

An Intentional Life

The Carefully Crafted Existence of English Teacher Tex Tourais

Tex Tourais' life seems directed by happenstance.

The Florida and Texas native lost his given first name during a pick-up football game early in his freshman year at William and Mary. Everyone was just getting to know each other and names hadn't yet been shared, much less memorized. His quarterback, in an effort at effective downfield communication, dubbed him "Tex" due to the University of Texas t-shirt he had thrown on without thinking that day. It stuck, and even his mother, who presumably played no small role in naming him "John" at birth, now calls him Tex.

At a friend's happy hour several years later, he met the love of his life after an acquaintance of the host convinced her new roommate, still tired from moving to Washington, D.C., to also attend the party. "You never know," the friend said. "You could meet your future husband."

Anecdotes like these belie the truth: the Upper School English teacher has carefully and deliberately curated a life of intention and purpose. He even enjoys and embraces the illusion of his name. "People hear 'Tex,' and don't think of a bespectacled English teacher," he muses.

"Being a teacher is part of my identity."





Tourais' personality is a combination of affability, a love of language, and strong communication skills, so all signs pointed toward a successful career in marketing and sales. In his senior year of college, while completing his marketing degree, he realized that if he took just one more English class, he'd have a second degree. It turned out to be a prescient decision. After graduation, though, he started his career doing marketing for dot-com companies like 1-800-FLOWERS, Omaha Steaks, and Macy's by Mail. "If you got an email from any of those companies—or Heller's Whirligigs!—between 2000 and 2002, it came from me," he says apologetically. His career was going well, and he enjoyed lax hours and leisurely lunches.

"I have a felicity with language but am equally comfortable with digital environments," Tourais explains. "It was definitely a 'Jack of All Trades, Master of None' situation. As long as I could evince middling skill in Photoshop while crafting terse, pointed copy for Valentine's Day-themed waffle makers, I was a star. It occurred to me that I could coast for the rest of my life and that society might even reward me for doing so, but that would be a poverty. I would become boring, discontent, lifeless." He did some soul searching, took bartending classes, picked up side jobs to find human connection outside his cubicle—none of that addressed the problem. Tourais had always been interested in teaching, so he investigated what it would take to completely overhaul his career.

A small private school in Prince George's County outside of Washington, D.C., where he was living, offered an opportunity for change: the school was desperate for an English teacher and couldn't afford an experienced one. It was a sea change in many ways, including salary. Tourais took a massive pay cut, increased the hours he worked each week, and loved every moment. "I need the work to be intrinsically valuable; I need the expectant eyes of 18 kids in a room willing me to be better,

"I needed to become a teacher in order to become something other than what I could have become, a degraded version of myself."

>> continued on page 20

"At the end of your life, you don't want to look back and be unable to tell the difference between the things you chose and the things that chose you."

>> continued from page 19



to become the thing I needed to be. I was developing holes in my soul in marketing, so I found something I was passionate about and felt a deep and abiding responsibility to. It changed my orientation to the very idea of work."

Now on the right path, he set about becoming the best teacher he could be. His new role offered a lot of growth opportunities. The English department consisted of Tourais and one other teacher, and funds were tight. He didn't have mentors, but the experience he gained proved invaluable. He even found himself leading the accreditation committee in only his second or third year of teaching, which he acknowledges was absurd.

To develop the practices and routines necessary for curriculum building and classroom efficacy, he leaned on a valuable resource right at home. His wife, Rachel, now an Upper School Science Teacher at MICDS, had years of teaching experience on Tex. "I knew the English side," he says, "but I needed the moves necessary to build a class. I needed the architectural piece. It was a lot of trial and error, making mistakes, reading curriculum books, and talking to my wife. I was lucky to have people in my orbit who provided me with help even when I didn't ask for it." He eventually completed the Klingenstein program at Columbia Teachers College, a fellowship that allowed him to live on campus in Lawrenceville with other young teachers while taking a "crash course" in contemporary pedagogy. His Masters from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury, which was partially financed by MICDS, filled in the gaps.

