

A Retrospective of Welton Academy '59

A look into what occurred at Welton Academy in the latter part of 1959.

By Piper Greisl

In the fall and winter of 1959, Welton Academy was struck with both controversy and tragedy. Several reports were made to the school, expressing concern over Mr. John Keating's teaching methods. The end of the term culminated in the tragic loss of life for one student. To gain deeper insight into these events, Piper Greisl reached out to Richard Cameron, a student at Welton.

Piper Greisl (PG): We're going to start with just a basic question. So, Welton Academy. Why? Why'd you go there?

Richard Cameron (RC): Oh, it was the best school.

PG: What made it the best?

RC: The students, the teachers, the reputation; it was kind of a no-brainer for my family and myself. I mean, if I didn't go there, where else would I go?

PG: Did you have any other family members attend that school?

RC: My father.

PG: Okay, moving on. John Keating — what was your first impression of him?

RC: First impression, he was a younger teacher. That was exciting. It wasn't the same old dude teaching us the same old thing. His first class was... Strange, for lack of a better word. I don't know how many teachers would tell you to tear out the pages of your book. He was interesting, to say the least. I mean, he got kids to listen, so props to him.

PG: Did that opinion of him change over time as you continued his class?

RC: Of course, I mean, he presented himself in a way that was very... performative. He told us we were going to learn things, and honestly, I felt as though my education was lacking

with his teaching. I didn't gain the necessary skills that I would have if we had a different teacher.

PG: Would you say that overall, you didn't enjoy his teaching style, then?

RC: His teaching style was fun. That's all I really have to say about that.

PG: Okay. How close were you with the rest of the so-called 'Dead Poets Society'?

RC: They were very — they were very big supporters of Mr. Keating. I think that separated us quite a bit. We weren't ever very close. I usually kept to myself; I was very in my books and very studious, of course, whereas my classmates were a bit more focused on this whole poetry crusade.

PG: Several of these students were also in attendance at Welton for quite a while. Did you know them for a long time prior to this year, or were they people you were just meeting?

RC: A couple of them I knew in passing. It's one of those things where you don't really know them until you have classes with them, or you sit down and talk to them, or they're your roommate. But I knew who they were.

PG: Let's talk about Mr. Keating's final day at Welton Academy. What were your first thoughts seeing the other students standing on top of their desks?

RC: Oh, I thought they were going to get expelled. Immediately. You don't really do that. It was either expulsion or one of them was going to fall off the desk and hit his head so hard he didn't have to worry about expulsion. It was a very valiant and noble effort, I suppose. But you're sacrificing your education for a man that you've known for a few months.

PG: Would expulsion have been an appropriate response to this sort of behavior?

RC: Absolutely. There's an honor code at our school, and I think that a lot of the time we just assume that our behavior will be excused because we're smart or we're talented or what have you. But at the end of the day, we have expectations set and we're told that we need to meet them.

PG: So, is that hypothetical threat of expulsion the reason you did not stand on top of your own desk?

RC: Well, not only the expulsion. I don't agree with Mr. Keating and what he did.

PG: And what was it that he did?

RC: My classmate... Neil. He was very close with Mr. Keating, and it got out of hand, and Neil took his own life because of Mr. Keating's teachings.

PG: Do you regret naming the other poets when asked to?

RC: I only regret it because they didn't come forward themselves. I think that if they were smart, if they were responsible, they would have come forward themselves and done what I did and be honest and let them know that it's not our fault. We're not to blame. We're the victims in the situation.

PG: And so, if you are the victims in the situation, who is the perpetrator then?

RC: Mr. Keating.

The following portions of this interview took place seven and a half years after the events of the 1959-1960 school year. Piper Greisl once again reached out to Richard Cameron in an effort to gain a further retrospective of Mr. Cameron's views.

Piper Greisl (PG): It's been a while, Mr. Cameron. How are you doing? How have the last seven years been going for you?

Richard Cameron (RC): Very busy. I've been very focused on maintaining the goals I set for myself at Welton, and I think I've done a good job of following through.

