

# THE CHANGING FACES OF GOW

## Day Students and Co-eds Bring that Pioneer Spirit to Gow

by Rick Ohler

It might have seemed like business as usual if you had dropped in on The Gow School campus last fall. The 86th year at Gow would have looked much like any other year, with young men from all over—26 countries and 20 states, dressed in blazers and neckties, moving between buildings at the tolling of the bells to signify the end of one class period and the beginning of another. If you had peeked into a classroom a few minutes later, you might have seen teachers tending to academic matters in front of small groups of students—five or six, no more—that have been the hallmark of Gow's success. There would be, you might guess, no reason to change much about the scenario. When you have led the world in education for young men with dyslexia and other learning disabilities for decades, and when you still find many of the original techniques of Reconstructive Language employed by school founder Peter Gow, Jr. effective, change hardly seems necessary.

But look more closely as you wander the campus; change is everywhere. Take in, for instance, a student council meeting. You'll be surprised to see that one of the student delegates planning a school dance is Shelby Balcom. She—yes, she—is a Gow sophomore from nearby East Aurora. Maybe next you'll come upon the cast of the school play, "Wait Until Dark," rehearsing in the Reid Arts Center. The lead is played wonderfully by Kristen Klementowski, not an import from a local public school, but a junior at Gow.

At day's end, something else will pique your curiosity: seven students—three girls and four boys—will leave for home, six who are picked up by parents or grandparents, and one, JT Cashmore, who will pilot his own car back to East Aurora.

It is a brave new world at Gow these days where even the Mission Statement: "The Gow School is a college preparatory boarding school for young men, grades 7-12 . . ." is no longer cast in stone, and is ready for an update. Co-education and day students have arrived at Gow. For good.

The coming of day students has been a



*Gow's Day Students with the author: Jack Brinkworth '18, JT Cashmore '13, Janna Milks '14, Victor Mohney '14, Kristen Klementowski '14, Author Rick Ohler, Shelby Balcom '15 and Max Balcom '17*

gradual process, one that the sixth headmaster Brad Rogers, now in his ninth year, and his faculty have nurtured carefully. Rogers has a unique perspective because, unlike his predecessors, he and his wife Anne have four children of their own, all who have graduated from or are currently attending local public schools. Both Brad and Anne Rogers are active in their children's schools and activities, so Brad understands the pervasive need, local as well as worldwide, for the educational expertise of Gow's program. And the Gow Summer Program has been attracting students from the Greater Buffalo area for twenty years, emphasizing the need for Gow even more.

Back in 2008, Victor Mohney garnered the distinction as the first day student. Assorted Gow family members may argue that they were first, having attended classes here and there, but Victor is the first bona fide, full-time day student. He arrived as a very young seventh grader, a veteran of the Summer Program who, even with private tutoring, struggled and was floundering in his home school. Industrious, self-motivated and with a supportive family, Victor, from Holland, just south of South Wales, has flourished, earning good grades, making friends, developing confidence in his evolving abilities while holding down a part-time job cutting firewood. And most importantly, he will be well prepared for college after graduation. As an added bonus, Kathy Mohney, Victor's mother, has joined The Gow School Board of Trustees and now

leads her enthusiasm and dedication to the Student Life Committee, which she chairs.

In 2010, JT Cashmore, son of two East Aurora School teachers who understood his special needs, made his way to Gow, commuting back and forth to his home and working on the maintenance crew during the summer. He will graduate this May, giving him the title of first day student alumnus.

Then, in January of 2012, Shelby Balcom came to join the ninth grade, already in progress. Brad Rogers recalls that day in November of 2011, when Shelby and her grandmother arrived in his office with something important on their minds. "Mr. Rogers," Shelby began, forthrightness never lacking in her, "I've been one of the best Summer Program students for the past several years, haven't I?" Rogers allowed as how that was indeed the case. "And you know that I'm struggling in school, and I'm not happy there at all, right?" Again Rogers agreed. "Well, Mr. Rogers, I need to go to Gow School. It's the only way I have a chance to be successful."

"That's great, Shelby," said the headmaster. "But there's one problem. We're a boarding school for boys."

"I understand," said Shelby. "But I need to go here. I can help the school change."

