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## **Years In Honors: A Personal Reflection of My Time Spent in the Honors Program and How it Influenced My Life**

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# Years In Honors

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A Personal Reflection of My Time Spent in the  
Honors Program and How it Influenced My Life

By  
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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

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## **Introduction**

Nine years ago, in 2011, I began attending Western Oregon University. I was given the opportunity to be part of the Honors Program and took it right away. I was excited to begin my higher education experience at this wonderful little school and was even more excited to be able to build a positive network of peers on the Honors Program.

Of my four years at Western Oregon University, I took the most honors courses in my first year. These classes were, for the most part, very impactful and the lessons and creative projects have remained in my mind ever since. I learned incredible lessons about myself as an individual and as a student. I realized, first, that I had never been challenged on quite this level before coming to Western and joining the Honors Program. After experiencing these challenges, I came to see that as a student I thrived

with these challenges and the incredible support I received from my fellow students, advisors, and professors in the Honor Program.

I learned how to begin thinking critically about the world around me, about my experiences and privileges and education. The honors classes I took threw me out of my comfort zone and into new and interesting subjects that I had never considered studying. I found that I not only enjoyed the challenge, but had fun and grew quite a bit during this first year.

My second year in Honors was defined by solidifying my relationships and friendships within the Honors Program. I began to lean on these people more as I navigated tough personal challenges. I found even more importance in academics and personal relationships. I explored options for my major and decided firmly on what I wanted to study: social science with a specification in sociology.

Entering my third year of college, I was feeling pretty good. Life was looking positive and I was moving steadily towards my degree. However, during the course of this third year I faced many challenges from deaths in the family, new mental health struggles within my family, and personal obstacles related to a negative living situation. I was put in a position I'd never found myself in: a choice in how I would spend and allocate my energy. My focus was challenged and began to change, shifting slightly away from academics and school and more on family and maintaining relationships and cutting out toxic relationships.

These struggles bled into my final year at Western and my focus continued to shift subtly throughout the summer before and during my final year. It was because of

the relationships and lessons I gained in Honors and the support I had from these friendships that I made it through the trials of the next couple of years.

Throughout the course of this project I hope to explore my time in the Honors Program more deeply. In addition, I hope to delve into my time attending Western Oregon University as a whole and explore how the lessons learned and friendships I gained in the Honors Program influenced and shaped my experiences outside of the Honors Program. I hope to explore how I changed and evolved while in the Honors Program at Western as well as how I changed in the years after. In addition, I'll be examining how the lessons I learned informed and shaped my career path and how it changed over time.

## **Year One**

During my first year at Western Oregon University I joined the Honors Program and began taking courses with my fellow classmates. We took the basics with some added flare from our professors. In this Program, we learned lessons far outside just literature, art, and science; we gained valuable critical thinking skills in classes such as literature, philosophy, and geography. These classes not only taught us to think critically about projects in the classroom but also encouraged us to use these critical thinking skills in our personal lives as we attempted to begin navigating adulthood, politics, bills, and relationships.

In addition to critical thinking, we developed a need to be challenged. We were encouraged to find ways of accepting any challenge and ensuring we could have fun

along the way. We learned that no challenge was too great and that if we didn't understand or feel we were up to the task, help was always waiting for us if we were willing to ask for it.

In our literature class we explored critical thinking skills as well as interpersonal skills. We were asked to engage in a particularly challenging group project with the idea that we would create a play combining three separate plays (*Medea*, *Macbeth*, and *Cinderella*). At the end of our term, the entire freshman honors class would take a trip to Ashland, Oregon, to see the Shakespeare Festival where they would be putting on their own version of *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Cinderella*. Our professor did not tell us what exactly he was looking for, challenging our critical thinking as well as creativity. He did not tell us how to combine them or exactly how he wanted this play presented, only that we needed to have dialog from all three productions.

This presented quite a bit of difficulty for each group as we scrambled to come up with unique and sensible ways of combining such different plays. One of the groups created a video inspired by the show *Cheaters* with characters from each of the plays involved in a love triangle turned disaster. My group created a play using each of the characters and their lines, combining relationships and combining some characters as well so that the story made more sense to us. It was during the course of this project that I discovered how creative and inspiring my fellow honors students could be.

This group projects helped to solidify the honors culture of leaning on one another when we need to and allowing for creative expression when available. In the past, I had completed group projects mostly on my own and had learned that it was

difficult to rely on other students in school to complete their parts of a project. I learned that it was simply easier to do most or all of it on my own to ensure that the project was complete and that we would receive a positive grade. However, during my first year in the Honors Program and especially during this class, my ideas were challenged and I found that not only were my fellow group members and classmates creative and capable, but they were all more than willing to participate above and beyond in each project against each challenge we faced.

The first difficulty we came across was how to meld the three very different and very pivotal plays with a very different feel and set of characters with no context or idea of how to do it. We watched each one separately and as a small group and decided to ditch some characters and create similar relationships across the plays. This worked well for us and we were able to blend the dialogue with little confusion. This project taught me how to truly push and challenge my own creativity in ways I hadn't considered before.

Our presentation of the play, complete with convincing name tags to differentiate the characters, turned out to be beautifully messy and creative, just as our group was. We were certainly not the most creative or the most interesting but we were proud of our first big group project within our honors group. We were even more excited, after seeing all the hard work from each group, to see how the professionals had done it at the Shakespeare festival.

When the festival finally arrived, the entire first year honors class packed up for a trip down to Ashland. We weren't going to just see this one play; we went to see a few

different productions. *The Seagull* and *Animal Crackers* were the first two productions we saw, the first somber with depth of thought and the second a comedy that had us roaring with laughter and engaged the audience.

We finally saw *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Cinderella* and it was very different from any of the ideas our honors group had come up with for our projects. The production had all three plays sharing space on stage at the same time. The actors interacted only with the fellow actors in their specific play, moving between each other and sharing props and managing to ignore the other plays. I remember thinking how difficult it must be for the deaf people in the audience to follow the electronic dialogue.

About two thirds of the way through the production, the actors began disappearing from the stage only to return on their cues wearing only their rehearsal blacks (all-black clothes worn during rehearsals), revealing that Jason from *Medea*, was played by a woman as would have been appropriate for that time, and Lady Macbeth was played by a man as would have been appropriate for Shakespeare. They continued acting as before. However, a circle appeared in the middle of the stage and our main characters, *Medea*, *Macbeth*, and *Cinderella* entered the circle. They jumbled themselves and left the circle, interacting with different plays and trading roles. It was a brilliant production and entirely confusing for a first year honors student with absolutely no experience in theater outside seeing *The Nutcracker* as a young girl.

After watching this play, we were asked to write our final papers about our thoughts regarding *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Cinderella*. We begged our professor to tell us what he thought: did he like it? What even happened on that stage? We begged for



context and clues to help us shape our thoughts and organize what we had seen. He did not offer this and slyly challenged us to create and develop our own ideas based on what we knew in the moment. As honors students, we were knowledge seekers; it was difficult for us to form an opinion and write a final paper about something we didn't entirely understand.

Aside from the plays and projects we watched and took part in while in Ashland we also came away with a deeper appreciation for our fellow honors students. I had learned a lot about my classmates as individuals on a creative level as well as an academic level and had gotten to see those different sides come together in a big way. We bonded together over our similarities during this trip and we also celebrated our differences. A person can learn a lot about their cohort when on a trip: exploring fun places, finding out what other people like or hate. It was a very enriching experience that I am glad I got to take part in.

In philosophy class, we once again tackled critical thinking, this time in a more straightforward way with the entire goal of the class being critical thinking. Yet, as we navigated different philosophers and their theories, I found that this was anything but straightforward. Thinking critically was difficult and stressful -- men had spent their entire lives considering one single question or a handful of questions.

