

A Legacy of Laughter: Elizabeth Begien '80
By Barbara Liston

All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colors a suffusion from that light.
S.T. Coleridge

Elizabeth D. Begien
1966-1990

Bizzy Begien attended Brookwood for nine years, graduating with the class of 1980. She was in my eighth grade homeroom, and I coached her in three varsity sports. We teachers are not supposed to have favorite students, I know, but she was one of mine. We stayed in touch through the years since her graduation, and I considered her to be my friend. What follows is not a formal obituary, but my personal reflections on what she meant to me and to Brookwood. – BCL

There is in an elementary school an unremitting cacophony. Hallways and playgrounds and cafeterias resound with the uniquely high-pitched revelry of children on the loose; even the most subdued class is awash with undercover rustlings and tappings, with mysterious clickings and the feverish whisperings of those for whom silence and stillness are certain anathema.

Like any veteran elementary teacher, I can tell you how, as the years go by, I've developed of necessity an internal decibel control; I've become, in a sense, inured to the cacophony. But this particular auditory control should not be confused with hearing loss; on the contrary, there is inherent in the control an exceptional acuity. Eyes closed, I like all my colleagues, can identify the healthy hullabaloo of an average school day. I know the muffled sounds of school-wide fatigue and the tenor of pocket skirmishes. I don't need a calendar to know when a dance or long weekend is imminent; it's in the tone of the clamor. I know the particular pitch of distress and the hushed strains of mischief-making. Each voice of each student in each and every Brookwood year has its own particular timbre; together a chorus of voices, they make our ongoing song. Like all my colleagues, I know my school by sound.

Bizzy Begien was one of those kids who presses into your heart and stays there, one of those kids you hope you'll know for the rest of your life. At Brookwood – and beyond – she was a whirlwind, that kind of disarming, happy tempest that rejuvenates a day. Though she was utterly guileless, open, and possessed of an unforgettable encompassing warmth, there was in her a wisdom about how to get on in life – and she made laughter the center of her world. She laughed all the time through all the years I knew her, but her laughter was not that simple, defensive irreverence of the anxious adolescent. She laughed because she had a uniquely unbridled capacity for joy and because she had that same capacity for sorrow. When she played lacrosse or solved a difficult math problem or sat with her friends at lunch, she laughed – because she could so easily tap the glee in each situation; and when she flunked a test, faced a family crisis, or lost a boyfriend, she looked for humor in the pain and always, *always* found it.

Bizzy wore her limitations on her sleeve for everyone to see; and though she wrestled with them overtly and earnestly, she also laughed at them. In doing this, she freed us, adults and students alike, from pretense, from unnecessary angst, from focusing on what was missing rather than on what we had. She was optimistic, resilient, courageous, and compassionate; she was a spitfire, and she was loud. The force of her personality drew life to her and made it spin; it was not possible to know her “a little” or to love her “a little” . . . She knew too much and loved too hard to leave a small wake.

Virginia Woolf said, “The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.” In Biz, we were given the laughter – bold, gutsy, beautiful laughter. In losing her, we are stilled unnaturally, frozen by that edge of anguish.

Today there is a new sound at Brookwood, a sound I never imagined I could hear. I mean this: It is the sound of a missing voice. It’s a hollow you hear in the babble, a shift in the rhythm, a broken note. We’ll miss her so much.