

# cardinal & cream



# Table of Contents

06

*Hard Work Is Not A Burden: Sarah Trouwborst's Italian Countryside Summer*

Written by Olivia Bell  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

10

*Calling Is A Simple Thing*

Written by Katherine Anne Thierfelder  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

16

*Keep Up The Good Work: A Bigger God Than We Think*

Written by Noel Moore  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

20

*Can You Be "Called" To Secular Success?*

Written by Mattie Washington  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

24

*Tragedy & Trust: How "Bob's Burgers" Came To The Lex*

Written by Samuel Stettheimer  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

28

*Romanticizing Media: How Movies Shape Our Reality*

Written by David Alcazar  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz

32

*Restoring Relationships: Acting Justly In A Broken World*

Written by Avery Chenault  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz & Olivia Bell

36

*Last Ride*

Written by Ethan Orwig  
Photos Courtesy of UU Athletics

40

*Dona Kaci: Caring Across Cultures*

Written by Isabella Cook  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz

44

*Baguettes For Breakfast*

Photo Story by Rebekah Marcotte

48

*Football Karaoke: Why We Work For No Reward*

Written by Truman Forehand  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz

# Letter From The Editor

Dear reader,

When I was 15 or 16 years old, I helped with a large-scale landscaping project at my church. I spent a few long days in the sun being apprenticed in hardscaping by Jim, the retired engineer leading the project. It was tough, hot, exhausting work. Jim and I probably laid 1,000 square feet of pavers in a couple weeks, transforming a hill into a flat lawn.

After a full workday, Jim took me to lunch at a hole-in-the-wall barbecue joint that doesn't rank well on search results. Over delicious pork and homemade banana pudding, we started envisioning what would come of our work. We knew it would be used for good, but we could only speculate, probably delirious from the fatigue, about all the great events we would hold on the new lawn.

Two years later, the pandemic hit, our church stopped meeting, and the lawn went unused for too many months until we finally cautiously returned for a first "Church on the Lawn" service hosted on the same pavers Jim and I laid. I greeted friends I missed, sat back in my folding lawn chair and remembered the lunch. Jim and I turned out to be right. The work was good.

That's the realization we want to pursue in this edition of Cardinal & Cream. In the following writings, our staff and contributors ask what is good work?

How do we choose good work? Must work be explicitly faith-based to be good? Can you genuinely love what you do, or is it all an act? How do we face tragedy, injustice and hardship without reward? Should we confine good work to our home or take it to Albania, France and Italy? What happens when the sun sets and we finish our work?

I hope our subjects point toward answers for these questions, but I cannot guarantee full enlightenment by the last page. The chief conclusion I draw after reading and seeing these 11 stories is that good work will happen, but it's our responsibility to go and do.

God bless!

— Samuel Stettheimer, Editor-In-Chief





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# Hard Work Is Not A Burden:

*Sarah Trouwborst's Italian Countryside Summer*

*Written by Olivia Bell*

*Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte*

*Additional Photos Contributed by Sarah Trouwborst*

“They would eat anything. Like worms, bugs, leaves. I refused to do it. I could not bring myself to be that adventurous.”

This past summer, junior nursing major Sarah Trouwborst lived the life that I have always dreamed of. In April, she decided to pack up everything for a month of the summer and move to the Italian countryside with an organization called World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF).

She had no contacts, no prior experience with Italian culture or the language and no concept of what to expect. All she knew was that she was going to work, and that seemed to motivate her enough to get on the plane.

“Organic farming, that kind of very rudimentary lifestyle, has always been interesting to me,” Trouwborst said. “Originally, I wanted to do it in Greece, but it didn’t really work out. I thought about Norway. Then, I just settled on Italy. Overall, I thought that this was a really cool way to get to know a culture, and a cool way to get to travel and meet new people.”

WWOOF is a giant database that helps recruit people from all over the world to work at independently owned organic farms in exchange for room and board. The experience itself is a mix of manual labor and international travel. Over the course of the month, Trouwborst worked at two different farms, one in a small village near Genoa and one in Tuscany.

“I was at the first farm for three weeks during the Italian rainy season. Fortunately, it wasn’t as bad as it was in other places, but we were doing a lot of work getting the house ready for visitors,” Trouwborst explained. “It was called an ‘agriturismo,’ which is kind of like a bed and breakfast. So, they have their farm, where they’re growing a lot of their food. Then, they also have the house and hospitality aspect.”

Although Trouwborst did not particularly enjoy the housework aspect of working on the farm, it was a necessary part of keeping the business alive. She would much rather have been outside tending to the fields.

“When it wasn’t raining, we were planting a lot. We turned fields of wild grass and made them into planting fields, which I had never even thought about. I thought that was a Pa-from-Laura-Ingalls-Wilder type of thing. It was really cool to see the process of it,” Trouwborst said.

As Trouwborst described what a day working in the fields looked like, she reflected on how Americans are so removed from the way our food is made and grown, but in other cultures, these processes are naturally incorporated into their day-to-day lives.



“I think I just wanted to be in nature, uninterrupted, for a while and to work with it in a really raw form. I have been really focused on going into medicine for a long time. That setting is something that’s so specific, sterile and disconnected from how we live and how all of humanity has lived,” Trouwborst said. “I knew I would spend the rest of the summer in a hospital or a medical setting. So, I wanted to be able to literally dig in and use my hands in a raw form and see what I put in, and, in two weeks, see something come out.”

Trouwborst went to Italy as a means of learning how to work with her hands and to grow in her appreciation for something that is often overlooked yet fundamental to human life. She spent a large portion of her summer digging up fields, planting crops, working in olive groves and pruning vines. But to the people Trouwborst worked with, these arduous daily tasks required for running a farm were more than just work; to them, it was a way of life.



“Their philosophy around work is a bit different. It’s less intense and more of a lifestyle, as opposed to, ‘I do my work and then I have my life.’ So, a lot of days I ended up going over in my hours just because I was really interested in it,” Trouwborst explained.

Plenty of people in our culture do not have a healthy balance between their personal lives and their work. They clock-in so they can clock-out and live for the weekend, or they despise work because it’s not always easy or effortless. As I write this, I am convicted of my own tendency to view work as a burden instead of contemplating why it was created. God originally created work in the Garden of Eden, and He declared it good.

“It was the dedication in it and the way they put their entire being into it that affected me. It was really cool to see the way in which their identity was so tied to their work. It wasn’t something that was like, ‘I have to go to work. I would really rather do something else.’ But instead, they made it something that they wanted to do, and they didn’t have to,” Trouwborst said.

In college, we are often advised not to waste our summers. The idea is that what you choose to do with your summers should matter. It should have a direct correlation to what you want to do after you graduate. To some, working somewhere that doesn’t directly apply to your desired career could seem careless.

But I don’t believe this is always the case. Not everything you do will have some sort of monumental impact on your future. Sometimes, you just have to go and work hard wherever you are, and the Lord will take care of the rest. Trouwborst didn’t see her experience this summer as wasted. Instead, she saw it as an opportunity.

“It was like, ‘This is what I enjoy doing, so I’m going to do it for the rest of my life,’” Trouwborst said. “I don’t do that as much as I should. That hasn’t been how I’ve lived or worked in the past. That was a very humbling thing to realize. This should be something I’m doing because I know this is something we are called to do. I want to make work part of who I am and realize that it’s not just my occupation.”



# Calling Is A Simple Thing

*Written by Katherine Anne Thierfelder*

*Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte*

Union was my absolute last choice when I was thinking about where I wanted to go to college.

Really, I only applied because my dad works here, so why not?

When I was doing my college search, I had grand notions of getting out and seeing the world. Union was the very definition of everything I wanted to escape, a bubble that contained the type of apple-cheeked, jean-skirted people I'd been surrounded with my whole life. I didn't need more of those people. If I was going to grow, I needed a radically different (aka, super secular) atmosphere.