In philosophy, we had deep discussions regarding philosophical questions, practicing arguments and discussions. I realized afterwards that we were practicing how to think and how to consider each and every angle of every possible situation. We didn't

tackle every question in life but instead practiced how to be mindful of our decisions and opinions.

While taking philosophy with my fellow honors students, I also began writing on my own again. I hadn't written for myself since high school as my days were filled with writing assignments for honors classes and sociology classes, most of which were writing intensive. I hadn't wanted to write for myself because it felt overwhelming. However, after taking philosophy and reading the assignments and writings by ancient philosophers, I felt inspired to delve into my own thoughts and put them on paper (or into a google document).

My writing developed and changed quite a bit during my time taking philosophy classes. I had noticed an improvement in the way I described things and explained complex thoughts coming from characters. I found it easier to write each character from a different perspective and these people in my stories gained more depth and became more relatable. My writing became more intuitive.

The professor we had taught us to find depth in every question and experience. He taught us to ask more questions, different questions, questions we had never considered asking in that context before. We did not have any hugely impressive projects during this class that stuck with me through the years. Instead, it was marked by reading difficult exposition and piecing together our own opinions and thoughts from the opinions and thoughts of other, bigger, deeper thinkers.

While philosophy forced us to examine deeper questions about our world and why we were here and what we were meant to do, we also took classes that had us look

closely at the modern world we lived in. One of these classes was economic geography. This class was the one that really made me consider sociology and social science as my area of study. I found that the capitalist ideals and goals were counter to what I felt was right for individuals and communities. I learned a great deal from this class and this professor, but I found I disagreed with him on many points more often than I agreed with him.

Our first project in this class was to read an article called *I, Pencil*. This article was all about the journey of a pencil. It examined the creation of each part of a pencil and the journey each piece took to come together to become a pencil. I don't remember the exact assignment that was attached to this article -- just that it was our opening assignment for the class. What struck me, however, was how this article focused solely on the pieces and products and labor associated with making and assembling a pencil. It mostly ignored the individuals and communities that were making each material and how these industries influenced the livelihoods and lifestyles of these communities. It struck me that this was a common theme within the study of economics. I found that this was counter to what I had grown up with (my mother studied social science as well and had been an activist in her place of work and since she had been a young woman). My entire life I had been taught to consider human beings first and money and corporate interests after.

While taking this class, I came to have great respect for our professor even though I found myself disagreeing with many of his ideals. He was knowledgeable and always kept me interested. He never refused to answer my questions and was always

willing to delve deeper into subjects that interested the class. He would gather information after class and bring new things and information to our next class to keep us interested. I found myself questioning him often and I found these questions met with glee -- he was genuinely happy that his students were willing to listen and argue. This is another reason I respected him quite a bit. In the end, this class really allowed me to think critically about what I wanted to study and, in addition to the introductory sociology classes I took, this class helped me decide to study social sciences.

During my first year at Western Oregon University I took many classes that all taught me similar lessons. We learned to work in groups through various group projects; we learned to rely on our group members for support and that all students in Honors were highly capable overachievers. We learned to think critically about big questions and small questions. We learned to question things from politics, to literature, to our own education. However, there was one class I took during this first year that stood above the rest sheerly for getting me out of my comfort zone and thrusting me into a gooey challenge.

I believe it was the second time we met as a class for the History of Neurocognition when our professor, a large bespeckled man with a no-nonsense attitude, brought in a bucket and a stack of trays with tiny blades sitting on top. He spread out clothes and dolled out trays without a word to us students -- the bucket sitting quietly by the front of the class. He set a scalpel beside each tray before grabbing the bucket and pulling several sheeps' brains out -- one for each pair of us. This was a shock; as an entry level history of psychology class, we had not expected any hands-on

learning in this regard, especially with actual brains. I'll never forget what he said after returning to the front of the class: "Well, they were going to go bad so we might as well learn something." Might as well!

My class partner, a psychology major herself, decided quickly that she was not at all interested in touching the brain so I jumped to the task. It was touch, I remember the membrane that protected the brain was difficult to cut through. I remember my partner mentioning that I should likely not become a brain surgeon which I agreed with heartily.

In addition to our gooey, fun, and extremely informative brain dissection activity, we also spent much of the class teaching each other course materials. Each student was assigned half of a chapter to learn. We then created a basic lesson to teach the class about this half of a chapter. Each day a different student spent between 20-50 minutes presenting the material to the class with some time for questions at the end of each presentation. After this, we were typically dismissed! I remember choosing the chapter regarding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder because it is something I have struggled with my whole life. I don't remember much of the information I learned specifically from that book but I remember it prompting me to dive deeper into my diagnosis and learn more about it.

Above I had mentioned taking a theater class which was part of a sequence of art classes through the Honors Program. In addition to theater and learning about plays and how they are made and come to fruition, we also took a music class. I took this class with a friend of mine in the Honors Program and we were both excited for it as we had both taken choir classes in highschool and even before that. However, this was not a

choir class as we had anticipated. Instead, it was a class that discussed the theory of plays being adapted into musicals. We took a look at one of the most popular musicals, *Rent*, and explored where it came from originally and how it became what it is today.

We took a look, first, at a book regarding orchids. *The Orchid Thief* was a book not simply about orchids and how they grew and what made them thrive and nor was it a book about how to obtain or find orchids in the wild. This book was about one journalist following a man with an obsession for orchids. He is dead set on cloning a rare type of orchid and goes on a harrowing quest to find a wild ghost orchid to clone.

After reading this book and discussing it at length, we watched the movie adaptation of this book, oddly enough called *Adaptation* and starring Meryl Streep and Nicholas Cage. This movie was, to say the least, not my favorite film nor my favorite adaptation of a book to a movie. However, it was imperative that we watch and learn from it as the screenwriter took a different approach when completing his version of this piece of media. He writes *Adaptation* from the perspective of himself as a screenwriter writing about a woman who is writing about a man who is attempting to poach orchids (as far as I remember it, at least). It's very meta and a bit confusing if you don't have any experience with this area of study.

After spending time learning about how a book is adapted into a movie and how the content can change quite a bit along the way, we took a closer look at the musical *Rent*. *Rent* tells the story of a group of young artists, one is a writer, one is a filmmaker, one is a dancer, a singer, etc, as they live under the shadow of HIV/AIDS. The characters we follow experience personal struggles with HIV/AIDS as well as with addiction and

prostitution. It explores their struggle to survive life in New York, I believe in the East Village, during the bohemian days of the late 80s and early 1990s. The musical first came about in the early 90s but has roots in media long before.

Before there was *Rent*, there was an opera called *La Boheme*. The story of *La Boheme* tells a very similar story to *rent*. Taking place sometime in the early 1800s, it follows the story of a seamstress and her friends who are all artists, similar to the artists in *Rent*- some of the characters, such as Mimi, even share the same names as their counterparts. It follows these characters in Paris as they struggle with similar issues as in *Rent*: alcoholism, poverty, and sickness relevant to that time period and location. In *La Boheme*, Mimi dies of consumption at the end of the final act following a fit of coughing.

However, though *La Boheme* is an excellent source material for *Rent* and is inherently very similar, it is still not the original source material. *La Boheme* is based on a series of articles and short plays/stories called *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* by Henri Murger. This collection was about life in the mid 1800s in Paris and romanticized the bohemian lifestyle.

This project was interesting to me throughout the term. I found it fascinating to see the progression of short stories that appeared as articles, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, to a fully fledged opera with a distinct plot and set of characters in *La Boheme*, and finally to a Broadway musical that made it to the silver screen as *Rent*. I remember have two distinct impressions of this course: first, that the author Henri Murger probably had no idea that his little collection of short stories would evolve into something so incredibly widespread (even *The Office* used their tune from "Seasons of

Love” from the musical *Rent*); and second, that this was definitely not the choir class that I had expected it to be initially.

