

A stained glass window with a central floral design. The window is composed of various colored glass panes (teal, purple, grey, and gold) held together by dark lead lines. The central panel features a cluster of light blue flowers with green leaves. The text "cardinal & cream" is overlaid in a white, serif font across the upper portion of the window.

cardinal
& cream

AS **STORYTELLERS**
DEVELOPING OUR CRAFT WE SEEK TO
HONOR, MOVE & INFORM
OUR COMMUNITY BY CREATING NARRATIVES THAT
ENCOURAGE **CONVERSATION,**
THOUGHTFUL **ADVOCATE** FOR POSITIVE
CONNECTIONS. CHANGE
& BUILD
LASTING



POLICY: The Cardinal & Cream is a bi-annual student run publication. Perspectives are the opinions of their creator, not the staff of Union University. The Cardinal & Cream is a member of the Southeast Journalism Conference, Tennessee Press Association and the Baptist Communicators Association.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR:

Dear reader,

I have mastered the art of being cozy. Being as comfortable as humanly possible at all times is something I pursue on the daily. I'm always counting down the moments until I can be snuggled up with a book and my cat under a blanket with a warm drink and a candle flickering, having the perfect movie night with popcorn and a perfectly curated ambience or even just taking a good nap on a Sunday afternoon.

I have a hard time letting myself be *uncomfortable*. I don't put enough patience or trust in the fact that the rest will come eventually — that I don't always have to be in a state of contentment.

Every time I sit down to write this letter, a deep wave of sadness hits me and I end up having to abort mission. I love writing these. But this is the last one I'll write. And I really hate that. I don't want to sit in that — even for the brief amount of time it'll take me to write this letter.

Change and uncertainty have always been at the top of my Things That Make Me Uncomfortable list. And with graduation rapidly approaching, change and uncertainty are not discomforts I have the luxury of choosing to avoid anymore.

I came into college as a very anxious and insecure 18-year-old. The four years ahead felt like an eternity. Now I've blinked, the time that passed feels like it was nonexistent and the only proof it did pass is the change I see in myself. I'm not as anxious as I used to be, and I feel significantly and surprisingly more secure. I can feel that even the way I sit in a room has changed. I sit a little taller. Talk a little louder.

The craziest thing now is that I'm not even afraid of the change anymore. My fear of change has been replaced with something else. I feel restless. Restless waiting for the change to come. It is a weird feeling to be restless in a place I have always felt most comfortable in.

What I'm learning is that you have to be without rest sometimes for renewal to come. Sometimes restoration doesn't feel restful in the moment.

So I'm going to sit in the discomfort for once. And I'm going to thank God for it and for how He will use it.

In this issue of the Cardinal & Cream, we reflect on restoration: what gives us life, what brings us rest, where we experience renewal. It is a little on the nose that this is the Spring edition, the season of restoration. Life springs back from death as buds start to blossom on trees again. But of course, every story we tell serves to point back to the greatest story of all: the Gospel. It is the ultimate story of perfect and complete restoration.

Thank the Lord that Jesus brings restoration in this life, and, more importantly, beyond it.

He's making all things new.

All the love,
Margee Stanfield

Margee
Stanfield



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WHAT A GREAT ADVENTURE: REMEMBERING JIMMY DAVIS

WRITTEN BY: AMY DE GROOT

PHOTOGRAPHED BY: BRYLEE WILLIAMS

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY: CHRISTINE MENZEL

1966. Red brick framed the entrance of Union's timeworn Arts and Sciences building in downtown Jackson, white paint just beginning to peel off the dozens of window frames dotting its exterior. A young man of 18 stood below the arched doorway, face bright and handsome, hands rough from years of farm labor that once characterized his very existence. He was ready for a new challenge.

What the young Jimmy Davis did not yet know was that the freshman chemistry class he was entering was the beginning of an over 50-year commitment to Union's higher education.

"[Davis] was at the very heart of Union life," Hal Poe, retired professor of biblical studies and close friend of Davis, said. "He was always a positive influence behind the scenes, and he was involved in virtually every area of university life."

Jimmy Davis, professor of chemistry and vice president for institutional research, passed away on November 2, 2025, at the age of 77, after a four-month battle with heart complications. Fall 2025 would have marked his 48th year working at Union. Davis

was a chemistry professor, a vice provost, the leader of the Baptist Memorial Hospital nursing program, the vice president for the Germantown and Hendersonville campuses and a member of former President David S. Dockery's cabinet.

But before all that, he was just a quiet farm kid from Lexington, Tennessee, studying a subject that he loved in a place that felt like home.

"I got to know him as a really smart fellow," Keith Dismuke, adjunct professor of chemistry and former college classmate of Davis, said. "He was very articulate. He was very bright. You need that to get through chemistry."

Davis and Dismuke were inseparable in those days, comparing notes for classes, joining honor societies, facing the Vietnam War draft and running chemistry experiments — one involving fire and putrid odors that cleared out the entire art department floor.

After graduating summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry, Davis continued his education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Dismuke went to the University of Florida. Though it would be years before they would walk the Union chemistry halls together again, Davis was not alone. Illinois was where he met Chris.

"I could tell he was something special," Christine Menzel, adjunct professor of biology and Davis' wife, said. "He just brought [me] feelings of joy."

Menzel instilled those same feelings in me as we sat in front of the fireplace, her in her chair and me in "Jimmy's"— the big, brown, leather kind that a 77-year-old chemistry professor couldn't help but sink into each night.

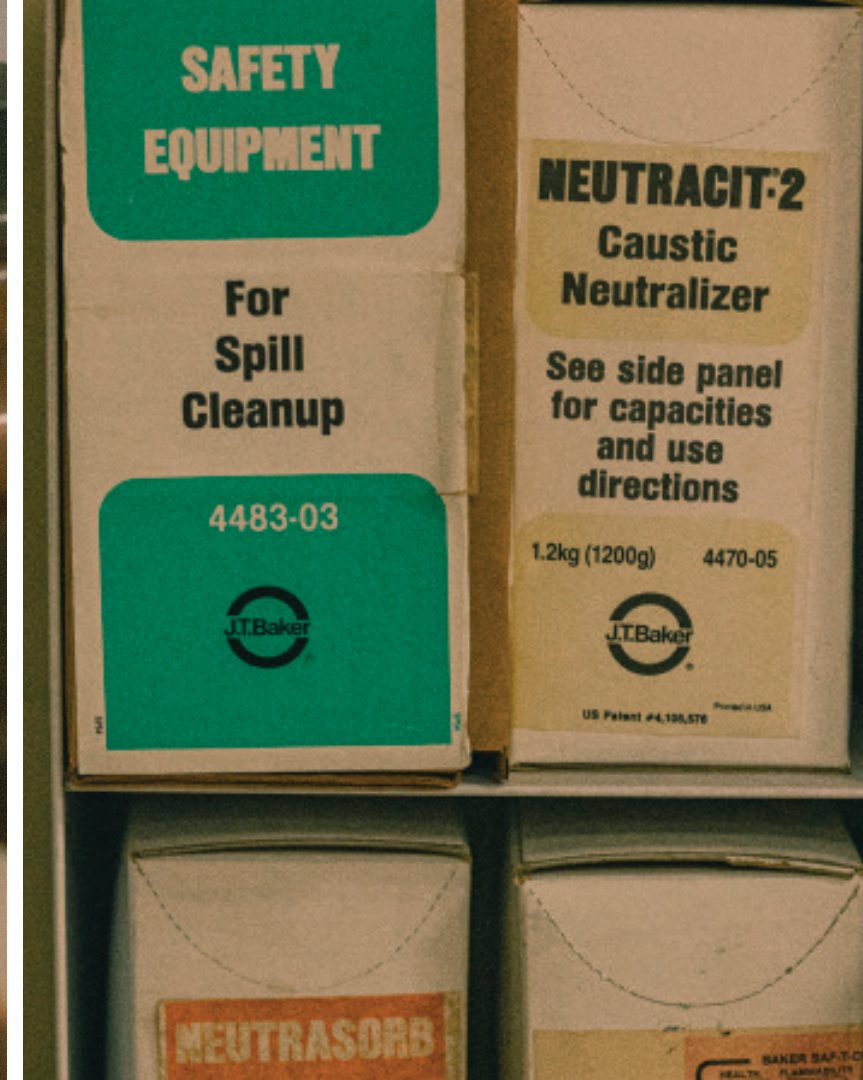
The pair met while grading chemistry exams. Suddenly, it was a Friday night, and Davis and Menzel were rushing to make the showing of "The African Queen" with Humphrey Bogart. Their first date.

"Such a lovely movie to start a relationship," Davis wrote, recounting the events near the end of his life. "My wonderful scholar, lifelong learner. What a wondrous day when we got married. What a great adventure we're having."

The couple eloped in 1974, hands clasped together while exiting the courthouse. Davis sported a slim black suit with a crisp white tie atop his button-down, deep red hair hidden by a soft-brimmed hat. Menzel's ivory, knee-length dress sparkled in the sunlight, upstaged only by the stark crimson of her shoes.

"What a honeymoon we had. Being young, we were wild and crazy," Davis wrote. "We drove cross country in a 1968 Chevy Bel Air, white, no A.C. I remember Salt Lake City, San Francisco, L.A., the Grand Canyon, petrified forests, the painted desert, meteor craters."

Married life suited them. After graduating, the pair had a short stint in Florida for Davis' post-doc research before returning to Union as a professor. Soon afterward, however, he transitioned from teaching to administrative work.



“He was adventurous, never afraid to do new things,” Menzel said. “He wasn’t afraid to try because he liked dealing with people.”

It was during these transitional periods that his son, Patrick — the pride of his life — was born. Having a son gave him an excuse to try sports. Though he never became an Olympic swimmer or a professional cyclist, he always gave it his best shot.

“His wife, Christine, and his son, Patrick ... were the center of his life,” Poe said. “And that was just evident every week I knew him.”

Poe quickly recognized his passion for reconciling faith and science as well.

“He was the scientist, and I was the theologian,” Poe said. “We talked about issues that we thought were important to understand the world.”

These conversations brought them from Union classrooms to Subway lunches to conferences at Wheaton College to research at Oxford to ultimately teaching a joint class after Davis’ return to the classroom in 2014. This collaboration also led the pair to co-write four books seeking to help college students harmonize biblical and scientific truths.

“Everything that [Davis] did was filled with love and care for his students,” Grace Beem, 2025 Union alumna with a Bachelor of Science in Chemistry, said.

Davis was Beem’s research advisor, her first choice for the role.

“He was more of a life mentor,” Beem said. “I knew that I could come to him with any problems that I had in chemistry or my personal life, and he wouldn’t judge me ... Even when I made a mistake, he was always very kind and gentle with his words, and he never showed any signs of frustration.”

Gentleness defined Davis. He instilled confidence in Beem that she could complete her research — that he trusted her talents. He never snapped at anyone; he never joked at someone else’s expense. No one ever heard him complain.

“It was my first year of teaching ... and some folks didn’t make enough to pass. I said, ‘Dr. Davis, I’m a failure.’ He said, ‘Why do you say that?’ He never said no. He just asked, ‘Why?’ Like he knew it wasn’t true but was waiting to understand my thought process before kindly telling me why I was wrong,” Dismuke said.

Davis always wanted to understand people better so that he could love them better.

