

# Acceptance

A LEGENDARY GUIDANCE COUNSELOR  
HELPS SEVEN KIDS FIND THE RIGHT COLLEGES—  
AND FIND THEMSELVES



*David L. Marcus*

THE PENGUIN PRESS

New York

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ALSO BY DAVID L. MARCUS

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Why Teenagers Get in Trouble—and How Four of Them Got Out*

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TO JUSTINE,  
*who guides me*

AND TO BENJIE, TATIANA, AND ALEXA,  
*who make the journey complete*

## PREFACE

### One More Year

In a small office at the back of a deserted high school, Gwyeth Smith Jr. was puzzling over the college admissions season that had recently ended—the cruelest in his thirty-plus years of working with applicants.

Smitty, as friends called him, was the director of guidance at Oyster Bay High School on Long Island’s North Shore. He had close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair, a matching mustache and beard, and looked younger than his sixty-two years. It was a humid morning in August 2007, a week before the start of classes, and he was clearing his desk to prepare for the fall rush. He studied a newspaper clipping about a nearby school’s dismal luck with the Ivy League.

PRINCETON: 4 of 5 rejected

YALE: 5 of 6 rejected

BROWN: 11 of 12 rejected

HARVARD: 7 of 8 rejected, and 1 wait-listed

The school, Northport High, prided itself on its two dozen Advanced Placement courses, its arts program, and its service project in Central America. Little of that had swayed the Ivies this time. In all, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Brown had accepted just three of Northport’s thirty-one applications.

Every high school in the area except Oyster Bay had been hit hard by rejections. A few miles away, the Mineola guidance department was baffled by MIT’s snub of their salutatorian, a science whiz with near-perfect SATs. At John F. Kennedy High, on the South Shore, eight of nine University of Pennsylvania applicants were turned down, along with all seven who tried for Washington University in St. Louis. Across the country, counselors could list student council presidents, Eagle Scouts and scholar-athletes who’d been spurned by first-, second-, and third-choice schools.

The acceptance rates at the colleges explained why. Penn took only 15.9 percent of applicants, Stanford 10.3 percent, Columbia 8.9 percent. Duke rebuffed more than half of the 1,381 valedictorians who applied. And it wasn’t just the elite private schools. Binghamton, of the State University of New York system, had gotten so many early applications that thousands had to be put off for decision until spring. Even safety schools were no longer safe: The University of Miami, once derided as “Suntan U,” got nearly twenty thousand applications for two thousand openings.

And yet Smitty was serene. Most of the kids at his small public high school were admitted to their first-choice colleges, and many had sorted through competing offers. A boy who floundered at the start of the admissions process was accepted at all seven

schools he applied to; he'd chosen Rice over Cornell. One girl hadn't just gotten into MIT, she had actually *rejected* MIT. Instead, she accepted a scholarship to Case Western Reserve, where professors requested her help on a research project.

Smitty had made sure that Oyster Bay was one of the first districts in the area to buy software called Naviance, which displayed scattergrams with students' scores and GPAs and a summary of where they'd been accepted or rejected. With a couple of clicks, Smitty was reminded that Penn had admitted one girl even though twenty-three kids in the senior class had had better grades. A few more clicks showed where other Oyster Bay students were heading: Duke, Cornell, University of Chicago, Brown, NYU, Northwestern, George Washington University, Rice, Tufts, Boston University, Barnard, Berklee College of Music, McGill, Michigan, Wisconsin, Delaware . . .

What made the acceptances more remarkable was that Oyster Bay was not a school of national stature. For decades it had been overshadowed by its neighbors, Syosset, Cold Spring Harbor, and Jericho, which dominated science competitions and churned out National Merit finalists. Some of the best public schools in the country could be found across the Long Island Sound: Scarsdale and Chappaqua, Greenwich and Westport. And just down the road were the academic bastions of Great Neck and Port Washington, better known to generations of *The Great Gatsby* readers as West Egg and East Egg.

But Oyster Bay had Smitty. Parents called him the "guidance guru." Few counselors, they said, lived and breathed the applications game like Smitty. He could find the perfect school for the most quirky kid, coax a sensitive essay from the toughest jock, and induce the nerdiest engineering student to exude poise in an interview.

Legend had it that Smitty was so well connected he could simply pick up the phone and request that a college make space. That, of course, was an exaggeration, but Smitty was so gifted at getting the absolute best out of his kids that he got them to open doors that otherwise might have been closed. At every step, he pestered them, championed them, and encouraged them. He nudged students into difficult courses, drilled them before they took the SATs, and relentlessly made them revise their essays.

