



THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

BY ADAM VOILAND '01 PHOTOGRAPHY BY GABRIEL AMADEUS COONEY



DEERFIELD LAND TRUST PRESERVES 1000TH ACRE OF OPEN SPACE

It's all about the open space. You begin to understand this while partaking in what's virtually a Deerfield tradition—the running of the Small Loop. Every step seems to pull you back in time. Out there in the North Meadows, snaking around the old Yazwinski barn, the land finally free from the silent blanket of winter, gone is the frenetic bustle, the stress, the technology, the breakneck pace of life. Out there, engulfed by the vastness of the space, the muck squelching beneath your feet, the rich odor of cow teasing your nostrils, the razor straight rows of old corn stubs extending westward toward the river, the world fades slowly away with every pace. Glancing back, the tip of the Science Center juts gingerly into the southern horizon, the only remaining remnant of reality. Then abruptly, with one more stride it too is gone, obscured by a row of trees, faintly glimmering with the moisture of spring. And with that, the effect is complete—you're back nearly 300 years finding yourself on the western frontier of the United States, back to the days of yeoman farmers, Indian raids, and British rule.



IT'S HUMBLING, SOMEHOW, KNOWING THAT FOR

over 300 years—much longer, even, than the academy—these same fields have been here. For centuries, just as they still do, farmers have toiled tirelessly, reaping a plentiful bounty from the fertile soil of the Deerfield River's flood plain. The names of the farmers have a familiar ring—Williams, Yazwinski, Ciesluk, Melnick—they've all been farming here for generations, their farms more than just their livelihoods, but a way of life. It's a way of life that harkens back to the very roots of the town—simple, agrarian, sustainable.

Perhaps even more tangible, even more immediate to the runner than the history, though, is the raw beauty of the space. There's something simply indescribable in the landscape that surrounds this academy—it's that thing that draws people out on these runs, these walks, these saunters across what are now historic fields. That same thing—the context of this place—is what brings alumni back years after graduation, and for many, the land becomes wholly intertwined with the school creating that indescribable thing we call the Deerfield Experience.