Overall, my first year at a university and my first year in the Honors Program were illuminating and fun! In just nine months my world had expanded and my mind had begun to open and explore the true possibilities at my fingertips. Growing up, my mom had worked at Oregon State University in the forestry and education departments over the course of 30 years. I had been exposed to a university campus throughout my childhood and knew that it would eventually become part of my life. However, attending a different university than that of my family (I had uncles, cousins, siblings all attend Oregon State University), allowed me to see a different community and different campus culture to that of Oregon State. Our little campus felt as though it had a more tight-knit community than at Oregon State. I had classes with several of the same people outside of the Honors Program.

Growing up at Oregon State’s campus, I felt that most students didn’t get a chance to know their professors or their fellow classmates until they got into their higher level courses and began to specialize in a specific subject. Being part of the Honors Program showed me that even being among many students and people you didn’t know, I at least had a core group of students and professors who knew who I was and who I knew as well. It was comforting to walk down main street each day and to see familiar faces. Leaving my first year and returning home for the summer, I felt as though I was leaving Hogwarts. There was the excitement of leaving school and being able to enjoy a summer of fun and work to earn some money, but there was also a certain level



of sadness as we left our newfound friends. I was excited to return to school in a way I had never been before.

## **Year Two**

During my second year at Western Oregon University, I spent time taking more honors classes. The year before, I had decided that I wanted to study sociology and social sciences. I had been led to this decision through taking sociology classes, anthropology classes, and an honors class called economic geography. My classes had taught me to really begin thinking critically about the world around me and the education I received. As I entered my second year, I was excited to get back into student life, to see my friends, and to start learning all the new lessons our professors had in store for us.

Entering my second year, I found myself moving out of the dorms and into a house off campus. This was my first time living in a home with people other than my family. Living in the dorms was a nice in-between -- living on my own but not having to pay or worry about lots of monthly bills or relying solely on my own income for these bills. Now, however, I was living in a house in a beautiful little neighborhood with two wonderful people: my best friend of six years who was studying sign language interpreting, and a deaf girl who was studying education. This year was marked by deepening friendships within the Honors Program, of course, but also by widening my social circle and getting to know new and different people.

Having a roommate who was deaf and another who studied American Sign Language, there was very little need to speak words out loud in my home during this year. Over the month before school began, I started learning from my roommates. I had signed myself up to take the first course in American Sign Language and was eager to get an early start in learning this complex and fascinating language.

My hearing roommate who was studying to become an American Sign Language interpreter, taught me the basics. We spent much of our spare time going for walks in August (she got a puppy in later July so we went on lots of walks). On these walks, she would teach me colors, fingerspelling, and how to describe things using non-specific signs. These were fascinating and the thirst for knowledge that I felt pulled me into this learning. Honors had instilled within me a need to learn and this was an excellent way to satisfy it in the meantime. My deaf roommate, Alyssa, however, was a feisty and sassy young woman. She taught me as much slang and “bad words” she could think of to teach me.

I learned so much from these two wonderful women in just a few short weeks that by the time I got into my first American Sign Language Class, I was way over prepared. I already knew most of the material for that class and found this to be an incredible advantage for me. I was able to assist my fellow students in the class and was able to focus more on asking clarifying questions and on the projects we were given and it helped immensely. I learned that having a set of knowledge shouldn't discourage you from learning more about it and can be a positive when attempting to get more information as you will already know what questions to ask.

In addition to my wonderful roommates, I lived a few houses away from some of my wonderful Honors Program cohorts. It was having these individuals and this community around me that helped me through my first major personal challenge of that year: a bad relationship. It sounds lame, but I know that with the help of my friends in the Honors Program, I was able to find my worth and ditch a bad, lazy boyfriend for good.

I'd prefer to avoid spending too much of this project on this bad relationship I experienced, so instead I will merely say that during this time I learned that I not only valued an education and some amount of ambition in myself, but that I found it necessary to have in a partner. My boyfriend -- and he was very much a "boy" -- had no plan for attending university, no job, no form of transportation, and was living on a friend's couch. At the time, he was kind to me -- he was always kind. But he never pushed me, encouraged laziness, and wanted us to spend time together constantly. The Honors Program had taught me that this would never be enough. This lesson had risen in a new form for me as a bad relationship and would continue to pop up in my life in the form of bad jobs, bad roommates, and negative family members.

One of the most pivotal classes I took while in the Honors Program was decidedly not one that I thought would have such a lasting impact on me. Much in the same way that I had found I needed a challenge, this class taught me that not all challenges are presented as challenging. Some challenges look like an "easy A". I distinctly remember one of my roommates seeing the option for me to take "Creativity" and she told me to take it for the "easy A." It was not. Not only because it challenged my

way of viewing the world and my space in it but because it challenged me to look towards the future and decide where I wanted to be with my life in five to ten years.

I remember the project distinctly. We were asked to write about where we saw ourselves in five to ten years and where we wanted to be. I remember thinking, "I have no idea!" I hadn't really considered that question before. Where *did* I see myself? What did I want for my life? I had always thought that veterinary medicine was what I had wanted to do, but at the time had not felt called to science. I had recently decided on working towards a degree in social science or sociology but wasn't sure what sort of career path I wanted or where that degree could take me. Because of this, I decided to write more about what living situation I hoped for myself and what sort of personal life I wanted to lead.

As a career or job for myself, since I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, I decided to write about becoming an author. I had begun writing for myself starting in middle school and had continued off and on during my high school years and into college. I enjoyed writing, but it was mostly for myself and I have never had any real intention to have others read any stories I've written. While it would be an excellent dream even now to be able to write full time on my own schedule, it's not a reality for me at this age.

Having chosen a "career path" I began thinking about where I wanted to live. This was much easier for me than deciding what I wanted to do. I wrote about living in a small A-frame cabin in the Washington Wilderness surrounded by trees and dogs. I'd have a river nearby and would live close to a small town. I would travel and see

beautiful sights. I would meet interesting people and try new foods and engage in new experiences. Of course, it's been over five years and I am certainly not close to owning my own tiny quarter-million dollar cabin in the Washington Wilderness. However, I at least have an aunt who has retired and has a cabin that I can visit any time.

Unfortunately, my aunt currently lives right next to a beautiful empty cabin with a loft room that has been overrun by blackberries. It's like it came right from my dreams and into reality. Sadly it is not on the market (for some reason).

This project taught me the importance of having goals that are attainable and achievable and it also taught me to shoot for the stars. Understanding your own limitations and abilities is important in achieving your goals, but it should not keep you from wanting or dreaming for something greater. We can always grow and adapt and learn new things so it's never a bad idea to have a few lofty goals.

In addition to understanding what you want out of life, this class taught us some useful techniques for meditation. One of these is called "grounding." Grounding allows a person to feel more present in their life and to focus your mind. It can help people feel more creative, balanced, and centered in their lives. It can help a person decide what they want out of life.

When it was first presented to me, I was not overly fond of the idea of grounding myself. It was not initially explained to me that this exercise was meant to help you feel more balanced and present. Rather, we jumped right into meditation and she had us ground ourselves by tying ourselves to the Earth, metaphorically. The reason I didn't like this visual or this specific grounding exercise was that it made me feel more trapped and

“held” to Earth rather than feeling present and balanced. However, as I explored different grounding techniques on my own, I found some that helped me more than her exercise did. I still do some of these exercises today and would likely not be doing them if it hadn’t been for this class.

Another thing we discussed in this class is the idea of being intentional with your thoughts, your feelings, your actions, your thoughts, and your very presence and energy. She talked to us about the energy we put into the world and asked if we felt we put out positive energy or negative energy. At the time, I felt like a very positive person putting out positivity. Now, it may be a lot more balanced in the middle. She taught us that we can control this energy and how much we project it out of ourselves. While I still don’t feel I have great energy control, it was interesting to see how this would coincide with psychology classes I took in later years.

