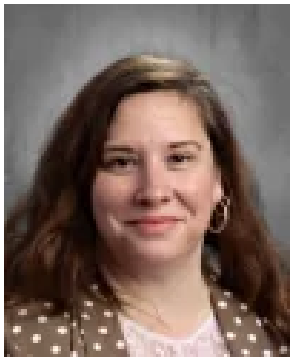
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Liz (Vlcan) Sparks
Class of 1999



We love to see all of you taking the core principles you learned at ASA out into the world, but there is a special feeling when you come back to us -- for a visit or something longer -- with an added layer of life experience. Last year we welcomed back Liz Sparks to teach Social Studies to our 8th graders and this year she has moved to 12th grade to teach Government & Economics as well as taking on the Mock Trial Team.

Initially coming to ASA at its beginnings in 1995, Liz is a prime example of Arts + Smarts. After a successful run as a singer-songwriter right out of high school, she turned her focus to law and teaching. Liz was kind enough to answer a few questions on how she met these transitions in her life.

You started at ASA in 1995 and are considered an honorary member of the Class of 1999. What did you do after you left ASA?
Immediately after high school, I began a solo career as a singer-songwriter under the name Liz Capra. I released two full-length albums, *Different Bodies, Different Places*, and *Grappling*, and a Live EP. I toured extensively for a few years. I also married one of my dear friends from ASA, Ethan Sparks, a fellow musician, writer, and poet, and we started a family. We have five children - Fabienne, Isabel, Jude, Harrison, and Monroe.

After becoming a mom, I was concerned about being on the road as a touring musician, so I decided to pursue another passion of mine - human rights - and pursued a legal education. I received my Juris Doctor (JD) in 2012, after having worked in human rights in habeas claims for capital defendants and at the Hague on issues of war crimes prosecutions. I then turned my focus to academia, writing and researching in bodily autonomy as a human rights issue, receiving my LLM in Feminist Jurisprudence and Bioethics while teaching law at multiple law schools. I taught Women and the Law, Feminist Bioethics, Bioethics and Health Law, as well as taught undergraduate writing. I am also a poet and fiction writer and received my MFA in Fiction in 2023.



The access to recording software and music self-distribution nowadays makes it easy to forget how much gumption it took to start an indie label and record music in the early 2000s. Where did you find that determination and drive at such a young age?
I founded my label the year I graduated from high school, in 1999. I would like to say that it took a lot of gumption, but I think it's more accurate to say that I was too much of a punk to follow the rules of the established order (i.e. to do things the way I was "supposed" to). I grew up in the music

industry. My father's band was signed to a major label and opened for big bands of his time - the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys. But by the time I was born, he was producing and engineering (my parents also founded the Conservatory for Recording Arts and Sciences, here in Phoenix), and running music studios. So, that industry was something I was very familiar with and that is largely where my disillusionment with mainstream labels came from.

I wanted to make music that I liked, I wanted to say what I wanted to say, and present myself in the way I wanted to present myself. I did not believe a label would allow any of these things, so I decided to do it [on] my own. I was very focused on supporting myself fully as a musician, and I believe forming my own label allowed me to do this for many years.

Some might consider the leap from a music artist to working on social justice through law incongruous. Was the law something that always interested you or were you inspired by things you saw out in the world while you were touring?
Both. As my ASA teachers can confirm, I was never a shrinking violet about issues. When I saw injustices as a kid, I pretty consistently spoke up about them. So, I think this is partially just my personality. But I did experience many things touring around the country and the world that broadened this perspective. For instance, I saw a great [deal] of homelessness, poverty, and injustice. I also talked to so many people around the world, learned so many new ideas, and heard so many new perspectives, that I seldom felt like I had all the answers. It made me want to seek answers and it made me want to advocate for others, most especially for those who could not as readily advocate for themselves.

A Bachelor of Arts Magna cum laude in Political Science from ASU followed by Certificate in Human Rights, Institute for Global Justice, Utrecht University where you studied International Human Rights Law at the Hague, a Juris Doctor, Case Western Reserve University School of Law and L.L.M Cleveland State University; you went a diverse and unusual route in your legal education. What inspired your choice of specialities and learning institutions?
I chose Case because of its specialty in International Human Rights. I wanted to work with a professor who is now their Dean of the Law School. He is how I ended up at the Hague, Utrecht University, and on the Jessup Moot Court team, as I became his TA after my first year in law school. Much of the rest happened organically. While working at a women's health clinic, I focused my human rights advocacy on bodily autonomy, and that's how I met some of the scholars I worked with at Cleveland State. One thing always sort of led to another, in that I was/am always seeking new perspectives and new opportunities to learn and expand my own areas of scholarship.

Before coming back to ASA as a teacher, you taught undergraduate writing courses and Bioethics, Health Law, and Feminist Jurisprudence to law students at San Diego University, University of San Diego School of Law and Cleveland-Marshall College of Law. Do you think this gives you a unique perspective in preparing our 12th grade students for college?
I hope it does! I do know pretty intimately what will be required of my students at the collegiate level, and this knowledge informs my pedagogy, my curriculum, and even how I establish relationships with my students.

How did you happen to come back to ASA?