Then a pandemic happened. Everything shut down, and the program I'd gotten into at the college I really wanted to attend was overseas, so they pushed my program back. On top of that, they didn't give me nearly enough aid to justify the kind of degree I'd be getting (really, they didn't give me enough money to justify *any* degree).

That's how I ended up at Union, and I've loved my time here.

Because I came to Union, I found people who share my profound love of writing and are also Christians with whom I can discuss how to be a Christian artist. These are the same type of people I was hoping to escape by going away for college.

Because I came to Union, I have had the opportunity to visit Utah on a number of different occasions, and that's where I plan to move when I graduate.

Because I came to Union, I have been able to dive into serving my church, helping provide stability to the youth program I grew up in as we go through a massive transition.

If I hadn't come to Union, my life and who I am would look nothing like it does now.

But I never felt Called to be at Union. In fact, I didn't even feel settled about the idea until about four weeks after classes started.

It's kind of funny, this concept of Calling. It's something we hear little to nothing about when we're in high school. Sure, there's a lot of pressure to pick a college and a major and to have some idea of what we want to do with our lives, but it isn't until we graduate that people start talking about life plans through the lens of Calling and God's will.

That's how people phrase their questions when they ask about your plans after college: "What's God's will for your life?"

And when you ask them how you find God's will for your life, they respond by saying something like "Whatever the Lord is Calling you to, do it for His glory."

This is not an incorrect answer. This is not always a helpful answer, either.

Because at the end of the day, is there much difference between God's will and God's Calling?

God's Calling can seem like this elusive creature that only appears to the very worthy when Mercury is in retrograde. It's the transparent brick road we try to follow with every step we take, down to the cereal we buy. Finding your Calling can feel like playing "Where's Waldo" with life-or-death stakes.

This sort of pressure that Christians and Christian college students feel usually pushes people to develop one of two dispositions regarding Calling:

The first type of person looks a little bit like a Chihuahua, shivering as they tiptoe through life, running their every move through this detailed grid of God's will and (hopefully) saturating their steps in prayer to figure out if they're headed in the right direction. They're going somewhere but usually very slowly and with a narrow mind. This person gets so caught up in the need to be following their Calling that they miss out on people, places and opportunities that might have been wonderful chances to do a very normal thing with a faithful heart to the glory of God.

The second type of person doesn't move at all. They sit in the same spot, eyes heavenward, arms outstretched, waiting for their Calling to come raining down on their proverbial heart, filling them with a peace and a picture of the after-school outreach ministry for inner-city kids that God means for them to start in Boston: the whole reason they were put on this earth to begin with, their Damascus-road moment.

Both of these types overcomplicate Calling. It's a simple concept, really.

God has already told us what to do.

This is the point where students (It's me. I'm students.) internally scoff and throw their mental hands in the air because we've heard that statement before.

We usually know *what* we're supposed to do. We know we're Called to be saved. We know we're Called to go and make disciples of all nations. We know we're Called to be faithful (all of which, by the way, are commandments, not suggestions). But that isn't specific enough. We aren't told *how* we're supposed to accomplish those commands.

We want God to hold our hand and whisper in our ear, telling us which job to take and what city to move to, and if we can't hear that voice clearly, we panic and assume that means we're doing the wrong thing.

I don't believe that coming to Union was the wrong choice for me, but I cannot say that there was ever a point in the process of getting to Union where I felt God telling me it was the right choice, or even the wrong one.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've had a Damascus-road encounter with God about a decision, but there aren't enough hands in the world to count the number of decisions I've had to make.

Life isn't made up of decisions that are only right or wrong. Life is made up of a bunch of little decisions that you just have to make and be faithful to because choosing Apple Jacks over Cheerios is neither right nor wrong.

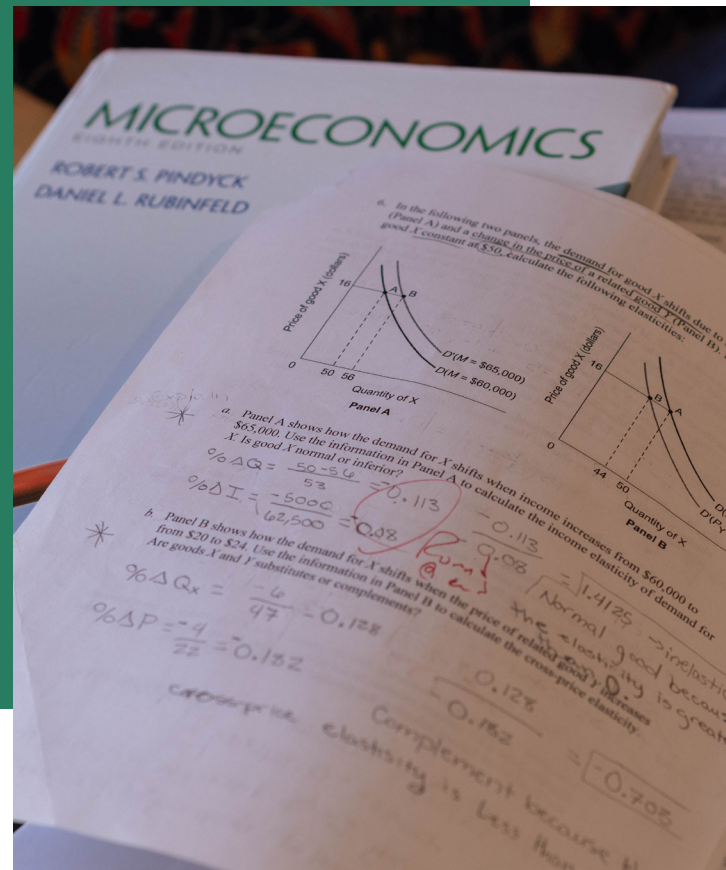
I once heard a wise woman speaking about Calling say, "You can't mess up God's plan, but you can miss out on it."

When I think about life's direction, and when I'm tempted to become overwhelmed by the decisions before me, this statement has brought me comfort by reminding me of the simplicity of Calling and God's will.

There is nothing I can do, no decision I can make, that will ruin God's plan for my life or anyone else's life. Not even Adam and Eve's sin messed up the plan God had before time began, His plan to make His glory known among the whole Earth. Who are we to think that we are significant enough or powerful enough to derail God?

Christian culture's common view on Calling has led us to the point where we've disguised our arrogance as faithfulness. All the pressure is on *us* to make the right decision instead of on God to use and redeem the things we do for His glory.





If you start to sweat a little (or a lot) when people ask you what you're going to do with your life, ask yourself what God has given you a love for.

I love writing. I've never had a Damascus-road moment where God descended upon my soul with a peace saying to be a writer. I don't even know if I will write for my career, but I know that it's not an accident that I like to write. God made me that way, which means there's a way—nay—many ways I can use writing for God's glory.

*Calling is a simple thing. If you need a step-by-step guide, it's this:*

1. Pray
2. Decide
3. Pray
4. Trust
5. Pray

If there is genuinely a wrong decision to be made, and you make it, don't think God won't or can't fix it. We must be faithful in doing the next right thing and let God handle the big picture.

For college students, our biggest decisions, the life-making or breaking ones, seem to be what we're going to do and where we're going to do it.

My advice would be to take a job, do it with excellence to the glory of God and share His gospel as you go. Take one because you like it. Take one because you're good at it. Take one in a place where there's a need for the gospel to be shared. Go near. Go far, but whatever you do, go faithfully.

The tools to build His kingdom have always been at your feet. In most cases, it doesn't matter if you pick up the hammer or the wrench. Just choose one and get to work.

**"We must be faithful in doing the next right thing & let God handle the big picture."**





# Keep Up The Good Work:

## A Bigger God Than We Think

Written by Noel Moore

Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

The idea of working for the glory of God in everything you do, putting in genuine effort no matter what the task, is nothing new at Union. I mention it in almost every tour I lead, tying our core values of “Excellence-Driven” and “Christ-Centered” together as I quote Colossians 3:23: “And whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord, and not for men” (World English Bible).

But, recently, another core value has been nagging at me: “Future-Directed.”

