

## Garden-Variety R-MA Success Story By Kathy Heer

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Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think we'd be sending a child to boarding school! That was for the very rich, or the very dysfunctional, ...or so we thought prior to our R-MA experience. Our relatives and friends obviously thought the same thing when we told them our decision to send our son to R-MA in 2004. They were mystified. "*What's he done that you'd have to send him to military boarding school?*" they asked. Well, we didn't *have* to do anything, but on hindsight sending Michael to R-MA was one of the best things we ever did—and our son was not a standout kid, he was only one of the many "garden-variety" R-MA success stories. I am very quick now to correct anyone's misperceptions about boarding school in general, and R-MA in specific—first and foremost it is a co-ed prep school, with a military structure. There are dances, outings, activities, clubs, sports and traditions. My son had some ups and downs while there, like all adolescents in high school, but he made good friends, had some great times, pulled a few pranks, and got a great education. He gained in independence and maturity, and Michael furthered his understanding of the world, himself and others as an R-MA student.

Let me start at the **end** of my story...Michael graduated in the top quarter of the 2007 class at RMA, lettered in two sports, took one AP and two honors classes his senior year, and served in the Cadre as an officer. As he walked across the stage to receive his diploma, I could not help but reflect upon how far he had come. Indeed, I realized that every kid walking across the stage that day probably had a story to tell, however, I can only tell you our story.

Michael was an excellent elementary school student, a survivor of the Spanish immersion program in Fairfax County Public Schools. We had every expectation that middle school and high school would go well for him, and he started seventh grade in the Honors Program. Adolescence hit him hard however, and it suddenly seemed easier for him to be the class clown, rather a scholar. Entertaining his peers came naturally, and certainly that required less effort than his schoolwork. By eighth grade the teachers were convinced that he was ADHD, although this had never been mentioned previously. If it wasn't the water balloon in Spanish class, it was being caught mooning someone in the locker bay. Other kids seemed to get away with murder, but Michael got caught for every single infraction it seemed. He wasn't even particularly good at being bad at that point! Nothing he did was mean or malicious, just the kind of annoying, off-task shenanigans that exasperate teachers.

As Michael's interest in academics seemed to plummet, we hired tutors, sent him to study skills classes, and put him on medication. Worst of all, we became terrible nags, sacrificing our evenings to organize his assignments, standing over him forcing him to study, and drilling him for tests. We were exhausted, and we were getting nowhere fast. We found ourselves constantly angry with him over his lack of effort and poor grades. We also began to realize that it would be very difficult for Michael to make changes at school after a point, without changing his environment. His secondary school was very large and with nearly 1,000 students in Michael's grade alone, personal attention was just not available, and certainly not for a kid with an attitude.

By the end of eighth grade Michael was a youth who would simply back off, or create a diversion, rather than take a risk or try anything new and risk failure or humiliation in class. The good news was that he was never in any real trouble and his companions continued to be the more accomplished, high achieving kids he'd known from elementary school.

My husband and I began talking about private school. We quickly realized that transporting Michael to and from any local private day school and trying to make it to work on time in northern Virginia, would be a huge logistical problem for us. Then an acquaintance at our Methodist Church mentioned Randolph-Macon Academy to us in a casual conversation. We'd never heard of it, but quickly went online and checked it out. It looked pretty good, and we could see that boarding school at R-MA would cost us about the same as attending local private day schools, and would solve the transportation issues.

Nevertheless, we decided to set up a plan and give the situation at home one more year. (On hindsight we really wish now that we had gone on and sent him to R-MA for his freshman year!) We set academic goals for his freshman year and laid out a plan of activities for him to get involved in. He joined a club, ran track, and played spring lacrosse. He got his grade average up to a respectable 2.8. Things were looking better for us at home, but it was still taking hours of our time each evening to work with him on every test, homework assignment and project. He seemed to do little academically on his own. We got caught up in the trap of trying to force our son's success through our own efforts, rather than fostering his. We began to realize that a dramatic intervention was needed for all of us!

We began joking about "boarding school" about mid way through Michael's freshman year in public high school. On a trip to visit Grandma in Roanoke we got off at Front Royal and swung by Randolph-Macon Academy just to look around. *Hmmm – the kids walking around looked rather normal, the campus was very pretty and there wasn't a prison guard to be seen anywhere!* For the heck of it we decided to come back for an Open House a few weekends later. We left the Open House with my husband and I both wishing we could go to school at such an interesting place ... and Michael was very quiet on the way home.

As Michael's freshman year ended at home, the situation was on a modest upswing, but several things were now glaringly obvious to us. The only sport Michael had ever loved was basketball, and his chances of making the high school team was nil due to the cut throat competition to be on the team. Secondly, it was clear that our son was now a discouraged and unmotivated learner, and there were just too many students in the school for anyone to really care about that. After his stint as class clown in eighth grade, he had moved on to become the invisible C student, the kid not doing so badly in school that anyone would notice, but not doing well enough that anyone would have any higher expectations for him. Randolph-Macon Academy started looking pretty good to us if the place could live up to its hype, so we applied "*just to see*" if Michael would get in. He was accepted, and we were suddenly faced with a huge, expensive, very emotional decision. Could we afford it? Would Michael see it as being punished or "sent away" for his shortcomings? Would he feel we loved his younger sister more than him? Could we bear to have our 14-year-old son live away from us? Were we abdicating our role as parents? All these things tumbled around in our minds over and over.

In the end we offered R-MA to Michael as a fresh start, a wonderful opportunity to do things he would not be able to do in his public school, and tried to present the whole thing as a grand adventure. We talked about the pros and cons a lot, but let him decide in the end. The two big selling points (from his adolescent point of view) was getting to sleep later on school day mornings since the bus came at 6:45 am at home; and a shorter school year at R-MA by a couple of weeks (no teacher work days or Monday holidays)! Michael decided he would give R-MA a shot for one year then as a family we would re-evaluate the situation. We were scared to death!

