

AN UNEXPECTED DESTINATION | By Debby D’Arcangelo ’82



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FRED CARLSON

Flashback 24 years: It is the summer after my senior year at Exeter. I am traveling from the Pennsylvania town where I am working for the summer to my home near Boston. I have to change trains in Trenton, NJ. I think of Trenton as a very dangerous place. Maybe it is from hearing about the riots after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s death in the late 1960s. My heart beats fast as the train approaches the station. I am wondering if I will be mugged. I cautiously get off the train, follow the dozens of other people walking up the stairs, and make my way to the train headed to Boston. I board it with a great sigh of relief. *I am so happy to be getting out of Trenton!*

Flash forward 12 years from that time, to the fall of 1994: I am sitting in my car, parked on a street in one of Trenton’s most challenged neighborhoods, surrounded by the shells of what were once beautiful brick homes. Several are boarded up; they are in the process of being renovated into affordable housing. Stenciled on every other board, in block letters, is the message: “Say No to Drugs.” It is a cold rainy day and there are no people in sight. My heart is beating fast. I am waiting in my car because I am a little early. I wonder if my car be broken into after I go inside. Then I ask myself a bigger question: “Could I come here every day?” I’m about to interview for a job in Trenton.

Flash forward five years from that time, to the fall of 1999: I am sitting in my car on a street in Trenton. My heart is beating fast. I am excitedly waiting for a large truck to arrive. It is a moving van. I am in one of Trenton’s nicer neighborhoods. My husband, daughter and I are about to move into a house in Trenton.

How did I make the transition from being incredibly afraid of a place to making that place my home? In some ways my journey evolved over time, one decision leading to another. But there were also influences in my younger years that led me to this point.

First, were my parents; I learned so much from them. My three siblings and I attended some of the best and most expensive schools in the country, all of us on significant scholarships. My parents’ goal was to get us the best education they could, and they gave up everything material they had to make it happen. They were incredibly proud of our achievements. Through their actions, they taught me how helping someone else can be extremely satisfying.

I’ve also been influenced by my experiences as a student at Exeter. I didn’t write this to make a clichéd statement about the Academy’s influence on me. But as all of us who have a long history with this school know, what you learn here has a way of sticking with you. You can’t avoid it. At Exeter, I was inspired to try to do something really big with my life. I remember sitting in Assembly and hearing so many great people share what they had done. I learned there were flesh-and-blood people doing really great things—and that I would love to be like them.

For me, it is both a blessing and a curse to be inspired this way: a blessing because I’m always striving to do more, a curse because I never feel that what I’ve done is enough. Overall, I know it is more of a blessing, because it keeps me from being complacent.

It’s easy to think that Exeter’s greatest influence on me was having high aspirations, but I have come to realize that my time at Exeter taught me a lot about something that seems much smaller in scale: the benefits of being a responsible member of a community.

All those mornings I sat in Assembly, dreaming about doing something really big, I was also learning about community. I loved interacting with others: students wherever I went; teachers in the classroom, at check-in or on the pathways; the janitor in my dorm; the librarians whom I got to know through my scholarship job—and so many more people. For me, it was a great joy to spend the day going from activity to activity, feeling part of a larger group. I could see the benefits for myself and the community.

When I applied to Exeter more than 25 years ago, the application was a hand-written letter about how you would contribute to the Exeter community if admitted. The question itself instilled in me the need to add value. Even if I wasn’t going to do something big, I needed to do something that would make whatever I was doing better.

I knew that no matter what I did, I had to answer these questions: How was I going to add value? What was I going to contribute?

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Debby D’Arcangelo ’82 served as an Exeter trustee from 1996 to 2006. This essay is adapted from a Meditation that she delivered at Phillips Church on October 27, 2005.

friends, some of them faculty children, to a chocolate bunny feast at her apartment, or send them on an errand to the Chocolatier with far too much money for what she actually wanted.

The visit of a writer or speaker would always generate a good excuse for her to gather old friends for a meal on campus. As her mobility became more limited she worked at making her apartment warm and welcoming; hiring a gardener to tend the plot in front of her windows, to give herself and others the benefit of natural “vista” instead of another parking lot—an aesthetic and spiritual comfort she inherited and imported from her native North Dakota.

She had the school paint her rooms deep red or sage green, enhanced by her impressive and diverse collection of tapestries, photographs, sculptures and original paintings. At times, even the elaborate earrings she wore were a kind of artistic statement.