PG: Since graduating from Welton Academy, what did you go on to pursue career-wise?

RC: I'm a lawyer.

PG: Civic, criminal?

RC: Criminal.

PG: What law school did you attend?

RC: Harvard.

PG: So, we're going to do some reflection and compare it to your previous interview. So, we're just going to go through the same questions and see how your viewpoint has shifted, if at all. Can you recall your first impression of Mr. John Keating?

RC: He was a very magnetic man. He spoke, and you just listened. He was a weirdo, to say the least. He had a very particular way of teaching, and I think it was very captivating, especially as young men, to listen to that kind of thing. And he gave us a sort of understanding I don't think other teachers would have given us.

PG: From what you remember, does that kind of viewpoint shift at all from how you considered him previously?

RC: I unfortunately have to say yes. I think I blamed Mr. Keating for a lot of where I lacked in school and socially, which was not fair to him. He was a fantastic teacher. He may not have been the right teacher for me, but that doesn't change the fact that he really cared, and I think that is what makes a good teacher.

PG: How close were you to the other members of the 'Dead Poets Society'?

RC: We were close once. As far as I know, they all still talk, they're all still quite close. But I'm no longer included in that sort of friendship.

PG: Do you miss that closeness that you once had with them? And if so, why?

RC: It was such a brief time when we were close. Hard for me to look back on it with a clear head and say that I can miss it. I'm not sure what it all is. I mean, the lack of youth talking or what have you. But more often than not, I do miss that. Yeah.

PG: Just to kind of get your viewpoint on some of the events of that year, I spoke with Mr. Charlie Dalton, and he mentioned something involving a cave. Could you tell us a bit about that cave?

RC: The last time I talked about this cave, I lost my friends. But, yeah, we would meet in said cave, and I mean, it was as simple as discussing poetry. It's just a bunch of kids standing around in a circle and singing and dancing and then just talking to each other about stars and girls and our parents. It became less about the poetry and more about being there for each other.

PG: Mr. Dalton also referenced a letter written and signed by the 'Dead Poets Society' saying that girls should be admitted to Welton Academy. It seems that this was not, in fact, a Society thing, and it was written by Mr. Dalton himself. Can you confirm or deny that?

RC: I'm going to protect my buddy Dalton here.

PG: Okay, okay. And what were your, if you can recall, thoughts on that letter?

RC: I thought it was genius. Absolute genius... No. You know, you've got to be there for your buddies and support them, no matter how ridiculous it seems.

PG: Given that statement then, do you regret naming the other poets?

RC: I did what I thought was best at the time. Now, I understand that there were other actions I could have taken. I thought I was protecting my friends. I now know that that is not the case.

PG: Do you regret blaming Keating along those lines as well?

RC: Yes.

PG: And why is that?

RC: I've had very few, if not any, teachers who have truly cared the way that Mr. Keating did. I think by blaming him for what happened, I've truly hurt more than I've helped. Not only my friends, but myself.

PG: And with the topic of Mr. Keating and the other poets, in the past, you stated that your first thought seeing the other students standing on their desks was the risk of expulsion. And that you chose not to because of that risk and because of your thoughts about Mr. Keating. How do you look at that situation now, years later?

RC: I should have just stood on the damn desk.

PG: Why is that?

RC: We, as the Dead Poets Society, our whole mission, or the whole point of us being together, was so that we could be together. I don't think I've ever had friends as good as those. And I regret not standing with them when I had the chance.

PG: If you could say anything to those friends now, what would it be that you chose to say to them?

RC: O' captain, my captain.

PG: What would you say to Mr. Keating now, if you could?

RC: O' Captain, my captain.

PG: Do you have any close friends now?

RC: Not particularly. I have acquaintances. I have friends that I will get a drink with occasionally, but no one that I'm extremely close with.

PG: Moving forward in your life, what are your goals? Your reminders to yourself?

RC: I would like to teach. I would like to become a professor of law, and I would hope to get through to kids the same way Mr. Keating did.

PG: That sounds wonderful. Do you have a school you'd love to teach at or anything?

RC: Welton.