Dear Members of the Westminster Community,

In ways large and small, we project our values and priorities — what matters most to us. At Westminster School, the dedication of Armstrong Dining Hall, Brockelman Student Center and Kelter House intentionally affirmed the values that continue to define us: the importance of community and personal relationships, as cultivated at regular family-style meals, through the informal interactions in a student center at the crossroads of school life, or during casual conversations in a dormitory common room. At the heart of our campus, the Sixth Form Lawn and surrounding Cushing Hall, Andrews Memorial Chapel and Armstrong Dining Hall all celebrate the enduring lessons fostered by the relationships at the foundation of our community ethos.

Today, more than ever, lessons related to community and personal relationships, which recognize our common dignity and shared obligation to be respectful, have never been more important. Increasingly, in the world beyond Williams Hill, those values are ignored, even intentionally flouted. Actually, how we treat other people provides powerful insights about ourselves — what kind of person we are, whether we care about other people, whether we are gentle, kind and generous of spirit, or whether we are just selfish, self-absorbed and demeaning. Extending respectful courtesies to friends, peers and personal acquaintances is easy but never sufficient. In our school community, we believe that the personal dignity of everyone — all students, staff and faculty — should be respected.

We also believe in extending the same respect to guests, visitors and especially to strangers — to those with whom we are not familiar. This winter, I received the following email from a campus visitor, which I shared with students at a December assembly:

“I am a Granby resident and swim at the Westminster pool. I often have occasion to encounter groups of your students while on campus. … I am continually amazed at the studied ‘grit and grace’ of your students. When I thank them for holding a door for me, they reply ‘of course.’ I have never encountered any sullen students; in fact, they are normally first to greet me and smile. Even if busy with their friends … they always regard me with respect and comportment. Swimming is a major component of my health and well-being, and I am especially pleased that I can walk thru the premises … [and] am treated like a respected member of a community. This is no small achievement for all of you, and I thought you should know.”

This email from an admiring campus guest reminds us that in our everyday encounters we make impressions, especially on those who don’t know us. Those impressions influence perceptions of us personally and of our community. And even when we are not on campus, we remain ambassadors for our school. How we behave, no matter where we are, affects perceptions of us, of those with whom we associate and of Westminster School.

In that context, the email is such an enormous credit to our students. It underscores what we embrace as a defining attribute of Westminster’s ethos and culture. This guest’s anecdote reflects what we mean by grace in Grit & Grace. Grit is about the hard work that must accompany self-improvement. Grace is about an awareness and sensitivity to other people. Unless balanced by grace, grit is selfish. With grace, grit is selfless. Together, we share an aspiration to sustain a gracious school community.

Our campus setting is impressive, featuring beautiful buildings, gorgeous lawns and magnificent vistas. We are so fortunate to share these spaces for teaching and learning. However, whenever alumni reflect upon their memories of Westminster, their stories invariably return to people — memorable teachers, enduring friendships — to the lessons about caring for those we know and for the visitor we don’t know, the visitor we happen to encounter visiting campus for a swim. At these moments, when we are not aware that anyone may notice, we soar with our capacity for grace.

Soar Together is the motto for our current fundraising campaign, about which you will hear a lot more in the months ahead. With your philanthropic support, we seek to sustain our ongoing commitment to enrolling and supporting the very best students with need-based scholarships; to attracting and retaining the very best faculty by honoring their extraordinary vocational commitment; and to underwriting all the programs — whether academic, athletic, artistic or extracurricular — through which we teach the lessons we hope will define the legacies of our alumni. When addressing our school community, students often conclude their remarks with “Martlets Fly Together.” With this campaign focused on the people who define our school community, we aspire for Martlets to soar.

William V.N. Philip P’06, ’09
Headmaster