Heroically, during her last days Marcia planned gatherings of new and old friends on campus, thinking of the combinations that would find interest in each other and enjoy stopping by her sunroom in Cushwa for a cup of coffee or a glass of wine and conversation. Always conversation. A close friend wrote about these conversations in the last few weeks: “...current events, history, politics and teaching issues, Christianson’s case teaching, women and women’s issues on campus. I was always glad to be with her.”

Tireless teacher, generous neighbor, friend, writer, scholar, critic, ferocious intellectual, and advocate for so many—all of these facets contributed to who Marcia was at the Harkness table, certainly, but they were at their best in front of a living room fire, in the light-filled porch of her tasteful and elegant apartment or in the sincere encouragement she called out to colleagues on the path beneath the first glimmer of spring warmth toward which she often turned her face, which she never took for granted, and which she never questioned. ●

This Memorial Minute was written by Ralph Sneed, Becky Moore, Kathy Brownback, Joyce Kemp, Donna Archambault, Mercy Carbonell, Jeff Ibbotson, Jane Boesch and Lawrence Smith (chairperson), and presented at faculty meeting on October 18, 2006.

Finis Origine Pendet

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After college, I went to work for a highly reputable Wall Street bank. I was following my expected career path, my parents were very happy—plus, I was paying off my student loans. I thought I would always have a traditional corporate career, adding value and contributing in the business world. I thought that I would contribute to the community as a kind of “extracurricular activity.”

My husband also was working on Wall Street and we were both being paid well. After a while, I realized that I didn’t need to follow that career path any more. The for-profit mission of “maximizing shareholder value” wasn’t inspiring me. Around this same time, my husband and I moved from New York City to Princeton Junction, NJ. It was midwinter, and dark when I began my long commute in the morning, and dark again when I came home. I thought that there must be a way to add value without having to travel so far. I also thought that maybe contributing to the community didn’t have to be “extracurricular.” Maybe it could be my career.

But how could I best contribute? Where was the greatest need? It seemed obvious to me, possibly because I had lived in cities at different times, that the greatest need was with low-income urban communities. What urban community was closest to where we lived? Trenton.

You may have driven by the famous neon-lit sign declaring “Trenton Makes, The World Takes” on the bridge that spans the Delaware River connecting New Jersey and Pennsylvania. That sign was erected more than 75 years ago, when Trenton was a thriving industrial center. Trenton factories manufactured products used worldwide, including the steel cable that supports the Brooklyn Bridge and the Lenox china presented at the White House. Trenton was also a cultural, recreational and shopping destination for anyone who lived within 30 miles.

For a variety of reasons that are probably taught in History 333, Trenton, like many northeastern cities, lost its industrial commercial base and experienced a flight of its primarily upper-income white residents to the suburbs. Due to red-lining and other barriers, lower-income people, many of

them black, were left behind. The “white flight” also left room for immigrants and other lower-income people to move into the city. With the advent of malls and multiplexes and the growth of places like downtown Princeton, affluent suburbanites feel they have no need to come to Trenton. So most stay away.

But when I realized that Trenton was where I could add the most value, it was clear that’s where I had to go. It took me about 12 months, but I made a transition from what was my last banking position, advising multimillionaires on their investments, to helping low-income families and communities in Trenton. This brought me to the job interview in Trenton in 1994, when I wondered if I could go to work every day in such a neighborhood. I got the job, which was at a nonprofit dedicated to helping low-income people help themselves. The organization’s name is Isles, for “neighborhood-scale islands of redevelopment,” and it gives people information and training so that they can use their own skills, labor and available resources to get what they need. One program helps neighbors turn abandoned lots into community gardens, another helps community groups facilitate the clean-up of contaminated land in their neighborhoods. There are many others.

My car was not broken into when I worked there. In fact, I met amazing people and learned a great deal in my six years at Isles. I learned that most of the people who live in low-income neighborhoods are no different than anyone else I’ve come across in my life—they just haven’t had the same opportunities. They want what’s best for their families and they’re willing to work hard to make their communities better. They just have a lot of challenges, a lot of forces pushing them down and pulling them down, and they don’t have a lot of resources. Over generations, this really affects the young people, many of whom don’t have hope, don’t see a way out and so aren’t motivated. But I could see that they could be motivated if they had something to hope for.

The most important thing that I learned (or had reinforced for me) at Isles was the magic of respect. Respect is such a basic human need—I think it’s like water, food, or shelter. It’s meaningful to everyone, and so often it’s not given to lower-income people. I know I always want to be treated

respectfully, so I know I need to treat people that way myself. In all my interactions at Isles, I worked hard to show people from the community and the people I worked with, that I respected them. (In fact, I had to work extra hard because many knew where I had gone to school and were even more suspicious of me as a result.)