Of course, there had been discussions about co-education at Gow for years. "I knew,"



said Rogers, "that one day we would be co-educational. Maybe this was the time. I pulled the ninth graders out of class, took them to the library and explained that we had a young lady who wanted to come as a day student, and would they be willing to accept her. Without hesitation, they were. I knew that whatever advances we made would require the support and understanding of the faculty, administration and staff. They were ready, too. I went to (former headmaster) David Gow just before he passed away, and he said, 'I approve,' adding in his mischievous way, 'And good luck with that.'" So Shelby Balcom arrived for the winter term of 2012, the lone girl in a sea of 140 boys, the Amelia Earhart of The Gow School.

As Admissions directors Rob Garcia and Doug Cotter were putting together the classes for the 2012-13 school year over last summer, more potential day students came forward. Ultimately, four of them made the jump from public school to Gow. There was Kristen Klementowski from East Amherst; eighth grader Max Balcom, Shelby's brother; Janna Milks, a junior from East Aurora; and Jack Brinkworth, a seventh grader.

These "pioneers", as they have been called are unique individuals with seven different stories. But there is a commonality that binds them together. All seven found that their dyslexia rendered their former schools frustrating, demeaning, even frightening. Ultimately, they were smart enough to know, the education they were getting would be of little long-term value. And all of them had an intense desire—call it a pioneer's desire—to take some ownership of their education.

So, half a school year into the experiment, how is it going?

I have met with the day students twice since the beginning of the year to let them talk freely about their experiences so far. What a wonderful, articulate, forthcoming group of young men and women they are. Oh, they might grumble about Saturday classes or long commutes or the workload or the fact that a physics lab write-up needs to be six pages long, but the relief that they have found at The Gow School and its welcoming faculty - an educational alternative that works for them, surfaces without hesitation. "I was scared to ask questions in my old school," says Janna. "I would never ask a question in class because the teacher wouldn't answer it anyway. Here I'm comfortable raising my hand and asking the teacher to go over something

again." Janna has the best of both worlds, as well, a satisfying school situation that still leaves her enough time to work at a local stable and take part in the 4-H activities she loves. Jack Brinkworth was miserable as a young sixth grader at his former school. Now he's sporting one of the highest GPAs in his grade and he's an effervescent conversationalist. Says Victor, "I like the smaller classes. Six kids in a class. You can't hide. And the different cultures, so many different kinds of kids from all over the world." Oh, and by the way, Kristen just set the Gow School record for the most Girl Scout cookies ever sold on campus. Of her the headmaster says, "Everyone at Gow is good at something, and we try to identify what that one thing is. Now we know that Kristen's thing is acting. She is a very good actress."

Perhaps then, experiment is no longer the proper word to use. "The message," said Brad Rogers, "is that we're not just trying this, we're actually doing this. Having a day student representative on the student council (Shelby Balcom) gives all day students a voice, legitimizes their presence as a part of the student community. That speaks to the fact that this is real. Now we have a day student who wants to be a boarder, to take advantage of the evening and weekend activities. And a boarder who wants to be a day student. So there's a process of de-mystification that the school's encountering and encouraging." As far as the effect the girls are having on the boys? "The boys are cleaning up a little, polishing themselves, remembering to shower a little more often."

There have been the odd tiffs between students, a few hurt feelings that have caused Rogers to call in faculty, staff and students for one of his patented "social autopsies," to identify the issues and smooth the waters. And there remains the sense that Gow is still a boys school with some girls. The girls do have their own "chill room"- upstairs in Main Building—no boys allowed—and they have "safe" faculty members, to whom they can go at any time with any problem. "The new car might have a little mud on it," says Rogers, "but it's still a fine car. Problems that we have now with students will be of the type that we've always had to solve, not ones caused by the advent of girls or day students."

Rogers is the first to acknowledge that none of this could succeed without the complete backing of his faculty and staff. In the course of preparing this article I

talked with not only Mr. Rogers, but Alice Gow, Assistant Headmaster Dan Kelley, Lower School Headmaster Jeff Sweet, Development Director Gayle Hutton, teachers Tom Giallanza, Vin Barrett and Jeff Poblocki. They agreed that, early in the ball game, it's working so far, and they've seen that day students, male and female, bring something fresh and new to the campus.