What does good work look like outside college, after graduation? In the world of jobs, organizations and companies that don’t always share the same ideals Union does, can we still do good work?

“We need Christian lawyers and we need Christian politicians and we need to not necessarily evangelize every space we’re in, but just be a picture of what it means to be operating under the call of God.”

Olivia Abernathy sat before me, gesturing earnestly as she spoke. As senior director for the Office of Childhood Success at United Way, her work includes advocating for state policy changes regarding childcare and running a tutoring program for elementary schoolers. Her work is important, and the idea that good work can only be done in a faith-based organization had her wrinkling her brows. On the contrary, Abernathy insisted that God can bring about good work anywhere.

“When I look at the biblical narrative, I see this idea of God making all things new and good, restoring what’s been broken,” Abernathy said. “I really love the idea of Shalom and the world being brought to wholeness again. And so that’s how I see good work. It’s really whatever it takes to create Shalom and human flourishing.”

Shalom is Hebrew for “peace and completeness,” often used as a greeting or farewell. Good work brings about peace. I smiled; that sounded lovely, to aim for unity and agreement in your career.

Having worked a 9-to-5 desk job the past two summers, sharing cubicle walls with three middle-aged, talkative, somewhat bitter coworkers, I knew how difficult that ideal could be. Peace was not something that was particularly high on the priority list there; conflict was far more entertaining and could provide hours of over-the-cubicle conversation. And, from what I saw, work was done not to bring glory to anyone (not the company, not the workers, definitely not God) but because it had to be. Nothing more.

Not all workplaces look like that, though. As Allison Eichenlaub, first-year teacher at Andrew Jackson Elementary, greeted me with a smile, a hug and a “look at my teacher’s badge!” I felt some of the jadedness from my internship slip away. Eichenlaub has always been full of enthusiasm, excitement and passion for the things she is involved in; it’s energizing to see she has carried that eagerness over to teaching.



**“When I look at the biblical narrative, I see this idea of God making all things new and good, restoring what’s been broken,” Abernathy said. “I really love the idea of Shalom and the world being brought to wholeness again. And so that’s how I see good work. It’s really whatever it takes to create Shalom and human flourishing.”**



“A lot of teachers have actually complimented me,” Eichenlaub said. “They’re like, ‘I don’t know how you’re still smiling at the end of the day, but we just love that you’re always smiling.’ It’s not me telling them I’m a Christian, but it’s me showing them the light.” She grinned, then pointed to the big yellow smiley face on her shirt. “That’s why I wear this. To be the light.”

Despite her cheerful attitude, her time at Andrew Jackson Elementary has not been easy. She told me about children from broken homes, children who rely on their school days for meals and often must leave the campus altogether when their families can no longer afford to live near the school. Rather than grow discouraged, Eichenlaub sees them as a mission field.

“It’s exhausting to go there, and it’s a hard environment, but it’s very rewarding because I can tell that they are so appreciative of the love that I give to them,” Eichenlaub said. “You can tell that a lot of them do not receive that at home.”

Eichenlaub is doing incredible things at her job, impacting children and teachers’ lives alike in the short time she has been there. Abernathy, in her role serving children, is intent on her mission as a child of God, confident in her purpose to glorify the Lord wherever she is placed.

But in many workplaces, Christians are not allowed to share God’s Word, or, as Eichenlaub said to me so matter-of-factly, they may lose their jobs if they do so. Is that where the Lord wants us, in careers where we can’t explicitly share His Word?

“I don’t work for a church, and I don’t work for a ministry, but it is still a very ministry oriented motivation that gets me into the work that I do,” Abernathy said. “I feel like it’s kind of having a small view of God if we assume that it requires a certain paradigm for His kingdom to be coming to bear.”

It is not in Abernathy or Eichenlaub’s job descriptions to share the Gospel. Teaching children, forming leadership teams, working in politics—the work they do is not what we would think of as inherently Christian, but it can be. We are the hands and feet of Christ, all with unique gifts, talents and skills. Christians can live out their faith anywhere, no matter where the Lord places them. If I wasn’t convinced of that before, talking to these women certainly swayed me.

But, as I sat with them, another question came to mind: If, fundamentally, good work is done for the glory of God, can good work still be accomplished through nonbelievers?

“I think there’s so many ways that we can see the kingdom of God come to bear in the world,” Abernathy said, “and that’s a good thing. You can do good work and not even know it.”

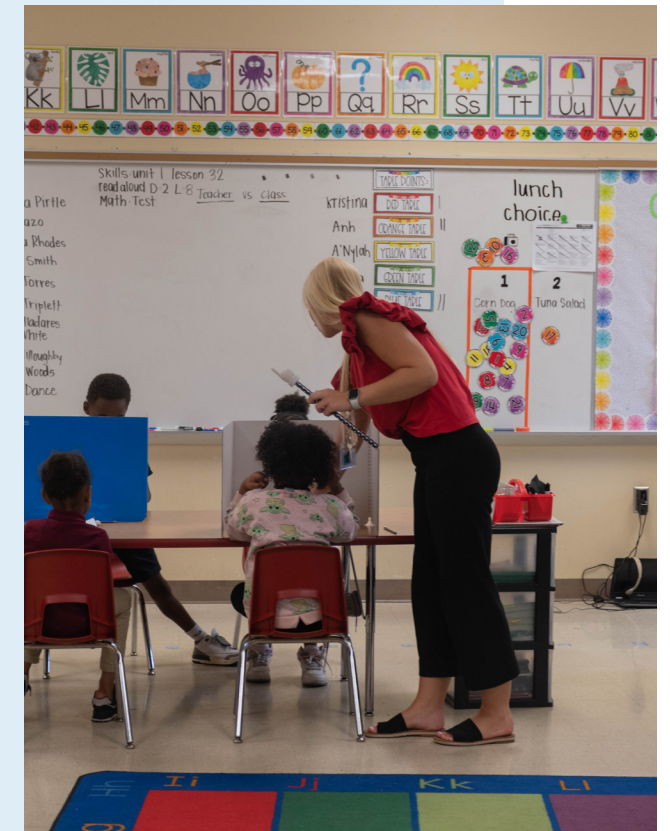
Some people believe that good work consists only of furthering God’s kingdom; others see it as doing all things excellently because it is how we were made to do work. But just because one person or organization is Christian and one is secular does not mean God cannot use both for His glory. To think good work cannot be done in a certain career or by a certain person is to limit God. After all, He redeemed an entire world of sinners.

“I think being in so many spaces that aren’t inherently Christian organizations has humbled me a lot,” Abernathy said. “I don’t have all the answers, and I don’t have a monopoly on being a good human.”

We must not become the Pharisee of Luke 18 whose self-righteousness from living a supposedly pious life was his downfall, who assumed that nothing good could possibly come from a tax collector, when in reality the tax collector was the one justified. Working to bring about God’s plan through a ministry is incredible, but Colossians doesn’t say, “And whatever you do—so long as the job description is directly related to your faith—work heartily, as for the Lord, and not for men”

The work we do may not end up being inherently Christian in nature, but that might be where we are needed the most. If we are truly vessels of the Holy Spirit everything we do, including secular work, should be directly tied to our faith.

I got it wrong, at the beginning. The question is not can we do good work outside of Christian organizations—that answer is a resounding yes. What we need to be asking is this: How can we take advantage of the opportunities God has given us to share His light? And how can we better recognize His power to use anyone for His good? After all, He is not restricted to the confines we sometimes put Him in. We serve a God a lot bigger than that.