During the pandemic, my partner and I returned to Arizona after more than a dozen years away, pushed to action by the uncertainty of it all. He had already shifted from undergraduate teaching to high school teaching (he teaches Senior English and Creative Writing), so I was inspired to look for similar opportunities in our new/old city. When I found an opening for 8th Grade Social Studies at ASA, I applied immediately. The curriculum for 8th Grade is Human Rights and Civil Rights, so it felt like a perfect fit.

How does ASA differ in your eyes as a member of staff versus as a student and what is the same?
I attended ASA at its founding, so many things are different. But, many things are also very much the same. What is different as a member of the staff is that I feel I have a perspective on what my students can do with their art after they leave our pigeon nest. I think many of them believe, just as many of us did in my era, that they will need to leave it behind once they depart. I hope to impart to them how many of my fellow classmates (myself included) went on to pursue careers in the arts and how successful they have been. So, in short, I have the wisdom of experience to share, which is quite different than when I was in their shoes and the terrifying world was still in front of me.

What are your ultimate goals as an educator?
While I love my content area, there is nothing more important to me than establishing supportive connections and relationships with my students. Last year, I felt so privileged to bond with so many of my 8th graders. I love seeing them around campus and reconnecting. I want my students to know that I am someone in their corner, not just now, but well into their futures.

What do you like to do outside of school?
I love to cook (I am Mexican and Italian, so these are common favorites, but I like to branch out, too), spend time with my partner and children, and have friends over for dinner and conversation. As a writer, I spend a great deal of time out of school working on scholarship, writing fiction and poetry, and reading.

Other Alumni News & Updates...

- **Andy Boyd ('10) & syd island ('11)** performed in *Room, Room, Room, in the many Mansions of eternal glory for Thee and for everyone*, an acoustic hyperpop folk opera about death, sex, God, gender, utopia and the end of the world. Co-created with their friend Philip Santos Schaffer, the show was up for a limited 2-week run through October 28th at The Brick in Williamsburg(NYC). Please check out the great review by Sara Holdren at Vulture for *New York Magazine*!
- **Daniel Brodie ('00)** "I had the honor of designing the video and projections for the Broadway production of *The Wiz*. It's a testament to the invaluable skills and experiences I garnered at ASA, which significantly contributed to this achievement. Our production is set to tour starting this month, and it includes a week at Gammage in January. I believe it would be a wonderful opportunity for our fellow alumni to experience this adaptation." Please go to wizmusical.com for more details or to secure tickets. Daniel regrets that he won't be in attendance personally, but is confident that many from the ASA community will appreciate and enjoy the show.
- **Allison Harmon ('18)** After receiving her Bachelor's degree from Northern Arizona University in Biomedical Science in 2022, Allison began her Masters degree in biology

with an emphasis on fungal immunology at NAU this fall and works full time as a research technician on developing a Valley Fever vaccine.

- **Madeline Isakson ('10)** received praise this spring for her collection of interior furnishings using aluminum and styrofoam waste. The EPS collection is a series of artful pieces making use of materials that would otherwise forever sit in a landfill, gaining Madeline notice from *Design Milk*, *Hypebeast*, and *IFDM*. She recently moved from Detroit to Brooklyn to work at the Pratt Institute.
- **Natalya (Kolosovskaya) Kolosowsky ('04)** is the founder of an internationally recognized performance art project/teaching methodology called Shadow Tender and runs a small communication strategy firm that works with educational institutions and minority-owned businesses. "For the past 1-2 years, I have been working with Eastern European war refugees in the Pacific Northwest, collaborating with local non-profits and building community resources at the intersection of culture, arts, and mental wellness. I currently serve on multiple advisory panels and workgroups in the Portland area." Natalya has taught and exhibited nationally and internationally, and had the honor of representing the United States at the 2013 and 2017 World Stage Design Exhibitions and at the 2015 Prague Quadrennial in the Czech Republic. Natalya's current creative project looks at Post-Soviet identity from the lens of fairytales and folklore.
- **Jonathan (Howard) Lyons ('00),** is the creator of the viral street performance character Buddy the Rat and an interdisciplinary theatre artist living in New York City who works as a performer in mask, puppetry, and physical theatre. He has performed as a Blueman in *Blue Man Group* and as a principal cast member in the off-broadway show *Sleep No More*. As a puppeteer his work includes Moisés Kaufman's *El Gato con Botas* at the New Victory Theatre, Basil Twist's *Petrushka and Dogugaeshi*, and Anthony Minghella's *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera. Most recently, Jonothon has been understudy for Audrey II manipulation in *Little Shop of Horrors* on Broadway.



- **Anthony Spaulding II.** While not a graduate of ASA, Anthony proudly mentions that he attended our school in the *Peoria Times* article announcing his appointment as Interim Artistic Director at the Southwest Ballet Theatre. His impressive CV includes time with San Francisco Ballet and Dance Theatre of Harlem. Anthony has been sharing his skills with SWBT as an artist in residence and choreographer and was named to his new position in July; he will continue to teach and choreograph along with his new responsibilities. The company supports a school for youth and adult dancers, and since August, the Boys' program is tuition free in order to encourage more boys to dance.