

The Thrill of the Chase

It was too early in the morning for most people to be excited about history. While commuters yawned through news radio broadcasts and stay-at-home parents got their children ready for school, Kevin Delaney was fired up about World War I. On a beautiful Friday in April, at exactly 7:30 a.m., his Honors United States History class dove into heavy research more typically suited for serious historians than a motley group of sixteen and seventeen year olds. Delaney stood at his podium and pushed up the sleeves of his button-up, letting his nineteen students know the plan for the day. Last week, they had gone through a list of soldiers who served in the Great War and hailed from their own town of Wayland, Massachusetts, and picked who they would be researching for the latest chapter of the Wayland High School History Project. Today, the real work would begin.

“I think I speak for everyone,” one student piped up, “when I say kids work better with music.” Delaney happily obliged, switching to a browser tab on his computer that had a Pandora radio station ready to stream alternative rock through the speakers in front of the classroom. “Doin’ Time” by Sublime drifted through the room. The keyboardist tapped out three notes over and over again while the nasally vocalist whined, “Summertime, and the livin’s easy.” Between the bass line and steady drum beat, it was almost hypnotic. A few students bobbed their heads and mouthed the lyrics as they began to sink into their research.

Their work had just begun, but Delaney’s expectations were high. The handout for the project outlined everything they would need to find out about the men they were researching - “fellows” as Delaney calls them. Students would try to find anything and everything they could about their subjects from the time they were born up to the Great War. They would need to

understand the general issues of the time collect evidence about how those issues affected the town of Wayland and their individual soldiers specifically. At the heart of a great biography, Delaney wrote on the sheet, was “storytelling with evidence,” a line augmented from historian Jill Lepore’s The Story of America: “History is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence.” Delaney centered his classes around this mantra. In his classroom, the students were treated as true historians, expected to find great stories with the tools they were given.

There were no books with deep wrinkles cracked into the spine or dog-eared packets of historically contextual information wet with highlighter ink on the grey laminate desks. Instead of getting lost in promising books and coming up empty, students worked primarily with information they could find online. Wayland's library had digitized Town Reports, going back as early as 1851, as well as yearbooks for the public schools whose contents included a first grade classroom from 1898. Genealogy websites allowed them access to the family trees of men who had died before their grandparents were born. Google’s arsenal of free books let them search through unlikely sources for specific phrases. Newspaper databases made searching for names a breeze and kept their hands clean. Delaney paced around the room, always slightly smiling, half-frame glasses hiding the crow’s feet around his eyes. Were it not for a healthy head of greying hair, he could easily be mistaken for the cool new teacher fresh out of grad school.

“This is a classic,” chimed Curran Murphy, nodding his head as Foster the People’s 2011 smash hit “Pumped Up Kicks” came through the speaker. He tapped his foot to the music and continued his work. Despite the temptation to stray from the task, the students were mostly diligent as they poured through census records, School Board Reports and military files. One

student ventured away to Reddit for a few minutes and quickly switched browser windows back to his research when he heard brown Oxford shoes tapping on the tile as Delaney walked behind him. Group mates would chat occasionally - prom was coming up, and so were the SAT's - but for the most part, conversations stayed on topic.

It was easy for them to stay captivated by the information. The men they were researching grew up in the same town they had. One group of confident athletic boys learned about a train that derailed in the center of town in the early 1900s. They imagined themselves as curious little boys at the turn of the century, sneaking on to the site of the crash in the days after and poking their noses where they shouldn't. Curran Murphy, tall even when seated and letting his upper lip stubble grow as wild as it could with shoulder-length brown hair to match, found something in common with those long deceased. "The idea of being imaginative kids," said Murphy, "we can relate to that." The men they were studying were far from lifeless names in history books. They were all Waylanders, with a hundred years and a lot of change in a little town to separate them.

Once a place of agricultural and pastoral scenes, Wayland turned into a quiet, affluent suburb in the years following World War II. The school stressed its capability to prepare students for college, often encouraging students to go above and beyond to get there. Students were tracked in three groups based on their academic ability, with College Preparatory as the standard level, implying that even its average students would be prepared for university level work. These efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1987, the school won the *Red Book* Award for Academic Excellence, and as of 2016 is one of *US News's* top fifty best public high schools in

Massachusetts. In 2015, *USA Today* reported Massachusetts as having the best public schools in the nation - these accolades were not unmerited.