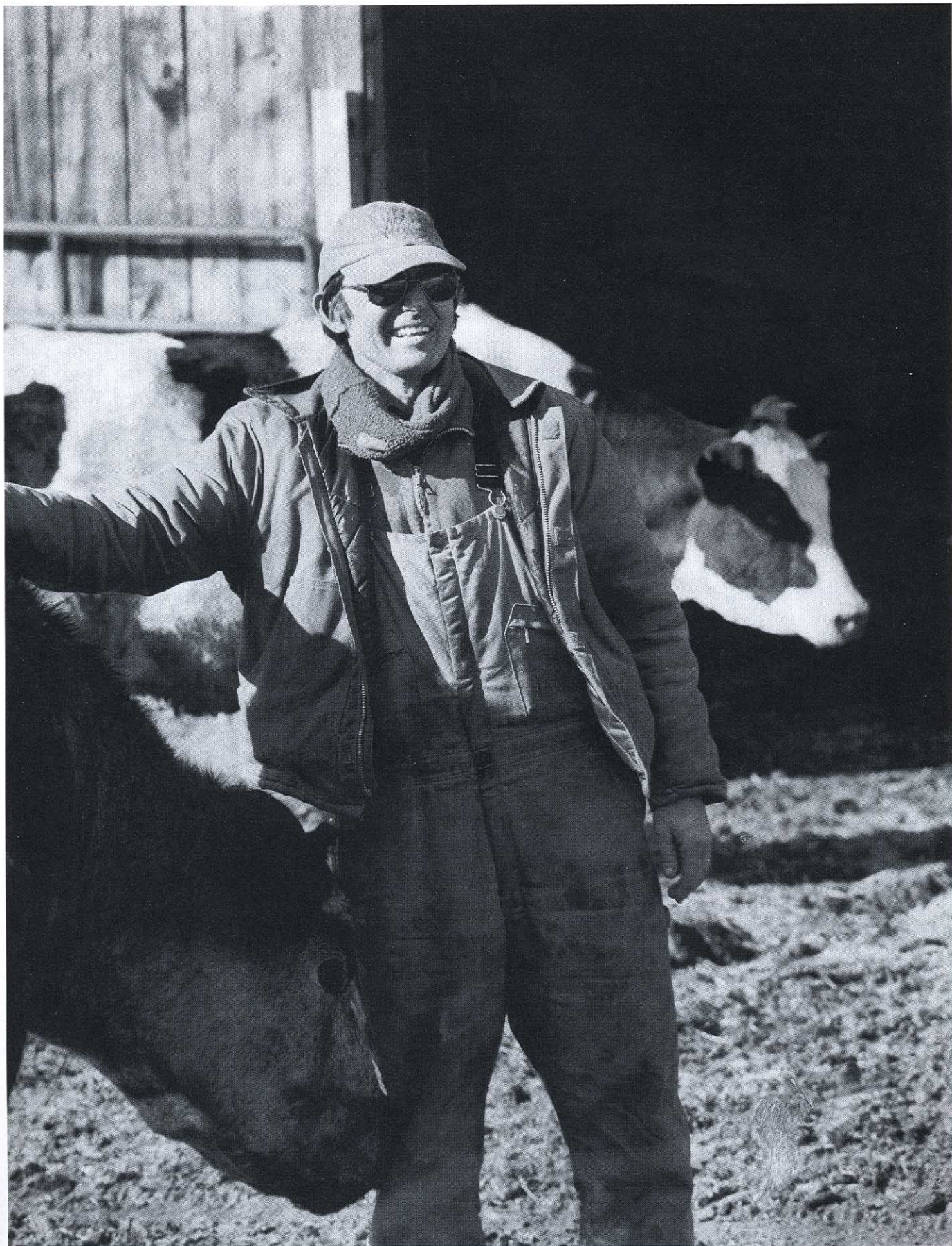
That's why the preservation of the 1000th acre of local farmland last September by the Deerfield Land Trust warrants celebration. A small ceremony held on the 21st in the South Meadows, abutting the academy's new playing fields, marked the occasion. Attending the ceremony were Helen Grybko—whose 36-acre parcel of land pushed the trust over 1000 acres—local farmers, members of the land trust, and local press.

"The full scope of what we're doing here will not be understood for years," said Richard Hubbard the director of the Massachusetts's Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR), a program founded in 1977, that pays farmers development rights as long as they agree to keep their land in agriculture. "I am continually awed, not just because of the beauty, but the historic importance of this resource," he continued.

