School: Service with a smile as students help out at Villars’ refugee centres
Mountain: Why the Torchlight Descent is still such a treasured moment
Ideas: The year after: making the most of the moment you leave the mountain
People: Three Aiglonians share their experience of the 2008 financial crash
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**The Science and Art of Longevity**

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**Editor’s Letter**

**PRAISE**
I thought the Winter 2016 issue of the Aiglon Magazine served up a marvellous blend of engaging coverage and articles by alumni and current students and staff linking the school’s past with present and future. In just a few short years, the magazine has managed to strike an appealing balance of alumni and school news with personal stories about life in and around Aiglon. Thanks again, Mr Corlette, for the Aiglon experience and brave Karen Sandri and creative team, for keeping the magazine vibrant and relevant, and reflective of that Aiglon experience.

Erik Friedli
(Alpina, 1996)

**MIND, BODY, SPIRIT**
I always enjoy receiving Aiglon’s news, beautifully presented and informative. Wonderful to see that our dear school is still thriving and instilling the same principles we were taught during the early 1960s, but it seems to ring a bell. I asked an ex of mine who went to Châtelard during the early 1960s, but unfortunately she couldn’t think of (another) one either.

Simone Tow
(Alpina, 1965)

**INSPIRED**
Accolades are due to Aiglon Magazine, especially for the fine photos in last summer’s article about mountain huts. My daughter had been nagging to go hiking all spring and my husband recommended Maine or New Hampshire — which were unanimously declined. I suggested something more dramatic, pointing to the magazine’s images of La Cabane des Dix, one of our long ago Aiglon ski expedition destinations.

Jeremy McWilliam
(Alpina, 1976)

**LEADERS**
Just a quick note to say how much I enjoyed the article in the last issue about leadership. And I have gotten several nice messages from Aiglonians about it, from friends both old and new. This is fun, thanks again for thinking of me for the article!

Pamela Bates
(Clairmont, 1985)

**MONTE ROSA?**
In reference to Bill Lockwood’s query about girls’ schools near Châtelard (Issue 7), Monte Rosa seems to ring a bell. I asked an ex of mine who went to Châtelard during the early 1960s, but unfortunately she couldn’t think of (another) one either.

Simone Tow
(Alpina, 1965)

**WELCOME TO ISSUE EIGHT**

BEING PART OF AIGLON’S BUSY admissions team can sometimes mean spending as much time off the mountain as on it — but after two years in post, it is clear that while our community originates on the mountain, its spirit extends around the globe. I’d like to thank all of you who have given up your time and resources to support Aiglon, whether that is spreading the word about our ethos, hosting events, informing new families, supporting our Arts and Assembly building or taking part in our reader survey.

Indeed, you can see the strength of our community in these pages, from the volunteers who help to run the fire service (on page 48) to those who are supporting refugees in Villars (on page 16). On page 22 we discover what Aiglonians are doing in the classroom. On page 32 our community remembers the annual torchlight descent of the fire service (on page 48) to those of our community in these pages, taking part in our reader survey.

And, I have gotten several nice messages from Aiglonians about ideas of expedition destinations.

Valerie Scullion
Director of Admissions and Advancement
Send your comments to advancement@aiglon.ch.

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**Parsons Building**
As renovations to the former Exeter House continue, the Aiglon College Association Board of Governors and Trustees has approved renaming the building in honour of the late Head Master, Mr Phillips Parsons, and his wife, Bibi. With immediate effect, the former Exeter building will be known as the “Parsons Building.” Tony Jahnoomal (Alpina, 1965) and chairman of the Board said: “The Parsons made an amazing contribution to Aiglon for more than 30 years. We are so proud to honour them in this way.”

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**Architecture for Assembly and Arts**
Last June, Aiglon launched a competition to find an architecture firm to design and deliver a campus centerpiece: the new Assembly and Arts Building. After a grueling selection process, Durisch + Noli Architetti has been announced as the winning firm. To find out more about the building and our campus masterplan, please visit: www.aiglon.ch/campusmasterplan

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**Unique opportunities for students**
Targeted for their maturity, global awareness, tolerance and multilingual skills, Aiglon students are being actively sought for undergraduate programmes requiring a semester abroad. New York and Northeastern Universities offered these opportunities to just a handful of their applicants — including five Aiglonians, a tribute to Aiglon’s commitment to educating global citizens.

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**Results of readership survey are in**
Thank you to all the readers of the Aiglon Magazine who took the time to complete the readership survey emailed to Aiglonians back in February. We were delighted to see a per cent of you said that they read all or most of the magazine and 86 per cent of you said that the magazine strengthened your connection to Aiglon — and we are listening when you say you would like more classnotes (we will be sticking with the extended section introduced last issue). To read the survey results in full, please visit www.aiglonlife.ch/survey.

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**Join the conversation!**
www.aiglonlife.ch
email: advancement@aiglon.ch
write for Aiglon Magazine, Aiglon College, 1885 Chesières, Switzerland.
Facebook: www.facebook.com/aiglon
Twitter: @aigloncollege
The secrets of the White Rabbit

ONCE UPON A TIME, I would attend a conference hoping to come away with an abundance of new knowledge and insights — ideas that could transform my professional practices or illuminate my personal life. Now I'm content to come away with one or two small stones in my shoe: diamonds of discomfort, both precious and perturbing.

In this idleness, indifference or a cynical, hubris-laden “I’ve heard it all before”? Or, like a lifelong lepidopterist, have I stopped trying to build a collection of everything and started looking for rarities, misprints and anomalies? It may be a little of all of these – and that I tire more quickly of certainties than I do of questions.

Let me give you an example from a recent conference. A keynote speaker cited a frivolous word-play variously attributed to former US president Dwight Eisenhower, Clint Eastwood and the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland: “Don’t just do something – stand there.”

I liked the subversion of a well-worn cliché through a neat reversal and pondered it. Ten minutes later, I realised I hadn’t retained a single word of the presenter’s talk because my attention had been totally sidetracked and led down a rabbit hole. What had happened?

Reversal had created paradox, paradox had created puzzlement and puzzlement had required a whole mental investigation to see if a new sense of order could be built from the inversion. And of course it could – quite an interesting one too. The whole paradigm of the action-oriented world had been replaced by a static one; a different, looking-glass universe. I was completely detached from the presenter’s topic, yet I felt my attention levels had been curiously sharpened and intensified.

It occurred to me how quick we are in a conventional learning environment – a school classroom, a lecture hall or even an outdoor setting – to recoil in the straying attention of our audience, or our students, and prevent them from disappearing down rabbit holes. When we do this, we may unwittingly pull them back from the brink of genuine interest and dynamic enquiry.

