

STUDENT TESTIMONIAL

“You don’t have to do it alone, everyone needs advisors and allies.”

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Jessica Kain received her diploma from the International School of Los Angeles, California, US, in 2004. She now lives and works in Mustang, Nepal, serving as Founding Director at the Marpha Foundation and the Rosehips Center for Creative Learning. She holds a BA in Studio Art and Anthropology from Dartmouth College, an MFA in Sculpture and Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University, and completed a residency at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

How did you reach where you are today?

I have lived in Nepal for the last five years. Here, in a village called Marpha, I collaborated with local women to start Marpha Foundation, a small NGO founded in response to the expressed need for improved education. The pervasive model of formal schooling in the area perpetuates a learning culture based on memorization, grades, class rank, and obedience. Our communities reported a lack of motivation among students and teachers and openly wondered, “How can this change?”. Our contribution to this ongoing conversation is to provide a fluid framework to explore alternative ways of learning that are both participant-centered and culturally responsive. We pursue active research through our full-day early learning center, community libraries, artist residency, and extracurricular classes incorporating English language, the arts, and ecology.

Why did you decide to pursue the IB diploma?

After years in the French school system, with long-standing plans to pursue university in Europe, I decided that I wanted to stay in the US and felt the IB would best prepare me for the US university system. It also gave me something I badly wanted at the age of fifteen: more choices. The fact I could choose subjects and levels of study gave me an important sense of agency that fostered both responsibility and criticality regarding my learning. The preponderance of the extended essay in the IB also had a big appeal. I loved writing and strongly disliked tests. The fact that there were multiple forms of assessment made me feel like success was possible. I strongly credit the IB for keeping me engaged at a time when I could have easily been alienated from my own learning. It primed me to pursue, and later foster, learning environments that among other qualities can be described as inclusive and reflective.

Which IB teacher inspired you the most?

From her clothes to her syllabus, everything about Barbara Kuhl inspired me. She was my IB English teacher, but I had worked with her before that in both junior high and high school. To this day, she is a prominent figure in my pantheon of inspiring women. Especially in moments as a teacher and facilitator, I find myself asking “What would Barbara say?” *Matter of fact* and *deadpan* come to mind when I think of her communication style. She possesses the incredible gift of clarity and humor, which I always equated with grace. It was these qualities that gave us students space and confidence to ask questions that both propelled classroom conversations and our own personal paths of inquiry. “Interesting is an empty word.” I think she said that. Of all my teachers, from grade school to grad school, Barbara gave me the most rigorous training in how to articulate and pursue my curiosities. What she taught me was discipline. And it is discipline that has given my passions direction.

What advice do you have to offer IB students?

The best advice I can give is to show up. Success starts with being willing to participate. And while energy and momentum are important, I’ve also learned that pauses are necessary. The greatest service to any activity is taking time to actually see what’s going on. I might get in trouble for saying this, but consider a gap year. What else? Seek out mentors—ask for help and communicate your curiosities. You don’t have to do it alone, everyone needs advisors and allies. And, please read! Read a lot. Spend time with different communities. Practice compassion when communicating. Listen deeply. Question your presumptions. Check your privilege. And always remember to spellcheck your writing, answer emails on time, and stay in touch with the people you care about. Good luck!