

Dan Abramowicz: I'm Dan Abramowicz, Graduate School class of 1984, a former President of the Association of Princeton Graduate Alumni and a member of the Princetoniana Committee. I'm doing a project on the history of the marshals for the Princetoniana and I appreciate your help. Heather, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the project. Before we begin, would you please briefly introduce yourself?

Heather Butts: Yes, my name is Heather Butts. I'm the class of 1994, the great class of 1994 at Princeton University. I am an Assistant Professor at Long Island University, and I run a non-profit called Health for Youth that works with underserved young people to help them transition from high school to college and college to the graduate world. I also have a lecturer position at Columbia University and St. John's University. So, I'm also a lecturer at those schools, and of course I'm the current Grand Marshal. One technically becomes the Grand Marshal the year before you actually perform your first duties. So, I became Grand Marshal in 2018, and then I served as a Flanking Marshal to the then Grand Marshal, Dan Lopresti. And then in 2019, I had my one and only in-person Grand Marshal duties, which I did, and then for the last two years, I've been a Grand Marshal in virtual times, in the COVID times.

Dan Abramowicz: Great. Well, as you know, we're going to talk about changes in the Marshals or in the P-rade during your term. And of course, you've got some great examples of big changes. We will get to that shortly. In the meantime, were you a Marshal prior to becoming a Grand Marshal, and for roughly how long?

Heather Butts: Yes, I was a Marshal approximately 15 years before I became the Grand Marshal. So, I was first introduced to marshaling by Beth Rose, class of '77, and her father Charlie Rose, class of '50 who was the Grand Marshal when I first became a Marshal. So, I was very involved in the Alumni Schools Committee, and so I got the attention of Beth because I was doing a lot of interviews of young people who were from all over the world.

Dan Abramowicz: Excellent.

Heather Butts: And, that may not seem like such a big deal in 2021, but 16, 17 years ago it was a bigger deal because we didn't have the resources that we have today. So, I did that, and then I've been a Marshal ever since. So actually, including COVID times, it's closer to about 18 years that I've been a Marshal.

Dan Abramowicz: Great, and I remember when the School's Committee made a commitment to try to interview as many students as they could from all over the world. You're right, it's easier now today, but back in time that was a much more challenging objective, so that's great that you were able to help.

Heather Butts: Right.

Dan Abramowicz: So, let's talk a bit about your view of the role of the Marshals, being the current Grand Marshal. What do you see as their key role or function in the P-rade?

Heather Butts: That's a really great question. I would say that the role of the Marshal has always been one of supporting the actual P-rade participants, so making sure that it's safe, making sure that people have a good time, but that they have a good time and are not put in harm's way. We work closely with the University's Public Safety team, and we work closely with the University. So the ability to be able to just make sure the P-rade is safe is one of the important jobs of the Marshals. Another is making sure that the P-rade runs efficiently. We like to get P-rade completed in under three and a half hours. That's the goal. The last two years, that's been pretty easy, as they have been virtual. I now have the distinction of having the fastest P-rade as a Grand Marshal, but I'd rather retire that distinction. Trying to get P-rades finished in under three and a half hours is a real feat over the last few years, because of the larger class sizes. So, that's been our goal for the last few years. And then also, and this has become more pronounced in the COVID era, working with the University to really think through the logistics of P-rade and how the P-rade will run and what it will look like and how we can work with the university in terms of, will there be an in-person P-rade? Will it be virtual?

So, thinking about how the P-rade actually functions and how it runs and what that will look like, that's also key. And, we get a lot of information from the University, and the other Grand Marshals will talk about this, but we get a ton of information from the University about different flows and different things that different classes will be doing and themes of different years and how that'll impact on it, but the main aspects of the Marshal's duties are to make sure P-rade is fun, but safe.

Dan Abramowicz: Excellent. Thank you for that, and I think you've really already answered the next question I had in mind, which is, has the role of the Marshals evolved or changed at all during your tenure?

Heather Butts: Has the role changed since COVID?

Dan Abramowicz: Yes, and I think you pointed out one example, which is kind of a more proactive role by the Marshals in getting involved in the logistics, not just sitting back so to speak. Is there anything else that you can think of in terms of an evolving role?

