The Bronx High School of Science Alumni Foundation

Introducing Alumni Stories with J. Sebag '69

Bronx Science is proud of our more than 50,000 alumni who are making an indelible mark on the world and their communities. The Bronx Science Alumni Foundation is excited to introduce our new feature entitled Alumni Stories, through which our incredible alumni will share reflections about their time at Bronx Science and their lives.
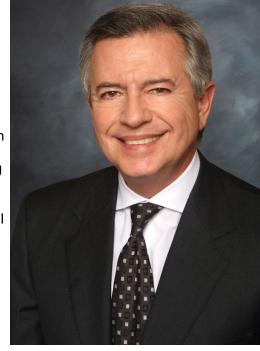
We are honored that Dr. J. Sebag, Class of 1969, has agreed to kick off our series. You can read his story below. We hope you enjoy getting to hear from your fellow alumni their stories in their words.

A Bronx Science Tale

A 28 year-old man living in Israel assembled his wife, two infant kids, and meager worldly possessions to take a bold chance. He set off for New York in pursuit of a dream only possible in the land of opportunity; a land where a man with no money, no lofty name, and no property could dream the American dream. I thank that man, my father Joe, for being so intrepid.

Slight in stature and not courageous or obviously talented, I could not become a successful American quarterback nor rock star. Education was the path for me, and fortunately it suited me. The day I was accepted to The Bronx High School of Science was the first great day of my life. I liked that they had decided to build a tile mural of the great scientists of the past instead of a swimming pool. In fact, prior to matriculating I coerced my father into driving past the school on Sundays, just so I could gaze upon the entry mural and dream again and again. Of course, reality was not quite what I had dreamed, but there are countless reasons why I was in the right place at the right time in my life. It was 1965.

One important reason was that in 1968 Bronx Science established a computer center when no other school was so advanced. I came to learn that this was characteristic of our school's forward-thinking, advanced approach to education. Fortunately, I was able to get into the class that taught computer programming, and the journey began. Picture a bunch of skinny, bespectacled kids (some wearing slide rule tie clips) scurrying about with stacks of punch cards to feed into our IBM 1800. Now picture what happened when a stack was dropped on the floor! It was all so exciting, and the electrified air was palpable. Now imagine the buzz generated when faculty from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, also in the Bronx, came to visit <u>our</u> high school computer center.

Einstein wanted to establish its own computer center and sought insight and programmers. I was again fortunate enough to be selected and got my first real job in life - programming computers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. I had just turned 17 years of age. Recall that in 1968 few knew what a computer was, let alone how to program one. Besides, high school kids were cheap labor. But we weren't just kids from any old high school, we from <u>The</u> Bronx High School of Science. Indeed, after that first summer the experiment was deemed such a success that Einstein paid us all a raise (to minimum wage!) retroactive to the day we started two months earlier. We were rich. In fact, I worked there for years to pay my way through college.

Learning to program computers as a junior at Bronx Science and working at Albert Einstein as a programmer changed the rest of my life. Apart from greatly helping to organize my thoughts and actions, these experiences opened doors and created unimaginable opportunities. I often counsel students that the key to success is not just to score well on tests and achieve scholastic excellence. We can all do that. The key is to simultaneously distinguish yourself as an individual while surrounding yourself with people who are smarter and more talented, driving you to work harder, at times just to keep up. Effort will always compensate for any perceived or real deficiencies. Individualism is particularly difficult for an immigrant child whose only desire is to fit in and be accepted, so the messaging can be confusing and conflicting, especially for a teenager. But, learning to program computers in 1968 at Bronx Science separated me from the crowd. Doors opened to paths that enabled me to fulfill my father's great American dream. I attended Ivy League universities, learned from outstanding professors and exceptional fellow students, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship at age 32, and ultimately became a vitreo-retinal surgeon.

Yet, life has a strange way of taking us down paths that were not initially obvious. We cannot always predict the consequences of our decisions or events in our lives, nor who will be the key mentors or enthusiasts that befriend us along the way. But what a ride. Consider the following: the first team I worked with at Albert Einstein consisted of neurologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and engineers studying cortical brain wave electrical activity during shifts in attention. As the computer programmer on the team, I was included in periodic research meetings, where all gathered. However, the meetings could not start until a man in scrubs and a white coat sporting a stethoscope over his neck came striding in. WOW! Imagine the impact on a teenage kid witnessing this lofty level of importance…I knew then that I wanted to be that guy when I grew up. Indeed, I have become that guy, but in life there is always an alternate, parallel dimension. Had I not been so impressed by that neurosurgeon, I would have very likely stayed with computers, before 99.9% of the world knew about computers and the pervasive power of computing. I often muse that had I stayed in computer science in 1968, Bill Gates might have come looking for me.

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