From his dry wit to his chemistry pun t-shirts to the shelves of his Memphis home lined with scientific toys to the snowflakes pasted across his office door to the “Jimmy H. Davis” bobblehead Beem gifted him sitting atop his desk, Davis loved to laugh. He loved to collect and enjoy the beautiful things in life.

Davis just loved life.

“He always told me that he loved his office because he felt so loved that people thought of him,” Beem said. “All these things are like a collection of love.”

Davis loved the world around him and everyone in it. But above all that, he loved his Lord.

Davis was true to his God. Davis was willing to learn from the intelligence of others. He was dedicated to helping young people grow.

And he was excellent in every single thing he did.

I wish I had met Dr. Davis.

I wish I had seen him walking back to White Hall from his weekly lunch with Dismuke — tan cowboy hat atop his head, vanilla ice cream in hand and an ear-to-ear grin plastered across his face. I wish I had taken Chemistry 111 and experienced his excitement

for the environment and the God who made it. I wish I had broken bread with him and Dismuke when they hosted Be Our Guest dinners together. I wish I had connected with him about our shared passion for gardening. I wish I could have teased him about his outspoken love of Diet Pepsi. I wish I had seen him in the crowd with Dismuke during every orchestra concert I played in, cheering maniacally for the students he knew and the ones he didn’t. I didn’t even know him, and he was cheering for me.

“He intended to work until he was 80, but he didn’t quite make it,” Menzel said. “The old heart got to him. And I’m trying to carry on as he would want me to because he made me a better person.”

He made everyone a better person. And he will continue to make people better: the students in Dismuke’s classes, the friends Poe meets for coffee, the coworkers Beem interacts with and the wonderful son and daughter-in-law that Menzel treasures.

We will all love better.

“He met his maker, definitely,” Dismuke said. “I hated to see him go, but I know he knew where he was going. And I hope to follow in his footsteps someday.”

So do I.

THE LANGUAGE OF JAZZ: LET ME HEAR YOUR DANCE

WRITTEN BY: ELIZAH ABETTI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY: OLIVIA TEN NAPEL

The only major exposure to jazz I've had is through watching "La La Land," listening to "A Charlie Brown Christmas" album and singing "Fly Me to the Moon." It's fun, it's soothing, it's elevator music, it all sounds the same.

Or so I thought.

One day, when I was in the car with friends, one of them queued up Laufey, who is an Icelandic jazz pop artist. A catchy guitar, a classy beat and a low, calm, willowy voice came through the car speakers, and I realized I had never heard this artist. I remember thinking, this is jazz?

Well ... sort of.

You've probably heard the wildly popular "Where Is My Husband" by RAYE, "Lover Girl" by Laufey, "Die On This Hill" by Sienna Spiro or "Man I Need" by Olivia Dean. These women blend jazz, pop, soul and R&B into their music for an addictive combination. They are ballads to be belted, anthems of womanhood with relatable lyrics.

I suspected that the popularity of these songs may be a reaction to the sad-boy, Noah Kahan-esque music we've all grown used to over the past couple of years. Out with the folksy, depressive music that has us in our feels and in with the freedom that jazz pop gives us. This theory motivated me to embark on a journey of delving into the true nature of jazz.

I would soon learn my theory was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Jazz is a language of musical expression that is based upon insanely organized improvisation," DJ. Culp, an associate professor of music at Union University, said. "It's America's first unique musical fingerprint to the world."

As a jazz drummer, Culp is in a position to either support the soloist or become the soloist himself. He explained that jazz musicians each have their own sound and style, which are like their signature calling cards. They say to one another, "Let me hear your dance." The more familiar you are with a musician's specific sound, the more you can appreciate what they are creating.

Jazz has an innate American ideology built into it with the functions of the jazz band members; in fact, there may not be anything more Western. The jazz soloist in the band plays for a bit, then melts back into the group sound — emphasizing the unity of working together and individualism.

Listening to jazz live is like watching a painter start and finish a painting in one sitting. Even though it's only five minutes, you see their struggles, problem-solving, the joy in their brushstrokes and

the finished product. When musicians finally hit that sweet spot of call and response with their instruments, the result is unmatched. In fact, no one will ever hear that exact combination of sound again.

“Jazz is different every time because it’s so based on improv and soloing,” Josh Humphrey, a sophomore commercial music recording engineering major, said.

Like Culp, Humphrey plays jazz percussion.

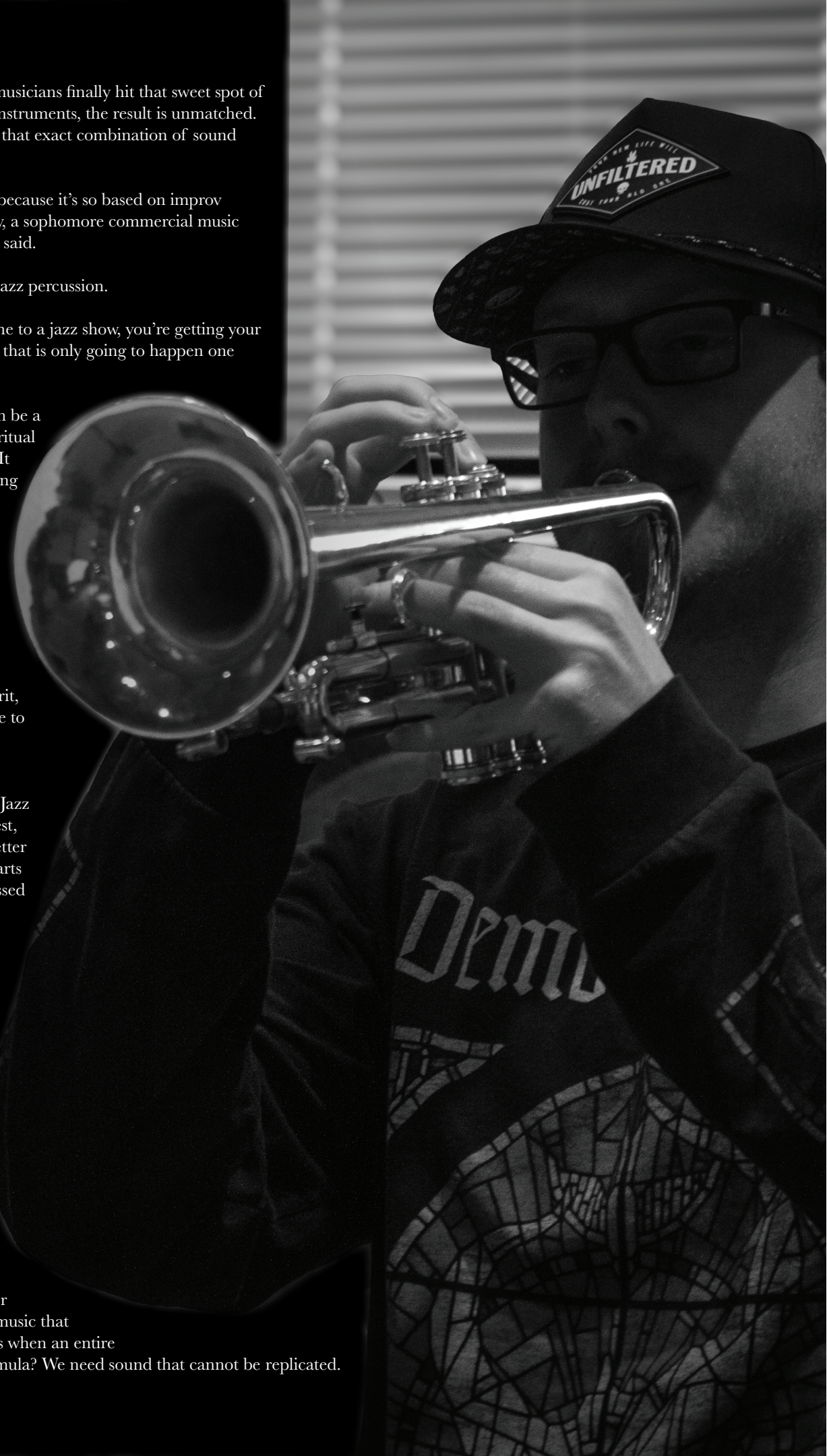
“So, you know when you come to a jazz show, you’re getting your own personalized experience that is only going to happen one time ever,” Humphrey said.

When jazz is done right it can be a deeply personal and even spiritual experience for the musician. It is up there with creative writing and art as one of the most direct forms of pure human creativity.

“There are moments where I am worshiping God even though I’m playing jazz. I am worshiping in my spirit, not necessarily with the tune, but I’m worshiping in my spirit, because I’m doing what I love to do,” Culp said.

Unfortunately, live music is diminishing in public places. Jazz is the best live. It has the fullest, brightest sound, and it is a better experience when all of the parts of the music are being witnessed by an engaged audience. If this interest in jazz-sound continues, one can only hope the demand for live music comes back in our digital age.

We are obsessed with nostalgia from time periods we weren’t born in — the tactile, sensory ‘80s being one of them, or in this case, the classy, swing vibes of the ‘20s. We are beginning to realize that jazz doesn’t all sound the same; the music in the charts does. Once musicians find the formula for what sells, that’s the kind of music that they make. But what happens when an entire generation is tired of the formula? We need sound that cannot be replicated.



Once you unearth the treasure that is the enjoyment of jazz, you can’t unhear the music. Culp compared jazz with coffee. You know it’s amazing, and there’s a reason so many people enjoy it, but you personally have to cross over the initial threshold of bitterness to truly appreciate it. It requires careful listening, attention and repetition, because five minutes later, it’s over.

Culp leaned towards me with an eager desperation to convey the impact of this experience.

“You have as much time as you could ever need to sit in front of Michelangelo’s La Pietta sculpture. Just sit down and soak it in. You don’t have that luxury with music. We’re about to start the tune, and I hope you buckled up, because in three minutes, we’re done, five minutes, we’re done, and we’re moving on to something else. It requires patience and a lot of mental tenacity,” Culp said.

Streaming music is like eating at a buffet. I will pick and choose the music that matches my mood and then marinate in those feelings for a while until I decide I’ve sated my appetite for feeling that way. We want music to express our feelings, to be relatable, which means it will all be mood-based. That’s why the Spotify Daylist playlist is so funny. How do you, Spotify, know what my mood is, based on my music choices? That isn’t the sole purpose of music, but we like to view it that way.

Young adults can tend to be isolative, depressive and melancholy, so of course we gravitate towards music that reflects this. In college I’ve really struggled with loneliness, and I either use music as an escape from those feelings or as a way of wallowing in it. It temporarily makes me feel better because an artist told me that loneliness is normal. Then I scroll for an hour and a half on Instagram, looking at the fragmented parts of other people’s lives that I will never engage with.

And I wonder why I’m lonely.

Jazz shattered this pity party, turned off the slow strains of the guitar and sad piano, blasted my life with joyful trumpet, and I realized my theory was wrong. We aren’t craving happy music, we are craving joy. Instead of navel-gazing and focusing on ourselves, jazz encourages us to lift our heads and engage with others in a meaningful way. Jazz can be sad too, but it doesn’t force emotions.

“So do you think jazz will ever die?” I asked Culp.

“No, I don’t think so. It’s how America talks, how America thinks. And what jazz gave the world that it didn’t know it needed was a method to improvise in extremely small amounts of time,” Culp said.

