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A Letter from the Editors:

K: This semester encompasses many “lasts” for me. My last paper. My last time on stage. And, of course, my last Tempo. For the past few months, these “lasts” are all I can seem to think about. They are what I will focus on when I sit on the football field at Brooks Stadium wearing a black gown and funny square hat awaiting my turn to graduate. They are what I love, what I have invested my time in, what I want to do for the rest of my life. They are my passions.

S: My passions have also shaped my life. My passions for God and family, photography and writing and—as anyone who really knows me will tell you—for music and Bon Jovi. When Krystin and I talked about the importance of passion in a person’s life, it seemed like a perfect idea to make this installment of Tempo our “passions issue.”

K: Our passions come from a deeply-rooted source inside of us that we may not even realize exists. These passions form during our pasts and shape our futures. They are often what categorize us: the athletes, the businessmen, the artists, the activists. They give our lives meaning and purpose. They are also what make us unique and interesting individuals.

S: When we asked our writers to share their passions with us, we were overwhelmed with the diverse responses we received. We read about passions that ranged from travel to family to food to Star Wars. Our eyes were opened in more ways than one as the stories began to flood in, overflowing the pages with pieces of our writers’ very own souls. When we read these stories, we felt as though we knew their secrets and their aspirations. We felt as though we knew them.

K: Reading these stories is what led us to make the decision to include our writers on the cover of Tempo this semester. We related to so many of these stories and finished each piece wanting to talk to the author about their life and their passion. We felt it was absolutely imperative for our readers to see the faces of the men and women who have given their hearts to these tales.

S: Getting all of these passionate individuals together in the same room was an experience we will never forget. It is our wish that through this issue of Tempo, our readers and writers will form a connection to one another, just as we have.

K: It is an indescribable feeling to have such a strong attachment to the voices that speak out on each page of this issue of Tempo. I cannot think of a better way to end my time with this incredible publication. To our writers and our readers, thank you for sharing the past few years with me. Happy reading!

Best regards,

Krystin and Stephanie
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

4  **My Life In Writing**  
Realizing and releasing the power of the pen

5  **Rules Of The Ring**  
Learning the ropes of the wrestling world

9  **Celtic Wonders**  
Explore the lure and lore of Celtic culture

10 **Pledging Allegiance**  
A patriot pays tribute to the freedom that is found in a flag

11 **Rise And Fall... And Rise**  
Uncovering the passion and power of an unlikely love affair

15 **A Passion For Fashion**  
One seasoned fashionista reveals the story behind the seams

19 **Lessons Of Love**  
Step into the life of a real “Scholar”

23 **Meetings And Musings**  
What it’s like to come face to face with two admired authors

---

7  **The Game Of Life**  
Two students shape their futures with dedication, drive and a dream

13  **Flavor Of Love**  
The joys of creating exquisite cuisine and perfecting your palate

21  **Family Ties**  
What really happens when your life is “relatively” replaced

25  **The Story Of Stories**  
Investigating the innate necessity of hearing and telling tales

---

**Cover Models:**  
*Top Row:* Jessica M. Edwards, Corey Thompkins, Kirk Johnson, Caroline P. Smith, Olivia D. Marlowe, Jeremy Anderson, Alison St. Clair  
*Middle Row:* Tasha Sutherland, Melissa Comparato, Brittany Taylor, Taylor Hemple, Adrian Gross, Leigh Hendrix  
*Bottom Row:* Anne-Marie D’Onofrio, Tory Richardson, Ebene Ridley, Jessica Saffran, Lauren Formalarie
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Life Behind The Lens</td>
<td>A photography collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>The Beauty Of Brazil</td>
<td>Recalling the radiance found during days spent along the Amazon River</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Crimes Of The Art</td>
<td>Discover how the allure of glitter crayons can lead to an all-consuming craving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Tales Of A Jedi</td>
<td>One Star Wars enthusiast explains why she simply couldn’t resist the Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Going Green</td>
<td>Find out how exploring the environment can change the way you live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>The Heart Of Africa</td>
<td>One student makes a mark through a mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>A Taste Of The Tropics</td>
<td>Finding respite and relaxation in two heavenly havens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Life In The Limelight</td>
<td>The benefits of choosing a drama-full life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>The Music Man</td>
<td>Defining life through songs from the soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Rave Reviews</td>
<td>Book and music reviews of authors and artists we adore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>The “X”-Girl</td>
<td>Exposing the appeal of the wild world of pornographic erotica</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Writing is communication. Writing gets thoughts down on paper. Writing is therapy. Writing is inventing. Writing is powerful because words are powerful. Writing encompasses everything positive and negative about the world.

Imagine a world without writing. If there was no writing, the only way human beings could truly communicate would be through speech. And if we wanted to remember something—a certain time in our life, a moment, anything—how could we remember every detail without writing it down? That’s what writers do; they capture moments that should be remembered or experienced for the first time by the reader.

I love writing. I’ve called myself a writer for many years now, and I plan on calling myself one for the rest of my life. I started writing in eighth grade when I was assigned a short story in my Honors English class. I wracked my brain for hours thinking about possible ideas for a story. Eventually I got tired of thinking and sat down to watch some kind of murder mystery film. And, for some reason, that sparked an idea. I wrote my first short story that night and handed it in the next day with pride.

I must have written at least five of the worst crime drama short stories ever that year, but I loved them because they were mine. Since then, I have written countless short stories, plays and, most recently, poems. Thankfully, my work has gotten much better since I gave up on the murder mystery genre.

Although I have always considered myself a creative writer (fiction always seemed to be what I gravitated toward most), the college courses I’ve taken have opened my eyes to new writing possibilities. Writing has become my way of inventing characters with qualities similar to the real people in my life who are manipulated in different ways to, in the end, achieve my idea of perfection. These characters constantly reinvent themselves through my work to become the many players in my very own life story.

Writing has also allowed me to creatively describe fantastical moments—the moments that aren’t real but we all wish were. More often than not, these tend to be overly-romantic gestures I’ve dreamt about or seen in movies. Then there are times when I seem to document low points or times I’d like to forget—the argumentative family members, the failed relationships and the self-inflicted emotional pain. I think I write about these topics to remember the life lessons I’ve learned through these experiences.

When my audience reads my work, they get to play these moments out in their own minds. My hope is that perhaps, if even just for a second, my reader can imagine the story as if it is all happening to them. Being able to achieve that kind of connection through a piece of paper makes the process very personal and yet also emotionally satisfying on a broader level.

For me, writing is a release. It releases energy, tension, emotions—everything. I love being able to share my thoughts and feelings with others and have the potential to reach someone on a personal level. Writing has also become my way of breaking through the barriers of everyday life. I write all of my work because my heart is telling me that I have a story and it needs to be told. I try not to think about whether or not people will react negatively to my work or if it’s going to be controversial.

Personal censorship rarely becomes an issue for me. Occasionally, I write creative pieces or personal essays that involve certain subjects that I feel strongly about, like abortion, marriage or the death penalty. I have an insatiable thirst to start writing and continue until everything I want to say is out in the open. This is probably because I firmly believe that writing things down is a very effective way to make a statement.

I also try not to think about the person reading my work, although I have found that attending workshops and making revisions by using other people’s comments are effective tools of the trade. I write my pieces for myself and if I’m happy with the end result, that’s all that matters. And if it came from the heart, that’s even better.

When I’m writing from inside of me, my emotions take over and I barely have time to think about what I’m writing. My creative juices start flowing and my hands seem to be moving on their own. And when I’m on to something good, I rarely ever stop. I just keep going. I move my pen vigorously across the page and keep telling myself, “Don’t think; just write.” So that’s what I do. And that’s what I will continue to do until the pages in my life’s book are finally complete...or at least until my hand gets tired.

Realizing and releasing the power of the pen

Words: Melissa Comparato
Learning the ropes of the wrestling world

What would you do if you could live out any of your childhood dreams? Some people dream of being a teacher or a fireman or an actor. My childhood fantasy has always been a bit different. Since I was eight years old, I have wanted to become a dominant female in the World Wrestling Federation (also known as WWE or World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.).

I've watched wrestling for the past 17 years, and I always said to myself, "If they are ordinary people and they've made it in the business, why can't I?" My dream just so happened to fall into my lap. My friends, Matt and Robbie, explained the wonders of wrestling training to me months before my first meeting with Shannon Moore, the awesome "Prince of Punk." Moore has been an established professional wrestler of the WWE since 1995 and is the owner of the renowned Gas Chamber Ink tattoo parlor.

November 17 marked the first day of the beginning of my new life. So far, I've been in training for almost three months, and I've been keeping a journal to document the struggles and victories of this incredible time. I have learned so much already and I'm sure I will continue to learn and grow throughout this journey. I know this is one of the most over-used clichés in history, but I live by it: "Never be afraid to follow your dreams." Besides, who says they can't come true?

November 16
I can't believe I'm actually doing this. If my mom finds out, she'll probably kill me. My mind is racing with so many questions. What will Shannon be like? Will he be mean to me? Will he be uptight? What do I wear to the ring? God, I hope I don't look like an ass.

November 17
I still can't believe I met the Prince of Punk today! I had jitters the whole time that Matt, Robbie and I drove to Whispering Pines, N.C. I still do. Shannon asked me why I wanted to be in the business, and I almost died when all I could say was that I've watched wrestling since I was three. I felt tears of joy running down my cheeks as I explained how I didn't want to be like those divas on TV who just take off their clothes as they wrestle.

Words: Ebone Ridley
Photo courtesy of: Ebone Ridley
I told him I want to be like one of the guys. I said, “I want competition; I want to be able to give a cruiser weight a run for his money. I want to be the next high-flying Lita.” He completely understood. I can’t wait for next week—especially since I’m one of the first girls he’s ever trained.

November 24
I spent another day in the squared circle and it only got better. My friend, Jackie, has taken the plunge into the “dark side” as well, so now she and I are the only girls attending the prestigious School of Wrestling. Our first lesson consisted of learning some basic moves such as headlocks and arm bars. These are easy enough... until you have to start “selling it,” which is basically the same thing as acting. The moves don’t hurt much, but if you’re in an arena with thousands of spectators, they need to see the “pain” you’re in.

December 1
Jackie and I learned how to run off the ropes the right way, and Shannon made us tire ourselves out on purpose. If you can’t last at least five minutes in the ring without running out of breath, you might be screwed when you have to put a 10 or 30-minute match together. After talking for a while, we all listened to each other cut promos, which consists of telling a story while talking shit to your opponent. For example, I could cut a promo on Pun... I’m totally sere... wed. Maybe I’ll just resist competition; I want to be the next... Mike, you stole my title... Mikal Mosely, you stole my title away from me, but that’s OK because I feel like the sky is the limit... I refuse to fail at this.

December 22

I’ve noticed lately that I no longer have any interest in college. I know it’s wrong, but I feel like I’m more focused on wrestling than theater—which is odd, considering theater is my major. I always feel like there is a huge opportunity for me to shine in theater. I mean, I never took drama courses in high school, and this is actually my second year being involved with theater. But with wrestling, I feel like the sky is the limit and I will not fail. I refuse to fail at this.

December 28

“We will laugh about it later on in life.”

January 20

“Now coming to the ring: Mikal Mosely, Rob Night, The Fabulous Jackie Brown and... Ebone!” OK, so I know there’s nothing original about my ring name. I just wanted to make sure that if my name is ever called, it will be something I can remember.

January 27

I can’t believe it... I’m going to my first show in March! I honestly don’t know what I’m going to wear or do—I feel like I don’t know enough yet to wrestle someone in a show and I don’t feel sexy enough to valet yet. (Valets are the sex pots who accompany the wrestlers ringside.) I’m totally screwed. Maybe I’ll just take pictures or something. Matt already has his wrestling shorts coming in and I don’t even have a character yet.

February 3

I’ve worked out and fought mock matches four days in a row this week, on top of going to rehearsal every night for a play that I am currently stage managing called WAR (women), which opens in a week. The only thing keeping me going is wrestling. As soon as rehearsal ended on Friday, I rode with Matt to Charleston to get wrestling boots. It was midnight by the time we got there, but I was stoked because “Monday Night Raw” came on tonight instead of Monday—and Donald Trump was the special guest!

