

Ten Minute T(ea) with Mr. John Bird

*Interview conducted by Sydney Olney
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“I’m still trying to wrap my head around the idea that people join Model UN on purpose,” says long time house counselor and Phillips Academy English teacher Mr. Bird, with a wry grin on his face. He had been asked about the weirdest thing he had ever overheard from students.

Have you ever had questions for teachers that you weren’t comfortable enough to ask? After surveying peers, a list was put together of seven questions that Andover students wanted answered. When thinking of faculty members who would be comfortable answering these questions, one person instantly came to mind. Mr. Bird, who also serves as a dungeon master for Saturday night Dungeons and Dragons, is perhaps one of the most forthcoming and honest adults on campus when it comes to life as a faculty member. Sitting across from him in Commons, Andover’s dining hall, I continued to ask him questions:

Q) Have you ever heard a student complain about you, not knowing that you were in hearing range?”

A) No. I haven’t. I’ve been lucky.

Q) What about your colleagues?

A) Oh yeah. But I think that’s probably true for everyone. We live together here, so everyone feels like they can share these things, and you definitely overhear people complain (or have them flat out complain to you) about another teacher entirely.

Q) What’s your favorite/least favorite thing about being a house counselor?

A) The best is getting to know students outside of the classroom. The worst is the hours. You stay up really late when you’re a house counselor. Even when you’re not on duty, it ends up spilling over into your life so that you find yourself going to bed later and later. If I’m on duty on Saturday night, I don’t get to bed before three.

Q) Really?

A) Yeah. You have to unwind. Everyone has to see that your lights are on so that they know you’re awake.... It’s just hard. I’m not an extraverted person, so when I spend a lot of time with

people, I need time to myself to recover when I'm done. I'm going to be fifty this year, and that's too old to be staying up until three on a regular basis.

Q) How awkward is checking in on students getting parietals?

A) It's kind of awkward. I would like to think that I would be one of those house counselors who can talk openly about sexuality and things like that, but you know, when it comes time to sign the sheet, I have a hard time talking about it. I can talk about things in class that I can't talk about to a student in my dorm; I can say things to students in my dorm that I can't say in my classroom. It's a similar problem. So, I generally don't ask a lot of questions. I used to ask more. And then going to make sure that they're following the rules, that's the other part, and that's not that hard.

Q) Have you ever heard of a house counselor knowing that an illegal parietal was going on, and ignoring it?

A) Nope, I've never heard of that. There's no juicy gossip from me, sorry.

Q) Do you ever "ship" students with each other? Have you ever made specific pairings for a group project to set students up?

A) No. That seems like a really bad idea.

Q) Why?

A) Everyone's a different persona in the classroom. How one person is in the classroom isn't the same as how they are outside, and they aren't same in their other classes.

Q) Any other reasons why?

A) It seems really inappropriate for a person to do that—just purely professional ethics.

Q) Do teachers here ever joke around with each other about troublesome or problematic students?

A) Yes, of course. We talk about you guys all the time. The good ones, the ones who need more help, the ones who are more problematic, all of them. That's what we do. If this were a widget factory, you guys would be the widgets. What else would we talk about? This is our job.