

Fourth in an occasional series following a group of seniors at Virginia Beach's **Bayside High School**.

# Kids Say The Darndest Things

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO LISTEN  
TO TEENAGERS DECIDE  
WHAT'S RIGHT AND WRONG

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PHOTO BY KATHY KEENEY

**PAOLO BUSANTE IS ALREADY** sitting in Mrs. Garrett's B-day first block sociology class when I arrive. He avoids eye contact with me, maybe embarrassed that I'm late and the students probably know I'm here because of him, to follow him for the day and see what it's like to be a senior in 2003.

It doesn't take long for me to feel ancient.

Behind the times.

Clueless.

And shocked.

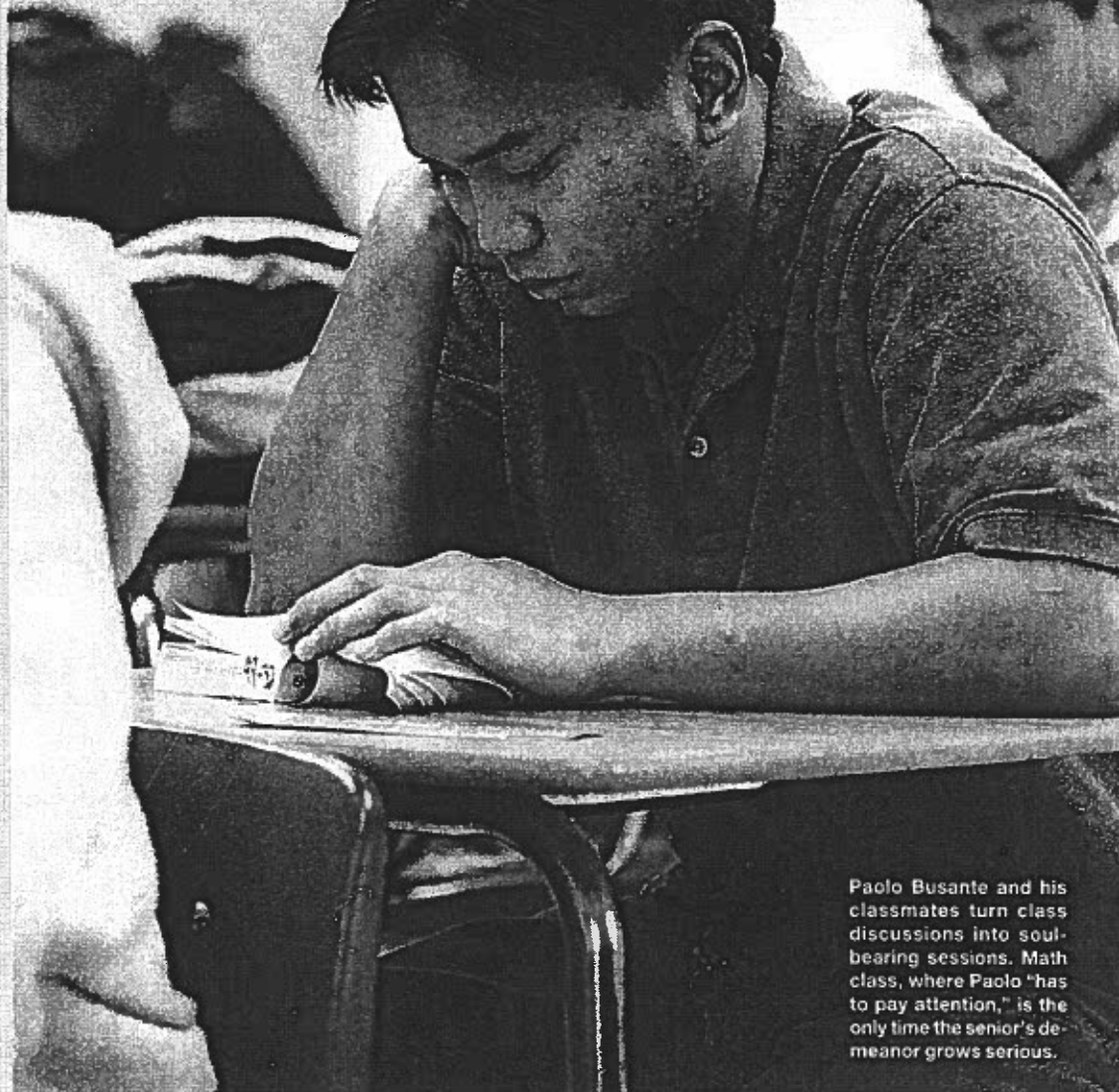
When I graduated in 1985 from Niagara Falls High School, I had never heard of A and B days, a schedule of classes meeting every other day for approximately 90 minutes. We had 45-minute "periods" instead. Some experts argue that students learn better by being exposed to new material for longer periods of time in one sitting and having more time to ask questions. Others say the "extra" time ends up being used for homework.

