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PURPOSEFUL, PERSONAL PATHWAYS

Engaged learning, the core of the Furman experience, is powerful and immersive. It shapes and transforms lives.

BY COLLEEN NEWQUIST

For two decades, Furman University has pioneered an immersive form of learning, weaving engaged learning together with the classroom experience to help students identify their passions and create successful and meaningful lives. Alyssa Richardson '12, who went from a small town in South Carolina's so-called "Corridor of Shame" to Harvard Law School, is one such student. So is Mark Pittman '07, who just returned to Greenville as an emergency room physician, and Brandon Tensley '12, who is a journalist in Washington, DC. The tradition continues with current students Kjersti Kleine '17, who has found her vocation in public health, and Nathan Mathai '17, who is exploring how to merge his passions for accounting, political science, and education.



NATHAN MATHAI '17 with **BRENT NELSEN**,
Professor of Political Science



About 80 percent of Furman students participate in internships, research with a faculty member, and/or study away by the time they graduate. For some, the experience has been extraordinary and life-changing. But some is not all. And all, says President Elizabeth Davis, should be Furman's goal.

"These stories are exceptional, in both meanings of the word," Davis says. "Without a doubt, these are exceptional people, whose intelligence, commitment, and innate drive were nurtured on this campus. But these stories are exceptional in another way. If we were to ask ourselves if these experiences are part of every student's

experience at Furman, then I think we'd have to say: 'not yet.'"

Guaranteeing "The Furman Advantage"—a personalized educational experience that integrates classroom learning with real-world experiences and self-discovery—for every single student is the university's collective vision. The Furman Advantage, Davis says, will set the university apart and create a new standard in higher education.

"We have already seen the impact of students who discover a passion channeled by the passion of faculty and staff mentors. We know the effect of strong student life programming, the connections of external partnerships, and alumni and employers

who are confident about the skills we develop in our students," Davis says. "Imagine what will happen when we ensure this experience for every student at Furman. Imagine the impact if we can greatly increase the number, breadth, and scale of opportunities, as well as our external engagement."

With \$47 million in support from The Duke Endowment, the university is making a commitment that every Furman student will have an experience similar to the journeys of Richardson, Pittman, Kleine, Mathai, and Tensley.

THE VALUE OF MENTORS

Alyssa Richardson was not feeling it. With the recommendation of Riley Institute Executive Director Don Gordon, whom she met through the 2007 Governor's School Summer Program between her junior and senior years of high school, she was selected for the weeklong Emerging Public Leaders (EPL) program at Furman later the same summer. Led by the Riley Institute's Cathy Stevens, she and 21 other would-be leaders were sitting in a circle, and they were supposed to be singing. Richardson, who had never been to any kind of summer camp and who had torn a knee ligament before arriving, was on crutches, in unfamiliar surroundings, and could feel her scowl deepening.

Richardson, who for the last year has worked as a clerk to the Honorable Margaret Seymour, Senior US District Judge in South Carolina, grew up in Dillon, SC, and attended school for most of her life in the so-called "Corridor of Shame," the swath of rural, impoverished school districts along Interstate 95 that in 2014 were deemed unlawfully underfunded by the state supreme court. Her family wasn't poor—her father was a school principal and her mother a secretary—but after moving to Columbia, SC, in her sophomore year of high school, she became acutely aware of the perceptions that come with growing up in a disadvantaged community.

"I wouldn't say I had a chip on my shoulder, but I would say I felt like I had a lot to prove because at that point, I realized I wasn't from a great place. I had teachers saying, 'Oh my God, you know how to read,'" Richardson says.

Richardson's educational background made her all the more determined to succeed. "This is going to sound crazy, but honestly, I worked the hardest I've ever worked in my life in high school and in my first year at Furman, harder than I worked at Harvard Law, just because I felt like I had so much to prove."

It was this determination Gordon saw in the high school valedictorian, but during the EPL ice-breaker activity, Richardson

was doing a good job of hiding it from facilitator Stevens.