We discussed being intentional with our energy as well as being intentional about our energy towards our goals and, really, towards each aspect of our lives. Put good energy towards something, feel positive thoughts and emotions for it, speak positively about it, and it will come to pass. I was never convinced that this was true, especially as a sociology major and learning about how many obstacles can be pitted against you depending on where you start in life and, specifically, your economic status. However, I have found that if I am being positive and speaking positively about my goals, I am more motivated to achieve them and am more intentional about how I achieve them. Above all, fear of failure has always been my obstacle. Not allowing that

to take over has allowed me to achieve more success than I had imagined I would in work and in my personal life. Project positivity and positivity will return to you.

Finally, this class also showed me the invaluable skill of practicing gratitude. It can be so easy to get bogged down in what you can't do or what you don't have -- it is a lot more difficult to accept your limitations and be grateful for all of the abilities and strengths you *do* have. Practicing gratitude is something I still try to do each day. I try to wake up and think of three things that I am grateful for; it is often my physical abilities, my family and friends, and my pets as these are all things that keep me grounded and present and balanced in my life. I do this when I go to bed as well: three things that I am grateful for throughout the day. This one can be difficult on bad days when it feels like the world is crumbling. Still, it is an incredibly useful skill to have and can save a person so much angst and frustration.

Ultimately, this class taught me the importance of knowing what you want out of life. It taught me to be intentional and to attempt to put positive energy into the world and towards my goals. And it taught me gratitude. Gratitude for what I have and my abilities is what kept me out of a few depressive spirals throughout my college career. The themes I saw in this class would follow me throughout my time at Western Oregon University and I would continue to see them as I began taking more classes in community and public health. It felt good to have Creativity as a base education before entering these classes.

Creativity allowed me to expand my thoughts and my view of the space I take up in the world and the energy I put out. Another class that broadened my mind was

another geography class called Cultural Geography. This class discussed the importance of location and place to different cultures and how specific locations can be central to culture.

Unlike some of the other honors classes I took at Western, this class did not particularly stick in my mind. I remember feelings about the class: I enjoyed it and loved expanding my worldview even more. This class led me down a more specific path within public and community health; it got me interested in global health classes and new and different sociology classes as well. I remember feeling more passionate about my choice of study and feeling excited to learn more and find more classes to take. This class helped me to choose to take some classes over the summer to further my education in sociology.

I believe the final honors classes I took during my second year at Western Oregon were the Natural Science classes. I remember distinctly spending much of a term learning about natural disasters. Our class was split into groups and each group was given a specific natural disaster to study and present to the class at the end of term. The topics included: fires, tornados, volcanos, hurricanes, etc. I remember hoping we'd get tornados because they had always been so interesting to me.

Instead, my group got mass extinctions. At the time, I hadn't felt that this was really a natural disaster in the same way as the other topics, and it wasn't! But that didn't make it any less interesting or valid as a disaster. We took a look at each mass extinction throughout Earth's history. While I don't recall specifically what they were called - though I'm sure I could look it up - one thing that did stick out to me



academically from this project was that each event eradicated between 75-95% of all species on earth. It is incredible to me how resilient life can be and how patient it can be as well. We have had so many different species living on our planet and just a small percentage still exists today.

Resilience is what gives us the strength to cope with stress and challenges. It is part of life. Eventually, every living thing is going to encounter stress, it's part of life. This was an important lesson that I would come to learn over the years in ways I had not expected. This class showed me that throughout our lives, with each struggle we face, we build our resilience and much like *Jurassic Park*, I would see that that life is resilient and always finds a way.

More than the facts we learned, there were other themes that stuck out to me from this class. This was one of our biggest collaborative projects in our first couple years at Western Oregon in the Honors Program. The first big project we had as a cohort together was our theater project: combining three different plays into one. This time, we were doing different research. We did a little less collaboration and fewer group meetings outside of class. Instead, we delegated a lot more to each other and spent time working on specific parts of our project. We had to trust our group members a bit more than before because we could not always be there to research together. However, this wasn't a problem for us as we trusted our group quite a bit. The only obstacle was getting to know and learning to trust people we hadn't really worked with on group projects before -- these groups were composed of different people.

I came to know and like even more of my honors class during these projects and we came to see that we each enjoyed different challenges and brought different and useful skills and knowledge to our groups. The subject matter was interesting to me but not fascinating, nor was it an area of study I felt like pursuing. I valued the trust and the relationships that came from that class and project more than anything else.

During the summer, I didn't take any honors classes though I did take three classes within my major and those were of great value to me. I used my study skills I had practiced in the first couple years in the Honors Program. I knew I wanted a challenge to stay busy during the summer and to ensure that I would be able to take the classes I wanted to take.

At the time, I was still working towards a possible minor in gender studies and had worked out an independent study project regarding gender studies with my sociology advisor. I read an anthology and did a report on most of the articles within the book. Keeping myself busy and challenged during the summer was fulfilling in an odd way. I worked through the summer as well, working at the library on campus.

### **Year Three**

Entering my third year of college, life was incredible. I felt that everything was looking great, my life was going well, and my relationships with friends and family were only getting stronger with every passing day. I had finished three summer sociology classes that had all been extremely interesting to me and had found a new apartment

with one of my roommates, our deaf roommate moved away to a different house and different city.

Every new challenge felt exciting and fun. I was taking more classes within my major and had finally decided on Public and Community Health Education as a minor for my degree and had solidified my choice of Social Science as my major so that I could focus on sociology, health, and other important social sciences.

Over the summer I had taken an independent study class regarding gender studies. Learning about this subject was important to me as I felt it was important to study how gender was viewed in different cultures and throughout time. It was fascinating and beautiful. At the time, I was still trying to decide if I wanted this to be my minor or my specialization within sociology as my major. However, Western Oregon University did not have an option to minor in gender studies. So, to manage this, my major advisor helped me to craft a minor program with the classes that were offered at Western such as gender studies, LGBTQ studies, gender and language classes, and other subjects. Ultimately, I had decided to stick with health education as my minor and, rather than specialize within sociology, I broadened my major to social sciences so that I would be able to continue taking these gender studies related classes.

During my third year at Western Oregon University, I had begun taking fewer Honors Program classes and instead had focused, as I mentioned, more on my major and minor classes in health education and social sciences. I believe the only honors classes I took were my thesis development classes and one final philosophy class as that had been one of my favorite parts of my first year in the Honors Program.

My thesis development classes began in my third year at Western Oregon University. Suddenly, the big scary project had arrived and it was time to decide what we were going to do. I had considered several different topics, all of them serious. I considered looking at cannabis culture in a university community. I considered looking at activism in some regard: specifically animal rights activism. I considered doing some sort of educational project or summer camp based project for my thesis. After seeking the advice of several other individuals, I decided it would be best to pick a topic that seemed fun to me so that I would stay interested and not grow bored of my topic.

My minor at the time was going to be gender studies, though I was considering changing this to public and community health as this was more interesting to me. I still wanted to feel connected to gender studies and I still found it interesting so I felt it would be best to focus my thesis topic on something that had to do with gender and sexuality. At the time, I was really interested in Batman. I had been watching old Batman films with my roommate at the time and had been interested in the way women were portrayed in this particular genre of film and TV. They seemed to be strong and yet hypersexualized at the same time.

When I was trying to decide on my exact topic, struggling to figure out a title, I remember sitting on the couch watching Tim Burton's *Batman Forever*. Catwoman had always fascinated me. She was the embodiment of grace and ferocity, charm and rage. She had been dealt a terrible hand in life and dragged herself back from death -- literally. She was like Batman: not quite a deadly killer, but not a hero. For these reasons, I made Catwoman the subject of my thesis and decided to look at the gender

representation of Catwoman in live action films. I wanted to look at how she was oversexualized and how this could harken to different waves of feminism.