Jazz may never sell like pop sells, but that’s why these artists have genres mixed in. The improvisational style of jazz is constantly being reinvented in new and fresh ways, like the soul pop in the charts. It isn’t about your mood or isolation — it asks you to consider life and appreciate human creativity.

“Nowhere in the United States, nowhere in the world, has something so organic with so much feel and style, expression and meaning,” Culp said.

Jazz encourages us to not think of ourselves so much, rather to consider things outside of our head. It is shocking like a banana duct-taped to a museum wall. You don’t have to like it, but at least it made you think outside of the normal lines that you’ve set for yourself — or maybe that the world has set for you. You may not be sure what you just listened to or saw, but you had a reaction that forced you to think, and look, now you remember it.

MOMENTOUS AND MUNDANE: LIVING A LITURGICAL LIFE THROUGH COFFEE



WRITTEN BY: COLIN HARRIS
PHOTOGRAPHED BY: OLIVIA TEN NAPEL

I am an inveterate coffee drinker. Perhaps that is not the right word. That connotes a concession to a vice or weakness. This is hardly the truth, for the methodical process of my coffee brewing, and the slow, rich consumption of it are not a vice or an indulgence but a recovery — a recovery of Being from the incessant drain of Doing.

The endless demand of Doing is hammered into us from the moment we lift our heads off the pillow until our heads meet it again. There's no perfect remedy to this affliction, but I strive to overcome it by asking the Lord how I can balance the Biblical call to work and rest.

Admittedly, when I am crafting my coffee, it appears like I *am* doing something. I fill up my kettle with water. I turn the dial to exactly 205 degrees Fahrenheit, and while the water starts to boil, I carefully select the origin of beans for the morning. I typically have a vast array to choose from — coffee I have purchased in shops, gifts from loved ones and my monthly subscription-based coffee. The latter I preserve in a vacuum-sealed canister that I open with the push of a button, rewarding me with the satisfying

PSHH of air making its escape, and the first wave of delicious aromas hits like a drug.

Around this time, the water begins to bubble, and I pour out my selected whole beans into a handmade ceramic bowl that houses my beans as they are weighed. This is one of the most pivotal parts of any process of making coffee, a precise tried and true ratio will be the first determiner of coffee that is too weak, acidic, bitter or strong.

The grinder hums softly until the beans are poured into its hopper, wherein the hum transforms into a rough churning sound, like driving over gravel.

Now I am ready to take my coffee grounds and bring them to their higher calling. The grounds are poured in, and the glass decanter is placed beneath the brewer, all of which are on the scale to get me to that aforementioned perfect ratio. I pour the water, baptizing the grounds and giving them new life, letting it marinate or “bloom,” unlocking all the desired notes, a kaleidoscope of aromas and flavors, ordaining the olfactory senses.

Over the course of the next three minutes, I slowly and continuously pour water until I reach the desired total weight. Lastly, I pour out my coffee in a — though it sounds laughably

extra — specialized glass designed to maximize the flavor I have so carefully tried to curate and extract.

Again, it might appear that I am Doing something when I make my coffee in that incredibly meticulous process, but I am only *active* in order to be *passive*. I do these many things so that, at last, I can do nothing. I can Be. Then, by the Grace of God and the quieting of my heart posture, in those wee hours of the morning, something beautiful is born, which would not have existed if not for the demand to relax by the creation and slow consumption of my own beverage.

In order to be able to create this moment, I purpose myself against the distraction of the worries and noise ahead. The greatest preparation one can do for their day is to first anchor themselves in the Word and allow the Spirit to speak to them in the stillness of the morning hours. To achieve this, I avoid looking at my phone at all costs, with its calendar of events for my day, notifications from the night before, people clamoring for my attention and time. Once looked upon or thought of, all morning tranquility is lost with no hope of reclamation. For the purposes of waking up worry and distraction free, I sleep with my phone in the living room and wake up to a physical alarm clock.

In an exercise of admittedly difficult restraint, I avoid picking it up for the first hour I am awake, and instead thank the Lord for this day I have awoken to and ask Him the courage to face it. Cultivating a space for the Lord to meet you, even in the simple making of a cup of coffee, requires intentionality and prayerful consideration of each action, an invitation to the Holy Spirit to join in your Doing. My morning routine is a liturgical process and an act of worship to the Lord. It echoes the command in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that everything we eat, drink and do should be for the Glory of God. The Lord decided to make coffee for me both a means of employment but also a hobby and something I delight in, something I research intently and desire to excel in. I take something I am passionate about and use it as a means of worship. If I strive to make a cup of coffee to the best of my ability, taking a gift from God and stewarding it well and glean from it the most it can offer, that simple action and mindset carry over into every other facet of my life.

Anything can be liturgical. It's the act of intentionally and prayerfully directing your works Heavenward, sacrificially. When I am striving to make the perfect cup of coffee, I know I will never achieve it, same as I will never be fully sanctified in this life post-Genesis and pre-Revelation, but that should not deter me from trying to craft it, just as the Christian should never stop chasing Holiness. I desire to imitate my Creator in creating something beautiful, something that I delight in, then offer it back to Him as my first fruits of praise. When I pour out my coffee, as I sit down to read God's Holy, inspired and inerrant Word, the aromas waft from my glass like incense in the Tabernacle. It is but a foretaste of deliverance and the Heavenly Feast that is to come.

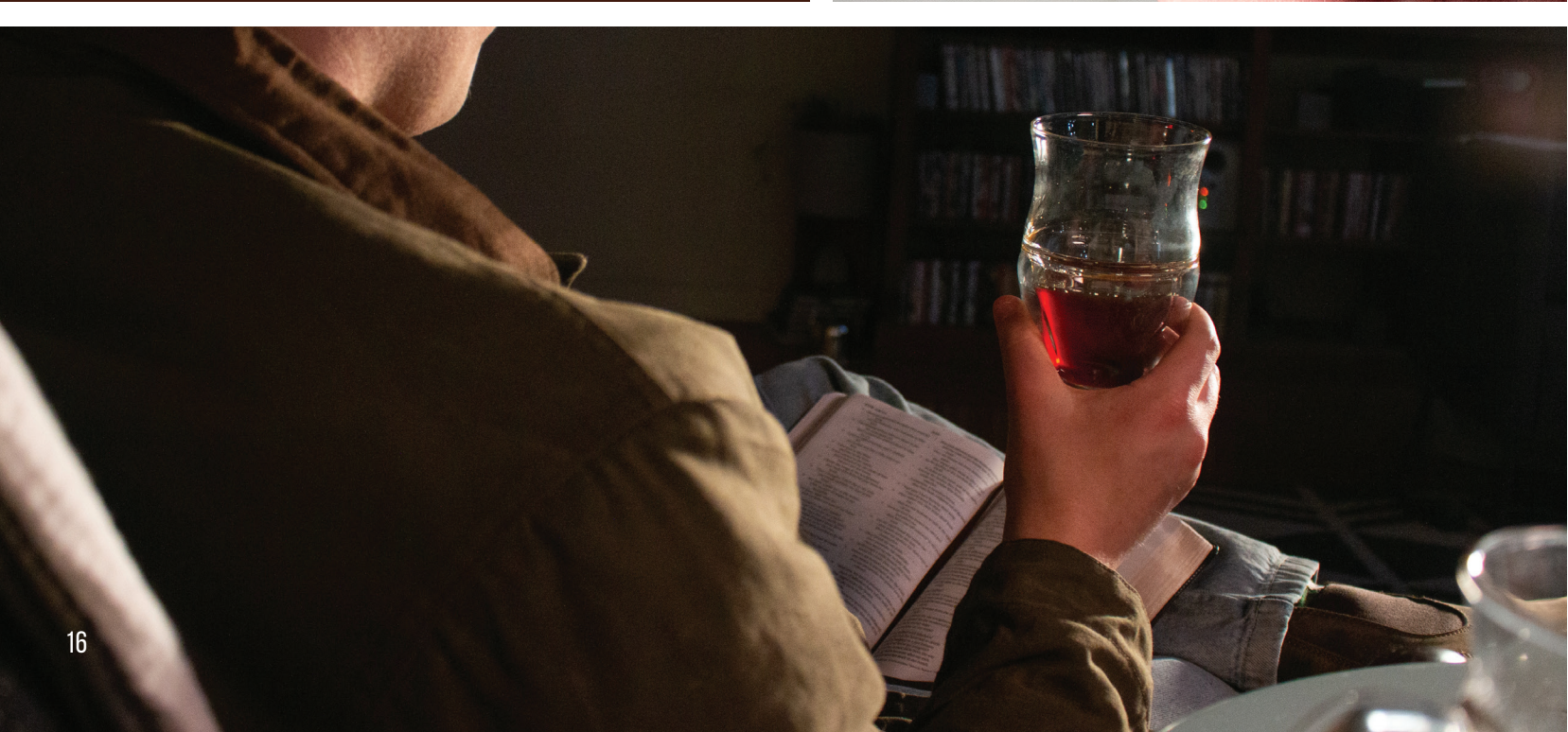


Living a liturgical life comes at a cost. It requires slowing down and a sacrifice of efficiency. Too often we confine God to the stained glass windows, wooden crosses on steeples and the chains around our necks, but this is a small view of the Creator of the Universe. He is omnipotent and boundless and around us, aware of every thought and action.

I admit I fall short of this more often than I care to admit. I would be lying if I said I made every cup of coffee like I was carving the statue of "David." I would be lying if I said that I avoided the allure of my phone every morning. I would be lying if I said I didn't sometimes read my Bible like it was a task to be checked off or every day. I would be lying if I said all my works were prayerfully offered unto the Lord and not sometimes done with grumbling and complaining. All these things are grievous sins that plague me, that I must be cognizant of and fight every day.

Today, more than ever, it is easier to be distracted, to always be Doing but never Glorifying. It is imperative that we remember the Purpose behind our work. Failure does not matter, imperfection does not matter — the only thing that matters is that whenever we are Doing, we are imitating our Creator. We create because He created us, we delight in our creation because He first delighted in us. We do it to the best of our ability because He first made us perfectly.

Making my coffee in the morning is a beautiful reminder of how the Lord sees me. We are not just tools in the belt of a workman; we are pictures in the wallet of a father. We exist because we were wanted and enjoyed. When I make my coffee and delight in it, it is a vivid picture of the Lord delighting in me, His creation. We are beautiful because we are God's creation. Beauty is the fingerprints of the Trinity left behind on Creation and in the works we make back unto Him. Beauty alone will save the world. Not a butcher, not a baker, not a barista. Live to be an Everyday Saint in the Momentous and Mundane. As I sip my amber first fruits down to the last dregs, it is always accompanied by a thankful grace; it is always a burnt offering.



CHASING EDEN: NATURE'S BALM TO A GROANING WORLD

WRITTEN BY: ARYANNA HIGHFILL

PHOTOGRAPHED BY: OLIVIA TEN NAPEL

I am, by nature, a deeply cynical person.

Don't get me wrong. Most mornings, to my nocturnal roommate's chagrin, I bounce off every wall I can find. I love mornings. I love light. I love the small romance of coffee and quiet. But most nights I go to bed heavy-hearted.

