As Voyageur celebrates its 50th anniversary, we look back on its origins

voyageur: a person who is an expert woodsman, boatman, and guide in remote regions; origin of voyageur 1785-95; < French: traveler, equivalent to voyag(er) to travel (derivative of voyage journey)

In 1969, the twentieth year of his headmastership and the sixtieth year of St. Albans’ existence, Canon Martin must have believed that fear, partnership, success, failure, and gut-wrenching wilderness experiences should be part of the plan for the boys under his care. He used none of those words, however, in introducing to parents a new program that would deftly weave these experiences into the lives of students.

Rather, Canon Martin sent parents a simple, straightforward, note: “The attached was developed by Mr. Kielsmeier in collaboration with friends and colleagues. It represents a philosophy and program to which I wholeheartedly subscribe. I hope that we can make it a part of our life here at St. Albans.” Stapled to his note was a six-page proposal by Jim Kielsmeier, a part-time football coach at St. Albans and a teacher in the first U.S. Outward Bound program (based in Colorado), for developing and implementing St. Albans’ own intense outdoor program. The new program, according to Kielsmeier, would fit St. Albans’ “needs, facilities, and boys. It will not challenge the basic ideals and philosophy of St. Albans, but will enhance them. It will not seek to compartmentalize its ideas into a department or discipline such as drama or athletics, but will work with the existing school framework with full, meaningful integration the goal.”

The Outward Bound movement, which spread to the United States in the early 1960s, was initiated by Kurt Matthias Robert Martin Hahn, a German Jew born in Berlin in 1886 and educated at Oxford (as a Rhodes Scholar), Freiburg, and Gottingen. Hahn secured a job in the German Office of Foreign Affairs during World War I and served as private secretary to Prince Max von Baden, with whom he would
found Schule Schloss Salem, a private school dedicated then and now to high academic and service standards, rooted in respect for one's self individually and for one's community collectively. Imprisoned in 1933 and then expelled from Germany for his direct criticism of Hitler and the Nazi Party, Hahn went on to found, in Scotland, the Gordonstoun School, where he further developed his principles of education, and then, in 1941, the first Outward Bound School in Aberdovey, Wales.

Hahn’s partner in these ventures was Sir Lawrence Durning Holt, whose family had interests in the Blue Funnel Shipping Line and Ocean Steam Ship Company, and the Aberdovey School was founded to address a concern about seemingly able young seamen on World War II merchant vessels: Younger sailors were less likely to survive at sea than their older counterparts. Holt and Hahn theorized that the elder seamen had far more practical experience surviving the lashes of the ocean on less seaworthy lifeboats and even shipwreck flotsam. With not only the fate of Britons but also the world itself seeming at stake, Hahn and Holt created Outward Bound to change this outcome for the younger seamen through a one-month training course.

Since then, “Outward Bound has evolved but never departed from Hahn’s original concept of an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence, and all grow in concern for those in danger and need,” according to the program website.

By 1969, Canon Charles Martin had shepherded St. Albans through most of the Golden Age of Capitalism, the rising threat of nuclear war, the upheaval of the Civil Rights movement including the integration of the school, humankind’s first moon landing (with Michael Collins ’48 on the Apollo 11 crew), presidential and other assassinations, peace rallies, war rallies, the beginnings of the drug culture, and Korea and Vietnam. If his boys, current and alumni, needed anything to reassure them in the mounting storm surge and troubled waters, Kielsmeier’s proposed outdoor program seemed to be the life ring.

Kielsmeier was not the first to introduce Outward Bound to Canon Martin. In 1962, Chuck Froehlicher, a prime mover in bringing the Outward Bound program to the United States, and specifically Colorado, had written an admiring letter to Canon Martin about a Letter from the Headmaster’s Study on student drinking and parties; he also shared with Martin information about his new program, which would attract one hundred students in its first year. (At least two St. Albans graduates attended the Colorado Outward Bound School in its early years: Henry Baird ’62 and Eden Weinmann ’65.) Martin responded enthusiastically: “As for Outward Bound, I am all for it—every aspect of it. The physical is important and much needed in our time, but it seems to me that in order to fulfill the full ideals of Outward Bound, the ideal of ‘hard’ and of ‘useful’ must be carried over into every aspect of a boy’s life.”