Everything started out pretty smoothly. During this particular thesis development class, we were asked to pick our topic, which I mentioned above, and to get a basic understanding on what this project needed to look like and how we could tailor it to our topics and areas of study. We were going to be starting work on certain parts of our project such as the literature review. The literature review was a basic background of our topic: a way to take a look at all the research that had already been done so that we could get a sense of how we could contribute to this body of knowledge.

We also worked on sketching out an outline for what this project would entail; some included a lot of field research including surveys and such, while others included further reading and research into books. In addition to this outline, we created a timeline - as realistic as possible -- for how long each piece would take to complete and when we would need to complete each part of our research.

Things were going well during this time. My motivation to complete this project was high and I felt positive about my topic. I had a great support system for this project: a major advisor who guided my research, a minor advisor who helped to guide my questions, and my honors advisor who helped to keep me on track. I was grateful for these supports as well as the ability to work on these projects alongside my fellow honors students: to lament when things were difficult and celebrate each small victory. Unfortunately, this motivation would not last forever.

In addition to my thesis development classes, I took several classes in my minor which was public and community health. Though not honors-related, some of these classes allowed me to grow as an individual and gain a deeper appreciation of my honors community and the relationships and lessons I had learned in my first couple of years.

One of these classes was healthy relationships. This class had us reading books one may find in the self-help section and discussing love languages. Initially, I thought it was silly. However, as we dove further into reading and practicing discussion around how we felt and how we felt about our feelings and those difficult discussions, I started to realize that this was useful practice and I felt that I was learning and practicing these things too late. It felt like these things should have been taught in high school. I found that this class began to reflect similar themes to those that I had seen in Creativity. We discussed our energy and how we express that energy. We discussed practicing gratitude and understanding love languages; about being present in your life and relationships - romantic, platonic, professional, and otherwise.

I did my best to absorb the information. I looked at my life and realized how unhappy my personal life had become. My best friend of eight years and roommate of two years had, for the last year, become a toxic presence in my life. She bullied me daily, bullied her boyfriend daily as well (who had moved in with us to pay her rent). This situation ate away at my mental health and I began spending more time outside of my home at the library, friend's homes, or with my family. Taking healthy relationships allowed me to see the holes in my life and that I was allowing my worth to be dictated

by someone who didn't seem to like me very much anymore. Though this was not an honors class, I once again found myself leaning on the friendships I had built while in the Honors Program.

More than any academics, my third year at Western Oregon University was marked by the beginning of a series of personal challenges and pitfalls. The first of many occurred at the beginning of the school year. My grandmother (my dad's mother) was diagnosed with dementia and was recommended to not live alone or drive alone. This meant that she would be moving from northern Washington state to live closer to my parents in a retirement home. This was a long and difficult process as she was more than reluctant to give up her freedom. I spent some time becoming a support for my parents. I helped move her down to be closer to them, I visited her each weekend. I watched her slowly forget me and then my mother and finally my brother and dad (her son and grandson by blood). It was a long and difficult road for her that did not end for a couple of years and continued to be a financial and emotional drain on my parents and myself as well.

In addition to this, my father's brother, who had been diagnosed with brain cancer, began to rapidly deteriorate. His mental state fell and he became a shell of his former self. He went through aggressive chemo and did everything he could to fight the good fight for his life. But in the end, towards the end of my third year, he lost that battle and died. My step-dad had, who had been watching both his older brother and his mother fade away before him, could no longer manage the trauma.

After my uncle died of cancer, my step-dad began to see a psychologist. He went to one who was specifically available to veterans. This was a terrible fit. He was on and off medication for the entire year. Eventually, he became suicidal. When he went to a Friday appointment, we were called by his therapist who let us know that he would be in the psych ward for the duration of the weekend. They asked us to bring him clothes and to visit if we could. I remember receiving a call that Friday evening from my mother telling me what had happened. She was in disbelief. I was, too. He had always been the strongest person I knew.

He received a diagnosis: bipolar disorder. This diagnosis left our family reeling as we scrambled to come together. After this, my brother began to spend less and less time with us, contacting us less and less. He called me one day to explain that he was gay but could not bring himself to come out to our parents (he knew my mom would be supportive but his dad would not). He feared the impact it would have on his dad after his diagnosis. It was a struggle for my brother: he was torn between wanting to support our family and wanting to explore himself and find a new support system who was more accepting than his dad. This marked the end of my brother's close relationship with our parents; ever since, he has only contacted the family once during the summer (for his birthday) and will visit for one day during the winter Holidays. His absence had a huge impact on my dad, who did not fully understand why his son suddenly put distance between them.

The struggles seemed endless. One thing right after another hit our family. My parents desperately wanted me to focus on school work and maintain my positive



standing with school, but it became increasingly difficult to stay focused on school when my family felt like it was falling apart. These struggles led me into another summer; the summer before my final year in school. This summer would hold even more challenges for us to face and hurdles for us to jump; but we managed as a family, together.

When the summer began, we had a calm before the storm. Things felt almost normal. My dad was trying new medications to help him manage his disorder and my mom was finding ways of taking care of him and herself. We were managing. Then, our family labrador, Jessie, had a ruptured spleen. My parents called me, though I was already having one of the worst personal days of my year thus far.

As I mentioned above, my roommate/living situation was tumultuous at best and a disaster at worst. I had been reaching out to professors, advisors, and friends and family for advice on how to manage the situation. I was bullied daily and gaslighted on the regular. I was made to feel as though all of her problems were somehow my fault and any time I had a problem and brought it up, she would turn it back around on me.

The healthy relationships class I had taken helped a great deal in wrapping my head around the idea that someone I loved would be bullying me daily. I looked to my teacher and professors for advice. I remember one professor telling me: "If she is a rational person, she will have a rational response. If not, maybe parting ways is best." It stuck with me and seemed to be what I needed to hear to kick start me into action. Finally, I had to have a conversation with her. I told her how I felt and reminded her that I was a person with thoughts and feelings. I told her that if we were to remain friends, we would need to live separately. She said nothing to me from that moment for an

entire month. After I spoke, she walked away from me and returned to our shared apartment.

Not even an hour later, my mom called to let me know that Jessie -- our family dog -- had a ruptured spleen. We had a decision to make as a family: let her pass on now, or go into surgery to give her a few more months with us. They would be good months, but it would be expensive. We decided as a family that we needed our dog. They decided on the surgery and as soon as I hung up, crying hysterically, I ran home to gather clothes for a weekend with my family. I moved quickly as they were taking her into surgery at that moment and I knew I had not even hours to get back home.

I called a close friend, another honors student, and he was there to help me in a heartbeat. We met at my front door and walked in to find all of my belongings in a large, broken pile against my bedroom door, the living room left in shambles with cracked ceramic pieces littering the carpet. An elephant tea-pot gifted to me by my grandmother, who was now dealing with dementia, lay in a shattered heap of turquoise and gold. A large poster of *Breaking Bad* -- a show we had spent hours watching together while creating a poster of favorite characters and moments from the show -- lay crumpled and shredded in a heap with torn academic papers. It felt eerie and unsettling in the apartment as it never had before. We couldn't see her though I knew she was in the apartment -- her door was closed and I could hear her dog barking and scratching at the door in an attempt to greet us. I left my friend in the doorway and, crying, sifted through the wreck of my things and found some clothes and my car keys.

We left. I didn't return to my home for several days and my roommate managed to avoid speaking with me for a full month. It would not feel like a home again.

My friend was with me, he drove my car home and stayed with me and my family. He got me through weekend homework, reminding me that school and honors were there to ground me, that my honors family would be there when I came back on Monday. It was the only thing I could focus on -- though I was not productive at all -- to get me through the weekend. Jessie lived two more beautiful, strong months and died just after my birthday on August 3rd. We were devastated as a family but we knew she was ready to cross the rainbow bridge. My honors family and their wonderful animals supported me through this impactful experience.

