Meagan Ryan graduated from Elk Grove High School where she participated in theatre and speech team. Her interest in theatre brought her to NIU’s theatre program. In addition to the many hours Meagan spends in the program, she will be working on indie films over the summer. “Why You Should Search for the Yeti” was important to Meagan because it is about one of her most influential teachers.

Meagan wrote this essay in Nicole Smith’s English 103 course in the fall of 2010.
WHY YOU SHOULD SEARCH FOR THE YETI

MEAGAN RYAN

The room looks absolutely nothing like I remember it; five neat rows of five chairs each is nearly all that’s the same. Posters once adorned all available wall space. Posters for the original *Planet of the Apes* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, among other such old movies, stood out among various “Big Brother is Watching You” warnings. From the window in the door I can tell that the walls are now entirely bare. My sixth grade reading, writing, and social studies teacher, Gerry Lekas, is retiring at the end of the year. The end of an era at Friendship Junior High School has arrived at last. However, the word “relevant” is still on the board, the point to which he would indicate whenever a student would digress off topic without a point. Walking into the room, Mr. Lekas is exactly where I would expect to find him: lounging in his high-backed computer chair, feet up on the tall stool in front of him. The now sixty-year-old teacher looks as though he hasn’t moved or changed at all in the four years it’s been since I’ve seen him. I received the greeting I always received upon entering room 103 of Friendship Junior High: “Miss Ryan, how are you?” Upon hearing he intended to retire, all of my initial questions went out the window since the situation lent itself, instead, to the very obvious question: “Why?”

“It’s been a good, long run, but it all has to end at some point. I’m getting out before the new system drives me out. We’ve given sixth graders their own laptops. I have yet to see a single one of them bring a pencil or paper into the room, much less use them. Kids no longer have the desire to learn. Kids care about points, not knowledge. They want the grade without the information, without the work. They want to memorize, not learn. No one asks questions, and no one wants help. After summer ends, they all put on blinders that eliminate everything that isn’t a necessary evil to get to the next summer,” Mr. Lekas tells me.

I inquire as to what became of the online grading system at the junior high. The school teacher informs me that he still refuses to use the online system, much preferring his pencil, paper gradebook, and personal organization over the internet’s version of
the same thing. I explain to him that the “computer incident,” as my sixth grade class knew it, lives infamously to this day. I also remind him of the fact that he probably spurred my distaste for the meshing of technology and school work.

I remember looking up from my desk in room 103 of Friendship Junior High, as the female version of Carrot Top, our insane lab lady Ms. Jeykal, strode into the room. She looked rather confused as she approached the front of the class and Mr. Lekas. In the most mocking tone she could muster, Jeykal declared, “Gerry, Jan [our head secretary] says that she hasn’t been receiving any of your online grade updates so far this year in her system. You really need to start sending them in to her.”

“The computer doesn’t work. I can’t use your system to send in grades if the computer isn’t even working.” After a good bit of back and forth between Carrot Top and Mr. Lekas, she asked him if the computer was plugged in. We all took this as a shot at the intelligence of our teacher, and the students gasped slightly at the thought that he’d missed something so obvious. “Well, I haven’t UNplugged it.” A smug smile grew on my teacher’s face as Jeykal went to go double check that fact. The look of horror as she reemerged from behind the desk was outstanding. Before Jeykal could inquire as to what she found, Lekas said simply, “Must have been a mouse.”

“They have been cut. CUT. What did you do to this computer?!” The shade of red that Jeykal’s face turned clashed horribly with her carrot colored hair. She stormed from the room, livid at the death of her precious computer. As the door closed behind her, the entire class laughed at the palpable trail her fury left behind. At that moment, I knew that room 103 would be one of the biggest influences I’d ever experience in my life, and I had a lot more to experience.

To this day, Mr. Lekas maintains that he has absolutely no idea how the wires could have gotten “chewed up.” He repeats to me that it “must have been a mouse,” but the look on his face suggests he does not really believe that, and I do not believe that either.

“You always taught us to question things, not just some things but everything. Why is that?” I ask Mr. Lekas. The grey haired man in the computer chair sighs and chooses his words carefully for his response.

“Too often people assume that those above them are right. I seem to remember a student of mine arguing over one point on a paper that she’d lost due to a technicality. She seemed to think that honor and color and other such words had a U in them.”
“Well they do. Granted not here, but they do. I was reading *Harry Potter* a lot at the time,” I reply.