# CAN YOU BE "CALLED" TO SECULAR SUCCESS?

Panel Featuring Matt Bowman, Colene Trent, Sean Otto

Written by Mattie Washington • Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte



*No one warns you about the culture shock you face going from public high school to a private Christian college. One day you're coughing through a cloud of smoke on the way to class and the next you're caught in the crossfire of a heated predestination debate in the middle of the lunchroom (if you're like me, you didn't even know what that was).*

*I had never once considered what my "calling" in life was. Sure, I had thought through career options and tried to pick the one I felt most confident about, but I had never been asked "what is God calling you to do?"*

*Because of that, I felt panicked when I listened to my peers describing their master plans for working at nonprofits or their intentions to live overseas as missionaries in developing nations. I felt unprepared, but more specifically, I felt like a bad Christian.*

*How could I love God and not feel "called" to do those things? It plagued my mind back then, and I'm sure it continues to plague many other Christian students.*

*To gain some insight on the issue, I gathered Matt Bowman, Union's director for graduate admissions and recruitment in the College of Education; Colene Trent, associate professor of economics at Union; and Sean Otto, recent Union graduate and manager of a startup landscaping company called Prosper Services in downtown Jackson, Tennessee.*



**Mattie:** Each of you have the opportunity to either work in a situation where you're helping people who might feel called to secular work or you're currently working in that environment yourself. How would you say one is called to secular work?

Trent: I'm not sure I ever had a definitive moment that God was going to use me in economics. Instead, I just did what I was gifted at, what my professors encouraged me to do and what my skill set led to while being a Christian. Now that I'm on the other side of my job and have a stronger faith than when I started my career, I see that I was called. We just don't talk about it in that same sense. I think maybe we should. I don't think God wants Christians completely removed from industry, healthcare or education. He's calling us to those industries because He wants us to be present.

Otto: I work in a very secular field. I never thought that I had a call to ministry, but I've always seen God's hand in every aspect of my life. And it's not always this glorious thing where God speaks down and says, "this is exactly what you need to be doing." When I'm at a job, I'm helping my employees. I'm giving them grace, and I'm doing the job above and beyond what people would expect and what people ask for. I was working with one of my construction managers a couple weeks ago, and he called me at seven in the morning and asked how I was, and I said I was great. He asked, "why are you always doing great?"

It was an opportunity to share that there's more to life than just this work. So even though my calling isn't to be on a pulpit preaching on Sunday, my calling is to share the gospel and share God's light everywhere I go.

**Mattie:** What are some common problems students face when approaching the topic of calling? What do they wrestle with when making life-changing decisions?

Bowman: In my job, I get to deal with graduate students who are figuring out if they want to go into education or move into leadership. Prior to that, I actually worked in the Vocatio Center



and got to talk with undergrads a lot about "how do I not screw up God's will for my life?" I had to tell them, "you're not that powerful." One of the earliest questions we are asked is, "what do you wanna be when you grow up?" When faith intersects that, it turns into "what is God calling you to do with your life?" which sounds massive and overwhelming. Too many people talk about calling as if it's this moment in time where they figure out what God wants them to do until the day they die. Calling and vocation is this life-long process. I'm trying to help students unlearn those pop-theology models of what calling is and helping them to understand that they're only planning the next three to five years. That's a lot more manageable.

**Mattie:** Many Christians struggle to understand if desiring money is a sin. We are called to place our treasures in heaven, but we also need money for survival on a daily basis. Is it okay to value a simple life, work you enjoy and reasonable wealth?

Bowman: When we say something like "reasonable wealth," we have to recognize that it's subjective. Solomon warns us in Ecclesiastes that for the man who loves wealth, there's never enough. Paul talks in the New Testament about knowing that whether we have much or little, He can by His grace sustain us, teach us to persevere in the seasons where we don't have a lot and keep us humble in the seasons when we do.

Trent: In my personal finance classes, I try to contrast the way the world would approach personal finance with how Christians should approach it. The world would have a goal of getting rich just to have money. I try to tell my students that their goal should not be to get wealthy: it should be to be spiritually and financially mature. With being financially mature, you know what decisions you need to make, and you also know how and when to make those decisions. Spiritual maturity can happen regardless of your status in society, the size of your bank account or your salary.

**Mattie:** The secular world views money very differently than Christians. What challenges arise when students leave and find jobs in the secular workplace? How should Christians interact with those secular working environments?

Otto: You have to be strong in your resolve. If there are boundaries that you've made that you want to keep up, you need to know why. Not just because doing certain things are frowned upon by your peers at school, but you actually need to believe that you shouldn't partake in them. If that resolve isn't your own, your resolve will fail.

Trent: You should be different from the person in the cubicle next to you. Your life should look different. The way that you handle your money, the way that you value your family and faith: it should look different from the rest of the world.

We should stick out just a little bit. You want to be able to give an answer for "why does your life look different?"

Bowman: We should work harder; we should have a better attitude. We should go above and beyond because we have a higher calling. If for three years you work in a field that you realize isn't where you want to be, you've still learned something. Sometimes jobs you don't like are as valuable and informative as jobs that you loved. Christ can use a negative experience to shape you and teach you how to love people who are really hard to love. Don't get so caught up in "what am I going to do?" that you overlook how Christians should work differently than others.

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*Throughout the Bible, we are taught what honorable intentions look like when it comes to dealing with money, success and power. We are able to use Christ's example as a model for our lives.*

*Before Jesus began his ministry, before any heated debates and meals with sinners, He was a carpenter. He found value in a craft that didn't directly lead to evangelism. In a sense, we can use those occupations generally considered "secular" and turn them into opportunities to carry out our universal purpose: making disciples of all the nations, including our own.*

**"Calling  
& vocation  
— is this —  
lifelong  
process."**

# Tragedy & Trust:



## How “Bob’s Burgers” Came To The Lex

Written by Samuel Stettheimer  
Photographed by Rebekah Marcotte

“Hi, are you Bob from Bob’s Burgers? I live in Bells, and I’m so sorry to hear about what happened.”

Bob nodded. “What’s your name, my friend?”

“Brendan. We just moved there and I heard about—it. I’m so sorry, man.”

“But we’re here now,” Bob said to lift the mood back to cheer.

“We’re here. Yeah! And I get to try your food. I’m looking forward to it. I just wanted to say hi.”

Brendan walked off stage left as Bob and I resumed our conversation in the Lex.

“Does that happen often?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re a celebrity, man.”

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As a Union celebrity, Bob O’Donnell has his name in lights, or at least in chalk, on the menu board of the Lexington Inn, or “Lex,” Union’s in-house diner. A week before new students arrived in August, the Lexington Inn officially became “The Lex Featuring Bob’s Burgers” and introduced four of O’Donnell’s signature burgers picked from 15 years at his own restaurant in Bells, Tennessee.

O’Donnell’s entire career, except a stint in the Army, has been in the restaurant business. He grew up in it, working for his dad, and in 2009, he and his wife Jenny opened the restaurant which would become known as “Bob’s Burgers, Pasta & Pizza.”

“I never had big dreams for myself being something. I just wanted to be in restaurants, that’s all I wanted to do,” O’Donnell said. “I love to cook. That’s why I didn’t ask my wife if she’d be okay if I got into the restaurant business; I went into the restaurant business.”

They lived in poverty for the first three years, selling blue plate specials to scrape by. Eventually, O’Donnell tried making some burgers, but they weren’t unique enough to gain real popularity.

Then O’Donnell found his special element: the bun, sourced from a bakery in San Antonio. It’s sweet and light, almost like brioche or a potato roll. But there’s still a strong enough structure that the bun does not collapse from the condiments and patty juices. There is no “last-bite” problem of the burger falling apart midway through dining.

It was 40 cents more expensive per bun than the next best option, but the O’Donnells bet it would pay off. They used them, and the burgers were a hit. O’Donnell put more burgers and chicken sandwiches on the menu, ending with 13 options for each. That tender-yet-strong bun played a foundational role in the restaurant’s popularity.



Their reputation grew outside of the immediate Bells area. Several of Union's executive-level staff began frequenting the restaurant. O'Donnell recalled serving President Samuel W. "Dub" Oliver's family almost weekly. Administration loved the burgers so much that former faculty member C. Ben Mitchell started an inside joke that they would one day bring a Bob's Burgers franchise to Union. They never expected it to actually happen. Why would O'Donnell hide his successful operation on a college campus?