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Assistant Headmaster John C. Davis called Kielsmeier in Colorado to let him know about the opening but was told he was “on the top of a mountain and couldn’t be reached.” Pete Gordon, assistant headmaster for the Lower School, followed up with a letter: “Your work with us in the fall [1968] did not go unnoticed, and consequently we would like to explore the possibility of your coming to St. Albans.” And come to St. Albans Kielsmeier did, with his experience, energy, and enthusiasm ready to bring Outward Bound into the Bulldog world.

Kielsmeier wrote: “I would hope to bring to St. Albans, and impart to the students, a concern for total development … The classroom is but one of many possible vehicles of learning. The inner city, the vernal wood and even the athletic field are potentially magnificent laboratories … Using various skills and tools I have acquired, I would seek to add depth to my students’ experiences through exposure to diversified contexts of learning. I would challenge them to relate their experiences to modern realities.”

That all sounded good to pursue, but exactly how to do it? Kielsmeier firmly believed that Outward Bound had to be incorporated into the fabric of the entire schedule and there needed to be full program at St. Albans. In choosing James C. Kielsmeier as the first director, Canon Martin found a man whose personal experiences were as diverse as the program would become. A Midwesterner born in Elgin, Ill., in 1943, Kielsmeier graduated with a B.S. in zoology from Wheaton College, Ill., where he also played football as team captain and earned ROTC honors. Kielsmeier worked as a coach, counselor, and instructor to young people from Spanish Harlem in New York City, as a U.S. Forest Service Engineer focused on road surveying and blazing transit lines in Lakeview, Ore., and as a firefighter. Kielsmeier served in the U.S. Army from 1965–67, first completing the Airborne Course and becoming parachute jump qualified; becoming an Army Ranger with “intensive training in survival, mountaineering, and map reading”; serving as a company commander at Fort Lewis, Wash.; and spending the balance of his time in Korea “as Officer-in-Charge of a division-wide troop community relations training program,” where he earned the Army Commendation Medal. In 1967, he migrated to Washington, D.C., to pursue a master of arts in international studies at American University. By fall 1968, he was coaching part-time at St. Albans. He spent the summer of 1969 as an instructor at the Colorado Outward Bound School.
Early Voyageurs rappel down the face of the Activities Building.
faculty buy in, including participation and support. Initially, this support came from Kielsmeier’s first partner, math and science teacher, and soon Science Department Chair, Allan L. Forsythe, who taught at the American School for Boys in Kayseri, Turkey, and Mercersburg Academy before coming to St. Albans in the fall of 1967. Rounding out the team, Douglas Deane Hall Jr. was hired in the spring of 1970 to help develop the environmental studies portion of Outward Bound.

Then, of course, the students had to participate fully. More specifically, “Rappelling and building climbing can occur right here on the grounds along with map reading, first aid training, and drown proofing. A high rope/confidence course is now being developed in the woods near the Activities Building and will be fully operational shortly,” wrote Kielsmeier. “There are few limitations in terms of activities for an enthusiastic Outing Club group. An excellent beginning rock climbing area [Carderock Recreation Area] is located within 20 minutes of school. Woods and streams of a rugged nature are just a few hours from Washington. The many blighted areas of the inner city offer numerous challenges for service projects.”

Writing in 1971 for What’s Happening, an educational periodical produced by the Outward Bound national office, Kielsmeier described the accomplishments of what was now termed the Voyageur Program in its first year. “In the fall of 1969, we offered an alternative to competitive athletics: a program combining rock climbing, some rope course work, and general conditioning . . . In addition, Upper and Lower School Outing Clubs were formed. The Lower School one, open only to eighth graders, caught on very well, and students engaged in an active program of rock climbing with some canoeing and camping.” Other activities that foundational year included rappelling off the Activities Building, the Lucas Building, and the refectory roof (including rappels by Canon Martin); conditioning workouts on the new Marcy Circuit Trainer; and canoeing on the C&O Canal, on the Potomac and other nearby rivers, and in the Lawrence Pool.

**Most successful with Upper School students**

was a North Carolina Senior Project, a two-and-a-half-week March program attended by twelve seniors and two St. Albans advisors and run at the North Carolina Outward Bound School. The course included intensive hiking in the Linville Gorge Wilderness area and Pisgah National Forest, runs through a ropes course, fire-fighting training, two days of beginning and intermediate rock climbing, a full day ascent of Table Rock Mountain, and a discussion of national forest issues. The group encountered many stress-inducing situations common to outdoor programs: getting lost, confronting the various strengths and weaknesses of individual group members in a given situation, seeing challenges that seemed initially insurmountable to overcome, and evading curious skunks intent upon eating the group’s food. Participating students were given the additional responsibility of managing the food budget and organizing the menus for the length of the program. The entire trip was documented on film, print and 16mm, which four students combined with a soundtrack to produce a multimedia presentation for the school that demonstrated their wilderness experience. “It was a great hit and has since been shown to parents and to groups from other schools,” Kielsmeier reported in What’s Happening [Note: If any Bulletin reader has a copy, please contact Archivist Mark Wilkerson.]