Heather Butts: The big one is the more proactive role that we've taken in the last two years. When there's been the virtual P-rade, the Marshals actually worked very closely with Gary King, the voice of P-rade, in order to essentially get people to know what it is that Marshals do. A lot of people think we're those people that wear those orange floppy hats, and we kind of stand around smiling and they don't really know the behind the scenes of what we're doing. But also, which is why I love this project, they don't know the history of the Marshals. They don't know where we came from. They aren't really clear as to even what our role is. So, the

last two P-rades have been very gratifying for me because it's given Marshals a chance to be able to behaviorally show what it is we do and how we do it.

And by doing that, we've actually gotten, I would say, more of a foothold to be able to be a real part of P-rade and what it means and how it functions. So, that's really gratifying. I had a student in one of my classes a couple of weeks ago come up to me and say, "Hello, Grand Marshal Butts." And I said, "Wait, what?" And she said, "I'm Princeton Class of 2021, and I saw you on the virtual P-rade and that's how I know who you are." That never would've happened three years ago and that's not to say, oh, I'm so happy that somebody recognized me from the virtual P-rade. I'd rather be in-person than not, but the fact that she knew I was a Grand Marshall, and also knew exactly what we do, was great! She could talk about the role we play and could quote some of the lines some of the Marshals used in the virtual P-rade. That was all really wonderful.

So, that's what the virtual P-rade has done, that's the change that I've seen during COVID, and I think we will only continue to evolve as an organization and grow as a group. The other thing that has changed is we now have monthly meetings, as you know, and I implemented that basically to start to have the Marshals really bond as a community. So as Marshals, a lot of the time we see each other in our Marshal roles and we see each other at P-rade, but we don't necessarily get together to socialize or get to know each other outside of P-rade. So, that's another huge change that we've implemented, having virtual get-togethers, being able to converse with each other on a more regular basis and having a virtual Marshal's reception after reunions. So, those are all ways to bond us and for us to really create a community that I think was always there, but over the last couple years I hope has grown even stronger over time.

Dan Abramowicz: I would endorse that. I think your leadership and making the Marshal role more of a year-round function has made a difference. And you alluded to perhaps one of the more significant changes in the P-rade in its history, and that is the fact that we went to a virtual P-rade under your tenure, given COVID and the need to be focused on safety.

Heather Butts: Right.

Dan Abramowicz: What was that like for you? Because it was a dramatic change, no doubt.

Heather Butts: We had been planning obviously for an in-person P-rade for 2020, and then in March it became increasingly clear that in-person wasn't going to happen. So, that was challenging. I really feel for the 00's and the 05's. For some of the other classes it's been challenging, it's been difficult, but there's a little bit more warning for them than for those classes. And so, to have to shift the way they did, people did it with a lot of grace and a lot of dignity, but that was difficult. So, that first year I would say was challenging just because that shift happened within the span of a couple of months, and then people really had to sort of

wrap their heads around the fact that there wasn't going to be an in-person P-rade, that their hopes of having that really weren't going to come to fruition.

And, then sort of think about this in a different way. Now in 2021, unfortunately we kind of all knew that's where it was heading for 2021. So, we could plan out the virtual P-rade with a little bit more time and be able to make sure that we were able to give even more acknowledgement of the major reunions that maybe it was a little more challenging to do in 2020. So, that was a shift. It was very difficult for the classes that had to do that, but people really came together and rose of the occasion to be able to give the P-rade the dignity it deserves online.

Dan Abramowicz: That's great, thank you. And, just thinking about the role of the Marshals in the P-rade, is there a particular example that comes to mind for you about the positive impact that the Marshals have had on the P-rade?

Heather Butts: I think it, again, goes to all the little things that you don't see, from letting people know where restrooms are, to making sure that young children don't run into the middle of the P-rade and get hurt. It was something of a joke with the other Marshals, but I'm convinced one of the reasons I became Grand Marshal is because three years in a row I pushed golf carts that got disabled at the top of the route down through Poe Field and to the finish line. So, those are things that... and every marshal has a story like that ... where they pushed the cart or they helped a family get across, or they helped to make sure that a float got through in a way that it should have.

And, this may seem very sort of, oh well, but what's the big deal? But, you add all those small acts up and you get an ability to be able to run a P-rade in a way that is enjoyable, fun, safe, timely, efficient, and that people will fondly remember. So, there are many such stories of Marshals who pitched in whenever needed. For example, think about all the Marshals when you get to Poe Field during the rain, they've had to make sure that the carts can get through and the people can get through and that the people are safe all the way.