In late August of that same summer, we had two more largely impactful events. First, my grandmother, after her year-long battle with dementia, passed away in her sleep. It was peaceful and both my parents were with her. However, this led to the second event: my step-dad's first official suicide attempt. I won't go into details as I was never given full details (my parents keep that between themselves, my uncle, and my dad's therapist). I distinctly remember my uncle buying a safe for my dad's gun collection, one that he could not have the combination to; he would no longer be allowed access to these weapons. This was devastating not because he missed his weapons, but because, as an adult, he was having things taken from him. It seemed to make him feel childish. This time, he spent much longer than a weekend in the psych ward. I did my best to support my mom during this time. She needed it now more than

ever. Neither of my parents had their parents anymore, all my grandparents were now dead.

Everyone deals with personal challenges and obstacles, but this was the first time in my life that I felt like the world was crashing down around me, and I felt that I had no skills to deal with all of it at once. It felt as though the universe had gone haywire and thrown too much my way. When my senior year began, I was stretched to my personal limit. I felt lost, confused, like I had to shoulder everything my family was dealing with along with my school work. I felt that any semblance of control that I felt I had was slipping away and by the time I noticed, it was too late to hold onto it. It was gone and I felt adrift without the skills to help myself.

#### **Year Four**

In an attempt to help myself and take care of my personal and mental health, I began focusing even more on my minor in public and community health. I chose classes that focused on managing the self, managing stress, and managing personal health in general. Some of the classes I took included stress management, nutrition, and techniques of relaxation. Each of these classes reminded me greatly of the honors creativity class I took. I saw similar themes such as relaxation, managing your personal energy, and understanding personal goals. After spending a summer feeling lost and confused, I felt I needed more guidance on how to care for myself and my health. I had lost so much control and motivation in such a short amount of time and was desperately looking for some form of guidance.

The first of these classes I took was stress management in an attempt to find strategies of dealing with the seemingly endless array of frustrating tragedy that had been thrown my way. This was a public and community health class that I took with a couple of friends of mine. It focused on topics that I had seen before in my creativity class through the Honors Program: topics such as mindfulness and being present in the moment. I had a great teacher and we spent much of the class involved in deep discussions regarding stress and how it can manifest in different situations for different people. We would begin or end most classes with some form of guided meditation and deep breathing. Each theme in the class harkened back to Creativity and I was reminded again of the importance of gratitude and being present.

One of the most interesting projects that really stuck with me from this class, that we had also done in Creativity, was mindful eating. We were asked to prepare, eat, and clean up a meal by ourselves without any sort of distractions. This meant no cellphones, TV, books, or anything else that would distract us. The purpose of this was to see how our experience changed when we had nothing to distract us from the moment. We were warned that this may present quite a challenge for some, who may require more stimulus than others, but that some of us may be surprised at how easy it really was. I expected to be one of the individuals who struggled with this as that had been my experience with exercises like this in the past.

With this particular project, I remember first feeling bored. The exercise itself wasn't boring as I had expected it to be and found that by the end of it, I not only didn't feel bored at all, but that I felt proud of myself for completing it. I had found that I

hadn't eaten as much junk as I normally might have and that I felt motivated to eat healthier foods and to drink water throughout the meal. I felt empowered within myself and felt positive and went for a walk after my meal. I found that being present had allowed me to think about and consider some problems that I was facing in my life. Normally, we watch TV while we eat to pass the boredom or to keep from dwelling on certain subjects, but I found a positive experience in being mindful while eating.

Being present allowed me to focus on having a healthy and mindful experience. After this, I had adapted it into my own daily or weekly exercise: hiking without electronics or running/swimming without electronics. Of course, I take my phone with me, but I have tried to engage in one healthy mindful exercise at least once a week without having any distractions. This can be exercise-related or can be some other form of mindfulness exercise.

Another class I took for my minor but also for my own wellbeing was nutrition. This class, as one may guess, was about nutrition and food. This was a simple class that I remember struggling with greatly. I remember that each class was filled with positive discussion which was something I had always enjoyed participating in. After taking several honors classes throughout my time at Western, I had come to realize that I greatly enjoyed discussion-based classes. However, with all of my personal challenges, I found it difficult to be present during class. I found myself missing classes, something I had never regularly done. I would justify missing one class each month, which soon became one out of three classes per week.

Hindsight is 20/20 and it is clear to me now that I was struggling with depression with no idea how to label it within myself or how to talk about it with others or how to seek help. I could have reached out to professors for assistance with this, and I know deeply that my health teachers would have helped me, but when you can't label your own struggles, it's hard to know how to ask for help.

I remember this class had a very family-like feel to it. The health department was very close-knit and accepting of any new people. It was during this time that I joined a club on campus called Green Dot: a club dedicated to informing people about and stopping violence on university campuses. It was very dear to my heart and I spent long hours with this group of women. We covered tragic topics such as sexual assault, date rape, and so much more. We made sure that other clubs had a chance to receive By-standard Training, which teaches people how to react in situations where they see something that makes them uncomfortable or they see someone in a negative situation. We did this by offering training during specific times for different clubs and athletic teams on campus. We also set up booths during events in the main building; information booths explaining our club and recruiting new members. Finally, we would attend some classes and educate others about the levels of violence on campus and how we can combat this. I loved this club and it really highlighted for me the importance of making a difference in the world.

This club was important to me and though I had begun it in my third year, I really began to put more time into it during my fourth year. I was aching for some kind of family to cling to -- a support system to fill the hole I was left with after each disaster. I

found this within both my honors family and my health and wellness family. They were strong women, women I admire with traits I desperately wanted to embody. I wanted to be strong, for myself and for my family. But I didn't realize at the time that I was looking for strength in the wrong ways; I was trying to make myself stronger rather than leaning on the strength of those around me, those who were willing with open arms.

In addition to taking nutrition and stress management, I also began taking a class called techniques of relaxation. This class was based mostly on meditation: principles and techniques of meditation. We would spend most of each class session meditating and relaxing, unwinding each muscle. Often, this would be through guided meditation from our professor or a guided audio meditation. I enjoyed this and by the end of each class, one could hear the soft snores of some of the other classmates.

This class took place at noon on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It was a surprisingly helpful class to take in the middle of the day during my fourth year. I was able to unwind. I was able to take one hour a few times throughout the week to totally unwind and think about absolutely nothing. I would say that I definitely took this class for granted. If I were taking it now, I would attempt to take more away from the class rather than a few simple techniques for unwinding the body. I'd ask more questions and ask for additional resources outside of the provided materials. However, these were still helpful skills to have during this difficult time for myself.

Outside of my major area of study, I also decided to take a psychology class because of all the things that had gone on with my dad over the past year; this was a lower division introductory psychology class. This class was mostly about studying the



science of human behavior and human experience. Rather than delving into specific disorders and psychological issues, we discussed broader areas such as research methods for psychology (which I didn't find as boring as I thought I would). We also discussed how humans learn and how and why they remember certain things and how they recall these memories. We discussed how humans perceive the world around them and how altered perceptions can be seen and labeled as mental disorders.

Additionally, we covered cognition and development briefly in this class and spent some time going over how the brain develops over time with age. Cognition and development were also topics discussed in the psychology class I had taken during my first year at Western with Dr. Alexander. Finally, we talked about the biological bases of behavior, which studies the link between an individual's behavior and its organic bases. I didn't find myself getting what I wanted out of the class, which was to gain a greater understanding of specific disorders. Rather, I found that I had begun to foster an interest in psychology and helping individuals who struggled with their own mental health.

While I didn't take many honors-related courses during my final year at Western Oregon, I did take several sociology classes and social science classes in an attempt to finish my major requirements for my degree. The classes I took included: classic sociological thought, classic sociological theory, and a couple of classes that discussed how we could conduct our thesis research.

