



Wonder Woman

Actor and *Avengers* star Cobie Smulders sheds light on the teacher who helped her discover her superpower.

BY TEDDY KATZ

Yeah, you did it! You guys friggin’ did it!” That was actor Cobie Smulders in a recorded video message last June that went to the graduating class at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver.

It was Smulders’ high school, too, until she graduated in 2000. In her message, Smulders tries to speak directly and genuinely to each of the graduates in this unusual year, saying, “Let’s just call it what it is: A bummer.” She’s talking about COVID-19 disrupting their end-of-school rituals and celebrations.

“Guys, I know first-hand what a challenging place high school can be. I did it. I’m a survivor as well,” Smulders jokes in her message.

In the two-minute video Smulders is at times silly, at times poignant, touching and human, and speaks about their shared experiences. “I mean, I know that Mrs. Hughes is still teaching there,” say Smulders. “[I remember we read] *Animal Farm* and it got very real.”

Mrs. Hughes is Amy Hughes. She also attended “Byng,” as the students call it, and has been teaching English and theatre at the school for 31 of her 33 years in the profession. Hughes taught Smulders English in Grades 10, 11 and 12, and definitely left her mark.

“I think Mrs. Hughes — it’s still hard for me to call her Amy — was the first teacher I saw as a human. Not just as an educator but a woman with a life outside the classroom,” Smulders says. “She instilled in me a broader view of the world and had me read books that enabled me to see from a new perspective.”

Smulders’ video message came about after Ryan Reynolds, another Vancouver-raised celebrity, posted a video and bought pizza for all the graduates at his alma mater, a neighbouring school that just happens to be Byng’s biggest rival.

“Someone on staff said to me, ‘Do you think Cobie would do one of those [videos]?’ so I just emailed her.” Hughes says Smulders was happy to do it, adding, “She continues to give back to the school in so many ways.”

Since leaving Byng, Smulders has built quite the acting résumé. She starred in the ABC drama *Stumptown*. She’s performed alongside Tom Cruise, and she’s played a kick-ass, gun-toting superhero in the *Marvel Avengers* series including the box-office record-breaker *Infinity War*.

Smulders started making a name for herself when she was just 23. Then, in 2014 she was nominated for a People’s Choice Award for her part on the CBS hit comedy *How I Met Your Mother* — a role that seemed written for her, in many ways. For starters, she played a Canadian and introduced a global audience to,

among other things, Canada's collective passion for Tim Hortons, hockey and universal health care.

Smulders' Canadian roots have always been important to her. Every year she donates money in the form of a "Centre Stage Award" at Byng, which goes to students who plan to pursue careers in the performing arts.

Smulders isn't the only celebrity to come out of her school. The year she graduated, Byng started a mini arts academy and it's become a magnet for talented musicians, actors and artists who audition to attend.

With all that talent around, Smulders didn't really stand out from the crowd in her high school days. Truth be told, she didn't really want to.

"She was a B student. She was thoroughly, beautifully average, and yet exceptional at the same time," Hughes says.

Smulders didn't like to be the centre of attention, but as it happened, the camera loved her. For a while in her teen years, she worked as a model and even travelled the world to walk the catwalk for international shows.

None of that went to her head, however. "She wasn't a look-at-me kid. She was, 'I'm in the herd and periodically have to pop out to model.'"

Her low-key approach included an effort to make her teachers happy. "I very much wanted to have my teachers like me and worked hard to make them proud," Smulders says.

Hughes was one of those teachers. "She had spunk. She was the kid whose eyes would sparkle when she smiled," says Hughes. "You would ask a question in class and look out at the students and think, no, I haven't got that one, nope, haven't got that one either. But that one there will follow me anywhere. She was that kid."

Alongside the modelling, Smulders began to gravitate toward roles in high school plays. But Hughes says there wasn't one "aha" moment where Smulders showcased her acting talent and signalled that she was going places. It was more her way of relating to people.

"She has that social-emotional intelligence that is so profound. That's what takes you places," says Hughes.



Amy Hughes teaches English and theatre at Lord Byng Secondary School in Vancouver.

Some of that EQ may have grown out of her experiences at Byng. Looking back now Smulders says, "High school can be a magical, painful time of growth." She says Hughes often pushed her and her classmates, gently, out of their comfort zones.

For example, Hughes likes to equip her students with essential tools for debate. Her goal is to get them thinking critically and building their own arguments while breaking down stories and examining themes, plot and character.

"I remember reading out loud in her class and feeling incredibly nervous," says Smulders. "This was really the first time I raised my voice to speak in front of a group."

Hughes isn't surprised to hear this. "She was kind of a shy kid. It's one thing to get on stage and play somebody. It's another thing to be you."

As a teacher, Hughes worked hard to build her students' confidence and stretch their experiences. "When I look back at high school, it seems like I was continuously put into moments that made me petrified," says Smulders.

That risk-taking practice was put to use a short while later. At 22, after a few years of acting classes, Smulders drove to Los Angeles, looking for a way into an acting career. Not long after, she landed her role in *How I Met Your Mother* and hasn't looked back since.

Hughes says she's proud of Smulders' ability to remain down-to-earth in a high-flying profession. "There are so many people who've bought into the glamour. But that's not Cobie. She's just doing her job and doing it well.

Staying grounded likely helped Smulders through an especially dark time. At 25, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She had multiple surgeries over two years and only revealed the struggle some time afterwards. Now in remission, and a mother of two girls, Smulders says her battle with cancer has made her a better person and a better mom.

That healthy perspective has always been Smulders' particular strength. "I like to tell my students every one of them has a superpower," says Hughes. "Cobie has her superpower. She's just a good human. I really don't think Cobie has changed a lot in the last 20 years."

The admiration is a two-way street. When Smulders let Hughes know she hoped to single her out for this article, Hughes found it humbling.

"It matters to me as a human that Cobie thinks that way of me. I think that's lovely." **PS**

In this profile, notable Canadians honour the teachers who have made a difference in their lives and have embraced the College's Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession, which are care, respect, trust and integrity.