Not in a self-pitying way. I have parents who love each other and six siblings who double as best friends. I grew up moving as a military kid, experiencing so much in what is still, politics aside, the most free and prosperous nation in history. I've been healed of cancer. I go to a good school. I have a church that feels like home and a phone full of pastors, mentors and friends I could call if I needed anything. And more than all of it ... I have been chosen by a Savior who loved me enough to die for me. I am an heir to eternity. More on that later.

I know my cup is not just full: it's overflowing.

I also know that for every girl like me, there are a hundred who die of cancer. Even more who grow up without loving families. Children are abused. Veterans die alone. People are anxious and lonely and suicidal. Many will never hear the name of a Savior who offers hope beyond the weight of this world.

So, like I'm sure many do, I go to bed heavy-hearted, not because I doubt goodness, but because I believe in it and can't reconcile how much darkness still exists on this side of eternity.

Nature has always felt like a balm to this tension. Not an escape from reality, but a reminder that this isn't the final version of things. That the groaning we feel is echoed in creation itself. And that once, there was a garden. And someday, there will be another.

To understand why that matters to me, you'll have to come with me on a camping trip in the middle of nowhere, Tennessee.

Day One.

The four of us piled into my loaded-down Hyundai Elantra. Abby Dawson, Union University alumna, claimed the passenger seat and began sifting through a granola playlist. In the back, Summer Smith, a senior English major, and Hope Watson, a sophomore public relations major, drifted in and out of conversation — their laughter rising and fading like a station I couldn't quite tune into. I was driving, and (like I tend to do in

most of life) projecting confidence, buoyed by the fact that I was the only one who had ever been camping, assuring everyone that I had everything under control.

Abby leaned toward me as the Red Clay Strays hummed over the speakers and said, almost to herself, "I don't really know what I'm expecting from this. I just know I need it."

Gravel popped under the tires as we pulled in; the lake stretched out ahead. Within us sat everything we'd brought from "real life": Dawson on the edge of graduation and the abrupt shock of a working world that doesn't pause to ask how you're holding up. Smith mid-discernment, sorting through a future that seemed increasingly tangled in a political and cultural landscape that rarely feels life-giving. Watson carrying the quiet weight of a semester that had asked more of her than she'd known how to give. I cut the engine, and we sat for a second longer than necessary.

None of us said it out loud, but we were all tired. Heavy-hearted in ways that don't always have names. Who isn't? Everyone is loosely chained to a device that never lets you forget the world is on fire, only that you're supposed to care deeply and carry on anyway.

The drive itself had already begun the work. Cell service faded. Roads narrowed. The world asked less of us. Somewhere between unloading the car and wrestling with my cheap Walmart tent, something softened.

"I think nature is the only place I don't feel like I'm being evaluated," Dawson said. "Everything else in life feels like a performance review — how ambitious you are, how resilient you are, how well you've bounced back. Out there, none of that mattered. I wasn't impressive or unimpressive. I was just small, and God was still present."

That night, we *tried* to build a fire. I instructed everyone to gather kindling, mainly to distract from the altar of fire starters I had made. It eventually worked. Most things do.

“Out there, I realized how much of my life has been spent reacting,” Dawson said. “Reacting to expectations, to pressure, to what comes next. Sitting by that fire, there was nothing to react to. No urgency. No crisis. It reminded me that my worth isn’t proven by how quickly I move or how much I carry.”

When I crawled into my sleeping bag — already regretting my single-blanket decision — I listened to the unfamiliar chorus of night creatures and the steady breathing of three friends I love deeply. My heart wasn’t so heavy.

Day Two.

Smith was awake before the rest of us, wrapped in a sweater near the edge of the lake, watching the light change.

She has the kind of presence that doesn’t demand attention but earns it anyway.

“In real life, it feels like you’re supposed to know where you’re going,” Smith said. “There’s pressure to narrate your future like it’s already settled. But out there, nothing was rushing me. The lake didn’t need a plan. The trees weren’t anxious about what they’d become. It reminded me that God isn’t panicking about my uncertainty.”

She stopped, then added, careful with her words: “It’s so easy to feel overwhelmed by how dark the world is. You don’t even have to look for it. You just walk downtown, turn on the TV, open your phone. And I don’t think we’re supposed to hide from that ... if anything, believers are often called to run straight toward it. But being in creation reminds me that the darkness isn’t ultimate. A sunset or a mountain or even a bird doesn’t erase suffering, but it reminds me that God is still in control, that this story is going somewhere and that the brokenness we see will end.”

We spent the day walking without purpose and reading in patches of sun. No one checked the hour. No one asked what was next.

We lay on a picnic blanket scented with smoke and bug spray, laughing as we flashed phone cameras in each other’s faces, just enjoying ridiculousness together in a human, girlish way.

Day Three.

The fire burned lower on the last night. Watson pulled out her guitar and started singing softly, firelight illuminating her in a way neon spotlights never could.

“When I sing out there, it doesn’t feel like performing,” Watson said. “It feels like agreeing with something that already exists. Like creation is already singing, and I’m just trying to join in. Even with everything broken, there’s still harmony trying to happen.”

She paused, then smiled at the memory.

“Something about being out there ... singing, eating yummy food, sitting around the fire ... made it all feel easy. It was great. I left feeling very energized and grateful,” Watson said.

As we drove away, Dawson leaned over to me again.

“Yeah, we needed that,” she said, glancing back at the campsite. Driving back to campus on dirt roads turning back into pavement, reentering a life full of responsibility, I realized what had changed. Not the world. Not the darkness.

Being in creation doesn’t deny the brokenness of human nature; it just refuses to let it be the whole story. Sometimes the gift of grass and water and sunsets and stars is that they quietly insist that the harsh realities of life — the death and taxes and disease and evil and lostness — are not all there is. It reminds me that what we see now is not what will always be. That restoration is not a metaphor but a promise that one day we will walk in a new Eden that, for now, we chase. An Eden where children don’t die of cancer or wonder why mom and dad are fighting. Where we will never face death because all we know is life. Where everyone feels seen and known and loved ... because they are.

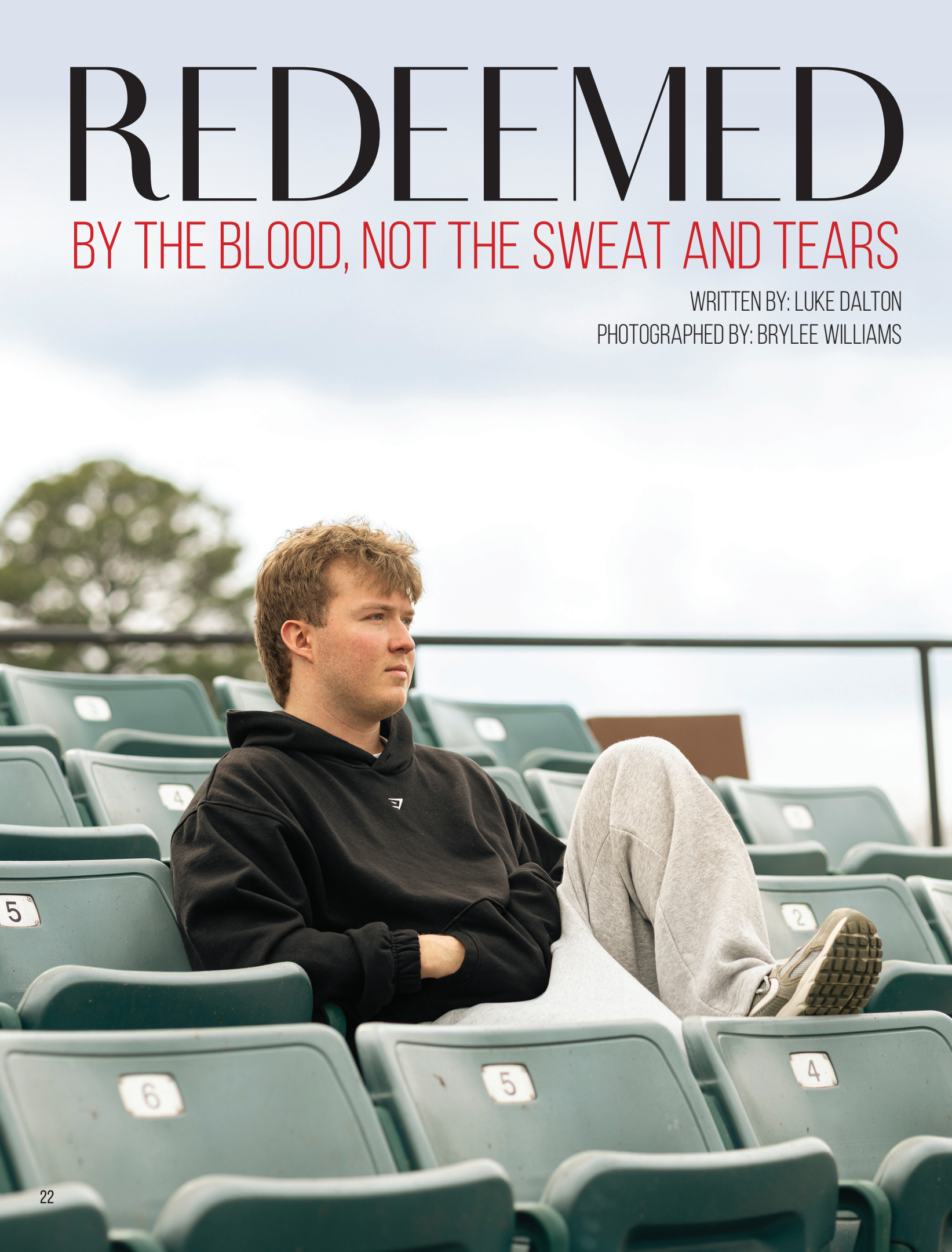
And for now, that reminder is enough to let me sleep.

REDEEMED

BY THE BLOOD, NOT THE SWEAT AND TEARS

WRITTEN BY: LUKE DALTON

PHOTOGRAPHED BY: BRYLEE WILLIAMS



The final whistle blows. Cleats get untied. Knee pads lie on the ground. Tears are streaming down the faces of some of the toughest people you've ever known. There is no goodbye, not one that would feel sacred enough for what you have lost. There's only a hole in your heart that you didn't even know could be possible. The locker room you spent four years of your life bounding through now seems foreign. You're welcome anytime, but it's not yours anymore. And the sad irony is that, for others, this is merely a chapter break, or even a new beginning.

Teams reload, restock. The next class comes through. The next generation of (insert generic mascot here). You start to recycle old shirts and gym shorts. And suddenly the logo staring back at you looks misplaced. What had once been a symbol of pride is now a forgotten memory you wish you could desperately grab ahold of once more.

Sports are beautiful because our time is limited.

That final closing of the chapter, accepting that limitation and the finality that it brings — that's what makes the time as an athlete so special. But it's hard to cherish those moments while you're in them. Especially when someone closes the book for you.

"Imagine watching someone you love die, and you're forced to look at pictures of them all the time, every day," Sydney Whittaker, senior biblical studies/language major and former captain for the women's volleyball team, said.



For Whittaker, this was the harsh reality of her senior season. In just her second game of the season, Whittaker landed wrong after approaching a hit on the outside, immediately tearing the ligaments in her left knee.

“Approaching my locker, I just had this awareness of, ‘This is gonna be the last time that I do this.’”

How do you mourn something that is alive?

