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I Know A Place

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WHAT I WISH I’D KNOWN WHEN I STARTED COLLEGE

I started college in a place I never imagined I’d be. I hesitate to tell this story because I am now a fierce advocate for the university who made me who I am today, but to tell you the truth, I spent my first day, my first week in tears, wanting to be anywhere but there. Four years later, I walked across the stage at graduation as the president of my class and gave a speech about how I couldn’t imagine us being anywhere else but there. It was transformation by the hardest.

WHAT CHANGED? COMMUNITY.

What I wish I’d known on that first day is that college is, at its core, about community. Learning what community is, what it looks and feels like, how to build it, how to live in it well, and how to show up in it as yourself.

Now, I wouldn’t be teaching Honors Years One at The University of Alabama’s Honors College if I didn’t believe that the skills you develop, the deep dive into your major, and the knowledge you acquire in your classes is why you are here. But, I also teach HYO because I believe that discovering who you are in this world and how to be in community matters just as much. This work doesn’t come with a syllabus and isn’t always about discovering your profession or your larger “why.” It is more tangible. It’s the work of learning how to be a good friend and what it looks and feels like to have a hard conversation with someone whose life experience looks nothing like your own, It’s about learning to walk with other folks as they go through breakups, failed tests, moments of doubt, and asking for help when you go through those things, too. It’s about celebrating a successful final project presentation and showing up for another meal together at the dining hall. This work is not a distraction from your education. It is your education.

THIS WORK OF COMMUNITY HAPPENS EVERYWHERE, AND IT HAPPENS MOST OFTEN WHEN YOU PAY ATTENTION.

When I started college, I landed in a place where everywhere I turned, there were people who cared. People who said “Come and go to Week of Welcome with me” or “Won’t you be my little sister?” or “Why don’t you join us on this Golden Girls oral history project?” I cannot tell you the ripple that each of those invitations had on me, but I can point to one example that captures these ripples nearly 20 years later. Here at UA, there’s a program called Honors Action. It is a week-long experience for 250 Honors College freshmen led by current Honors College students. It’s part orientation, part service, and constant learning. It takes months of preparation and collaboration to pull off, and it took me a minimum of five years before I felt like I had a real handle on everything it required, but I had the courage to jump into leading Action two weeks before it started, the skills I needed to do it, and the support from my community to believe I could because I’d learned to do the work of community during college and saw that modeled time and again for me by my college professors. I knew how important it is to offer students the same invitation I was offered, the one that calls you to do the hard work of community and to be a part of something like Action, like the Honors College, like a small group and show them with every student leader, staff, and faculty member what working in a community looks and feels like. What Action has taught me, and keeps teaching me, is that community doesn’t just happen. It is built, carefully and together, by people who show up for each other.

That is what I would tell my first-day-of-college self: Pay attention to the people around you. Learn to read closely, write well, and communicate, and also learn how to be good neighbor, make community, and discover the person you’ll be the rest of your life. Your classes will challenge you and help you grow. Your community will teach you how to live. ●