February 9

We left around 5 a.m. to make sure we were in the ring by 8 a.m. Not only did we get lost (it’s hard finding a road when you can’t see in the dark), but we also got pulled over for speeding. By some stroke of luck, we actually got to the ring with time to spare—three minutes to be exact. When I stepped into the ring, I realized it was really cold. I couldn’t focus today because I couldn’t feel my hands. I took about eight hip tosses from the guys and landed wrong every time. I always landed on my butt or my hip bone instead of my back. I eventually had to stop for the day because I couldn’t even walk. We left around 10 a.m. so we could get back to WAR (women) by 1 p.m. Well, it just so happened that we got pulled over again... in the same county... on the same road.... for speeding... again. We all knew we were getting a ticket as soon as we got pulled over and we talked about how we will laugh about it later on in life. Within minutes of getting the ticket, we were already laughing.

February 17

I am definitely feeling financially drained. I spend at least $60 every Saturday—$50 for training and $10 for food. Not only did I quit my job at the theater department scene shop weeks ago, but I just spent $91 on boots. But I just found out that my debut is on March 23, and I cannot wait to fake-kick somebody’s ass! I can see it now... As soon as I make it in the WWE, I’m coming after Torrie Wilson!
Two students shape their futures with dedication, drive and a dream

Words: Corey Thompkins
Photography: Olivia D. Marlowe

It’s Sunday, Sept. 10, 2006. I wake up at 7 a.m., not even needing a cup of coffee or an energy drink to get me going. As soon as I get out of bed, I put on my black pants, black and blue shoes, black and blue socks and a jersey from my collection. I jump in my car and start heading north on U.S. 501. This day is one that I have been waiting over seven months for... the first day of football season!

As I drive along the highway to Charlotte, I can barely contain my excitement. Once football season begins, there are few things that can make Sunday afternoons better than being in Bank of America Stadium watching my beloved Panthers play a game. When I cross the state line into North Carolina, I know that I’m only five miles away from seeing the green sign that reads: “Bank of America Stadium next right.”

As I walk toward the stadium, I notice a sea of blue, white and black jerseys everywhere. Knowing that kickoff is less than an hour away, I quickly head through the gates and to my seat. Directly across from me, I see the blue and gray seats that make Bank of America Stadium so beautiful. The feeling I get from knowing that I’m about to watch another game gives me a high that nothing else compares to.

My passion for the Carolina Panthers started almost immediately after they became the National Football League’s twentieth franchise. The Panthers were the closest team to where I lived in Winston Salem, N.C., so rooting for them came naturally to me. I remember being excited about taking school pictures in the fourth grade because it meant I would be wearing my Carolina Panthers apparel that day. While all of my schoolmates were proud Cowboys, Redskins and Steelers fans, I relished the fact that I was somewhat on an island with my Panthers love.

Last year, I took being an outsider with my sports team preference to a new level. I was living in New York City completing an internship when the Panthers played the Giants in the first round of the playoffs. I definitely walked around that big city with my head higher after we stunned the Giants 23-0 and advanced in the playoffs.

To say that I’ve experienced highs and lows by watching Carolina Panthers football is an understatement. I remember when we made the Super Bowl three years ago and then lost to the New England Patriots in a nail-biter, and I remember when we won our first game of 2001 and then lost the next 15 games. Living through that 2001 season is the only proof I need to show that I’m a diehard Panthers fan.

Since my sophomore year at Coastal, my passion for the Carolina Panthers has evolved into something greater. My goal is to eventually become the Panthers’ president and CEO. I’m not saying that if a job opportunity came along with a different NFL or NBA team, I wouldn’t take it. But despite all opportunities that may come along, the place I want to be is Charlotte, N.C., with the Carolina Panthers. And since everyone has to work, I figure what better way is there to spend my life than with a team I am truly passionate about?

As much as I enjoy watching the Panthers play, I also have a passion for actually playing football myself. Sometimes I feel like my friends and I resemble 11-year-olds because we are all out on the field playing on Saturday or Sunday mornings. Even though we aren’t getting paid millions like the professionals and we don’t have thousands of fans watching us, we treat every single play as if that’s the case.

I consider myself fortunate to have found something I am so passionate about that has also shaped my goals in life. Despite how challenging it may be to obtain my goal, I know that the end payoff will be greater than the work I’ve gone through to obtain it. Nothing could be better to me than being a member of the Carolina Panthers organization, and it excites me to know in my heart that one day I will be the proud owner of the president’s suite at Bank of America Stadium.
Basketball has taught me that passion is one of the most powerful driving forces in all achievements because it begins with love and grows with sacrifice. To me, passion looks like that famous picture of Michael Jordan dripping with tears and sweat while holding the NBA finals trophy. It looks like tears of joy or disappointment flowing down the faces of the seemingly strongest of men.

My love for basketball began when I sat on the cracked concrete stairs of an old school building as a child, gazing up at the older, more talented boys. They only let me play when they needed more players, which was enough to keep me coming. I showed up every day dressed in my frayed denim shorts, high-top Nikes and neon-colored tank top. I was always either watching or emulating the moves they used while playing on the “good rim”—the one with fewer potholes and grass patches.

I usually showed up early before the summer sun began scorching the pavement to get a few shots in or practice my amateur between-the-legs dribbling. I played against invisible defenders. I was Magic Johnson, Marv Albert and the scorekeeper all at once, taking and announcing my game-winning shot simultaneously. If it went in, I would pump my fist and smile like Magic did.

Back in the day, I played the game because it was fun and it never got old. But before I knew it, the game also became an opportunity. Playing college basketball was something I dreamt about as a child, and I also knew my family had hopes of me earning a degree. Basketball became a tool that could help me make them proud. I tried to practice like each day was the one that determined whether or not I made it to college. The stakes were higher, so the game started to mean more than just fun. This new perspective made me put more heart into it.

In high school, I stumbled around the court with varsity players as a lanky, awkward freshman fresh off a growth spurt. The stumbling lasted for a few years; sometimes I looked like a shoo-in for a Division I prospect and other times I looked like I should just retire. The only real option was to sacrifice more and work harder, which paid off when I was blessed with an athletic scholarship to Coastal Carolina University.

But then I realized that the game now meant even more—a chance to make it to March Madness, to play on the biggest stage under the brightest lights in the tournament that I used to watch on CBS as a high school athlete. I knew I would sacrifice almost anything for this opportunity.

Experience has taught me that success doesn’t fall into your lap just because you love the game. I sat the bench a lot. I battled injuries, surgeries and losing seasons before even being able to contribute on the floor. But the game means more to me because of these times.

Anyone who loves something and sets out to reach a goal will face adversity. There will be times when the outlook is dim when you’re chasing a dream. There will be times when no one believes in you... not even yourself. When you forget what you’ve set out to do,
I first noticed their influence in the 1990s. At the time, singing traditional harp and flute were paired with the words like ‘ance’ almost everywhere. I discovered stories of love and woe, war and celebration. I was transported to a time and place far away, and it was in that moment that my world was overcome with enchanting music.

Back in 1997, Loreena McKennitt's Celtic Wonder was released, and I had been using Celtic words for this ancient civilization. The disk featured famous female Irish vocalists like Niamh Parsons and Deanta—neither of whom I was familiar with at the time—singing traditional Irish songs that date back to the early 19th century. The haunting lyrics told stories of love and woe, war and celebrations.

When I really dug deep into the history of the Celts, I found a fascinating culture as varied as the stars in the sky. I discovered a group of people who respected nature, life, religion and art—both before and after its Christianization. (The Celts of the southern British Isles were Christianized with the Roman invaders, whereas the Celts of the unconquered North were Christianized through missionary work during the Middle Ages.) The Celts didn’t sacrifice animals, but this was always in honor of the changing seasons, in tribute to the gods or in hope of a bountiful harvest. But the Celts were also a warrior people who had conquered most of Europe before the Romans and spread their culture through both contact and invasion.

The word “Celt” is a broad term for the groups of people who spoke Celtic languages and shared a similar cultural and religious identity. Their civilization is thought to have developed around the fifth century B.C. in central Europe, when they were the dominant power. The majority of Celts shifted from central Europe to the British Isles after they were defeated by the Romans on the mainland. Today, people of Celtic ancestry can be found in many places, including Ireland, Scotland, England, France and Wales.

Like many other groups of people, the Celts’ original pagan religion and mythology varied from tribe to tribe, giving the religion a difficult pantheon to trace. This ancient religion included a “Mother Goddess” who was familiar to all tribes, as well as a “Green Man” who represented spring and life. Some aspects of the pre-Christian Celts are still obvious in the icons of the Christian Celts. For instance, the endless knots that are set into the Celtic crosses represent eternity and the endless cycle of life. The Celtic cross can be seen in cemeteries across Europe, but also in store windows across Ireland and the United States.

Although I am still an amateur when it comes to the widely-varying culture and mythology of the Celts, I am a willing student. Glancing through time at a group of people who honored the simple things in life fills me with a great respect for the earth and its inhabitants. My exploration into the Celts’ world has opened my eyes to the broader context of the world, history and religion. I am now more open-minded and eager to embrace a variety of cultures and ideas. When I listen to the music or read the history of these people, I understand their hardships, their joys and their hearts. And, through their expressions, I get a clearer picture of my own.

Celebrate the four major Celtic holidays...

Imbolc (February)—honors the reawakening of spring after winter.

Beltane (April or May)—the most sacred celebration, this fire festival is celebrated with large bonfires lit to purify people and animals.

Lughnasadh (July or August)—a harvest festival with a great feast.

Samhain (October or November)—also known as the Celtic New Year, this is the most important Celtic holiday. Samhain is the time in which the spiritual world invades the real; it is also a celebration of the cycle of life.
Pledging Allegiance

A patriot pays tribute to the freedom that is found in a flag

"I pledge allegiance to the flag, of the United States of America..." It was my favorite part of the school day. As soon as I heard the intercom switch on, I was always the first one to stand up, face the flag and place my right hand firmly over my heart. I remember standing at attention as I'd seen my father do thousands of times and saying The Pledge of Allegiance louder and with more pride than anyone else. I felt it was my responsibility since my father was in the United States Marine Corps and served his country on a daily basis. I used to get goose bumps when I recited those words every morning in elementary school. I wanted everyone to know that I was proud of my father, the military and the freedom our country has as a result of those brave men and women.

My favorite sight to look at in Myrtle Beach is not a beach sunset over a pier or the ocean horizon on a cloudless day. It is the huge American flag that flies night and day, rain or shine, outside of the Tanger Outlet Shopping Center on U.S. 501. It catches my eye every time I drive past it and it reminds me of how much I love America and everything this country stands for. When I left home to come to Coastal Carolina University, I made sure I had an American flag with me to hang in my dorm room. That same flag has traveled with me as I’ve moved all over Myrtle Beach during the past four years. It even hangs over me now as I write this and reminds me to be thankful for the prosperity of this nation.

This country was founded on three beliefs I was raised with—God, freedom and independence. The story of America is unlike any other country’s story. Despite the fact that we live in a comparatively young country, we have still been a dominant world power since the turn of the 20th century. "The American Dream" is a widely-spoken statement and one that is not solely used by Americans. People come to America from all over the world in pursuit of this dream—not the European Dream, not the African Dream, not the Asian Dream. It is the American Dream. It is the pursuit of this dream that made America what it is today, and it is this pursuit that continues this country's prosperity.

My passion for America extends beyond my thankfulness for the freedom and rights we are given as citizens. I love that America is a conglomerate of varying states that each have their own culture. Being a South Carolinian, a Californian or a Kansan is second only to being an American. Each state is individual and has its own laws, customs, slogans, foods, economies, flag and reputation. Texas is known for its cowboy hats and bluebonnets; Idaho for its potatoes; Florida for its beaches; Georgia for its peaches; New Jersey for its attitude. All of these differences appeal to the plethora of preferences the American people have. Part of the beauty of America is that its citizens can move wherever they want, whenever they want, until they find that perfect niche where they feel home.