"Cat (Cathy Stevens) really worked hard to pull me out of my shell and get me talking and get me into these lighthearted fun and games I wasn't really used to. I think she worried about me, she worried that maybe this girl is too angry to fit in here," Richardson says.

And yet, Stevens remained dogged in her support of Richardson. "Cat definitely was someone who went out of her way to reach out and make sure that this sort of closed-off person she saw during the summer was not the same person who entered Furman her freshman year," Richardson says.

Her educational upbringing sparked an interest in how laws affect education, and once on campus, Richardson became involved with the mock trial team, where Director and Dana Professor of Political Science Glen Halva-Neubauer nurtured her talent as well as helped her navigate a new world.

"I had never flown in a plane until I did mock trial. I had never been out for a nice dinner. I just never had that kind of experience. Dr. Halva-Neubauer was someone who helped me become a little more polished and a little bit more comfortable in this world of privilege and resources that I wasn't quite accustomed to. He did it in such a graceful way that I didn't feel awkward or singled out," she says.

Halva-Neubauer was a mentor throughout her Furman years, identifying internships and summer programs he thought would be a good fit for her. Richardson continued working with Stevens at the Riley Institute, too, as an intern for the Diversity Leaders Initiative from her sophomore through senior years. And Idella Glenn '84, then assistant vice president for student development and director of diversity and inclusion, provided personal guidance.

"She was someone I could have very real conversations with when I felt awkward about the amount of privilege that surrounded me, or times that there were certain social cues I didn't know a lot about," Richardson says.

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ALYSSA RICHARDSON '12

Her educational experience at Furman felt “very personal, and very personalized,” she says, including an internship with Furman trustee Randy Eaddy ’76, a senior partner and corporate lawyer at Kilpatrick, Townsend & Stockton LLP.

“I actually met Randy months before the internship began,” Richardson says. “He was being inducted into the Political Science Hall of Fame, and I happened to be sitting in the audience beside his family.” They chatted about the similarities of their paths—African Americans coming from small, rural towns in South Carolina to Furman—a place, as Richardson describes it, of “privilege and wonder.”


“I didn’t know it at the time, but the parallels would continue because he, too, went on to Harvard Law,” Richardson says.

The internship at his firm “marked the very point at which my views on ‘making a difference’ began to expand,” Richardson says. “Prior to that summer, I thought the only way I could use the law to effectuate change was by being on the ground, as a civil rights lawyer. But at Kilpatrick, I saw great lawyers using their prestigious platform to reach into the community. Randy Eaddy used his sway at the firm to start an internship program with his alma mater. Another Furman attorney, Yendelela Neely Anderson ’03 (now a Furman trustee) was using her platform as an employment associate, and later partner, to serve on the board of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society. This wasn’t the iconic story of my hero Charles Hamilton Houston taking on Jim Crow one case at a time, but it was a more nuanced story of gaining resources, access, respect, and privilege, and then using those acquisitions to lift others along.”

Richardson just began her “dream job”: working for the South Carolina United States Attorney’s Office as assistant US attorney for civil rights. South Carolina is the first of a handful of states rolling out this new position in response to the current climate, Richardson says. “I’ll be focusing exclusively on prosecuting civil rights violations. The major focus of my docket will be prosecuting excessive use of force. I’m incredibly excited about staying here in South Carolina and helping disadvantaged communities right out of the gate.”

ALYSSA RICHARDSON '12
with **JUDGE MARGARET SEYMOUR**





“Because you’re in small classes, you inevitably end up talking with your professors, talking about what interests you, or how that class or material can be applied to the broader world.”

MARK PITTMAN '07

THE CLASSROOM CONNECTION

A genetic counselor, a teacher, a lawyer, a priest. What sounds like the start of a joke is actually **Mark Pittman's** circle of close friends from his days at Furman—friends who, like him, are people who have chosen careers with social impact. Pittman, a native of Aiken, SC, returned to Greenville in July as an emergency medicine physician at Greenville Health System.