It's a great joy to see people's eyes light up when they're treated with respect when they assume they're going to be ignored.

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When I met with community groups I could easily be the person ignored, since I was different from everyone else, from the color of my skin to the way I talked, and I lived outside the community. Whenever someone in the group acknowledged me and welcomed me, *my* face lit up. We all appreciate respect.

It was at Isles that I got to know Carl. Carl was about 10 years old when I met him. He lived with his dad, in the affordable housing development adjacent to Isles' offices. Carl would come into the office almost every afternoon after school. He didn't necessarily participate in any of Isles' programs, but he would visit with different employees. We'd ask him how school was and how everything was at home. As he got older, he'd ask if he could do something to earn some money. Since we took turns taking out the garbage at our small nonprofit, I

would pay Carl to help me when it was my turn. It was important to me that we take out the garbage together; that he knew that I wouldn't ask him to do anything I wouldn't do myself. Growing up, Carl has continued to be industrious: finishing high school, taking college courses, working many jobs, supporting his church and, recently, finding a job helping at-risk youth that has led him to a successful career.

In his younger years, though, I think Carl could have easily gotten into trouble. I think he benefited a great deal just from having Isles in his neighborhood. It gave him a place to go, where he could connect with people. For him, Isles' just "being there" was very important.

Over the years, Carl has become like a member of my immediate family. Carl recently said to a large group of people that he appreciates how much we trust him. But I feel that we are the ones who owe him a great deal; we appreciate how much he has helped and trusted us.

After I had been working at Isles for a year or two, I started feeling uncomfortable driving out of the city to my family's house in the suburbs every evening. I felt a disconnect between what I did during most of my waking hours at Isles and how I was living the rest of my life. There were many people who worked for Isles and enjoyed living in the city. Fortunately, I was able to convince my daughter, who was then 6 and loved our house in the suburbs, and my husband, who had to lengthen his already-long commute, to move to the city.

We have experienced no hardship moving to Trenton. On the contrary, our lives have been significantly enriched. We live close to great restaurants, a beautiful park and a variety of cultural activities. We live in a beautiful older home which would have cost us a lot more money in a suburban neighborhood. And, most importantly, we live in a very diverse community, which all three of us really appreciate.

It's also great being boosters for the city. Many of our acquaintances from the suburbs look at us in dismay when we explain that we live in Trenton and really enjoy it. Many try to insist that we live in West Trenton, which is technically part of the suburbs. They're used to people fleeing from, or just completely avoiding, the city. But when they hear our story, the story of people they consider to be like themselves, it makes

them question what they think they know about Trenton and, I hope, older cities in general.

In some small way, I think that I'm helping people with the same journey I've made—from being scared, as I was in the train station 24 years ago, to respecting and appreciating an urban community.

I no longer work for Isles, but I do serve on the boards of some organizations that help lower-income families and communities in Trenton and the surrounding area. Many of my fellow board members live in Princeton or the nearby suburbs. It's important to me that the organizations have a healthy perspective about our work: Is there respect for the people who benefit from the work that we do? Are representatives of the communities we serve involved in our decision-making process? Is there a real partnership among equals? Not all of the organizations are there yet, but I appreciate sharing my perspective and working toward mutual respect between those of us providing the services and those of us receiving them.

Just as when I was a student at Exeter, I still have aspirations to do much more. I don't feel that I have done much, but I do realize the benefit of "just being there" in Trenton. The benefit of not only giving to, but being part of, a wonderful community that I want to support.

A final flashback, this one to the fall of 2005: As part of my work for the Trenton Public Education Foundation, I am walking into one of Trenton's most challenged schools—the Daylight/Twilight School for high school drop-outs. The foundation is creating partnerships with nearby corporations to provide job opportunities for the many students who graduate from this program. My heart isn't racing at all. I'm not scared, even though there are some students who've had a variety of problems. I know that, in general, these young people have grown up with a substandard educational system having little hope and few opportunities—they just need to be given a fair chance to succeed. I know that one of the main tenets of the Daylight/Twilight School is "respecting the student."

As I walk down the hallway, I catch a student's eye and smile at her. I see her face brighten and she smiles back at me. I am so happy to be doing what I can to add value at this school. *I am so happy to be living and working in Trenton!* ■