

To Whom It May Concern:

“I wish I were a monkey! I wish I were a monkey!” In a small town in the south of France, a barefoot man dances around the classroom chanting this seeming nonsense. Crazy? Perhaps, but this bizarre dance also marked the first time I understood the subjunctive. This is just one example of the lengths to which Jacques Weber will go in order to help his students understand. Jacques is one of the most charismatic, engaging, funny people I’ve ever met, a skill that serves him well as a teacher. One would expect a group of high school girls to dread having to go to class during the summer. Even when set in beautiful Provence, school is school. However, thanks to Jacques’s creativity and enthusiasm, class quickly became the highlight of my day. I have never had so much fun and at the same time learned so much. When Jacques was teaching, I was never bored. Even the most tedious grammatical concepts seemed fun, an intriguing puzzle he urged us to solve. His obvious love of language was contagious and he managed to get every student in the room as excited about direct objects as he was. Every day brought on an exciting new challenge, both in and outside the classroom. Jacques taught us to use our newfound knowledge in fun and practical ways, whether by taking us to a grocery store after teaching us food vocabulary or organizing a soccer game after we learned about the World Cup. He wasn’t teaching for some arbitrary assessment; he was preparing us for life.

I have rarely encountered a teacher who cared as much about his students as Jacques. True, we did not find ourselves in a traditional academic setting: a summer immersion program in France where he served as both teacher and program director. However, I believe that Jacques would have showed the same genuine interest no matter where we had met. Jacques was more than our teacher. He was our mentor, our friend, our surrogate father thousands of miles from home. He made each of us feel capable of handling the daunting challenge of life abroad and was always there to lend a helping hand or just a sympathetic ear, whether our problem was with verb tenses or our host families. He worked tirelessly to ensure that each of us got the most out of our summer experiences, organizing endless activities to expose us to the culture in which we found ourselves submerged. His was a truly all-encompassing approach to language and culture. We not only learned vocabulary and grammar but also history, geography, sports, etc. He was always open to our feedback, tailoring the trip to fit our specific interests.

It is not an exaggeration to say that my experience in France that summer changed my life. On a purely academic level, with Jacques’s help my French improved monumentally. When I visited colleges that fall, I stayed after a class to talk to the French professor, and she was shocked to learn that I had only spent five weeks in France. “You must be a fast learner,” she concluded. While this is true, I think Jacques deserves much of the credit for the huge strides I made. More importantly, I grew that summer as a person. La Ciotat taught me to be more confident, both in and outside the classroom. Jacques encouraged all of us, never leaving us a moment’s doubt in his belief in us. He is one of the best teachers I’ve ever had, and also one of the most influential people I’ve ever had the privilege to know. I cannot recommend him highly enough as an engaging teacher, a supportive mentor, and a genuinely wonderful person.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Harlan

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