At the end of the day, it's the kids doing

it themselves," says Balling. "They own it." Although they are a long way from Andover, they have grasped the concept behind the Academy's motto.

"All they know is '*No para sí mismo, sino para los demás*,'" says Balling, reciting the group's full Spanish translation of *non sibi*. "And that's what it's about."



As part of a ceramic cooperative at the archaeological site of San José de Moro in Peru, these young men make replicas and other products using the motifs of actual excavated artifacts. Julio Ibarrola (second from left), a master potter, cooperative leader, and teacher, trains the young men.

Looking back, moving forward

Surrounded by Incan and Mayan ruins, **Larry Coben '75** discovered that by teaching people in impoverished countries around the world the basics of entrepreneurship, he could inspire them to preserve their cultural heritage sites. He also realized that simply by providing local people with mentors and preliminary financing, he could positively affect their lives while empowering them to care for irreplaceable fragments of their history.

Coben attended Yale as an undergrad and went on to Harvard Law before realizing he didn't want to become a lawyer. He cofounded one of the country's earliest providers of renewable energy before, in succession, establishing a medical waste disposal company; being named CEO of Bolivian Power, a NYSE-traded company; and forming an asset-acquisition group. Coben, a native of Livingston, New Jersey, then decided that rather than founding another startup, he would nurture a longstanding interest in archaeology. Returning to school, he earned a PhD degree in anthropology with a focus in archaeology from the University of Pennsylvania. He conducted his dissertation research at Incallajta, an Incan site in central Bolivia some 100 miles from the nearest major city, and was alarmed to discover that the site was being used to grow crops, play soccer, and graze cattle.

"I tried all the traditional methods that academics generally try, which is to tell people how important their own patrimony and past are," says Coben of his efforts to help the locals realize the significance of the ruins. "It really has zero impact, of course, because people know

how important it is, but if you can't eat your history, you're not going to preserve it." In an area where per capita income averages \$100, Coben needed to find a better motivator. He offered to install a gate across the sole road in, charging foreign tourists \$10 to visit the site. Locals would be allowed to pass free of charge, and Coben would pay a month's wages for someone to supervise the gate. Total cost to him: approximately \$50.

He was met with skepticism, but in the first week four tourists passed through the gate; the second week, three more came, by which point, the project already had achieved a 40 percent return. Suddenly, the populace developed a new attitude toward the site.

"They realized it wasn't just an intangible asset of their past," says Coben, "but that it had some relevance to their present, and that it would be much better to put it to a nondestructive, sustainable economic use: tourism." The income was immediately used to buy out the grazers and build a soccer field in a more appropriate location.

Based on that success, Coben established the

"...if you can't eat your history, you're not going to preserve it."

—Larry Coben '75

Sustainable Preservation Initiative (SPI). Its approach is unique—though there's plenty of ecotourism, Coben hasn't found anyone using an archaeology-based paradigm.

"It gives people a way to utilize the past to create a future," he says.

To date, SPI has stepped in at sites in Peru and Guatemala and is looking into locations in Haiti as well. Employees—not of SPI, but of locally formed cooperatives—are natives, and the range in number per site is 12 to 40; they're a mix of heritage and business people whom Coben pairs so they can learn from one another. His long-term goal is to be in sites in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa by 2015. Before the crisis in Syria, SPI was ready to go to Jordan, but because tourism has fallen in the region, Coben says it would be something of a false promise to the Jordanian people to set up anything now. That's a reflection of SPI's venture capital approach: Coben doesn't want any location to grow too quickly and fail.

The newest SPI project is Pachacamac, Peru's most visited site after Machu Picchu. Based there are 35 women who otherwise would have had few economic opportunities; they have



Local community women, with help from Larry Coben '75, paint iconographic symbols from the site of the temple of Pachacamac, near Lima, Peru, on a newly constructed artisanal center.

been newly trained in business and artisanal skills. Yet Coben is quick to note that SPI is not an aid organization. The women's success is their own responsibility, he says, referencing Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus's observation that it does no good to teach a man to fish if he can't afford a rod.

"There are plenty of organizations that teach people skills, but then neglect the business side," Coben says. "We're trying to give people the same chance an entrepreneur in the United States would have. These are extraordinary people. They just need extraordinary opportunity."

From seeds, a vine

Rabbi Everett Gendler arrived on campus in 1977 as part of a move by then-Headmaster Theodore Sizer to transform the structure of the school's chaplaincy to a Catholic-Protestant-Jewish tri-ministry. Although Gendler had been trained in the conservative movement, he had always been, according to daughter Tamar Szabo Gendler '83, "deep down, an ecumenical practitioner of religion." So he led services for Jewish students and organized a Hebrew table at lunch, but also taught classes on non-Western religions while serving as an advisor to all students, regardless of their religious affiliation—or lack thereof.