It would be great if I could tell you that Michael turned things around that first year, but it would be a lie. His grades actually dropped a little overall, because the teachers knew his name

and held him accountable. While he did managed to get his homework and assignments turned in, he still continued to think that test taking was like a game of chance, you go in cold, roll the dice and see what you get. It was frustrating!

As Michael integrated into the R-MA social fabric that first autumn, he gleefully related all the legends and lore of the exploits of generations of R-MA cadets in the best tribal tradition. As the new boys in the dorm jockeyed for status and position, any exploits in their pasts were exaggerated and dramatized for storytelling. From what Michael told us in the beginning, we worried that his schoolmates were con artists and criminals, and that R-MA was right up there with Alcatraz in terms of rules and supervision! Michael marched a few tours and exasperated the resident life advisor (and his parents!) more than once that first year. It was truly an adventure for all of us! Yet while it was not always apparent on the surface, progress and real changes were brewing underneath during that first year at R-MA for Michael.

The funny thing was, we never had to work to get Michael to go back to school on Sunday nights after a weekend at home. In fact, he would get all packed up and ready to go on his own and *tell us to hurry up!* By Christmas he was bringing some of the “criminals” home for the weekend and they were nice kids. They said *please* and *thank you* and did not steal the teaspoons or towels! As we came to know his friends and meet their families, we realized that R-MA students represent a cross section of society, as you’d find in any school.

Michael enjoyed playing on the JV basketball team that first year, and the varsity coach was actively courting him to return and play the next year on the varsity team. R-MA was slowly reeling Michael into the fold, like a fish on the hook, using the personal touch as the bait!

So our first year at R-MA year ended. We had survived the boarding school experience and it wasn’t bad at all. In fact we had discovered that our time with Michael was really enjoyable since we did not have to nag or worry about what was due at school! Michael seemed to appreciate us more after living away from home, and he was more open to doing things with us or just hanging out at home during vacations and weekends. We began to see each other in a new light.

In many ways our son had had a good year at RMA, but we debated the question of paying for another year at R-MA when academically Michael’s grades had not improved. We talked with his old high school guidance counselor, and we talked with Dean Ezell. In the end, however, we once again let Michael decide. We knew that any decision we made was pointless if he did not “buy in” to it. It was his high school career after all. In the end he opted for RMA, much to our surprise, because he had done his share of complaining about everything from the food to his roommate. That decision to return for the second year (drum roll here) was the turning point. An invitation to be a part of the Cadre, the officer corps of the Junior Air Force ROTC Unit, came during the summer, and Michael realized that he was probably the very last candidate selected due to his mediocre grades, but it was something he was hoping for and it meant a lot to him. Col. Sadler called Michael at home and told him that he would need to bring his grades up.

So we packed Michael up and sent him back to R-MA for a second year, his junior year in high school. The magic moment, which we’ll never forget, came when we received Michael’s first quarter grades. We thought at first that someone had made an error – **his report card had all As!** More important than the great grades, however, was the fact that he had made the effort and had proved to himself that he could do it. While we never saw straight As again, he made the Dean’s List every quarter from that point on. Michael had done it all on his own. He had found the formula and regained his academic motivation. He learned that being on the Dean’s

List felt good, and it had privileges. What helped him turn the corner? It helped that the Cadre demanded good grades to stay in, and the varsity basketball coach said Michael could be on the team, but to get any playing time his grades had to improve. The R-MA “family” cared about our son, they had reached out to him and nudged him along, and he had responded. Real changes takes time and old habits die slowly so on hindsight, so the decision to return to R-MA the second year, so that the seeds that had been planted the first year could grow, was the turning point in our situation.

So, our R-MA story ended after three years as Michael walked across the stage to get his *advanced* diploma (*with a concentration in English*) on a hot June morning in 2007. The college counseling he received was excellent and the application process painless as he did it all at RMA. He was admitted to four universities and will attend Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond this fall. Our hopes are high but we recognize that college will present new challenges for our son as for any freshman. We do feel he is well-equipped to handle dorm life and we hope his time management will revert to what he learned at RMA. He has already lived away from home, managed his money, learned how to wash and iron, make decisions and fend for himself because of his boarding school experience. His maturity level and experience, in many ways, is beyond that of the typical college freshman.

Our son is now a tall, confident young man. Michael made some really good friends during the last three years at R-MA that he has “grown up with” in every sense of the word. He developed a love of mountain biking because two brothers at R-MA introduced him to the sport. He played two great years of varsity basketball, and two wild seasons of varsity lacrosse while at RMA. He has a letter jacket hanging in his closet to show his kids someday. He knows young people from all across the USA and the globe. As parents, we feel certain that R-MA changed the course of Michael’s life. Michael learned how to open himself up to possibilities at RMA, and that effort has its rewards.

Michael has done things we never thought he would do, in the past three years. He traveled twice with a church mission group to Honduras and acted as translator for the group. He read thirteen Shakespearean plays, and memorized the opening siloquy of Richard the III, in an Honors English class his senior year. I would have fallen over laughing if someone had told me in eighth grade that he would ever accomplish such a thing! The A in Physics was nothing to sneeze at of course, but c’mon, but how many people have read that much Shakespeare? Now that’s educated!

So let me end by noting that our son did not apply to the University of Virginia or receive an appointment to West Point after his three years at R-MA. No one offered him a free ride to college nor was he valedictorian of his class, but please keep in mind that I said in the beginning that he was just a garden variety, generic R-MA success story! And that, folks, was good enough for me and worth every penny we spent!!!!