

# Profiles of Proficiency

## The Extracurricular Accomplishments of Four Exonians

By Karen Ingraham

It could be the flash of hand to buzzer or the steady scratching of pencil to paper as time drains from a clock. It might be a late-night stroll in the U.S. Capitol or the patient revision of an editorial. Between classes, on nights and weekends, Exonians take on challenges that test intellect, promote ideals, and provide creative outlets.

Meet four graduates, amongst many, who have garnered national, regional and local recognition for their extracurricular pursuits.

### Max H. de La Bruyère

#### Advocating for Social Change

When Max de La Bruyère unpacked his belongings in Cilley Hall four years ago, he was ready for the Academy's academic rigor. He had been bored at his old school and was looking forward to a challenge. But, he says, "I was afraid of [not] fitting in, afraid of being in a new place." He believed his biggest hurdle would be "getting out there and taking advantage of what Exeter had to offer" beyond the classroom.

He needn't have worried.

This graduate, who was awarded the Williams Cup, leaves Exeter as a man who found his niche—as a political activist, community organizer, communicator and mentor.

De La Bruyère, a proctor in Cilley Hall his senior year, acknowledges some of his first friendships as being the catalysts for one of his most transformative experiences at the Academy. It began near the end of his prep year when, one by one, some of his best friends came out to him and said they were gay. De La Bruyère hadn't known any gay people prior to coming to Exeter. He says, "It was a world I was totally oblivious to."

He began attending the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings during his prep year, and he was the only straight male there for awhile. That bothered him. It also upset him that he had been the last person to whom his gay friends had come out to, because they had been concerned

he might not accept them. So, at the end of his lower year, de La Bruyère applied to be a co-head of the club.

"One of the things I wanted to push against was the stereotypes of GSA and gay people," he says. "I tried to do a lot about acceptance—to make it a gay/straight alliance and not a gay/gay alliance."

During de La Bruyère's tenure as GSA's co-head, the Academy hosted John Amaechi, the first NBA basketball player to come out; Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Christian priest; and U.S. Representative Barney Frank, D-Mass., an openly gay congressman. This spring, De La Bruyère was also an outspoken supporter of the gay marriage bill in New Hampshire, urging—in columns written for *The Exonian*—Senate Majority Leader Maggie Hassan P'11, D-Exeter, to vote for its passage.

De La Bruyère did, in a small way, help get Hassan elected in 2008. As co-head of the Democratic Club, he did 5 a.m. literature drops, made phone calls, and organized Exeter voters for

not only Hassan, but also President Barack Obama, U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen, U.S. Representative Carol Shea-Porter, and many local and state Democrats. His politicking was a shift from his middle school days, when de La Bruyère and his friends founded Club CSAR—an acronym for "Communists, Socialists and other radicals."



**Max de La Bruyère '09, recipient of the Williams Cup, strove to eliminate stereotypes as co-head of the Gay/Straight Alliance.**

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His interest in politics was piqued, however, during his lower year, when Boaz Chandrasekhar '07 said to him, "Max, you're smart; you're a liberal. Why aren't you working for us?" That got him to swing by a phone bank during Shea-Porter's first congressional race in 2006. "It was the excitement of that election that first drew me in," he says. What kept him engaged through the 2008 election was the "eye-opening" nature of New Hampshire politics—the opportunity to see democracy working, at clambakes and town hall meetings.

De La Bruyère isn't sure how his political future will ultimately play out. He's more focused on going to Yale this fall, where he plans to take humanities electives. A former recipient of the Harvard Book Prize, winner of a National Merit Scholarship, and named a Morehead-Cain Scholar by the University of North Carolina before he chose to attend Yale, de La Bruyère is self-effacing in light of his accomplishments.

When asked about his writing, for example, he says, "I wouldn't call myself a writer, but I love trying." Named a Lamont Younger Poet in 2007, and one of a handful of seniors selected to read a meditation this spring, *The Exonian* senior columnist says when he first came to Exeter, "I tried a lot . . . and I failed a lot," with writing. Yet, with the guidance and support from English Instructors Jane Cadwell, Todd Hearon and Matt Miller, de La Bruyère learned about the art of revising—about working at something until it's where he needs it to be.

