Alumni News

Reflective Essay by AWS Alumnus Olivia Allen

Olivia Allen is a recent graduate of Seattle University with a degree in Environmental Studies. She currently works as an environmental educator at an outdoor school in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, where she enjoys inspiring children to love and care for the earth. Olivia attended Anchorage Waldorf School from kindergarten through eighth grade (1998-2007), where her curiosity to learn about the world was ignited.

“If the people lived their lives as if it were a song…” A room full of harmonious voices chant the melancholic yet uplifting melody that sounds so alive that I can almost feel its pulse, akin to the glow of a thousand glimmering candles unified into a single, burning flame. I can still hear that mystical music, even years later, whenever I think about my Waldorf days. A time in my life defined by group song, the smell of freshly baked bread floating over the room at countless soup potlucks, jewel-colored main lesson books, wood-framed chalkboards, the fairytale spectacle of maypole dancing, woven baskets overflowing with pastel shades of wool, and the soft flicker of candlelight bathing my classroom in warm honey. Together, my classmates and I embodied St. Michael and slayed the dragon with sword and steel, sang the world into being as we delved into the epic Kalevala, collected spoils of honor as powerful Romans, traveled from Midgard into the godly realm of Asgard before visiting the endless wasteland of Niflheim, wielded our might from the thunderous perch of Mount Olympus, wandered the lengths of the ancient world in search of Osiris, survived the feudal shadow of the Dark Ages, reveled in the astrological discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, beheld the rebirth of art and music from Renaissance masters, explored the vast oceans and lands of the New World, built industrial cities with steel and mechanic invention… The list of our shared quest for wisdom remains inexhaustible. It was a saga undertaken to discover the ways of the world through head, heart and hands, open and outstretched with inquisitive hunger.

We plunged legions below the surface of conceptual explanations. Instead, our lessons breathed life as our interaction with the curriculum brought each topic into the world with a palpable heartbeat: the ideas, stories and facts we absorbed found their voice through our collective song, verse and poem.  Colors revealed themselves through various interactions between the primary three; red, yellow and blue were constant companions whose unique personalities revealed an infinite palate to our brush. The frail anatomies of botanical specimens were studied through careful observation, inspection of the various sepals, stamens, corollas and pistils, and detailed sketches that captured the essence of each unique organism on our journal pages, but preserved the living plant in its natural environs. We were mesmerized by the robust colors of nature’s bounty, and further enthralled with the natural dyes they produced. Our hand-spun wool yarn was bathed in infusions of the beet’s electric magenta hue, soft gold produced by steeped onion skins, and the faint lime green tint that cabbage expelled.

With each morning’s recitation of “I look into the world”, my capacity for learning expanded threefold; an inquisitive head, compassionate heart, and eagerly capable hands greeted each new day with anticipation for learning. Because I had developed relationships with the concepts, figures, people and ideas of our blocks, I was ecstatic to continue my journey of discovery about their individual perspectives, lives, talents, tribulations and values through stories told by my teacher during the main lesson hour. The steady, cohesive stream of content allowed my young mind to grasp not only a concept of the brutal rampage of the Vikings during their Scandanavian conquest, but imagine myself aboard one of their ornate sea-faring vessels as it ruthlessly charged through stormy seas. The illustrations that accompanied our personal narrative accounts of each lesson were brightly hued expressions of our imagination revealed to the world in paper form. When I look back at my main lesson books today, I see age-old histories, myths and disciplines crafted by the stroke of my developmental stages; the early years characterized by thick block crayon shapes, with detail and precision becoming the task of ink pens, pencils, pastels, charcoal and watercolors as my artistic horizons broadened in tandem with my mind.