It helps to have money to spend on students. Wayland's average expenditure per pupil is \$16,445, a little over 12 per cent higher than the state average of \$14,518 and well above the national average of \$10,700. In the recently constructed high school, every classroom is outfitted with a Mac desktop computer and a thousand dollar Smartboard that together put any dusty old chalkboard to shame. In Wayland, students' Toyotas and Hondas line the parking lot, with the occasional smattering of Mercedes-Benzes and Audis - more often than not, students drive Sweet Sixteen birthday presents. Their parents rake in a median of \$165,903, a whopping 88 per cent higher than the national average. Their houses sometimes sell for multi-millions. When Delaney asked for a grant for a high-end scanner worth \$700 in order to convert precious documents to make them more accessible and less susceptible to damage, the school board happily awarded him the money. While teachers in other Massachusetts towns like East Bridgewater and Southamptton supply pencils and glue sticks with money out of their own wallets, Wayland's high schoolers were treated to MacBook Airs, courtesy of the taxpayers.

Delaney was careful to make sure his students had a baseline knowledge of the events surrounding their research. He gave occasional tests, but less often than others teaching the same subject. When it came to Progressive era reformers, he wanted his students to know who Alice Paul and Carrie Chapman Catt were, but knew that in two years most wouldn't remember anything beyond basic facts. Instead, he focused on getting them to truly know the topic by sinking into their own detailed research. Delaney said that using local history was "a really awesome way to get kids to learn about things in a microcosm, but in a big picture way as well."

Brian Cohen felt a strong connection to the soldiers he was Googling. From his studies, he knew World War I was on the horizon for those he was researching, but the class of 1916 was unaware of the horrors to come: trench warfare, gangrene, and shell shock were in their immediate future. Cohen and the rest of Delaney's students have the benefit of hindsight, but can understand why so many young American men volunteered for the military in 1914, three years before Congress passed the Selective Service Act of 1917. Cohen was able to combine his knowledge of historical fact with empathy and drew the conclusion that for the teenage boys heading off to fight, "Maybe they thought of war as an adventure."

Delaney knows his method is successful. "I guarantee you," he said, smiling assuredly. "Those kids understand Progressive reforms in such a deeper, more sustaining way than I used to teach it." In twenty-eight years of teaching, trial and error has taught him that children learn history best when you help them tell stories. He'd never brag, but the nine awards and honors he's won for teaching show that his technique works.

It is only by pure serendipity that he ended up teaching. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, he simply picked courses that interested him - which just happened to be history classes. He hadn't even considered teaching until a semester abroad in Madrid during his junior year led to helping Spanish students learn English. Even then, he spent his first two years out of college as a carpenter working on historic restorations before he decided to get his Master's in education. After brief stints teaching in his hometown of Dover-Sherborn and in Westwood, he settled in Wayland in 1992. For someone who never necessarily intended to become an award-winning teacher, he has quietly set himself apart as an extraordinary educator. In 2010, then-Principal Patrick Tutweiler told the *Town Crier*, "He is a pillar at Wayland High

School, one of the people who arrives first each day, shortly before 6 a.m., and is among the last to leave.”

All the school board money and state-of-the-art technology in the district can't always buy smart kids and great teachers. Weston, a slightly more affluent neighboring town, spends 25% more than Wayland per pupil and has a smaller student-teacher ratio, but falls short according to *U.S. News* rankings - Wayland's Warriors scored marginally higher in Math and English proficiency than the rival Weston Wildcats. RateMyTeacher, a mainstay website where students can review their teachers based on how easy, helpful, smart, and clear they are, reveals that Weston's teachers average a 3.63 out of 5 while Wayland's teachers average 3.92. Delaney's score of 4.89 is brought down only by students who think he's a hard grader, still extolling his class and all they learned.

Still, it is rare to find a teacher with no enemies. Even the best educators have students rankled by failed midterms and others uninterested in the material who muddy the waters of otherwise high praise. But if any student - past or present - harbored ill feelings towards Kevin Delaney, they were well hidden. One former pupil went so far as to doubt the existence of people who so much as disliked the man, jokingly suggesting, “They're fictional.”

To an outsider, Delaney looks positively average - a middle-aged white man teaching high school history. He comes home to two kids, a wife, and a cat. What lies beneath, however, is an extraordinary educator passionate about his subject and devoted to his students. In his early days as at Wayland, Delaney's students saw him as a friend rather than a teacher. He was entering his thirties by then, but his zeal and the way he talked to students like they were his peers made him appear younger. “It felt like he wasn't that much older than us at the time,” said

Lori Lerman, who was part of his inaugural class of Wayland High School History Project historians in 2001. “There was just something special about the way we all worked together.”