Tourais is grateful for how the timing of his career as a teacher has worked out. After five years in D.C., as he and Rachel were starting their family, they dreamed of finding a school where they could teach together and send their children. They began to look around the country. Tourais had embraced using technology in the classroom, a holdover from his work in the dot-com world, and MICDS was looking to hire teachers that could help implement the brand-new 1:1 program. They are also grateful that MICDS was hiring both an English and a science teacher at the same time. "We looked at St. Louis and decided it was easily a town we could see ourselves raising kids in. Because of the tuition remission program at MICDS, both of our kids (**Elise '28** and **Max '30**) are able to attend. We are really proud that our kids go here and that our work benefits them as well," he says.

He's also grateful for the team he joined at MICDS. "I went from having a two-person department to having a department full of thoughtful, impressive teachers. It's also wonderful to have a chair who puts in the work and is personally invested in pedagogical trends and thought leaders. **Lynn Mittler** absorbs copious amounts of content, has a head for pedagogy, and has consistently tailored professional development to where my head's at. Then, you've got someone like **Chris Rappleye**, who decides to dig into the brain processes that drive writing and thinking and ends up publishing a book about it. Meanwhile, **Julia Hansen** is setting up Independent Reading programs, and **Celeste Prince** partnered with the History department to take my daughter to Atlanta for the Civil Rights in the South Winter Term class. It's endless, the things my colleagues are up to." Tourais is a constant learner himself, reading dozens of plays if he decides he doesn't know enough about theater or taking a short story class so that he can teach his own. He appreciates MICDS' commitment to supporting teachers who want to explore their passions, describing how he went down a rabbit hole of researching video games with interesting narratives. "I built a course around horror and science fiction and the relationship between author and artifact and reader-slash-player. MICDS has been very generous in giving me the room, latitude, and resources I need. The School encourages teachers to follow their own visions and grow into the kinds of teachers they need. I've always felt very supported by MICDS."

He, in turn, finds fulfillment in supporting his students. "It's challenging," he admits. "There's a really high emotional burden to this job. When you see a student who is getting in their own way, who is resistant to education, who just won't do the things that would better their lives. When they're choosing to be bored, to not engage, that's disheartening." He recalls his own experience as a student and admits it was probably frustrating for his teachers. He coasted through high school and much of college even as teachers and professors pushed him to do better. "It wasn't until grad school, until I was a teacher myself, and I was focused on absorbing as much information as possible that I became a strong student. That informs my teaching. When you learn to cook, you become a different kind of eater; production informs consumption. So, my video game class ended in the creation of a video game; my short story class ends in writing a short story. When they've written themselves, they come to understand the kinds of choices an author makes and why."

Tourais knows he's playing the long game. "Every kid has to mature at their own pace, come to their own understanding of society in their own time. I don't necessarily need for the engine to run right now; it's my job to ensure that when they do come to fire the ignition, the thing turns over." He also understands that he most likely won't see that moment. "Maybe it starts in college, maybe later. But when they decide it's time, those pistons need to move."

Still, the most important question Tourais might ask on any given day is simply, "Are you ok?" He's attuned to the

>> continued on page 22

What is Tex Tourais Reading?

Tourais' favorite books are constantly changing, but at the moment, he's recommending these works:

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez

"It's a whole other way to read and live than I know."

Catch 22 by Joseph Heller

"You can be the funniest and smartest person in the room and still have humility, big ideas, and laugh-out-loud comedy."

Haunting of Hill House by Shirley Jackson

"The lyricism and the way she constructs sentences, the sounds of the words in your head, they're a little off, and there's something wrong, but there's a beauty there, unsettled but mesmerized all at the same time."

Dangerous Liaisons by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos

"It's mean-spirited, vicious and savage and funny...a nasty little book"

"I think what the kids notice about me is the intentionality. Everything in here was a choice, and even the wrong ones were agonized over. The kids come to believe that. It matters to them."



>> continued from page 21

personalities in his classes, and when a student seems a little off, he's ready for that conversation. "I try to just sit there and listen—which is not exactly my skill set. And empathize. Sometimes, you'll get that email years later. 'There's an interaction I had with you, and you probably don't remember it, but it was meaningful to me.' As a teacher, you don't know the impact you're having on kids, both positive and negative, and that's wonderful and wonderfully stressful. I have the capacity to do something that some kid remembers for a good long time, but I also have the capacity to destroy someone's day without even knowing it. It's a double-edged sword."