The sparking of an original reflection is of genuine interest and dynamic enquiry. It also occurred to me how quick we are to exhort people to act rather than reflect, to do rather than to be. We see reflection as a frivolous word-play variously attributed to former US president Dwight Eisenhower, Clint Eastwood and the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland: “Don’t just do something – stand there.”

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That’s not to say we should stop worrying about attentiveness, or about people getting distracted, or about students’ attention lapsing during presentations in conventional learning environments. It’s just that we are worse at it than we think. Or, worse than we like to admit.

And does this particular rabbit hole have an end? It does; and as I emerge, shaking the uncomfortable precious stones from my shoe, I hear the White Rabbit telling me to leap before I look. ☝️

Richard McDonald
HEAD MASTER

Bringing Aiglon to the world

FROM LEFT — Stephanie Heathfield, Valerie Scullion, Luke Steward, Helen Sanders.

Aiglon website and as a result of Mrs Scullion and her team’s recruitment work. That work involves training recruitment agents, developing new markets, such as in Africa and Iran, and hosting recruitment and alumni events across the world. And it involves communicating what is wonderful — and, most importantly, unique — about Aiglon.

“For our parents, a strong academic performance is a given,” she explains. “So often it is our values that particularly resonate. Moral fibre, a healthy body and mind, and service are principles many parents would like to know that we are a not-for-profit school and that their child is not simply a number on a balance sheet.”

Along with the Head Master, Mrs Scullion is tasked with making the difficult choice of which students to accept. “It’s all about the fit,” she says. “As well as academic capacity you’re looking for young people who will embrace life on the mountain and have a positive impact on student life.”

It’s also important to get a mix of nationalities, of which there are currently 55 at Aiglon. “We try and have no more than 15 per cent of any one nationality,” says Mrs Scullion, “and we’re always working to add new ones. Applications reflect what is going on in the world, so we have to keep on our toes.”

Recently the admissions and advancement teams merged — a move which makes sense in part because the two teams share the same ultimate goal. “We are the first point of contact – and we hope that is the start of a relationship that lasts a lifetime,” Mrs Scullion says. “It is all part of building our community.”

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The sparking of an original reflection is of genuine interest and dynamic enquiry.
When he first went on an Aiglon expedition, the Australian-born Joshua Yeldham (Belvedere, 1989) fell into the snow underneath his heavy backpack and sobbed. Fourteen years old, and completely unused to the cold and the rigours of the mountain, Josh says he was convinced to go on by his guide, who said if he didn’t make it to the refuge he’d freeze — and by his friends, who carried his backpack and encouraged him onwards.

Afterwards, he says, he was so proud of making it that he put his hand up again and again for expeditions. “I would not be who I am today without the mountains,” he says, simply.

Today he is a celebrated artist and filmmaker, living between Australian river and sea in a eucalyptus forest with his two children and his photographer wife, Jo. He produces beautiful art, which has been described as a spiritual journey through nature. “I left Aiglon with a spiritual connectedness to nature,” he says. “Before Aiglon, if I couldn’t do something I’d have a tantrum and give up. But there I expanded as a human, I learned how to go past my breaking point. I learned how to move my body into the wilderness, go beyond where I am, where it’s comfortable and safe.”

His work often takes him on a physical journey, “up the river in isolation,” and a spiritual one, “entering new domains of knowledge.”

Bullied as a boy at a single-sex school in Sydney, he loved the friends he made at Aiglon. “My roommates were from Nigeria and Pakistan and it was fascinating, having mates like that. I also loved being friends with girls, and I fell in love for the first time at Aiglon. I’m very grateful for that.”

Yeldham also fell in love with art, thanks to the inspirational art teacher, John Sutch (who died, in 1988, aged just 30). “Mr Sutch took me to Giacometti exhibitions and introduced me to jazz. He taught me I could be amazing,” Josh says.

And today, he continues with another Aiglonian tradition: meditation. “Sitting quietly listening to a student talk taught me about storytelling – it taught me how to captivate an audience.”

“I would not be the person I am today without the mountains.”

Writer: MEGAN WELFORD

Clockwise from top — Joshua Yeldham, photographed by Jo Yeldham; Morning Bay, shellac ink on hand carved linen paper: Silver Owl of Morning Bay, studio cast aluminium with cane.
**Diary**

**26 August 2017**
**New Parents’ Reception**
The New Parents’ reception will be from 18.00 to 20.00. We look forward to welcoming you to the mountain.

**29, 30 September 2017**
**San Francisco**
Join us for cocktails on Friday and a hike on a Saturday ending at the Pelican Inn for drinks. Friends and family are welcome – please do join us for any or all events!

**1 October 2017**
**Los Angeles**
We are delighted to invite Aiglonians to join us at the home of Cecilia Peck-Voll (Clairmont, 1975) and Daniel Voll for a meeting of friends and alumni.

**3, 5 October 2017**
**Boston and Miami**
Aiglonians will gather in Boston at the Barcelona Wine Bar (South End) at 18.00 on 3 October and then in Miami on 5 October, details to follow. Save the date!

**15 November 2017**
**Hélène de Beir Lecture**
Hélène (Clairmont, 1992) was killed in Afghanistan working with Médecins Sans Frontières. This annual lecture, held in her memory, will focus on humanitarian awareness and service.

**14 December 2017**
**Guys and Dolls**
We eagerly anticipate this year’s school production. Join us before the show for tea and scones from 15.00. The performance starts at 16.00 in the Hall.

**14 December 2017**
**Parents Dinner**
Sixth Form Parents are cordially invited to dinner, location to be confirmed.

**15 December 2017**
**College and Careers**
The College and Careers Office presentation begins at 13.30 in the Sports Centre Classroom.

**15 December 2017**
**Parent-Teacher Meetings**
Meetings begin at 13.30.

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**Around the mountain**

**CHATEAU D’AIGLE**

**1,000 years of history and heritage**

**HEERE IS SOMETHING MAGICAL**
about a medieval castle set among the vines. Add to that scene a spectacular alpine backdrop and the image is unforgettable. Which is perhaps why the Château d’Aigle, and its large vineyard, attracts around 20,000 visitors a year, as people come from far and wide to learn about the region’s winemaking history.

The Château d’Aigle and the vines that surround it date back to the 12th century, when the building was home to the knights of Aigle. After a long and colourful history, in 1804 the castle was bought by the town of Aigle and for 200 years it had a number of roles, including courthouse, prison and housing for the poor of the town.

Today, the impressive building houses a museum, as Nicolas Isoz, its curator, explains: “We renovated and reworked the museum in a fun and interactive way with films, touchscreens and other elements which show the world of vines and wine,” he says. “But we try to show visitors the historic side, too. We show the castle with its medieval towers. Certain areas are decorated in the original style. And then the museum explains the landscape around us, the vines and the world that they belong to.”

