

TABLE TALK WITH DIRECTOR OF ADMISSIONS MICHAEL GARY

By Famebridge Witherspoon

When Michael Gary talks about his life, he returns often to the theme of “life-changing” experiences, each of which, he says, has prepared him well for his current role. As Exeter’s director of admissions, he is, after all, in the business of changing young people’s lives.

“My admissions work at Exeter is an opportunity to return the opportunity that was offered to me,” he says. “It’s very rewarding.”

The many ways that Exeter changes and enriches students’ lives is at the heart of the vibrant new admissions viewbook, a colorful 54-page school portrait loaded with information, dynamic photography and students’ live-ly accounts of life at Exeter today. Designed by Mark Edwards ’78, the viewbook is aimed squarely at prospective students, says Gary.

“The reality is that parents no longer send their children to Exeter; instead, it’s the kids who choose to be here. We are a rigorous institution, yes, but there’s excitement here also, and I want the new viewbook to speak to kids by letting our kids tell the story,” he says. The response from prospective students, he adds, has been overwhelmingly positive, and Gary hopes the admissions section of the Academy’s new website, due to be launched this spring, will be just as effective.

Gary’s sense of how to best convey the Exeter experience to prospective students derives not only from his professional background, but his personal life as well. He grew up in the inner-city projects of New Haven, CT, an experience, he says, that taught him to recognize and take advantage of opportunities.

One of those opportunities was playing basketball with New Haven’s Police Athletic League (PAL) program. It was through PAL that Gary met his mentor, a local police officer, and became involved with the U.S. Grant Foundation, an academic enrichment program at Yale. Basketball also “allowed me to be accepted in my old neighborhood, to be a good student and not be considered a nerd,” he says.

Through the U.S. Grant Foundation Gary learned about the Pomfret School, a boarding school in Pomfret, CT, where he enrolled at age 15. He describes Pomfret as the first of his life-changing experiences, as “a whole new world that opened many doors for me,” he says. After Pomfret he attended Trinity College in Hartford where he studied economics and became interested in marketing and public relations. “Basketball was my ticket into Trinity and out of the inner

city,” he says. He graduated in 1986 and earned a master’s degree in education from Harvard in 1995.

Gary spent the next several years working in advertising and marketing. In 1989, he returned to Pomfret and began his career in admissions as an associate director. In 1996, Gary moved over to the Peddie School in Hightstown, NJ, where he served for the next six years as director of admissions and financial aid. He came to Exeter in 2002, with his wife, Trina, and their children André ’06, Tammara, age 13, and Milan, age 11, both of whom are currently homeschooled.

Winter finds Gary, eight members of the admissions staff and 24 faculty members reading more than 2,000 applications for approximately 325 spots. What are they looking for? “First and foremost,” he says, “students have to be ready for what PEA expects and requires.” That means an attitude of seriousness and a passion for learning in and out of the classroom; strong academic records; and an eagerness to share their ideas. The challenge isn’t finding such students, he adds, but rather “running out of open spots for kids to come here, and out of money to offer them financial aid.”

Gary would like to do away with the disclaimer on the PEA application that reads “students who are applicants for financial aid may be in a more competitive situation for admission into the Academy.”

Another goal of the admissions process, Gary says, is creating a diverse community. “As an admissions officer, it’s my charge to find ‘youth from

every quarter.’ Exeter has a long history of partnering with organizations and educational enrichment programs that work with inner-city schools around the country. These groups identify kids with potential, aspirations and a track record of doing well,” he says.

The results are in the numbers. The 2005–06 student body totals 1,056 (on and off campus); 51 percent of the students are male, 49 percent female. Students’ average SAT scores are 693 (verbal) and 698 (math). Students come from 46 states and 25 countries, 35 percent are minorities and 13 percent are legacies (that is, family members of alumni/ae) and 33 percent receive financial aid.

Gary sums up his four years with pride and hopes the future is just as bright. “What has made Exeter strong in the past remains; families continue to perceive PEA as a top academic opportunity. But they are pleasantly surprised to find how warm and genuine we are here. I think now there’s a greater emphasis on taking care of our students,” he says. He also looks forward to watching the newest Exeter students embark on their own life-changing experiences.