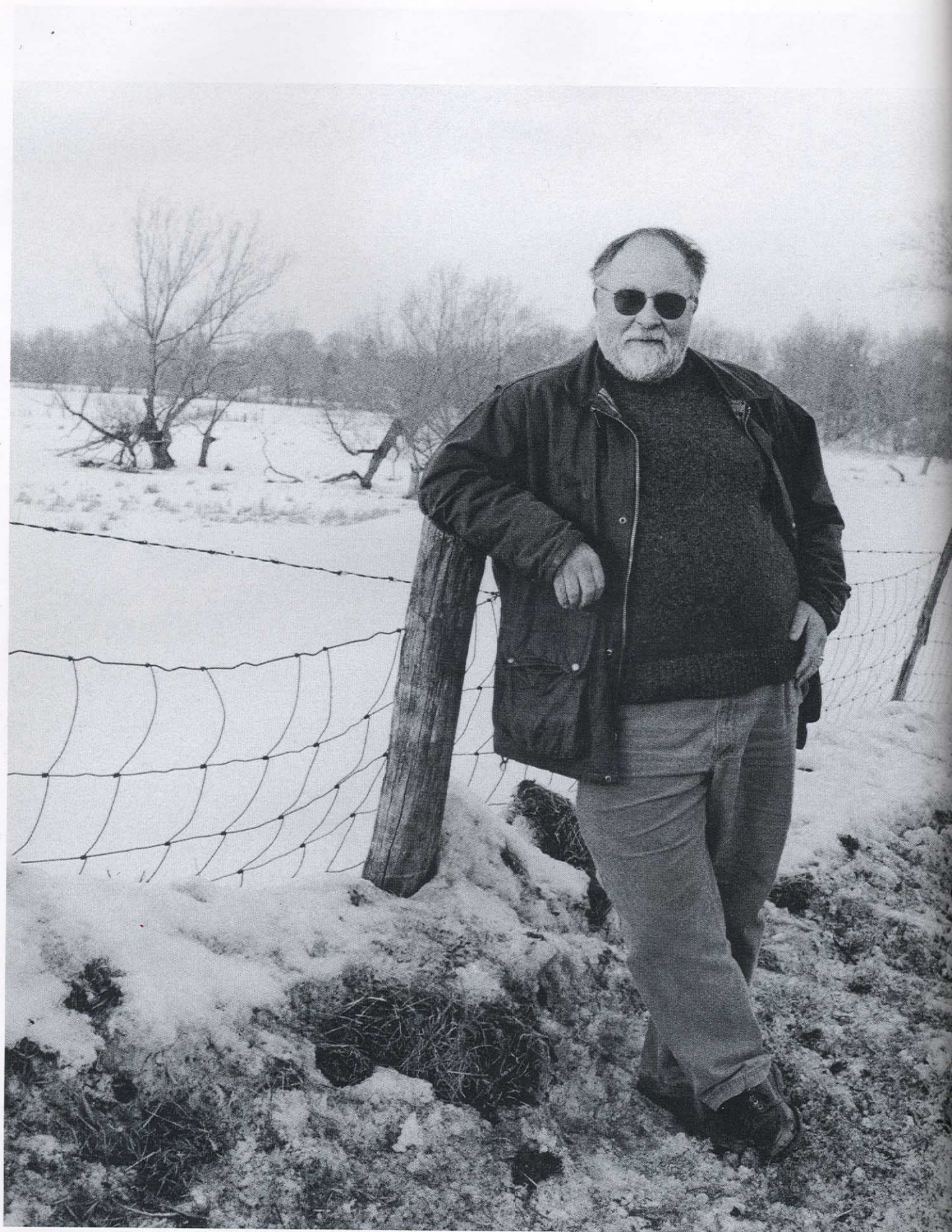
Mark Zenick, the director of the local Deerfield Land Trust took the podium next: "People have been farming these fields since the time before George Washington was born. Think about that. If we choose not to preserve, this valley will be immeasurably impoverished," he said.

In the last few years, Mr. Zenick said he has seen the value of good, tillable land, like that surrounding the academy rise dramatically. "Values, especially in the valley, have climbed to where they are sometimes \$4,000 per acre," he said. In comparison, less desirable land in the hill towns might have a worth of only about \$600. As a rule, land that still has commercial, industrial, or residential development potential can command an even more substantial price, especially recently. As a result, for many growers, selling the development rights can guarantee peace of mind in the financially precarious occupation of farming.

Jay Healy, the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture Commissioner, and Charlemont farmer himself, however, emphasized how precious this particular soil is. "That land, with its sandy loam, which Mother Nature took



Frank Yazwinski III '64



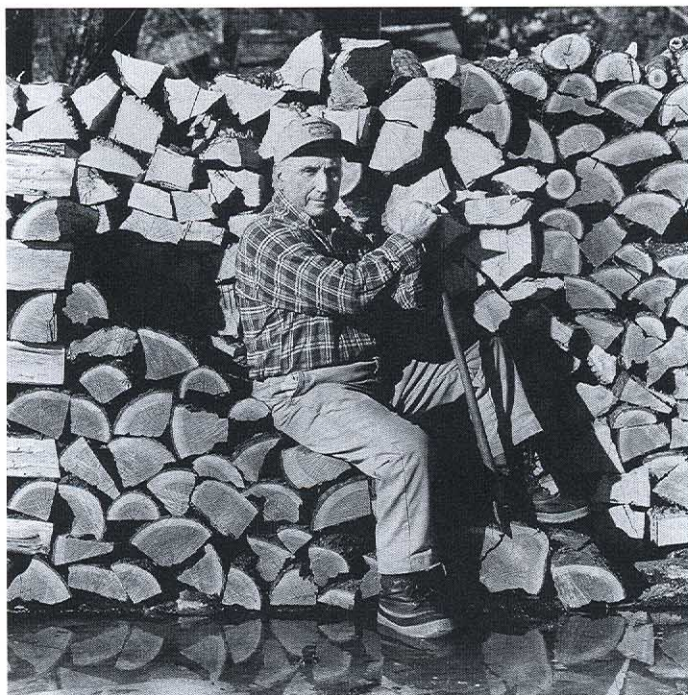
thousands of years to create, gives some of the highest yields in the world. The land is simply some of the best around," he said. The land, part of the Deerfield River's floodplain, boasts about 18 feet of topsoil, putting it in the top two percent in fertility in the world.

