

## *Forging a New Path*

By Lindsay Steinbach

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Dartmouth College's Sudikoff Computer Laboratory is an unassuming brick building, tucked in the shadow of grand Baker Library. One must descend several sets of stairs before reaching the entrance to the nearly underground labs. At night, the doors click shut and may only be unlocked by those with special access. In the back of this guarded building, behind another set of locked doors, lies a small but vibrant office. Plants adorn much of the free space, growing in pots atop desks, shelves, and along the walls. One wall of the office is plastered with pictures of smiling family members, and a whiteboard hangs on another wall, covered with cartoon drawings by the many visitors who stop in.

The inhabitant of this office, Tim Tregubov, is a systems administrator at the Sudikoff Lab. He is a full time employee of the college, responsible for keeping the networks running smoothly, managing the computers for the computer science department, and providing faculty support. He is also a Dartmouth sophomore.

Tregubov, 29, has always defied convention. In 1975, his parents came to the United States from Moscow, just three years before he was born. They settled in Claremont, NH, a city about thirty miles south of Hanover. Since his family spoke Russian for the first several years of his life, Tregubov had a difficult time when he first entered pre-school. He was unable to communicate with his English-speaking peers, and stayed back for an extra year to work on his language skills. Once he picked up English, it was time for him to enter the Claremont school system. Tregubov describes Claremont as a "depressed little town...with one of the worst drug problems in the state." Claremont has been in the news on multiple occasions due to their school funding crisis. In 1990, the city sued the State of New Hampshire, claiming that the state's reliance on property taxes as the primary means of educational funding resulted in unequal educational opportunities and a violation of their constitutional rights. The suit reached the New Hampshire Supreme Court and progress has been made on the issue, but the city's schools still remain underfunded.

Tregubov hated school, and in seventh grade, he begged his parents to let him stay home. His parents reluctantly agreed to home-school him, but his passion for learning ensured that his education did not suffer. For two hours every week, he took English lessons with a retired Dartmouth professor in Claremont, where he read poetry and wrote essays. He also enrolled in a distance-learning school called the Laurel Springs School. Many diplomats' children and young actors use this program during middle and high school. It is an accredited school through which Tregubov received a high school diploma, even graduating in the same class as actress Jennifer Love Hewitt.

After graduating from high school, Tregubov found himself at a crossroads. "I was in this place where I didn't know what I wanted to do," he remembers, pausing to take a bite of sushi. He sits at a table in his favorite restaurant, Yama, where the waiters and staff know him well. He speaks with a slight Russian accent and frequently breaks out into a

contagious smile as he talks. “My parents are very passionate about what they do,” he says. “They put their whole lives into their work. And it’s not working to live or something like that, but that they really loved doing it. I’d watch them, and always wanted to have something that I was that passionate about.” So after receiving his high school diploma, he decided to apply to art school and pursue graphic design. He comes from an artistic family, as his father is a priest and iconographer and his mother is an embroiderer. Though he was accepted to several schools, he did not receive sufficient financial aid, and his family’s lower-middle income could not support the cost. Rather than fall into debt, he decided to forgo college and instead focused on a web design company that he started, called Zingweb. He also put his resume on Monster.com, and within a day, he heard back from a recruiter with an offer. He took the job, and began working in Boston at a document warehousing company. Although the job was financially rewarding, he began to grow restless.

Around this time, Tregubov spoke to a friend who was working at Dartmouth College. His friend encouraged him to work there, mentioning that employees have the opportunity to take one free class per term. Tregubov jumped at the chance, since he was currently taking night classes on the side. He returned to New Hampshire in 2000, and took up his current post as a systems administrator. His boss, Wayne Cripps, admires Tregubov’s talent and his commitment to his work. “He figures things out for himself, and he figures out the right thing to do,” says Cripps. Lorie Loeb, a professor in the computer science department, raves about Tregubov’s work ethic. “I’ve worked with a lot of different people, I’ve done a lot of things in industry and worked with people all over the country, and I would work with Tim anytime. I would recommend him for anything because of the energy that he puts into it,” she says. “He just always makes sure that things are working and even better than they should be. It makes the classes run well. You don’t have any idea how valuable that is until you don’t have someone like that.”

Though Tregubov was always intrigued by the opportunity to take classes as an employee, he was initially hesitant to return to the classroom. For his first several years at Dartmouth, he didn’t enroll in any classes. He then became friends with a professor in the Greek department, and the professor urged Tregubov to take his Modern Greek class. It’s an intensive class, essentially condensing Greek 1, 2, and 3 into one term, rather than three. Despite the heavy course load, he made it through. “I had so much fun,” he says with a smile, “and I realized ‘I can do this.’” After Modern Greek, he began to take a class every term, choosing the ones that sounded most interesting to him. Two of his favorite classes so far have been a Russian poetry class and a class called “Eastern European Avant-Garde.” An introductory psychology course rekindled his long-time interest in the brain. “I’m sitting in psych classes and I remember stuff that I used to read for fun as a kid,” he says. “It makes it easier since I have it in the back of my head somehow.”

