



WABASH COLLEGE

Class Agents Letter

Alumni and Parent Relations

P.O. Box 352

Crawfordsville, IN 47933

Web site: www.wabash.edu

Email us: alumni@wabash.edu

Phone: (765) 361-6369

Class of 2000

Class Agents

Pat East

Jeff Rice

Tim Craft

Trevor Fanning

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Gentlemen,

I'm sorry I have to write this letter. Unfortunately, there's no news from the College, just a single update about one of our classmates.

Robert Dirks was among those killed in the Metro North commuter train crash last week. I've talked with a handful of classmates and Wallies who knew him. The two things every single person has said, nearly verbatim, are "he's the smartest person I ever knew" and "he's the nicest person I ever knew."

I asked a few folks who knew him well to share a few stories to honor his memory. I'm having a hard time processing his death, despite not being more than acquaintances at Wabash. I don't really know why, maybe it's because we both have two young kids. Their stories helped me and if you're having trouble, I hope they help you too. So sad that such an impactful person is gone so soon.

From Greg Thomas:

I've spent all weekend trying to find one memory or one story that sums up Robert and his impact on myself and my fellow chemistry graduates, but there really isn't just one story that does him justice. I met Robert as a prospective student and when we both showed up to Wabash in the fall of 1996, we had an instant bond with both of us coming all the way out to Wabash from the Pacific Northwest. Our friendship was immediate and only grew as we wound up sharing so many classes together over our time at Wabash. Almost instantly you knew that Robert was different. As Wabash men, we were all bright and talented when we arrived, but Robert was different. He quickly mastered every concept thrown at him and more times than I can count he helped me through difficult topics in the classroom. We spent plenty of time together away from the classroom and study tables- often to break

from our studies to play cards (Robert loved cards...card games, after all, are math) or video games or the occasional game of racquetball. The thing that has stayed with me since graduation and will stay with me forever is that no matter what we were doing- chemistry, cards, or sports- Robert was always patient, kind, and respectful. A true Gentlemen's Gentlemen in every sense of the word.

I have the utmost respect for all of my Wabash brothers, but it is rare for men of that age to look at a peer not just with respect, but with sincere admiration. And I had that for Robert. Not just for his immense scholarly talent, but for who he was as a person, even as a young man. In our four years at Wabash together, not once did I hear Robert utter a cross word about anybody or anything. I'll always remember Robert not just as the most brilliant person I've ever known, but as the nicest person I've ever known. I was lucky to have shared that time both with Robert the scholar and Robert the gentlemen.

From Chris Huffer:

Robert was an amazing mind. We Chem majors all knew from about 6 weeks in that he was operating on a different plane than the rest of us. But he was always really nice, never hesitated to explain things that we didn't understand. We loved him. We were always sort of proud that the smartest guy on campus (we were sure of it) was a chemistry major. He was just as brilliant in Math. I think he was winning the "Problem of the Fortnight" on Dr. Poffald's bulletin board starting September of freshman year. He was kind of a stereotypical genius in a way - I don't think I ever saw him wear anything but sweat pants and grubby T-shirts to class. Ryan Tipps and I called him out once in The Bachelor in our article about how to impress women. One of our points was - "Don't dress like Robert Dirks." I read in the article that he did find a wife... of course another genius PhD from Cal-tech.



A few of us Chemistry majors were talking before comps about who might get distinction. Dr. David Phillips was there. We told him, "We think N = 1 to 4 of us could possibly get distinction." Dr. Phillips said, "You're sure of one?" A second passed, and then he smiled. "Oh yes. Mr. Dirks."

I hadn't seen or talked to Robert since graduation, but his death has hit me kind of hard. For such an amazing talent to be lost so senselessly, such a freak bit of bad luck, it doesn't seem just.

From Joe Gerber:

I don't know that I've got one really good story as much as I've got so many good memories of him. I guess one story that stands out in my mind is that during our freshman year, I was taking a math class that was proving quite difficult for me. I had just received my score back from a big test...and the results were not good. Like a lot of freshmen at Wabash, I was used to doing very well in school and so this really shook me up. I had never really done this poorly on a test before and I was starting to wonder if I had what it took to make it at Wabash. Rob found out about it and gave me a real pep talk about how difficult that class was and how "we all have a bad test or two" and how I should just get up off the mat and move on. I took his encouragement to heart and tackled the class as best I could. I didn't get an A in the class, but I didn't do too poorly. But later in my time at Wabash, I realized (somewhat humorously) that Rob had absolutely no idea what he was talking about during that pep talk! For Rob, this class was not a "difficult class." He had actually tested out of two levels of math higher than the course I was taking. And Rob had never "had a bad test or two." He had a 4.0 GPA at Wabash even though he was a double major and double minor! I think this story says a lot about Rob. He was an incredibly rare combination of unpretentiousness and brilliance who was willing to help out an academic peon like me in my hour of need. I am extremely grateful for the time I was able to spend with Rob Dirks at Wabash College and I am so deeply saddened by his tragic departure. My thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends, and loved ones.

A couple of links to news articles about Dirks:

<http://www.nhregister.com/general-news/20150205/vignettes-of-victims-in-metro-north-train-crash-with-suv>

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-05/robert-dirks-chemist-at-d-e-shaw-research-dies-at-36-in-crash>

If you have any stories you'd like to share, please email me at pat.east@hanapinmarketing.com. I'll include them in the next letter.

Yours in Wabash,

Pat, Jeff, Tim, and Trevor