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Honors Class of 2021 students Natalie Nwanekwu, Julia Jureidini, and Olivia Pfieffer (from left), punting on the River Cam while studying abroad at Cambridge University as part of the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics Cohort.
Life in Saint Monica Hall

by Erin Fabian ’21

Student life at Villanova is one-of-a-kind, but being in Honors makes the freshmen experience even more unique. On South Campus, St. Monica Hall serves as a living and learning community for each new freshman class of Honors students. Freshmen have the opportunity to live alongside like-minded peers, as well as join learning cohorts that encourage further bonding between new friendships and academic exploration in a comfortable classroom environment. The connections made during the Honors freshman experience often lead to lasting friendships that continue beyond the first year of university. Here’s what some of the class of 2023 had to say about their first year on campus!

“I really liked living in the Honors dorm as a freshman because right away, on move-in day, I was already part of something bigger than myself on campus. Living in the Honors dorm and taking Honors classes gave me an immediate commonality with my peers living around me, so it made making friends much less scary than it initially seemed. By living with the people that I shared classes with, I made some of my closest friends on campus, and living right down the hall from them is something I miss now that I am home.” - Becca Jacobson

“Something I love about being in Honors is being in a cohort! I’m in the Interdisciplinary Scholars cohort (which is small but mighty!), and it has given me the chance to get to know some great Honors students, as well as a number of professors, on a personal level. Forming good connections right off the bat helped me feel welcome at Nova and within the Honors Program! I’ve been very happy with my Honors experience and look forward to continuing my path through Honors.” – Samantha Aitken

“My favorite part about freshman year was that I got to meet so many amazing people and also got to be a part of so many fun clubs. Also, living in the Honors dorm was awesome because I got to have classes with the same people I lived with. I’ve met some of my closest friends through Honors!” - Jose Garcia

“My favorite part of freshman year was definitely getting involved with Special Olympics. It’s such a unique organization and the weekend of Fall Fest was the best weekend of the year. It was amazing to see the entire campus get involved and to see how much time and effort Villanova students dedicated to the weekend. I also loved living in the Honors dorm, because I was able to meet so many people really quickly. It was nice to have so many friendly faces around campus and in class, and it made the Villanova community feel much more like home.” - Fiona Gavin

Becca Jacobson, left, and Fiona Gavin, right, pose with Erin Fabian, middle, their Honors peer mentor.
A Villanova Romance, but Make it Honors

by Viktoria Kall ’22

Though known for its academic rigor and ability to cultivate close-knit classroom dynamics, the Villanova Honors Program can also be quite the matchmaker. Now an Honors ACS professor, Ryan Brown is one of the lucky people who has the Villanova Honors Program to thank for his relationship with fellow Honors student and now wife, Regina.

On a rainy day during their freshman year Honors orientation, Ryan and Regina first met standing outside of the Connelly Center. Among their peers, they discussed the anticipation of what the Interdisciplinary Scholars cohort would have in store for them, having no idea that along with the Honors classes they would share together, it would actually bring them to find their spouses.

Ryan and Regina had multiple Honors Interdisciplinary-cohort classes together their first three semesters at Villanova, and maintained a close friendship until the summer of before their senior year, when they started dating.

After the pair graduated together in 2013, Regina attended graduate school, moved to New York, and became the assistant editor at a magazine called Commonweal. Having solidified their relationship together at Villanova, it only made sense that they would get married close to their alma mater. After getting engaged in October of 2017, their November 2018 wedding took place in Berwyn, with the reception in Wallingford, which were both less than 20 minutes away from the spot they first met. Ryan would later give his wife a keychain with the coordinates to Villanova, reminding them both where it all began.

When asked about their relationship now, they reflect about how fun marrying someone they went to college with is, saying that they “have so many happy memories in common,” that were only made possible because of their shared college experiences. They both noted their gravitation towards Villanova, and how special of a place it will always be for them, as they remember the long nights they spent studying in Falvey together (how romantic!).