It's a skill this graduate, with a Classical Diploma, has honed in many of his undertakings at Exeter. The boy once worried about fitting in is now a leader who says what he'll miss most is the faculty and his friends, and "the comfort kids have around the [Harkness] table, the respect they have for each other. It's a wonderful way to learn."

## Amy (Qian) Huang

### Deciphering problems, discovering truths

Amy (Qian) Huang didn't take a computer science course until her upper year. But this spring, the senior and her partner, David Xiao '10, won first place in the Worcester Polytechnic Institute High School Programming Contest, beating 26 other teams in a race to solve nine computing problems. It was the first year members of Exeter's new Computing Club participated in the event.

Huang, a Cox Medal recipient at graduation, was no stranger to problem-solving contests. She's participated in math competitions since middle school and was consistently among the top female finishers in national high school math competitions during her time at Exeter.

Her love for math and computer programming germinated in China, when she and other first-graders were often given dozens of arithmetic problems to solve. Huang eventually came to recognize patterns in solutions and developed shortcuts to reach them.

"It was fun as a child to discover [those] properties," she says.

When she and her family moved to the United States, Huang was enrolled in the second grade and, she says, "Language was an issue, but math was not." It was a subject she easily excelled at as she progressed through primary school, finding geometry "interesting" and algebra "fun." It is the process of learning something new, she says, that engages her—the ability to take apart a problem, study it, and then arrive at a solution.

Nevertheless, her problem-solving abilities were tested during her prep year at Exeter. "The thing that really struck me is that we learned things in a different way," Huang says. In finding so-

lutions to homework problems and discussing them collaboratively with her classmates and instructors, Huang discovered there were often underlying links between two seemingly different problems—that the basic logic was the same. "It's really exciting" to make those discoveries, she says.

Huang joined the Math Club her prep year and participated in the American Regions Mathematics League, the largest on-site math competition in the country, each of her years at Exeter. In 2007,

Huang's lower year, the Exeter team competed against more than 120 teams made up of nearly 2,000 students, and finished first in the nation.

This summer, Huang heads to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for the Mathematical Olympiad Summer Program, a training camp for some of the best math students in the country. To qualify, Huang took a series of tests administered by the Mathematical Association of America. The final test—the United States of America Mathematical Olympiad—was a two-day essay/proof examination comprised of six questions held this spring. Huang was one of the top two female scorers.

While Huang thinks she'll study math when she attends Harvard in the fall, she also plans to become involved with the daily newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*. Language may have been an initial hurdle for Huang, but it quickly morphed into an opportunity for new forms of investigation and analysis.

"Reading comes a lot easier than writing when you are learning a new language," comments Huang. As a result, she was a voracious reader in elementary school, and that fueled a love and admiration for storytelling. "It is so interesting [to me] how powerful simple words and phrasing can be. It helps to express, indirectly or explicitly, things that are very important."

By middle school, Huang had taken up the pen and was editor-in-chief for the school's newspaper. At Exeter, she was a reporter for *The Exonian* her prep year and a news associate editor



**Amy Huang '09 was one of the top female scorers at the United States of America Mathematical Olympiad this spring.**

the following year. What was perhaps most meaningful about those two years was how her opinion about journalism shifted. Her early exposure to Chinese media had caused Huang to doubt freedom of the press, but the investigative reporting she did at PEA, specifically the access she was granted, led her to realize that freedom of the press is “a vehicle for positive change,” one that “can be used to solve problems.”

Huang’s problem solving extended into other facets of Exeter life. She started ESSO’s Games With Seniors Club her prep year, facilitating weekly student visits to retirement homes. After a year of sporadic, low turnout by students, Huang had learned enough about organizing people that she was able to increase student involvement during her lower year.

A junior varsity volleyball captain and varsity tennis player as a senior, Huang also appreciates the nuances of competitive play. “In tennis, you’re the one making every single point,” she says. “In volleyball, it’s different. Good teamwork and team dynamics are often as important as good technique.”