The Château is part of a 1,000-year-old wine-making tradition. The vines produce Chasselas, a grape variety which makes a dry white wine (and is also grown in the Rhone Valley and in the Lake Geneva Region). Visitors can see the nuts and bolts of winemaking, from planting the vines through to the presses, barrels and bottles, to the moment when one pours a glass. Part of the exhibition is dedicated to explaining the information contained in the labels on a bottle of wine which is, says Nicolas, a veritable calling card for winemakers.

An interactive explanation of how to taste wine – which doesn’t involve drinking a drop – explains the different stages of wine tasting, from its look, its bouquet and its taste. However, visitors who want to taste the real thing are invited to join a guided tour which includes a visit to one of the local vineyards which have links to the museum.

To find out more about the Château and Vine and Wine Museum please visit: www.museeduvin.ch or call +41 24 466 2130.

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**Author:**
**SANDRA HAURANT**

**Photography:**
**JOE McGORTY**

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**Medieval majesty**

This castle dates back to the 12th century, and today houses a museum where visitors can learn about its history and that of the 1,000 year-old winemaking traditions.
I try to take off my scientist hat when I look into space," says Head of Physics Mr John Turner. "You want to look with a certain wonder. People sometimes assume that you have to be thinking about it from a science perspective – I am a physicist, after all. But I have a different perspective. It's just quite beautiful."

Mr Turner first found his passion for astronomy on a clifftop in Australia. "In 2002, long before I came to Aiglon, I travelled around Australia for six months," he remembers. "I had the opportunity to witness the total solar eclipse in December that year. I was staying just outside Ceduna, a small town in southern Australia, and I walked out along the cliffs which overlook the southern ocean. I stood by myself and watched the shadow of the moon rush towards me, over the ocean. It was quite something."

Since then, his love of the night sky has prompted him to travel to see the very best skies that the world has to offer: from lying under the stars in the Namib Desert, staring at the Milky Way, to walking around at Everest Base Camp after the sun went down. "I went out late at night and suddenly I was surrounded by Everest on one side, the world's highest mountains on the other, and just this perfect sky, completely clear, and millions of stars."

But despite these star-filled travels, Mr Turner says one of his best experiences took place at Aiglon's Kalouti Observatory: "We witnessed the final flight of the Space Shuttle Endeavour during a star party. You could see two little dots of light – one was the shuttle, one was the space station, just cruising across the sky."

Like most interests, astronomy can have a competitive element. One of the most popular activities for astronomers is a 'Messier Marathon' – an attempt to spot all 110 astronomical objects catalogued by French astronomer Charles Messier in one night. Mr Turner has taken part in a few but, he says, he's not desperate to cross things off a list. He enjoys just looking, rather than looking for something.

"We have an amazing telescope and binoculars here at Aiglon, but there is something special about looking with the naked eye," he says. "The light from the stars comes down into your eyes and isn't filtered by any equipment. If you've got troubles down here on Earth, looking into space puts them into perspective. The everyday doesn't seem that important when you contemplate the enormous size and beauty of space."
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Physics

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9. Rocket launcher
10. Viscosity tube
11. Ballistics cart
12. Connectors
13. Solenoid
14. Demonstration motor
15. PASCO Data logger
16. Homemade electroscope
17. Magdeburg hemispheres
18. Resistance box
19. Motion sensor
20. Thermobile
21. Spool of wire
22. Potentiometer
23. Dynamics trolley
24. Oscilloscope
25. Balance beam
26. Slinky
27. Bunsen burner
From Villars, with love

Service has always been at the heart of Aiglon life. So when refugees began to arrive in Villars, Aiglonians knew they could make an impact.
Manon also wanted to get behind the headlines and beyond the numbers. “You hear the political arguments, the statistics and people worried about refugees taking our jobs,” she says. “But it’s more personal than that. These are human beings who would have loved to stay in their own countries, this is not something they’re doing for fun. When I hear that kind of reporting on the news it enrages me.”

For the past 18 months, volunteers from Aiglon and Eclair, a community group in Villars, have worked with the asylum seekers. Like Louise, Valerie Barnes is an Aiglon parent and Eclair volunteer. “We started in October 2015 with an appeal for winter clothes and shoes, because refugees often arrived with only flip-flops,” says Valerie. “When the children started going to school, we rallied round to arrange school bags for them. So many people in Villars played a role. We are part of a privileged community and when we asked, people gave.”

Since then, volunteers have helped their new neighbours learn French, teachers gave maths lessons while the children were waiting for places in local schools, and Aiglon opened up its sports facilities to help teenagers let off steam. They have played cricket and football together, painted and danced, walked and skied, cooked and eaten, talked and listened – the many ordinary things most of us take for granted.

With clothes sorted and French lessons organised, the volunteers made ready for Christmas. “Together with the refugees we made a mural with scenes of Swiss mountain life and decorated the windows with paper snowflakes,” says Louise. “For the Christmas party, we asked the Head Master, Mr Richard McDonald, to bring his saxophone. He brought Aiglon guitar teacher Mr Jack Sakie and all of a sudden the centre was full of Afghan and Syrian men dancing to jazz.”

Later that winter Mr Torrance, together with seven Aiglon students and a mountain guide, organised a snowshoeing expedition for a dozen refugees. “Expeditioning is a big part of our educational ethos, so taking them snowshoeing was wonderful,” he says. “Halfway up the mountain we stopped on a snowbank, and within seconds an intercontinental snowball fight broke out, Afghanistan versus the rest – we had so much fun. And later that term the refugee team won Villars’ official snowball fight.”

Every Wednesday afternoon, Aiglon students visit one of the refugee centres to lead an activity they have spent the previous week preparing and, says biology teacher and Delaware Houseparent Mrs Naomi Haynes, they have witnessed huge changes in the refugee children they work with.
“The kids have always been very loving. From the second week, they’d come out to meet us and greet us with hugs. But we’d come back to Aiglon every Wednesday absolutely exhausted because the kids were a million miles an hour. They had bags of energy and nothing to dissipate it,” she says. “Now they sit quietly and concentrate – the secure and stable environment has had a huge impact. And they speak brilliant French – they put us to shame.”

Seeing such a change in the children has also had a huge impact on the volunteers. “Some of the kids were really quiet,” Manon says. “I remember one eight-year-old boy. He was always really sad, he wouldn’t play, so hearing him laugh for the first time after six weeks was the best thing ever. It was my biggest achievement.”