Although everyday was a gift in itself, special times of year were highly anticipated as a young Waldorf student. The calendar of festivals began each autumn with a Michaelmas play depicting the unwavering courage of St. Michael and his lofty quest to slay the dragon, enacted by all of the grades as a collective homage to bravery for the school community to enjoy. It marked a day bathed in the boldness of the color red, acceptance of the transition from summer heat to autumn frost, and gratitude for the earth’s bounty. Harvest faire was an afternoon to cherish the ripe fruits of the season; soup-laden tables were stacked high with homemade breads and treats, lively folk music was performed by various fiddle-wielding musicians, friends and families joined hands in gleeful dance, children crafted the various resources of the season in the form of corn-husk dolls, woolen figurines and brilliant leaf pressings, and the ornamental squashes and gourds symbolized a community-wide embrace of autumn. As winter’s chill settled into the world, the yellow light of each day waned into silvery shades of dusk. Moonlight was our guide as we walked with our little lanterns, tightly bundled in scarves, mittens and parkas, meandering under the star-patterned sky to bring warmth into winter’s spell at our Martinmas walk. Each handcrafted lantern glimmered as brightly as the small fires glowing in our hearts, fueling our joyful song as we strode beneath the shadowy figures of trees. December harkened the festival of Advent, with daily verses of gratitude for the rocks, plants, animals and human kingdoms. Deep green boughs of fir formed the spiral that I proudly walked into, hands clutching my gleaming candle, and voice singing “Advent, Advent, a candle burns…”. This event not only symbolized Christmas cheer, door-to-door caroling and exchange of handcrafted gifts, but also the ringing in of a new year and great appreciation for the four kingdoms of our earthly realm.

With each year, our understanding of the responsibilities of a well-functioning society strengthened. Our school orchestra provided entertainment and joy to retirees and the elderly, seasonal baked goods were donated to those in need of nourishment, and public space was made cleaner by our efforts to rid streets of garbage and debris. These immersive experiences transmitted into my young mind a personal dedication to public service, and solidified the idea that many hands do indeed make light work- that together, any accomplishment is possible.

And as a class, our possibilities to serve the school community took shape in a different capacity through our studies of business, math and economics. I still recall the thrill I felt every Friday as we combined yeast and flour to make large quantities of dough that would act as canvasses for cheese, bell peppers, mushrooms and olives; each of the hand-selected toppings were chosen by students in the school based on their personal preference for pizza that day. Order forms were collected, number of slices per student tallied, toppings added, pizzas baked and thus began the lunch-hour delivery to each classroom that not only resulted in satisfied customers, but a healthy profit for our class. A similar business model was implemented during the holidays, when families could purchase freshly baked apple pies with flaky, latticed crust; or customers had the option to decorate their front doors with the finest greenery of the season, when handcrafted wreaths dressed with large crimson ribbons became our product. Our funds were dutifully saved until the eighth grade, when each dollar was carefully allocated to planning a culminating graduation trip that would serve as celebration, rite of passage, and a final period of reflection with the classmates who had become family through our shared journey.

“The sun with loving light, gives life to me each day…” It began with these true, simple words in first grade, back when I was unaware that my childhood spent at Waldorf would mark the most formative, inspirational years of my life. I often reminisce about the smell of lavender wafting through the classroom, the daily circle where I joined hands with my classmates, how empowered I felt stepping into the lives of notable historical and literary figures in class plays, the pride of mastering new and exciting skills, appreciation for various forms of creativity, art and song; but carry within me each day a continued reverence for the infinite knowledge to be learned through my interaction with world.

ALUMNI PROFILE ARCHIVES

Kamueku Kakizaki, Class of 2001

Interviewed by Annette Marley, March 2013

Two years ago, Kamueku Kakizaki (AWS alumnus from the first sixth grade in 2001) landed in New York City with two suitcases and the desire to work for an architecture firm. Within three weeks he landed a job with Chelsea West Architects, a firm that designs large projects in New York and Asia. Current projects Kamu is working on include a new campus for the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) and an energy corporation headquarters building, both in India.

Kamu did well academically and was one of two graduates from his class of fifty to secure employment immediately following completion of a Bachelor’s Degree in Architecture at the University of Washington. This, during a recession and in a field that even in a good economy has a high rate of unemployment.  He says working for this particular firm suits him well. He is especially interested in the “net-zero” energy consumption design he is involved in developing for the corporate energy headquarters building in India. He also loves living in New York City and thinks it’s a great place for young people like him. He also has been able to support himself entirely with his work.

Upon reflection, Kamu says his Waldorf background has definitely had its positive influence on him personally and on his interest in architecture. “My parents were very interested in Waldorf. My mom was a Waldorf  Kindergarten teacher for several years (Rie Kakizaki), we never had media in the house, and because I was a quiet kid, the way Waldorf provided other ways to communicate, visually and through the arts, was a good match for me. I think differently and feel well-rounded as a result. This all helps with architecture, not only because of the visual element, but also because I have to balance multiple needs: the people using the building, energy consumption, client budget, structure, technological amenities, computational modeling and analysis, and ultimately what a building should state to the world. The building industry takes up nearly half of the US energy consumption, so in many ways I feel architects have a huge social responsibility in building the future for our global civilization, so to speak. I would say my designs are fairly grounded in a socially responsible way.”

