

**Depending on how you look at it, all 302 members of the class of 2005 covered a considerable distance during their time at Exeter. For some, that distance was geographical; for others, it was intellectual, emotional or spiritual. Here, the journeys of four graduating seniors, each of whom came a long way.**

By Susannah Clark '84

Photographs by Brian Crowley



**Even with significant hearing and speech impairments, Gordy Powers quickly emerged as one of the top students in his class, as well as an inspiration to his classmates and teachers.**

**G o r d o n P o w e r s ' 0 5**  
*A Fair Hearing*

Students at Exeter come in just about every variation, but Gordon Powers, a day student from East Kingston, NH, was unique when he started four years ago. Powers wears two hearing aids—even so, he doesn't always catch everything—and due to a muscular disorder, his speech can be difficult to understand. In a school where academics are based in a very large part on discussion, significant hearing and speech impairments might seem like insurmountable obstacles. "I actually wasn't accepted right away," Powers says.

But as Exeter was soon to discover, Powers is nothing if not determined. "Because the classes are so small, I felt that Exeter would be fine for me," he says. So he set about convincing the school.

"There are not a lot of kids with physical disabilities here," observes his senior year adviser, Assistant Principal Tom Hassan, who was dean of admissions at the time of Powers' application. "The admissions committee took extra time and care in considering Gordy's case. In the end, the committee was convinced that Gordy would succeed, as well as add a new dimension to the Academy's 'youth from every quarter.'"

Math instructor Dave Arnold, who was Powers' adviser for his first three years, is forthcoming about his initial concerns. "Frankly, I was nervous as all hell," he confesses. "All Gordy's classes were going to be oral-based. How threatening would that be for anybody, let alone someone with hearing and speech disabilities? He didn't really know." Arnold's concerns didn't take long to fade. "Halfway through his first year, I knew I was going to have problems with some advisees," he says, "but Gordy wasn't going to be one of them."

Powers' fellow students, it turns out, quickly learned to understand his speech. "The interesting thing is that it's the teachers who have trouble," Arnold observes. "The teachers put pressure on themselves to understand every word. But in class after class, the kids very quickly pick up on what he's saying because they don't feel any pressure."

"One person will understand me," Powers explains, "and they will tell the class what I said. If they don't understand me, I'll repeat myself or write it down." He always carries a small notepad for just such occasions, as well as an apparently limitless patience for repeating himself.

Four years later, it's very clear that Powers was right for Exeter. This spring, he was named one of the school's two Presidential Scholars, and at Exeter's commencement ceremony, he received the Williams Cup, which is presented to a four-year student who "has by personal qualities brought distinction to Phillips Exeter," as well as a Cox Medal, awarded to the top five students in the graduating class. Next fall, he will attend Harvard.

Among the many things Powers brought to Exeter was a sign language club he founded, which has helped him bridge any gap between himself and his peers. "It's a lot of fun," Powers says. "It helps them understand what my life is like, and it helps me keep up with my sign language."

People who've gotten to know Powers well say that his disabilities quickly become a rather insignificant characteristic, like his sandy-blond hair or his slight build. Powers himself takes this approach. "It does influence me and it is a part of who I am," he says, "but it's no big deal."

Hassan agrees. "You get to know him for who he is and what you're struck by is his academic strength. In wonderful ways, the Exeter kids have reached out to him, and Gordy to them. He has a core group of very strong friends."

The way Arnold sees it, Powers may well have taught Exeter as much if not more than what Exeter taught him. "The kids have learned so much from him," he says. "It's a perfect example of how someone can bring so much to the school."

**R a t h a L y ' 0 5**

*'Capacity for Lifelong Growth'*

The thing about improving a great deal is that it implies you weren't doing so well to begin with. Ratha Ly, a four-year senior from Philadelphia, however, readily agrees with that assessment. "At first, I found it very difficult adjusting to Exeter," she says.

With good reason. Ly's parents are both survivors of the Cambodian genocide of 1975 to 1979, which claimed the lives of an estimated 1.7 million people. The Lys immigrated to the United States when Ratha was just a baby, and later had two more children. But when her parents divorced, she quickly took on adult-size responsibilities. "I had to pick up the slack when my mom was at work," Ly says. "Every morning before school, I'd wake up and cook the food and clean the house, and after school I'd come home and take care of my brother and my sister." Nor was her neighborhood, where gangs are a daily fact of life, exactly kid-friendly.

"Ratha had the typical kinds of pressures a student from an inner city faces," says her adviser Carol Cahalane, chair of the health education department. "Her friends didn't value education. But she stuck with the books, even though there was a lot of pressure to go in a different direction."