For many older teenagers and adults, however, boredom is the major challenge – until they receive a B- or N-permit, they are not allowed to work. Instead, the commune has come up with creative ways for the refugees to contribute to community life. Some volunteered as marshals at a local car rally, while others used their cooking skills to cater for social events – including Valerie’s birthday party. “Three Syrian ladies very kindly made stuffed vine leaves, fattoush tomato and parsley salad, burek pastries with feta and spinach, faleaf with winter slaw, plus yoghurt and rose baklava for dessert – it was wonderful,” she says.

Now that the children are settled in local schools, and many families are being rehoused down in the valley while the authorities process their asylum applications, staff and students at Aiglon are reflecting on what they – as well as the refugees – have learned.

What most surprised Mrs Haynes were the lives people had left behind: “I assumed they’d come from nothing, but many had been to good schools and spoke good English. Their parents had good jobs with good prospects. That they had to give all that up to come and live somewhere with metal bunk beds and communal facilities – that’s quite sobering.”

For Mr Torrance, it is their journeys that stand out. “There’s a former Afghan army captain who walked from Tehran to Switzerland with his wife and five children. These are epic journeys – and epic people.”

He thinks that Switzerland in general, and Villars in particular, have a positive story to tell. It shows that in relatively affluent communities, concerted action and a can-do attitude can make refugees welcome. “Switzerland is under the radar – we hear a lot about Germany – but per head of population, the Swiss are quietly taking a lot of refugees and looking after people really well,” he says. “For Aiglon, it’s been an overwhelmingly positive experience. Over the past 18 months, its staff and student volunteers have worked closely with local residents at the refugee centres, putting the school’s principles into practice and strengthening ties with the local community. “It’s easy for a boarding school to exist in a bubble, so this has enabled us to get out and be recognised,” Mr Torrance adds. “Getting students to use what they have for the benefit of the world is a big part of Aiglon’s ethos. This is a fantastic vehicle for that and it’s on our doorstep.”

Perhaps most importantly for Aiglon, volunteering at the refugee centre has taught students some major life lessons. Thanks to the refugees, they see the world differently and – crucially – truly believe that they have the ability to change it. According to Mrs Haynes: “Some of the students have been involved from the beginning and say it’s the part of their week that matters most to them, having a relationship with the kids and doing things for them. They feel they’re making a difference, however small.”

Denis and Manon agree. Both are now involved with other charities – Manon with a Russian group that cares for children with Down’s syndrome, and Denis with an NGO in Romania enabling children in Râmnicu Vâlcea, his home town, to go to school.

“We should give back to our communities because we’re lucky to be in a school like Aiglon,” says Denis. “We need to think about those who don’t even have the basics. Working with refugees makes you understand the world better – and try to do something to make it better.”

If you would like to support Aiglon’s work with refugees and asylum seekers please contact Chaplain Mr James Torrance at chaplain@aiglon.ch.
What do Aiglonians do when they come down the mountain?

Writer: MEGAN WELFORD
The year you leave Aiglon is life-changing: school is out, and not just for summer. But before – it seems – you even have time to draw breath, the questions begin: will you go to university? Which continent will you choose as your base? Will you go into the family business or strike out on your own? Of course, most Aiglonians already have the answers – and for many, that includes choosing to do something different. To travel. To explore. To serve. And in the process, they sometimes find a completely new – and unique – direction.

Donatus von und zu Schaumburg-Lippe (Delaware, 2012) had vaguely considered taking a gap year, but says he was forced to ‘take a reality check’ when he didn’t get into his first-choice university. The subsequent year out turned into four, and led him, a German national, into the British Army.

“It didn’t hit me until I didn’t get my place,” he says. “I’d always had good grades but I was lazy. I wanted to go into some kind of entrepreneurial career, be a manager and a leader. When I got rejected, I realised I didn’t have those skills.”

Rather than giving up, Donatus decided to dust himself off and acquire the skills he needed; the army, he says, seemed like “a good place to learn how to get things done”. In preferring the British army he was partly inspired by his chemistry teacher, Mr Peter Chapman, who could occasionally be persuaded to recount tales of his time at Sandhurst – the military academy of the British Army. “It took a lot of pain – and 36 letters to the German Ministry of Defence – but eventually, after a year of officer training, the German Army agreed to let me go.”

Before bootcamp began, Donatus took inspiration from another Aiglonian: English teacher Mr Darren Coxon. “We talked about the book Yes Man by Danny Wallace, where he spent a year saying ‘yes’ to everything. I decided to do the same for four months. I went to New Zealand, because my mum suggested it. I rented a car and slept in it, and worked in youth hostels. I have a fear of heights but I ended up parachuting and bungee jumping and I loved it.

“Up until then I’d been surrounded by kids my own age but now I had to learn how to make friends with people of all ages. I also learned to relax and trust in fate and in my own capacity to do things. I said yes to visiting a friend from Aiglon who then became my girlfriend – before, I wouldn’t have had the courage to go.”

Next, came Sandhurst and rapid instruction in both discipline (“I once failed inspection because my toothbrush wasn’t facing North!” he says) – and also how to use humour and friendship to survive. He then joined the Household Cavalry as an officer, and developed leadership skills. “People rely on you to make decisions. It’s tough. You have to be confident.”

Mark Logie (Alpina, 2003) also found responsibility – and confidence – in his year after Aiglon. Taking advantage of Aiglon’s Round Square connections, Mark worked as a resident assistant in an Adelaide school, responsible for the very lives of the young people in his charge. “I was setting up ropes for a climb,” he remembers, “and I was so worried that instead of the normal three pieces [of metal, for securing ropes], I put in seven!”

It was, he says, a steep learning curve. “After all, I was barely older than they were. But I did some tutoring and learned I was capable of explaining concepts. I missed home, but I had experiences like sleeping on a rock shelf in the Flinders Ranges and waking up to an amazing sunrise. It gave me a taste for travel.”

Jennifer Vandeventer (Exeter, 1979), from New York, volunteered for Sir Peter Scott (founder of the World Wildlife Fund) at the Wildfowl Trust in Slimbridge, Gloucestershire, UK. “I wanted to spend more time in the countryside and try something different,” she says. “I lodged with a couple who were restoring a 17th century cider mill. There was no heating and a glass of water by your bed would form ice overnight. The floor was dirt and we found ancient coins and silver spoons in it. There was no ceiling, so you had to walk across the beams to go to the toilet in the night.”

Metal man [right] — “I was setting up ropes for a climb and I was so worried that instead of the normal three pieces [of metal], I put in seven!”
I learned that work, even making coffee, is harder than it looks.

A little daunted, Jennifer nonetheless looked on the bright side. “It was fun, and sometimes hilarious. We ate delicious food and played games by candlelight. I learned that you choose whether something will be fun or miserable. I could have been lonely, but I learned to spend time by myself.”

