

Dear Fellow Educator:

On September 20, 2012, just a few weeks into the new school year, I welcomed the entire upper school student body and faculty into the auditorium to hear a presentation by Denis Belliveau, author and film-maker of *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*. I am accustomed to this role, but I have to admit, I was a little nervous. Over the summer, during a time of administrative transition, I had booked this speaker with no consultation or authority higher than my own, and my decision was based merely on the perusal of a PBS website, testimonial letters such as this one, and a hunch. Never before, as a teacher who has been inviting and sponsoring speakers for special assemblies for over a decade now, has my leap of faith been so richly rewarded.

As the students and teachers made their way into the auditorium that Thursday morning, I could sense some confusion and apprehension: why did we upset the normal school schedule so early in the year for something that is not part of our regular program? It was not immediately clear to most how this assembly was connected to anything. But as the head of history department and coordinator of our school's Symposium program, I had a track record of booking some good speakers in the past, so at least some colleagues and students were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. An hour later, when Denis had finished his presentation, no one wanted to leave the auditorium and return to "regular" classes.

Denis is an amazingly engaging speaker. He connects to his audience. His format for this assembly was beautifully simple. After a brief introduction, he showed a few clips of the visually mesmerizing and compelling documentary *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*. Then he came back out on stage and said, "OK, let's get to it. What are your questions?" For the next forty minutes, there were hands up all over the auditorium. Denis answered every question directly, thoughtfully, and honestly. Even though he must get asked the same questions over and over again, his responses never sound canned or rehearsed. With humor and insight and authenticity, Denis kept our audience on the edge of their seats.

Denis's presentation is not just about Marco Polo's journey in the 13th Century, or even the interesting and exciting journey he made with Francis O'Donnell to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Polo's return to Venice, through some political and geographic landscapes of the Middle East, Central and South Asia, and China that bear eerie and illuminating similarities and connections to current headlines. On a higher and broader level, Denis's message—just as I had hoped when I booked him as a speaker—is about recognizing and following an intellectual and spiritual passion; it's about doing the hard work to perfect your craft; it's about learning how to move and communicate across cultural and political boundaries. Quoting Mark Twain, the explorers Belliveau and O'Donnell actually show students that "travel is the enemy of bigotry." When Denis

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challenged students to “get out there; meet people; get to know them” it had the ring of authenticity that their classroom history teacher simply cannot match.

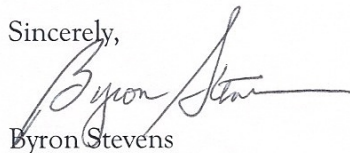
Had Denis just given that all-school assembly I would have considered his visit a success. But Denis also addressed a class of advanced photography and studio art students about his background and work as a visual artist. In the evening he screened an extended version of his documentary and did a talk-back for our parent community – to which a large number of our students came back to hear more! The next day, I insisted to our middle school history teacher that she rearrange her lesson plan and allow Denis to come speak to her classes. Not only did she do so, but also after meeting Denis and witnessing how effectively he engaged and inspired her students, she immediately started rearranging her curriculum to include Marco Polo and Denis every spring. While on campus Denis spontaneously dropped in on a couple history classes and engaged students in the dining hall, ever ready to connect with them and share his knowledge and love of Marco Polo, history, travel, and meeting new people.

Denis was whole-heartedly invested in making his visit to our campus a success. He is easy-going, adaptable and flexible, but he is also consummately professional in all of his interactions with students, teachers, and families.

In ten years of planning these sorts of special assemblies and symposia, I have never received as much unsolicited feedback – praise, congratulations, and gratitude – from students, teachers, administrators and parents as I did in the days after Denis came to speak at Stevenson School. I have been fortunate enough to have sponsored successful presentations in the past by then current U.S. cabinet members, university presidents, and best-selling authors. Most recently we have had well-known and accomplished Hollywood artists, including actor Billy Boyd and film composer Alan Silvestri, as well as the best-selling author and game guru Jane McGonigal. But as one laconic and usually somewhat cynical senior put it to her history teacher after Denis’s talk, “That was probably the best special assembly we’ve ever had.”

Obviously, I am an enthusiastic endorser of Denis Belliveau and *In the Footsteps of Marco Polo*. But should you have any further or more specific questions as you plan your event, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Byron Stevens

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