During this final year, my grades had begun to suffer. I found it more difficult to focus during class and found myself putting off study expectations because it was easier

to escape into a book or while watching TV rather than focusing on classwork. Having thesis work, which included research classes, and several research classes for sociology felt overwhelming. I found myself feeling less and less interested in my research topic and in class in general.

The only honors class I took during my fourth year at Western Oregon University was my thesis development class, though it was more research classes to go alongside my research classes for sociology. This particular class focused on our individual research and our original writing. It was an independent study sort of class; a way to get credit for our individual thesis work and to allow for time to be carved out for this project.

During this time my thesis project began to really take shape and become the beast that would haunt me for years. As I mentioned, my topic was focused on Catwoman in Live Action Movies. With my background in gender studies, I decided to look at the oversexualization of Catwoman and how she marries ferocity with sexuality.

The background research I did included looking into the literature already provided surrounding women in the action genre. They had always been hypersexualized but none had been quite as fierce and independent as Catwoman. I took surveys around the university regarding student and faculty interpretations of Catwoman and women in the action genre and whether or not they felt that hypersexualization was even happening at all.

I specifically spent time watching the live action films in which Catwoman appears: *Batman* (1966), *Batman Returns* (1992), *Catwoman* (2004), *The Dark Knight*

*Rises* (2012). In the first of these films, *Batman* (1966), Catwoman is played by Lee Meriweather who portrayed a very sassy, conniving, seductive Catwoman who literally throws her cat at her enemies in addition to constantly manipulating the men around her. In *Batman Returns* (1992), a much more iconic Catwoman is played by Michelle Pfeifer in her classic tight black suit roughly stitched together with thick white thread. She portrays a much darker, more menacing Catwoman set on revenge. Early in the film she is killed by being pushed out a window and vows to never be a small, frightened mouse. Saved by cats, she stitches together her suit and never looks back.

In *Catwoman* (2004) Catwoman is played by Halle Berry. This is the first time Catwoman is portrayed in a live action film by a black woman, though she was played by Ertha Kitt in the original show. It is argued that she is more sexualized than ever in a shredded back suit. Finally, in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Catwoman is portrayed by Anne Hathaway and displays a very self-possessed, intelligent, and no-nonsense Catwoman. She is sexualized, yes, but less so than her counterparts as the films take a darker turn in this series.

One of the main things I focused on in my original thesis was feminism and how it can be found and displayed in each of these representations of our fabulous antihero. I took a look at the timeline of each Catwoman and how they align with different waves of feminism. Our initial Catwoman, played by Lee Meriweather, comes onto the scene in 1966 during the second wave of feminism as women fight for equal rights and liberation. She's still wearing her pointy bra, but we begin to see instances of women

using their sexuality to empower themselves. Sexuality is absolutely one of Catwoman's main weapons of choice, in addition to her sharp claws and acrobatic skills.

The next time we encounter Catwoman is some thirty years later as the third wave of feminism arrives on the scene. This wave is more of a response to the failures of the second wave. Third wave feminism displays the intersectionality of feminism and we begin to see that as we see a fierce, independent, single woman fighting for revenge. She is still almost a second-wave feminist icon in that she is a straight middle-class white woman, but we begin to see a change in the character, more depth.

Halle Berry arrives on the scene and we see a different story and a different Catwoman. She is just one in a long line of women connected to cats and has taken up the mantle of Catwoman after the last one passes. This is after she nearly drowns. With this Catwoman, we begin to see the intersectionality come into play as she is a blackwoman with a more independent day-job than a simple secretary. She is more of a hero in this story than an antihero. Finally, Anne Hathaway brings back the original idea of Catwoman as a thief with a troubled past. With this version, we see a Catwoman who's backstory includes violence and hardships, more so than the ones we had seen before.

Up until this point, my project had been going fairly smoothly. I was able to complete all of the introduction and background research and assembled a solid foundation for my project. I was also able to complete most of my research and get it all written down. I conducted surveys and used a database to organize the information I had collected. By spring term of my fourth year, I was well on track to graduate and

complete my project. However, life, as I mentioned, has a way of bringing our plans to a grinding halt.

Throughout the year my motivation had begun to dwindle. I had been feeling lost and alone in my personal life and found myself with little to no support from some friends and family I had come to rely upon. I began to lean on my friends and cohorts quite a bit more, though some of those I leaned on were not positive people in my life and led me down paths I should have avoided.

By the time graduation rolled around, my thesis was not ready. My project was unfinished though I was very close to completion. I was ready to graduate and with everything else moving forward, I began to feel unmotivated to finish. I was feeling a little lost within my personal life and was simply trying to survive my own mental health struggles and personal challenges. I was working longer hours at work, struggling with my personal mental health as well as my family's mental health. In the midst of all of this, I had a difficult time prioritizing school work. Balancing every single thing while on the cusp of graduation was difficult.

### **Afterwards**

Life seemed to get away from me. Graduation came and went. I walked, shook hands with my professors, celebrated with my friends and family. I hugged my mother after the ceremony and remember my godmother buying me a beer. I felt a thick twinge of guilt in the back of my throat. It has stuck with my, nagging in the back of my mind, eating away over the years like a tapeworm.

I moved away from Western Oregon University, away from my family, and away from my support system to a town I was unfamiliar with. I loved this new place and the idea of new experiences, and I had a plan to finish my thesis project over the summer after graduation. Despite being advised against this plan by my advisors, I had not anticipated how all-consuming this new life would become. I had a new roommate and began building a new support system for myself. Some of my friends from the Honors Program became a large part of this support system, even my roommate had been in honors with me.

Still intending on completing my project, I found myself in an unfamiliar city on my own as an adult for the first time. I got a job working in the corporate office of a farm and outdoor store. It was a smaller business, a subsidiary of Winco, with only two stores. Though it was a small business, it was still profit-oriented. My job for this company was to work on price-comparisons. I compared our prices to competitors prices and informed my boss if our competitors had lower prices than we did. My other job here was to assist clients and customers with custom orders. If we didn't have a product, it was my job to help them find what they needed and get it shipped to a store near them.

It was very easy work done at a desk with two older ladies working beside me. It did not challenge me, it was not fulfilling and did not make me happy. I found myself slacking off quite a bit, spending time on my phone when I should have been working. I wasn't given enough to do and had to find ways of staying busy, though there was very little to do around the office. One day, I got a call from a frequent customer - an older

woman who ran a small farm with her husband. She got all the new equipment for their farm from our company. Sweet and kind, she did not have a bad bone in her body and I genuinely enjoyed when I got to help her with an order. She was looking for a fence - specifically, a door for her fence. I found the product online and went to my boss so that I could give her a quote on our price. He wanted to charge an extra 40% for the product.

My background and area of study at Western was, as mentioned, sociology. The idea of overcharging an old woman knowing she wouldn't follow up and check the price online felt wrong to me. I told the customer where and how to order the product herself and have it sent to her home. This same situation happened twice more before my boss realized what I had been doing and fired me. I had never been fired before, though I had also never had a full time job before. I was devastated, though I also felt a bit more free to be out of a job I genuinely hated. At this point, with the summer almost gone, all thoughts of my thesis project had faded to a dull, occasional tap on my consciousness reminding me of this unfinished gray cloud. My roommate and I had spent some time fostering some elderly pit bulls throughout the summer, however they passed on after a short time. After these dogs passed and just before I was fired from my job, I had adopted a small mutt. She helped to keep us sane and jovial. I searched for a new job.

My time in the Honors Program taught me a lot about myself and how I can feel fulfilled and successful and productive. I learned that I have a passion for making a difference in the world. The classes I took in the Honors Program, especially during my first couple of years, informed my decision to pursue sociology as an area of study. It

was for this reason that I learned how unfair life can be for some people and about how I could still make a difference in the world if I really worked hard.