When an Exeter admissions officer visited her high school, Ly decided to apply and was eventually admitted, arriving at PEA in the fall of 2001. Her previous schooling, however, hadn't prepared her for the rigors she found here. "I didn't know what an adverb was," she admits. "I didn't know how to write those five-paragraph essays. I was at the bottom of the class."

Learning to talk about her difficulties at home was an additional challenge. "In the Cambodian culture, you're not supposed to discuss family problems," Ly says. But she was determined to make it work, and in turn the school reached out to her.

"She's had to cope with much more than the average student here at Exeter," Cahalane says. "But she asked for help and support, and she was able to build from there. She became stronger with each week that went by."

Ly sought out academic tutoring from her teachers and also took advantage of the Academy's counseling programs, including Student Listeners, a peer-to-peer counseling program. The end result is something she is clearly proud of. "It's gotten a lot better," she says. "My trust has expanded. I can open up to people, and my adviser has become like a mother to me. It was challenging, but I'm doing much better academically."

The key to Ly's success, according to Cahalane, is her perseverance. "She's got to be one of the hardest-working people I know. When she sets a goal for herself, she does what she needs to do. She's done a lot on campus, and has really tried to soak up as much as she can at Exeter." Her senior year concluded with two significant achievements: presentation of her senior project, an independent research paper on the Cambodian genocide, and the news that, along with her classmate Brendon Randall-Myers and upper Yujhan Claros, she was awarded the Frank A. Weil '48 Prize for Exemplary Growth and Promise, which honors students who've demonstrated "a drive and a capacity for lifelong growth."

Ly is headed to Wellesley, a school she chose for its strong liberal arts tradition as well as its Southeast Asian studies program. She says that while one of her career goals has been simply to make money, recently she has come full circle to an earlier ambition—to become a teacher, and perhaps one day open a school in Philadelphia to help prepare middle and high school students for the rigors of top colleges. "It's my way of giving back," she says. "I've have to work for everything, but a lot of people have supported me through the journey. I feel really grateful for this opportunity, and I'd like to do the same for others."



**Ratha Ly says she found Exeter overwhelming when she first arrived, but her willingness to ask for support and her perseverance greatly impressed her adviser, Carol Cahalane. "Ratha's got to be one of the hardest-working people I know," says Cahalane. This June Ly was awarded the Weil Prize for Exemplary Growth and Promise.**

## Jordan Luke-Close '05

### A World Away

If there were a prize for the senior with the longest commute to school, Jordan Luke-Close of Taranaki, New Zealand would win it, hands down. “Not many people leave New Zealand,” says the one-year senior, who made the 14,000-mile trip to New Hampshire last August and didn’t return home until June. “Australia is a two-hour plane ride. The world seems far away when you’re down there.”

Which made it a bit of a hurdle just to leave her country, much less travel so far from it. Luke-Close admits that New Zealand, and the Maori culture in which she was raised, is fairly insular. “No one in my immediate family has traveled,” she says, “and many people aren’t really interested in knowing what’s out there. But I wanted to break that barrier, and I had the opportunity to do so. It makes me feel lucky.”

Luke-Close learned about Exeter from an American Field Services (AFS) exchange program. AFS helped her apply to Exeter and, after she was admitted, placed her with a host family in Hollis, NH, Andrea and Charlie Seddon. She spent three weeks with them when she first arrived in America and visited them when she could throughout the school year, including vacations. “Whether you like it or not, when you get here, you can’t leave,” she says. “But I had somewhere to go, and that was real comforting.”

While the cultural differences between New Zealand and the United States may not, at first glance, seem great—certainly the language is the same—Luke-Close notes that there are a great many subtle differences. “New Zealanders tend to go with the flow and be more humorous,” she says. “Sometimes the people in my classes couldn’t tell if I was serious or not.” Arriving in America during the presidential election campaign, she was also struck by “how political Americans are.” Beyond that, there’s driving on the other side of the road, snow, and—yes, it’s true—when you flush the toilet, the water spins in the opposite direction. “It still scares me now,” Luke-Close says with a laugh.

Then there were the usual adjustments even local students go through, like getting comfortable with the Harkness system. Luke-Close admits that it was tough at first. “At home, when I handed in a paper, it was between me and the teacher, instead of between me, the teacher and everyone else,” she points out.

“That’s what she struggled most with,” says her adviser, Julie Quinn, PEA’s director of communications. “It took some real work on her part, but she’s gotten to the point where she’s comfortable around the Harkness table. Not only has she come a long way in terms of physical distance, she’s come a long way in dealing with the intricacies of boarding school and American culture. She always enters things with a sense of optimism and cheer, and that has carried her a long way.”

