

CONFESSIONS OF A HOUSE MASTER

Peter Thackrey's day is never dull, starting, as it does, with the lambing and finishing at the witching hour

I cherished my image of a house master; short, rotund, dressed in tweed, with spectacles benevolently smiling upon his young charges while he wanders around the boarding house, a thread of smoke rises from his pipe as he shuffles off to bed and sherry at 9pm. It did not take long

(about two minutes after I entered the boarding sector of an independent school) for this beautiful vision to be crushed under the high-octane juggernaut of 21st-century boarding house life that hit me when I became a housemaster at Bedales.

My day starts at 6.30am when I get up and unlock the boarding house for boys going on an early morning run, or to help with lambing in the spring term. I then check the boys are up and chase the stragglers off to lessons before I start teaching French and Russian for the day. After classes I attend meetings or run an activity before the boys return to the house for the evening. More meetings follow: a student council, a chat with a boy struggling academically or socially, a call to a parent perhaps.

We do not have a prefect team in house, but four teachers are on duty helping with the boys each evening, thereby building rapports which pay dividends in the classroom. Our mixed-age dorm system enables authentic relationships to be built-up across the ages with the older students acting as positive role models (with training from me).

Every week a group of boys come to my kitchen for dinner – typically raclette or fajitas. We cook, eat, clear up and chat together. Having put the boys to bed, my staff leave around 11pm, at which point I do a few more rounds, lock up the house and write up conversations from the evening. If I'm lucky, I get to bed at midnight.

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every single night, for as long as it takes. Some nights are joyous; boys have an endless capacity to revel and delight in life and when they succeed I burst with pride. It is supporting the boys through life events both big and small that one builds up an authentic lifelong bond with those whom you have cared for some of their most formative years.

There are, of course, some conversations I will never forget. Dimitri was an overseas boarder who set off a smoke bomb in the toilets. He sighs heavily as he flops into a chair in my office, looking bored. 'About the smoke bomb,' I begin. He rolls his eyes to the ceiling with a groan of frustration. 'Urrrrgghh. Yes.' His thick, rich Eastern-European vowels colour the air. 'And the whole building was evacuated?' He raises an eyebrow in assent. Obstreperous and contemptuous as he is, I feel I have to ask the obvious question. 'Why did you do this inside, Dimitri?' Dimitri raises both eyebrows in surprise. 'Because Peter,' he said, explaining slowly and clearly for my benefit, 'If I do this outside, someone will see it was me. In toilets, no one knows it is me.' His logic is flawless.

Some nights are truly difficult. Telling a boy someone they love has died; trying to heal widening rifts between boys and their friends or family; or trying to reach boys who are struggling with mental health issues can all be heartbreaking. Not to mention helping them negotiate the myriad of challenges they face in the world outside of school: social media, drugs, alcohol, self-harm. The list is endless and as a new parent myself, it can be frightening. However,

this is what I'm trained to do and I take great pride in the astonishing level of expert care we are able to provide for young people while they are with us. The job of a boarding housemaster or mistress is exhausting, all-consuming and not for the faint-hearted. But I am also in the enviable position of being able to say that my job is a joy and a privilege. Even without the tweeds and sherry. ■



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