

## Ten Minute T(ea) with Ms. Jackie Bonenfant

*Interview conducted by Adi Gandhi  
November 22, 2016*

Q) Do you have any recollections of instances where the administration might have intentionally ignored misconduct on the part of a student due to special circumstances?

A) In my experience in the Dean's Office, well, we have the student handbook, which states the guidelines for our community. When we learn about something that's happened, we follow the student handbook. If someone's cheating, then it's pretty clear what the next steps are. If someone is caught drinking, then there's a procedure for that, too. So I think when something does come to this office, we are very conscious that our responsibility to students and families is to make sure that we're following the handbook. I can't imagine that students or families would trust Milton Academy if they felt that we had some things in our student handbook that we didn't follow. And it could seem as if we know things that we don't act on, but I think that it just appears to students as if we know more than we actually do, and sometimes I think we act on things without students' knowledge. If a student comes to the Dean's Office and says "I saw this student do something," we would probably say, "Thank you very much for that information," and we would follow up, but we might not go back to the student who reported and say, "Just so you know, this is what happened." We wouldn't do that, so I do think that there are things that the administration might do of which students aren't aware.

Q) So, after all your time here, you don't believe that there are any exceptions to any rule in the handbook that would call for ignoring the punishment laid out by the handbook?

A) You know, I think there are always exceptions. But I do think that, in general, we try very hard to uphold the handbook, because that's what guides us. Why should you trust that you, as a student, would be treated fairly, then? If you were caught cheating, and someone else was caught cheating, and nothing happened to the other person, but you were DC'ed, then how would that be fair? How could you trust Milton to treat people fairly if we had things written in our handbook that we just didn't do?

Q) But what about in the cases of mental illness or disorders? Wouldn't that call for overlooking the what the handbook states?

A) I think that, depending on what had happened, it might be hard to say that what happened was because of the mental illness or not. Could it have been a factor? Yes. But could we state with a hundred percent certainty that it caused the student to act in a certain way? I don't think we could. And, if it's something so personal and private, we aren't going to put such an issue out for the student body to know, so, again, it might seem as if we are ignoring the rules for that student when we really aren't. I do think that one of the things about Milton is that we do try to look at

all the circumstances that could have led to what happened in each situation. One of the things we say is that context really matters. That's why we have the student sit with a group of students and adults. We want them to explain what happened. I think there's a big difference between a kid who says, "I knowingly handed in somebody else's paper," and a kid who says, "In my old school, we could copy things from online and paste them into our paper, and that was normal practice." Those are obviously both plagiarism, but with two very different circumstances. I think we do think about the circumstances involved in any particular instance. So I think those factors could make a difference in the next steps of dealing with what that student did.

Q) Sometimes students have good relationships with teachers and might let it slip that they did something that was against the rules. It could be something so trivial as skipping study hall. Do you think the faculty member has a right to overlook what that student did in favor of preserving their relationship?

A) I think the teacher should do for that student what the teacher would do for any other student who did the same thing. We can't have favorites. I'm glad when students and adults have good relationships because I think that's one of the things that makes Milton the wonderful place that it is. What that also means is we need to hold students and ourselves accountable for doing what we're supposed to do. I also don't think that holding students accountable means that we don't like them or don't value them as people. It means that, in one particular instance, they made a wrong decision, and they must face the consequences. There's a lot of learning to come out of that. Kids who make mistakes aren't bad people; they make a mistake in that one moment. We all do that, and we all will continue to do that throughout our lives, but that's what it means to learn and grow and become the people that we are. I don't think we do anyone any favors by saying, "Yeah, I know you did that, but we're going to overlook it." I don't think that's who we are. We have an obligation to treat everyone fairly. One thing we should all understand is that when you screw up, you say you're sorry and take the consequences and then move on and don't do it again. I think that's part of being human.