As he got older, students grew to see him in a different light. “It was so clear that he cared about how each student did,” said Jillian Nystedt, who took his Honors US History class in 2013. “He was almost fatherly.” His passion for his subject and for his students made him popular, but it was the way he taught and the way he treated his students that truly set him apart from other teachers.

Affectionately called “D-Train,” his old-school fashion clashed beautifully with his ability to relate to his students. Behind a paternal veneer and half-frame glasses, his Paul Newman blue eyes and dimples shone through. He had developed something of an unofficial fan club – one so prominent that in May 2008 it prompted one of his students, Nick Chertavian, to create a page in his honor on Facebook.

Chertavian created it as a joke when the website launched the ability to make fan pages, initially using it as a place to post historical quotes and links. Instead, Delaney's students used the space to laugh about his awesomeness in the purest meaning of the word. “Delaney was not born in the traditional sense,” reads one post. “He simply came into this world with a gun in his hand and took care of business.” Another suggested he may be God himself. “Delaney has actually only had one child. It was Jesus Christ.” There was a certain amount of mystery to Delaney - he had a photo of his son in a little league uniform at his desk, but for the most part, he kept his personal life to himself. Few students knew of his penchant for woodworking, his love of mountain biking, or his culinary skills. They certainly had no idea that he used to accompany his children trick-or-treating by donning a well-worn black and white wig and round eyeglasses

fit for a grandmother, speaking roughly seven octaves above his natural range. He called the character Susie Creamcheese. Shrouded in secrecy, Delaney became the focal point for adolescent obsession. Chertavian remembers that upon hearing of the fan page, his unflappable teacher “just laughed and shook his head.” It was hard to faze the man.

He conducted his classroom in open dialogue. Students could interject with questions, make arguments, and joke around while he led them through the trail of American history. Rather than lecture at his students as he rolled through slide after slide, he talked with them, introducing new ideas and concepts and allowing them to discuss topics freely. Students who gave great answers were bountifully rewarded; he would point at the person in question and say, “That deserves,” then briefly pause, finishing with a swift “a check plus!” The catch phrase never failed to amuse.

At his core, Delaney was a storyteller with a knack for bringing history to life. Ben Boegehold, a student from the class of 2008 said listening to Delaney talk “felt as though he knew the characters from history and was telling us about them, as if they were his friends.” Delaney believed that humans were predisposed to learn through stories, as they had been since we roamed the African Savannah 150,000 years ago. What Delaney figured out over almost thirty years of teaching is supported by anthropologists, sociologists, and evolutionary biologists alike. “The human mind is a story processor,” writes social scientist Jonathan Haidt, “not a logic processor.” Not that his students cared about the science behind why they enjoyed his class so much - they just liked the guy.

Lively as Delaney's class was, he knew his students were capable of serious historical work. Tom Brokaw's 1998 book, Greatest Generation, called for the nation to sit down and

listen to the stories of those who had fought in World War II. In the spring of 2001, after seeing a newspaper insert for a small oral history project underway at a library in a nearby town, he launched the Wayland High School History Project, where he tasked his honors-level juniors with conducting research about the town most of them had grown up in. The answers wouldn't be found in a textbook and couldn't be memorized for a test. Building upon the facts they had learned in class, teams of students explored how World War II affected Wayland, interviewing veterans and referencing primary source documents to build narratives and write history.

When he first began the project in 2001, the town buzzed with excitement. Parents were proud that their children had been deemed smart enough to take on such a task. Students who were already interested in history and those who weren't jumped at the opportunity to interview survivors and act like college students directing their own work. Those from the Greatest Generation loved that youngsters were learning about the impact of World War II. The *Wayland Town Crier*, *Metrowest Daily News* and *Boston Globe* all ran articles commending Delaney for his innovative project. Students gushed about how much they were learning and their teacher stressed the importance of listening to people who experienced history first-hand. "I couldn't get enough of these guys," student Mike Ball told the *Town Crier* after finishing an interview with some veterans. "This is my fourth one, and each one is unique. Each has their own story." Across 29 interviews, the personal histories of 37 men and women came to life for a group of teenagers who at the beginning of the year had no idea they would finish eleventh grade as practicing historians.