I once traveled overseas to Japan and, while I enjoyed the different culture and the experiences I had there, I noticed certain things about America that I missed. The food was a huge factor. In the States, if I’m in the mood for Italian food, I can go to Olive Garden. If I have a hankering for Mexican food, I head to El Cerro Grande. When I was in Okinawa, I had to convince my mother to make a home-cooked meal with a foreign theme. Many people take the opportunity to eat whatever genre of food they’d like for granted, but food is a crucial part of American culture as it used to be the basis of our economy. My family always gathered around the dinner table every night (another wonderful American tradition) so I can’t ignore the convenience our culture has provided in this aspect.

I don’t know if every country in the world celebrates a specific day of independence, but I believe that the Fourth of July is the only holiday on the globe that is still celebrated for the same reasons it was over 200 years ago. There is no way to misconstrue the celebration of our country's freedom from tyranny into something completely different and unrelated. Independence Day is my favorite holiday and I’ve always felt that we should dedicate an entire week to the celebration. The American people often don’t realize how blessed we are to live in such a magnificent country, and this perception might be remedied if we were reminded more often of this simple fact.

There is no denying that we have our crime rates and poverty rates and a national debt in numbers too great to convey. The majority of people now are even questioning our current government’s ability to perform its various functions. But if these are the only things that American citizens focus on, they will never be able to fully appreciate the freedom that is The United States of America. If we could all just take a step back and compare the United States to other countries, we would see that we truly are a nation “under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” And that is something to be proud of.

Words: Caroline P. Smith
Before I started writing this, I really had to stop and ask myself why—why do I have a passion for religion and for Christianity? And then I realized something... I don't. The word "religion" connotes rules—things we do that are right and wrong. I think that, for many of us, religion just seems like a bunch of people telling us what to do with our lives so that we can have the best possible outcome when we die.

Nothing about this system of rules appeals to me. I think many people are the same way. We break rules simply because we can, because they are there. We download music without paying for it or speed on U.S. 501 while not wearing a seatbelt. We constantly break rules. It is not this religion of rules and judgment that I have a passion for—it's Christ. The word "passion" is synonymous with "love." And I am in love with Christ because He changed my life.

For a large part of my life, I thought I was a good person. I had a wonderful family, I was practically raised in the pews of a Methodist church, and I was nice to people... most of the time. Therefore, I was a Christian.

I had a great childhood, and I don't remember anything terribly tragic or unsettling happening when I was younger. Life was good and I was happy. I think that when we're children, we are blind to the hardships of life.

Everything is
centered on our happiness, which, as a child, does not take much.

Somewhere around the beginning of high school, things started becoming a little less easy. It took more than ice cream after dinner and a later bedtime to make me happy. In high school, everything seemed like such a big deal. The things that made me happy made me really happy, and the things that hurt seemed to really hurt. The petty comments made in the lunch line, the bad grade on a test, the boy who didn't like me back—all of these things seemed to hurt a little bit deeper. So I began to live more for the happy things. I tried to have the most friends, I tried to have the best clothes, I tried to be the prettiest and the most popular—anything to make me happy at the end of the day.

I can remember lying in my bed at night, completely exhausted from trying to please everyone and wondering how I was going to wake up the next day and do it all over again. I think what I was feeling is something that we all feel; it’s almost like a human condition where we have a sense of emptiness and a need to be happy and to feel complete.

I’ve recently been reading a book about finding happiness in God instead of in other things in the world. In the book, the author uses a quote from Blaise Pascal, a famous 17th century philosopher. I think Pascal must have felt the same way I did at some time because his words seem to relate to what I was going through.

In *Penses*, a series of essays, Pascal wrote about the meaning of life, he says, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

I think that there’s a lot of truth in this bold statement. I saw it mirrored in my own life: I chose to embark on a self-created war to find happiness. I entered into a five-year battle with alcohol, eating disorders and depression. I lived a life of drunkenness and perversion to distract myself from the real pain I was feeling and attempted to find happiness.

Once I realized that happiness didn’t lie at the bottom of a bottle, in a large group of “friends” or in a beautiful body, I got depressed. I lost hope. Nothing was ever good enough and I didn’t know what else to do in order to be satisfied and fulfilled with my life.

I went to church every Sunday with my family because that’s what you do when you’re a Christian—you go to church. But it never took away the pain. My family knew something was wrong, but they never knew what. They saw my life spiraling downward and did everything they could to stop it, but they couldn’t fix me.

I completely destroyed every relationship I had. The hurt inside was so immense that the only thing I knew how to do was take it out on other people. My large group of friends got smaller and smaller and I pushed my parents so far away that they didn’t know how to get back in.

I thought college would be a chance to start over, to leave everything at home and finally be happy. But apparently problems don’t stay where you leave them; they always seem to find a way back in. I was happy at Coastal for a while—meeting new people, enjoying classes, going to the beach, going crazy on the weekend. But somehow, things were still never OK. I would always convince myself that it was OK to never eat, that alcohol could fix things, that being prettier or skinnier would make things better. I eventually ended up more depressed than I had ever been.

When one of my friends noticed how completely miserable I was, she asked me to go to church with her. I thought to myself, “Sure, I’ll try God. Nothing else seems to be working.” So I went to church and I heard the same words I had listened to every Sunday of my entire life: “Jesus loves you.” But it was different this time; this time, it actually meant something.

I realized for the very first time that Jesus really does love me. He loves me so much that He died so that I could be happy—wholly satisfied and fulfilled. And this happiness wasn’t like the kind I felt during a good night of drinking before a very, very bad morning. This joy wasn’t temporary. It was eternal; it was real.

And then I recognized that the only thing standing between my pain and this joy was myself. I was messed up. I was broken. I was hurt. And the only thing that could fix me was Christ. Everything else—drinking, hooking up, looking perfect, being skinny—was never good enough. It was never good enough because Jesus is the only thing that is. He’s the only thing that ever made me happy, that made me feel full and alive. This is why I’m in love with Christ. This is why Christ is my passion. Because life with Jesus makes me feel and it makes me love.

I think Pascal was right when he said even the man who seeks relief from life through desperate means is looking for happiness. I think it’s what we all look for in life. For so long, I tried to find it in so many other things, but there was always something missing and always an emptiness left in my heart at the end of the day. Now I find happiness every day in knowing that Christ died for me and that, above everything else, He wants a relationship with me.

This doesn’t mean that life is perfect or easy. Life still gets hard sometimes. Each day has the possibility for uncertainty and for more pain. I still fall flat on my face and it still hurts. I just have a hope now at the end of the day, and things never seem as bad as they were before. As hard as life can get, it’s never enough to destroy me. I have a Savior who loves me, and every single day that is where I find my joy.
Flavor of Love

The joys of creating exquisite cuisine and perfecting your palate

I have an addiction. It is not something I am particularly proud of, but it is a part of my life nonetheless. I am addicted to The Food Network. When I get bored in the afternoons or late at night, some of my best friends are Alton Brown, Mario Batali, Emeril Lagasse and Paula Deen.

The Food Network is such an easy channel to leave on, because it doesn’t require you to sit down and actually watch the programs. You can just casually listen to it while you’re doing homework, reading or browsing Facebook, which is good for me, because I have an increasingly short attention span—especially when I’ve had my Frappa-Cappuccino from Port City Java.

My favorite show is “Good Eats.” Hosted by Alton Brown and filmed in Atlanta, Ga., the show reveals the “science” behind food by exploring the “formulas” of cooking. Brown also provides the answers to tough food questions, such as what causes peppers to be hot and why peanut butter sticks to the roof of your mouth.

I used Brown’s fail-safe plan last fall to bake a perfect Thanksgiving turkey for my family. He devoted an entire episode to this, guiding me step by step through the whole process from thawing to carving. That delectable family dinner makes me think about another one of my favorite shows, “Paula’s Home Cooking,” where Paula Deen cooks all kinds of traditional Southern comfort foods that remind me of meals I have enjoyed with my grandparents.

There are also travel shows, such as “$40 A Day,” in which perky Rachael Ray goes to exotic vacation spots and budgets only $40 to spend on three delectable meals. It is always interesting to see if she can manage this task, especially in expensive cities like Maui, Denver and New York City.

Just like marijuana is called a “gateway drug,” my Food Network addiction has led to another one: cooking. When I watch the channel nowadays, it is not merely for entertainment. Sometimes when I see Emeril baking pork chops or Bobby Flay grilling chicken, I get inspired to try it myself.

I rarely follow the recipes exactly; I always add my own little twists on the original. Cooking is a good skill to have at any age, but I think it is especially useful in college. It always helps to be able to take a break from my hectic class schedule and just cook myself something nice—or even better, to cook something nice for others.

Cooking for friends and family has become one of my favorite things to do. I enjoy seeing the looks on their faces when they try the meal I have created, and the best part is I always get to eat it, too. My cooking skills also haven’t hurt me when it comes to dating and relationships. If you don’t really have money to buy an extravagant gift for that significant other, you can just cook them an elegant dinner for half the price of taking them out to eat. After all, it’s the thought that counts, right?

With all of this talk of food, I’m starting to get a little hungry, so I’m going to head down to Kroger. I think I might take my time and browse the aisles rather than just grabbing the necessities. I’ll see what inspires me this time. I suggest you do the same. I promise you that cooking is nowhere near as difficult as they make it look on TV. Besides, if you do mess up, there’s always Jimmy’s Hibachi...
Lemon Lime Shrimp

Ingredients (Serves 4):
- 20 jumbo shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- 2 cups chopped fresh cilantro
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large lime, zested and juiced
- 1 large lemon, zested and juiced
- 2 garlic cloves
- Salt and pepper (to taste)

Instructions:
1. Toss shrimp in a bowl. Add chopped cilantro and lemon and lime zests.
2. Heat oil in a large skillet and cook garlic for 30 seconds or until you can smell it. Add a sprinkling of salt to the oil.
3. Add shrimp (with cilantro and zests) to the skillet and cook for five minutes or until the shrimp is opaque.
4. Transfer shrimp into a serving bowl and drizzle with remaining oil and cilantro.
5. Squeeze lemon and lime juice over the dish and add pepper. Serve immediately over salad greens or pasta.

Note: This is a recipe I saw on The Food Network Web site, foodnetwork.com, and added some of my own twists to. There is a lot of room to play around with this dish, especially in how you serve it.

My Mom’s Breakfast Casserole

Ingredients (Serves 6-8):
- 1 lb. package bulk sausage
- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups grated cheddar cheese
- 6 eggs
- 6 slices of toast
- Salt and pepper (to taste)

Instructions:
2. Combine milk and eggs with 1 ½ cups of cheese. Add salt and pepper.
3. Pour mixture into an 11” by 14” pan that has been generously coated with cooking spray.
4. Add crumbled sausage throughout the mixture.
5. Break slices of toast into one-inch pieces and push them down into the mixture.
6. Top the casserole with remaining cheese and cook at 350° for about 45 minutes.

Note: This is a recipe my mother got from a friend at our church. My mother will only make this particular dish once a year on Christmas morning. It is a long-standing tradition in my family. The dish is pretty simple, but feel free to have some fun with it. Add some hot sauce or different herbs and spices, or try a different kind of cheese.
One seasoned fashionista reveals the story behind the seams

For me, fashion is more than a passion; fashion is a lifestyle that reveals what’s behind the seams. A lot can be said about someone based on what they’re wearing. People change outfits and outfits change people. Fashion and personal style are influenced by culture, personality and mood. Fashion is not about wearing a specific brand or keeping up with the latest trends. Fashion is about the look, the statement and the story that is revealed, starting at the seams.

Anyone who knows me knows that I’m dressed up 90 percent of the time. Why? Well, the short answer is because I feel like it. But the real answer is that fashion reflects who I am. I wouldn’t say that I’m a trendsetter, a fashion addict or a shop-a-holic. But I would say that I have a “fashion feeling”—an understanding of what I like and who I am.