Going forward Rogers would love to have more girls and more day students, cautioning that the school still has to retain the small school feeling where every student gets individual attention. That is, after all, what each of the seven day students said he or she values about Gow, the personal touch. But, he says, he loves the idea of extending Gow's reach into new communities. "It's our moral responsibility." Realizing the \$35,000 price tag for day students (boarding students pay \$55,000) presents an obstacle, he's committed to making financial aid available to those who demonstrate the need. One-third of Gow's 151 students now receive nearly one million dollars in financial aid, most in the range of \$15,000 to \$18,000 a year. "If we need to stretch to make Gow a reality for some local students, we'll do it," he says.

"We want more people to know about us," said Rogers. The Gow Visitation Day, held on October 8, brought families from across the region to hear a presentation by administrators, to participate in a question and answer session with students, to tour the campus and to speak with teachers. "We'll continue to make our Teacher Training Institute a viable option for educators from other schools. We'll make our facilities available to local sports groups at dirt cheap rent, just to cover expenses. We'll offer a series of lectures in the dyslexia field that is open to the public. The more people we can entice to visit us, the more the word gets around about the great things happening at Gow. Maybe that will lead to a young man or young lady enrolling in the Summer Program, as a way to test the waters, to see what the benefits of a Gow education are. Perhaps that young man or young lady will become the next day student." The next pioneer.

*Writer Rick Ohler is a lifelong friend of The Gow School. His first book, "Have You Lived Here All Your Life? Not Yet" was published in July by Right Field Books. Visit [www.rickohler.com](http://www.rickohler.com).*

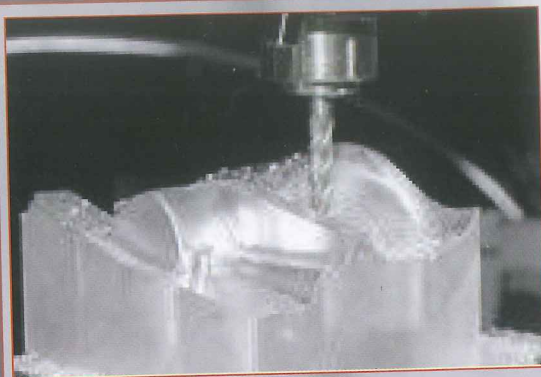


# THE STAR BUILDING

Gow's former dining hall transformed into the Alice R. Gow Science, Technology and Research Building

## CNC Machine Arrives at Gow: Will Expand Horizons of Applied Technology

Written by Rick Ohler



There's a new BMOC at the Gow School, only this time BMOC isn't Big Man on Campus, it's Big Machine on Campus. As this edition of *Gow Life* goes to press, a seven-ton, pickup truck-sized Haas VF3-YT computer-numeric-control (CNC) metal fabricating machine is being installed on a specially fortified concrete pad in the new Alice R. Gow Science, Technology and Research (STAR) Building, the former dining hall. Both the STAR Building and the CNC machine come to Gow thanks to the generosity and dedication of alumni, parents and friends who provided, in a very short time frame, more than \$1.2 million to ensure that Gow will continue to have one of the most advanced applied technology, robotics and physics programs of any secondary school in the country.

The prospect of having a facility such as the STAR Building and a tool as versatile and precise as the CNC might explain why retiring Applied Technology Department Chair Vin Barrett, Director of Technology Jeff Poblocki and intern Chris Ceren '08 were all smiles when I visited them

over the Thanksgiving break. Barrett and Poblocki run the popular BattleBots curriculum which Gow alumnus Trey Roski '84, invented, took to cable TV and then helped Gow initiate in 2000. In BattleBots, teams of students design and build small, remote-controlled robots, fabricating all the parts in their own workshops, and then enter them in competitions against high school and college students from across North America.

Barrett and Poblocki had just returned from a training session on the Haas VF3-YT in Rochester when I met with them, and it seemed impossible for them to do anything but gush with enthusiasm. They were amazed by the machine's capabilities and precision. For instance, students will now be able to insert a piece of solid aluminum (or other metal) as big as 40-inches, by 25-inches, by 26-inches into the machine, close the door, program the computer on the front panel with a special code, push the GO button, and watch as cutters, routers and lathes produce a perfect (to within 1/100,000 of an inch) wheel or other part. The tech teachers were clearly impressed, too, with the cross-curricular possibilities the

CNC presents not only for BattleBots participants, but for all physics, applied technology and math students as well. When I left them, the trio was deep in animated discussion about how to adapt what they had learned for the curricular needs of Gow students.