On the morning of January 24, 2023, O'Donnell was scraping ice off his windshield when Jenny received a call.

"My wife opens the door and says, 'Bob, the restaurant's burnt down.' I go, 'What?' I did not believe her. I get in my car, and I'm praying, and I'm driving. It's only a mile and a half. As I'm driving there, I said, 'Please, Lord, I don't know if this is gonna be right or wrong or altogether torn apart or what.' I showed up, and the ceilings were down, some of the walls were down and everything was burnt down to the ground. That's a terrible day," O'Donnell said.

The results of 15 years of 80 hour weeks disappeared overnight, thanks to a hidden electrical issue in a wall. His lauded pizza, homemade pasta and 26 hamburgers and chicken sandwiches went the way of their old blue plate specials.

"What do I do? I was empty at that point."

The restaurant was just down the street from Bells First Baptist Church, pastored by Mark Wade. First Baptist held a fundraiser for the O'Donnells later that week, but probably more importantly, Wade helped O'Donnell with the emptiness.

"I went in to talk to him, and he said 'Bob, you know, you've just got to trust God.'

"Mark, I do. But I tell you what, I can't figure out what to do. I know God's given me the ability to be able to hold a restaurant and manage it and be successful. But now what?"

"Sure enough, he says 'Bob, you just have to let go and let God. Don't worry about it; God is going to provide a way. You just have to believe it. What you're saying right now is that you don't totally believe.'

"Right between the eyes. He was right: I didn't. I said, 'Okay, I'm gonna give this to God. Just let this happen, whatever happens.' Not three weeks later, Mark gives me a call. He says, 'Bob, would you be interested in coming out to Union?'"

During this time, Todd Brady, Union's former vice president of university ministries, heard about the fire. Brady talked with Vice President for Business Affairs, Rick Taphorn, and the pair remembered the Union executives' old inside joke about bringing Bob's Burgers to Union.



They waited an appropriate mourning period, but eventually, Brady talked to Wade, Wade talked to O'Donnell, both O'Donnells talked to Taphorn, negotiations were had, students offered input, a menu was settled, O'Donnell donned a Lex apron and Taphorn ate six burgers in the first week.

But that's not the important stuff. I'm not trying to sell a partnership with the Lex as equally fulfilling as owning the best restaurant in town. It's not a perfect situation; O'Donnell misses his old menu with pizza, pasta and more burger options. What matters to him is really the food, so he has pushed for key changes. The Lex brought in a heavy-duty gas fryer, and after persuading Dub, they shipped in O'Donnell's original secret-ingredient buns. It's not the same, but it's good.

"Bob's a really likable guy, just talking with him almost feels like your grandfather, right? Just a good, strong Christian guy that I'm hoping will have built strong relationships," Taphorn said. "But then, Bob's got tremendous community reach."

The O'Donnells' Bells restaurant had a fanbase. They ran a rewards program that, at its peak, boasted six thousand people. Bells, notably, has a population just above 2,600. In addition to Brendan, old regulars without connection to Union have already shown up at the Lex to support O'Donnell.

"I think the goal is always to serve students first. I think the secondary part is to make Union be a welcome, open space where families or the community want to come and have a meal. It's kind of like, 'ooh! A hidden gem and a nice place,'" Taphorn said. "Hopefully, the Lex will have more and more community members come in and enjoy what students get to enjoy."

Institutional dining is rarely pointed to for quality cuisine. The secret spots in town don't tend to run off captive customers like students, but O'Donnell brings a human draw to the sometimes-faceless, red-brick campus.



"It's just a neat thing that I have friends here already that know me—people that know the food," O'Donnell said. "Today, we had four customers come in that were not Union people. They were older couples. The two couples came in and ordered our burgers just for the burgers, that's all they came in for."

Tragedy is tragic, and nobody wanted it, but seeing the tender moments of new people brought to our often insulated campus might justify O'Donnell's hope and trust.

"God will bless me when and where he wants to bless me. Everything's gonna work out," O'Donnell said. "The long of it all is that we just persevered through it all. And it was hard. It wasn't easy. But I love cooking. I love doing what we do."



Written by David Alcazar  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz

Every time I drink disgusting coffee, I envision myself as Elliot Gould in "The Long Goodbye."

Set in 1970s Los Angeles, Gould plays Philip Marlowe, a private eye caught up in a murder plot surrounding his friend. But in reality, it's just a mechanism for Gould to do what he does best: be cool. He does this effortlessly as he wanders through stores at two in the morning buying Courry brand cat food and getting shaken down by cops in an interrogation room. He's always disheveled, always has a wisecrack to throw around and is constantly finding unique ways to light matches for his cigarettes which always hang from his mouth. A slick high-rise apartment and a ginger cat are his only companions in a sea of strangers that he either wants to kiss, punch or drink with.

That's the kind of effortless cool I imagine for myself as I down coffee that tastes like dirty water. I see myself as Gould, a bit messy but unphased by the taste of the brew because I've been on the prowl for hours, searching for clues. In reality, I've probably missed my alarm and stumbled into breakfast to start a day that will consist of doodling under fluorescent lights and scrawling out star formations on notebook paper (journalists weren't built for Gen Eds). The bad coffee isn't fueling anything as romantic as Gould's life and to make it all worse, I'm asthmatic. So no cigarettes.

This experience isn't restricted to bad coffee or myself. We often romanticize ourselves through art, especially movies. Larger-than-life characters live in stories where reality is heightened and everyone knows what to say. In small ways, we like to see ourselves as those figures when we are probably just a face in the crowd. Most people aren't private eyes. In fact, I doubt anyone reading this essay even knows of a private eye in their city, let alone personally. They seem to exist purely in the world of fiction, designed for cool movie stars who get the girl and don't have asthma. This kind of romanticism (hopefully) isn't intertwined with people's identities. I'm not a private eye, and I know I'll never be one. I'm allergic to cats and can't smoke cigarettes. I don't dwell in that place; it only lingers in my mind in rare moments like when I sleep in and need to drink my school's dining hall coffee.



## ROMANTICIZING MEDIA:

*How Movies Shape  
Our Reality*

But not all art is cleanly separated from our lives. When lines blur between fantasy and reality we begin to develop a more complex relationship with romanticism. A person's career is a prime example of this. Not all movie characters are Elliot Goulds from the "Long Goodbye" or Keanu Reeves in "Point Break." What about doctors? Accountants? Or in my case, what about journalists? Tying what we see on screen to our own little worlds undoubtedly affects us.

I first began to realize this phenomenon while watching Wes Anderson's 2021 film "The French Dispatch." The film follows different journalists working for a fictional magazine (based on The New Yorker) who venture into unknown spaces to uncover stories. The writing is elevated to a hyper-romantic state and portrays the vastness of the human condition—displaying fleeting emotions among explosions of color. This quote still moves me to tears and remains one of my favorites from any film:

***"He is not an invincible comet, speeding on its guided arc toward the outer reaches of the galaxy in cosmic space-time. Rather, he is a boy who will die young. He will drown on this planet in the steady current of the deep, dirty, magnificent river that flows night and day through the veins and arteries of his own ancient city. His parents will receive a telephone call at midnight, dress briskly, mechanically, and hold hands in the silent taxi as they go to identify the body of their cold son. His likeness, mass-produced and shrink-wrap packaged, will be sold like bubblegum to the hero-inspired who hope to see themselves like this. The touching narcissism of the young."***



Somewhere in Memphis and enveloped in the shadows of a movie theater, I heard those words for the first time. As someone who is pursuing writing for a living, this film (and especially that quote) inspires me to delve deeper into my craft. I want to write as evocatively as Anderson does and live with the same unrelenting passion of his characters. But I might not. It wouldn't take my career bombing for these images in my head about the world of journalism to ruin my perception of myself. In an era when media consumption dictates how people perceive themselves, it can be difficult to distinguish why I love something outside of its connection to the movies I've watched.

