SOLACE IN A STRIP: ALUMNUS’ COMIC GIVES VOICE TO GRAD STUDENT WOES

For more than 10 years, Piled Higher and Deeper, a comic strip created by Jorge Cham (PhD 2003 ME), has helped graduate students to know that they are not alone in the stresses and ironies of their lives. Anyone who has been up all night grading exams, or who has struggled to obtain publishable research results, or who has wondered how an adviser’s advice can sometimes be so unhelpful, can identify with the students who appear three times a week in the pages of the Daily and more than a dozen other college papers around the country.

Cham studied robotics at Stanford and taught for a couple of years at Caltech after graduation. But now he publishes the strip full-time. Not bad for an activity that started as a way to procrastinate.

Q: Please tell us about how the strip got started back in 1997.
A: I started Piled Higher and Deeper my first full quarter at Stanford. I was pretty swamped, taking a load of classes and T.A.-ing, I was also trying to impress my professor by doing a free, independent project in the lab so he would hire me as a research assistant for the rest of my PhD. Despite all this, I started the strip to procrastinate and also from having this sense that there were all these stories about the graduate experience—trying to find funding, being a T.A., being swamped with classes—that weren’t covered anywhere else. You don’t see it in the movies or the TV shows, you don’t see it in the comic pages. You especially don’t see it in the student papers, which mainly focus on undergraduates. It felt like there was a huge number of people on campus that you don’t really hear about.

Q: Did you just start drawing a few and take them to the Daily?
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Q: This has continued on beyond just the pages of The Daily. What is the strip’s presence on the world stage now?
A: From the very beginning I put the comics on my home page and then I put the Web address, which at the time was phd.stanford.edu, on the bottom right corner of the comic in the newspaper. I think what happened was that people who read it at Stanford, and liked it, would tell not only other people at Stanford, but also their friends that they knew from undergrad who were now going to other grad schools. Those people then told people that they were in the lab with and that they were in class with, and then those people would tell their friends from undergrad, etc. It’s been steadily growing for the last ten years, mostly through that network of people that know other people that go to grad school.

At some point I started offering the strips to other newspapers and MIT picked it up right away, and then Carnegie Mellon picked it up. I think right now there are maybe fifteen or twenty newspapers across the country that publish it. Mostly, the audience is online, where the website phdcomics.com gets over 9 million page views a month at last count. I once counted how many schools were represented in the website’s subscribers and the number came out to be bigger than 1,000.

Q: So, what are you doing today?
A: In 2005 I decided to do the comic full-time. I draw the comics, I run the business that publishes the books, that sells the merchandise, that does the Web site, and I also do a lot of speaking engagements, talking to students about the common themes in graduate school, why a lot of students burn out, and what procrastination is about. I’ve been invited to speak at more than 150 schools so far.

It’s been an interesting journey. I think only in the last three years was it really possible for me to do it full-time.
Q: How do you keep your material fresh now that you’re not in grad school anymore?
A: Right, the question is, how deep are the scars? I get asked that a lot and what I usually say is that I still try to write from the heart, in two senses: First, everything that I write has to relate somehow to something that happened to me or something that happened to someone close to me, or something that I could see myself going through. So, people send me ideas a lot, and I use a lot of them, and I credit them at the bottom of the comic, but in the end it has to relate to something that I went through. The second thing is that it’s still interesting for me to write about graduate students and why they go through with this and what it means to do research, what it means to look for new ideas and be in academia.

Q: Being a graduate student certainly is a unique experience, where in some ways you are both a customer and an employee at the same time.
A: Yeah, this is something that has evolved a lot since I started. One of the things that happened while I was at Stanford was that the GSC (Graduate Student Council) was just starting to organize. There were big protests about housing that ended with a big camp-out at the quad. Across the country, other grad students also started to organize and some were even unionizing. At the same time, from the administration point of view, there was a wave that started in the early ’90s to look at undergraduates as customers—to move away from the concept that students should be glad to be here, that two-thirds should not expect to graduate, to be more like, well, you’re paying for this and we want to recruit better students, so we better work hard to keep you. That was for undergraduates. I think that wave moved to graduate schools around the late ’90’s. I think you’ve seen a lot of schools start to pay more attention to graduate students and their lifestyles, not just their research, and the process by which they graduate. A lot of university offices across the country are forming with a sole focus on graduate student issues.

Q: Still, graduate student life has many stresses.
A: Yes, I think the power dynamics between students and professors are always going to be there. The question of what grad school means in terms of people’s personal development and careers is also going to stay there. Why am I doing it, is it worth it? That’s something that people are always going to stress out about.

Q: So you got the PhD here in I believe Professor Mark Cutkosky’s group, right?
A: Who is, by the way, a great advisor. He’s not at all a role model for the mean professor in the comic. Also heard that Mark has to give the disclaimer, when he’s talking to these students, that he’s not like the professors in the comic. Sorry, Mark!

Q: Isn’t one of the student characters based, at least in some part on Professor Beth Pruitt?
A: We both worked for Mark for a while (we came in at the same time) and we partnered in a couple of projects. We’re still good friends. We also have a lot of friends in common from working in the same research center. But yeah, there is one particular character (Tajel) that I based on a lot of people, and she was one of the inspirations in the sense of being someone who is very assertive. And has curly hair.

Q: Of course, you weren’t here just as a cartoonist. So what were your research interests?
A: I knew from early on in my undergraduate days that I wanted to be a professor. That was my goal the whole time. I went Stanford to study robotics. I came in at a very good time. Mark was preparing a big, multi-university proposal and I got to work on that. When the proposal got accepted it became my source of funding.

Q: So did you build a particular robot then?
A: The goal was to build cockroach-inspired robots. Robots that could run very fast, but at the same time be very robust in the sense of being simple to control and also physically able to resist damage. The idea was to first of all look at biology. The cockroach uses a lot of innate squishiness in the joints, in the legs, in the muscles, to achieve the ability to negotiate bumps and disturbances. We also looked at new manufacturing technologies that let you grow robotics parts instead of assembling them with screws and bolts and fasteners. It lets you grow them on a substrate, and then the muscles and the motors and the sensors are all embedded inside of materials that can be made bendable or hard, depending on how you want them.