My mentor, Linda Kuykendall, once told me, “Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” I couldn’t agree more. Professionalism is more than an accessory; it’s the runway to my future. I see trends as a challenge and match them with my personality. Trying to balance professionalism and the latest trend can be as difficult as keeping a white suit white, but I know that I’m designing my own “brand” and my style is a sample of the direction I am headed in life.

My closets are a collection of my personality. On the rare occasion that I’m not dressed up, people always ask me if everything is OK. This is because over the years, I’ve designed my own style—professional yet trendy—and when I’m not representing my own brand, people notice.

What most people don’t know is that when I’m at home, I display what I call my “play” style. When I’m on campus, it’s difficult to catch me wearing the same outfit twice. But when I’m at home, my neighbor has to remind me to rotate the color of my Wal-Mart sweatpants. Working out is my anger management, and there is something about wearing sweatpants that tells me to work out or chill out.

I think of the fashion seasons as “work” and “play,” not “spring” and “fall.” There are two elements that are the foundation of my style: the color black and my shoes. I love to wear black—not because I’m gothic, depressed or know how to cast spells. I think the color black is professional, strong, classic, timeless, chic and simply posh. If I own a piece of clothing in another color, it’s usually because I already have it in black. Black works for me. We all have a signature color and we should know that color and work with it.

Accessories can make or break an outfit, and I believe that the single most important accessory is the shoes. Some people collect stamps, sports memorabilia or shot glasses. I collect shoes. I like to think of shoe shopping as my way of “sole searching.” Shoes provide your platform, your base, your balance, your height and your first step to completing any ensemble. Shoes describe your present by the style and cut and they tell your past by the sole and scuffs. Shoes can provide comfort or inflict pain. They can be longtime friends or short-lived sidekicks.

My passion for fashion is always evident when I wear the most beautiful pair of shoes in my collection: my black patent Manolo Blahnik’s. They’re stunning, elegant, sassy and worth every penny. I think of shoes as an investment... and if I had as many investments in the stock market as I have shoes in my closets, I would be rich.

A completed ensemble has the power to change mindsets and bring out different elements of people’s personalities. I decided to find out what happens when you take three Coastal girls with personalities and ambitions as different as their clothing style and have them pick out their favorite outfit from izzi-b. izzi-b is a boutique where you can find high-quality clothing, jewelry, shoes, intimates and accessories from top designers like Habitual, TRUNK LTD, James Perse, Joie, 7 and nikki b New York. Each girl came out with a different look that put each of them in their own class of style.

The unique looks these girls created show that we should follow our intuition, not just the latest fad. We live in a world of fashion that will continue to change, but that doesn’t mean we have to. Trends will come and go, but style is forever. Your style should always be a sketch of who you are—with or without a trend. If I wear my Manolo Blahnik’s or my Wal-Mart sweatpants, what lies behind the seams is always the same.

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Lindsay Haggard
Sophomore, Psychology Major
On Lindsay: capris by LTB—$45; top by James Perse—$50; shoes by Seychelles—$80; accessories by nikki b, NY—$42
Nina Oates

Freshman, Health Promotion Major

On Nina: tunic by Joie South Side—$225; leggings by Joie—$33; shoes by Seychelles—$88; accessories by nikki b, NY—$42
Allison Evans  
Senior, Sociology Major  
On Allison: jeans by Habitual—$189; flow top by French Connection—$98; cashmere alligator muffy hat by Eugenia Kim—$205; earrings by Zoe Chicco—$99
Lessons of Love

Step into the life of a real “Scholar”

Freshies

It started in the summer of 2003. Hordes of eighth graders sat around wondering if they should join this new program called Scholars Academy (S.A.). All of us were picked because of our remarkable SAT scores and good grades. No one knew for sure what S.A. was, but 22 of us decided to take a chance.

On that first sweltering day of school in August, our three supervisors tried to keep all of us together as we entered our new home on the second floor of University Hall at Coastal Carolina University where we would be attending classes during our “high school years.”

I was antisocial and didn’t know any of the kids there, even the ones from my own school. I sat near the back of the room, clinging tightly to my best friend, Sara Cox. I still couldn’t comprehend how the heck I got this opportunity. I knew I was smart, but these kids seemed like geniuses.

Our first real test, interestingly enough, came in the form of an online political science course. There were no deadlines, so it became an everyone-goof-off-and-watch-music-videos-class. Then at the end of the semester, almost every freshman tried to do the whole workload in a single week. It wasn’t pretty. That course created an Internet addict out of me, and by the late fall I had a boyfriend, Carson, who was an Internet junkie as well. He was leaving S.A. in the spring due to his exuberant amount of apathy toward a certain aforementioned political science course and the S.A. program in general.

In the spring, I found myself in my first college course: Physics 201. I had actually developed an appetite for theoretical physics, due to a summer spent with my uncle who loved the writings of Stephen Hawking and Carl Sagan, so I felt ready. Taking this course was such a strange experience. Instead of coming home at 3 p.m. like I had every other day, I came home early at 1 p.m. to cheese puffs and Comedy Central. The college students were bigger, taller and actually understood what the professor was teaching. It took a little while for me to catch up, and the fact that I was learning Algebra II at the same time didn’t help.

Our S.A. class instinctively cloistered together and formed small groups. There were only six of us from North Myrtle Beach, and we had an empty school bus all to ourselves. We left the high school parking lot at 6:30 a.m. with the best bus driver imaginable, Ms. Sharon. She would spout off her opinions about topics ranging from abortion to hotties in Virginia Beach, and she always stopped at a gas station so people could grab a candy bar. On the last day of the school year, Ms. Sharon stopped the bus at Oliver’s, a greasy burger joint. I can still smell the French fries mixed with diesel fuel.

Sophies

I was tired. I had just endured another autumn night of mental breakdowns. And I was not alone. Our new teachers were so excited that they had “intelligent” young students, so they gave us generous amounts of homework to keep us mentally active. S.A. had claimed a new residence in a small nook on the first floor of Kearns Hall. We had our own room with beanbag chairs and lamps where we could relax in between classes that we called (for reasons unknown) Las Vegas.

All of us staggered off the North Myrtle Beach bus into the darkness, found a beanbag chair and fell into it. Chelsea began to snore. Dayne sprawled his body across the table. Everyone fell into this sort of fashion until we were all sleeping in the darkness of Las Vegas. This day describes our sophomore year perfectly.

Our companionship grew because we all shared one thing: all of us were overworked and tired. There were only 12 of us left, due to others not being able to keep up with the workload, and we were becoming one large group. All of us could commiserate and joke together, and everyone started opening up.

We also had something few other high school kids have: freedom. We were the first S.A. class, and we called ourselves “the guinea pigs.” Our class
was given a lot of freedom because no one knew how far was too far and we had a lot of fun because of it. For instance, one of our teachers took us to a white gazebo on a spring day to discuss Darwin’s theory, and the period ended with us showing him that we really could pick him up with only our fingertips.

Of course, I didn’t relate to these kids at first. At the beginning of the year, I felt lonely. Sara and Carson had both left, and I didn’t really know any other people at S.A. I had even toyed with the idea of leaving S.A., so I went to our base high school for a day and visited some classes. I realized that I would never see my friends if I went there because I was taking upper-level courses. I also realized that I wasn’t as lonely as I thought; my English teacher called me that night and I realized that I would never see my friends if I went there because I was taking upper-level courses. I also realized that I wasn’t as lonely as I thought; my English teacher called me that night and I realized that I would never see my friends if I went there because I was taking upper-level courses. I also realized that I wasn’t as lonely as I thought; my English teacher called me that night and I realized that I would never see my friends if I went there because I was taking upper-level courses. I also realized that I wasn’t as lonely as I thought; my English teacher called me that night and

I realize now that it was the right decision to stay at S.A. because I would have been miserable anywhere else. When I look at pictures from this time, there is one in particular that stands out. It is of all of us sitting on a rock near the library after gym class. When I look at that photo, I realize that these people had become my friends. I knew who they were, what was new in their life, their backgrounds. And they knew me.

Junior Minties
At the start of my junior year, the 10 of us who were left started picking out more Advanced Placement and college courses since our high school requirements were pretty much completed. Most courses had some S.A. students in the class, but we also chose classes that separated us. Even though everyone started taking different courses, we still met up as a group, especially when there was free food on the Prince Lawn.

Our entire group sat on the stairs of the Eldred E. Prince Building during Club Recruitment Day, freezing our butts off and eating semi-warm Papa John’s pizza. Before we made another trip to the food stand, we looked at a few of the booths begging for new recruits to join their clubs. Before we finished, Dayne had unknowingly “signed up” for the Philosophy Club and the Fishing Club. “It comes with your tuition”—how I love that phrase.

S.A. moved back to University Hall and we were all together and away from most supervision since the maximum security and attention was placed on the new freshmen. Most of the time, we danced and acted silly. I was always the deejay, playing some classic ‘90s tunes, and I usually found myself doing a bad attempt at the tango with Devon.

These people had superseded friend status. Over the past three years, everyone had seen the best and worst of each other. We could read each other like books, and we knew everyone’s quirks and pet peeves. We annoyed the heck out of each other at times, but we cared about each other. Yes, we were a family.

At the end of the year, I started helping out with Coastal’s theater department, working on the stage crew for two plays, Still Life with Iris and Second. I became friends with more college students from my classes and from these two plays, and I started to recognize more Coastal students who I used to ignore. You see, it’s an unspoken rule that S.A. students shouldn’t mingle with college kids. I’ve broken that rule many times, and I am a great example of why S.A. is now placing more focus on what the students do and who they’re with.

The Finalists
Devon sits down with her caramel macchiato with whipped cream and we chat—about our lives, about how the freshmen are holding up, about how we miss seeing everyone. We talk about how none of us are together anymore and how there are only nine of us left from the original 22. (One could say the workload over the past four years has been “rigorous.”)

I am now one of the worst about not keeping contact with the S.A. family. The bus situation has changed so that now everyone has to share a bus that is overflowing with people who are not nice to us. Also, Ms. Sharon was taken off of our bus route and replaced with an older gentleman who turns away from what he sees occur on the bus. Having people try to pick fights with me when all I want to do is look out a bus window propelled the wanting of a car.

Because I now own a car, I chose courses that would be easier and fun for my last semester. I had freedom to pick anything I wanted, so I chose courses that begin at 10:30 a.m., so I don’t have to wake up until 9 a.m., unlike my previous 5:30 a.m. wake-up calls. I never stop at S.A. headquarters anymore; I just go to my classes and leave. I’m not alone on this. One girl chose to take nothing but AP online courses, so she never really comes to S.A. at all. We are now focusing on the degrees we want to attain, so we are splitting apart.

I still see Devon and some of the others every now and then, but we’re no longer pushed into one room and supervised. I’ve grown to know some of the Coastal students better than some of the S.A. seniors. I barely see them now, and I really miss being with them. They are still my family, and I love them. As this four-year experiment and experience comes to an end, I realize how important family is. And even though I know that sometimes families split apart to begin the different lives that beckon, the roots of that family are always there. My roots just happen to be planted on the soil of a college campus.
Mama hugs—there’s nothing like them. The way her arms feel as they wrap around your shoulders that seem to sag into her. The way her soft hair grazes your face and smells sweet against your cheek. The way her body exudes a rosy warmth all of the time. The way that just one little word—“baby”—can make you feel better when you’ve had a rough day. Even when you think you’re too big to need anybody, you still need her.

Last semester, my family moved to the Middle East for a year-long stay. This was a curveball for me because I lived with my family throughout my first four years of college. This meant that for the first time, I was forced to live by myself. No mom, no sister, no brother, no stepdad. Just me. Well, me and Daisy, my sister’s dog.

My stepdad, Marios, got accepted as a faculty member at an American university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). After a short time apart, while Marios got acclimated to his new surroundings in the Middle East, Mama decided to move to the UAE. We decided that my living alone for one solid school year would be a good experience. After all, we already had a house in Conway where I could stay.

