

WERNER BRANDES ON HIS VISIT TO THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF TBILISI, AND THE CRUCIAL ROLE EDUCATION IS PLAYING IN GEORGIA TODAY.

JANICE REITER

By Werner Brandes '66, '84 (Hon.); P'84, P'86



*This past winter, instructor emeritus Werner Brandes (right) spent a month at the American Academy of Tbilisi and then, come July, welcomed five AAT students (shown here with librarian Joanne Jones, left) to summer school: George Osepashvili, Revaz Margania, Salome Topuria, Ketivashakidze, Salome Kanchveli.*

Since my earliest school days, I have believed in and worked for partnership and cooperation, both on the local and international level. The fall of the Berlin wall opened up the possibility of new beginnings in countries previously under the Soviet umbrella, including Georgia, the birthplace of Stalin. If there was a way to help Georgian educators with the vast changes now sweeping their country into the 21st century, I was determined to do so.

Since the “Rose Revolution” in November 2003, Georgia has been able, for the first time in its long history, to think about building an independent social democracy, an effort supported by the United States and the European Union. Already, Georgia has become a beacon of political and economic progress and of modernization. But much work remains and, as always, education will have to carry the burden over the long haul.

This is where Exeter comes in. In 1931, Edward Harkness funded a new approach to education, acting on the faith that students and teachers could learn together by discussion and by doing, and the hope that this endeavor might benefit all mankind. I can't tell you how proud I am to have taught for four decades at a school dedicated to these principles.

In the years since Harkness made his gift, Exeter became not only a national high school, but also an increasingly trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific one. In 2001, Donald Thomas, a former Exeter teacher and protégé of the legendary English instructor George Bennett '23, brought this same philosophy to the American Academy in Tbilisi (AAT), the independent, English-language high school he co-founded that year. Harkness in Tbilisi struck me as both a challenge and an opportunity, and as a Euro-American, I felt I had something to contribute.

I could also relate to this unique historic moment. I started first grade in the fall of 1945, when Germany was given a chance to extricate itself from totalitarian dictatorship and to confront the evil it caused during WWII and the Holocaust. Today, I am touched both by the global geopolitical importance of Georgia and the Caucasus area, and by the very real challenges the region faces. An hour's drive from Tbilisi is the birthplace of Stalin and a museum extolling his tremendous power and influence. To the north of Georgia is Chechnya, with its seemingly unending cycle of terrorism and counterterrorism. And yet the

Georgian government, assisted by many international organizations, is dedicated to conflict resolution. The Harkness method is already being practiced there daily.

I arrived in Tbilisi on February 2, carrying two suitcases full of books and CDs donated by the Academy Library. Home was a small apartment on the fourth floor of a Soviet-style housing complex. Each day I got up and took the minibus to AAT, where I visited classes in each department, concentrating on history, English and humanities, but also observing classes in Georgian, chemistry, physics and math. I attended Russian classes for several days and wrote an evaluation of the program and the three teachers.

There was also time to socialize with students and, more importantly, with the faculty, most of whom I had already met at the Exeter Summer School, where they had “prepped” before going on to  
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**Harkness in Tbilisi**

The *Bulletin* first reported on the American Academy of Tbilisi in fall 2001, just as the Georgian school opened its doors to its first 50 students. But Exeter's association with the school actually began several years earlier, when Donald Thomas, AAT's founding principal and a one-time PEA faculty member, forged a partnership with the Exeter Summer School to help train future AAT faculty in Harkness-style instruction. Since that time, the Summer School has welcomed several dozen AAT faculty members and students. In December 2003, former Summer School Director Hobart Hardej and Bates-Russell Professor Peter Greer '58 traveled to Tbilisi to visit the three-year-old school, attending classes, meeting with faculty members and trustees, and “when speaking about Harkness,” as Greer wrote in the summer 2004 *Bulletin*, “preaching to the choir.”



*A Harkness class at the American Academy of Tbilisi.*

## China Trip

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station to ask for walking directions. Instead of directions, they got a ride from a Beijing resident who recognized their plight.

Visits to three Chinese schools gave the faculty a glimpse of the cultural challenges Asian students may encounter at the Academy. The schools the faculty toured featured lecture-style classes of 60 students who were attentive but largely silent—a marked contrast to the Harkness system, in which active student participation is encouraged, if not demanded.

“What aspects of the Harkness classroom might be familiar to and comfortable to our Asian students?” asks Jeanne Stern, head counselor at the Lamont Health and Wellness Center. “Where might there be obstacles? How might teachers understand a more reticent student?”

While the study tour is over, what the group learned will “continue to unfold over time,” says Eggers, as faculty members write reflections on their trip and make presentations to the trustees and their faculty colleagues. They will also discuss how all their China experiences might filter into Exeter’s programs. It’s a process that will necessarily take time and consideration, says Director of Studies Mark Delaney, himself a member of study tour. But, he adds, “a door has been opened.”

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*For additional photographs of alumni/ae-sponsored gatherings in Hawaii and China, see “From Every Quarter,” pages 64-65.*

## Tbilisi

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their M.A. work in education at Harvard and Simmons College. In the process, I had become a mentor and friend to many of

these teachers, and they appreciated the fact that I could connect them with both the United States and with Europe.

Watching the students, I was reminded that it takes time to fully appreciate the Harkness method. While many of the ninth graders were still bewildered by the process, the seniors I observed were very proficient. It was also clear how much they have come to value this new way of learning, as have their parents. The seniors’ poise and thoughtful curiosity, coupled with their teachers’ patience and laserlike precision, were inspiring to behold. Amid an educational system still struggling to shake off the influence of Soviet-era bureaucracy, with its required national lesson plans and supervisory strangleholds, AAT is a small miracle of independence, and a model for interdisciplinary learning and the humanities.

I left Tbilisi on March 2, too early to attend ATT’s first graduation ceremony, which took place on May 27. It was a proud moment for AAT and for all of Georgia (so much so that Georgia’s president, Mikhail Saakashvili attended). It was also a proud moment for Exeter. Two ATT graduates are now at Harvard on full scholarships, and others are attending various American, European and Russian universities. In June, having seen the school through its crucial formative years, Don Thomas retired and was succeeded by Richard Lussen of Northfield-Mt. Hermon, as part of AAT’s long-term plan for an American school head and an American-trained, Georgian-born faculty.

Will Harkness in Tbilisi continue to thrive? I am sure of it. The faculty meets regularly around a (very big) Harkness table, and is already in the process of reviewing AAT’s curriculum for the year 2009. And an effort is underway to build a new res-

idential campus. As for Exeter, I hope more of our teachers and students will have opportunities to participate in the evolution of this Harkness of the East.

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*Werner Brandes is the Lane*

*Bicentennial Professor in the*

*Humanities Emeritus. A member of*

*modern languages department from*

*1964 to 2004, he was also the long-*

*time director of the Washington*

*Intern Program.*