"The application process is all about discovering who you are." That was one of Smitty's sayings. So was, "Everyone has a story to tell." His job, he liked to say, was not to simply flaunt scores but to get students to present their most compelling selves to admissions offices.

Smitty's mystique helped him get away with telling parents some blunt truths. As a father went on about how his daughter *had* to get into Emory's premed program, Smitty's cheeks would redden. "Sir, with all respect," he'd interject in his gravelly voice, "are we talking about your ambition or hers?"

Smitty had become known beyond Oyster Bay. A few years earlier, *Worth* named the fifty public schools with the highest percentage of graduates going to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Four Long Island powerhouses made the list, and so did the little upstart Oyster Bay. Although Smitty enjoyed the resulting accolades, he believed the magazine's premise was superficial. He worried about the increasing emphasis on a

handful of prestigious universities. While he encouraged applicants to aim high, he also pushed kids to look beyond brand names for the right fit. He tried to get his “youngstahs,” as he called them in his native Maine accent, to see where they were headed long-term—to view college not as an admissions prize but as a path to becoming a pediatrician, teacher, YouTube engineer, you name it.

When he looked back at the past season, his proudest achievements were not Ivy acceptances but the months he spent helping students reveal their best truths. He thought of the boy who came to terms with his father’s death while writing his applications, or the girl, a first-generation American, who wrote revealingly about her dad growing up in Paraguay with one pair of shoes.

As Smitty sorted through his papers, a slender, six-foot-tall boy with short brown hair cleared his throat at the doorway. Every year, Smitty took on several students as special projects. Jeff Sanders was one. Although he was among the most popular kids in school, some teachers saw him as a slacker.

But Smitty appreciated things in Jeff that those teachers missed. He was a three-sport athlete who wanted to go into sports management. Even now, he scouted community and high school players to help them get recruited, writing reports for a Web site read by coaches.

Jeff was a selfless kid in more ways than that. Smitty had heard, for example, that the boy’s family had taken in several relatives who were in crisis, something Jeff never talked about. He often stayed home on weekends to look after his young cousins while other students partied.

Jeff was also an enthusiastic kid, perhaps too much so. He was ready to rush his college hunt despite a problem—he still hadn’t stepped up as a student. Smitty knew that was now essential. Jeff would have to deliver better grades, and find a compelling way to tell his story in his applications.

Jeff sat down in Smitty’s office, and after small talk about their summer vacations, they focused on Jeff’s college hopes. He reported that he’d already chosen a school where he wanted to apply early. He’d have to finish the package in seven weeks, which worried Smitty. He knew that meant the most current grades the admissions office would see would come from Jeff’s junior year.

Smitty turned the conversation to Jeff’s record. If he remembered correctly, the boy’s grade point average was 78.1. He pulled up Jeff’s stats on the computer to

check, and he was right: 78.1. Smitty swiveled around in his black executive chair and looked Jeff in the eye. He felt his job at such a time was to be honest, not blindly supportive.

“Before we get into early applications or any applications at all, you need to demonstrate you can handle the kind of work you’ll get in college.” His pitch lowered. “I’m not sure what went wrong, young man, but you had a dismal junior year. When an admissions committee sees that GPA, you’ll get blown out of the water.”

He told Jeff that early decision would be a bad idea. He needed to pump up his transcript first—not just in grades but in the quality of his classes. Smitty knew admissions staffs look at both factors. He suggested that Jeff switch out of Discrete Math, which taught the basics for consumers, and take precalculus instead. He also suggested that Jeff take physics. If he did well with such challenges, it would show colleges he was academically serious. Smitty knew that was asking a lot of Jeff, but he’d learned that if you push kids, they’ll step up.

“You’re going to be very busy,” Smitty said.

“I’ve been busy my whole life. I like being busy. I go crazy if I’m sitting around doing nothing.”

Smitty wanted to make sure the boy left on a positive note. “You’re smart, you’re a leader, you’ve got so much going for you,” he said. “You need to throw yourself into academics as energetically as you throw yourself into everything else. I have no doubt you can do it.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Smith,” Jeff assured him.

Smitty was also hoping that Jeff would be motivated by his girlfriend. Jenna took difficult courses, turned in assignments early, and had a 107.7 GPA, making her the salutatorian. She wanted to apply to Harvard, Columbia, and Brown. If some of her work ethic rubbed off, Smitty felt, Jeff would have a shot at a selective college. If it didn’t, he wouldn’t.

Smitty had decided that this would be his last year on the job. His colleagues at high schools across the country were bracing for another difficult application season, with a record 3.3 million students in America’s class of 2008. Fear of this competition would drive kids to send out more applications, which would only make things worse. This final year, Smitty knew, would be unlike any he’d had since starting his career in 1971.