Not leaving the nest during college may seem crazy to some college students, but for me, it never was. My mom always trusted me and gave me plenty of freedom. On more than one occasion, she actually pushed me to go out more. She knows she doesn’t have to worry about me. She knows I just need her to be there for me—and she always has been. Who was the one who kept me going even when I felt like giving up? Mama. Who was there to help me fight my battles? Mama. Who was my best friend, provider, cook and counselor? Mama.

This was the first time I had to learn what life equaled minus Mama. When my family first moved to the Middle East in August, I went with them; this was supposed to help me when it was time for me to leave my family behind. Instead, my impending departure seemed to hang over my trip like a suffocating afghan. Saying goodbye was even harder.

On D-Day (Departure Day), the UAE airport security people were nice enough to let Mama and Marios walk with me farther into the terminal than they were technically supposed to. This sure didn’t make the goodbyes any easier. Instead, it allowed me more time to miss what I couldn’t possibly miss yet, since I wasn’t even out of their sight.

I started crying as soon as we got in line for my first baggage search. I had to leave Mama and Marios soon after that. I waved back at them as I quickly walked in the opposite direction down the terminal—which I swear got darker the farther away I got from them. My eyes still searched for my mama through the tears. I knew our separation would be rough, but I had no idea how hard it would be until I returned to the States, back to an empty house and a lonely puppy.

Traveling overseas was exhausting, and I came back to school a week after classes had already begun. I automatically felt behind, which was hard for me to deal with since I’m a perfectionist. The fact that I took seven classes, worked part-time and took care of Daisy only made matters worse. I divided up the remainder of my time between other campus activities and spending time with my grandparents and my boyfriend.

On top of that, I had jetlag for about a month. I’ve heard that if you count each hour that you travel by plane, that’s how many days it will take you to recover from jetlag. For example, a 19-hour flight would take you 19 days to recover. I believe this assessment wholeheartedly. I was so tired and emotional when I returned to the States that I cried in quite a few of my classes.

Everything seemed more difficult and my problems seemed amplified simply because I didn’t have my support team. Even though we were worlds apart from each other, my family still tried to keep in touch and be there for me as much as they could with an eight-hour time difference interfering. This said a lot, since it’s pretty expensive to make phone calls from the Middle East—thank God for e-mails and text messages!
It's so true that you never really know what you have until it's gone. I regret things that I took for granted—sharing a room with my little sister; enjoying our noisy house; Mama cooking the meals and cleaning the house; my younger brother mowing the lawn. But most of all, I just miss being able to spend time with them. I even miss our arguments.

Alexis is the youngest child in our family. She is also one of my best friends. Even though she's only 13, Lex is very mature. She is very expressive, and she writes and sings. When we were kids, I got easily annoyed with my snooping kid sister, not knowing that she was just trying to be like me. And it didn't help that she always cried. But as we got older, we got closer. Lex and I always seem to get over our issues with each other because we realize how much we really need one another.

Tyler's my younger brother—and I say "younger" instead of "little" because he is over 6 feet tall, which technically makes me the little one. Tyler's nickname is "New," which is short for "Newman" after the "Seinfeld" character. Even though Tyler looks nothing like the real Newman, I think I've just always liked to say, "Hello, Newman" like Jerry does. Doing this still brings a smile to my face.

New has put up with so much over the years, especially living in the same house with four females: Mama, Lex, Daisy and me. Some people might think living with a bunch of women would have a negative effect on a growing boy, that he might grow up being overly emotional and less masculine. But New has turned out quite well—a well-adjusted genius, in fact. At 15, he has already taken a few years of college courses, and he wants to become an engineer. He is always competing at high levels in chess tournaments, as well as in spelling and geography bees... and he's quite a handsome young man.

Over the years, it has always been Mama and me taking care of New and Lex. In the process, they have taken care of us, too. Marios entered the picture when Mama was working at Coastal; they met, became workout buddies and fell in love. Marios has been a generous stepdad, and I'm very grateful he has taken care of our family and not given up during the trying times. My mom and stepdad have been married for almost 10 years now, but my stepdad has spent a lot of that time teaching in other countries, which hasn't always made their marriage easy. But they still always make it work.

I never realized how much I truly depended on my family members, especially Mama. Since they have been away, I have had a lot of time to reflect and think about all of my experiences during the last four years. And after everything I have been through this past school year, I finally understand that I have not been alone through it all. I have had my friends by my side, seeing me through the hard times.

My grandparents still help me through this time. Granny is always willing to come spend the night with me, cook for me or watch Daisy so I can get some work done. Papa is ready to catch me every time I want to just let go or disappear. He holds me, lets me spill a river on his shoulder and promises me that everything will be OK. He puts up with my mood swings. He knows my secrets and my worries. He still chases my "boogie men" away, like he did when I was little.

I've been so blessed by the people who God has placed around me in order for me to grow and succeed. These people are my guards; they stand on the watchtowers of my soul, keeping vigil through any storm.
What it's like to come face to face with two admired authors

Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim
David Sedaris
Back Bay Books—$14.99
Length: 272 pages

What it's like to omeface with two admired authors

David Sedaris' newest collection of stories, Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim, provides another hilarious look into his wacky life. The book opens up with the story "Us and Them," which details a young Sedaris' fascination with the family across the street who did not own a television and the subsequent inadequacies they experienced because of it. Sedaris also tells of the time he spent as a hippie so he could beg for money at fairs, ballparks and outside of stores, as well as his obsessive-compulsive need to touch random strangers' heads on planes, buses and elevators. As in his previous books, Sedaris' family meanders throughout the bulk of these stories, providing the reader with a greater image of what the Sedaris clan must be like. I recommend that you run—not walk—to get this national best-seller that will make you realize you might not be as weird as you think.

Beach Music
Pat Conroy
Bantam Books—$15
Length: 784 pages

Although Pat Conroy has written many critically-acclaimed novels, one of his most beautiful and heartbreaking works is Beach Music. This book follows the path of a man widowed after his wife throws herself from a bridge, and the subsequent actions he must take to raise his daughter and uncover the secrets behind his wife's death. Protagonist Jack McCall's story weaves between his old life in South Carolina and the new life he makes in Rome after his wife's suicide. This beautifully-written novel combines Conroy's fluid style with an obvious love for his roots, all of which is interwoven within this haunting story. The South is Conroy's home, and after reading this novel, readers will want it to be their home, too. Beach Music is a love story, but it's also a story about a man trying to heal, rebuild and reconcile his wife's mysteries with his own.

Words: Laura Mogel
Photography: Lauren Formalarie
As a lover of reading, I have always read anything I can get my hands on: books, magazines, cereal boxes, supermarket circulars. I've even devoted my academic studies to the art of reading. As an English major, I frequently read texts that are hundreds of years old, such as those by Chaucer, Shakespeare and Austen. I often ask myself, "What were these people like? What did they look like? What did they sound like?" Outside of the sketched portraits that accompany their works, I really have no tangible sense of what these authors were like as people. While this is not necessary to garner an appreciation or love for their works, seeing the writer and hearing them makes their words more powerful and resonant.

I did some research this past fall and found out that two of my favorite writers were going to be in the South and within driving distance. So on October 15, I made the five-and-a-half hour drive to Atlanta, Ga., to see David Sedaris.

Ah, David Sedaris. Ten months before my visit to Atlanta, a friend of mine gave me a very slim book entitled Holidays on Ice. I remember thinking, "Sure, this will be some light reading for the winter break." In less than two hours, I had finished the entire book. As I turned each page, my laughter grew and grew. Some were cackles. Some were smirking laughs that said, "You got that right, buddy." Some were belly laughs. Some were eyes closed, mouth open, I-need-to-catch-some-air laughs.

I read about Sedaris' experience as Crumpet, a Macy's elf, one winter in Manhattan when he needed work because he still had not gotten the callback for his dream job as a screenwriter for "Days of Our Lives." I read about the odd jobs he had and the even odder people he met. This was really good stuff. It was honest and smart and witty. I finished the book in awe of Sedaris' ease and fluidity, and I immediately became his biggest fan.

To get even more psyched up for his reading, I listened to his book, Naked, on CD on the way. Hearing him read his own words was remarkable because it was as if he was simply talking to me, telling me a story. Because these were his words, there was no separation between character, plot or theme; it was just him and his crazy life.

When I walked into the Atlanta Symphony Hall, all 1,762 seats were full. The place was buzzing with excitement as both young and old waited for the man who united us that evening. I wondered if they were locals or if, like me, they were willing to travel to see this man whose humor and brilliance I find infectious and intoxicating.

After waiting 15 minutes, the lights dimmed... and there he was. Thin, but with huge presence, he was dressed conservatively in khaki pants and a brown blazer. He walked slowly, head down, before addressing the theater that had filled up just for him. Sedaris read four stories—one fiction piece centering on dialogue between a cat and a baboon, and three personal, reflective essays. The topics included his childhood babysitter (an obese woman who made him and his four sisters scratch her back with a monkey-shaped hand), his time spent working in a morgue and a visit to a Philippines restaurant that employed midgets only. Between readings, he told the audience what books he was currently reading, how he spent his time divided between London and Paris and how he couldn't wait to have a cigarette.

Sitting on the edge of their seats like puppies waiting for a treat, the crowd lapped up every syllable Sedaris delivered. He was so good at timing, intonation and voice; he used them to his advantage to wrangle in even the most skeptical and wary spectators. I realized this guy is a rock star.

While he performed the voices of the multiple characters littered throughout his pieces, all I could think was, 'He is so good.' He creates a personal intimacy between himself and the reader so that we feel like we know him. Although he would be our wacky friend, we want to know him. He is a writer who makes what he does seem so easy. His stories are energetic, silly and profound, and exemplify the purpose of the written word because he conveys the human experience. And sometimes it hurts, but he lets us laugh at it—he encourages us to laugh at it. A real man, a real writer, stood before us that night baring his soul and sharing his family secrets, and we could not get enough.

I thought to myself, this is the reason to write, to allow people to come together and heal collectively through the inspired words of an individual. In that hall, with those people, I understood how brave Sedaris was to divulge these intimate tidbits that allowed us to laugh because they were also our own secrets. By telling us about his life, David Sedaris was conveying the human experience. It was breathtaking.

Sedaris held a book signing after his reading, and I was sixth in line. (I suppose sitting in Row U had its advantages.) Once the five people ahead of me filtered away, it was just the two of us, face to face. We talked briefly, maybe two minutes. But in those minutes, he was mine. This man who made me laugh, made me cry, made me wrinkle like a prune in the bathtub where I usually read his work, was in front of me and I was in awe. Unlike Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Austen, this man is not just a legend; he's a living, breathing, practicing writer. His words inspired over 1,000 individuals to step into the balmy Atlanta air to hear him regale us with tales and remind us why we buy books in the first place.

After my first experience meeting a best-selling author, I was hooked. Shortly after meeting David Sedaris, I found out that Pat Conroy would be at the brand new Horry County Library in Conway for the inaugural celebration. I was thrilled.

After reading one of Conroy's novels in high school, I was moved by his ability to connect with me about things I didn't necessarily care about. Boys becoming men under a military school's watchful eye was not exactly a scenario I was interested in. But he made me interested. He led me there. Conroy has an eloquent touch for extracting the hidden, raw and tortured emotions his characters possess, and presenting them as worthy raison d'être that lead them from one place to another. He understands the complexities of his characters, and through his words, helps me understand the complexities of human life.

I arrived at the new library ready to meet the man who had written such great books as The Lords of Discipline, The Great Santini, Beach Music, The Prince of Tides and, most recently, My Losing Season. There were 50 people (mostly older residents) in the small lecture room. Conroy nonchalantly walked into the room, sat down, half-listened to his wife, writer Cassandra King, introduce him and waited until it was his turn to speak. By this point, I was thinking, 'Hmm... Not sure if he's what I expected.' Then as soon as his name was called, he jumped up and became an entirely different person, ready to entertain us.