Now writing his dissertation and planning on teaching adjunct ACS courses in the fall, Professor Ryan Brown is excited and grateful for all of the opportunities Villanova has given him, both professionally as well as personally. Let this be a sign for all of us to take our Honors courses seriously. You never know whom you’re going to meet!
Patrick and Maddy: Navigating Life Together, from Honors to Law School

by Erin Fabian ’21

As all alumni of the Villanova University Honors Program know, our director, Dr. Smith, highly encourages bonding among Honors students. Most students will hear the infamous (if not questionable) statistic at the Honors Induction ceremony that “30 percent of Honors students will marry other Honors students.” While most 18-year-old freshmen will roll their eyes and forget this quip quickly, later in their college experience or adult lives they may contribute to it!

When Patrick Connolly and Madeleine Messinger started their freshman year in the Interdisciplinary Studies cohort, they each had no idea that their future spouse was sitting across from them in the classroom. Patrick, who graduated in 2016 with his BA in Theology, and then in 2017 with his MA in Theology, and Madeleine, who graduated in 2017 with her BA in English and Humanities, were brought together through this unique seminar, which involved spending way too much time together and many a late night reading or discussing great books.

During their time at Nova, both Patrick and Maddy shared a love of Villanova basketball, and they were actually both in the Pavilion the night that Chris Jenkins sunk the famous buzzer beater shot, winning the 2016 National Championship title. Maddy was working as an EMT for Villanova Emergency Medical Services during the game, so she made sure that all the students were safe as the celebration ensued. Maddy loved working for VEMS during her time at Nova, and really enjoyed the unique student-run program that served the local community. She was also a Resident Assistant in St. Rita’s. Patrick was also passionate about serving the Nova community, and as a member of the Knights of Columbus, he even got to see the Pope at the Knights of the World Meeting of Families.

After their time at Villanova, Maddy and Patrick moved to St. Louis, MO, where Patrick studied graduate level Theology at Saint Louis University, and Maddy was a campus minister at Washington University in St. Louis. Patrick proposed to Maddy in front of the Saint Louis Art Museum where they spent time walking through the beautiful grounds, talking and making plans for their future. Those future plans eventually turned into a move back to Maddy’s hometown of Los Angeles, CA, where they are currently both law students at the University of Southern California. They got married this past January at USC’s Catholic Center.

One of their favorite parts of the Honors Program at Villanova is how it brings together like-minded young people who want the most out of their undergraduate experience. They especially admire the leadership of Dr. Thomas Smith, who always told them that he wanted to bring together students that sought the truth of the world and the meaning of the good life. Here’s to another Honors couple proving that Dr. Smith’s 30 percent statistic might be correct after all!
Rob Duffy '13 and Ryan Brown '13 experienced the Honors program much as any other Villanova Honors student might; thrown into it from the beginning, they have wonderful memories of being in the Interdisciplinary Humanities cohort, taking engaging and challenging courses, and spending a semester abroad. As best friends, their shared Villanova Honors experience is something they'll always cherish. This past year, though, this experience continued when both Rob and Ryan returned to campus to teach as adjunct professors in Honors. “In brief, it's really great to be back,” says Ryan. “I haven't quite wrapped my head around the transition from student to colleague while at Villanova—I walked into the Law school the other day and had the strange realization that I was older than most law students, whereas as an undergrad it had always felt like forbidden territory reserved for actual adults.”

“The campus has changed quite a lot since we were here, but many things have stayed the same,” says Rob. “And I’ve really enjoyed teaching with Paul Camacho and Helena Tomko.” During their time as undergraduates at Villanova, Rob and Ryan both studied Humanities; Rob double majored in Philosophy as well, and Ryan in Math. “We probably took more classes with each other than most arts and sciences students are wont to do,” says Ryan. One the friends’ greatest memories from Villanova is their experience studying abroad in England.

Rob says, “I distinctly remember standing on the ramparts of Toledo, where we and another of our friends, Eric, had gone to visit Regina, Ryan's now wife, during study abroad. We drank Spanish wine and probably talked about things that we'd first been introduced to in Honors.”