While Jeff Sanders was one of Smitty’s special projects, he had thirty other kids to

personally worry about. Every spring, Smitty handpicked advisees from the junior class. He liked a cross section: a handful of hard-luck cases, a few unfocused kids, some who were middle-of-the-road, and several top performers aiming for big-name universities.

Five of his advisees particularly intrigued him. There was Jeff, who now knew he needed to step up his game quickly. Allyson, an excellent student, fretted that admissions officers would dismiss her as just another Jewish overachiever from the suburbs. Chelsea was gifted at writing and photography, but procrastinated badly. Lee felt pressure to live up to the Ivy expectations in his Korean American community. And Riana, an African American girl, had lived with expectations that weren't high enough.

As he sat in his office on this hot August day, Smitty was already plotting the college quest for these five and the dozens of others from Oyster Bay who faced what would likely prove the toughest admissions year ever.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

### Yale Loves Me; Yale Loves Me Not

Soon after moving to the suburbs of New York a few years ago, I wrote a series of newspaper stories about students applying to college. I met private consultants who steer kids into advanced classes and exotic internships to impress admissions staffs. I wrote about parents going to a college fair . . . at an elementary school.

In the prosperous village of Jericho, I asked a mother when the college-admissions frenzy starts. “In utero,” she said.

Since my days as a high school senior, a new industry had been born. It was built around getting affluent kids into the fifty or so most prestigious colleges. One Manhattan consultant started working with students as early as ninth grade, and charged forty thousand dollars—as much as a year at some private colleges. The rich had become engaged in an admissions arms race. That left middle- and lower-class families at a disadvantage. They couldn’t afford packagers. All they had were how-to books and Web sites—and, if they were very lucky, an exceptional guidance counselor.

Far more than people realize, a wise college counselor can make the difference in getting in. Perhaps more important, the best counselors understand their job isn’t just knowing the world of financial aid, or the difference between the filmmaking programs at NYU and USC; it’s helping teenagers see their strengths, their potential, and how to make those things come alive in an application to the right school.

As part of my newspaper series, I set out to find one such counselor. When I asked Long Island parents and principals, the same answer kept coming back: “See Smitty.” They meant Gwyeth (rhymes with *faith*) Smith Jr. of Oyster Bay High. One mother told me she bought a house in the district because of his reputation.

And so, one morning at the start of admissions season, I drove to Oyster Bay High, a stately eighty-year-old brick building just up the hill from the Long Island Sound. Smitty was waiting for me in the guidance office, and for the next hour, in his reassuring Maine accent, he told anecdotes of bright kids who choke on the SATs, of parents who meddle too much, of the essay that saved an applicant’s candidacy, and of his life’s goal of helping students onto the best path after high school.

To watch Smitty in action, I flew to Pittsburgh for an admissions conference that attracted five thousand participants. While other counselors ordered morning coffee, Smitty was roving the campus of nearby Duquesne University, checking the student union and grilling undergrads about their classes. Later, at the convention center overlooking the Allegheny River, he greeted admissions deans, asking by name about their spouses, their children, and, at one point, even a dog.

Don't apply to Harvard.”

It was the only time my father offered advice on my college hunt. My dad had gone to Bard in the early 1940s. It was a freewheeling campus above the Hudson River. He loved it, but halfway through he went off to World War II, and returned to finish at Harvard. After Bard, he told me, Harvard struck him as too impersonal for undergrads.

My guidance counselor's main role was making sure I had enough credits to graduate. For my college tour, I boarded an Amtrak up the New England coast. My first stop was New Haven, where I strolled through Gothic archways, eavesdropped on dining hall conversations, and fell under Yale's spell.

Two of my brightest classmates, David and Teddy, also applied. I knew Yale wouldn't accept three kids from Hartsdale, New York. Realizing I needed to outshine them somehow, I wrote an essay on how I was smitten by everything Yale, from the small seminars to the deep-blue T-shirts. I sent it to the *New York Times*, which published it on the cover of its education section under the headline YALE LOVES ME; YALE LOVES ME NOT. The *Times* included a drawing of a gawky teenager—a fair depiction of me—gazing into a mirror at the image of a broad-shouldered young man smoking a pipe and wearing a sweater with a big Y.

Yale rejected me anyway, and accepted my two classmates.

I ended up at Brown, in Providence. I disliked college for the first year, then connected with an inspiring history professor, began exploring the city's old world richness, and gradually felt I was where I belonged. I got over my pangs for Yale.

