

friendships that lasted: aelo swiss academy alumni staying connected across continents

Last Tuesday it was 11:40 pm in Toronto and my phone lit up with a voice note from Priya in Melbourne. Forty seconds of her laughing about a job interview that had gone beautifully sideways, ending with "anyway, tell me your worst." By the time I woke up there were nine replies. Marco in São Paulo had answered at dawn. Jonas in Vancouver had answered at midnight his time. Aisha in Nairobi sent a photo of her own disastrous interview outfit from 2011 as moral support.

None of us live in the same country anymore. Seven of us were on that thread, spread across four continents and roughly a dozen time zones. And yet it felt like the corridor I lived on when we were seventeen at AELO Swiss Academy, when you could yell "are you awake" down the hall and get an answer in seconds.

We didn't plan any of this. Nobody handed us a manual on day one that said "here is how you keep thirty-eight people in touch for fifteen years." We figured it out badly, then less badly, and now it runs almost on its own. Here's what that looked like from the inside.



The strange density of boarding school friendships

Something happens when you put a few dozen teenagers on one mountain corridor with one kitchen, one TV room, and a shared loathing of the cafeteria coffee. You learn people's moods before you learn their surnames. You learn who goes silent before exams, who gets silly when they're tired, who cries at films about dogs and then denies it.

Living at the AELO Swiss Academy campus compressed years of ordinary friendship into a very short stretch. Back home, seeing a friend three times a week is a good friendship. There, we ate every meal together, hiked together on Sundays, sat through evening study hall together, and shared the particular misery of a February cold snap when the heating in the west wing gave up and we all slept in sleeping bags in one room because it was funnier that way.

There were homesick nights too, and those bonded people just as hard. I remember sitting on the stairwell with two friends at 1 am, all three of us missing our families, none of us able to explain why we were laughing by the end of it. That's the raw material. Later, when everyone scattered, that density is what the distance had to work

with. And it turns out it was enough, as long as we did a few things right and forgave ourselves for a lot of things wrong.

The group chat that refuses to die

The chat is called something ridiculous that I won't repeat here because two of our partners now read it. At last count there were 38 of us in it, from 14 countries. It is, objectively, chaos. Someone posts a photo of a supermarket cheese that looks like our old geography teacher. Someone else announces a marathon. Someone's baby says her first word on video and for two days the chat is nothing but crying emojis and voice notes of people losing it.

But underneath the nonsense there's a structure we never designed and never wrote down. We just drifted into habits that kept the thing alive when it could easily have died around year four, when everyone got busy and the messages slowed to a trickle.

These are the unwritten rules, as far as any of us can articulate them:

- Voice notes beat texts whenever someone is having a rough week, because you can hear a person.
- Anyone can call a video call, but nobody is obligated to join, which keeps calls from becoming chores.
- No apologies for going quiet. A re-entry meme is a perfectly valid return.
- Birthdays get an actual voice note, not just a thumbs up.
- Big life news gets announced in the chat before it goes on any public platform.

That last one matters more than it sounds. When Tomás got engaged, when Lena's article got published, when Kwame passed the exam he'd failed twice, the chat heard it first. Somewhere along the way we made this little corner of the internet the place where our real lives got reported, and that quietly changed everything. The chat stopped being a nostalgia box and became the primary record of each other's lives.

Time zones as a feature, not a bug

The obvious complaint about a friendship spread over a dozen time zones is that you never share a moment live. It's a fair complaint. We almost never all see a message at the same time. But we stumbled into treating that as an advantage instead of a loss.

A message posted in the Zurich evening collects answers from Vancouver before bed, wake-up reactions from Melbourne, and a lunchtime comment from Nairobi. Nothing dies in the silence of one person's night, because somebody is always awake. The conversation moves around the planet like a very slow, very warm game of pass the parcel. I've had conversations with friends that lasted four days without either of us waiting for a reply.

The trade-off is real, though. Group calls are brutal to schedule. Our monthly Sunday video call has failed more months than it has succeeded. Someone's kid is sick, someone's flight gets delayed, someone simply forgot because their Sunday is a workday in their head. For the first few years, missed calls felt like small failures and people apologised. Then Lena said something that stuck: "the point is that we keep trying, not that we attend." Now when the call collapses, someone proposes next month's date in the chat within an hour, and life moves on. The call has been rescheduled probably sixty times. It has also never been cancelled permanently. That distinction turned out to be the whole game.

