

TRUTH TO POWER
FEATURES

Sharpening More Than Just Pencils

Sometimes 'Back to School' means way more than Trapper Keepers and book bags

BY JORDAN GASS-POORÉ, FRI., AUG. 23, 2013



The smell of wax, polyester, and mold trigger the blur of memories from 12 years in the public school system. With age came the knowledge of where those smells originated (crayons, new Wal-Mart clothes, and the schools' ventilation system). We were still rockin' the Lisa Frank Trapper Keeper, blue jean pencil pouch, glitter pencils, and cheetah print lunchbox well into high school due to some "style" advice from our older cousins ("It's vintage!"). In reality, we were broke, and this way no one would steal our school supplies. But the transition from grade levels (and out into the mysterious black abyss of an unstructured reality beyond grade levels) is more about the emotional and mental preparation than the physical. That's why we've recruited Austin psychotherapist Joanna Labow, Texas State University art history senior lecturer and *Chronicle* contributor Andy Campbell, *Chronicle* internship director Kate Messer, as well as Lana Witham and Rose Russo, who worked as stylists on our photo shoot portion of this piece with the teens from their alma mater, the Griffin School, to offer advice and share experiences that may make these transitions easier.

Sociology

- Before Rose Russo attended the Griffin School, a college prep high school, she says she felt really misunderstood in public school and was cast as a "misfit." "I felt like my spirit was being crushed every day," says Russo. So, she transferred to a place she found to be nurturing and appreciative. "I knew I was smart, and I knew I was creative," she says. "Griffin made me feel empowered with responsibility, like I could actually influence my surroundings."
- Joanna Labow remembers commuting to Douglass Residential College in the late Sixties. This trek, along with the ominous presence of what would be her father's terminal illness, made it very hard for her to integrate into the student population. "All of my friends had gone away. I just thought my life was over." She looked on the bright side of what she had initially perceived to be a grim situation. It was at Douglass where she met her first girlfriend and lifelong friends. "I would not trade anything," Labow says.

Psychology

- Despite doubts about higher education, Lana Witham took what she considers to be a "cliff dive" by attending the Art Institute of Chicago for a year. "I found out the hard way," Witham says. While she was in Chicago, her dad was hit by a vehicle in Georgetown. Money became an issue. "You can't really prepare, because there is no context until it's happening to you," she says. But Witham was accustomed to change, having been raised an only child by "two very eccentric parents." Her ability to be her own support system, to wipe the slate clean, has helped her adjust to change. "I don't know if there's an easy way to transition without just doing it," says Witham.

Economics

- As an Oberlin College undergraduate, Andy Campbell worked 40 hours a week at Subway to help finance his education (not to mention food, which was partly subsidized by his employee discount). Now that the smell of bread has completely

seeped out of Campbell's pores, he says he can better relate to his current undergraduate students and their workload laments. It's all about perspective, humility, and respect.

- Rose Russo says her life plans deviated from most of her friends' because she attended beauty school instead of accepting offers from colleges and continued to live with her parents for years after high school graduation, she says. "I knew it was right for me."

Political Science

- Life for Joanna Labow meant a good portion of 12 years at a small, all-girls private school in New Jersey. She says that despite being president of the school's student council, it was difficult for her to express herself. "I had a really great façade, so I looked good emotionally," says Labow. "But I was not a happy camper inside. Boy, I could fake it." Her quick-witted personality helped her cope with depression and the transition from high school to college. Social and political activism furthered her emotional and intellectual well-being. "You really believed you could change things," she says of that late Sixties/early Seventies era of social change. Some of her self-defining characteristics, like feminism, stemmed from her college days.

Theatre

- Iana Witham says her love for theatrics stems from her desire to wear a pink Barbie princess dress to preschool. Witham's parents supported her dream, and from that day forward, she says her self-confidence has soared. So when Witham, now a hairstylist at Austin's Hearts & Robots salon, feels like shaving her head or dying her hair purple, this self-proclaimed "loud wallflower" goes for it with a vengeance. "It's the one part of my being that I have any creative control over," she says.

Music

- Rose Russo just wants to be herself. That has posed problems before, as she remembers being a sassypants to her parents as an orange-haired, combat-boot-wearing teen. A more confident and enlightened Russo now practices self-expression as a mobile hairstylist and vocalist for two local bands. "I'm always able to be honest, to say what I believe, and to express who I am in a way that is kind and comfortable," says the self-proclaimed chameleon.

Homeroom:

- Many of Andy Campbell's Johnston High School friends no longer live in close proximity to him. But that's okay. Campbell says it's important for people to get past the need to keep loved ones physically close. "Have a love from afar; have a love when you're together," says Campbell. "If I don't see someone for three years, and then I see them, we're both really excited and happy to be together. I love that – maybe as much as if I were with them every day." Campbell recommends tapping into those memories and using that as your catalyst to connection.

Study Hall:

- Go ahead and attempt to grab the life carrot at the end of that stick. If you fail, you might learn something. For Kate Messer, Class of 1980, her dream of attending college at Chapel Hill in North Carolina was crushed because of financial realities ("Reagan pillaging PELL Grants was a definite factor."). But that dang carrot was too enticing to ignore, so during Messer's senior year of high school she "CLEPped" (College Level Examination Program) out of almost a year of college and attended night classes at Palm Beach Junior College, worked as "the Pepsi-Challenge Girl" and interned at a wild, free-form FM radio station in Jupiter, Fla. Messer's advice for those high schoolers yearning for worldviews outside their own? Get a summer job and/or an internship.

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