

WHERE ARE THEY NOW

Lila French



Lila French '99 was the first MIT woman to become a New England Division III champion.

by Lila French '99

Editor's Note:

In 1999, Lila was the womens' team captain and MVP, setting MIT Varsity records in the Pole Vault (11' 1/4"), Javelin (112' 8"), and Heptathlon (3679 pts.). The Heptathlon mark is still the 4th best all-time performance for MIT, and the Javelin Throw ranks 5th. She won the Pole Vault in both the New England Division III and Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference Championships in 1998.

Lila was a Course 6 major, graduating with both an SB in Computer Science and Engineering and an MNG in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

After MIT, she spent several years as a computer programmer while continuing to compete in the Pole Vault, but eventually ventured into the film industry, where she has become an accomplished actor/director/producer. In 2017 she won the Best Director of a Short Documentary award at the Madrid International Film Festival. You can find out more about Lila at her website, lilafrench.com.

Hello and greetings from the south of Spain! Where I'm glad to be back after a great but longer-than-expected trip to South Africa.

In February, after about a year of focus on my latest film, I'd gone to Cape Town to kitesurf, while skipping a bit of winter in the Southern Hemisphere. But at the end of March, a countrywide lockdown began, and I got stuck. Finally, after two "Groundhog Day"-esque months in an Airbnb and a few botched attempts, I got a repatriation flight back—via a two-and-a-half-day drive to Pretoria, a bus to Johannesburg, a flight through Doha, and a drive back from Madrid. It was exhausting, although I can't say I minded the adventure.

Back at the 'tute, I was a Course 6, Class of '99 pole vaulter. I was part of the first Varsity Women's Indoor Team and one of the first women vaulters. In those days, the men's and women's teams had separate programs, but I did most of my vaulting with the men. I had some success at the regional level and was nationally ranked, however women's vault wasn't an event at Div. III National's until 2000, so I graduated without that experience. But it wasn't much of a disappointment, because I'd planned to continue competing post-collegiately.

I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, where I worked at a tech startup while continuing to train and compete at open meets. It should have been no surprise to me that I'd favor outdoor workouts to spending my days programming at a desk in an office—one clear memory I have from MIT is walking to my job at a lab in a basement one summer morning, and feeling wistful while passing the lawn care workers because they got to spend their summer outside. Pretty quickly I found myself working as a contractor, partly remotely, allowing me to hit the gym in the morning and the track in the afternoon. I loved it.

After three years and some progress, I wanted more, and so I

decided to move to pole vault mecca Jonesboro, Arkansas. Being there was both wonderful and frustrating. I was in my element, training in a disciplined way with clear focus, and I always woke up excited for what was possible. However, somehow I never had a breakthrough. My fitness level and technique improved, but I never surpassed my PR from before moving. After a little less than two years, I left, thus ending my pole vault career anticlimactically, and moved to Los Angeles.

It was disappointing. Now, I can look back and see ways in which I was rigid, where the process lacked joy, where I was limiting myself mentally. It also took practicing yoga years later to discover the importance of not trying to impose anyone else's form or way of doing things on myself from the outside, but rather to feel how I move and to find my own way. I needed a big change. But at the time, I only felt the difficulty of leaving my aspirations behind, not knowing what was ahead.

Upon arrival in Los Angeles, I took a random leap and enrolled in acting classes, a childhood passion that had been simmering but on the backburner during the previous years, and it was even more fulfilling than I imagined. I found joy in entering the worlds of people different from myself. It deepened my sense of empathy.

After several years, I performed in a play called "Birdbath", which I later adapted to film. I'd never directed a film before, but I had a clear vision for how to tell the story, and, being from MIT, wasn't intimidated by the many unknown technical aspects of filmmaking. I hired a good crew, learned what I needed to, and got it done.

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Andrea Bradshaw and Dan Harper

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After completing the film, I spent some time going through the motions of pursuing acting in Los Angeles, but my enthusiasm for the process had waned. I'd started yoga and meditation, and most TV shows and stories had started to seem like noise. And after making a film, the idea of spending time auditioning for something I didn't really care about paled in comparison to spending time creating something.

In April of 2015, I visited Barcelona for my birthday and fell in love with the city, the country, and the relative contentment of people with small pleasures there compared to in the US. So, knowing I could work remotely and develop film projects anywhere, after 11 formative years in L.A., I moved to Spain, to enjoy daily life more, which I have.

Since moving, I've made a second film—"Da Parish", a documentary about a community's recovery after Hurricane Katrina—and a third—"Winter in a Beach Town", a narrative short I shot in the little town I live in, Andalucia. I've continued yoga, I started kitesurfing (apparently continuing a trend of participating in sports that are difficult in airports), and I travel.

While on lockdown in South Africa, I spent some extra time contemplating my path, and what I ought to be doing in the world... Competitive kitesurfing? A different job? Write the script that's been floating around in my head?

I've come to the conclusion that I should try to do whatever I enjoy regardless of the outcome, where I enjoy the hours I'm putting in—"Let us do good because it is good to do good," Vivekananda said—where the process itself is good and fulfilling and where I'm finding my own way.



Andrea Bradshaw '09 and Dan Harper '12 got a chance to get together before the start of the U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials on February 29, 2020 in Atlanta Georgia. Andrea won the NE Div III Championship 800 meters in 2009 and Dan took the same title in the 10K in 2012. Andrea ran 2:48:28 in the Trials Marathon and Dan's time was 2:28:10, under less than ideal conditions, as described by Andrea in her note about the race: "It was pretty windy, hilly, and then just uphill for the last 4 miles it seemed. I wasn't quite happy with my time, but happy to beat my seed by over 150 spots! And I still can't believe I did this. I still think of myself as a 600m runner!"



Lila has continued to make use of her athletic ability by taking up kitesurfing.