She also stockpiled a set of excellent stories. “I had some baby geese imprinted on to me for a film about Nobel prize-winning zoologist Konrad Lorenz. They follow the first thing they see. I wore wellies with a bell so they would eventually follow another woman in the film when she wore the same. For weeks these six goslings followed me everywhere – they tried to get in the bath with me, they slept in a basket by my bed. They were very cute. And messy.”

Jennifer was inspired by the people around her, whom, she says, she might not otherwise have had access to. “Peter Scott was a Renaissance man,” she says, “an Olympic sailing champion, a painter, a scientist, a conservationist. His world was so big. Normally, to work somewhere and with someone like that, you would need at least a Masters and several years’ work experience.” Prince Philip was a Wildfowl Trust patron and she visited Buckingham Palace twice – “In and out the back door” – to survey Mute swans.

And she made an important discovery. “I learned that even work that looks really exciting is made up of 99 per cent tedious tasks. I spent eight hours a day staring through binoculars trying to identify swans by their bills.”

Shuja Jashanmal (Belvedere, 1983) also learned about work the hard way. “I worked in my family’s butcher’s shop where I learned to differentiate beef and lamb cuts. My mom would insist I bathe before dinner as I always smelled of meat! I then became quite good at selecting fruit and vegetables for our supermarket customers. My employers (my family) took full advantage of my situation and paid me a mere $90 a month! The cheapskates!”

Domingo Morgan Luco (Alpina, 2016) found himself working more hours than anyone should – full time in a café with 5am starts and every evening in a restaurant until midnight. “It was horrible,” he says, “but also brilliant. I met people I’d never have otherwise – people who’d left school at 16 with no qualifications, a woman who was selling her house to go and work with animals in Sri Lanka. I learned that work, even making coffee, is harder than it looks.”

Like Donatus, Domingo was rejected by his chosen university and as a consequence, his year after Aiglon was one of true self-discovery. “I was arrogant and vain,” he says. “I assumed I would get in to Oxford. When I got rejected I felt it was the end of the world, my prospects were ruined. I decided to take a gap year and apply again.”

Domingo went to live with his father in England and says the best thing about his year was spending time with his baby sister Gabriella, two. “We’d do singing and dancing and swimming and I’d take her to the park. A lot. The bond we have now will last.”

Domingo’s second application to Oxford was successful and he will start there, studying Geography, in the autumn. His advice for current sixth formers? “Don’t be stuck in a bubble. You don’t need to go to university straight away, explore the world, be open. And don’t be too hard on yourself. Think about where you’ll be happy.”

Jennifer says her year out cured her yen for the countryside, and she went back to New York, where she went on to work in publishing, have three daughters – and now works with undocumented immigrants. “You’ll never get that time again to just try something different,” she advises. “There are all kinds of ways to have an adventure.”

And Donatus is applying his newly-acquired skills at Hult’s International Business School in London, where he leads a large number of social clubs and student organisations. “Going to the right university can be a placebo for confidence,” he muses. “I didn’t learn anything theoretical or business-related during my time out but I am a hundred times more competent now than I was before.”
Egon Vorfeld (Delaware, 1985) is no stranger to crashes, bubbles, crises and panics. As founder of wealth management company The Forum Finance Group (FFG) and a former City banker, he has lived through plenty of them and come out the other side. But in September 2008, as banks all over the world from the US to Iceland crashed and burned, something felt different. Clients were calling up in a panic: was their money safe? Was this bank safe, or that bank? Should they move their money? What was happening?
A bank that is not taking any risk is not making any remuneration

Natalya Akentyeva
Parent of
Andrey Makiyevskiy
(Delaware, Upper Sixth)
and Anastasiya Makiyevskaya
(La Casa, Prep Form Two)

Finance is not a science. You are going to be wrong sometimes, but not wrong?
Egon Vorfeld
(Delaware, 1985)
Parent of Johannes
(Delaware, Lower Sixth)

I wasn’t worrying all day—I was excited about the changes I felt were coming
Ruggero Borletti
(Alpina, 1984)

Andrey Makiyevskiy, Guardian
Superintendent of Aiglon College

Egon points out that after any significant event where people have lost money, there tends to be a strong reaction by politicians or regulators. “There is a lot of finger pointing,” he says. “They should have known, they should have done this, they should have had the rules in place, monitored better. There’s a general trend of increased regulation after any event where people have lost a lot of money.”

Banks, he says, are now expected to have much higher capital requirements and carry out far more compliance. “I would say that most financial institutions employ ten times the number of legal advisors and compliance officers than they did before and probably half the number of investment managers and relationship managers in relation to the number of clients that they serve.” And while Egon says he entirely appreciates the need for regulation, he is concerned that it might not always be the right solution.

“The irony is that a tick-box culture makes it easier to commit fraud, in a way,” he says. “The fraudster knows exactly what they need to do, and there is less room for intuition. When I worked at Cazenove’s in London—the most blue-blooded broker in the City, the Queen’s broker—I remember talk about the ‘sniff test’: does it smell right? Your intuition was at least as important as going through the motion and checking off a list. I have always been a believer in transparency and high quality service. ‘Finance is not a science,’ he says. ‘Lending here in the States now is much more regulated: you cannot get a loan without putting some real money down any more. And that’s a good thing.’

To Egon, the lesson is all about recognizing the value of transparency and high quality service. ‘Finance is not a science,’ he says. ‘Everyone, me included, is trying to make sense of it, trying to model it, trying to predict. But it’s not a science. You are going to be wrong sometimes, but how wrong? The key thing is to manage the extent to which you are going to be wrong. If you limit your losses, you are actually going to do a lot better than if you just focus on making money, as that is when you get very badly caught up in one of those bubbles.’

And despite finance’s new worlds of rapidly changing technology and digitisation, with more and more money changing hands by computer, the old maxim still stands, he says. “If a thing seems too good to be true, it probably is.”
The last time Aiglonians ski down the mountain together, they do it by torchlight. We explore the traditions and the memories.

Writer: WILLIAM HAM BEVAN
Photography: IAN GC WHITE
When the Class of 2017 gathered this March at Col de Bretaye for their final descent, even the weather seemed to recognise the sense of occasion.

“While we were inside the restaurant, it started snowing – for the first time in three weeks,” says Akram Safa (Belvedere, Upper Sixth). “By the time we started on the journey down, it was coming down a lot. It was funny, since this was the last-ever time we were going to ski as a class. It was as though it was all planned.”

Maria Minkova (Exeter, Upper Sixth) says: “It was snowing heavily, but soon people were hardly noticing because they were so excited. It was such a great way to end the season. Being able to share this time with my friends was the best present Aiglon could have given me.”