Tregubov’s genuine interest in learning makes him a standout in the classroom. Loeb taught him in several computer science courses and claims that he was the model for everyone else in the classroom. She says, “I would be amazed if he didn’t have incredible grades, and if [his success] was only true for the classes I’m teaching.” Jen

Huang, a junior at Dartmouth, has taken three classes with Tregubov so far. “He’s easily one of the coolest people I’ve met at Dartmouth,” says Huang. “Since the classes I take with him are computer science-based, he’s always been a little more than a student in class. The professors always ask him for help or tell students to talk to him if they’re having technical difficulties. Tim is great because he never gets annoyed. Every student in Sudikoff wants to be his friend.”

His passion for learning only grew as he took more classes, and class became the “pinnacle of his day.” He decided that since he loved taking classes so much, he would pursue an idea that had been in the back of his mind for several years—earning a Dartmouth degree. However, Dartmouth’s policy allows employees to take one class a term, and no more. If Tregubov continued taking classes under this policy, it would take him about seven more years to earn his diploma. He approached the college several times about the possibility of taking two classes per term, to no avail. Finally, around six months ago, he wrote an official petition letter and submitted it with two faculty letters of recommendation and two student letters of recommendation. His petition worked, and Dartmouth made an exception for Tregubov. He is now allowed to take two classes per term, as long as he pays for the additional class. Yet soon this financial burden may be lifted. Dartmouth recently revamped their financial aid packages, eliminating tuition for students from incomes of under \$75,000 per year. So far, Tregubov has completed thirteen out of the thirty-six classes one must take to graduate. Once he has taken eighteen classes, he will be allowed to officially matriculate and take advantage of Dartmouth’s new financial aid initiative.

Tregubov is now in the midst of his first two-class term. All-nighters have become a fact of life, but he remains satisfied with his decision. “There is not really anything else I’d rather be doing,” he says. “In the evenings, I don’t want to go watch TV or something. My release is to do my homework, because it’s not the thing I do every day.” This term, he is taking a computer science course called “Projects in Digital Arts” and a psychology class called “Cognition.” Tregubov plans to pursue a major in cognitive science, with a focus on computer science. His goal is to take two courses every term from now on, even in the summers. At this rate, he will earn his diploma in about two and half years.

Miraculously, Tregubov manages to find time between work and class to work on outside projects. After he took several of Loeb’s computer science classes, she began recruiting him to work on a number of independent projects that she organizes. One major project that he worked on was a competition sponsored by Google last spring, in which colleges across the country modeled their campuses in 3D for Google Earth. The group invested countless hours modeling more than 130 buildings on Dartmouth’s campus, but they were rewarded when they were chosen as one of seven winning teams from over 350 entries. According to Loeb, Tregubov was a huge asset to the team. “He’s working full-time *and* taking class, and excelling in that class...And he steps in to do this, and just did an amazing job,” she says. He also contributed his time to a project this term known as “Green Lite Dartmouth.” The initiative educates students about how much energy is used by offering real-time, animated feedback for energy use in the dorms, displayed on low-energy monitors. Tregubov played a critical role in networking the whole system and

getting the information displayed on the monitors. At midnight the night before the official launch, the monitors weren't working properly. Tregubov suggested that only one might work, but Loeb was convinced that he would have both up and running in time. She says, "I told him, 'We'll have two, I'm sure.' And lo and behold, we had two. Of course he figured it out."

Since first arriving at Dartmouth, Tregubov's long-term goals have changed radically. He had originally rejected the traditional educational system and the concept of classroom learning, but now he claims that he "can't think of anything more worthwhile than learning or teaching." Through his work at Sudikoff, he realized that interacting with people is the highlight of his day. "The part of my job that I like is when people come by and I help them out with something, and they stay around and chat," says Tregubov. "I've made their lives a little bit easier." Combining his passion for learning with his interest in working with people, he envisions a future in which he can either "teach or heal."

Though his future goals came into focus during his time at Dartmouth, Tregubov may have known them all along. Since childhood, family and religion have been guiding forces in his life, and he was raised in a home of teaching and healing. His father, a "radiant" man who he considers his hero, is the priest at their Eastern Orthodox Church in Claremont. One of his favorite childhood memories is when his father would return home from work at the church. "He wears this big black robe with these long sleeves, and I'd run down the stairs to meet him," he says. "He would hug me in this big robe, and it was permeated with the smell of incense. Just being in that dark, incense smell was amazing." Despite his chock-full schedule, Tregubov still makes time to drive to Claremont nearly every weekend, where he attends church and visits his family.

Tregubov's path in life has been an unconventional one, and many of his decisions require an element of fearlessness. His bold outlook may have been partly shaped by a single day. Several years ago, Tregubov remembers coming into the computer lab on a cold, rainy day. After a long trek from the parking lot, he walked inside and was immediately faced with a student who said, "It's raining outside! Isn't it awesome?" When she recognized that Tregubov clearly did not share in her sentiments, she said, "I love the feeling of rain, I'll run around and lift my face up. You should just embrace it." With her words echoing in his head all day, he decided to take her advice. On his walk to lunch, he lifted his head up and enjoyed the rain. "I realized a lot of things we think of as unpleasant and try to avoid really are just experiences," he said. "It changed the way I thought about things, a lot of scary things... [it] made me realize fear is the worst thing ever. I don't want to be controlled by fear." Since then, he's never looked back.