Carolyn Ness, Treasurer of the Deerfield Land Trust, and chair of the Deerfield Planning Board, and a part-time librarian at the academy agreed: "This soil is simply incredible—it is as fertile as the soil in the Nile River Valley. It's worth saving," she said.

IN FRANKLIN COUNTY, OF WHICH DEERFIELD IS A PART, the number of farms is decreasing. According to figures prepared by the town's Master Planning Committee the number of acres of cropland has decreased by nine percent since 1971, a total of 464 acres.

Despite considerable progress in the last ten years, only 13 percent of the land in Deerfield is permanently protected, about 1,042 acres. "We simply must do better; 13 percent isn't enough. We need to keep Deerfield, Deerfield," Ms. Ness said.

Commissioner Healy agrees: "The land doesn't take care of itself. Communities like this can change very rapidly. Deerfield Academy, or anybody, shouldn't look at itself as



Above: Headmaster Eric Widmer '57. Left: Edward Yazwinski '45. Opposite: Mark Zenick, director of the Deerfield Land Trust

being in an isolated bubble. We can't have blinders on any more, and look only in the immediate future. We have to understand how quickly things can change," he said.

THE ACADEMY, ALONG WITH OTHER LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS, is doing its best to preserve remaining open spaces. Despite hope among some local organizations that the school would do more, Headmaster Eric Widmer '57 said the academy has supported land preservation in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

"The most dramatic assistance came at a critical moment last year, when land on Routes 5 and 10 was in danger of being sold to developers," said Mr. Widmer. "The Land Trust attempted to intervene, but it didn't have enough funds. They approached us, and I brought the matter to the attention of the board of trustees. A member of the board agreed to loan the necessary money to us, which allowed the trust to purchase the development rights, preserving the land. The figure was well over \$300,000—no small amount," Mr. Widmer said.

Additionally, according to Business Manager Michael Sheridan '58, the school makes an annual \$5,000 donation to the Deerfield Land Trust.

Stuart Chase, the headmaster of neighboring Eaglebrook School and one of the original founders of the Deerfield Land Trust, counsels, "The highest and best use of aesthetic, agricultural, and forest land is not necessarily high density and therefore high-value development," he said. "Man needs unencumbered space and beauty to offset the frantic pace of everyday life. If we are to preserve what soothes and restores the soul, then our land policy and tax laws must be changed," he said.

Mr. Chase, fueled by this passion for open land has pushed hard, putting over \$1,000,000 of Eaglebrook's money into land preservation throughout the last 25 years, ultimately preserving around 500 acres of open space.

"Everything must, of course, be approved by the board of trustees," he said. "But, our alumni, very much like Deerfield's, no doubt feel the area is important. The rock, the woods, the view, they are all part of the ethos of this school. And, as long as it doesn't take away from other things, they've been very supportive."

The perception that the academy is sometimes not doing enough to help in this effort is the result of "a failure of communication," said Widmer. "Land preservation is very important to the school. If the trust had needed help on the 1,000th acre, we would have given it," he continued.

"The day that they preserved the 1,000th acre was a great day. And it's not just that it's the 1000th acre—as far as you can see, up and down the road, the land is protected. The character of the land must be assured forever, and you can bet that is of interest to us," concluded Headmaster Widmer. ■



True to his agrarian roots, Adam Voiland '01 lives on a farm in Montague Center, Massachusetts. He was preceded at Deerfield by brothers Ryan '96 and Luke '99.