Since graduating from Villanova in 2013, Ryan and Rob both went to graduate school for philosophy in different cities, “but routinely traveled to see each other until we both ended up returning to Philadelphia this year,” says Ryan. In an instance of serendipity, the friends ended up back in the very department that first connected them, now as professors rather than students. “I really admire Villanova’s educational programs and commitments, and so I’m very happy to be part of it and hope to continue to be for some time,” says Ryan. “It is somewhat daunting to be teaching alongside people whom I know from experience to be really excellent teachers, but it’s also really rewarding to be able to discuss teaching with them and to learn from them how to teach effectively.”

Ryan, Rob, and their friend Nate Ober at the Colosseum during their study abroad experience
The people who make up the Honors Program’s staff may have changed, along with a few course requirements, but the essence of the place has remained quite the same. “It has the same intellectual community and love of learning, and it makes me really happy to see how that is passed on to the students,” says Rob. Now back at Honors for a second round, both men have been able to reflect on what makes it such a special place. Rob points to the “shared life” as the most valuable aspect, for him, of the Villanova Honors Program. “People were excited to learn, and a whole world of learning opened up. The learning became part of our lives, even or especially with core classes. As a teacher, I always hope that my own students will have the opportunity for such an experience of intellectual community with one another beyond the classroom, and I’m grateful to see that the Honors department still shapes the space and curriculum in a way to make that happen.” For Ryan, the best part about Honors was and always will be the people: “The combination of wickedly intelligent and deeply caring professors with the unrestrained—but as yet undirected—intellectual curiosity of the students is the perfect cocktail for real education.”

Welcome home, Rob and Ryan.

She was able to travel with 15 other Villanova students, and expand her network at Villanova and even the world. Emily studied international financial markets, venture capital and private equity, sustainability, the European Union economy, and Italian language and culture! Emily took advantage of cheap flights and long weekends. She was able to travel around Italy, then to Germany, France, Barcelona, Amsterdam, London, Prague, and Copenhagen to see friends studying in other countries. Her favorite thing she ate, though, was a Milan staple: risotto. Milan is famous for its risotto, and Emily admits she became “quite addicted” to the creamy, saffron-infused dish. She hopes to teach herself how to make it one day as she has yet to find any quality risotto in the United States.

If Emily could relive any day, it would look like any other typical day in Milan: navigating the city metro from her apartment to visit the Duomo and the shops that surround it, feeling as though she genuinely knew the city.

An American in Milan: Emily Ecklund’s Experience Abroad

by Taylor Hinch ’21

Emily Ecklund ’21, a Finance and International Business major from Chicago, IL, had the opportunity to study abroad in Milan, Italy, with IES Abroad: Business Studies during the fall of 2019.
Experiences like this helped Emily assure herself she was becoming comfortable and less nervous abroad, while also developing a deeper connection to the city. She recommends that anyone planning to study abroad in the future write in a journal during the experience. Emily wishes she had and, though she thought she would not have time, recognizes there was so much opportunity during the day to jot down emotions, memories, or cool experiences.

Emily says the most significant lesson she learned while studying abroad was to step outside of her comfort zone and her “U.S.-centric” mindset to embrace the cultures around her (for her, this included being more open to learning Italian!). Emily says Honors has instilled in her that “one of our ultimate freedoms of being humans is the ability to absorb as much knowledge as possible,” and she carried this with her to every country she visited. She knew there was so much to learn from the places around her, but also about herself. Emily, thank you for sharing your story with us!

Reagan Wish and the Sorting Hat: One Senior’s Exploration of the Hogwarts Houses

by Catherine Bialkowski

Are you a Gryffindor, a Hufflepuff, a Slytherin, or a Ravenclaw? To which Harry Potter house do you belong? Oddly enough, most people reading this article will have a firm response to such questions; questions that, ultimately, are based on a wildly popular (for good reason) young adult fantasy book series. Harry Potter has invaded our culture to the point where Hogwarts-themed weddings, Deathly Hallows tattoos, and even a Harry Potter theme park are in fashion.