For Pittman, the academic experience was key to helping him identify his direction. He entered Furman with a vague idea of doing something in the sciences—maybe psychology, maybe chemistry. He knew both programs were well regarded.

"When I got to Furman, I took a chemistry class, and I fell in love with it. Everything made sense, and the teachers were passionate about it," he says.

His love of science led to research experiences. The first was with Judy Grisel, chair of the neuroscience department, after he'd attended a talk by her and asked a lot of questions. Seizing on his interest, Dr. Grisel offered him the opportunity to do research in her department that summer. "It was the first time I had really contemplated research," Pittman says.

He enjoyed the work, but spending hours in a lab made him realize he wanted to do something where he could connect more with people. His second summer, he spent several weeks shadowing physicians in different areas of the Greenville hospital to get exposure to what medicine is, what different types of medicine there are, and what a career in medicine might be like. "That's when I decided, hey, this is something I could pursue," Pittman says.

Just to be sure, he spent the summer before his senior year back in a lab, conducting chemistry research. "It was a lot of fun, but I still felt like I needed to do something more hands on with patients," he says.

The hands-on exposure, combined with the classroom experience, was invaluable both in helping him determine his path and in being prepared for his ultimate choice, Pittman says. Opting to take classes like psychology and German instead of more traditional pre-med classes like biochemis-

try while at Furman, Pittman nonetheless felt like he had a leg up on some of his classmates at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, where huge auditorium classes are the norm. "Even though I may have been behind the curve, I felt comfortable jumping into those classes because I felt like I had a good grasp on how to learn," he says.

Furman's small class sizes, and the opportunity they present for flexibility in teaching methods, helped him identify his learning style. "At Furman, I had classes where we read books and took notes, and some where we would watch a movie and discuss it or write a paper. Or we did a research project, or we went outside. It helped me discover how many different ways there are to learn information and how I best process," Pittman says.

Those small classes also helped him uncover his passion. "Because you're in small classes, you inevitably end up talking with your professors, talking about what interests you, or how that class or material can be applied to the broader world," Pittman says. "There's a lot of talk, not just about history or chemistry, but how does this apply in the broader context of Greenville, or the world, particularly in the broader context of where others are struggling. There's a lot of talk about how we serve our community."

"What I found through Furman was that I love meeting people where they're struggling, and for me, it's emergency medicine. I love being able to provide some sort of comfort when someone is stressed, when they're vulnerable. I have a hard time saying medicine is the only thing I could ever do, but I love where I am now."

PETER HOWARD



“I was pretty sure that I was going to double major in political science and economics and go to law school. I was 99 percent certain that was what was going to happen. And then that is not what happened.”

BRANDON TENSLEY '12

A LIBERAL ARTS LAUNCH

When **Brandon Tensley** decided his first semester to fulfill his foreign language requirement with a class in German—the only language course that fit his schedule—little did he know that he was altering the course of his life.

“I was pretty sure that I was going to double major in political science and economics and go to law school. I was 99 percent certain that was what was going to happen. And then that is not what happened,” he says.

He took a class with Ann Culberson, lecturer in German and French, the first semester and with Jane Chew, now retired professor of modern languages and literatures, the second semester.

“It sounds very cliché, but I never saw those German classes as chores. It was very engaging. It was always exciting. It was like a linguistic puzzle, and that’s very much the way they taught the language. It was made very accessible through their particular teaching styles,” he says.

Through those German classes, his initial plan “was blown to bits,” Tensley says. Enamored of the language, he consulted Chew on whether she thought he had the mettle to be a German major. Not only did she say yes, she encouraged him to study abroad the fall of his sophomore year. “I said, ‘Don’t you think I’d be a little too green, only having two semesters of German language under my belt?’ She says, ‘Dive in.’”

“She unexpectedly turned around my life in terms of what I did at Furman. I became interested in languages, in studying abroad. I was a black kid from Columbia, SC. It never featured in my college plans to major in languages, to think I could do well in languages,” he says.