He did not read. Instead, he talked about himself as a young writer. He told a story about being at a book signing with four other authors. When nobody seemed interested in his own works, he decided to unload another author's books because the crowd was buying them so quickly. He also talked about being at a function to support his wife and being mistaken as Stephen King by an enthusiastic fan. Enjoying the attention, he went with it.

Unlike my Row U experience in Atlanta, I could see Pat Conroy's facial expressions clearly. I could see where he positioned his hands when he spoke and how he paused when answering questions. Conroy was very open and forward; he wasn't shy about letting us know that he couldn't hear very well, so we "better speak up if we wanted an answer." He was humble about his success and seemed almost embarrassed that we were spending our Friday night there to see him. The whole experience was lovely, like being at a book club or a friend's house, except our friend was a successful writer who we all adored.

I was able to talk to Conroy for about five minutes during the book signing after his talk. We chatted about a variety of topics—the different areas in South Carolina (where he still lives), different books we were reading, good places to eat in Horry County, the craft of writing.

Meeting accomplished and great men like David Sedaris and Pat Conroy gave me an even deeper appreciation for the power of the written word and left me even more invigorated and excited to be a reader.

While I love the works I study in my English courses—works that are classic and timeless and significant—I also love the works I discover on my own.

The exciting part about reading the works of contemporary authors is that they are still alive. This means we can anticipate their new releases, read interviews and, if we're lucky enough, see them in person. There is something so rewarding in seeing and hearing a writer who has made an impact on our lives. By hearing their stories told, we recognize our own stories, and it is in this that the connectivity of life is revealed.
The Story of Stories

Words: Leigh Hendrix
Photography: Scott Dean
At least three times during my college career at Coastal Carolina University, I have stood on a stage and spoken these words: "I'm a dyke." Into a microphone. In front of a lot of people. I told my "coming out" story on National Coming Out Day to encourage visibility of the queer community on campus and I told it at the Celebration of Inquiry to explore how the need for visibility affects my life.

Despite what may be becoming popular opinion, this is not the only story that I tell. I don't hesitate to reveal a lot about myself—whether it's onstage, in my writing or in the hallway at school. As Nancy Mairs says in her radical feminist memoir *Remembering the Bone House*, "I think my story, while intensely personal, is not at all private." I tell my stories because how I choose to articulate my identity reveals a lot about how I experience the world.

I don't only want to tell my stories. I want to hear other people's stories. I crave books like Mairs' *Remembering the Bone House* and I thrill when the lights come up on Nalija Sun in the solo performance of her play, *No Child*. I can sit for hours with a friend over coffee and never say more than "Uh huh" or "Really?"

The story of a heterosexual woman with multiple sclerosis or a black woman's experience as a teaching artist in the Bronx does not belong to me. I cannot necessarily say I understand a friend's rape or the way she reacted to her mother's death. But I can hear these stories as truths and allow them to illuminate new places inside me.

Telling stories is a political act, particularly for those in marginalized communities. The familiar feminist axiom, "The personal is political," encourages destroying the boundaries between the public and the private. The best stories say the things we have been told we're not supposed to tell because silence equals invisibility.

Talking about rape, racism, sexuality, disability or the myriad ways one experiences oppression in the world using personal experience stimulates conversation and allows us to find commonality that encourages collective action. I can only speak from my experience, from my position in the world.

I also want to be a part of stories that are not directly personal. Some of my favorite experiences of storytelling have been in reading novels as well as seeing or being a part of plays. In *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson tells the story of what passion does to the lives of her characters with penetrating truth. Winterson uses penetrating language and fantastical imagery to assure the reader that, "Between fear and sex, passion is."

I saw a performance of the musical adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* and cried in my excitement at seeing the story of adolescent sexual confusion in early 20th century Germany told that way. The jarring juxtaposition of pop music and period scenes and costumes made the story resonate as a critique of moralizing in contemporary culture.

As an actor and a director, I search for stories to tell that will be immediate and vibrant for me and my audience, relishing the opportunity to explore fictional lives. These stories can be as true as our own.

I need stories. I want to tell them and I want them told to me. I crave that moment when the lights dim in the theater, when I hear the spine of a book crack, when I smell the coffee and see your face. I want stories about families, about first loves, about desire. I want stories about oppression, about revolution, about success. I want stories about people I know. I want stories about people I'll never meet.

Go ahead. I'm listening.
Life Behind the Lens

A photography collection.

Victoria Livinski
Snowboarders
GOING GREEN

Find out how exploring the environment can change the way you live
I love open spaces and green places. As a kid, my favorite place to play was outside. I would go exploring, build forts in the woods or lie on the hammock in my backyard. Today, I'd still choose to relax on a hammock rather than sit indoors. I try to live a "green" life because I feel that it's important to take care of our environment.

The summer of 2006 was perhaps the greenest and best summer I've had yet. I worked as a lake management intern at Lake Wheeler in Raleigh, N.C., and was thrilled to spend so much time outside every day. I enjoyed walking the trails in the park and watching the sun set over the lake.

One of my duties was to conduct lake patrols on our boat, meaning my job was to rescue the occasional stranded boater. While I was always a little nervous when I had to take the boat out by myself, I was also excited to be speeding through the water, bouncing on the wake of other boats while the wind tossed my hair. The days were long and hot, and sometimes the work was difficult and dirty. But what was important was that I was enjoying what nature had to offer.

For two weeks in June, I went on the excursion of a lifetime in Costa Rica where I was as close to nature as anyone could get. Along with other students taking this study abroad course, I lived and worked at the Pacuare Reserve on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica. My days were spent in the sun, learning sea turtle biology from a textbook and also learning everything about a place and a people that a textbook could never teach.

At night, we patrolled the beach in four-hour shifts, watching and waiting for leatherbacks to make their way up onto the beach to lay their eggs. The beautiful Costa Rican sky was unspoiled by big city lights or large buildings, with so many shooting stars that you could never wish on all of them.

The first time I saw one of these massive baulas haul herself up on the beach, I stood incredibly still, almost forgetting to breathe. We silently watched her dig a nest; as she laid her eggs, we carefully took measurements and examined her shell and flippers. As I watched that first turtle crawl back to the water's edge and slowly get swept back into the dark sea, I wondered what life was like for her under the ocean.

Living arrangements in Costa Rica were primitive at best, but this helped us remember why we were there. Our nearest neighbors were a six-kilometer hike down the beach or a boat ride across a wide and deep canal.

The small wooden huts we stayed in did not have electricity, so we used flashlights or candles after dark. Showers were quick and cold, using water pumped from a well with a generator. We ate local food prepared by a woman who lived down the beach from the reserve.

These quaint quarters were in a clearing bordered by the ocean, the jungle or the canal, depending on which direction you headed. Each night, we were lulled to sleep by the ocean's waves and jungle noises. The moon was our nightlight, and the sun was our alarm clock—along with the howler monkeys and birds living in trees just feet from our door.

One night, I had the opportunity to take that six-kilometer walk to our neighboring South Station through the jungle rather than along the beach. In the heart of this incredible environment, I was surrounded by so many living creatures I could not see. The mystery of that dark jungle was just part of the fun.

I'm so thankful that I was encouraged as a child to spend time outdoors, appreciate nature and care for the environment. It not only influences what I like to do in my spare time, but it also inspired my choice to study marine and environmental science in college. I want to help ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy everything I did when I was younger. If children have green spaces to enjoy rather than concrete jungles, I'll know that what I feel for the environment is shared by others and that we've done our job.
The tears began to well up in my eyes. I was driving fast down a highway trying to beat the worst part of the storm that lay behind me. The last thing I wanted was to get wet, but my tears wouldn't allow me to escape it. I was in a daze for most of the seven-minute drive home from work. The mood I was in had lasted since I woke up. I couldn't help but think to myself, "I have to get away from here." But where could I go where my mind didn't feel scattered and my heart didn't feel quite so empty?

I had just gotten back from Africa and found myself disgusted with many things I had loved before I went. I no longer found importance in cell phones, "American Idol" or the Internet. After a long internal conversation that consisted of many questions and no answers, I realized that there was nowhere in America that could give me comfort and peace. My heart was still in Africa.

Last May, I was looking out the window of a small plane, fumbling with a worn piece of gray paper that was torn and tattered. Most of the writing was illegible—especially for anyone who can't read Portuguese, which includes me. Flowers dotted the paper, each adorned with haphazard blue and yellow petals. Underneath one of the beautiful flowers, a child's hand had written "Jesquica love Alima"—the only thing I could interpret.

A 14-year-old girl named Alima had given me this drawing. As I looked at it, I immediately yearned to be back in Pemba, Mozambique, Africa. Pemba is the third poorest country in the world and also one of the most beautiful countries I have ever seen, with its never-ending coastline along the Indian Ocean and lavish green foliage of gigantic trees that reach toward heaven. But the most beautiful sight of all was the children.

Our plane took off, leaving the beautiful country and children behind. I tucked the drawing back into my journal for safekeeping and began to reminisce about the events of the past week in my mind.

On the first day we arrived, our group of 18 exited the small plane to see the open arms of little children waiting to be embraced. Their white teeth gleamed like pearls beneath smooth, black skin. There were words, tons of words, being passed back and forth between us and the children. We understood some sounds, while other words were translated through hugs, laughter and singing. These children did not care that we couldn't understand half of what they were saying; they longed to be embraced by warm arms and hearts.

In this moment, I knew my purpose and why God had sent me to Africa, a place I never imagined I would go. That day, a passion was planted within me to love the unloved: the forgotten children of Africa.
Our group spanned all ages and locations; the youngest member of our group that came from all over the United States was 13 and the oldest was 55. We had come together with one common purpose: to show God’s love through service. We volunteered at an orphanage of Iris Ministries. The children live there for various reasons. Some have lost their parents to the AIDS epidemic, while others have been abandoned by their families. Whatever the reason, they have been put there for a purpose: to touch the hearts of people, especially our group.

By going to a foreign country, I thought I would be the one bestowing blessings among the poor with toys, medicine, clothing and prayers. But the gift the children gave me was far better than anything I could ever have given them. The children showed me that joy doesn’t come from having money or buying new things. It comes with faith and a love of God.

The founder of Iris Ministries, Heidi Baker, spoke to us during one of our tent meetings (as we called them), and a reflection of God was seen among everyone. We began singing in Portuguese: “Abra os portões de inundaçao de céu, chuva.” Then we sang the same sentence in English: “Open the flood gates of heaven. Let it rain.” The children sang with their hands raised high and their eyes closed, holding on to the one thing they knew was constant—their Savior. Our voices mixed together as everyone sang each verse in both languages. Our hearts became one, mingled in a sort of love language to God.

After the meeting that Sunday morning, we walked down the white sand to the virtually untouched Indian Ocean. The turquoise water was interrupted by white waves crashing on the shore. The sight took my breath away.

A line of natives waited to be baptized and set free. One by one, they were submerged under the water, each surfacing with bright smiles and praises to God. After a while, the excitement grew as two or three natives were getting baptized by different people at once. The yearning and excitement of being cleansed and set free was too great to wait any longer. Children played in the sand, guided by the excitement of the day. They placed their faces in the sand, which covered them in a brilliant white mask until they ran back into the great ocean and it all washed away.

The day we left was harder than I could have imagined. Many of us rose early and walked down to the ocean to see one last African sunrise. The colors were amazing—orange, purple, red and yellow all coming together to make one beautiful picture. It reminded me of what we had accomplished during our stay in Mozambique.

We had played with the children, painted their bedrooms and taught school. These children sang with us and laughed as we tried to speak their language. They hugged us when they didn’t even know us. They believed in God with a childlike heart. And they taught us to do the same.

I left my heart over in Africa with the children and with the hope that my faith will grow to be as strong as theirs. My passion for God despite their poverty still amazes me. Sometimes I wonder if I would be that happy if I had next to nothing. I would like to think so. What I do know is that during the short week I spent among the children, the earth and the presence of God, I had absolutely everything.
In a makeshift refuge stands the silhouette of a young mother. She holds one child in her arms as another clings to her thigh. I stand outside, watching them through the hollow slots that separate the white-washed boards of their retreat. The girl, merely a child herself, anxiously awaits medical treatment as rain invades their sanctuary, plastering the small bodies of her young daughters.