Nineteen students, a mix of boys and girls who are mostly white, are filling out worksheets. Until Mrs. Garrett hands me one, I look around the room. A sticker on the teacher's podium speaks to me: Politics is a good thing.

Another sign reminds me how young my company is: Remember to use PEN only (BLUE or BLACK INK) for ALL assignments.

I'm writing with a red marker.

"Number fucking one and two are basically the same thing," says the boy behind me about the questions on the worksheet. I didn't catch a look at him as I entered the classroom, but I guess that he is not clean-cut.



Paolo Busante and his classmates turn class discussions into soul-bearing sessions. Math class, where Paolo "has to pay attention," is the only time the senior's demeanor grows serious.

He reeks of cigarettes, which annoys me almost as much as his kicking of the book rack underneath my seat.

On the side black board written in chalk is "Senior cap and gown pictures, Wed., Feb. 12 (A-day) and Thursday Feb. 13 during government classes.

Lucky kids, we had to get our pictures taken in the summer, before school started.

"What does reprimand mean?," smoking boy wants to know now.

I think about demonstrating the meaning, but the girl next to him answers more politely first.

"Tell someone not to do something..." she says.

I mentally label her a good girl with a pen-chart for the bad boy, frightenedly reminiscent of me at age 18.

Seconds earlier, she had asked Mrs. Garrett when the class assignment was due.

Which path will the girl take?, I wonder. Does she, too?

On a bulletin board on the left side of the classroom are the words "What Do You Stand For?"

*Imagination, Responsibility*, come the answers written on rectangular pieces of construction paper.

My high school classroom walls were blank except for chalkboards so I'm enthralled by the elementary-school like stimulation and can't stop craning my neck.

A poster on another bulletin board shows the Capitol with the words "Here, the yet unfolding experiment: the world's first government by, for and of its people - Democracy."

Another sign: Behold the turtle who makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.

**IT'S 7:45, AND THE GOOD GIRL** pulls out a novel to read as Mrs. Garrett writes "Deviance" on the board.

"How many have not finished?," she asks.

The worksheet lists 10 situations students may encounter and asks how they would respond to each: "Pretend that you have just witnessed the following deviant or criminal acts. For each case, answer the following questions:

1. What action would you take?
2. Would you ignore the act, intercede on behalf of the victim, reprimand the offender immediately, or notify the proper authorities?
3. Why would you react in this way?
4. What do your reactions suggest about the effectiveness of informal social controls for reducing the rates of crime and deviance?"

At 7:47, the three who raised their hands are done and Mrs. Garrett begins lecturing. She flips on the overhead projector:

"Deviance: Any action that is perceived as violating some widely shared norm of society or a group's culture."

"I've sped," says one student.

"I let a track runner cheat off my test," says another.

Others proudly offer their deviant behavior. "What kind have you done?," the smoking boy wants to know.

"I've exceeded the speed limit," Mrs. Garrett says.

As she attempts to explain how and where she was busted for being a speedster ("What street is parallel to Haygood?" she asks as she draws a map on the board), I entertain myself by looking at a black book bag on the floor.

"Abortion is Murder" is written on it in what might be White Out.

(I second-guess myself because I'm not sure if these computer-age students use my one-time, term paper savior.)

Mrs. Garrett finally moves on:

"Deviance varies between ethnic groups, social classes, occupational groups, geographical regions, males and females. For example, for Asians not to take care of an old person at home would be considered deviant. That's not the case in white communities. Or with pregnancies, a white community often reacts more harshly than a black community if a teenager becomes pregnant.

"Like it's OK for guys to fight, but not girls," a student offers as another example.

Mrs. Garrett tries to bring the students back to their worksheets.

"OK," she says. "What would you do if you saw someone littering?"

"I would get really mad and pick it up," says a girl.

"Then you'd be picking up my litter," says the smoking boy.

"A bird could possibly make a nest out of it," says another boy.

"Why can't I chew gum when I go to court," says the smoking boy. "As many times as I've been in court, I always chew gum."

Mrs. Garrett indulges him: "Maybe the judge thinks it's rude."

"I don't think it's rude," counters smoking boy.

Onto question two: *Cheating...*

"I'd just ignore it," says smoking boy. "It's none of my business."

