

*Bachelor of Education, Ottawa 1993*  
*BAH French Translation, Queen's 1992*

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*In her own words: "Loves learning languages and working with children."*

**M**ichelle Barchuk cannot claim French heritage, but she has succeeded in making the language and culture defining patterns in the fabric of her life. From core French classes in elementary school to a Queen's Honours degree in French Translation to work with bilingual students from around the world, she has characteristically woven her love of the language into whatever comes her way.

Now a core French instructor at Royal St. George's College, a private boys' school in Toronto (Grades 3 to OAC), she laughingly admits that actual classroom teaching has come as a bit of surprise to her. "I find it quite intriguing that I've actually ended up teaching. I got here in a roundabout sort of way that I could never have predicted. But when I think about it, each of my work experiences prepared me for the next step."

She credits the translation degree at Queen's — which gave her highly specialized language skills — for really launching her on the path to all things French. For one thing, it gave her the unforgettable opportunity of studying in France. "I was so lucky to be in a language program that required a year abroad. I highly recommend such a transfer to any Queen's student."

After returning from France to complete her final year of the translation degree, Michelle faced a major academic decision: tackle graduate studies in translation or train to be a teacher. Open to either possibility, she mailed in the necessary applications. "I decided to wait to hear the results before I seriously considered either option." When she got the nod from several education faculties, she settled on the University of Ottawa, figuring it made sense to live in a bilingual city while she learned how to teach French as a second language.

Michelle eagerly entered the eight-week teaching practicum required for her Bachelor of Education degree. (During the final year of her translation degree, she had enjoyed being a French monitor in a Grade 7 immersion class). Even so, she graduated feeling she needed to log more teaching time before she had the confidence to set up her own classroom. "I decided to step away from the teaching altogether. I knew that if I really missed it I would come back."

Instead, she registered with an employment agency and completed a variety of short-term contracts. "It was time of major transition for me. For the first time since I was a kid, I didn't have school to look forward to in the fall. That created a big void in my life. But you know what? It was also the first time I had the chance to step back, take a breath and think about where I was going in my life.

Michelle's bilingualism helped her score her next position, her first paying position that involved working with youth. Applying for the job of summer supervisor with a bilingual Canada Employment Centre for Students was, she recalls, "a very elaborate process. I felt like I was being grilled for the job of Prime Minister! Walking out of there I was sure I didn't get the job, but it turns out that my previous work experience and bilingualism impressed them." Michelle found herself busy juggling a fistful of projects and responsibilities. "I was responsible for all French services, including liaising with francophone students, employers and media."

By summer's end, however, a job with a more international flavour beckoned. After pulling out all the stops to find a new job — firing off résumés, making phone calls and setting up information interviews with previous employment contacts — she spotted a newspaper advertisement for the position of Coordinator of Academic Programs with Canadian International Student Services. For two years, she coordinated enrollment and homestay programs for international high school students spending a year in Canada. She pulled out when the job became too stressful. "I didn't want the majority of my life to take place in the office until 7pm. I needed some semblance of a life after work."

But her habit of reading newspapers closely paid off again when she caught an advertisement for the position of Assistant Director of Admissions at the Toronto French School, a bilingual, co-

educational independent school (pre-Kindergarten to OAC). Calling for a combination of administrative and language skills, the job seemed to be aimed directly at Michelle. "I thought, 'This is ME!' I really could do this." She snapped up the position, which involved, among other things, evaluating candidates for the school, and administering and interpreting aptitude tests. "It was great experience."

But two and half years later, Michelle started casting around for a new challenge. The classroom still called. "The prospect of

teaching both excited and terrified me. I had been away from direct classroom teaching since graduation and figured I had forgotten a lot. But I was bored and was prepared to be terrified and very possibly learn something new instead of remaining in my predictable job."

"Through a friend I heard about a teaching opportunity at Royal St. George's. I met with the principal and told him about my various work experiences — and about my fears! He was very encouraging. He assured me that I could make mistakes and continue to learn and challenge myself. Boy, was he right!"

For Michelle, mastering the twists and turns in her career has only increased her self-confidence. "My year abroad taught me a lot about myself. That's where I learned to speak French well. I really believe that if you can leave behind everything familiar for a year, you can pretty much tackle anything that comes your way afterwards!" ❖

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