He witnesses evolution with current students, especially on quiet Saturday mornings when grading essays. "I've been working on improving my feedback, on more efficiently, more compassionately getting students to that next plateau. When you see them reach it, or sometimes just when that next plateau becomes visible, that's really fun. I love when a student surprises me with a piece of writing that is compelling and engaging, one where their passion has created authenticity, one where they found value in the production of the thing in the moment."

There's satisfaction in the moment some days, too, after working hard to balance guiding students through 90 minutes of learning with an experience that doesn't feel repetitive. "When one of those comes off, where it lands and it's exciting, and there is academically playful chatter in the room and quality analysis, and they leave stuff behind in the room after class because their minds were blown, there's an energy to

that," he says. "There's no record except in the minds of the participants, an experience that they'll carry with them for a week or a month. That's a really exciting thing. There's a lot of pressure to be entertaining, and you walk down the halls and see cool stuff happening in all of these other classes, so that can lead to impostor syndrome. In my mind, if you can hit dynamic, experiential learning once every two weeks, you're probably one of the best teachers in the nation—even once a month, you're doing really well."

He continues, "The teaching of English is something that I might well have been built for. I do love literature, and I love that marketing piece: I'm trying to sell skills to kids who might not see the value in them. You have to establish your own ethos as a teacher: that you are working hard for them, that you value their time, that you're never going to intentionally waste it. It's important to convey that whatever it is you're teaching them is something that can help them right now and in two years but most importantly right now."

He sees the rise of artificial intelligence as a tool, but one that must be used carefully and with guidance. AI makes cheating easier but also has the potential to remove drudgery from complex tasks and thought processes. "It gives students more time for higher-order thinking because of the hours saved doing the lower-level thinking no one wants or needs to do," he explains. "It can also function as a nice sounding board and brainstorming aid. Additionally, every class has a wide range of reading comprehension skills, and with heavier pieces of literary criticism, students who might have struggled in the

past can now put sections into AI and get a summary, some bullet points—different ways to access the material. Then, they have a better chance of understanding and writing about it. It's not the same thing as talking to the teacher, but it can move them through that first cycle of lower-level questions."

Just as he was on the leading edge of incorporating computers into the classroom, he is now working to stay current with the advent of AI. "I want to be a help to people coming up behind me, not an obstacle. I have to embrace the change and admit that all the work I've put into facets I now consider myself good at might no longer be useful to me. You develop skills, and then, at some point, the skills become crutches. Something like AI comes along and kicks the crutch out, and what are you going to do? I'm going to hobble for a little bit, but it'll make me a better walker in the future. I'm excited."

He is also excited to see what his students will become and do. "It's not just about job functions and preparing them to be workers. Literature helps us become better, more nuanced versions of ourselves and, by extension, more sophisticated members of our communities. Writing is thinking. Writing these essays, they're puzzling through things too big to puzzle through in your head. Talking about and sorting through larger societal ills in class creates patterns of thought, a process and a routine whereby you can deal with complex issues by sitting down and taking notes and working through some ideas. They're learning how to be a person, how to engage with your own brain and leverage that and manage that and be a good steward of the intelligence they were given," he says.

In the meantime, he'll continue connecting with students during the day and as a Middle School track and field coach after classes. He'll head home each night to his family, which includes cats Harlequin (Harley) and Cheeto ("He thinks he's a dog."). He'll teach his course on writing effective college application essays at Eliot Summer Academy and head to Six Flags to ride roller coasters with his children. The Tourais family will vacation in Michigan, where Rachel has family, and will continue visiting national parks. And he will continue to read. If he's working on developing a new course, he'll dive into ten different works of literature that relate, consuming as many different works in that milieu as possible. If he's not, he'll read just as much but with a scattershot approach. It's a full, rich life, carefully constructed.

"I'm really happy here," he said. "It's been great having the kids go here. I love working with the faculty members and having a lot of freedom to build classes and then, when I get bored, build new classes. It's true of most, if not all, teachers: they keep introducing a little bit of chaos into their lives. I need to be doing different things every day, and the fact that the kids change every year makes it exciting, too." He smiles. "It might look like I do the same thing year-in and year-out, but you can't fish the same stream twice."