Combining his new love for German with his longtime interest in political science, Tensley ultimately majored in both and literally abandoned his pursuit of law school. He was in the middle of the LSAT exam, for which he’d spent countless hours studying and \$1,000 on a prep class, when he realized he didn’t want to go to law school, turned in the test early and

“I THINK MORE THAN ANYTHING, FURMAN MADE ME CONFIDENT, BOLD WITH EXPLORING OPTIONS UNTIL I FELT LIKE I WAS DOING SOMETHING I GENUINELY LOVED.”

walked out. While his friends and family questioned whether he’d lost his mind, Tensley felt confident in his decision.

“I think more than anything, Furman made me confident, bold with exploring options until I felt like I was doing something I genuinely loved,” he says.

Free to explore other options, his senior year he conducted an independent study with Professor of Political Science Brent Nelsen, an expert on Europe and the European Union. The culmination of the independent study was a paper on how the German education system disproportionately affects the outcomes for ethnic minorities, particularly Turkish students, which Tensley ended up presenting at three conferences, including one in London. “The political science department is very encouraging of students applying to these conferences, just to get the experience of presenting on something that you’ve invested a lot of time in,” he says.

Instead of law school, he pursued and received a Fulbright scholarship. He followed graduation from Furman with 10 months in Essen, Germany, teaching English and researching racism and social inequality in Europe. “The place that I was in was this urban, industrial environment in the western part of Germany, and my students were from all over the world. It was a way for me to see firsthand all of the issues I had been reading and writing about,” Tensley says.

Following his Fulbright with an MPhil in politics from the University of Oxford,

which he received in 2015, Tensley has continued to write on issues of human rights, social inequality, and political violence and governance in conflict-affected and post-conflict states. He has been widely published, including in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Pacific Standard*, *Slate*, *TIME*, and *The Washington Post*. One of 18 Americans selected as a 2015-16 Luce Scholar, he has spent the past year in Thailand as editor of *The Irrawaddy*, an independent publication covering Myanmar and Southeast Asia. After four years abroad, Tensley is now a freelance journalist based in Washington, DC.

Tensley sees being a writer as being an interpreter of sorts, a translator of complex ideas. “In academics, there are so many brilliant people and they have these brilliant ideas, but nobody’s going to sift through their 30-page article to figure out what they’re saying about generally important things,” he says.

Tensley’s goal with writing is to find a way to make issues that are important to him, important to others as well. “I see the journalist role as being that middle man, presenting information in a way that’s easy to digest for people who aren’t experts, who don’t spend all their professional time devoted to these issues.”

Underlying his pursuits remains Tensley’s love of languages, and he advocates the study of modern languages. “I think there’s so much value in languages,” he says. “They give you a window into different cultures, as well as your own culture.”

REAL WORLD EXPERIENCE

“Driving into Helena-West Helena, AR, was like nothing I have ever experienced. As we drove farther and farther away from Memphis, TN, the last town we passed before entering the Delta, I could feel my heart beating faster and faster. My little blue car was packed full of my belongings for the summer as I embarked on an adventure that would change my perspective about poverty and healthcare in America.”

Kjersti Kleine wrote these words in an essay* for the Shepherd Higher Education Consortium on Poverty on the heels of a summer internship. A poverty studies minor, she fulfilled her required internship at the University of Arkansas School for Medical Sciences (UAMS) East, a health education center for the Delta area of Arkansas. For Kleine, it was far more than an opportunity to check the box on a requirement. It was an experience that helped her discover her calling.

Entering Furman with the idea that she might major in chemistry, Kleine was considering a future in medicine. “I was really interested in health care and I liked the idea of helping people overcome their problems, so medicine seemed like a good fit for me at the time,” she says.

Taking Health Sciences 101, a course required for all students, piqued her interest in the broader health field, an interest furthered by attending related Cultural Life Program (CLP) events, which screened documentaries on topics like obesity and other health care issues facing Americans.