There’s rage, an anger at the finality of a sport you no longer get to partake in. A bitterness at the trivialness that something you devoted your entire life to is gone at the drop of a hat. It’s an emptiness; the connection that defined your very existence has now been severed. It’s the simple fact that you’re grieving something good. Where you knew who you were, and you knew who to be. But the problem is, nothing prepares you for the end or losing the people you did it for.

“My best friend, who is also a senior, who tore her ACL last year, gets down, starts untying my shoe, and she begins to cry,” Whittaker said. “But she wasn’t gonna let me go through the same thing alone.”

This senior class had been through it. Whittaker, along with Natalie Supine and Marie Torosian, experienced nothing short of a tumultuous time during their years as Bulldogs. They had been through a carousel of coaches and shifting power dynamics. But one thing is for sure ...

They always had each other.

“This recruiting class had become my family ... and as we were all hugging in that locker room, I had a thought of, ‘I’m okay with this ... this is more beautiful. This is more about what it’s been about the entire time,’” Whittaker said.

And yet it seems that this is always forgotten by spectators and critics. To an outsider, it’s merely the end of an athletic career. The world doesn’t seem to care, and athletes aren’t given their proper opportunity to grieve. It feels like a misallocation of tears to be sad over something so pointless and trivial to the rest of the world.

They’ll never understand. How could they understand having something you loved ripped away from you? Or making the demoralizing choice to simply walk away.



“I suppressed it for so long, there was no way I could imagine a world where I told my friends I wasn’t playing baseball ... Baseball was a part of me,” Patrick Maxwell, senior exercise science major and former outfielder for the Union baseball team, said.

If I’m not a ____ player then who am I?

It’s a question asked by six-year-olds outfitted in their favorite player’s jersey and eye black, confident they will make it to the big leagues (spoiler alert: you’re going to be 5-foot-7). It’s a question that athletes across the country ask themselves every day, and Maxwell was no exception. After playing more than a decade of organized baseball, it was easy to see why it was so hard to distinguish himself from anything other than a ball player. Maxwell thought he knew who he was after playing varsity all four years and signing on to play with the Bulldogs.

“It was tough for me to see my worth and value outside of baseball ... I realized it was a problem ... I had to step away and try to give myself to something that would give me value beyond performance,” Maxwell said.

Like Maxwell, many athletes’ identities become tied to their performance or their productivity. Once their athletic careers end, the numbers that long defined them become simply statistics on an already fading page of accolades. But there is hope. A way to allow that competitive fire to dwindle and be replaced with a burning flame of passion for something constructive.

For some, it might be through new clubs and social organizations. For others, it’s a permanent home address at the left weight bench at the gym. Whatever you can do to distract yourself from the wound that won’t seem to scar over.

“I kept wanting to grab for all these things the entire last semester, and the Lord was so gracious to me. He did not let me be able to do any of that,” Whittaker said.

Sports are a gift. Beautiful creations invented by the ingenuity of image bearers of Christ. They bring joy but also bring pain. They bring completeness but also hollowness. They are fun, they are beautiful, but like your mom would tell you after a bad performance ... they’re just a game.

There is only one true thing to find your identity in. Something that strips labels. Something that disregards the metrics and nameplates. Our athletes were able to find something greater.

“The Lord gave me purpose, gave me value, allowed me not to have a ball in my hands to have meaning ... He allowed me to just be Patrick.”

Reconciling that cold, hard fact with the one and only Truth (and as I’m sure you have heard it, the Way and the Light as well).

See, a faith like ours doesn’t care how many points you scored. It doesn’t care about scoresheets. What matters is simply a belief without ceasing. Making a way for love without performance. A faith without achievement. And a beautiful, once unforeseen, true rest. A redemption, not from anything we could have done, but by His blood.

“I wasn’t just a volleyball player anymore, instead ... God calls me his daughter,” Whittaker said.

To the select few who have more years of athletics ahead, I envy you. But I also pity you. Delaying the inevitable is hard. But there is more to life than 6 a.m. lifts and late nights at the batting cages. There are more hopes and fears for all the years that don’t have to do with bats and volleyballs. There can be confidence and assurance that you are exactly who God made you to be. And whether that person is considered an athlete or not. You are 100% perfectly and wonderfully made.





THE DIGITAL CHURCH: WE, NOT JUST ME



WRITTEN BY: ABIGAIL VAN NESTE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY: BRYLEE WILLIAMS

My Instagram algorithm knows me very well.

I sit down for a brief moment and naturally begin to scroll.

I see a funny video about Baptists. Send that to my theology friend.

I see a good clip of a sermon. Send that to my friend with whom I was just discussing a similar topic.

I see a clip of a youth pastor being pranked by his youth group. Send that to my brother, who works at a church.

I see a clip of a pastor screeching heresy to his church. Send that to my dad with a note, “Yikes!”

This is the digital age.

Social media is the hallmark of it. Everyone must be on one or more social media to be relevant (or so it feels). Companies, small businesses and individuals must run their accounts with the utmost care and thought to ensure they are seen, heard and respected.

So naturally, churches must too. Right?

My first experience, and many others’, with churches on social media was during the COVID-19 pandemic. While everyone was forced to quarantine, many churches livestreamed sermons on YouTube. For middle school me, this was revolutionary. I could stay in my PJs, eat my Sunday breakfast and watch a sermon on the big screen.

From 2020 onward, I began to see more and more churches participate on different social media platforms. Now, only six years later, I think nearly every church I know of has an active YouTube account, Instagram account (or two, or three) and maybe even a TikTok account.

With these slow changes, it’s easy to think that there aren’t any big differences within the church.

Justin Wainscott, the associate dean of the School of Theology and Missions, has been preaching for over 25 years and has had a close-up view of the evolving environment.

“There’s always been the conversation about whether people’s attention spans change because of the onset of social media and that sort of thing. And I think to some degree that’s the case,” Wainscott said. “[But] I think what’s different is the sensationalism, the emotionalism, with the things we’re looking for. Too often, too many people are looking for sound bites or just an emotional appeal because that’s what social media thrives on.”

While our ability to focus has been shattered with short-form content, that isn’t what’s most concerning to Wainscott.

“There’s still a hunger for quality content. People still want to listen to something that’s good,” he said.

And when it comes to preaching, many people want to see the fire and brimstone. So your algorithm feeds it to you. You’ll see the emotional apex of five different sermons if you only scroll for a few minutes — but that’s not conducive. Suddenly, the thought process is no longer, “What is true? What do I need to hear?” and instead, “What will make me *feel* stirred up. What will make me *feel* God?” The reality of Christ and the importance of Christianity have never been solely about feeling something.

We’re not called to forgive only when we feel like it. We’re not called to pray only when we want to. And we’re certainly not called to follow Christ only when the vibes are *just* right.



2 Timothy 4:3 warns us of this: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myth” (English Standard Version).

Social media preys on this idea. It wants you to feel scared about things that (most of the time) you don’t need to be.

“Because we’re constantly getting stuff on our news feeds [and] social media,” Wainscott said. “We’re more aware of more things, good and bad ... Now everything feels immediate ... Everything feels close.”

Our minds are constantly consumed with things that people, only 20 years ago, didn’t have access to. We have the world at our fingertips and in the back pocket of our jeans. While this knowledge allows us to feel more connected in many ways, our minds cannot simultaneously be filled with the world and with Christ.

“What [we] spend very little time on is thinking about the things related to eternity and things of the Lord and things that truly matter,” Wainscott said. “When we gather as God’s people, that is where we should focus on what really matters.”

As the world becomes more and more individualistic and lonely, the need for the church body is *so* apparent to me. Finding solace and comfort with other believers when it feels like the world may collapse outside is a key reason we’re called to fellowship.

“The church helps us be able to rightly lament,” Wainscott said.

Whether it’s fear, anxiety or even anger at the current world, you’re meant to pray it.

“Trust that God knows what to do with it even in ways you don’t,” Wainscott said. “The church [doesn’t] necessarily [have to] address everything, but it is perfectly appropriate to pray through a lot of those things.”

Which is why every believer *must* be active in their church. Not because it’s a social gathering. Not because it looks good. It is fundamental to your well-being as a believer and, furthermore, as a person living in a fallen world.

“When Christ calls us to Himself, He simultaneously calls us to the body,” Wainscott said.

As a believer, you must be part of a church body. A member is not good when it’s separated from its body.

The ease of being apart from a church is ever-growing. The devil has sought/desired to separate believers from each other for as long as the body of Christ has gathered. In recent years, this has become easier to disguise with more convenient excuses for lack of attendance. If you’re too tired to get ready to go to church, you can just watch online. Or you just don’t feel like your church understands you. Or that you don’t *connect* with the preaching.

The newest temptation, I believe, that threatens the church is online Bible studies — specifically, AI-generated ones.

With the growth of emotional appeal among Christians, many are tempted to study only what directly applies to them. Bible apps have hundreds of specific plans, from broad topics like anxiety or discipline to specific topics like friendship difficulties. But instead of these pre-written plans, AI Bible studies allow you to write what you’re struggling with, and they compose an individualized plan. A glance at the app made me queasy, but for many, this personalization is what they crave.

“Sometimes application is so individualistic that it just encourages self-centeredness,” Wainscott said. “This again is one of the values of being in the body, you hear application that is we, not just me ... There are corporate applications you would miss outside of the church.”

We cannot allow ourselves to slip into the headspace that accepts that there is room for artificial intelligence to lead us in any way.

Artificial intelligence is not filled by the Holy Spirit.

Artificial intelligence doesn’t have a personal relationship with Christ.

“There’s no way artificial intelligence knows your soul. It doesn’t know that three weeks ago you were struggling or that you’ve been wrestling with this decision. It cannot do what a flesh-and-blood undershepherd can do,” Wainscott said.

We *must* be *in* our churches. We must fully understand the importance of hearing God’s Word preached.

“What good preaching is out to do, in one sense, is a mirroring, reflecting the Incarnation, because it is God’s Word being revealed through other people,” Wainscott said. “Not perfectly, not chiefly, as it happens in Christ ... yet God is using people to communicate His Word, His truth.”

This is something you can’t get from the devotionals you read on your phone, AI-generated or not. You can’t replace being among believers and hearing the Word.

So let us put down our phones, set aside the never-ending algorithm preying on your weakness, find a church, plug into the church and set your mind on the things above.

Don’t let the lies of the world seep into every corner of your mind. Don’t allow the constant influx of untruths and false teachers to lead you to ask, “Did God *really* say?”

We must *know* what He said.





PODCASTING: TO KNOW AND BE KNOWN

WRITTEN BY: NORAH TAYLOR
PHOTOGRAPHED BY: OLIVIA TEN NAPEL

We are all born with an innate need to communicate, to talk and to be heard.

I am no exception to this rule.

I used to sport this green sweatshirt that had “professional yapper” embroidered across the front. I’m not sure where it’s gone to, but I kind of miss it. The best part about that shirt was that every time I wore it, a conversation would strike up about it — and there are very few things better than an invitation to yap.

When Ted Kluck, associate professor of communication arts, first saw it, I was standing in the Cardinal & Cream practicum class. We got sidetracked for a solid two minutes on the semantics of the word “yapper.” I’ve considered on many occasions getting him one that says “professional bloviator,” as that’s his preferred term.

Kluck has had multiple successful podcast endeavors. Not only has he been the guest of a wide variety of pods, but he also has two of his very own: “Gut Check Press” and “Kluck.”

