

From the Head of School
Than Healy

Learning from Le Chambon-sur-Lignon

At the start of each school year, I like to share a story with students about an impactful teacher I've had in my life. I've referenced family members, educators, coaches, experiences, and even inanimate objects, as a teacher can come in many forms.

At Menlo's 2022 Upper School Commencement ceremony, I spoke about a small mountain town in the southeast of France called Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. (as our Menlo Middle School graduates may remember) has an entire exhibit dedicated to Le Chambon because the town was single-handedly responsible for hiding, feeding, and arranging for the escape of some 5,000 refugees during World War II, two-thirds of whom were Jewish.

The story of the people of Le Chambon is really quite remarkable from a philosophy and psychology standpoint. They were no more educated, prosperous,

or religious than the residents of neighboring towns. They did not view themselves as heroes nor seek to draw attention to their actions after the war. Rather, they were humble, determined, and united. What led them to risk their own lives in favor of sheltering strangers?

As descendants of Huguenots—Protestants persecuted by the French Catholic Church—they understood all too well the consequences of hatred and oppression. They had a long history of compassion and empathy that defined them as individuals and as a community. They had leaders who inspired them to sacrifice their own safety for the protection of others. For centuries, from wars between Protestants and Catholics to the French Revolution to the Spanish Civil War, the citizens of Le Chambon were focused less on their individual rights than on their communal obligations. Their rich religious tradition was less about blind faith and rhetoric than about connection and collectivism. Carved in stone at the church in the center of town are the words, "Love one another."

I think we all imagine ourselves to be a hero in a moment of crisis. We like to think that we will stand up for a friend who is being picked on, intervene when people around us are engaging in behavior that defies what we know is right, or put ourselves in harm's way to help a stranger.

One of the most important things we as a society learned during COVID is that we don't learn our values in a crisis;



how we respond in hardship is a function of what we have done before. The communities and organizations—of which Menlo was one—that responded best to the pandemic were those that had for decades (or centuries) lived their core values. In our case: grace, kindness, flexibility, patience, and a focus on the group over the individual.

Similarly, what the people of Le Chambon teach us is that heroism—upstander behavior that saves lives and communities—doesn't just happen but rather comes from a series of small decisions and daily practices over time.

When I shared this story at recent Menlo Middle and Upper School assemblies, I asked students whether, when called to make myriad decisions in the coming weeks, months, and years, they will choose empathy as one of their core values. Will they prioritize what is best for the group even at their own expense? Will they inspire others to do the same?

All Menlo students are incredibly fortunate. They have someone who got them to this school; some of the best teachers and coaches in the country; a safe, clean, inspiring environment, and a network of support unlike any other. But with privilege comes responsibility, and opportunities to make decisions throughout their lifetimes that impact the lives of others. Our fervent hope is that they follow in the figurative footsteps of the people of Le Chambon and believe deeply in purposes larger than themselves.

We live in a culture where heroic behavior is punished as often as it is rewarded. Standing up for someone else



will often carry social consequences. But what I want our students to know, is that when they choose to act on behalf of others or do what is right—even when those around them do not—those decisions will shape who they will become for the rest of their lives.

We want this school to be a place that trains the great upstanders of our time. We want this to be a place that will stand fast against the tide of self-interest that sometimes feels like it is taking over the world. I am eager to create that school in partnership with all of you.

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Our year is off to a great start, Menlo! I look forward to continuing our work together to build a culture that reflects our core values of connection, community, and collective well-being.

Sincerely,

Than Healy
Head of School