I remember watching the 1976 film "All The President's Men" around the age of 13 and deciding that I was going to be a journalist. The film follows the two Washington Post reporters (played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) who broke the Watergate scandal. As with any '70s thriller, it's gritty and realistic. I can still see Robert Redford's perfect face chewing up idealistic dialogue about the free press while Dustin Hoffman's weird face rattles off the complex details of the case. It's the kind of journalism that actually happened but still seems foreign and far from real.

I know I'm not a Redford or an Anderson protagonist. I know more or less what journalism in the real world looks like, but these films still have a profound effect on how I view journalism. Regardless of profession, we all do this. More often than not, our day-to-day lives don't meet these expectations. Nonetheless, we let the fantasy of the movies permeate our expectations of who we should be. At least, I do.

How, then, do I approach consuming media? Do I shun these films that I love or spend my time viewing them attempting to separate my life from the characters? I don't think that makes much sense, especially considering the power that art has in shaping our worldview. That feeling of excitement that floods my body while watching "The French Dispatch" isn't wrong, and the potential for it to misshape my view of life isn't worth casting that feeling aside. The way we consume media ultimately dictates the degree to which art can warp our expectations for our lives.

A simple, universal and endlessly complex question lies at the core of these habits: what does it mean to truly love what you do? Getting lost in the world within films isn't intrinsically unhealthy and shouldn't dilute our lives with unrealistic answers to that question. Subconsciously though, I can let these films guide the mental trajectory I set for my career. For me, it is splitting hairs to separate genuine inspiration from the outcome of setting unrealistic expectations. I'm still going to see clouds of cigarette smoke and hear '70s jazz when I drink gross coffee, and I'm always going to embrace the electric feeling of seeing journalists on-screen—living out the lives that inspire me to write.

The answer, as with most complicated internal problems, isn't straightforward. Truthfully, I don't have the answer. One's relationship with art and self can't be sorted out with a one-size-fits-all solution. I can't separate the parts of myself that intertwine with characters in films, and to try would probably make me miserable. For now, putting heart into my work and striving each day to find joy in the process can be enough.



# Restoring Relationships:

## Acting Justly In A Broken World

Written by Avery Chenault  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz  
& Olivia Bell

“Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord your God.”

I saw those words engraved on a plaque as I walked through Union’s Penick Academic Complex on my way to speak to Mary Anne Poe. I pulled open the double doors and looked down at my phone: “1000+ killed in deadly Morocco earthquake.” The headline is paired with scenes of unimaginable destruction, a small vignette of an aching world desperate for restoration.

As I continued walking, a question weighed on my mind. How should Christians seek to do justice in a world surrounded by constant pain, conflict and brokenness? How do we walk humbly and act justly, living out our calling and helping those in need, without developing a cynical outlook toward our broken world?

“Doing justice is part of the Christian mission in the world,” Poe said to me in her office in the social work suite. “Whatever you’re doing, whatever your job is, that ought to be part of what you’re thinking about.”

Poe currently serves as university professor of social work as well as the director of Union’s Center for Just and Caring Communities. Poe’s exposure to nonprofit ministry and growing up during the civil rights movement shaped her heart for justice. But Poe sees justice as more than just the act of making things right. For Poe, justice is the restoration of humanity back to the God who made us.

“Doing justice is helping people be in a right relationship with God,” Poe said. “Creation to Christ’s return is about God at work in the world with humans to restore relationships to a right, a just ordering, of what God intended those relations to be.”

Each injustice that occurs in our broken world reflects the world’s first injustice: the fall. This original injustice separated man from God and ultimately allowed sin into the world. So how do we cope with this reality as we move throughout our world today?





"I've come to learn that the scripture from start to finish is filled with the notion of God's justice," Poe said.

From Noah's Ark to Jesus' ascension, the narrative of the Bible tells of a God who redeems His people's sin. From the fall in the Garden of Eden to the crucifixion in Golgotha, justice has always been about reconciling relationships. It is through relationships that justice is both damaged and restored.

"Jesus entered into our world, moved into our sin-obsessed world and was a model for how to do justice," Poe said.

God's desire for just relationships throughout the world provides a framework for how Christians should do justice. Because our relationship with God has been restored, we are enabled to go into the world with the goal of encouraging others to restore their relationships with God. Relationships are both the driving force and the strengthening glue of justice work.

Marisa Infield, Union University resident director and current Master of Social Work student shared her experience of restorative relationships while working with at-risk children in the Knoxville area. Infield worked and lived in a community affected by poverty and violence, still struggling with the damage of historical segregation. Because of this, relationships were fragmented throughout the Knoxville community.

When six high school students were fatally shot and killed in her community, Infield watched as relationships strengthened others in an incredibly unjust situation.

"We had a prayer night in the community late at night," Infield said. "This was a time of night when most people, especially from the other side of the community would not come in."

Despite historically strong divides, people from across Knoxville rallied in prayer amid the grief.

"There was a lot of tragedy, and it was very somber," Infield said. "But also, to see two sides of the community come together—and come together in prayer, what we should ultimately be rooted in—that was really, really beautiful, to see the restoration of relationships between two sides of the city."

It is through relationships that we are mobilized to do justice in the face of tragedy.

Yet, it is not easy. As long as we exist in a broken world, we will wrestle and question and lament. There is hope in knowing that Jesus, the man sent to bring about humanity's ultimate justice, also wrestled, questioned and lamented.

"God entered into a world of pain and suffering and suffered with us," Poe said. "I think that's what we're invited to do if we're going to follow Jesus."

As we long for the restoration to come, we are strengthened by perfect power to exist in a broken world. Our finite minds gaze upon rubble and long for wholeness. Naturally, we are burdened by devastating earthquakes and wonder why violence mars our nation, knowing that we may never understand; we lament to God, knowing he listens; we mourn our reality while longing for what's to come; we lament the brokenness of the world while holding fast to the hope that one day our frail and fighting Earth will be restored.

"God is at work in whatever happens even if we don't see the big picture," Poe said. "We're at a point in time subject to the powers and principalities of this world. That's just another element of hope in the whole story. This isn't the end of the story. I'm in the middle of the story and it can be dark and painful, but I can trust that God is at work."



*Written by Ethan Orwig  
Photos Courtesy of UU Athletics*

It's tradition for Gary, your bus driver, to park as far from any baseball field as possible. It allows you and your teammates to get a feel for your legs; carrying equipment bags and buckets full of baseballs up to the visitor dugout is always a welcome challenge. The burning shoulders aren't the only thing that's hurting. Your arm is tired and throbbing. Not pain but a constant achiness that carries on throughout the week. You come to find that it's called overuse. Your arm can testify. You've thrown that ball thousands of reps added up over the course of the school year. It's been months of routine, hundreds of early afternoons on the field with your brothers, all to perfect a craft that is simply impossible to perfect. But you try anyway. People tell you that you have a rubber arm (an arm that never feels pain from throwing), and you're laughing with the other guys about how it might be true. Turns out, nobody has a rubber arm, and those who claim to are downright liars. And you're one of them.

It's Saturday morning in Livingston, Alabama, home of the West Alabama Tigers. It is the last of a three-game series. You and your brothers can feel it. It's almost over. The season, that is. The team has already been eliminated from making the playoffs. The taste of losing has been stained in your mouth for a while now. It tastes bitter, like coffee hours after you've finished drinking. But something's different. After all, the guys that have taken you under their wing have suddenly become seniors. It's their last time playing on a collegiate field for what might be forever. The idea of never playing again is stupid. You've never gone a day without baseball, and neither have they.

The weight of that fact begins to set on your neck as you march around the newly painted announcer's booth and the beer deck mounted above the visitors' dugout where you will soon be heckled to no end. It's creamy white with a red roof, like the lighthouses you see on your Mimi's calendar she hasn't taken down in

seven years. The bullpen down the left field line is nestled beside a short, crumbling brick wall that overlooks a lily pad covered pond, the picturesque kind where you might find Huckleberry Finn fishing. The bullfrogs echo their heavy croaks across the pond and mix in with the cicadas' rhythmic whirring.