“And you’ll recall I gave you that one point. The fact that you argued over a point proved mine; things you believe in are worth fighting for. Blindly assuming that the higher-ups are correct is what’s led America to the edge of the cliff. So do you jump with everyone else? Are you a lemming? No. Ask questions. Always ask questions. You will either get your way, or be thoroughly informed enough to leave and find out how to get your way. People don’t listen. It’s all in technicalities and hidden clauses. No one is honest, up front, or upstanding. Class is hard to come by, and honesty is even more so. A classy, honest person would tell you exactly what the truth was, all the time. But with class and honesty found so infrequently, what are the chances that you hear the truth often? Slight. Very slight.” My subject’s slight tangent is a wonderful reminder of the hours I had spent in that same room, with whole classes spent on unplanned discussions and philosophies. The man spent many-a-day teaching without text, and ignoring the set syllabus and material entirely. I jokingly point to the black board behind him where he kept “relevant” written in chalk. He quips back that as the “vocabulary queen” I had been in his class, I’d certainly slipped if I thought any of what he’d just said was irrelevant to what I’d asked. “It’s like sarcasm or irony. No one seems to know the true definitions anymore. They know only what they assume the meaning to be. Question. People need to be questioned. It’s all relevant. It’s merely a matter of how you got there. “Relevant” is merely on the board to remind kids to stay on task, but whatever they have to say is still relevant to them. It’s all relative, Einstein had that bit ages ago, but no one buys in.” It interests me that my Big Brother-fearing teacher has told me to buy into something, but I see an opportunity to continue the interview.

“You tell us to question everything. What about religion? There has been a lot of debate about religious views via sidewalk chalk in the last couple months. Atheists are locked in a stalemate against Christians for the most used ground space at the moment. Thoughts on this?” He pauses again, searching.

“The debate is healthy. All debate is healthy. I feel like I’ve answered this already today. Religious, political, moral: it doesn’t matter. All debate is healthy. At the very least, it widens the perspective of all those involved, directly or indirectly. Kohlberg’s
model for morality puts everyone into a stage of moral development. Perhaps that is all religion is; each is a stage before the end. And when you get to the end, you find out who wins the debate.” This prompts my planned follow-up question about which side of the debate he agrees with. “I, personally, identify as Christian. However, I would like it made clear that I am not a fan of organized religion.” He left it at that, apparently having nothing more to say on the subject. Most of my interview was upturned by his impending retirement, so I ran with that instead.

“How do you plan to spend your retirement? Are you going to do nothing but read, now that you’ll have all the time in the world?” My Twilight Zone reference did not go unnoticed. Since I’d seen the episode in his class, I expected nothing less, even if it had been years prior.

“Search,” he replies. “I plan to search. You all spend your time off at beaches, or resorts, or ski lodges. Things you find exotic. I spend my free time searching. I intend to start with the Yeti.”

“What’s Bachelor’s Grove?” A child behind me first asked Mr. Lekas about the Grove upon seeing a photo labeled with that name on the wall. He explained to the students that Bachelor’s Grove is a cemetery, and that the photo was taken on his first ghost search.

“It is not a ghost hunt. Ghosts do not like being hunted anymore than anything else does. I do not hunt ghosts. I search for them.”

“But why do you search for them? It seems like a waste of time to look for something that isn’t there.”

“It would be selfish and egotistic of us as humans to believe we are the end-all-be-all. Nearly every town you visit, anywhere in the world, will have some ghost story or other waiting to be investigated beyond the rumors. Why can’t I do it? When they come to the conclusion that paranormal activity is a legitimate phenomenon, I’ll have all the evidence to say ‘been there, done that, wrote the handbook.’” He paused for a brief second. “And I intend to.”

At this, I notice I’d kept my former teacher, one of five I’ve had whom I consider to have been valuable, long after I’d promised. After wrapping up the interview, while heading for the exit, I caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye on my way out the door.

“Mr. Lekas? What is the orange bit on your desk?”

“It’s a pumpkin full of pins. I would think you can see that Miss Ryan.”
“I mean, why do you still have it?”
“Students rarely think themselves so clever as to try to replace something once I’ve removed it. So when one feels so emboldened, I allow it. I’d knocked my previous pumpkin off the desk and, magically, the next day a new pumpkin was on my desk, pins and all. It’s been slowly decaying in the same manner as the last one did. Actually, I believe that was the year you were here. I don’t suppose you know whom I should thank?”

Mirroring my teacher’s countenance during the discussion about cut wires, I said simply: “Must have been a mouse.” Intending my cleverness to be the last word, I opened the door to leave as he called after me.

“Miss Ryan, that’s very loud, would you mind telling your drummer to tone it down a bit?” The laughter in his voice was obvious. Opening my yearbook at the end of sixth grade, I was pleased to see everyone had signed it. Because I’m that weird kid that actually likes my teachers, Mr. Lekas had signed too. In neat, curling script the words were written: “It was a pleasure teaching you this year. Please continue to march to the beat of your own drummer. He may be loud, but he’s never boring. – Lekas.”

Returning the joke of unlikely occurrence, I explain to him that I will tell my drummer to keep it down when he finds the Yeti. “Fair enough, Miss Ryan. By the way, at the end of the year you should come back. I’m offering up all posters, collages, and other random décor on a first come, first served basis.” I nodded as I left the classroom for the last time. Until the end of the school year anyway. I will have that original The Day the Earth Stood Still poster.