“That’s when I started to become really interested in this idea of public health and a little less interested in the hard science classes that I was taking,” she says. At the same time, she was taking introductory classes in philosophy, sociology, and psychology as part of her liberal arts core requirements. Finding that she really enjoyed the humanities and social sciences, she sought a way to connect her interests. She discovered that connection in a health sciences major with a poverty studies minor.

“Once I got more involved with the poverty studies classes and the health science classes, I realized how closely connected they are. Now I want to pursue a career in public health and analyze social determinants that can affect the health of a population,” she says.

Her career choice has been solidified by her out-of-classroom experiences, beginning with a three-week May Experience program her sophomore year with Assistant Professor of Health Sciences Meghan Slining, studying maternal and childhood health in Nicaragua. “My eyes were opened to the complexity of health care and public health access across the world,” she later wrote in the Shepherd Consortium essay.

The summer between her sophomore and junior years, she interned with UAMS East in Arkansas, where she worked at the weekly farmers market, promoting healthy alternatives to such favorite Delta recipes as pickles soaked in Kool-Aid, fried okra, Coca-Cola cake, and fried pie. She also planned and implemented Mission: Nutrition, a camp that educated children on good nutrition by introducing them to new fruits and vegetables, exploring the five food groups and how to read nutrition labels.

In Greenville, Kleine continues to work with Slining as a research assistant on a pilot study of an obesity prevention pro-





KJERSTI KLEINE '17

gram through Greenville County's Early Childhood Childcare centers, and she is a research fellow with Livewell Greenville, conducting research to test the effectiveness of public health intervention programs.

Slining also connected her with the bipartisan nonprofit Save the Children Action Network, and Kleine has twice attended advocacy summits on maternal and child health in Washington, DC. A student ambassador for the program, Kleine has met with senators and representatives of South Carolina and her native North Carolina to discuss strategies to improve the quality of life for children around the world. She started the Save the Children Action Network on Furman's campus, educating fellow students on health issues related to children and encouraging advocacy, and in April was named the inaugural Student Advocate of the Year by the organization.

"My experiences outside of the classroom, in conjunction with my experiences inside of the classroom, have been really transformative for me. When I think about the things that I've done that have made the biggest impact on my vocation and the things that I'm interested in, they all involve an experience outside of the classroom that's related to what I was learning about," Kleine says.

For Kleine, vocation is "finding where the things that you're passionate about can meet the needs of the world."

"I really like thinking about it in that way," she says. "I do think there's a lot of uncertainty going into fields like public health, and there's not necessarily a straight path that I'm going to take. I don't know what kind of organization I'll be working for one day or what types of graduate degrees that I'm going to end up getting. But I do know that this is something I really care about, I'm really passionate about, and there's also a lot of need for it in the world."

** Read the full essay, "Immersion is Vital to Understanding Health Challenges" by Kleine at <http://shepherdconsortium.org/immersion-into-communities-is-vital-to-understanding-poverty>.*





NATHAN MATHAI '17

A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Try everything." It's the advice **Nathan Mathai** received when he first explored Furman, and it's the advice he gives to prospective students when he's conducting campus tours.

As a prospective student from Plano, TX, Mathai visited the business department, thinking he might want to be a business major. "They were awesome," he says. "They say, 'Try everything out, and if you still really want to do something in business, you can always come back to us.' I came into Furman looking at history, political science, business, I think psychology at one point. I was all over the place."

Mathai ultimately discovered a passion

for accounting, which he is majoring in, political science, and education, along with ways to merge his interests.

A pivotal point was taking a world politics class with Professor of Political Science Brent Nelsen. "He encouraged me to apply for the study away in Brussels. When I chose accounting as my major, I didn't think I was going to get an opportunity to study abroad," Mathai says.

At Nelsen's urging, Mathai spent the fall semester of his junior year in the Brussels program, which includes an internship in addition to classes. Mathai was placed in the office of Ingeborg Grassle, a German member of the European Parliament.

