

2085:

A Putney Odyssey

By Don Cuerdon, *Director of Communications*

No human can accurately predict the future, but there have been some famously good guesses. In 1968, Arthur C. Clark collaborated with Stanley Kubrick to create a simultaneous major motion picture and sci-fi novel entitled *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Written at the height of the Cold War, Clark predicted, among other things, a permanent joint U.S./Russia/international space station—an idea that, at the time, was more out of this world than the depicted trip to Jupiter. Construction started 30 years later.

In 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, Carmelita Hinton thought the world needed a coed boarding school with rigorous academics, high moral ideals, and a healthy dose of outdoor activities and meaningful work. Seventy five years later, we're still needed.

The most consistent element of The Putney School in its first 75 years has been change. Ask alumni how they did it in 1945, 1955, 1965, and so on, and you'll get many different answers—some wore ties to dinner, some built dorms, some protested segregation. So it's safe to say The Putney School of 2085 will be different from The Putney School of 2010. But how? Mrs. H had no idea that, in 1928, elm bark beetles from the Netherlands would introduce the *Ophiostoma ulmi* fungus that would wipe out the namesake trees of the farm upon which she built her new school. What else is in store? As some like to say in these parts, "Hard sayin', not knowin'."

In its first 75 years the school survived World War II, the Cold War, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, plus the invention of television, rock n' roll, personal stereos, personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones. Although each has presented challenges, none managed to completely undermine what we have come to refer to (and quote copiously) as Putney's fundamental beliefs, put forth by Mrs. Hinton in a 1954 letter to the trustees. Perhaps most important is her missive, "To wish to live adventurously though not recklessly, willing to take risks, if need be, for moral growth, so that one definitely progresses along the long slow road toward achieving a civilization worthy of the name."

What challenges does Putney face in the coming ¼-century? In 2008, State Senate President Pro-Tem and Putney parent, Peter Shumlin, gave a presentation entitled "Climate Change and Vermont: Challenges and Opportunities." He predicted our climate will be that of today's West Virginia, if we're careful, or northern Georgia, if we're not careful, by the time we reach our 150th anniversary. That means the sugar maple will quite likely go the way of the elm, as will the fauna of the northern hardwood forest, and skiing will happen only at the highest elevations. We'll probably still be able to raise and milk cows, but who knows what dietary

2001

Tom Howe takes over summer programs from Brian Cohen. The observatory, gift of the Lifton-Zoline family, arrives to perch on Water Tower Hill. The "Building the Future" campaign receives an anonymous \$1 million challenge. Putney students spend three weeks in Kazakhstan during March break; nine Kazakhstani students come to Putney for 10 days in late March.

2002

Ground is broken for the Michael S. Currier Center, a performing arts facility. Jean Hinton Rosner dies, daughter of Carmelita Hinton, mother of Marni Rosner '69 and Sarah Rosner '71; grandmother of Martin Crook '04 and Ted Crook '04 and David Crook '07; great-aunt of Gina Engst '02 and Teresa Engst '03. A wind turbine is installed north of the KDU.

2003

The United States of America invades Iraq. Betty Robinson '73 and Emily Binger Cooper '74 die within a few months of each other after long illnesses. A scholarship fund in their memory is set up by an impromptu gathering of their friends and classmates in New York City.

2004

The CIA admits there was no imminent threat from weapons of mass destruction before the 2003 Iraq invasion. The Michael S. Currier Center opens with an all-alumni art exhibit in the gallery. The Farm is permanently endowed with a \$4.5 million gift from C. Graham Berwind '47. *The Fog of War*, directed by Errol Morris '65 wins Oscar for documentaries.

2005

The Putney School invites three students from New Orleans to study for a year because their homes and schools were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

discoveries and challenges will happen in that time. Remember when peanut butter wasn't deadly to certain individuals? The Putney Special may have to start with a smear of hummus (which is still preferable to Soylent Green) one day down the road.

Elms and maples may give way to oaks and hickories, but will online learning make our campus a relic? Urban sprawl has already converted many former boarding schools to day schools. What happens to Putney if the suburbs crawl from Springfield, Massachusetts to Springfield, Vermont? We are a product of our environment to a great extent.

But more at the core, will there still be a need for Putney? Will there be a day when we're preaching to a much larger choir? Or will we be the barricaded and barb-wired island of reason in some dystopian nightmare? The truth probably lies somewhere between the extremes—most likely a better world than today, but still very much in need of Putney graduates, or “trim tabs” as futurist Buckminster Fuller liked to call such folks as yourselves.

In the February 1972 issue of *Playboy*, Fuller said, “Something hit me very hard once, thinking about what one little man could do. Think of the Queen Mary—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there's a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab.

“It's a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trim tab. Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go.

“So I said, call me Trim Tab.” It's what's written on his gravestone.

In other words, if we exert a little pressure now, the future might largely take care of itself. Here's hoping.

But more at the core, will there still be a need for Putney? . . . The truth probably lies somewhere between the extremes—most likely a better world than today, but still very much in need of Putney graduates.

2006

The Blu-ray Disc format is released in the United States. New cow barn entryway is completed, rotten infrastructure and other sore spots updated with \$500,000 of Berwind gift.

2007

The final book of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, is released and sells over 11 million copies in the first 24 hours, becoming the fastest selling book in history.

Brian Morgan moves on to head White Mountain School.

Emily H. Jones hired as ninth director of The Putney School.

2008

U.S. President George W. Bush signs the revised Emergency Economic Stabilization Act into law, creating a 700 billion dollar Treasury fund to purchase failing bank assets.

Marissa Lederer passes away and Chittenden Bank notifies school that she and husband Felix left a \$1,000,000 gift to support financial aid.

Ground is broken for a net-zero energy field house.

2009

Reaction to the death of entertainer Michael Jackson cripples several major websites and services, as the abundance of people accessing the web addresses pushes internet traffic to potentially unprecedented and historic levels.

Field House, dedicated to the Caldwell family, opens and wood-fired bread oven installed in KDU.

2010

The tallest man-made structure to date, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, is officially opened.

Putney celebrates 75 years by hosting a June symposium on progressive education at the secondary level.

The Putney School academic schedule changes to trimesters in the fall of 2010.