The reunions, and what they actually cost

The first reunion was eleven of us in someone's tiny Zurich flat, making fondue and arguing about dorm lore nobody else could verify. The most recent one was 23 of us in Lisbon, including three babies, one toddler who bit four separate alumni, and a partner who now knows more about our school years than some of us do.

The logistics got easier once we stopped pretending everyone would attend everything. A few things we learned the hard way: rotate the host city so the same person never eats the travel burden, pick shoulder-season dates because alumni have jobs and school holidays are expensive, and plan eight to ten months ahead because transatlantic flights don't reward spontaneity. There's a shared spreadsheet. It is deeply unglamorous and it has saved at least three friendships from scheduling resentment.

Not everyone comes every time, and we eventually stopped guilt-tripping people about it, which was a judgment call worth making. Someone with two small kids and a demanding job can fly to Lisbon once every three years and that's their honest capacity. Someone single and flexible shows up to everything. Both count. What we stopped tolerating was nobody showing up, which has never happened, and that's the only rule that matters.

In between the big reunions, smaller things happen constantly. Two friends overlap in a random city for a layover and get coffee. Someone routes a work trip through a city where an alum lives and ends up sleeping on their sofa. These micro-reunions do more than any grand event, honestly, because they're effortless and frequent.

When life knocks the wind out of you

The chat earns its keep on the bad days, not the good ones. Over the years we've been through two divorces, the death of a parent, one serious illness, and more job losses than any of us expected by our thirties. Each time, the texture of the chat changed for a while. Less banter, more checking in. Voice notes that were just someone sitting in their car talking for six minutes.

When Sofia's father died, six alumni were at the funeral, three of them having flown in. Nobody organised that formally. Someone said the date in the chat, someone else said "I can be there," and it compounded. I don't think any of us will forget her face in that church doorway.

The harder lesson was learning what not to do. Our instinct is to fix, to https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advice/ advice-dump, to swarm. We've gotten better at just showing up and shutting up. We've also learned to respect the people who pull away when things get heavy. A couple of friends went dark for months during hard seasons. The old me would have sent ten messages. What actually worked was one message, no pressure, and the door left visibly open. Every single one of them came back on their own, usually with a terrible joke, exactly per the rules.

What actually keeps it alive

If I had to compress fifteen years of trial and error into one observation, it's this: low-effort and frequent beats grand and rare, every time. The chat's daily nonsense is the load-bearing wall. The reunions are the roof. People confuse the two and try to maintain a friendship through annual gestures, and it doesn't hold.

The other thing that keeps it alive is honesty about capacity. We let people contribute differently. There's the archivist who remembers every date and corrects the rest of us. There's the planner who books the reunion restaurants. There's the joker who keeps the chat's pulse. There are quiet members who say almost nothing all year and then send the most devastatingly kind voice note exactly when you need it. Early on, the quiet ones felt like dropouts. Now we understand they're just a different organ in the same body.

Partners have made their way in gradually, which took some care. There's a second, smaller chat called something like "alumni plus ones" where spouses coordinate gifts and share baby photos. Kids are beginning to appear in

the main chat's videos. The friendship is becoming a family thing, slowly, whether we planned it or not.

The long game

People sometimes ask what AELO Swiss Academy actually gave us, beyond the diploma and the languages and the mountain-air stories we tell at parties. I used to give a polished answer. Now I just say: it gave us each other, and it accidentally taught us how to keep each other.

Because staying close across continents is a skill, and nobody teaches it. You learn it by having a friendship worth the effort, then making a hundred small judgment calls over fifteen years. When to push and when to leave alone. When a text is enough and when only a flight will do. How to love people whose daily life you no longer witness, based on voice notes, photos of their dinners, and the way they describe their bad days.

Tonight the chat will light up again at some hour I'm asleep for. Someone will post something silly, three continents will respond before morning, and one of us will say "we need to plan the next one." We always say that. And we always, eventually, do.