Each spring since that initial foray, his students would venture out across town, talking face-to-face with people who lived through the events they had studied in class, touching

artifacts and experiencing history first-hand. By 2011, a decade's worth of sixteen and seventeen year olds had recorded and analyzed half a century of history, spanning from the Great Depression to the end of the Vietnam War.

“Mr. Delaney, I found something interesting,” Sophia Calder called out from the back of the classroom, her voice trailing off towards the end. Delaney made a bee-line for her, raising his eyebrows as a prompt for her to tell him what she had found. She spoke softly as she told him that she had been looking through the school records for the Wayland High School class of 1916. From the report, she discovered that of the 346 students who were tested, 31.5 per cent were “defective” in sight and hearing. Delaney laughed at the language, suggesting that most of those students probably just needed eyeglasses. No discovery is too small to be recognized.

“The goal is to reveal as much as we can as amateur historians,” said Delaney. The goal beyond that is a little unclear. “We might end up altering course pretty dramatically if they end up discovering a cache of information.” Part of the glory of the project is its nature of uncertainty. Most curriculum is planned by working backwards, starting from what you want your students to know by the end of the unit and then how to teach it to them. There is no way to work backwards from what someone has not yet discovered. While at times that frustrates both Delaney and his students, it excites them all the more.

“It’s not perfect history,” Delaney said. “But it’s what biographers will do.”

Delaney thrives on the thrill of discovering what was previously buried, and in the fall of 2011, he uncovered something unique that would be his biggest undertaking yet. An unassuming sturdy grey Samsonite briefcase from the 1960’s had been left in a storage room and buried under ghosts of history teachers past. It would have stayed buried, were it not for an impending

move to a newly constructed building. Delaney's job as the department head meant he was tasked with sorting through the miscellany. For eighteen months, the rare spare minutes a teacher has between classes were dedicated to deciding what would stay and what would go.

Inside the briefcase was a trove of historical artifacts, all belonging to one man. Somewhere along the way, Lieutenant Corporal Martin W. Joyce compiled all of his records from the span of his life. The papers were different from the projects he had done before – Joyce was from West Roxbury, a town thirty minutes east of the high school. There is no concrete connection between him and Wayland, only speculation that a long deceased former History teacher at the school had somehow acquired the documents and donated them to the department. Joyce himself had passed away in 1962 and had no living relatives. It would be more of a challenge for his students, without easy access to anyone directly involved with Joyce, using only the contents of the briefcase to piece together the story contained therein. An archivist from the New England Historic and Genealogical Society advised Delaney that he shouldn't do the project. Maybe leave it to the experts. Delaney knew better.

The briefcase was in the classroom every day. For the juniors that spring of 2012, it was important to interact with the documents, as images on the projector or by gently touching the files themselves. Delaney taught as he normally did, making sure students understood the core concepts and factors leading up to historical events. At the culmination of a unit, he would probe his students: What would Joyce be doing at this point in history?

When the documents generated more questions than answers, they researched broader topics. The briefcase contained little information about Joyce's childhood, but knowing that he grew up in Boston in the early 1900s, the students investigated what life would have been like at

that point in time in the city. A military form in which Joyce ranked himself as an “excellent” baseball player let the students assume he might have attended the grand opening at Fenway Park in 1912 – or at the very least, that he may have stood on Lansdowne Street and tried to peek through the billboards that lined the outfield wall. It was frustrating for students, especially those who had learned how to succeed in school in the traditional sense by memorizing facts. Delaney didn't have all of the answers like their other teachers did – researching Joyce's life was porous and undefined. Instead, it was their job to find the answers and report back.

The briefcase garnered a fantastic amount of attention for Delaney. In September 2013, *Boston Magazine* published an article outlining Joyce's life and how Delaney used the contents of the briefcase to teach his classes. “Joyce would turn out to be something akin to Boston's own Forrest Gump,” wrote Eric Randall. “A perfect set of eyes through which to visit America's past.”

Actor and director Casey Affleck took notice as well after reading the article, reaching out to Delaney to ask if he would like to collaborate on turning the story into a movie. Affleck left a comment on an article on the high school's journalism website, *Wayland Student Press Network* which discussed the partnership. “It's been said that a great teacher shows you where to look but not what to see,” he wrote. “Any teacher who has excited a mind to learn for the joy learning is a treasure to his community.”

