



## Tik Root, Class of 2008

### Worlds Apart

by Kimberly Reynolds

Tik Root '08 is a slight, outwardly unassuming person. He has tousled black hair, wire frame glasses, and a hushed voice punctuated with pauses as he gathers thought and momentum. He was adopted from India when he was a year old and came to live in Ripton, Vermont. He grew up there, in the midst of an active family with a sibling and step siblings, attending Middlebury High School.

A rebellious streak may have taken hold there. The school only allowed for a ski racer to miss an allotted number of days. In this Catch-22, a student couldn't seriously pursue ski racing and stay enrolled. So this led Tik to GMVS. He was immediately attracted and began attending the school in 2005.

"Ski racing and GMVS teach you how to be independent, and how to work as a team and as a community. But you have to be willing to take risks," he said. "The failure rate for taking risks in ski racing is much higher than it is in real life."

With this axiom, Tik has made his way into the competitive world of freelance writing, "You have to take hearing 'No' a lot. I'm a little more aggressive than other journalists. When it's this competitive, the worst I can hear is 'No.' It's a risk I'm willing to take," he said. In just a short amount of time, he has found a high rate of success.

He has published articles in *Time*, *BBC*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Economist*, among others. In 2013, while in Yemen, he collaborated on several articles with Spanish photographer, Juan Herrero, for an exposé that appeared in *The Atlantic* about the juvenile death row in Yemen. "It was a shocking experience, but there was a big push, a diplomatic push, and the juvenile executions were suspended by the President," in part as a response to his articles. "It was cool for that to happen; you look for this type of outcome. These are stories that must be told."

He stayed in Yemen until Christmas, 2013, when he left to begin preparations for a job as alpine ski researcher for NBC at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. Perhaps taking risks has become second nature to Tik, but prior to his stint in Yemen, he had to undergo a trial that may have put anyone's mettle to the test.

### The Arab Spring

In 2010, when he was studying Arabic at Alexandria University in Egypt through Middlebury Schools Abroad program, the Arab Spring broke out. The program was shut down and the students were evacuated. They had to wait four days in the Alexandria Airport before gaining a flight out of the country.

The program splintered with students opting to study in the US, Morocco, and Syria. Tik left to continue the 2010-2011 Academic Year in Syria. He enrolled at the University of Damascus and had just started his first day of classes.

"I was going to meet a friend from Middlebury who was coming to Damascus, and I stumbled on this protest. I didn't really see anything. I took a left. There was a protest in front of me. I don't know exactly what it was. I took my phone out of my pocket to try to take a picture, and I didn't even get to that point when the secret police stopped me," he said. "They asked for my phone and passport, and that was about it. I never saw a uniformed person for another two weeks."

He was taken in a van to a prison, his head down on the seat so that he never saw where he was going. "I think it was prison 251, but I have no confirmation."

For the first week of his internment, he was held in a 3 x 7 foot cell with one other person. The second week, he was held in a 10 x 12 foot cell with 21 other people. "It was broken down, a converted lavatory."

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He was interrogated several times the first day. One week into his ordeal, he was put in front of a TV camera, which he said was owned by the state TV. One part was an interrogation; the other part was enacted to make him admit that he'd done something wrong.

"I was confused. I didn't have any idea what was going on," he said.

"The second week was particularly rough. You could hear all the torture and beatings pretty much day and night. Some days were worse. About 80 percent of the people I met had been tortured pretty badly, and that was definitely worrisome. They maybe once, maybe twice put me in the line for torture to make me think I was going and then pulled me out."

It was his US passport that saved him. "Senator Patrick Leahy (US Senator from Vermont) was amazingly helpful in getting me out, as was Robert Ford (US Ambassador to Syria). I think the whole thing was as bad - if not worse - for my parents back here. They had no idea what condition I was in. I didn't have any information; they were inundated with so much information. I knew I was fine; they didn't, which I think as a parent is as bad as it gets," he said.

"I knew by the second week they weren't going to do anything too bad to me, but it could have dragged on. I was starting to prepare myself for it to drag on if it became something political."

"I'm very, very lucky, both for the citizenship and for the timing. If that had happened even a month later, it could have been a whole different ball game. People were held for eight to ten months," he said.

After securing his release, Tik returned to Middlebury and graduated in 2012, with a B.A. in International Politics and Economics as well as a working proficiency in Arabic. Although Tik's experience in Syria may have discouraged less intrepid journalists, he continued to take risks to get stories told.



Photos by Juan Herrero

Soon after graduating from Middlebury, he was back in the Middle East covering Yemen. Tik reflects, "In some ways, Yemen is more unstable than Egypt. Six people were kidnapped when I was there; one was assassinated. There was a car bomb in early December [2013]. It's unsettling how quickly these places get back to normal after this. Four to five hours after the car bomb, I was walking down the street. Two blocks of windows were blown out, and people were just walking down these glass strewn streets, just going about their business, doing their shopping, ready for the rest of the day. That's kind of more unnerving to me than a lot of the actual violence."

A world apart from war torn Syria and the car bombed streets of Yemen, Tik plans to further his education. With a B.A. in his back pocket and a portfolio of published work, prior to flying to Sochi for NBC, he applied to several graduate degree programs: Columbia University's International Affairs and Journalism Dual Degree; The George Washington University's Master of Arts in Media and Public Affairs, and The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

From the Middle East to the US to Sochi, Tik is definitely a student of world politics, willing to take the risks to get his stories told.

To learn more about Tik or read his articles, please visit his website:  
<http://www.tikroot.com>.

*Kim Reynolds is a freelance editor and writer who lives in Warren, Vermont with her husband and three children who attend GMVS, Gabriel '14, Katy '15, and Sophie Rosen '19.*