It is March of 2006 and I am one of 11 students who is spending a week traversing the Amazon River. Hoping to make a difference in rural villages, we erect part of a church, paint a home and offer much-needed aid to the natives. We’ve come to this place as volunteers. We will leave as martyrs.

I see a man lying in his home, anticipating the arrival of the neighbor who brings him food. A virtual prisoner, he passes the hours by recalling his youth, his children and his beautiful wife who suffered from the same disease not long ago. The name of this disease is unknown, but its presence consumes. The man’s pain increases and beads of sweat trickle along his brow to the jagged bones where cheeks previously sat. A cotton hammock wraps around his limp body like a cocoon, like a grave, trapping fallen crumbs, dust and the bodies of insects as they fester against his skin. Charcoal eyes find their way past deep folds of flesh and penetrate any visitor who enters the suffocating chamber. Tears fall as he whispers that he is ready to meet his God.

This man’s weariness forms a stark contrast to the energy of the children that surround me. As I look at these children, I hope to never forget how they capture the sun’s radiance, their energy spilling onto the clay paths. Eyes shine, cheeks swell and teeth inevitably appear from beneath mahogany lips, displaying smiles that make any stranger instantly feel welcome. Following our pale skin and digital devices, they crowd the paths or sit at a distance, carefully observing the newcomers. Miniature leather feet rest in tiny plastic sandals or remain submerged in the crimson dirt, somehow ignoring the fire ants’ constant sting.

Small fists cling to us as they cry out the only English they know—“Picture!” I snap countless photos of them, fearing my images will never capture the ways they spend their time along the Amazon—chasing after small balls, basking topless in the sunshine or simply enjoying a game invented by one of their own.

All of these children are innocent, young and breathtaking. They have been born into a barren world and they will undoubtedly die here, but during the years spent as children, they embrace a zeal which comes only from simplicity. Laughter eclipses their poverty and I am consumed with the desire to trade my responsibilities for their carefree nature.
When I think of Brazil and all that I experienced, my heart aches for these people. I fear for them, I pray for them and I wonder if anyone else will be moved by them. It's been nearly one year and yet something about that place, about those people, refuses to release my heart. I

Before leaving, I was told by the boat's captain that if I ever returned to these villages, I would be remembered. My face is now etched into the mind of every native. Knowing that I will not be forgotten is comforting. Knowing that my legacy will reside in these dear people long after the day is over and the months have passed allowed me to return to the United States.

I know they too will not be forgotten and one day I will see each of them again. Because every time I think of Brazil, I am transported back to their world and I can almost feel the sun on my back, the boat's gentle sway and the Amazon mud cleaving to my feet.

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Finding respite and relaxation in two heavenly havens

Imagine your toes sinking into flawless white sand that caresses your bare ankles as they sink into it, little by little. The translucent turquoise waters in front of you glisten in the sun, which soaks into every pore in your body, leaving you with a feeling of warmth. Palm trees with fresh coconuts sway in the soft breeze, creating grassy umbrellas that shade the most inviting spots on the beach. You close your eyes and listen to the waves gracefully colliding with the shore.

This all sounds cliché, right? It sounds a bit like the "tropical paradise" calendars on sale at Wal-Mart in the dead of winter. I used to think so, too. I thought this until I sat on some of those picture-perfect beaches straight off of a Caribbean postcard, felt the warmth of that sun and took in the color of tropical waters that seemed too breathtaking to be true.

All the tropical islands—the cactus-tree forests of Aruba, the busy marketplaces of Grand Bahama Island, the gorgeous red hibiscus trees of St. Thomas—have one thing in common. These locations are all utterly spectacular in every way. As a 20 year old, I've been lucky enough to enjoy the diversity of all three of these unique island settings, and I know that these are only the first of many excursions to far away places.

Last summer, I met a friend's aunt who had traveled the world and collected a handful of glamorous tales along the way. She told me stories about a leopard walking in on dinner at a resort in Africa, chilling walks through parts of Alaska and scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef all in one breath.

After meeting a few world travelers, I realized that everyone has an entire lifetime to do with what we desire and anything is possible. I aspire to become one of those people who can look back at life and list off on my fingers (and toes) all of the amazing places I have been. I want to carry around in my pocket a few good stories to pull out when the time is right.

For as long as I can remember, my family has had a giant plastic replica of a clear Coca-Cola bottle with a little slit in the cap. When I was little, my parents told me and my brother to throw spare change in the bottle because when it was full, we would go to the land of make-believe where all children's dreams come true: Walt Disney World.

When that day finally arrived, I was 12 and my brother, Nolan, was 17. Then my parents gave us a choice. We could either go to Disney World or St. Thomas, one of the Virgin Islands. After contemplating for about five seconds, my brother and I decided that Disney World could wait for another bottleful of loose change.

My family devoted an entire evening to rolling up our change in cardboard rolls and counting it slowly. I could feel the beginning of a life-long love for travel being wrapped up in the excitement.

Words and Photography:
Lauren Formalarie

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To learn how to get involved with foreign missions, visit the following Web sites...

www.row.org
www.crossculturalsolutions.org
www.aimint.org/usa
www.worldvision.org
of every roll of change as I awaited my first plane ride, my first time leaving the continent and my first tropical vacation.

When I stepped off of the plane in St. Thomas, I felt something I had never felt prior to that moment. A surge of heat washed over me, engulfing my body, and I could see the moisture sitting in the salty air like a mirage in the desert. The sun shone more vividly than I had ever seen. The second the warm breeze hit my face, I realized I had left New England and all of my troubles behind. For the next week, my family and I lived life in a little piece of heaven on earth.

The most outstanding part of our trip was when we snorkeled in the protected reefs of St. John, which is just a short ferry ride from St. Thomas. We spent almost the entire day underwater. The world we found there was intricate, colorful, brilliant and lively.

Life under the sea took me away from reality to a fantasy I once thought could only be dreamt. I saw a whole new kind of uniqueness in beauty. The fluorescent blue parrot fish stood out the most, with light blue streaks that lined each of their delicately structured scales.

The fish struttet past me like I was one of them, and as I swam along, I could hear their teeth munching on coral and algae. A manta ray glided past me, his fins flapping like a soaring bird, as a tiny fish swam closely above him, cleaning the excess algae off his back. Schools of fish that encompassed every color of the rainbow swam around me, sometimes softly brushing past me as coral and sea plants wound in every direction.

After my unforgettable stay in St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better. My family and I had tasted tropical paradise for the first time, and with the sweet tang of it still lingering on our tongues, we were already hungry for more. My family and I had tasted St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better. My family and I had tasted St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better. My family and I had tasted St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better. My family and I had tasted St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better.

The world we found there was intricate, colorful, brilliant and lively.

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After my unforgettable stay in St. Thomas, I knew that life could only get better. My family and I had tasted tropical paradise for the first time, and with the sweet tang of it still lingering on our tongues, we were already hungry for seconds. But we were forced to wait patiently for a couple of years until another Coke bottle filled up with change.

This time we would be venturing to an island that is uniquely separate from the others with its desert-like qualities: Aruba. This is where the divi divi trees grow, their branches deformed by the wind, causing them to point westward. The myth is that whenever you’re lost, the divi divi trees will help you find your way. These trees are not the only exotic vegetation on the island, as it is also filled with forests of cacti.

My most stimulating experience in Aruba was my windsurfing lesson. Having never been on a surfboard in my life (not to mention being fairly unstable on my feet), this was a rocky and exhilarating ride. The water on the flawless ocean was about two feet deep for a good distance from the shore outward, which made things somewhat easier. After a short lesson—which I probably can’t repeat a word of thanks to my short attention span and gorgeous surf guide—I set off to join other windsurfers who made it look like a breeze.

A breeze was, in fact, what carried me away to a frightening place. The challenge, which at first was just staying up on my board, quickly turned into trying to stay inside the “beginner’s buoys” and not get carried out past the “experienced buoys.” This mishap, of course, led me to be saved by a little blow-up raft and led back to shore by none other than the gorgeous surf guide’s beautiful girlfriend.

* * *

I am now at a point in my life where I am growing up and learning more about myself than ever before. Although I haven’t traveled much more than my two island vacations and some other places within the United States, I’m still developing a thirst for travel.

Because of my parents’ tough work schedule, their love for travel falls into place whenever they decide they need a vacation and some good ol’ family bonding. After getting suckered into attending a meeting with a cheesy timeshare salesman in exchange for a free trip, they were also suckered into purchasing a timeshare with Marriott at Grand Dunes. This meant the beginning of a lifetime of family vacations and an excuse for my family to come together and make memories.

Sometimes on cold winter days in the mountains of New England, I find myself looking out the window to see the lifeless trees barren of leaves turn into divi divi trees swaying in the wind, or the snow transform into the clear white sands and sapphire waters of Aruba.

Memories of the places I’ve been often linger in my mind, taking me away from the monotony of each day. I know that someday my daydreams about the amazing countries I have visited will turn into actual memories. I know that one day I will be submitting articles to world travel magazines where I will nonchalantly mention my peaceful gondola ride through Venice or the tasty baguettes I enjoyed in Paris. I will write about my time walking through the rolling hills of Tuscany, my safari through Eastern Africa and my visits to the ancient pyramids of Egypt and the great castles of Scotland.

I have learned that all it takes is a bottle of spare change to make dreams come true. By traveling to just one place, I opened a gigantic door to the whole world that is ready to welcome me. On this long road of life, I see many roadblocks ahead but, more importantly, I also see unforgettable journeys at each stop along the way.
I crave attention. It is my only addiction (besides caffeine and chicken finger wraps) and it is something I cannot live without. Even when I was a child, I was dramatic. I was always doing prat falls to fool my parents or retelling jokes I heard on David Letterman's Top 10 lists. I used to spend hours trying to get anyone—friends, parents, brothers, neighbors, pets, orthodontists—to give me attention. I'm sure it was rather annoying.

In the seventh grade, I finally found an appropriate place to get my fix. I was required to take a certain amount of electives and ended up in a performing arts course. I had become shy somewhere between my talkative younger years and middle school and I didn't really want to participate, but my teacher, Ms. Vogel, eventually coaxed me onto the small classroom stage.

I was terrified and exhilarated at the same time. I eventually made my way from the tiny drama room platform to the big time—the cafeteria. Every year Ms. Vogel's classes put on two shows: a Christmas variety show and a collection of songs from the '50s and '60s called (groan) Oldies but Goodies. I became more confident by the end of eighth grade and ended up singing "My Girl" to a packed cafeteria.

At Irmo High School, I met two very inspirational women. Mrs. Suber was the director of the small drama program, where we performed in a welding garage that had been converted into a black box theater. Mrs. Suber was a quiet woman with intense passion. The shows we put on were, well, not the best... but they were fun. The years I spent performing in that crappy drama room are some of the most treasured moments of my life.

Shirlee Teuber-Goins was my singing teacher. I went to her house once a week for a private lesson in her basement that had been converted into a studio. Shirlee sang and performed for many years, and her walls were covered with pictures of her past performances and former students who had moved on to bigger and better things. If Shirlee said you "kicked ass" in a performance, it meant you really "kicked ass." This may sound like strong language for a woman in her seventies, but that was just Shirlee.

During my high school years, I found a new outlet for my attention-seeking: the wonders of summer community theater. It's exactly like performing in a professional company—long rehearsals, hard work, annoying commute, prima donnas, difficult directors and, of course, a big paycheck... Wait, strike that last one.

Because of community theater, I got on a kick of doing two shows a year at school and at least two more in the community. Unfortunately for them, my parents became my constant chauffeurs. Luckily for me, unlike the parents you see in movies or cheesy Lifetime shows, my parents were very supportive of my passion. Even now, they drive three hours two to three times a year to see me perform.