The descente aux flambeaux has long been a highlight of the final year, and the fondue at Col de Bretaye is widely described as the most convivial of all Aiglon dinners. Before ski boots are clipped up and torches lit, there are speeches from the Head Master and the Guardians. Then it’s time to launch off down the sweeping blue run back to the foot of the Roc d’Orsay télécabine.

For spectators, the ribbons of flame dancing down the mountainside make an enchanting spectacle. And for those taking part, it’s a moment of reflection as well as celebration. It marks the end of the ski season, and one last chance to come down the mountain together as Aiglonians.

The format of the evening has scarcely changed in 30 years. “I remember that we took the train up from Villars to Bretaye on a Wednesday night,” says Marina Andina (Clairmont, 1996). “It was all of the Upper Sixth as well as a lot of staff. Some of our ski instructors were there as well. We had a lovely fondue with white wine before we skied down. And then the next morning, we had to get up and go to classes as usual!”

Even when visibility isn’t affected by a sudden snow flurry – or the tendency of the torches to burn out halfway down – the novel experience of skiing at night can be disorienting. Marina says: “It’s a piste you know so well, which you’ve done every day. But suddenly you’re going along in the dark with this flaming stick,” she says. “It feels very different, and it seems like you’re skiing much faster than you are. But everyone made it down in one piece.”

Some years bring a further peril. Snow coverage can be less than optimal in late March, and patches of mud are difficult to see until the last moment; but serious falls are rare. Akram says: “There were a few tumbles this year, but that’s part of what Aiglon represents – taking the challenge, falling down and getting back up again with a smile. That’s the attitude everyone has.”

A ‘buddy’ system, whereby classmates look out for each other, also helps to ensure safety. “I had help from friends who were better skiers than me,” says Maria. “If anyone went down, someone else would pick them up and ski with them until the end.”

The torchlight descent was one the most eagerly anticipated rites of passage at Aiglon for Jonathan Fackelmayer (Belvedere, 1995). He says: “It’s one of the big ones that I think we all related to. In my day, when you turned 17 you were allowed to drink beer and wine on certain days. That gave you a certain sense of growing up. The next big event was the descente aux flambeaux – and I suppose the one after that was graduation.

“In that final year, there’s a big build up to graduation. But instead of just having a party at the end, Aiglon gives you these occasions that mark the passage of time as you get closer to your ultimate goal. The torchlight descent is one that we still remember fondly and talk about, even 22 years on.”

“For me, the torchlight descent was special because it’s only ever done by the graduating class,” says Marina. “I don’t think it has ever been organised for anyone else. For me, it definitely was emotional. It was the end of our final winter there, our last term of ski racing was over, and we now had only one term left. After a bunch of exams, we would be out of there.”

For Akram, the event’s significance was in acknowledging and cementing ties between the year group. “I think one of the main things that Aiglon offers is a strong spirit of togetherness,” he says. “Without these
events, we wouldn’t feel how close our community is. I even think our friendships – those genuine friendships created at the school – are often formed in these situations when we’re a little outside our comfort zone.

“The comfort zone is a nice place, but nothing can grow there. Take the long expedition, when we have hardly any food and we have to survive. That’s when you really bond with people. You get to know them on a natural, genuine basis. I think that’s what distinguishes Aiglon from many other schools in the world.”

A select few alumni have returned to Villars and taken up a torch for a second time. As president of the Friends of Aiglon College UK and vice-president of the Aiglon Alumni Association, Jonathan attended the event in 2014. Little had changed from the first time around – save for his ski attire.

“I had to come straight from work in Geneva, so I was skiing in a full suit,” he says. “But the event was very similar to ours. It was wonderful to be among the seniors again, and to see that same sense of pride, camaraderie and fun on the faces of the students. That was a special moment for me: I got to do two descentes aux flambeaux, whereas most people only have the memory of one.”

This leads on to an as-yet unanswered question: when did the tradition begin? “I don’t remember it happening at all during my two years,” says Éric. “But at the speed I was skiing in those days, no torch would have stayed lit!” It can be said with certainty that the ritual had become part of the school calendar by the late 80s. “Skiing has been part of Aiglon’s DNA since day one, of course,” says Jonathan. “But as to the actual date it first started, I have no idea. I remember that it was well established at the time I did it.”

Marina agrees. “I was at Aiglon for seven years and I remember it from when I started in the fall of 1989,” she says. “It was in Exeter House that year, and I remember being in my room, looking out of my window and seeing this line of fire coming down the mountain. So I think it was already a tradition by then.”

For many who have taken part, the origin of Aiglon traditions is less important than their endurance, and the knowledge that future generations will be able to take part. Marina says: “My brother’s wife’s niece is at Aiglon this year, and I was talking to her over the half-term break about some of the things they still do – like the torchlight descent, and having to go skinning, doing winter expeditions and so on. It’s nice to know there’s a certain level of continuity. You can speak to people who were there in different eras and they’ll have a lot of similar experiences, which I think is great.”

And for those who fired up their torches at Bretaye this year, preparing for the final straight to graduation, the torchlight descent was not just a moment to look back and exchange nostalgia, but one to look forward to life beyond the school. Maria says: “In his speech, the Head Master told us that from now on we’d have more and more moments when we would think, ‘This is the last time I’ll do this at Aiglon’.” But we knew it wasn’t an ending. At Aiglon, your friendships last a lifetime.”

Jonathan agrees. “When I came back, I reminded the students that as they come to the end of their Aiglon career, it’s not really the end but the start of something new. There’s a whole alumni network out in the world today that’s very much looking forward to embracing the senior class as they move out of Aiglon and into the big world.”

Do you remember your descent? We would love to hear your stories. Email us at advancement@aiglon.ch.
THE SEBA CZ SCHOLAR
In February this year, Charlotte Asprey (Chantecler, 1993), Carlotta Newbury née Calleri-Zavanelli (Exeter, 1994), Mrs Fiorina Zavanelli, Head Master Mr Richard McDonald and Director of Admissions and Advancement Mrs Valerie Scullion travelled to Kenya to choose the third SEBA CZ scholar – the scholarship set up in memory of Sebastiano Calleri-Zavanelli.

Carlotta writes: “We were all inspired and humbled in equal measure by the impressive calibre of candidates. I think Seba would wholeheartedly approve of the next scholar, who will join Aiglon this autumn.”

Charlotte adds, “It never fails to go unnoticed how Aiglon creates a bond in those who have studied there that is unique. There is a noticeable yet invisible thread that binds us. I was in New York last week for only one week and saw no fewer than six Aiglonians! I wish and hope the next scholar will leave Aiglon with that same invisible thread.”