I later learned that one of my classmates dropped out of Yale. Not long ago, I e-mailed the other to ask how he liked it. His answer reflected what I have come to see as the core philosophy of Gwyeth Smith Jr. of Oyster Bay High.

“If you're there for the right reasons,” he wrote back, “you'll love it. But going because you feel you should go or because people will be impressed are not the right reasons.”

His e-mail echoed lessons I'd learned as a higher-education reporter for *U.S. News & World Report*. My assignments took me to many little-known colleges that had transformed students, from Alma College in Michigan to Simpson in Iowa. I realized there are hundreds of great schools out there.

At one point, I came across the same realization in my own life. After I graduated Brown, with a goal of working as a foreign correspondent, I took a nighttime Spanish

class at a community college in West Palm Beach. My Spanish courses at Brown had been taught by grad students more interested in discussing Cervantes than teaching the language. The community college took a more pragmatic approach. That's where I learned to speak Spanish, and eventually, thanks to my time at a campus with all the appeal of a strip mall, I became a foreign correspondent.

As I spent months watching Smitty advise students, I realized he was applying the same lessons my father had passed along. It's not about the brand; it's about the fit. In Smitty's eyes, this had to do with seventeen-year-olds thinking through a first big step toward adulthood. He realized that American teens have few rites of passage. Applying to colleges was one of those milestones. Though he wasn't the kind to speak of it in these terms, he viewed himself as an elder helping them through this ritual.

Smitty had other principles you don't hear in every counselor's office. He felt the application process wasn't just about getting in, but about awakening kids to themselves, and to a life's path. He tried to make students see college not as an end, but a start.

When he felt a student wasn't ready for higher education, he urged parents to consider a "gap year" of work, travels, or public service. He usually lost that argument. Mothers and fathers usually felt their kids needed to keep up with their peers. Only later, when their children struggled at college, would many parents see he was right.

When Smitty announced his plans to retire, I decided to chronicle his last year. I'd read many books about the college pursuit, but never one focused on the crucial role of an exceptional guidance counselor.

I was especially intrigued by Oyster Bay High, a public school with kids from all backgrounds. I wanted to see how Smitty and these students competed with privileged kids who had the dual advantages of a prep school background and private admissions consultants. One such consultant, Elizabeth Wissner-Gross, had a busy practice near Oyster Bay. In her guide, *What Colleges Don't Tell You*, she warned, "Summer is your child's chance to win the edge, to beat the competition. . . . By fall, your son or daughter should possess an entirely new repertoire of abilities. Don't let your children waste their summers 'hanging out.' "

Smitty took a different approach. He told parents that teenagers—even high school seniors—need to be children at times, and not get swallowed by the application frenzy. He felt kids' best chance of getting in was not to package themselves but to reveal

themselves.

This seemed the perfect time to observe an admissions wizard at work. When I watched Smitty in 2007-2008, parts of the game were changing. Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Virginia had just abandoned early decision programs. Economic turbulence made families everywhere take a closer look at state universities. Most intriguing to me was Smitty himself. I didn't want to write a book about status-obsessed applicants from exclusive high schools getting into Harvard; I wanted to show how a special counselor applied nearly four decades of knowledge to help Main Street students find, and afford, the right school.

In short, I wanted to see not how to “win” the admissions game, but how one man teaches students to play it in the way that charts the best course for their lives.

## Cast of Characters

### THE ADULTS

**Gwyeth Smith Jr.**, guidance director

**Kathi Reilly**, English teacher

**Matt Brown**, social worker

### THE SEVEN STUDENTS

**Jeff Sanders**, a jock struggling to become a more focused student despite upheaval at home

**Allyson Frankel**, who worries admissions offices will see her as just another Jewish girl from the suburbs with good scores

**Chelsea Flynn**, a free spirit who loves writing and photography

**Lee Kim**, a conflicted overachiever who wants to honor his Korean immigrant parents but find his own way

**Riana Tyson**, a black student stressed by an overloaded schedule as she seeks the college diploma her parents never got

**Nathaniel Coleman**, whose mother is involved in choosing the college where he will study engineering

**Layla Eran**, the valedictorian who often stays at school late into the night

## **OTHER STUDENTS**

**Jenna**, the salutatorian who wants to go to college near home

**Colin**, a crew star being recruited by Ivy schools

**Curtis**, still having surgery from a childhood disease and searching for a scholarship after his father abandoned the family

**Dominique**, an actress applying to theater programs

**Kasper**, an Iranian American whose dad was killed by a train just before the start of senior year

**Andreas**, a loner with hidden struggles from his brother's death