The culmination for the Lower School was the Assateague Sea Unit project. All fifty-seven Form II boys plus four faculty members and five Upper School student assistants spent three-and-a-half days at Assateague Island in May 1970. Preparatory activities included reading Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* in English class; studying beach ecology, including the effects of currents and weather and the formation of barrier islands; and, in government classes, discussing environmental responsibilities, oil drilling, ocean dumping, and the proposed development plans for Assateague Island. On the trip, students had to make and maintain their shelters, prepare two meals a day, conduct beach ecology studies, and keep notes and journals on their activities. Some additional work on shell collection and live sea animal specimen studies, weather station monitoring, and clam digging (the last to provide for the final trip dinner) rounded out the activities. Upon returning to St. Albans, students wrote papers on their experiences in science classes, studied live animals in a sea aquarium, critiqued their journals in English classes, and wrote letters concerning

“**There are few limitations in terms of activities for an enthusiastic Outing Club group. An excellent beginning rock climbing area is located within 20 minutes of school. Woods and streams of a rugged nature are just a few hours from Washington.**"
the proposed development of Assateague Island to senators, representatives, and the Secretary of the Interior. Jim Kielsmeier succinctly summarized the entirety of the first year's program. “The ideal has certainly not come fully alive, far from it; but through the problems and frustrations, a glimpse of the ideal is at least visible.”

And there was even more in that first year! Sometime in the spring, a small group of Upper School boys cleared trails in West Virginia, and in mid-May Kielsmeier, Forsythe, and a few Form I and Form II boys planted a garden on a proposed site for a country campus. Jim Kielsmeier’s Form II earth science class created a topographical-geological map/scale model of the Washington, D.C., area. On April 22, 1970, the entire school participated in a full-day program for the first-ever Earth Day, coordinated by Forsythe.

Year two for Voyageur, 1970-71, began over the summer, when the Rev. Craig Eder led a two-month cycling trip in Europe. In the fall, Voyageur I was offered as a one-half academic-credit Form IV and V course, held on Friday afternoons, that involved trip planning and training in wilderness travel, rock climbing, kayaking, and mountain rescue/first aid. To earn full credit, participants were required to go on three fall weekend activities, a ten-day winter expedition, and five to six project weekends in the spring. The Athletics Department offered Voyageur Activities, which could take the place of an athletic commitment for any sports season—kayaking, intensive physical conditioning, and MIYODA, a combination of mine, yoga, and dance created by David Ackerly ’71, Mark Jaster ’73, and Eric Zwemer ’72. In February 1971, Mike Goff joined the Voyageur staff, staying on through 1974, and a budget sheet from 1970-71 mentions $935 for a kayak construction project. (Do any of those boats still exist?) The highly successful North Carolina Outward Bound and Assateague Island trips would continue as well. Writing in the Bulletin in 1971, English teacher Howard Means described Voyageur as either “a refined Marine boot camp” or “a wildly advanced Boy Scouts, some ethereal point beyond the Eagle rank.”

NCS would officially be brought into Voyageur in 1971-72. Kielsmeier left St. Albans in June 1972 to return to Colorado; Allan Forsythe, Mike Goff, Thomas Duffield, and Joseph Donoghue would carry the program forward.

“We must always teach reading, writing, and arithmetic and teach them well at St. Albans, but even more we must nurture human beings who can face life confidently but humbly, full of respect for others and full of respect for life itself,” wrote Canon Martin in a 1971 Letter from the Headmaster’s Study. “This is what Voyageur is all about.”

Fifty years ago, no one knew exactly what Voyageur was going to become or what direction it would go. Writing in the Colorado Outward Bound School brochure sent to Canon Martin in 1962, Froelicher hinted at what he hoped the outcome would be. “The training enables any participant to acquire or increase the ability to live and deal with an ever-changing, exciting, difficult, and often dangerous environment. The experience of the training, by which newly revealed self-knowledge is almost inevitable, and consideration for others is shown to be not only necessary but imperative, can hardly fail to have a profound effect on character and outlook.” Words into action, belief into behavior—Voyageurs all, voyaging on and on. Amen.