"It was a really cool experience because

Dr. Grassle is a chairwoman for a fraud committee, so I actually got to see accountants coming in and giving their opinions on a variety of things affecting the EU. That was really encouraging for me to see, that I can go places with the degree I have. I'm not locked in. I don't have to just become a CPA or do taxes," Mathai says.

The experience also broadened his comfort zone. "The Brussels program very much challenged me to become a citizen of the environment I'm in. It's not a very cushioned study away program. We were living in apartments, so you had to do simple things like take out your trash, and they color-code their recycling, and you had to grocery shop. That forced me to grow," he says.

“THE IDEA OF REFLECTION HAS MADE ME MORE INTENTIONAL WHEN I LOOK BACK ON SUMMERS WHERE I’VE BEEN WORKING, OR JUST REFLECTING ON THE PAST SCHOOL YEAR.”

For the past two summers, Mathai has interned with the Dallas-based National Math + Science Initiative, an education nonprofit that works to improve student performance in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects, where he has worked on their growth and strategy and finance teams. In keeping with his “try everything” philosophy, he also has acted in a Furman theater production, had leadership roles on the Student Activity Board, TEDxFurmanU, and the Admissions Ambassador program, and he’s involved with the Riley Institute’s Advance Team, which plans seminars, discussions, and CLPs related to politics.

Running through this journey of self-discovery is the thread of self-reflection, both in and out of the classroom.

Mathai gives the example of a class he took called Religion and Art that explored the three Abrahamic faiths and their art and architecture. Students were expected to visit a related religious site and write about the experience. He attended a Greek Orthodox service with a friend.

“It was like, OK, we’re going to study this stuff in the classroom, now go out and experience it, then write and reflect on what you’ve learned,” Mathai says. “I’ve found that every professor takes the reflection paper the most seriously. They want to know, what did you

grasp from that? What did you take away? What did you not expect and what surprised you?”

Mathai has found that sharing these reflections with peers also has value. “In every study away program that I know of, you have to keep a reflective journal of some sort. All of us who were in a political office in Brussels met at restaurants and cafes every other week and discussed, this is what’s happening in my office, this is how this entity is reacting to this crisis in Europe right now. I explored a lot about people’s attitudes toward race in the office place in the EU, or normal workplace behaviors. Our professor challenged us to become political scientists that observe and take notes. It really opened my eyes to making the most out of experiences.”

On a spring-break trip to Northern Ireland sponsored by the Cothran Center for Vocational Reflection his sophomore year, Mathai learned a reflection technique from Professor of Mathematics John Harris, who accompanied the group on the trip. “He says, ‘I’m not really good at journaling, but I love to write down words that trigger memories or experiences on trips.’” At the end of the trip, Harris asked everyone to submit words that described each day. He then compiled the words and shared them with all the participants.

“It was really cool to see what different people had picked up on, re-

membered, what was significant to them. From that moment, I’ve taken that approach. When I was in Brussels, for the whole semester I did that with every city I went to on weekends. I would write words for Budapest, Milan, wherever I was,” Mathai says. “The idea of reflection has made me more intentional when I look back on summers where I’ve been working, or just reflecting on the past school year. It’s definitely made me tune in more to my experiences.”

The habit of reflection also has instilled in Mathai a sense of gratitude for his Furman experience. “When I was this wide-eyed freshman going to college, thinking this will be fun, this is an adventure, I never could have imagined all the opportunities that Furman has thrown my way and the people it’s put me in contact with. Being able to reflect is definitely a big way for me to just say thank you and be humble,” he says.

“I remember when I got to go to the TED 2014 conference my freshman year, I felt like, who would have known I’d be this 19-year-old at a TED conference in Whistler, British Columbia. My parents immigrated across the ocean with \$300 to their name, and here I was, all because of a Furman education. It definitely makes me grateful. It also challenges me to think, all right, this is what I’ve learned. Now what can I do?” ●