West Al finishes their batting practice, and you and the other pitchers dissolve into the outfield to shag stray fly balls while "Chicken Fried" plays for the 400th time this season over the loudspeakers. "Bro, not this again," you mumble. You don't really mean it. You have core memories attached to this song. The only time you listen to this song is on a baseball field. It's required, no matter where you're playing, for the announcer's booth to have "Chicken Fried" in every baseball pre-game playlist, as well as "Sweet Caroline," "Small Town USA," and most importantly, "Thunderstruck," by ACDC. It's the law.

You play catch for the last time of the school year. Others play catch for maybe the last time ever. As people begin trickling into the bleachers, families begin setting up picnic blankets and lawn chairs along the hill behind the right field line. A dozen or so trucks peak over the big hill overlooking centerfield. Dads open coolers and watch a grill master flip burgers on the right field deck. Others swing their legs from their truck beds to some Luke Bryan song echoing from the speakers.





Today is West Alabama's senior day. Thirty minutes before the game start time, West Al pays their respects to their senior players as if they were war heroes walking into the sunset with a medal around their necks, honorably discharged. Skip calls everyone over as the West Alabama seniors walk off the field with plaques and flowers over each shoulder. "I want every one of you guys to show West Al some respect," he says. You look to the others to make sure you aren't the only one who's confused. "Beating the ever-livin' daylights out of these guys is the only way to respect your opponent. That's how you respect the game. Even if we didn't come ready to go yesterday, we sure as heck are ready to spoil their big moment today. It's our duty as good opponents."

It's the seventh inning, and you are in the bullpen, brow sweat dripping down your nose. Your arm feels like it's about to explode. Coach Self asks where it hurts. You say, "everywhere," and he snickers. You weren't exaggerating. You pitched a couple innings in yesterday's double header, and with the lack of healthy pitchers, Coach Self

decided to throw you back out there for another round today. It's not his fault. You aren't sure it's anyone's fault. A lot of guys are injured. Everyone else is tired and sore.

Everyone's worried about their finals, including you. You do a little math. Give or take, there's 37 hours left before the first test. Shake it off. Control what you can control. That's what Skip always says. He's probably right. He usually is. You wonder why you're out here to play ball in the middle of nowhere. Was it really glorious to go to war against a team almost as bad as yours? Was it a duty, or more of an obligation? Maybe a little bit of both.

You hear the crowd cheer as one of your guys strikes out, and the loudspeaker starts playing the song again between innings. Only this time, "Chicken Fried" starts playing in the middle. Two pitches in, and your arm is threatening to break in four pieces. Twenty throbbing pitches later, you are blessed by three flyouts, and you feel the weight of the season begin to melt off your shoulders like butter. In the dugout, you're bombarded

by high-fives and slaps on the shoulder, and there's a wide grin across your face. Skip shakes your hand, looks you in the eye and says, "Way to work. Way to finish strong." It's the happiest you've been in a long time.

A half inning later, you're still drunk on adrenaline and sweat. Alex, your trainer, wraps your arm and straps a bag of ice on it like a frozen football pad. Skip calls time and slowly steps onto the field and requests a substitution from the umpire. The crowd grows silent as they instantly understand what's happening. Your seniors look to one another and nod, and walk off the field together, side by side.

One of the assistant coaches, Jack Peal, taps you on the shoulder. "That's gonna be you here pretty soon," he says with a grin. "It goes quickly. Quicker than you know."

It's a bittersweet moment. Union wins the last game of the season, but that seems so small now. You still feel the lasting strains of satisfaction in you, but you also feel a little solemn, a

little sad. Everyone put so much effort and hard work to perfect a craft they know they will never perfect, and you realize that, by the end of it, you won't remember the statistics.

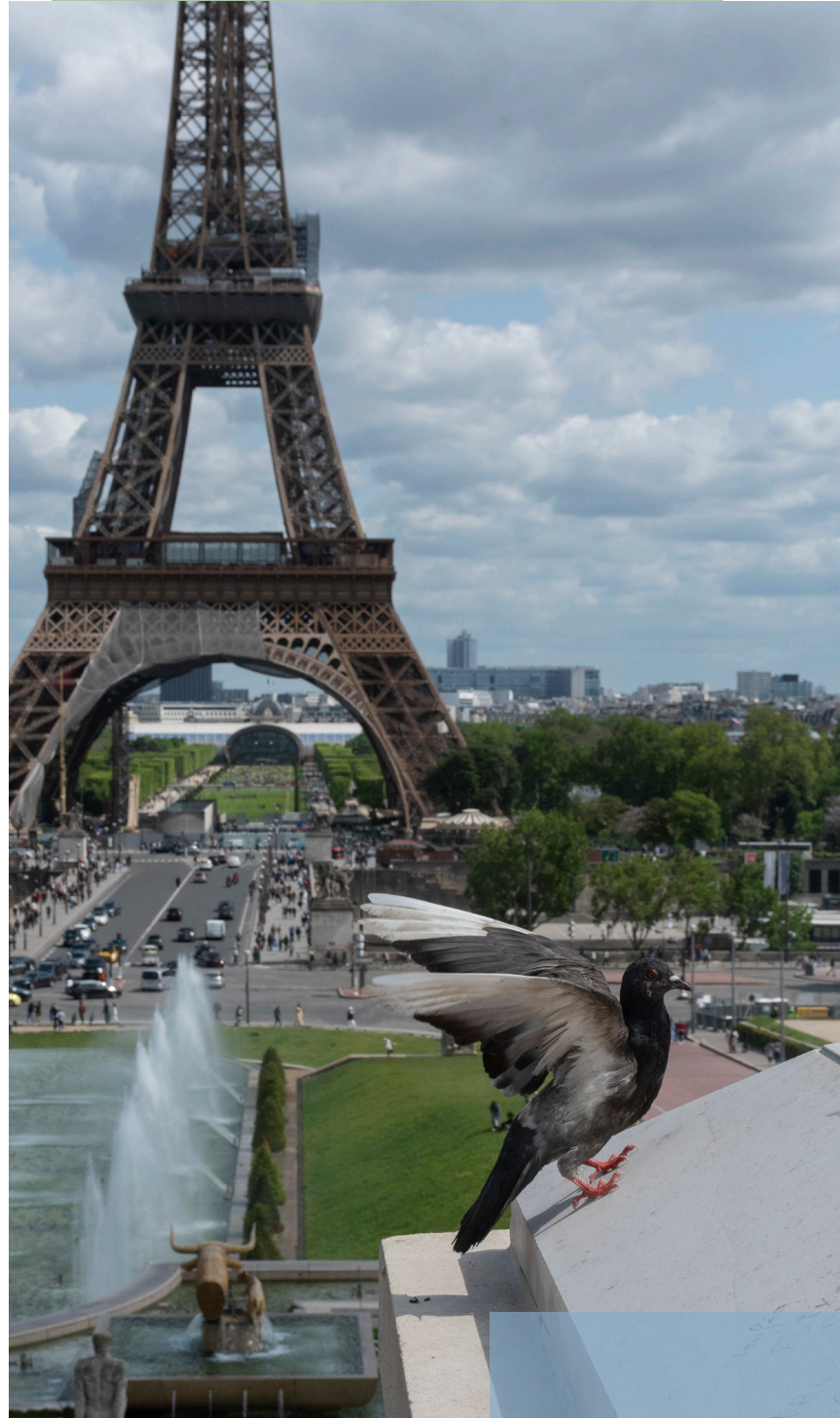
You'll remember these graduates as lasting stamps in your life not just from their skill on a baseball field but through the content of their character and tenacity to do hard things. It's being part of something most people will never experience, at least not at this level. Maybe that's what unites a team, more than just a love for a game. Maybe it's the brotherhood grown through, as cliché as it sounds, blood, sweat and tears.