She’s also had the added pressure of having her experience on public display. Before leaving her home country, she was chosen to be featured in a New Zealand public television documentary about four AFS students and their experiences abroad. “They filmed Jordy with her family in New Zealand before she left for Exeter, and they came here twice to film her,” says Quinn. “They were a touch of home for her. They knew what her life was like there, and they knew what her life was like here.”

Luke-Close would certainly agree with Francis Bacon’s truism that travel is “a part of education,” but she says she’ll need some time to digest her experience away from home. “This whole year has been huge for me,” she says. “I want to go back home and settle down for a year or two.” She’s planning to go to college in New Zealand to study broadcasting, but she hasn’t ruled out another exchange program. “I’ve learned a lot about myself,” she says. “Sometimes I’d wonder, ‘Why am I putting myself through this?’ But looking back, it’s been worth it. I made the most of it.”



**As an AFS exchange student from New Zealand, Jordy Luke-Close came a long, long way to enroll at Exeter. “No one in my immediate family has traveled,” she says, “but I wanted to break that barrier, and I had the opportunity to do so. It makes me feel lucky.”**

## Jonathan Pierce '05

### One Writer’s Beginnings

You wouldn’t expect changing schools would rattle someone like Jonathan Pierce. Change, after all, has been a constant in Pierce’s life. He moved around a lot as a child, shuttled from foster home to foster home within his extended family, ultimately passing through five different high schools on his way to his diploma.

Yet when he was encouraged to apply to Exeter for a post-graduate year and then admitted, Pierce initially said no. “I didn’t want to start over again,” he explains. He’d spent the last eight months in the same town in Indiana—the longest period of time he’d stayed in one place during high school. A talented basketball player, he’d already been accepted into a small Division 3 college in that state.

However, Exeter’s assistant director of admissions, Jay Tilton, persisted. “We twisted his arm,” he says with a laugh. Tilton, who also serves as assistant coach of the boys varsity basketball team, says that Pierce’s athletic skills certainly caught his attention, “but when I spoke with Jon on the phone and talked to other people who knew him, the things that really impressed me were his maturity and focus.” Tilton told Pierce he should visit Exeter before making up his mind, “and he said he’d at least do that. Well, by the time I saw him he’d already been on campus for three hours, and he had the biggest smile on his face.”

There were, however, episodes in Pierce’s past that are nothing to smile about, including physical abuse by an immediate family member. At Exeter, Pierce kept such issues largely to himself, but when he did choose to speak about them, it was in Phillips Church, where this spring he delivered a meditation that wove together his childhood experiences with a gripping account of an Exeter basketball game, a piece whose power derived not only from its compelling content but also from Pierce’s superb writing. “There wasn’t a dry eye in the church,” says Tilton. “He did a marvelous job.”

“In my mind,” Pierce told his audience, “I’ve been writing for years.” He had long known, he adds now, that the abuse he endured and the perspective he has gained on it “were a story I would want to tell one day. But I had no idea that it would be in front of my classmates in a church at a prep school.” Writing the meditation, he says, gave him the chance “to tie all these experiences together with where I stand now as a man.”

Pierce considers the progress he’s made as a writer one of the chief accomplishments of his year at Exeter, especially when he recalls one of the first essays he wrote for English class, a piece that was not well received. “To his credit,” says Mercy Carbonell, his English teacher, “he really worked on it. There’s a part of him, the athlete in him, that knows you’re going to make a bad shot. You learn how to make a better shot. He came back and wrote this incredible piece. It was about basketball, and it ended up becoming part of his meditation story.”

“Stories build upon themselves,” Pierce says. “The experience of telling my story and the response I received to it have already become another story.”

Pierce’s talent for writing goes hand-in-hand with an ear for literature, adds Carbonell. “He tends to pick up on the contextual current, the thread that’s right inside the narrative. He has a natural instinct for what lies behind something, the emotional core of a piece.”

What Pierce has learned about himself is that he is a lot more than just a great basketball player. “I’ve developed other interests since coming here, things that I love to do that are more important to me than basketball that Exeter opened my eyes to,” he says. “I trust myself a lot more. I know better what I’m capable of.” Or as he put it in his meditation, “There are so many things I can offer that extend farther into the soul than anything anyone could ever do between two hoops.”

Pierce is looking forward to college at Drew University in Madison, NJ, and beyond that, possibly a career in law. Wherever he goes, says Tilton, “We have not heard the last of him. Jon’s the kind of kid that keeps me in coaching and education.” ●



**Jon Pierce left a sizable impression during his PG year at Exeter, not only as an athlete, but also as a writer. For Pierce, the experience showed him that “there are so many things I can offer that extend farther into the soul than anything anyone could ever do between two hoops.”**