The moment I heard Kluck was going to be teaching a podcasting class, I knew I *had* to be in there for three reasons:

1. My job for Cardinal & Cream the last year and a half has been editing podcasts each week, and I acknowledge that there’s room for growth.
2. I have assembled copious amounts of furniture and have troubleshoot equipment for the new studio. Much like a child on Christmas, I wanted the chance to play with all my new toys.
3. I am indeed a yapper.

Maybe you’re more of a podcast listener. Maybe you don’t like the sound of your own voice on a recording. Or maybe you just prefer to hear insightful things as opposed to drawing them out yourself.

Either way, I would argue that the same reason I find value in podcasts as a talker, you can find as a listener.

When you boil a podcast down to its most rudimentary components, it is people connecting to people.

“I always wanted to connect with my audiences ...” Kluck said. “And the podcast seemed like a really good way to kind of continue that relationship in a way that didn’t feel quite as cloying and needy as social media.”

Kluck sat across from me in the Communication Arts department’s brand-new podcast studio. He commented on the new, fresh tech smell and his adoration of the red “ON AIR” sign that lit up outside the door. I appreciated his ignoring of the many nuts and bolts that still needed cleaning up (a great example of someone knowing which points to touch on and which to avoid in a conversation).

I had asked Kluck to come chat about podcasting and simply the art of conversing — one yapper to one bloviator. It was a conversation we’d had plenty of times before, so I knew he had a genuine understanding of humanity’s innate need to be relational.

A good podcast has to be edgy enough to be entertaining, observant enough to say something worthwhile about the world around us, but, first and foremost, it must be relational.

“For a writer or really anybody who’s a storyteller, you have this rich opportunity to know and be known in a different way,” Kluck said.

Once you brush off all the performative nature of podcasting, you’re left with a strange vulnerability.

With every smart or funny claim you make to your audience, you are saying, “This is a thought that *I* have and that *I* believe to be true.”

Every episode, you’re inviting listeners to know your inner monologue more deeply, and all you can do is pray that at least one person agrees (or at least that no one leaves a comment saying “Hey everybody, get a load of this hooligan!”).

“You’ve got this experience that exists on a different organ than art, right? It’s not high art, but it’s also not content,” Kluck said.

There’s heady art — the kind of stuff you want to sit with and think about alone for a hot second. Then you’ve got your content that’s 15 seconds. You give the content a little “haha,” and then you forget about it two scrolls later.

Podcasts don’t fit into either of those categories. By no means am I sitting with a podcast and considering the parallels of the beginning and ending conversations and wondering why the speaker chose the words he chose.

But I’m also not going to forget the conversation I heard two seconds later. I’ll remember the stories that resonated with me, and I’ll consider the presented points of view that are new to me.

In a way, I’m invited into the conversation with the speakers as I come to my own conclusions.

Please allow me to gripe and shake my fist at the sky for just a moment when I say that a podcast will never replace the connection that comes with a face-to-face conversation.

However, that being said, there is a genuine tie that comes when you decide to share your thoughts with a person or to listen intently to another voice.

“When I’m asking you guys questions, it’s because I genuinely wanna know,” Kluck said. “Whether the topic is emotionalism in the church or like your ‘Skinny White Boy Mount Rushmore,’ I do genuinely want to know.”

(These topics were a callback to the class we had just stepped out of. Callbacks: yet another sign of a great conversationalist.)

The mutual care and desire to know and understand one another are what drive us as humans.

It’s how you feel when you meet someone and you instantly recognize that they’re going to be an important person in your life. Or when you’re talking with your oldest friend, and you can’t remember how you got to the topic of the socioeconomic state of Paraguay, but you don’t care because the last three hours have been more rejuvenating than a three-hour nap could ever be.

“In just sharing our stories and being knowable and being funny and being genuine, we can make people’s lives better. And that’s fun,” Kluck said.

From the very moment we were able to, humanity has found ways to share our stories with each other. From cryptic paintings



on cave walls to carrier pigeons, to emails, we have been determined to find a way.

Podcasts are a way.

“We live in this time where more than any other time in the world, we have the ability to be as alone as we choose to be,” Kluck said.

Unlike much of the isolating content in our reach, simply listening to or recording a conversation in the form of a podcast creates a link between creator and consumer, connecting people to people.

This link and connection are most easily found through relatability. When we hear a story that we can relate to, whether it’s a deep emotional life issue or just an awkward encounter at the grocery store, it makes us stop and think, “Hey, maybe I’m not so alone.”

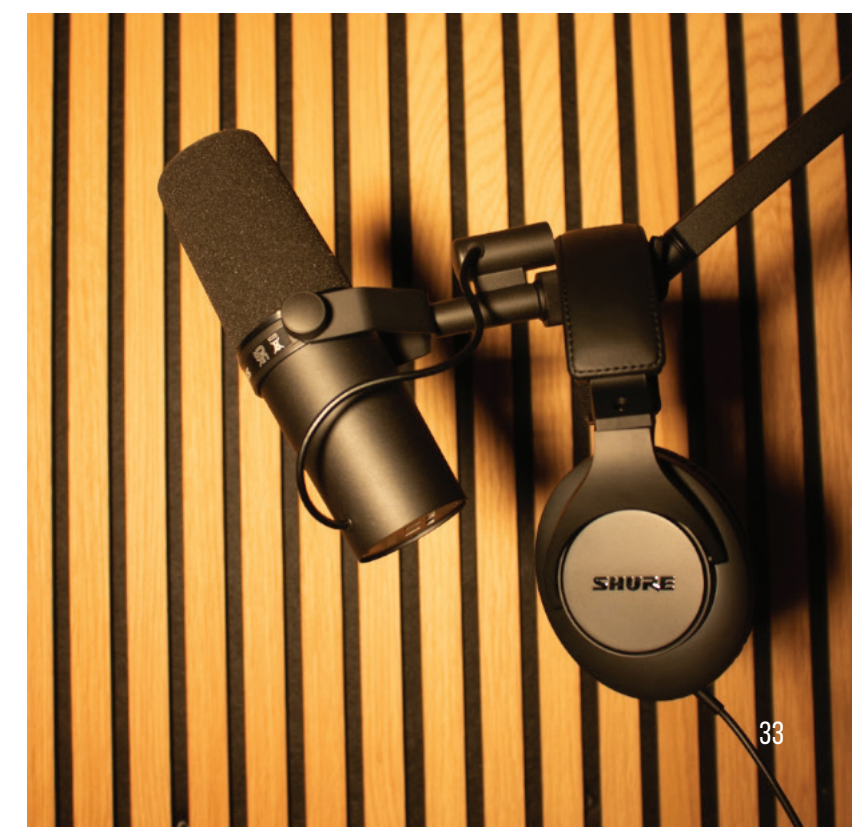
“We weren’t meant to be alone,” Kluck said. “We hunger for connection.”

We were designed with ears to listen, voices to speak and hearts to commune.

Let others hear your voice. Sit across the table with someone and set a mic between you as you delve into your hot takes and share your wild memories. Become known.

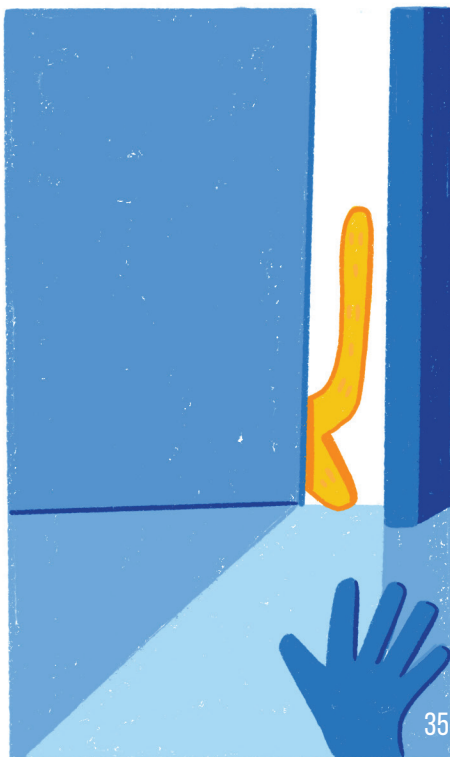
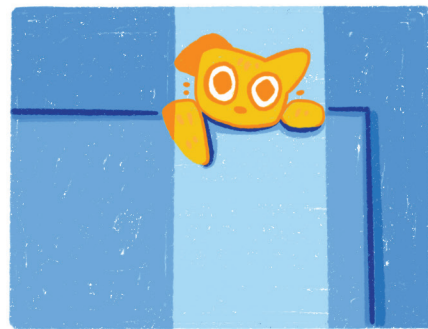
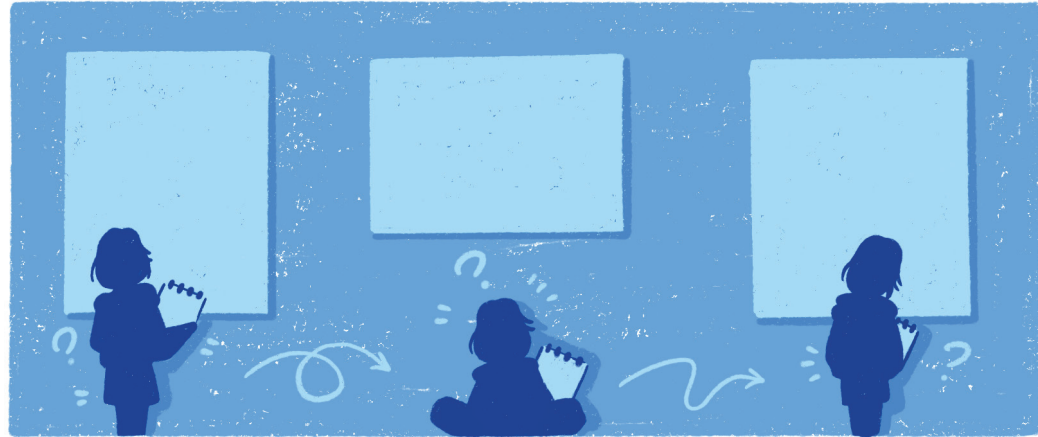
Listen to the voices out there. Be willing to consider new ideas and enjoy the company of someone new. Strive to know.