In true Delaney fashion, he was humble about all of the recognition, crediting his students for doing the hard work. So humble that despite the praise he was receiving, Wayland High School's current Principal Allyson Mizoguchi didn't even think to nominate him for Massachusetts History Teacher of the Year when she received the recommendation forms. “At

first I thought, ‘I’ll pass this along to Kevin [Delaney], he might have someone he wants to nominate,’” she remembers. As Mizoguchi was handing him the forms, she realized, “‘You’re the one.’” The state agreed, and honored Delaney with a ceremony at the State House on June 12, 2014. Still, Mizoguchi doesn’t believe Delaney submitted his statements of belief regarding education to the review board to get recognition for his work. “I don’t think it was because he wanted any kind of acknowledgement for the work he’s done,” she said. “I think he wanted to engage in a process where he was reflecting on his teaching. It was spectacularly exciting when he won, and he was so nonchalant about it.”

“Who would even talk about him?” Mia Iannace said. She was surprised to find Private Joseph Loggie in a book that had been uploaded to Google. She wrinkled her button nose and flicked back her straight blonde hair, dubious that anyone in the real world would care about a slice of Wayland’s history. A book about Canadian servicemen in the Great War had dedicated an entire paragraph to the seemingly unimportant soldier. Iannace found that Loggie was originally from the New Brunswick province and died in 1918 at a training camp in Jacksonville, Florida. She wondered aloud how he died if he never actually fought in the war.

“What was happening in 1918?” Delaney probed. Iannace thought for a moment. One of her group mates piped up to suggest the Spanish Flu, the pandemic which killed 675,000 Americans at the same time it took Loggie. Delaney agreed and repeated the cause of death, “Spanish Flu.”

It took Iannace fourteen keystrokes to find the book Loggie was mentioned in on the first page of Google results - a forgotten casualty of war come back to life thanks to a cursory search. On the same web page that lead Iannace to finding out that Loggie had died in that training camp

in Jacksonville seven months after enlisting and without seeing any action, a Google Maps result shows a memorial plaque for Loggie that sits at an intersection in the northern part of Wayland. How many times could Iannace have driven by that very sign on her way to Whole Foods or the Wayland Town Hall without noticing it? More importantly - what else could Mia Iannace find out about Joseph Loggie?

“Even if the stories are in the grand scheme of things not that consequential,” Delaney said, “They’re uncovering something for the first time, these muted voices that are lying in graveyards.” Delaney’s students become storytellers, able to bring a regular person to life regardless of their relative importance. In a presentation to the Daughters of the American Revolution, Delaney explained that the projects are driven by his “belief that students learn most effectively when they take the lead and devise research questions and strategies, collaborate to achieve a common goal, and personally connect with the past by discovering and telling the stories of the people around us.”

There’s an element of searching for treasure when it comes to historical research. Delaney admits he often gets caught up in the thrill of the chase. He’s willing to sacrifice his cool factor for the sake of encouraging students to contribute to the historical record. “The thrill is novelty,” Delaney wrote in his speech to the DAR. “The true discovery of the previously unknown.”

Some students take it upon themselves to discover that unknown. In the spring of 2013, Matt Goddard was driven by a deep curiosity about Martin W. Joyce. Tasked with covering Joyce's life in the 1920's, he contacted the Massachusetts State Police Archives in Worcester. A retired Statie happily gave the enthusiastic student a dozen documents pertaining to his

brother-in-arms and additional information about the history of the organization. The officer even came out to the school to talk with Goddard and his group mates.

Around the same time, Delaney had asked his class if anyone would be willing to go “above and beyond the call of duty” to get a photo of Joyce’s grave at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Already in town to visit colleges, Kevin Skronkowski took on the task. There are 400,000 graves at the cemetery, but Skronkowski was determined to find Joyce’s. The family of five went around grave by grave looking for the right one, his sister eventually finding it amongst a sea of white marble markers. “It was super cool but definitely eerie at the same time,” said Skronkowski. “We had been learning about this guy every day for almost two months and all of a sudden there he was, right in front of me. This is where he would be for the rest of time.”

Next week, Delaney plans on taking a group of students from his two classes to the National Guard Museum in Concord twenty minutes from the school. As to what they will find there, Delaney is keeping an open mind. He knows that the diary of a soldier named Charles Alward from Wayland is in the museum’s archives, but can’t say with certainty that it will be worth the trip. “Maybe Alward’s diary will be insane and really detailed, and we’ll get to know this guy in a deep way,” he says. “But a lot of the diaries in those days were, ‘Got up. It rained. Ate mush for dinner.’ And that’s it.”

Not knowing, Delaney says, is the exciting part.