It’s a familiar formula for Huang. Finding solutions around an oval Harkness table has always been an exercise in collaboration. It’s one of the things she’ll miss most about PEA. In talking with students from other schools, she says, “I realize how lucky I’ve been in coming to Exeter and experiencing Harkness.”

## **Emma WestRasmus** **Passionate about poetry and politics**

The underground tunnel system at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., is one of Emma WestRasmus’ favorite places. Especially after the U.S. House of Representatives has called a vote and members brush by her on their way to the House floor.

She also likes trolling the Capitol building at night, where she once caught a glimpse of the speaker of the house striding to a late-night congressional session. And she experienced “goose bumps and tears” when she was shown the Oval Office.

WestRasmus’ intimacy with the Capitol is the result of Exeter’s Washington Intern Program—a two-month appointment that places select seniors in the office of a U.S. senator or representative. In March, WestRasmus was assigned to the office of U.S. Representative Diana DeGette, D-Colo., the chief deputy whip for the Democratic Party.

WestRasmus describes DeGette as “a remarkable example of a smart, independent woman breaking barriers in the national, male-dominated political arena.” The congresswoman, she says, “can meet with President Obama about climate change issues in the morning and leave for a congressional trip to Afghanistan in the evening, but, in between, she still manages to take a few of the

young women here in the office—including myself—out to lunch. [She] offers us insight about her journey, and advice on aspiring to a career in politics.”

DeGette’s example and the “gentle majesty of Capitol Hill” have proven to be inspirational for WestRasmus, who is now contemplating a future run for elected office. She says, “Most of my days are full of research, errands, phone calls and writing, yet the magic and subtle sophistication of Congress is always present.” Being part of that magic is the culmination of years of hard work on New Hampshire’s political front lines.

It began, WestRasmus says, with a high-five she received from President Bill Clinton during a 1995 campaign stop. She was 4 years old, but it sparked an interest that had taken hold by middle school, where she skipped classes to hear Democratic candidates speak at a nearby university. When she was 12 years old, WestRasmus volunteered for her first campaign—Howard Dean’s presidential primary bid in New Hampshire.

A four-year Exeter day student, WestRasmus joined the Democratic Club her prep year and was chosen to serve as the club’s co-head by the end of her lower year. It was one of the first times in the club’s history that a lower had been chosen to serve her upper year, in addition to her senior year. She began interning for Obama’s campaign in 2007, two months after he



**Emma WestRasmus '09**  
**spent her spring term as a congressional intern and has won national recognition for her writing.**

announced his candidacy, and describes her politicking as a “coming of age.” Last summer, she interned for the campaign to elect Senator Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., and ran the PEA leg of that political movement during the spring and fall terms. “One of the best parts about campaigns for me is getting inspired by a candidate with vision and integrity,” she says, “and joining others to pour all we have into one shared goal. Local grassroots organizing is truly democracy at its best!”

While running for U.S. Congress remains a possible goal, WestRasmus believes her dream job would be to serve as a presidential speechwriter because, she says, it would combine “my love of politics, the executive branch and writing. [I would have] the opportunity to give voice to a vision.”

That’s another thing she’s been doing for awhile. A prolific writer, WestRasmus won a Gold Key award for a journalism piece and a Silver Key award for a poem in this year’s Scholastic Art and Writing Awards Showcase—an annual publication and virtual gallery that highlights nationally recognized work by high school students.

“Poetry has been the medium in which I have been able to take commonplace observations to a more substantive level. I am learning how to find deeper and more fulfilling meanings by creating connections between seemingly divergent ideas, descriptions and themes,” she explains.

WestRasmus also received six regional Gold Key citations from Scholastic for a personal essay/memoir, a writing portfolio entry and four poetry entries. And, prior works were also chosen for national awards in 2005 and 2007.

“Exeter has certainly been a very nurturing place for me to grow as a writer and literary thinker,” she says. “One of the best things about the English Department was the linked terms. As a day student, it can be hard to get to know faculty, and, in writing in particular, I find it so helpful to have a teacher that has seen more diversity in my writing and analysis.”