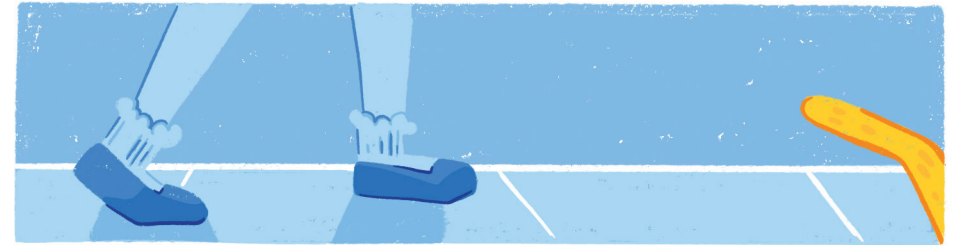
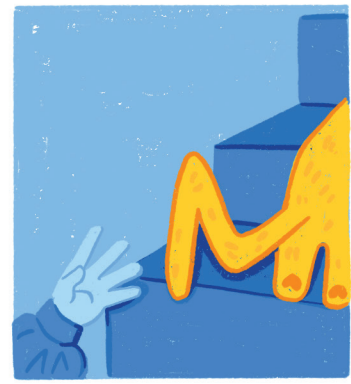
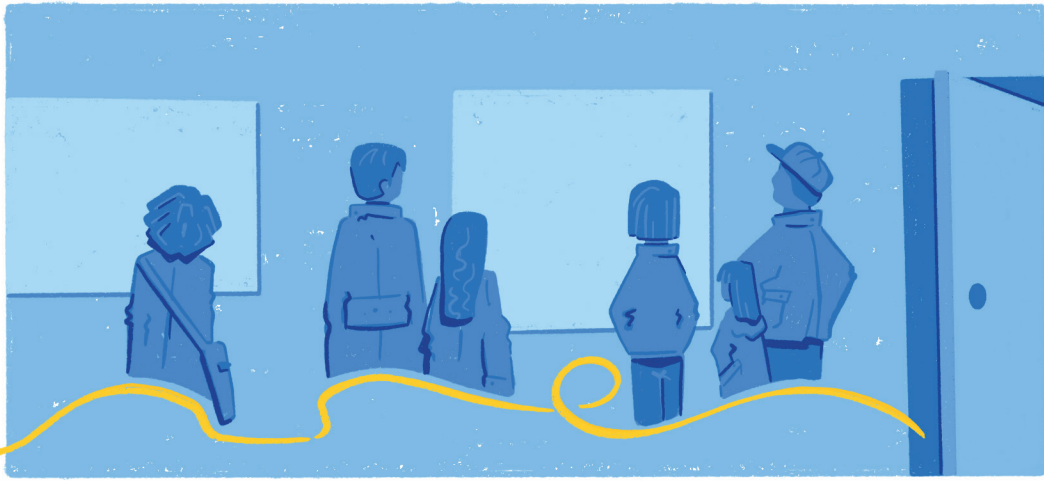
To know and be known is to satiate the innate hunger for connection we all bear.

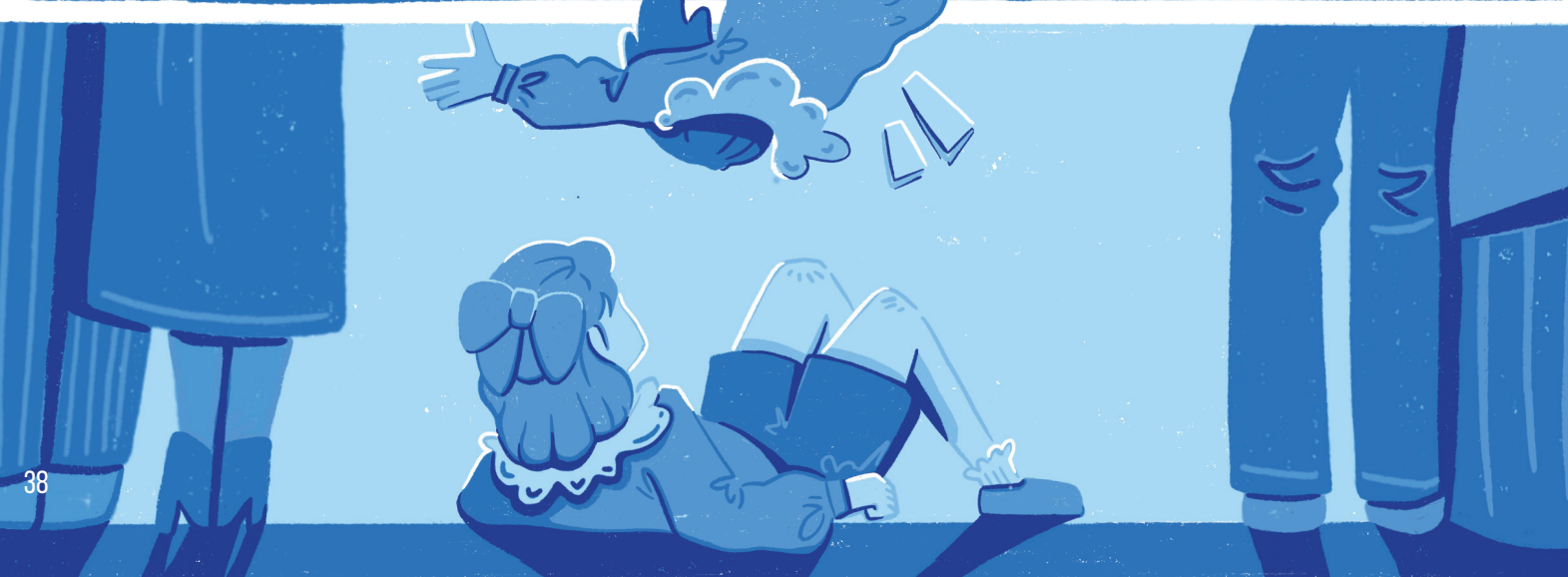
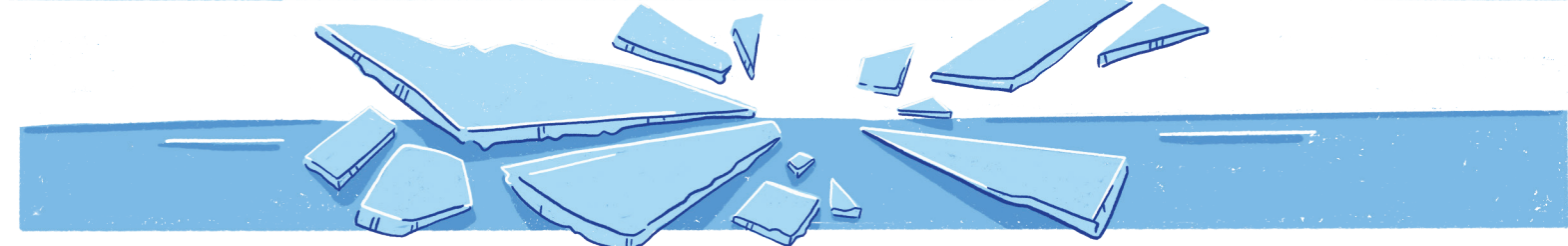


EXHIBIT, CLOUDLESS SKY

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY: ABBY THOMAS







MURDER MYSTERIES

AN ORAL HISTORY



WRITTEN BY: BRIGHT BURNS
PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY: OLIVIA TEN
NAPEL & LILY GRACE WAMBLE

I lay still, face pressed into the mud, rain softly settling on my skin and clinging to the fibers of my clothing. It was late, and only by the moonlight filtering through the trees could I see my own hand, fingers splayed among the scattered pine needles. I was just off the path, out of sight of any passerby, and I was pretty sure I'd been stabbed by a friend 10 minutes before.

A flashlight beam. Someone screamed and ran towards me, dropping to her knees and grasping at me. Though I couldn't turn my head, I was able to make out the face of 'Olivia Besse', mouth open, eyes closed, wailing.

"She's dead!"

I tried not to laugh as the group surrounded me, crying out in multitudinous expressions of grief and surprise. My first murder mystery party was going well.

The parties are the brainchild of Lily Grace Wamble². She's hosted 10 of them, eight at Union, and she's planning three more before she graduates in May. Over 50 Union students have

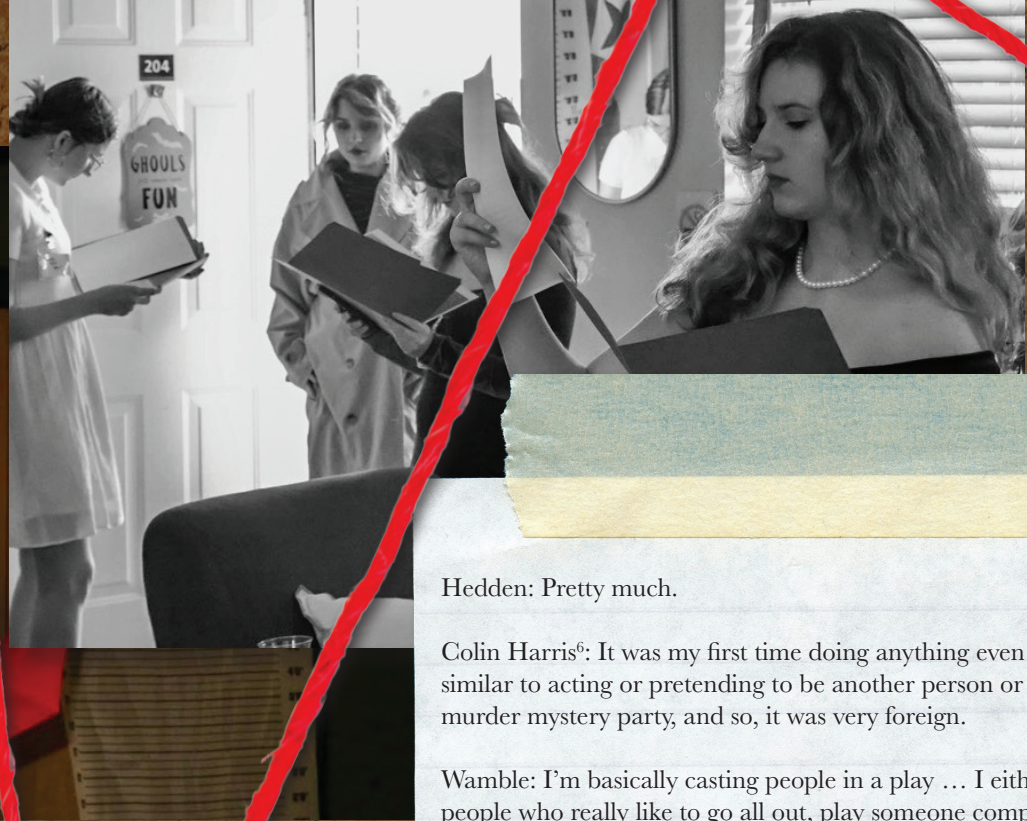
1. junior, English literature major

2. senior, psychology major

participated in at least one, and several have gone to all of them. Wamble creates each detail herself, meticulously editing together plot and characters for weeks before each party, and after which she refines further before posting them as kits on her Etsy shop. She's written mysteries for birthdays, for sorority events and just for fun. She'll write one for you if you pay her.

No two murder mystery parties are the same. They've taken place in the wild west, at a masquerade ball, at a battle of the bands and a summer camp — at which I was the victim. Wamble has decorated a variety of spaces according to this variety of themes, from a church to the Bowld gym to dorm rooms and the W.D. Powell Theatre. The guests come in costume, in makeup, with affected accents and props — cowboy hats and guyliner and fake piercings and homemade suits of armor — prepared to play their assigned roles.

As I speak to Wamble — and to others who have attended the murder mysteries — it becomes increasingly clear that these parties have an established, interconnected culture. Wamble's guests are given characters to portray and loose objectives to achieve, rather than scripts to follow, which allows guests flexibility and the ability to improvise. The more I hear about the parties, the more I get glimpses into new characters, stories and situations. There's a wealth of shared narrative that's been created.



The following is the result of my attempt to pick apart some of these narrative threads. I've been to two murder mystery parties, so I've had two experiences — only two of the hundreds that exist ...

Olivia Ten Napel³: This is like Halloween, but year-round. You get to pull out the random thing in your closet that you never thought you'd wear, and you get to wear it. You get to create this world for one night.