A NEW VENTURE
I have managed to find my way back to Switzerland and I am currently based in Geneva! Since graduating, I’ve completed two degrees at Bentley University and I am currently finishing my PhD in finance in Geneva! I try to come up to Aiglon as much as possible, even if just to breathe the almost unpolluted air and check out the incredible developments on campus. At the moment, I’m leading a family run ‘haute maroquinerie’ – luxury fashion brand, Sophia Sangani. We produce exotic skin pieces for both men and women, our online store will be live before this summer! www.sophiasangani.com

Hassaan Joosub (Delaware, 2008)

NEW YORK LIFE
After five years in Singapore, we have moved back to New York. Despite our Vitamin D deficiency, we are enjoying the craziness of New York life and enjoying seeing even more Aiglonians than we saw in Asia (Giacomo and Misha – come visit. Bali is not that great) Juan Zavalia (Alpina, 1990) comes through regularly, and Angela Lester (Chantecler, 1989) and Dominic Langcroft (Delaware, 1984) are neighbours, as was Javier Macaya (Alpina, 1987) until we moved. Gherardo Guarinacci (1984) keeps us all connected – she organised a dinner with Patrick Pearson (Alpina, 1992), Luc Bassompierre (1995), Zeina Dakak (Clarmont, 1994), Robertina Seiler (Clarmont, 1994), Vinit Mehta (Alpina, 1991), Dilip Madnani (Belvedere, 1992), and Steve Reeves (Alpina, 1992) who flew in from Minneapolis! And then another recent dinner with Dilip and Bahjat Talhouni (Delaware, 1992). Looking forward to reconnecting with other old friends – obareau@gmail.com

Oliver Bareau (Alpina, 1989)

Thank you for sending us so many updates – in fact too many to print! But if you want to know what Stephen du Plessis (Belvedere, 2005), Nicole Musimwa (Exeter, 2015), Charlotte Asprey (Chantecler, 1993), Mimi Yamani (Exeter, 2003), Alexandra Hinekfluss (Exeter, 2003), Shekhar Kanabar (Belvedere, 1998), Charli Heynike (Delaware, 2003) and others are up to now, please visit the NEW Aiglon Life site at: www.aiglonlife.ch/classnotes.

www.domainedebarbossi.fr
A worldwide community

URBAN CHANGE
My daughter Talitha and I have recently moved to Barcelona. After six years in the jungles of Sri Lanka, I am organising a transformational retreat business. Feeling healthier and stronger now than ever before, I am looking for off the beaten track and will be curious to return to Switzerland to climb different peaks that I felt challenging at 17.” www.lightnatureslife.com

HELLO BALI!
Marinda Liu Lobo (Clairmont, 1978) and Sue Nina Ritter (Clairmont, 1977), bought a place. I am organising a transformational retreat business. Feeling healthier and stronger now than ever before, I am looking for off the beaten track and will be curious to return to Switzerland to climb different peaks that I felt challenging at 17.” www.lightnatureslife.com

A NEW BABY
Lucian Wynn Anderson Pugliese, son of Claressinka Anderson Pugliese (Exeter, 1997) was born at home on Jan 31 2017. Lucian Wynn Anderson Pugliese, son of Claressinka Anderson Pugliese (Exeter, 1997), was born at home on Jan 31 2017.

MORIA CAMP
Jeremy McWilliam (Alpina, 1979) is looking to support families of refugees in Moria camp, on the Greek island of Lesbos. “We run the food, tea and clothing tents from 9am to 11pm and provide security for the family compounds so that there is some separation between women and children and single men.” To support Jeremy’s work please visit www.eurorefnet.org

THE SPIRIT OF GSTAAD
Tara Sahni (Exeter, 2012) and Sara Al Tamimi (LeCerf, 2012) at the book launch of The Spirit of Gstaad by Hamara Sahni (P’02) and Mandyvnya Theodaracopulis (Clairmont, 1994). A number of Aiglonians attended the launch. The Spirit of Gstaad by Hamara Sahni (P’02) and Mandyvnya Theodaracopulis (Clairmont, 1994). A number of Aiglonians attended the launch. The Spirit of Gstaad by Hamara Sahni (P’02) and Mandyvnya Theodaracopulis (Clairmont, 1994). A number of Aiglonians attended the launch.

THE WRITE STUFF
For the past months I have been writing for a Brown Political Review (BPR) at Brown University, where I also started studying after graduating from Aiglon in 2015. BPR is an entirely student-run online and print magazine that publishes political content on a range of issues. My articles mainly focus on European politics; recent topics have been Emmanuel Macron’s rise in France and the Labour Party’s role in the context of Brexit. For anyone who is interested visit www.brownpoliticalreview.org I appreciate any sort of feedback at ale_borghese@brown.edu

AN ENGLISH REUNION
In April, Richard Bloor (Belvedere, 1964) and John Gardner (Clairmont, 1985) reunited with fellow Aiglonians in England. Richard writes: “There was incessant chatter and laughter, and the venue was excellent.” The group raised their glasses to members who had passed away, including Andrew Clive (1965) and Nick Rowcliffe (1966), who organised the first reunion (with just eight alumni) three years ago. Save the date for next year: 25 April 2018.

GREAT HOSTS
In early January, 2013 SEBBA CZ Scholar David Kimondou (Belvedere, 2012) drove from Rome to Villars to visit Mrs Patience Fanelia-Koch (Director of College & Careers Counselling) and former Belvedere Houseparents, Mr and Mrs Saunders. I loved being back at Aiglon and on the Bretaye pistes! I had the chance to see the new SEBA CZ plaque in The Hall with my photo. I spent Christmas in Geneva, Italy, with Seba’s family which brought back many happy memories of holidays there when I was at Aiglon. Thank you to both Seba’s family and to Patience Fanelia-Koch for hosting me.”

Mr Charles Walker, 1969-72
West Green (Belvedere, 1972) writes: Mr Walker taught Mathematics, Chemistry and integrated studies; his wife Robert was Delaware housemother (Robert Baas was housemaster).

Mr. J.K. Knight, 1956-1958
Jonathan Knight (Belvedere, 1985) writes: My father, RJ Knight, who was a member of staff at the school in the late 1950s along with my mother who died in 1995, passed away in October last year at the age of 93 after a short illness.

Mr Keating, 1965-1966
Martin Keating (Clairmont, 1965) writes: Andrew Aiglon from Aiglon 1966-1963. He worked for Mason’s Pottery for 18 years, going on to set up his own sailing school in North Wales. He was an excellent skier and did some instructing in Scotland. Later, he and his family moved to Wiltshire, where he and his wife Helen built up a catering business.

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De nos passions, nous en avons fait notre métier.

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Fildzah Zulkifli says learning to ski involved a lot of falling over, but it was worth it to be able to ski down from Bretaye to Aiglon – by herself.