She describes her *Advanced Writing* sequence, which poet and English Instructor Matt W. Miller taught fall and winter terms, as “an oasis during the day, [where] we created a dynamic of honesty and supportive, compassionate critique.”

WestRasmus will attend Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, and will likely study international relations. Like many graduates, she says she will miss the “passionate spark of a Harkness class when everyone is engaged,” but she’ll miss something more, too.

“I’ll miss the sense of history, the marble stairs of the Academy Building worn down by generations of Exonians,” she says. “In many ways, [it’s what] I love so much about Capitol Hill—the understated elegance, the musty halls heavy with history, and a sense that we have all been called to use our intellect and compassion to change the world.”

## Arjun Venkatachalam

### Beating the Buzzer at Intellectual Competitions

During his upper and senior years, Arjun Venkatachalam ’09 often unwound on air. He likens his disc jockeying on WPEA 90.5 FM to therapy.

“Radio Free Smarjun,” the show he co-hosted with longtime friend Sam Steele ’09, had a loose format. They played the music they liked in a relaxed atmosphere, where they chatted about daily life. Venkatachalam says it was fun and “a way to take a load off every week.”

When not in front of a mike, Venkatachalam was often behind a buzzer. It began his prep year, when he attended his first Quiz Club meeting and became hooked on the “Jeopardy”-style format of the practice tournaments. The club members would split into two teams and respond to questions posed by their coach, Hunter Farnham. Venkatachalam says, “It’s a lot of fun because students end up discussing questions long after the question is read.

“What really appeals to me is the adrenaline rush you get during a particularly intense round,” he adds. “It might not seem that way, but Quiz Club is easily one of the most competitive activities I have taken part in.”

It’s a form of play that Venkatachalam, a Quiz Club team captain for the past two years, has excelled at. A month before grad-

uation, he and three teammates went to Washington, D.C., to compete in the U.S. Department of Energy’s National Science Bowl Championship—a six-day science education and academic

event—where more than 450 students from 67 high school and 36 middle school teams vied for top honors. Venkatachalam and his team tied for second place in the Fermi Division.

Two weeks prior to that trip, Venkatachalam was sharing the hot seat with three teammates in the final match of New Hampshire Public Television’s weekly high school quiz contest, “Granite State Challenge.” The team finished second in the state, after a season of competition that included 32 schools.

Venkatachalam, a 2009 candidate for the U.S. Presidential

Scholars Program and a National Merit Scholarship finalist, says his area of specialty in such competitions is often science or biology. And that, he says, is due in large part to two teachers: Joshua Frost, his middle school coach for

MATHCOUNTS, a national competition program; and Townley Chisholm, instructor in science.

“Mr. Frost taught me so much about math, but, more importantly, he instilled a passion for knowledge that I treasure to this day,” Venkatachalam says. “He approached MATHCOUNTS with such enthusiasm and ardor that it was infectious. With him, [it] wasn’t session after session of grinding problems out; it was a mutual discovery of elegant solutions to seemingly difficult problems.

“I credit Mr. Chisholm with getting me interested in biology. I’ve known him since he coached my Destination ImagiNation team in elementary school and was excited to learn he would be my teacher prep spring. His classes have been among the hardest courses I have taken at Exeter, but they have been worth it.” He says Chisholm’s “distinctive sense of humor” and depth of knowledge “caused me to love biology so much that I intend to major in biomedical engineering.”

He’ll pursue that degree this fall at Johns Hopkins University, one of the best medical schools in the country. He was one of only 100 accepted into the university’s exclusive biomedical engineering program. Venkatachalam plans to be a surgeon one day.

In the meantime, this day student will finish his final summer in Exeter with a handful of fellow class of ’09 graduates: Taylor Denson, John Williamson and Steele. “We’ve known each other from elementary school, and we’ve been best friends for most of our four years,” he says. “When I think back about the Academy, my memories will most likely be of hanging out in Ewald [Hall] with all three of them.” ●



**Arjun Venkatachalam ’09 competed in the U.S. Department of Energy’s National Science Bowl Championship.**

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