Abby Keathly⁴: It's really committed dress up.

Ben Hedden⁵: At least for me, I like to take on my character. One of the things about the murder mysteries: I don't spend much time actually trying to solve the murder. I actually try to embrace my character.

Me: So it's more an excuse to get in costume than it is to solve a puzzle?

3. junior, digital media communications major
4. senior, chemistry major
5. junior, music major

Hedden: Pretty much.

Colin Harris⁶: It was my first time doing anything even remotely similar to acting or pretending to be another person or doing a murder mystery party, and so, it was very foreign.

Wamble: I'm basically casting people in a play ... I either have people who really like to go all out, play someone completely different from themselves, or people who just like dressing up and to hang out with their friends [playing a character similar to themselves].

Ainsley Boatright⁷: Some people show up to the function and they've got a cool outfit and they're just themselves. The appeal to me —

Olivia Besse: I like being another person.

Boatright: [agreeing] I like being another person.

Rebekah Ruth Basie⁸: I love that you get to be a kid for a night and just play pretend

with your friends, but everybody is so bought into it. Everyone's committed, so everyone's playing together.

Keathly: It's like you meet all these people for the first time.

Wamble: People like to goof around. It gives them that outlet to pretend to be someone else for a little bit.

Ten Napel: There's no stakes. Everyone's doing it, and so you're not being embarrassing, like if it was just you doing it. ... People, they have this theater kid stigma ... The theater kids are only weird because the non-theater kids are not doing it.

Harris: I apologize to every theater kid I've ever bullied.

Boatright: I like a night where I'm not me.

6. senior, communications major
7. junior, Biblical languages major
8. junior, philosophy major

Besse: I get so immersed in my character that I've created. Even if I'm making up details on the spot every minute, I'm like, I am that person.

Ten Napel: You want to pretend to be a train worker or a cowboy ... you don't necessarily want to be a murderer, but you do want to play — people want to play characters.

Keathly: It's a whole subculture of campus.

Me: What does it look like for the evenings to be so loosely structured? At the first party I went to, someone got genuinely lost in the woods. At my second, people who weren't scripted to die were killed.

Ten Napel: [at the second party, a train heist-themed event] Lily [Pond] found a baseball bat ... she got her hands on it ... and she's just charging down the hallway of this church with a baseball bat ... everyone's trying to calm her down in character. I didn't realize that that was an option — that you could just do that.

Me: I heard Lily Pond attacked someone with a bat.

Hedden: It was quite egregious.

Ten Napel: I think it was a moment where people recognized that they could make their character their own and the story their own.

Lily Pond⁹: I think I did a really good job embodying the unhinged nature that comes out when people are in stressful situations.

Ten Napel: There's no formula for the way people act at these things.

Me: Has the culture of the games changed as people have returned and played more characters?

Boatright: For shizzle.

Me: I can't use 'for shizzle' in a direct quote.

Boatright: ... Maybe, but less than you would think, because identity-changing is such a massive part of why they work well. It's a different party every time.

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Turning on the TV, picking up a book, taking a walk — simple, pleasant pastimes. It's less simple to learn a character, to plan out a costume, to spend three or four hours pretending to be someone else with no rehearsal and no real knowledge of what the evening will hold. Maybe you'll be a court jester whom everyone else has been instructed not to laugh at. Maybe you'll spend the whole night as the girlfriend of someone with a fake accent and a fake mustache whose real name you do not know. Maybe Olivia Ten Napel will pretend to stab you, and you'll spend the next 30 minutes lying in the mud while the rest of the party examines the crime scene.

Walk in as someone new, leave your setting and your previous relationships with the people in the room, spend weeks planning for an evening you could not possibly predict. The creativity, the effort and the play are what make the parties work.

It's a different party every time. And the guests are different within it — whether they actually know each other or not, they're all strangers at Wamble's evenings.

9. senior, English creative writing major



CONTRARIWISE

PHOTOSTORY BY: BRYLEE WILLIAMS & OLIVIA TEN NAPEL





ONCE UPON A TIME

THE LIFE OF A PROFESSIONAL FANGIRL



WRITTEN BY: MARGEE STANFIELD

PHOTOGRAPHED BY: BRYLEE WILLIAMS

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED BY: MARGEE STANFIELD

I was 13 years old when someone recognized me in public and asked me if I was the girl who cried over the show “Once Upon a Time” on YouTube.

I was, in fact, that girl. I still am. I mean, I don’t cry on the internet anymore, but “Once Upon a Time” will always be my favorite show of all time.

Yes, I’m talking about that ABC show that’s a twist on classic fairy tales, where everyone is related, there’s always like five timelines going on at once, people die and come back to life, the CGI and green screens are really bad and the dialogue can be super unintentionally comical and ridiculous.

So ... why exactly is this show peak TV for me?

Once upon a time, there was a preteen girl who came to love a show. One day, she started making YouTube videos about her obsession. And it kind of changed her life. This is how it happened ...

I first watched the “Pilot” episode on Netflix when I was ten years old. I like to imagine sparkles reflecting in my eyes as my gaze darted quickly back and forth across the screen, while Emma Swan walked across oncoming traffic in heels, the Black Keys song “Howlin’ for You” blasting, and slammed a perp’s head into his steering wheel.

I am not sure I can articulate exactly what I felt in that moment, but there was a shift somewhere inside of me. As the first episode of the show came to an end, I thought something along the lines of, “I will never get enough of this.”

If you haven’t had the pleasure of taking the “Once Upon a Time” journey, here’s the general premise: all the classic fairytale characters you know find themselves trapped in our world. The show’s plot is kicked into motion when a ten-year-old boy named Henry, tracks down his birth mother (Emma Swan). He convinces her to drive him back home to Storybrooke, Maine. He believes this town houses a population full of cursed storybook characters,

cursed by his adoptive mother whom he believes to be the Evil Queen. He believes Emma is the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming and the key to breaking the curse.

But, frankly, that's just the first season and it only gets more complicated from there. Still, I loved everything about it: the message of hope, the richly developed characters, the fantasy elements and even the aforementioned laughable bits. "Once Upon A Time" — or more affectionately known to me and other "Oncers" as "OUAT" or simply "Once" — was like a mad scientist who created a monster (the monster being preteen Margee, completely obsessed with this show and insufferably unable to talk or think about anything else).

In a concerningly short amount of time, I had binged three and a half seasons of "OUAT," developed deep emotional ties to all the characters, knew a scary amount of personal facts about the cast members and was ready to start watching the show live.

My free time consisted of either rewatching "OUAT" or engaging with content related to it online. If I left the house, it had to be wearing one of my several "OUAT" graphic tees.

My room featured poster-covered walls, figurines of characters, blankets and pillows with my favorite characters' faces plastered over them. The most incriminating pieces of merchandise were two life-size cardboard cutouts of my favorite couple on the show (Emma Swan and Killian Jones/Captain Hook — better known by their "ship" name "CaptainSwan").

I started feeling the need for an outlet to express my love for the show. So, I made a YouTube channel. Without realizing it, it quickly became an outlet for an insecure introvert to express *herself*, too.

Eventually, I joined a collab channel dedicated to "OUAT," where six other girls and I each posted a video on our assigned day of the week. So I was not just cranking out videos for my own channel but this other channel as well. I was constantly creating.

I decided to start recording my reaction to "OUAT" episodes as they aired live each week. About midway through season six of "Once" airing, I posted my first reaction video.

And, for some reason, people *loved* it.

My subscriber count grew quickly after these reaction videos. I ended up reaching 2,000 subscribers. My most popular video had nearly 15,000 views. Which, now, does not seem like a lot, but at the time, felt like an unbelievable amount.

And so I didn't stop. Every Sunday at 7 p.m., I would flip on ABC, press record on my camera and plop down on my couch. I posted a reaction video for every single episode until the final episode aired.

My reaction videos were ... intense ... to say the least. In the intro before each reaction video, I included a disclaimer warning that I was a "hardcore fan of the show" and that I did "*occasionally* scream and cry in my reaction videos." This was an understatement. I pretty much had a low-grade mental breakdown in every single one (I wish I was exaggerating).

I definitely got plenty of comments from people thinking I was insane, way too loud and overdramatic.

But the amount of negative feedback I received was nowhere remotely close to the overwhelming amount of positive support I received.

For some odd reason, I resonated with a lot of people. I received so many comments from people I felt like just got me. They didn't just share my love for the show; they liked *me*, too? These people thought I was funny and cool and relatable? None of which were adjectives I would have chosen to describe myself. I was just being Margee.

On several occasions, people came up to me in public and asked for a picture with me. Most of them occurred when I went to a "Once Upon A Time" convention in Chicago, but they happened other places, too — most surprisingly in the locker room of my gym.



This era of my life culminated in a world-altering experience: getting to meet the majority of the cast at that “Once” convention. I got to watch panels of the actors who had so deeply inspired and touched me. I got to give them hugs, get autographs, have my picture taken with them and tell them how much the show meant to me.

I felt like my wildest dreams had come true by the age of 13, like my life had been touched by something truly magical in full “Once Upon A Time” fashion.

About a year later, the final episode of the series aired. I turned on ABC, pressed record and sat down on my couch one final time. As the final episode came to a close, the screen went black and just like that, “OUAT” was over.

Sometime after that, I started to feel a pressure from myself to grow out of this fangirl phase.

It has now been nearly eight years since the show ended, and over 11 years since I started watching it. As time goes by and I drift further away from the town of Storybrooke, the impact the show had on me never dulls. I don’t think it ever will.

I often think about taking my old videos down. I find them embarrassing now. However, I always end up deciding to keep them up. Younger me put a lot of work and heart into those videos. I feel it would be a disservice to my younger self to erase what she created. Most people do not have video footage of some of their earliest instances of self-expression. And I feel really privileged to have that. (And, hey, I still make a *smidge* of money off them.)



It is easy for me to fall into the urge to dismiss this whole era as cringey and juvenile. When I tell someone about this era of my life, I tend to default to downplaying it. I beg them not to try to look the channel up. I hide my face and very visibly cringe. I try to make it better by assuring them that girl is such a far removed version of myself. But in reality, she’s still very much a part of me, even more so than I’d like to admit.

“Once Upon a Time” and that time I spent making videos, made me who I am today.

Sure, I don’t post myself sobbing on the internet anymore, but when I queue up the “Pilot” episode of “Once Upon a Time” each year for my annual rewatch and become immersed in the town of Storybrooke once again, it feels a whole lot like coming home.

I’m not sure the fangirl “phase” is something I’ll ever truly grow out of. I still love to love things with a ferocity. I find I’m happier when I’m pursuing the things that bring me joy and enjoying them unapologetically. When I find myself lacking confidence, I think back to the girl who posted videos on the internet for all to see, who was completely herself without a single care of what others thought.

I think 13-year-old Margee was onto something. Today, I love to watch shows and movies, and I love to talk about them. The intro to my videos featured a logo with my channel name and the moniker “professional fangirl.” Now that I’m about to have my degree in journalism, I’ve realized I now have the skillset to maybe truly be a “professional fangirl” (entertainment journalist) one day.

Just like I catch myself dismissing my YouTube era, I find myself embarrassed to discuss this dream.

But that didn’t stop me before, and I can’t let it stop me now.



U STARTED HERE. KEEP GOING.

Rachel Shane
BSBA, '25
MBA Student

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