



A KING'S DREAM

Eric Widmer '61 helps to blend New England prep school tradition and Middle Eastern culture as headmaster of a new boarding school in Jordan.

It's not easy saying no to a King. Just ask Eric Widmer '61. Shortly after he announced plans to retire in 2006 as headmaster of Deerfield Academy in Western Massachusetts, a messenger from King Abdullah II of Jordan arrived bearing a request: Would Widmer consider becoming the founding headmaster of King's Academy, a boarding school scheduled to open outside of Amman that fall?

Widmer sent word that he was immensely honored by the offer. But he could not possibly take on the new position, as he would not have enough time between jobs.

The King's response was as brief as it was swift: "OK, 2007."

And so it was that, after presiding over his 12th Deerfield commencement, Widmer traded green hills and dappled maples for desert land and olive trees, chapel bells for the sounds of muezzins calling people to prayer, and roaming deer for camels. His charge: To bring to life in the Middle East a new version of the 200-year-old quintessential New England boarding school he had just left behind.

King's Academy, now well into its first year, was inspired by King Abdullah's own experiences at Deerfield, which he attended from 1977 to 1980. (Back then, his friends called him "Ab.") He loved everything about the school, from its "emphasis on critical thinking, camaraderie, tolerance, and sacrifice," as he said in a 2006 *New Yorker* article, to its family style meals in the dining hall, where students took turns being waiters.

"There was a big adjustment at first, that he had to wait tables," says Jeff Louis '85, who graduated from Deerfield a year after King Abdullah and is now chairman of Deerfield's Board of Trustees. "But he realized that it created this camaraderie and allowed him to have friendships. He was a Deerfield boy like everybody else."

When "Ab" returned to Deerfield in 2000 for his 20th reunion, he began to discuss his idea for a school that blended American-style education with Middle Eastern history, tradition, languages, and cultural values. He wanted to develop leaders—in the classroom, on the athletic fields, and in the community. And he wanted to "provide an opportunity for an educational experience unlike any available in the Middle East."

As the King envisioned it, his new school would be "utterly progressive, utterly optimistic, and utterly necessary."



Eric Widmer '61 (left) and his wife, Meera Viswanathan, with King Abdullah II at Deerfield's 2006 Commencement. At left: Parents Weekend at King's Academy.

After a dozen Jordanians and an Egyptian architect showed up at Deerfield to get a sense of the campus, King's Academy took shape quickly on its 144-acre site just off King's Highway in Manja, 20 miles south of Amman. Among its 23 buildings, the classrooms are at the crest of a hill and sports facilities at its base. In between are a dining hall, a 700-seat theater nearly identical to Deerfield's, a library, a student center, a health center, nine single-sex dormitories, the headmaster's house, and administrative buildings. It's a huge spread by Middle

Eastern standards. The architect, Khalid Azzam, describes the style as "Levantine," featuring stone, stucco, and wood.

"It's like a little oasis that's grown out of the King's dream," Louis says. "It's like someone took a sprinkling can and poured some water on the ground, and out sprang this institution."

That little oasis is surrounded by security walls topped with video cameras aimed outward to prevent intruders, a necessary reality. In addition, King's Academy has 25 full-time public safety officers. There is a gateway entry point at which every entering car is searched, Widmer's included.

Inside, King's Academy is a blend of New England prep school tradition and Middle Eastern culture. The school's 112 students (about 40 percent of them girls) come from 11 nations in the Middle East. There is one boy from the West Bank, but as yet no students are from Israel.

The students wear blue blazers with the school escutcheon, khaki pants or skirts, and King's Academy neckties or pocket squares.

The curriculum, spread over eight recitation periods per day, is "rather ambitious," Widmer says. In addition to the types of courses a college like Williams would expect, students are required to take classes in Islam and Islamic civilization, Arabic language, and the history of the Middle East. Critical thinking and discussion are emphasized over the rote memorization more common to the region.

"All along the way we have tried to have it both ways, founding a school with an American high school diploma program that is also fully accountable to the Jordanian Ministry of

by Kate Stone Lombardi '78

Education and reflective of our place in the Middle East,” Widmer says.

As was the case at Deerfield, athletics are emphasized in the afternoon, a tradition with which many Middle Eastern boys, let alone girls, are unfamiliar.



Above: An American teacher (right) chats with a Jordanian student and his father. At right: Just like their counterparts at Deerfield, students take turns waiting tables during meals.

(Some girls joined the swim team just to learn how to swim.) Rules governing the relations between boys and girls are far stricter than they are at Deerfield—no holding hands, no kissing, and no visiting each other’s dorms.

Other Deerfield traditions were “plagiarized freely,” according to Widmer, including the dining experience, where students eat family style and take turns waiting tables. It’s another adjustment for some of the students—children of royalty, prominent politicians and businessmen—who aren’t used to New England

egalitarianism. One girl, when told she would be expected to clean up her room, asked if she could have her maid from home come and do it. For other students, homework was a novelty.

“The tough, even-handed lifestyle at King’s is a harsh awakening for many of them,” says Margot Robinson, who is spending the year between her Deerfield graduation and her first semester at Williams leading math tutorials for King’s Academy students, working with the theater group, and serving as a dorm proctor. “Realizing that these reactions come from the values that they have grown up with, we have had to slowly teach them what we at King’s

value the most—hard work, cooperation, and respect for others.”

King Abdullah insisted on transplanting another aspect of Deerfield to his school—financial aid. With tuition at \$28,000 U.S. for full boarders, \$25,000 for weekday boarders and \$16,500 for day students, the academy is “committed to have at least a third of our students also receiving need-based assistance,” Widmer says.

The King already has visited several times and is terribly proud of the school, Widmer says. Next year, it is likely that

From Deerfield to the Desert

Eric Widmer '61 is no a stranger to the Middle East. He was born in Beirut, where his father taught at International College and his mother was a dean at American University of Beirut. He graduated from Deerfield in 1957 and studied French, German, and Russian at Williams, followed by Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, and Manchu at Harvard. (He’s now learning Arabic alongside his students at King’s Academy.)

Before becoming Deerfield’s headmaster in 1994, Widmer spent 25 years on the faculty of Brown University—15 of them as a dean—where he met his wife, Meera Viswanathan, an associate professor of comparative literature and East Asian studies. Viswanathan was instrumental in designing the curriculum at King’s Academy and currently is serving as an English teacher and dean of the faculty while she’s on leave from Brown.



his son, Crown Prince Hussein, will be enrolled.

As for Widmer, he is making the transition from starting a school—with all the requisite traveling and recruiting—to again running one. But this time around, there’s a student newspaper to start and name. A yearbook needs to be launched. A school rival needs to be found.

“We may appropriate the history of Deerfield and pretend it is our own,” Widmer says. “But we know it really isn’t. On the other hand, there is a certain freedom—a release—from the inertia of history when one is founding a school.” ■

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Abu Dhabi via the Big Apple

Another Eph making her mark in education in the Middle East—albeit from Washington Square in Manhattan—is Mariët Westermann '84, who was recently named vice chancellor of the new NYU Abu Dhabi. Westermann has been the Judy & Michael Steinhardt Director and Professor of Art History at NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts since 2002. She is a scholar of painting, particularly in the Netherlands, her native country, and is the author of several books on Dutch art.

In her role as vice chancellor, which brings her to Abu Dhabi frequently, Westermann says she is “especially thrilled to be working alongside such world-class institutions as the Louvre and the Guggenheim.”

The campus is to open in fall 2010, with 2,000 students from the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Europe expected to enroll.