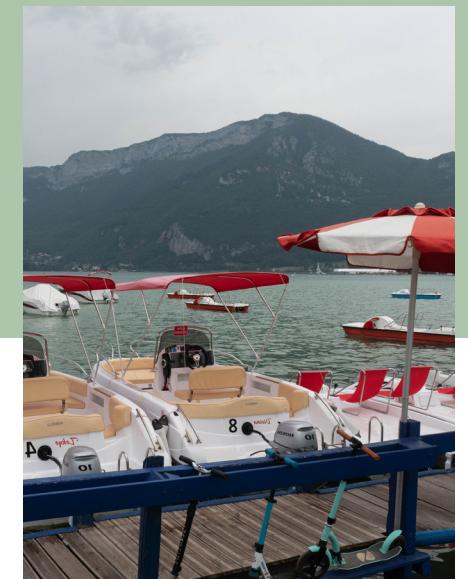
As you load up equipment bags over your shoulder, you pass a West Alabama senior, his face dripping in tears. After all, you just smashed his dreams of making the playoffs, on senior day of all days. You feel a little bad, but you were just doing your duty. The sun is dripping behind the trees, and you have completely forgotten about finals. Gary the bus driver can be seen lighting a cigarette, shaking his head at a hissing engine, fully prepared to tell us "the damn bus is busted. Have a seat, fellas."



# Baguettes For Breakfast

Photo Story by Rebekah Marcotte





# FOOTBALL KARAOKE:

*Why We Work For No Reward*



*Written by Truman Forehand  
Photographed by Lyla Dietz*

There were 35 or 40 Union students. All of them wore Union University football uniforms purchased for this very occasion, gathered around the locker room, taking a knee or sitting down on a stool or a bench or a bucket as they listened to this pregame speech from professor, Buster Bowl player and coach Ted Kluck:

“I want us to be nasty. I want us to play hard, and I want us to hit hard.”

The varying uniforms and accessories around the room betrayed the different levels of experience with football. Of the men who gathered together in this circle, some wore pads and helmets and cleats and gloves from high school while others wore borrowed gear or accessories purchased brand new just for this event. Some were All-State or All-District players in high school, and some had never worn pads before; some had never even thrown a football before this.

Everyone there was ready to play nasty but also prepared to follow Kluck’s next words.

“Hey,” Kluck said. “We’re going to play through the whistle, but we’re not going to play after it. We’re going to do Christ proud. We’re going to do Union proud. It’s a nasty game for nasty people, but we aren’t nasty after it. We play hard, and that’s it.”

The Buster Bowl is a unique event in college sports. The game isn’t easy to categorize—it’s not an official university sport, a club sport or an intramural, but rather a separate, fourth thing. There’s no division to win, no title to chase, and nothing really happens after the game. It is a hard sport, exhausting and sometimes violent, which poses the question: why do we do something so hard for what seems like no reward? After all, when the clock runs out, the experience simply ends.

Jay Hardison, senior computer science major, Buster Bowl wide receiver and former Union basketball player, sees two reasons behind the game: one for the school as a whole and one for the players.

“I think it’s a good way to get the students a little bit rallied together around one game and sort of hype built up,” Hardison said. “But mainly for the players, it’s just either another chance to play, or for someone like me, the first chance to play football because I never played before.”

Hardison is right that the community is a vital ingredient in the experience. The November morning air, with tailgaters by the stadium entrance and just enough of a chill for everyone in the stands to need a light jacket, red leaves barely hanging on to their branches as they dangle over the fence by the sideline—all of these are feelings of fall and football that, if they could be bottled, would sell out in minutes. Even a light rain last year could not put a damper on the collective high spirits.



America loves football, there is no doubt about that. Tristan Kluck, junior business management major and oldest son of Ted Kluck, shares his dad's lifelong obsession with the game. He collects merch from seemingly every NFL team, stepping out in a Seahawks windbreaker one day and a Texans practice tee the next day, all of which masks his die-hard but split loyalty to both the Detroit Lions and the New England Patriots.

Love for football is not what makes the Buster Bowl unique, though. There are reasons for doing this—reasons why we care about it that make sense on paper—but to really understand, you have to get a feel for the game and its aftermath. For the past two years, I have called the plays on offense for the game. Preparation was a collaborative effort. Coach Kluck decided what plays we would run and simplified the language for the guys who had never played before. I distilled the plays onto a laminated sheet, color coded by type: pass plays in yellow, run plays in blue, plays for those “absolutely gotta have it” moments in red.

“21 zone right sift.” I yelled the play at Tristan so I could be heard over the din of the game, and he jogged into the huddle to relay the call to the other 10 guys on offense. Tristan lined up at running back, the ball was snapped, and he took the handoff toward the corner. An opposing player tried to make the tackle. Tried. Tristan lowered his shoulder, went straight through the guy. You could hear the hit, shoulder pads against shoulder pads, all the way up in the stands. The sky was blue and beautiful right then, and the hapless defender got a good look at it as he lay on his back. It was the first quarter and some poor guy had just gotten his “welcome to football” moment.

Tristan remembers that moment vividly, as he does every moment of every game he plays.

“There’s a couple of us every year that understand the thrill and the adrenaline of running at a guy and just putting all your strength and all your force into knocking him over. There’s no other feeling like it,” he said. “Don’t take cheap shots, don’t try to hurt people, but it’s a violent game. People are going to feel it. You need to make them feel it.”

Hardison prepared for those moments differently. Having never played football before, there were nerves. There had to be nerves. No one just wakes up one day excited to get hit.

“I was super nervous because I had always seen these big hits on TV and stuff, and I was like, ‘I’m about to get my head snapped off right here,’” Hardison said. “Well, the first time wasn’t actually too terrible. I got hit and I was like, ‘oh, okay, that’s not as bad as I thought it was going to be.’”





As the hits go on and the game gets harder, you keep getting up and you keep brushing yourself off. Any player would tell you, though, that this is not just something you do for yourself—mainly you do it for the guy next to you. The game builds a group—the guys—that is different from just the guys you typically hang out with. For us at Union, it may even be the guys you typically play sports against.

“So there are guys that I never talked to, but when I see them in the hallway, I wave because we both are like, ‘oh, we went through something together,’” Tristan said. “We went out there and played football. And so I know that you’re willing to put it out there on the line for me and you know that I’m willing to do the same thing for you.”

The game creates a sort of momentary community, a brotherhood for 60 minutes of game clock. That bond creates memories, and a mutual understanding that it takes all of you. You root for each other.

“I really, really enjoyed that first touchdown that Jay had,” Tristan said.

Hardison scored three touchdowns—not bad for a guy who strapped on the pads and the helmet for the first time that morning.

“We had a run play called,” Hardison said, recounting the most improbable of his touchdowns. “Called” is the critical word there because there was a world of difference between the call and what happened.

“I was blocking, and Hunter tried to run it,” Hardison continued his story. “He gets wrapped up, and so I see him, and I just decided to get behind him and start screaming his name. So I screamed his name. He saw me and he flipped it back. And I outran everyone to the other side of the field.”

Union lost that game, though. I remember vividly the moment I knew we were not going to pull off the comeback. And I remember wondering why we did all this.

“If we win, great. If we lose, tough,” Tristan said. “But after that, it’s just over. There’s no ice baths afterwards. There’s no going to practice on Monday. It’s just over.”

You feel a football game for the entire week after. Yes, you feel it in the obvious places — if you took a big hit to the ribs on Saturday, your ribs will remind you every time you take a deep breath until at least the next Saturday. Football players compare it to being in dozens of small car crashes. You learn a lot about yourself in the week after. Mainly you learn that you can feel bruises in places you did not know you could even be bruised.

I remember tossing my jersey into a box after the game. The uniform belongs to the school and will be used next year. The black Union letters on the red fabric, sitting on top of a few dozen other identical jerseys. These shirts held the sweat and rain and dirt stains from the efforts of men who were best friends and men who had never met before. The guy who played quarterback for us in that game is an acquaintance of mine at most. I see him from time to time but not often. We drew up plays in the dirt together, though, when we were down two touchdowns and just trying to claw back into the game. That counts for something, I think.



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creating narratives that

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