I’d let him down too. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt such a complete beginner at anything.”

On a phone call to her parents that evening, Fildzah was “quite down. I told them how embarrassed and disappointed I felt and they encouraged me to keep persevering. They suggested setting myself small, achievable goals – starting with simple turns and then just getting from one point to another.”

These mini-goals helped enormously in her tri-weekly ski lessons, says Fildzah. “My first aim was learning how to put my ski boots on and off. Next up, I decided how to turn in various directions and so on.” She hasn’t looked back.

Skiing also has other, hidden, benefits, such as bonding with Aiglon students she might not otherwise have made friends with and growing in confidence in other areas of life.

“The help I’ve been given at Aiglon to learn to ski has made me feel that I might be able to take on other sports, such as tennis. In the past, I’d have given up and got demotivated almost immediately, but I know now what can be achieved if you really try,” she says. “That attitude carries over into my schoolwork too. Whereas before, I’d get really upset if I got a bad result in a test, I no longer drown in self-pity and just remember that practice and working harder can get much better results next time.”

And her personal best? The first time she skied all the way down from Bretaye back to Aiglon itself. “It took me about 15 to 20 minutes and I felt like a proper skier for the first time because it’s the piste that all the skiers use to get to the town of Villars.”
It’s the countryside and camaraderie that make camping food better than any other meal. Arriving at a beautiful campsite at the end of a 10km walk is really special. And first, we have a drink – cool water tastes really good.

We share the jobs that need to be done. Some people put up the tents, others cook and the rest of us do the dishes. We all eat together, and it’s a relief to finally sit down and rest. After supper’s finished we talk over the day. I guess it’s like having a beer after work – only without the beer!

Walking makes you really hungry, which makes the food you eat when camping taste much better. It’s easy to take food for granted at home or at school, but you appreciate camping food more because there’s no-one else around except you and your group. And eating outside makes food taste different: even if rain sometimes makes your bread soggy, it’s a fresh experience.

Pasta is a popular camping food. That, or something like Spanish tacos or chicken with spicy sauce and noodles. The key to good camping food are dishes that are easy to make and which don’t take too long to cook. We don’t cook sweets, because you can’t carry too much weight in an expedition bag, so we might just have a cookie or a waffle.

In the evenings after supper, we have time to relax and reflect on what we’ve achieved during the day – but mornings are more business-like. We don’t have a big breakfast, something easy like waffles and Nutella and a quick drink. Or we might just make a sandwich so that we can get off and finish the ex. The thing that’s special about breakfast is people’s funny ‘wake-up’ faces and not having to bother brushing your hair.

I go on expedition quite a lot, but my favourite trip was a cooking competition in second form. We had to design our own menu and make it fabulous. Other people’s food was amazing, it’s surprising what you can do with just a few ingredients. One student made sushi – wow. That was such impressive camping food.

Life at Aiglon

Last year, I travelled to Kibungo, in Rwanda, to teach at a school and help at a local orphanage. On the second day of the trip, a large truck drove into the orphanage compound and all the children ran towards it to unload huge buckets of water. But instead of drinking anything, they formed groups so they could bring the water first to the elderly house, then to the kitchen, then to the bathroom. Their sense of unity was truly inspiring.

When I look back at my time at Aiglon, it’s this project and another – teaching French every week to Syrian and Afghani refugees back here in Switzerland – which I feel have changed me. I wanted to try and give to people directly, to go to people and help them. We have five Guiding Principles, and the two I hadn’t explored much were service and diversity. These two projects helped me explore those principles.

In Rwanda, I realised how lucky I was compared to those people, with everything I possessed. Yet I felt that some people, even with the little they had, were really happy. We want to have more and more, but it is possible to be happy with so little.

Likewise, when teaching refugees, I heard stories about how their brothers and sisters had died in bombings in Afghanistan or in Syria, and how they had been forced to leave their homes. They had to leave everything behind and yet they remained so strong on the inside. I learned that it’s important not to judge someone when you don’t know their full story, where they came from and what they have experienced. And I made unexpected friends, too: in particular, a little boy in the orphanage. Meeting him made me understand that this project wasn’t just one where I’d make other people happy, but where I would find happiness, too.

Andrea Giordano

(St Louis, Upper Sixth)
Behind the scenes

Mountain firefighters

Writer: LUCY JOLIN
Photography: JOE MCGORTY

Villars and Aiglon rely on volunteer firefighters drawn from the local community and school staff.

A firefighter always remembers their first fire, and Mr John Gerhardt (Alpina, 2003) is no exception. He’d only been training for a few weeks before the first call came in – a fire right behind La Casa. “I was controlling the traffic,” he says. “I remember finding it amazing that when the hosepipes are full of water and going at full tilt, they’re like solid steel, so you can’t drive over them. It was just a small job but I was full of adrenaline!”

There’s a lot more to the work of the Chesieures-Villars fire service than you might expect. Of course, they fight fires. But they also do everything from hauling a fallen tractor upright to helping train passengers who have become stranded after an avalanche. It’s an essential service, and it’s entirely run by volunteers, several of whom are Aiglon staff: Senior Computer Services Technician Mr Gerhardt, équipe members Mr Laurent Calise and Mr David Moss, Deputy Head (Student Life) Mr Chris Chalcraft, Head of History Mr Nick Teal, and Head of Art Mr Peter Willett. Indeed, the school’s involvement with the fire service goes back a long way. Mr Gerhardt credits his involvement to Mr Russell Lewis, Aiglon’s former head of IT, who sadly passed away in 2008. “He came to my door and said: ‘I really want to do this, but not by myself – why don’t you join me?’ That was in 2006 and I’m still here.”

Two teams of volunteers operate at Chesieures-Villars. The first, most experienced team have beepers which can go off at any time and tell them what the situation is, where it is, and which vehicle they should use. Everyone then heads to the fire station in the village as quickly as possible. If the incident requires more power, the B team are contacted via their mobile phones. Each volunteer must also be officially on call for five weekends a year – during that time they are not allowed to drink, or leave the immediate area.

Gaining new skills is a big part of the job and every year volunteers identify areas where they’d like to train. For Mr Gerhardt, the practical skills gained as a fire service volunteer are a fantastic contrast to his working life – “which is usually spent in front of a screen,” he says. But he also loves the connection it creates between the school and the village. “It would be easy to sit up here in our little enclave,” he says. “But I’ve met so many local people who also volunteer for the fire service. We’re from many different walks of life, but we all wear the same uniform and do the same vital job.”

MY FIRST FIRE WAS JUST A SMALL JOB BUT I WAS FULL OF ADRENALINE!

Mr John Gerhardt (Alpina, 2003)
Senior computer services technician