Paolo offers a breath of fresh air:

"I don't think it's fair. Say I study all night and the person next to me copies. But I wouldn't say anything because I'm afraid of being called a snitch."

Smoking boy is relentless: "If I can help myself and someone else, that's great."

Mrs. Garrett is enjoying the conversation just as much as him:

"My pet peeve is when someone copies homework and gets it wrong and tells me it's too hard. For tests, I give multiple versions of the test with questions in a different order. No more cheating."

A student wants to know if girls or guys cheat more.

"I've caught more guys," says Mrs. Garrett.

"Girls may be more clever about it."

"Girls put (cheat notes) done their shirt," says a boy sitting in the front, "between their breasts."

"I'm not going to touch that one," Mrs. Garrett appropriately responds.

She instead offers a story about a student taking a final exam once and having four sheets of paper spread across the floor in front of him. When approached, he said, "Oh I don't know what that is."

Paolo can't take it: "He deserved to fail."

Smoking boy can't take *that*: "That's an ignorant thing to say. Shut up, man."

Paolo offers a breath of fresh air:

“I don't think it's fair. Say I study all night and the person next to me copies. But I wouldn't say anything because I'm afraid of calling me a snitch.”



*Shhh*, says Mrs. Garrett.

But one girl just can't: "It's not bad because sometimes the teacher doesn't teach you."

A chorus of "yesses" follows.

Mrs. Garrett takes her own shushing advice in response to that statement: "Number three on the list: What would you do if you saw someone selling marijuana?"

Smoking boy is first: "I would walk over to the guy and buy some."

Mrs. Garrett delivers the words I long to snip: "Why am I not shocked by that response?"

"I can pick four friends who do smoke for every one that doesn't," says a girl.

"All of mine do," smoking boy says with pride.

"I'm really naive," says a girl who earlier shared that she's from West Virginia. "I would think it was oregano."

Paolo says he'd probably say something if the dealer were selling to little kids.

Smoking boy gets defensive: "You can't put all the blame on the guy selling it."

"It's so easy to buy weed," says the boy who was hip to girls' cheating techniques.

"Ask in every class, there's at least two who could buy it for you."

"Three in this class can," claims smoking boy. "And I'd smoke it with you."

A student says she used to smell pot at her uncle's house when she was little.

Another girl shares that her mother was in rehab the year before the girl was born.

Smoking boy is unconvinced of marijuana's

dangers: "It's not a bad drug. It'll be legal one day. I will see to it that it happens."

Paolo's getting mad: "It's a gateway drug." "I've never done any other drug!," shouts smoking boy.

**NO ONE HAS MUCH TO SAY** about stealing a library book. What to do about date rape is a much more disturbing topic for the students:

Three girls say they'd tell the proper authorities.

Paolo and smoking boy finally agree on something: They'd kick the offending guy in the face.

The boy in the front would probably join in: "It's just as bad as murder," he says.

A girl who hadn't spoken up until that point speaks: "Girls don't tell all the time."

Why not, asks Mrs. Garrett, more to lead the student than to educate herself.

"They're embarrassed?," wonders the girl. "They don't remember?"

The girl used to be almost prosecuted, explains Mrs. Garrett.

"In this school alone, I know people who have been," says another girl, "myself included."

The teacher looks down at the worksheet she's holding. Most of the students in the class sigh.

Paolo says later that the girl who says she was raped "is a nice person, (but) she's always telling us about some problem."

At 8:50 a.m. Principal Gene Soltner makes an announcement.

"In the 400 and 500 hallways this morning, several groups of students were posturing. Three students are on long-term suspension because of what happened. Now 64 students, who started the year at Bayside, are no longer with us because of long-term suspension or expulsion."

The class is silent and expressionless.

Did Dr. Soltner plan to perfectly demonstrate the consequences for deviant behavior?

Does the class see the connection?

Do they take in all — or any — of the educational media this room offers? The teacher's definitions? The book's examples? The posters? The bumper stickers?

Or are they more concerned with their own thoughts — what they say as they speak in class or what they write on their worksheets?

Is the most important thing to them "What they stand for" as the bulletin board asks?

Does Mrs. Garrett, who doesn't take the opportunity to point out the irony of Dr. Soltner's announcement, do a disservice to her students by allowing them to remain in "me" mode by not challenging their statements — or is she encouraging self-centered conversation because it's the only way for her to engage some of the students?

Judging by the girl's black book bag I noticed earlier, the answer is most likely the latter. While "Abortion is Murder" is written in white on it, so are "I (heart) me" and "Body piercing saved my life." That's a two-to-one "I care for me versus others" ratio. And the bag owner didn't offer a hand, or even a look, to the girl who said she was raped.