Kamu says he was never pushed to achieve through an extrinsic reward system by either his parents nor by his Waldorf education. His achievements have been a result of “curiosity, desire, and interest.”

“I believe the Waldorf approach gave me solid ground to work from. I felt like I could tackle anything and was prepared in a deeper way to learn. Going from Aurora to public school was a real shock. For a while I was anxious about how different I was but that feeling didn’t last long and now I see that being different was a good thing.” At Aurora, Kamu was part of a class of thirteen students. He says he always felt like he could be very honest at Aurora and has fond memories of Mrs. Montgomery, a teacher with whom he had a close relationship. It was this sense of connection that Kamu especially missed when he became one of a class of four hundred later in public school. He still stays in touch with several of his classmates from Aurora, and they even held an informal reunion while back in Alaska over the past holidays.

Kamu’s architectural designs have earned high recognition, including becoming a finalist, along with a team of friends, in ArchMedium’s international student competition for the Olympic Museums in Athens and the New York City Theater, as well as winning honorable mention in the Toronto Pan Am Pavilion student competition hosted by the American Institute of Architectural Students. Some of his work is currently displayed in the Emerging Professional Exhibition at the American Center for Architecture in Washington, DC.

[](http://www.waldorfak.org/wp-content/media/Kamu-design.png)

One of Kamu’s designs

Yuta Takagi, Class of 2008

Interviewed by Annette Marley, January 2013

“I definitely would not have wound up what I am now without my time at Waldorf, especially the artistic and musical side of me…in a kind of romantic way,” Yuta Takagi explains about the influence that Anchorage Waldorf School has had on him, since graduating from the eighth grade in 2008. His interest in music culminated in a self-designed composition he wrote for the school orchestra to perform as his eighth grade project.  Also, for their eighth grade graduation performance, he and a classmate did a rock performance of Freebird by Lynyrd Skynyrd. During his sophomore year at South High School, his ambition to create a band finally came together with some musical friends of his. They named their band Amaranth Cerise (the technical color name of a hue of magenta in web design), they played at the Saturday market frequently during the following summer.

Yuta’s time with the new band didn’t last too long though before he decided to go abroad to Ecuador to live for a year as an AFS exchange student during his junior year. He lived with an upper class family in Guayaquil, near the coast, but got a view into the lives of struggling, unemployed farmers who had taken up residence in the city every day when he would take a bus from his private school to a conservatory that had given him permission to play their pianos. Yuta calls his Spanish “colloquial” and is curious to know how it will work in the rest of the world. He remains in touch with his host family in Ecuador and some close friends and is sure he will return for a visit someday.

Upon his return from Ecuador, Yuta felt like going back to South High School for his senior year would feel too restrictive, so he completed his high school education and earned college credit through the Alaska Pacific University Early Honors program.

Before entering college, Yuta was awarded a recurring National Merit Scholarship for his excellent score on his PSAT test as well as merit based scholarships from Oberlin College in Ohio, where he is now completing his freshman year. His current major is Biology with an emphasis in ecology and reforestation. When asked about this area of interest, he says, “I always fantasized about terraforming (creating habitable planets), so reforestation seemed like the real world equivalent. I like being in control and designing things from the bottom up.”

Music has again found its way into Yuta’s life at Oberlin, where, when I interviewed him, he was designing a musical installation piece during his winter term that will involve a computer interactively composing music based on the listener’s physical movements in space. He wants to apply to the Oberlin Conservatory’s TIMARA (Technology in Music and Related Arts) program, which, if he is accepted, would mean he would earn a double bachelor’s degree: one in music and one in biology.

When reflecting on Anchorage Waldorf School, (then, Aurora Waldorf), Yuta says his overall feeling is that “It was definitely really great. I mostly remember having a good time with my friends, especially when we played in the forest behind the buildings. I think my Waldorf education taught me how to think rather than only focusing on content.”

Yuta has plans to play on stage at the Saturday Market this summer, so keep an eye out for him and maybe even meet this ambitious and creative alumnus in person.