Reagan Wish ’20 devoted her entire senior thesis, "Harry Potter and the Hogwarts Houses: What it Means to Choose or Be Chosen," to this well-beloved series by J.K. Rowling. “I've always loved Harry Potter,” says Reagan. “I, like many of my peers, grew up reading the books, going to the movie premieres, and dressing up like the characters for Halloween. My friends and I would have epic debates on who was in what house and what constituted that decision. That's where the idea to do Harry Potter as a thesis topic came from.”

Reagan, an English and Art History major from New Castle, PA, has been a Harry Potter fan her entire life. Her father read them to her when she was first learning to read, and she's been captivated ever since. “One of the biggest pulls of the Harry Potter series is its world building,” Reagan says. “Rowling created an entire secret world that exists beside our own—it's easy to believe we could almost slip sideways into it. Hogwarts is wonderful because it's easy to imagine yourself there; as a student, practicing charms by the lake; as a seeker catching the House Cup-winning snitch; as a Gryffindor sneaking out under the invisibility cloak with the Boy Who Lived. It's a world that welcomes its readers not only to read, but to imagine their own story.” Reagan herself is "undoubtedly," as she puts it, a Ravenclaw.
"I knew this had to be my thesis topic when someone scoffed that I was 'absolutely not a Ravenclaw' and the argument almost came to blows," she says.

Rereading the books from a scholarly standpoint did not necessarily change Reagan’s experience of Harry Potter overall, but she did learn a new thing or two about them. “I did realize through the thesis that the series has several layers, one such being the house system as part of a schematic structure. Most fans notice that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff don’t get a lot of attention; they’re not particularly significant to the schematic, which pits Gryffindor the ‘Good’ against Slytherin the ‘Bad’ for easy reading, so they get left by the wayside. Largely, the Good in the series is performed by those who choose to do so—heroes are made not because they were chosen by prophecy or born for greatness, but because they want to do good. This is juxtaposed against the villains, such as the Malfoys and Peter Pettigrew, who, more often than not, do evil deeds not because they want to but because they are told to do so. While we’ve always known that Harry is a hero because he chooses good instead of evil, this thesis allowed me to see how thoroughly written in this theme was.”

Reagan credits the Honors Program as a wonderful learning community that introduced her to some of the best professors she has ever had. “Honors has taught me how to pursue my passions and seek out those who share my interests,” says Reagan. “By forging connections with these professors, all of whom have gone above and beyond to help me further my knowledge, Honors has shown me the value of a genuine, teaching relationship.” Reagan will pursue a Juris Doctor degree at Southern Methodist University in the fall, and plans to continue to a career in art law. She hopes to achieve a PhD and teach at the university level some day. We are so incredibly proud of Reagan, and congratulate her on completing her thesis and graduating!
Senior Thesis Snapshots
by Catherine Bialkowski

Mimi Gabor
Major: Biology
Hometown: Cazenovia, NY
Thesis Title: “The Good Death: The Ethics of Physician-Assisted Suicide”
What did you learn?
Throughout my research, the biggest thing I learned was the importance of asking “why?” It's not enough to ask “why?” just once – you have to ask it again and again and again if you want to reach solid conclusions.
Dream career: Preventative Care Physician
Favorite Honors Course: Shaping an Adult Life

Travis Nix
Major: Political Science & Spanish
Hometown: Lake Zurich, IL
Thesis Title: “Evaluating the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in Comparison to Previous Tax Reform Laws in U.S. History”
What did you learn?
I learned that good policy does not solely involve making the tax code more economically efficient and growing the economy.
Dream career: Politician or Economic Advisor to the President
Favorite Honors Course: Theology or History

Elizabeth Pianucci
Major: Political Science
Hometown: Edison, NJ
Thesis Title: "Voices and Votes: Understanding How the American Public Views Felon Disenfranchisement"
What did you learn?
So much! One of the most tangible things that I learned is how to analyze data on Stata, a statistical software package.
Dream career: Lawyer
Favorite Honors Course: Intro to Microeconomics & Intro to Macroeconomics
Thank You!

We would like to take a moment to thank you for taking the time to stay up-to-date with the Villanova Honors Program. A lot of time and effort went into the making of this newsletter, and we'd like to recognize those who contributed to content creation and design:

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