I think about 2018 when we had the lightning storm and all the Marshals that had to band together to make sure people got to safety, even the people that didn't want to get to safety, those who said, "Leave me alone! I'm going to stand out here with the lightning," but we had to work with those people and make sure that we didn't leave them alone and we got them into somewhere safe. So, that's an example where the Marshals were the unsung heroes ... those Marshals who you don't see, trying to get Nassau Hall accessible for people, or making sure that people get out of the rain. Those are the stories that maybe you don't hear about so much, but every Marshal has several of those stories and it's incredible.

Dan Abramowicz: I like the fact that you've kind of pointed out that it's a lot of little acts that add up to the impact and you're right. All those little acts make a big difference.

That said, maybe one of the more interesting things that you experienced as a Marshal was the lightning storm and having to deal with that and how some alumni decided that they didn't need to take safety.

Heather Butts: Right, exactly. It wasn't an issue. They didn't need to worry about it, exactly, because the Marshals dealt with it.

Dan Abramowicz: Great point.

So, I was wondering, what is your fondest memory of being a Grand Marshal in the P-rade?

Heather Butts: I've physically been the Grand Marshal of the P-rade once, but I would say honestly one of my fondest memories is when the Marshals were preparing for the virtual P-rade and we all got together to do an online screenshot and we were all there. I just looked out at the sea of amazing people that I've known for years, who worked really hard to make sure that this all came together, and I just thought to myself how proud I am that I was selected to be the Grand Marshal of this team and how proud I am to be part of an incredible group of people who I'm glad are getting the recognition that they deserve through the virtual P-rade, and hopefully through your incredible project.

So, I think that was just a huge moment of pride, just looking at everybody when I was seeing that. But again, it's the little moments where you see Marshals helping others that really make a difference. When you are the Grand Marshal, you get to kick off the P-rade and then you see it from an interesting perspective. So, it's actually really interesting to see that happen, and it's really neat and it's really cool. And so to the extent that I'm able to do that, it's a real joy.

Dan Abramowicz: Terrific.

Now let me give you an opportunity to add anything else that I didn't think to ask you or anything you may want to mention about the Marshals or the Grand Marshal role.

Heather Butts: The thing that I would really like to emphasize, and I'm so glad that you're talking with the other Grand Marshals as well, is that while faces change and people change over time, the core of who we are as Marshals, is the same. I bet when you talk to the other Grand Marshals, you're going to hear very similar themes. It's not that we collaborated together in terms of what we're going to talk about, but I think there are going to be central themes of comradery and love for Princeton. That's ultimately why the Marshals wear that floppy hat and stand outside a P-rade for 3 hours and 29 minutes and 59 seconds, hopefully, doing a job that can be challenging and can be a lot of work.

And, the reason is because these people love Princeton. They love this school and they love what they do and they love what the school stands for. So, I think you'll hear that thread throughout all of the Grand Marshals that you speak to. And so, I think I would just say that the faces may change, the Grand Marshals may change, but the spirit that we all embody in terms of a love for Princeton and a real commitment to the school and the traditions that it stands for are unchanged. There's a reason why we want to keep the virtual P-rade going because there are traditions that if you let a year or two go by, it could be challenging for people to remember what the traditions are.

So, you want to keep those traditions alive. You want to make sure that people know what they are, that they have a sense of pride in them. So, I would say all of that goes to this notion of pride and being proud of the school and the job that we do and that'll be a thread that I'm sure you'll hear from all of the Grand Marshals that you speak to.

Dan Abramowicz: I'm sure you're right. Heather, thank you again for your willingness to help me with this project.

Heather Butts: Yes, but I just want to again thank the school, and the staff like Mibs Southerland Mara and Kimberly Collins. They're incredible! And I want to thank all the previous Grand Marshals who have been so generous of time and spirit with me to get me up to speed in terms of what I need to know to be a Grand Marshal. So, none of this work would be possible without them and the incredible people at the University and obviously you. So, I want to thank you for taking this on because it's a beautiful project and I can't wait to see where it goes.

Dan Abramowicz: Thank you for that. And thank you again for your leadership. It has been great catching up with you again, Heather.

Heather Butts: You too. All right, we'll be in touch.

Dan Abramowicz: Be well, stay safe.

Heather Butts: You too, bye.