Read more about Yuta in the [National Merit Scholarship Annual Report](http://www.waldorfak.org/wp-content/media/Yuta-Takagi.pdf)

Austin Johnson, Class of 2005

Interviewed by Annette Marley, January 2013

“I always wear a helmet when I fly because sometimes I land in odd places, like on the side of a mountain.” Not exactly a casual statement you might overhear from a college sophomore in the halls at UAA, this was AWS alumnus Austin Johnson’s description of how he flies his refurbished Aviat Husky airplane all over the state of Alaska. As he explains it, “The government had this crashed plane for sale. It was cheap, so I bought it.” Then, Austin carefully rebuilt the plane inside and out, and now he has hundreds of hours under his belt flying it.

Austin is in his second year of studying mechanical engineering at UAA, but it doesn’t take long to realize that this alumnus from the first AWS graduating 8th grade class in 2005 didn’t wait fora college education to learn what he knows. When he graduated from high school, he didn’t want to go straight to college, yet he wanted to have an active mind, so he set off to answer his questions about renewable energy. Not with a trip to the local library either. Instead he packed up and went to meet face to face with renewable energy experts in Sweden, Denmark,Norway, and the UK and pursued his own study in the area. When he returned to Anchorage,he gave a public talk at the Anchorage Museum regarding his findings.

Austin then switched gears and pursued his interest in flying, earning not just a regular pilot’s license but full commercial pilot’s license at a flight school in Arizona.

This neat list of accomplishments was checked off in the two year gap between graduating from high school and beginning college. When asked, not surprisingly, after so much learning in the wider world, Austin says college has been an okay experience but not quite as engaging as he would like. He has plans to perhaps transfer to finish his degree elsewhere after this year.  This alumnus hopes to eventually start a renewable energy business in Alaska, believing strongly that with all the moving water in the form of rivers and tides, wind, and thermodynamic energy in our state, this is a promising area. Besides that, he says he just plain loves Alaska.

When reflecting on his time as a student at Anchorage Waldorf School he talks about the solid relationships he formed with his teachers. In fact, he just returned from a trip to Portland to visit Patricia Campabello (one of his former teachers at AWS).” He also deeply appreciates“all the time we were allowed to make stuff with our hands, like woodworking, drawing, and painting. I even appreciate the knitting we did, even though at the time I wasn’t too fond of it.”He recently had an opportunity to harken back to his sewing days at AWS when he needed to sew some items for the inside of his airplane. He goes on to say that during college classes, he just “had to enroll in a pottery class, so he could stay sane.”

After a short chat, one naturally wonders what will this self-educated young man pursue next?Likely it won’t consist only of milestones of the mainstream education system but will be full of more accomplishments from this alum’s self-directed learning.

Molly Larsen, Class of 2005

December 2012--Molly Larsen ’05 studied Biology and Environmental Policy, graduating from the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma WA in 2014.  She spent the fall 2012 semester at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut at the Williams College-Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies program focusing on marine ecology and maritime policy. While there, she worked in the Mystic Seaport shipyard as a shipwrights apprentice on the restoration of the 19th century wooden whaling ship the Charles W. Morgan. She is a commercial salmon fisherman in Bristol Bay and Kodiak in the summers, and took a gap year between high school and college which included solo travel in Australia and Central America, a NOLS semester course in Baja Mexico, and working as a deckhand on the 1812 privateer tall ship s/v Lynx for 5 months. Molly plays the fiddle, banjo and mandolin and hosted a weekly bluegrass show at her college radio station. From January-August 2013, she worked full time in the Mystic shipyard, completing the Charles W. Morgan restoration project in July of 2013. Molly is a marine biologist, teaching middle school, high school, and college students both science and sailing, aboard s/v Carlyn in pacific northwest waters. She continues to commercial fish in Alaska each summer.

Alumna Chris Harada-Li ’05 Excelling in Music Studies and Performance

Interviewed by Annette Marley, September 2012

“Go higher, higher!” These were the words Chris Harada-Li heard from her teacher, Mr. Steegmans, as she and her classmates swung in exaggerated high arcs on the swing set at a local park to do flips in the air and then land safely on their feet during recess in her 7th and 8th grade years at Aurora Waldorf School, now Anchorage Waldorf School.

And Chris is doing just that, shooting upward in her pursuit of music, seven years after graduating from Aurora in 2005. Her most recent and notable achievement is having received the [Anchorage Festival of Music’s 2012 Young Alaskan Artist Award](http://www.anchoragefestivalmusic.com/yaartist.htm). Chris received the prestigious award after submitting a tape of her violin music and says she was quite surprised to have been chosen to receive the award this summer. Indulging all who attended in a magnificent display of her mastery of the violin, she played in a solo recital with three pieces of music, each with several movements, at Our Lady of Guadalupe church, culminating in an hour and a half performance.

