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Now: Reflection on the Importance of Furman as It Is Now

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AWARD WINNER

More than 14,000 apply but only 2,000 are awarded fellowships from the National Science Foundation. **Kristina Pardo '14** was one of them.

**KRISTINA
PARDO EARNS
A GRADUATE
RESEARCH
FELLOWSHIP**

Furman mathematics professor Liz Bouzarth is aware of multiple people who have applied for a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, but she's known exactly one to receive the prestigious award—**Kristina Pardo '14**.

"Peers of mine who are now professors, when they were in graduate school they were unsuccessful," Bouzarth said.

"She beat out some graduate students for this award. It's very impressive."

The Graduate Research Fellowship Program "recognizes and supports outstanding graduate students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines who are pursuing research-based master's and doctoral degrees." More than 14,000 applied for the 2014 competition, but only 2,000 were offered awards that come with a \$32,000 annual stipend for three years as well as a \$12,000 cost-of-education allowance and XSEDE super-computer access.

Pardo, a double math and physics major, got the news on April 1 and initially didn't believe her good fortune. "No!" the Fort Lauderdale native said when asked if she thought she had a chance to win. "I honestly applied thinking this is going to be good practice for me and I'll try again next year because I'll have a better chance. I wasn't

expecting anything... I really didn't think it was real for a second. It was April Fool's Day."

Applicants' hopes rest largely on their proposed research plan, which is something undergraduate students generally haven't formulated. Pardo, however, spent last summer in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Summer Research Program studying black hole theory. She hopes to continue her studies as part of her PhD program in astrophysics at Princeton.

"I've never worked so hard on something," said Pardo. "I never thought I could work so hard. It showed me that grad school is the right option for me and I am in the right field."

That kind of focus is rare, Bouzarth says. "If you're an undergraduate sitting in college thinking about graduate school it's hard enough to pick a graduate school and decide what field to start studying, let alone pick a research project."

NOW

*Reflection on the
Importance of Furman
as It Is Now*

After graduating in May, I placed all the books I read at Furman on a shelf. The significance of these books could be located in the signs of their use: the bent spine of an anthology of film theory, the underlined passages in Plato's *Dialogues*, the marginalia in one of Faulkner's novels. To see these traces was to be reminded how these texts were central to what it meant to be at Furman. These were books that were lived with, books with coffee stains from studying them over breakfast, and with crumpled pages from tossing them into a backpack in the rush to class. Though debated in classrooms, they gave shape to interactions outside them, informing everything from politics to career

The Furman Scholars program coupled with a music scholarship lured Pardo to South Carolina, but she discovered she did not like music as much as she thought right around the time she found out math wasn't so bad after all.

"I liked math a lot when I was little, and I stopped liking it kind of around middle school because of really bad teachers," Pardo said. "I was in Dr. (John) Harris's 160 class, which is a class you need for your physics major, and I realized that I actually did like math. He was just so good and he's such a nice person and he was so happy to teach this stuff."

"I've known her since she came as a freshman, and she was special from the beginning," Harris says. "She has always been the kind of student that you really like to have in class because she's engaged in the classroom and outside of the classroom, too. She's bright and she's motivated and she's interested in lots of different things."

"I'm interested in cosmology, the



plans to how I spent the weekend.

Academics hardly encompassed all of life at Furman, but the books I studied function as a locus for my memories of campus and the people with whom I lived in community there. A liberal arts diploma is not an excuse to retire these books to a shelf in order to focus on a job. Rather, the diploma is an invitation to pick up a well-worn work and take it with me out the door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Betts '14 studied English and philosophy at Furman. He plans to pursue a career in journalism.

history of the universe, but I don't know what I'm going to end up doing," she said. "I definitely want to do theoretical work, work with math and computers basically. Not too much actual practical stuff. I tend to break things."

—Ron Wagner '93

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF YIK YAK

In *The Republic*, Plato argues that a utopian society emerges out of specialization: The producers create the goods, the warriors protect the society, and the rulers are the well-educated, thoughtful philosophers whose voices are heard above all others. But **Brooks Buffington '13** and **Tyler Droll '13** created Yik Yak, a new social media app, because they believe just the opposite.

"When we were at Furman, there were those few students on campus whose voices were always heard," says Buffington. "They were the popular ones—usually athletes or students who were involved in a lot. They had the most followers on Facebook and Twitter, so their postings got the most views."

"We wanted to create something that would allow an equal playing field for everyone," explains Droll. "We realized the only way to do this was if the users were all anonymous. That's the whole idea behind the app."

With Yik Yak, users post up to 200 characters without signing in or creating any sort of profile or avatar. Their observations are viewable within a 1.5-mile radius of the reader, making the app function as a hyper-local "bulletin board." But it has also been criticized for acting as a hyper-local gossip mill where anonymity fosters hostility.

OVER HEARD

Postings from the Interwebs

KAITLYN BOOTH:

I cannot wait for next year. #FURMAN BOUND

JENNISON HAYES:

It's not going to feel real to me until the day I drive up to Greenville and realize how my life is never going to be the same. #FURMAN BOUND

CAROLINE TRAVAN:

I got that diploma! But first...let me take a selfie with the pres! #FURMAN GRAD

TIERNEY BREEDLOVE:

So President Kohrt just chuckled that awesome laugh as he shook my hand. Guys, if you only knew! He came to my senior recital! #FURMAN GRAD

At Boston College, Yik Yak was taken to task for racist comments posted by users. A student group at the college protested the app and drew national attention.

At another school, a student sent a bomb threat through the app.

These types of controversies are not exclusive to Yik Yak. With an increase in social media outlets, the possibilities for more unfiltered—and faceless—speech increase as well.

In many ways, social media is reframing old debates about human nature: Does anonymity allow for greater candor or greater incivility; does it produce more authenticity or more misinformation? And does the inventor bear responsibility for how the invention is used?

"Anonymity is good in that it provides protection, which hopefully fosters honesty in social discourse," says Furman associate professor of philosophy Aaron Simmons. "Yet social repercussion is a valuable tool for promoting good social behavior, as it leads to moral self-transformation in line with community expectations. Anonymity might, then, work against the very discourse one is trying to encourage."

According to Simmons, in a successful society, everyone—from the user to the inventor—shares responsibility for discourse and the media from which it emanates.

"With innovation, responsibility trickles down through a community," he says. "In the effort to be a responsible citizen of a global community, I would hope that inventors often return to the technology to assess its usage and continually improve it for its users."

With Yik Yak, Buffington and Droll have never stopped trying to improve it. Since its launch in January, the two have blocked the use of Yik Yak on high school and middle school grounds through geo-fencing techniques.

And now users may "upvote" or "downvote" posts to mark approval or disapproval. When a post has many more downvotes than upvotes, it is automatically removed.