



Foundation Day 2018

For a student's perspective on Foundation Day, high school junior, Vincent Chow, was selected to write an article by principal, Ashley Whitely. Vincent shares what he took away from the experience after meeting and listening to our distinguished alumni on April 23, 2018.

Wyoming High School's Foundation Day was the 23rd of April, a day notable for the reemergence of several Distinguished Alumni, rare and beautiful creatures who annually descend like Olympians from their grand destinies to impart their wisdom upon the student body of their Alma Mater. The Distinguished Alumni this year was one David Shenk, class of '84, a best-selling author, filmmaker, and essayist. Joining him were a trio of previous Distinguished Alumni: Jill Van Lokeren, '86, Ambassador Thomas Boyatt, '51, and Dan Jones, '56. David Shenk gave a speech to the assembled population of the school, and later held two Q&A panels with the other Alumni, answering questions submitted by the students and faculty about their experiences, their advice, and how growing up in Wyoming affected them.

Hmm. Kind of boring when you hear it all summarized like that. To be there in person is a different story- David Shenk is also a lecturer, and when you bring a professional speech-giver back to their roots to give a speech, you tend to end up with something pretty engaging. So in honor of his speech, this piece is actually two articles- the red article and the blue article. The red article is the normal Foundation Day affair, David said this, Dan was here, all the stuff you expect. The blue article is the fun article where I take what David said and I start pulling at its strands and fibers to see just how it's knit together. I'd make the paragraphs different colors, but I imagine the easier this article is to print and read, the happier the Wyoming School Foundation will be, so unfortunately, the colors are only metaphors. We'll start with a red paragraph.

You must look at the facts, because they look at you. Winston Churchill said that. At least, I'm pretty sure he said that- I wasn't present to hear him say it, I just got it off the internet. However, I can be relatively assured that the phrase is genuine a.) because it came from the International Churchill Society webpage and b.) because David Shenk and his peers are everyday pursuing a path of learning and understanding the truth. The books he writes, on Alzheimer's and genetics and chess, are products of an inquisitive mind bent on discovering facts and sharing them in an eloquent and engaging manner: a "truth nerd," if you will. David's words, not mine. Indeed, the media and news outlets working to get the facts of a situation and get them right: also truth nerds, the scions of historical truth nerds like Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow whose journalistic deeds changed the course of American history. The theme of David's presentation was The Truth, that thing that helps people know how the world works and how it will affect them and how they can improve it, and importantly the dangers that come when, as in the new era of technology, The Truth becomes easier and easier to obscure. There was a sign circulating on the internet in the aftermath of 2017's March for Science: "Knowing Stuff is

good. Seriously why do I even have to march for this geez.” David’s speech was that sign, but longer, and more nuanced.

Blue article. David can say that the journalists and writers he works with at The New York Times and Wired and other news organizations are truth nerds, and he’s probably right- after all, he knows them better than I do. But the people they work for, the CEOs and marketing executives and all the rest, are running businesses, and it’s common knowledge that managing a profitable corporation and telling The Truth aren’t always complimentary goals. Remember, Winston Churchill also said, “It is better to be making the news than taking it; to be an actor rather than a critic.” Or a news executive. Fox News CEO Rupert Murdoch sends memos to his reporters describing the attitude he wants them to take on certain stories and that’s surely not presenting the facts in an unbiased manner. But CNN’s wall-to-wall coverage of President Donald Trump up through the election and into his presidency helped bring the man who called the mainstream media “the enemy of the people,” into power with hours and hours of free publicity- because it sold. To paint the mainstream media as crusaders for The Truth without taking into account the influence of money and politics on their reporting is a dangerous approach.

Red article. David’s own journey to The Truth was lengthy and took perseverance in the face of many, many disappointments- as he mentioned in the Q&A, “I could’ve given a speech all about the rejections I’ve had, things I thought were the most important thing I ever did that people just didn’t appreciate.” But through it all, Wyoming High School proved to be a formative place for him. It was in these rooms that David discovered his passion for writing, where he had the formative experiences that would help shape his life and ideals: namely, he forged, cheated, and Raided the Gauls (participated in the activity of launching chalk from small catapults at French students during Latin class). And David used these experiences to grow, to make decisions and learn from them. The lesson he learned: this is what truth nerds do. “They look at their mistakes and they admit them and move on.” Other members of the Alumni had more wise words for the students undergoing their own formative years today. Jill Van Lokeren said that high schoolers are in a position to say “I’m excited to find out what I can offer this world,” and Dan Jones added that growing up in Wyoming taught him that “People are the most important things in the world.”

Blue article. Wyoming is a great place to grow up because it’s safe and it encourages people to be themselves, except when it doesn’t. Focus on the first part for a moment. A friend of mine, a year ago, had their life planned out- they wanted to design video games, they wanted to work for a certain company, they wanted to go to this specific college. A year later and some of the best classes Wyoming High School has to offer and they’re rethinking it all, discovering new passions in politics, in social justice, in activism, which might spell out a whole new path for them in life. Wyoming is the kind of environment that lets kids stretch out and test their growing limbs in the things that really interest them. All the same, the limits aren’t hard to spot. Wyoming has its favorite activities- a strong, well-funded sports program prints big flashy posters of star players and hangs them on the walls and in the stadium while other accomplished extracurriculars like an impressive theater program and one of the best Model UN clubs in the country depend on fundraising and contributions from members to stay afloat. And the social structure of the school, perhaps as a result of kids spending their entire schooling experiences in the same town, is rigidly cliquish. Teens hold 15 years’ worth of grudges and the same six people have been on student council since middle school. For many a student, I worry that leaving the Wyoming Bubble and entering the rest of the world will be a cold shock, a surprise that our community, simply based on the qualities that define it, hasn’t prepared them for.

And we come now to the purple article, that part of the recipe where everything comes into a conclusive whole. The purple is also a metaphor. Taken out of context, Foundation Day is a bizarre interruption in a student's everyday life. Let's take someone who to most kids is a stranger, a successful stranger but a stranger nonetheless, and give them the opportunity to share some of what they've learned in their life with these young scholars. In a society where both the ingrained youth culture and the media that caters to it encourage mistrust of both strangers and adults, it can be difficult for teens to empathize with honest but trite lessons like "Be kind to others" and "The most important thing is relationships with other people." David Shenk struck a chord with students in a way many Foundation Day speakers don't, and this article, this whirl of thoughts and reactions to the ideas he espoused over the course of foundation day, is just proof of his success. It's aiming too high to hope to teach life lessons to teenagers over the course of a day, but to get them thinking about it is a good first step, and David Shenk made strides.