Chris is currently in her fourth and last year at University of Michigan where she will graduate with a Bachelor’s degree in music. She misses Alaska’s fresh air, the mountains, and her mom’s cooking, which she enjoys during her visits back home. But Chris´s plans have her aiming for new and far-away places from Alaska. She has recently decided to graduate one semester early and then spend some time in Germany on her own researching and applying to possible graduate programs in music. With relaxed confidence, she says she realizes she’ll probably have to learn to speak German, according to her plan.

When reflecting on her years at Aurora, she has good memories. “They were happy years. It was a very comfortable place, and I am a happy person today.” She says that Aurora challenged her to be creative “unlike at other schools, where all the materials you use are created by someone else. My main lesson books were my creation.” Chris has several of her paintings from Aurora on her wall, and friends will often comment about them, impressed that she was the artist. Since she started at Aurora in the 3rd grade, she remembers teachers having close relationships with her and her classmates. “You have their attention 100% of the time.” She says Mr. Steegmans still corresponds with her and sends her honey from his bees.

In addition to the Festival’s prestigious award, Chris also won the 2009 Anchorage Youth Symphony Concerto Competition, and prior to that was awarded the Mary and Lucian Cassetta Scholarship. Chris’ goal is to eventually teach at a music conservatory for which she will have to earn a PhD in music. She also has yearnings to be a professional performer. Given her achievements so far, there is no doubt Chris will go as high as she wants to go.

Listen to Christine play: [Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Movement 1, Part 1 (Christine Li)](http://youtu.be/qPk92EiFz4k)

Alex Forsyth ’06 has this to say about her Waldorf education….

February 1, 2010

I am excited to go to college. The promise of what lies ahead inspires me to push forward, but it is my past that I credit for being ready, willing, and able to do so.

Growing up, I had no idea that my education was different. I didn’t know that every day since kindergarten, my school was carefully helping me become a unique, well-rounded individual. Everything was carefully planned to expand my capacities. From kindergarten to the early grades, electronic media was discouraged. I don’t have any childhood memories of Disney or cartoons or video games, but I do have childhood memories of chasing elves and fairies through intricate worlds created in my head. I learned fairy tales and ancient mythology from around the world. I have memories of Zeus and Buddha, Saint Peter and Loki, Horus, Set, Poseidon and of writing and drawing my own textbooks, each book its own work of art. Making my own lesson books gave me much more than a textbook could have given me. The act of handwriting each entry, drawing pictures and making my book look beautiful, helped to instill the knowledge in me.

Because we studied many religions and cultures in the early years, I have great respect and appreciation for them. From first through twelfth grade, I learned flute, violin, viola and guitar, studied Russian and Spanish, and had classes in painting, drawing, woodwork, handwork (textiles), drama, and music. Even our P.E. class was different. We were not taught to be competitive, rather we were taught games that involved working together towards a common goal.

I didn’t appreciate it until recently, but Waldorf education has given me a well-rounded education. It instilled morals, empathy and self-confidence in me from a very early age, and encouraged me to see issues and ideas from many different perspectives. I can think critically & imaginatively and I appreciate doing something well.

I am grateful for my education and for my parents, who worked hard to put me through this schooling. They sacrificed much, so that I could go to a Waldorf school from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and they tried to provide a home life that was in harmony with what I was learning and experiencing at school.

I cannot wait to go to college, as I see it as a door to greater opportunities. I am confident that, with the tools and capacities I have been given by my education and home life, I will do well in college. I plan to become fluent in Russian, and would love to return to Russia and live there to continue my studies. In the future I see myself helping people and making a difference.

Alexandria Forsyth

K – 8th Grade Anchorage Waldorf School

9th – 12th Grade Summerfield Waldorf School

May 24, 2013

Dear AWS,

Well, like Ricci Coon said, I made it, and my class. Through the funny times, the tough times, and even the times when we almost mutinied  whatever class we had to take naps in, instead (don’t worry, we behaved!) It’s just so hard to believe it’s over, that we won’t be returning next fall (well…as students, anyway.) But yes, it’s over; one chapter is ending, and another is about to begin, and I know for a fact that this place where I grew up, is so much more than a school. It’s family, and I know I will always carry this large, crazy, exuberant family in my heart for as long as I live. It has truly been a magical experience.

Wishing you all the best in whatever you do,

Maya Bolak, AWS  8th grade Class of 2013