I also learned that I greatly enjoyed building friendships and building a community. At my previous job, I had no sense of community, no chance to build friendships and grow closer to my coworkers - there was no bonding experience offered at this job. I realized that it was something I craved, something I needed in order to feel positive about a job.

When looking for a new job, I knew that working in an office would not be positive for me as I also enjoyed being challenged to succeed. I found it difficult to sit for long periods of time doing menial tasks and instead found myself searching for an alternative environment. During my search, I found and applied for a position working with a non-profit called Jasper Mountain. It was described as a home-like residential facility for kids aged 5-13 struggling with mental and behavioral health. Most of the kids had been in several different placements throughout their lives and almost none of them had contact with family members. They were the most tragic cases in the United States.

I had worked with kids before at Oregon State University in the Precollege programs - aimed at getting younger, rural students excited about higher education - and was excited for the opportunity to work with students again, though I was still unsure if I wanted to go down this path for a career. However, once I began working with these clients, I realized that this job was everything I had been looking for: I was challenged every single day - pushed to my limit mentally, emotionally, and physically; I



was feeling passionate and felt I was making a difference and a positive impact in the lives of these children; and I loved my coworkers. We had a beautiful community around us and so much support. There was a culture of kindness and support at this job that I had never felt before.

After getting this position and beginning my work with students again, I found a renewed passion. I found that my career goals had suddenly changed - or, rather, had solidified. I now knew that this was what I wanted for my life: working with students and helping them to improve their situations and help them to get through their own struggles. I found myself leaning more and more on lessons I had learned early on during college and in the Honors Program.

My career goals became more clear to me and I began to dream of that cabin in the woods again, marrying my passion for the outdoors and my passion for helping struggling students. I decided that I would seek out wilderness therapy. I had never considered going into mental health as a career. The Honors Program helped to show me how I could find fulfillment in helping and building a community, and this was a way I could do that for clients.

I have changed quite a bit since being at Western Oregon. I have continued working with students, however, and found myself in the Portland area working at a place called the Parry Center. This was a similar facility to Jasper Mountain and when I began working there, I had more experience and drive than ever before.

Working at the Parry Center was a bit different than working at Jasper Mountain. At Jasper, we took children who had been in several different failed foster placements

and other placements throughout their lives without success. These clients had little to no contact with any family members and no one to advocate for them other than the state they were born in. These clients came to us because they had severe behaviors and mental health challenges and needed structure and consistency in their lives. In contrast, the Parry Center took students who were still in contact with family. They also had severe behaviors and diagnosed mental health disorders. However, at the Parry Center I worked mostly with middle school aged students (ages 11-15 rather than 5-13). This age group typically displayed different behaviors. Mostly, our middle school students would come to us after a suicide attempt. They would typically spend time in the hospital after an attempt and if the family had good insurance that was willing to pay, they would come to us for a short stay -- usually between 3 weeks to 4 months.

The most frustrating part of this job was dealing with insurance companies. These faceless, nameless companies had more say in the treatment plans and placements of these children than their therapist or care providers. If insurance was unwilling to pay for an extended stay, despite therapist recommendations, they would have to be sent home. On the reverse side, we had several clients stay longer because their families did not want to try and manage them at home and their insurance was stellar enough to pay for a longer stay.

These facilities are not meant for an extended stay unless it is legitimately necessary. It is traumatic to spend time in a locked program with unfamiliar adults, crappy food, constant nurse care, and daily therapy visits. Not to mention the severe behaviors and mental health of every other client. We would regularly have clients

screaming, attempting suicide, attacking staff, attacking each other, spitting, scratching, kicking. If you can think of it, we saw it. This was not a home. It was not nurturing. It was treatment.

Parry Center focused a lot on family therapy. If a family was unwilling to participate, we would typically be unable to keep their child in the program. There was one particular case that has stuck with me for two reasons: 1) I could not understand the abandonment of a child; and 2) I was amazed at life's resilience once again.

We worked with a client who started our program when he was 9 years old. He came to us as a female. He had a younger brother and both had been adopted by a young Jewish couple. The couple had made it clear when both children were young that they had really only wanted the younger brother. The two were a package deal but they had really only wanted one son. They took both siblings anyway.

This client, we will call him A, came to us at nine years old. He came to us after being hospitalized for a suicide attempt. After hiding himself behind a bush, A cut his wrists. His younger brother, seven years old at the time, found him and got help. A was hospitalized for 72 hours before being released to us. He was projected to stay in our facility for three months to receive medication adjustments, twice weekly therapy, and family therapy. Over the next year, his family would avoid family therapy, ignore their child's phone calls, and refuse to visit their child.

His behavior regressed. He became more violent and depressed, projecting confusion, loneliness, and deep anger. A's entire life was unfair and he knew it. His family began finding reasons to refuse to take him back when it was recommended by

his therapist. His behavior was too erratic and they were concerned that he would attack his younger brother or that they wouldn't be able to manage him in the home. Our therapists told them that if they could not participate in family therapy, they would have to take their child home. Finally, when he was nearly eleven and had been with us for just over a year, his family took him home.

Just weeks later he attempted suicide again and returned to us. During this stay, he was projected to be with us for just six weeks before returning home. Unsurprisingly, the cycle repeated. He became more violent and erratic. He attacked staff and other students when he felt alone or threatened. He aged out of our younger unit and came to my unit with the rest of the middle schoolers. He had begun asking to be called by male pronouns and we respected this as he began transitioning socially. A turned twelve while in our care despite his recommended stay being six weeks. We spent a lot of time together; we read all of the Harry Potter books together and convinced the rest of our unit to watch the first few movies. He was a really wonderful kid with the whole world stacked against him.

After being with us for so long, his insurance company was finally done paying. His family was required to attend family therapy or take their child home. Finally, A had a "home date" -- a date he could look forward to. Two weeks before he was projected to leave, his family moved to Boston. Three days before he was projected to leave, his family relinquished their parental rights and cut ties with A. He was no longer legally their responsibility and was, once again, a ward of the state. His insurance would not pay for him to stay any longer as he had no parental guardians and we could not keep

him. On his “home date” he left us to stay temporarily in a hotel room with a small shifting group of case workers. Sadly, this is the fate of *many* misplaced and at-risk youth in Oregon and around the United States.

This case stuck with me. I had read horrible backstories before, especially working at Jasper Mountain, but I had never been part of the backstory. I had never witnessed and helped work through feelings of abandonment on that level or that closely before. I was reminded how resilient life can be. This job challenged me in ways I never expected.

My love for a challenge spiked and I took on more and more responsibilities, helping out where I could and volunteering more of my time for these clients. I worked hard and narrowed my focus. After just six months in this job, around the time A came to my unit, I was promoted to supervisor and began working even more hours.

Eventually, I left the Parry Center, and I started with a new company that provides after school care for students. I have been a supervisor/site director with them for two years. This job hasn’t been nearly as notable as Jasper or the Parry Center. However, I feel that I have excelled and grown in confidence in this job. I continued to take on more projects. My position has changed quite a bit since the pandemic began and we have begun providing all-day care for essential families.

Through all of it and my thesis project was long behind me, not much more than a faded, anxious feeling that popped up every few weeks to nag at my consciousness. It was something I knew I needed and wanted to finish, but by this point it was fear

keeping me from moving forward: what if I couldn't finish, what if I couldn't get a hold of anyone? What if no one would help me?

I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to finish this project and take it in a new direction. My hope for this reflection was to be able to get my thoughts down, first of all, regarding my time spent at Western Oregon University within the Honors Program. I had hoped to explore the ins and outs of student life both on campus and off campus, both in the classroom and in managing personal struggles. I feel that I succeeded in these areas and that I was able to provide myself with some reflection time to better understand why I was unable to finish this project in the first place and what obstacles I faced and overcame. I feel that I was able to share how the lessons and personal relationships that I gained from my time in Honors got me through each trial and how they helped to shape me into who I am today.

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