The Gendler house—which also included Naomi '85 and Gendler's wife, Mary—was open to all students, many of whom dined with the family at Friday dinners. It was a welcoming, open approach that tied in with

his Judaism, which, says Tamar, is really "a way to understand the universalities of the human experience." So although Gendler, who has been a vegetarian since his youth in 1940s Iowa, established on-campus marks of religious ritual



In summer 2013, two campers at Camp Solomon Schechter in Washington release ladybugs into a garden to serve as natural predators of bugs (like aphids) that nibble on tomatoes.

that were welcoming to students for whom they were tradition—a sukkah, or hut, for the harvest festival Sukkot and a mandala in the center of campus—they also appealed to students who were less familiar with them. And everyone appreciated the jack-o'-lanterns with which he decorated the synagogue at Halloween.

But perhaps what stood out most, says Claudia Kraut Rimerman '84, was an intentional awareness of the planet that Gendler shared with all students, a recognition that “God is creator of the planet; it was all about understanding God’s creation in a very accessible way.” That focus led his daughters to spearhead the establishment of The Gendler Grapevine Project, a six-year initiative that will combine funding and support for groups within the Jewish community that promote social justice and environmental action through 2018.

Gendler retired in 1995 and has since kept busy traveling with Mary to India for two or

three months every year, meeting with Tibetan exiles to educate them in nonviolent struggle. His 80th birthday fell on August 8, 2008—80 on 08-08-08; “For someone who stopped the car when his odometer hit a palindrome, that’s about as exciting as it gets,” says Tamar, laughing. But five years later, there was no such interesting pattern, and his daughters searched for an appropriate way to honor the man, a gesture that would be a celebration of his legacy. The Gendler Grapevine was born.

“The idea was to tie the values of the Torah together with concrete actions that will have meaning and are geographically spreadable,” says Rimerman. “So we’ll find clusters of people who can do something about the environment in a Jewish context but then also spread it to others outside of their communities.”

Each year, a new kind of recipient will be chosen—in year one, that was Jewish summer camps; in year two, it’s rabbinical schools—with multiple grants offered, in amounts ranging from approximately \$5,000 to \$10,000. The first year, 10 summer camps shared \$75,000 in gifts from board members and others. With the money, they built organic gardens, installed low-flow toilets, and hired fellows to teach campers about the environment. This year, the board hopes to double that amount.

“We wanted to carry forth in the next generation the seeds of what he’d planted in those who are now in their 40s,” says Tamar. The selection of recipients is not arbitrary, she says, explaining that board members look for high-leverage, low-cost projects. So the camps reached some 10,000 kids directly, but the campers then took the ideas home, for a net reach of perhaps 50,000 people.

Another component of the Gendler Grapevine is a website that’s an archive of all of its namesake’s works, both articles he wrote and articles of which he is the focus. It’s a way to preserve Gendler’s teachings for all time, and even after his 90th birthday (which will be the sixth and final year of the funding project), the website will remain accessible. It also offers “Great Ideas

“We wanted to carry forth in the next generation the seeds of what [Rabbi Gendler] had planted in those who are now in their 40s.”

—Tamar Szabo Gendler '83

Executive committee members of the Gendler Grapevine include (back row, from left) Rachel Loeb, David Weil '80, Naomi Gendler Camper '86, Tamar Szabo Gendler '83, Emily Loeb, Tajlei Levis '85, and Claudia Kraut Rimerman '84. Mary Gendler and Rabbi Everett Gendler are seated. This photo was taken at Rabbi Gendler’s 85th birthday celebration in Western Massachusetts.



for You to Try,” suggestions for low-cost ways to make environmentally sound changes around the home.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Gendler Grapevine is that Tamar and Naomi reached out to former PA classmates and other alums whom they knew had had some connection with their father during their years on campus, inviting them to be a part of the project. Rimerman was one who signed on; others are David Weil '80 and Tajlei Levis '85,

and they're hoping to hear from anyone who would like to be involved in some capacity. That has been an unexpected gift.

“For us, the reconnection has been extraordinary,” says Tamar of the PA alumni who are part of the project. And of her father, she says, “Each year, his birthday present is that he gets to give. It's quite a legacy.”

Sarah Zobel is a Vermont-based writer of profiles and features, primarily on health, wellness, and education.

PA's Non Sibi Weekend Debuts

More than 1,100 students, 200 faculty, and dozens of PA parents, staff, and alumni took part in the Academy's recent Non Sibi Weekend and experienced a revitalized approach to one of the school's core values. Held April 25 and 26, Non Sibi Weekend is the new model for Non Sibi Day, which was founded in 2007 and involved campus, local, and worldwide service projects.

“The Community Service Office created several new developmentally appropriate learning experiences, provided participants with a strong educational context on the social issues involved in each program, and offered background information on community partners,” explained Monique Cueto-Potts, Community Service Program director. “Reflection activities—so important for lasting impact—were incorporated into every project, and we sponsored a special evening opportunity for interested participants to gather for further reflection.”

Students also attended sessions with speakers or panels, viewed and discussed documentaries, and engaged in various activities with community partners. Off-campus opportunities, such as volunteering at the Greater Boston Food Bank, helping at Lawrence Habitat for Humanity, or clearing trails in the town of Andover's conservation areas, were offered both days. The April 30 All-School Meeting featuring Biz Ghormley '00 was devoted to a discussion of the Academy's overarching *non sibi* values.

To view Non Sibi Weekend photos, visit www.phillipsacademy.smugmug.com and click “Student Life.”



John Hurley