To oversimplify what the CNC means to the applied technology program, you could say that for years Barrett and Poblocki, along with community volunteer Ray Beers (retired Moog, Inc. Engineer) and their charges have been making parts by hand. Let's say you needed a mounting block for your BattleBot. You would design the block in the tech room upstairs at Orton Hall, plot it out in a CAD program, then walk it over to the machine shop at the Reid Arts Center. You would measure the piece of metal with a tape measure, calipers



or micrometer and make the cuts. Then you would mark bolt holes on the block and drill them with a press and tap the threads. It's accurate,



## CNC Machine ~ What is it?

The acronym CNC stands for Computer(ized) Numerical(ly) Control(led), and refers specifically to the computer control of machine tools for the purpose of (repeatedly) manufacturing complex parts in metal as well as other materials, using a program written in a notation conforming to the EIA-274-D standard and commonly called G-code. CNC was developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s by the MIT Servomechanisms Laboratory.

*(Source: WordIQ.com)*

as evidenced by the many trophies the Gow BattleBots teams have won in both California and Florida tournaments, but only to a point. Now with the Haas and the new facility, everything will happen at the STAR.

At the STAR Building, the CNC will sit at the north end of the building with the Applied Technology labs close by. As students become proficient, they'll design their parts, plug in the code on the Haas CNC computer and produce a finished product of such high quality that it could pass muster at an aircraft or watch factory.

Both Headmaster Brad Rogers and eventual Applied Technology Chair Poblocki are quick to point out that, while BattleBots will continue to form an important part of the curriculum, especially because of the teamwork aspect it requires, the STAR and the CNC will take Gow beyond BattleBots.

"We want to get away from just warfare," says Rogers, "and head into construction, not just destruction. We'll still enter competitions for design and other robotic applications,

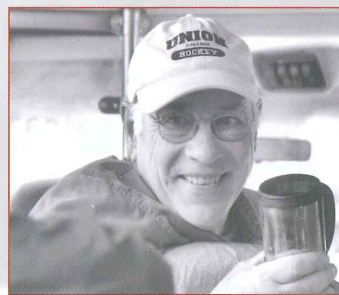
but we won't be destroying someone else's creation."

"For the short term," says Poblocki, "we'll concentrate on projects we have under way, and we'll be able to make more intricate, more complex and precise BattleBot parts with the CNC, and we can undertake some things that before we might not have been able to attempt. Down the line, though, it might turn out that with our increased ease of fabrication, and the increased level of competence of our students, that BattleBots might become a half-year course, while during the other half year students are working on humanoid robotic projects. That's what's so exciting, all the possibilities. I can see younger physics students and geometry students working with shapes and having the CNC being a great resource. And the leg up it will give graduating Govians as they head toward engineering or science programs at college will be considerable."

While the Haas CNC will be the star of this latest chapter in Gow's history, The Alice R. Gow Science and Technology Building will provide the stage. STAR might as well be an acronym for state of the art, because everything about it incorporates the latest available technology. Other than the brick shell, you would never know that for nearly half a century, generations of Gow students and families ate there. The renovation, designed by architect Heather Nemeo with input from Headmaster Rogers, Buildings and Grounds Director Paul Rose and teachers Poblocki, Barrett, Joe Gullo and Brad Rausch, features several classrooms with lab spaces adjacent and wireless information systems at hand everywhere you go.

Full walls will turn into video screens of infinitely adjustable size, and teachers will be able to work projectors from wireless controls, even merging projected images over each other to demonstrate paths of objects or changing velocities. A 12 foot square window forms the north wall and is engineered to be removable and accommodate vehicles bringing in large pieces of equipment. All of the learning areas are gathered around a central, vaulted-ceiling atrium where public displays, lectures and receptions might be held.

As ground-breaking as all this seems, we would do well to acknowledge that Headmaster Rogers and his staff are simply following along one of the paths that Peter Gow, Jr. set for them 87 years ago. The school's founder well knew the value of hands-on learning, especially for young men with dyslexia. Toward that end he was an inveterate tinkerer, often taking his students to his garage on Sunday afternoons to take apart a Model T engine to understand it's working. We can only imagine how pleased he would be, not only with the additions to Gow's technology curriculum but the enthusiasm with which faculty and students are forging ahead.



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