My first "big break" came with a community theater production of Godspell, where I was a member of an ensemble of 12 disciples. The great joy of performing in that production was that I got to be funny. Not just kidding-around-acting-like-an-ass-making-my-friends-snicker funny. I got to be more of a deliver-a-joke-just-right-and-make-250-people-laugh-out-loud-and-roll-in-the-aisles funny. It was an unbelievable feeling. I felt like the conductor of an orchestra of giggles, guffaws and ha-ha's. I knew I had found something I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I decided to study the dramatic arts in college, specifically musical theater. I am currently rehearsing for my seventh role at Coastal Carolina University, and I have also recently landed another summer theater job... except this time, I'm getting paid.

Without my realizing it, theater has basically become my life. I am constantly thinking about my next audition. The Edwards Theatre and Wheelwright Auditorium are my homes away from home and my crazy theater friends are my second family. My room is a shrine to the theatrical arts—a live-in photo album of every show I've ever seen or performed in.

I've come a long way from the annoying little kid and the shy middle-schooler. In many ways, I am a completely different person—I have confidence, courage, drive and passion. But I haven't entirely changed. I still crave to be the center of attention, and my friends will tell you I'm still annoying on occasion. Sometimes I still get scared of performing... but then as soon as I step into the limelight, I am home.
Discover how the allure of glitter crayons can lead to an all-consuming craving

When I was six years old, I stole a box of crayons from Eckerd’s. Sixteen perfectly pointed Crayola crayons that, for a limited time only, had been mixed with glitter. These crayons hung from a poorly-stocked art display like a piece of ripe fruit glistening under a fluorescent midsummer sun.

Without thinking, without hesitating, without even really processing what it was that I was doing, I snagged them and drove my hands deep into the soft folds of my pink My Little Pony jacket. The cool yellow box felt hot inside of my coat pocket, and my face burned with guilt. I booked it for the door before the shimmering wax could begin to melt.

For two weeks straight, I drew. I drew until the once gently-pointed tips had been reduced to stone-smooth nubs. When I could no longer wield the incredibly tiny bits, I made a collage from the pebbles and the colorful paper labels which had long ago been removed. And so it was that through committing a Class D misdemeanor, my passion for art was born.

Sixteen years later, I’ve traded in my stolen Crayola crayons for overly-priced Prismacolor colored pencils. Although my method for procuring art supplies has changed, my desire to create art has not. I will often spend hours on a drawing, sometimes working until 4:30 in the morning. I’ve agonized over one line. It’s frustrating, overwhelming and disheartening at times; beautiful, serene and fulfilling at others. It’s like experiencing every true moment I’ve ever had all at once.

My body tells me I need to make art just like it tells me I’m hungry or I need to breathe. Sometimes when I am sleeping or in the shower, this feeling finds me. It always visits at the most inopportune moments and never ever when I want it to.

Imagine the feeling you get while reading the last few pages of a dangerously good book. Take the anxiety and tension you experience in those final minutes and add it to all the excitement and anticipation you felt as a child on the last day of school before summer. Now multiply that by the number of butterflies in your stomach the night you gave away your first kiss. Take this to the third power. That is almost what it feels like to need to make art.

Perhaps it’s the unlikely circumstances surrounding my introduction to art (or maybe it’s the incredible number of butterflies at the scene of my first kiss) that are responsible for my love affair with color. Most of the art I create and admire is best described as expressive and gratuitously colorful—sometimes walking a thin and delicate line between beautiful and tacky.

Because my artwork is very much a representation of who I am, my emotions often act as a catalyst. If I am feeling overwhelmed, alone or inadequate, I can find a hiatus in art. Whatever I am feeling internally at the time is usually recreated in my work. I receive the most pleasure from painting and mosaic because I feel like I can best express myself through these mediums. Drawing can also be very stimulating.

Something—I’m still not sure exactly what—turned me off of art during my last two years of high school. I decided to only pursue a minor in the area of art, and I chose to major in English literature. Only recently have I realized the important role art has played in my life.

My interest in art is not business. My interest lies in the pleasure of art, of simply being able to create art. The ability to learn new things and improve my skill as an artist is enough to satiate my need.

The art I create as a result of this need is probably as close as I could ever get to accurately describing the actual experience. Still, my artwork is in no way equal in beauty to the way I feel when I am creating it. If I could accurately translate the intensity of that feeling into my art, it would be an unexpected masterpiece—glitter crayon on canvas.

Words: Taylor Hemple
Photography: Olivia D. Marlowe
Sometimes I come across a few CD skips in my thoughts that say, “You’re paying good money for college! Why don’t you just pay attention and get your money’s worth out of your classes?” These thoughts place themselves between the songs in my head, but I shake them off and move on through my mental playlist.

When I stare at the chalkboard in biology, I see music notes from a Method Man beat instead of notes about the scientific method. While I listen to lectures on economic policies, I’m really singing Pink Floyd’s “Money” in my head. My mind is an amphitheater and I am the only audience.

Sometimes I would like to escape myself for just a moment of silence because the music becomes so consuming. I bet it sounds like it would be pretty neat to be able to hear a song perfectly in your head without needing a radio, but the only problem is I cannot control it. This dilemma has stolen many hours of sleep from me. Music is my gift and my curse. Even though I love it, I can never escape from it.

Music is a language of its own; it needs no words to express an idea or emotion. Music does not deal with facts or data; it concerns the state of the soul. Without the ideals of music, we are machines. Without the emotions and feelings that music gives us, we are nothing but organic thought processors.

Music is also a complex mathematical science with exact calculations. Only a skilled mathematician (or musician) can create the right equations to write a good formula (or song). It’s sad to see how many people are generally musically illiterate. Watching someone fumble horrible melodies and disfigured chords is like listening to someone with a five-word vocabulary try to converse with a college graduate.

One of the worst tragedies is when someone can read and play music but doesn’t know what to do with it or how to make it their own. Music is clay that can be molded into many forms. Many people take the most memorable songs at face value, as if they were always there, like a tree or a rock. Listeners never stop to think that these classic masterpieces came directly from the imagination and insight of another person.

Music is an eye-opener. One song can change a person’s life; another song can define it. Music is about mixing things up and forming new perspectives and ideas. Music is a living, breathing, growing life that is always changing with society and sometimes even leading the way. If music was about reaffirming everything we already believed in, it would be dead as an art form. Music has been about challenging the status quo and causing a little controversy in this boring modern life of ours. As Bob Marley once said, “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds.” The most inspiring songs let the audience experience life through the songwriter’s eyes by making the music and lyrics both personal and universal.

This is why the best musicians are also prophets and philosophers. But the mental state of many great musicians is very delicate. Just as someone with a focus on art and drawing will think more in terms of visual concepts, someone with a focus on music will think more in terms of intangible concepts. Since music is based solely on intangible creation, a musician’s mind can see unlimited possibilities pertaining to the rest of the universe. This type of thinking is not uncommon to what could be called an “unhealthy” mental state.

However inspiring or beautiful the product may be, it is hard to walk on the edge of chaos without falling into the other side. Many musical icons have been plagued or even killed by this condition: Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Johnny Cash, Sid Vicious, Jim Morrison and Bradley Nowell. These musical icons wrote hundreds of songs that people still listen to and can easily recall to memory.

There are countless times in a day when a moment arouses a specific memory or emotion in my mind that I will relate to a certain song that defined a time in my life. There are three songs that are the staple numbers to the soundtrack of my life so far: “Wish You Were Here” by Pink Floyd, “You Don’t Know How It Feels” by Tom Petty and “Summertime” by Sublime.

There is an appropriate song for every occasion. I have put a lot of thought into what songs I want playing during various events in my life—when I’m walking (Bee Gee’s “Staying Alive”), when I’m driving on the highway (Foghat’s “Slow Ride”), when I’m at the beach (Sublime’s “Garden Grove”), when I’m alone in the dark (Something Corporate’s “Cavanaugh Park”), when I’m writing songs (Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”), when I get rejected (White Snake’s “Here I Go Again”), even my funeral (My Hotel Year’s “Heaven”).

Each song is specific to an appropriate emotion or ideal. Among the many ideals that music symbolizes, freedom is one that is often overlooked. We take for granted that we can listen to and create music whenever and however we want, and many Americans are not aware that some governments and religions forbid these very activities. In Islam, the scriptures of the prophet, Muhammad, claim that music is a sin because it creates an alternate universe for the listener which undermines the world that Allah has created.

I believe that music is a divine and ethereal chemistry and nothing brings us closer to that divinity for which we are reaching. Music is the greatest and most encompassing art of all. A musician’s canvas is the air. A musician’s subject is life. A musician can paint beautiful brushstrokes on the ears of the audience. Each note is a different color. Each instrument is a different shade. Each melody is a new shape. Every song is a sculpture. Art attempts to capture and depict the essence of life, and every good song is the epitome of life itself.

My band and my music are the epitome of my life. Every song I write rips a piece of my soul onto paper and then into the air. Every note I sing spreads my spirit into my audience’s ears and to the bottom of their hearts. Making music is my only true talent—the only product of my being that I feel belongs solely to me, as it is created from the very essence of my soul.

Every thought I suppress in conversation, I vocalize in my music. Every theory I have about life and existence, I write in my songs. I sing my heart out onto the stage—every moment crystallized in my mind, everything I stand for. I am usually quiet and reserved when I’m not onstage; when performance time comes, I am loud and in your face. People don’t really know me if they have never seen me perform. I enjoy keeping this secret just to see the look on people’s faces when my band strikes its first chord. After listening to my band’s album, most people tell me they can’t believe it’s me singing. I tell them that’s just what I was going for.
There are few books that include such a plethora of dramatic literary aspects as The Count of Monte Cristo. This novel is filled with action worthy of the big screen—clever mystery, disguise, forbidden love, romance and the ever-present theme of good versus evil. Protagonist Edmond Dantes is the classic hero—the new captain of a trading ship, engaged to a beautiful woman, handsome, intelligent and hated by no one. Or so he thought. In one night, his life is stolen away from him when he is sent to prison for 13 years as a result of his innocent interaction with the banished emperor of France. Dantes emerges from prison a changed man with a single goal: revenge. Readers who have a passion for novels that are thoroughly entertaining page after page should put this masterpiece by Dumas at the top of their reading list. And although this book was made into a movie in 2002, the two are hardly similar, so don’t take the easy way out—the extra time you spend will be well worth it!

Set against the backdrop of Steinbeck’s hometown, the beautiful Salinas Valley in California, East of Eden is a modern-day masterpiece that is as much about Steinbeck’s setting as it is about the characters. What begins as a story about two American families gradually transforms into a sprawling and highly-epic study of good and evil. The story unfolds as a modernized retelling of the Cain and Abel story from the Book of Genesis, while somehow also intertwining itself with all the essential elements of the best Danielle Steele novel—love, betrayal, greed, lust, murder and, of course, sex. What’s more is the diverse and unlikely cast of characters Steinbeck employs to tell his story: whores, farmers and a wise Chinese man. All of these elements culminate in the poignant and resonating ending of the work, which is a final affirmation of free will. This novel was #1 on the fiction best-seller list after its release in 1952, and the story continues to have a powerful impact on readers today.

In 1951, a short story called “Slight Rebellion” was published in The New Yorker. This story by J.D. Salinger introduced the world to Holden Caulfield, the antihero in Salinger’s hotly-debated and best-known novel, The Catcher in the Rye. It is a little known fact that two years before “Slight Rebellion” came a short story called “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” which eventually became the first and most famous of a collection of nine short stories released in 1953. Readers who enjoy this author’s unconventional writing style will be pleasantly surprised if they choose to discover his Nine Stories. These short tales encapsulate the best of Salinger: colorful and magnetic characters, quirky plots and an uncanny grasp of the inner workings of human beings. Many of the stories involve various members of the fictional Glass family that live in most of Salinger’s works. With intriguing titles like “For Esmé — with Love and Squalor” and “Just Before the War with the Eskimos,” each story is as unique as its name. Salinger takes his readers from familiar places to strange ones with his seemingly simple stories that often come to a surprising conclusion.

The name Stephen King conjures up images of his many horrifying creations: an evil clown (IT), a troubled telekinetic teen (Carrie), an ax-wielding hotel caretaker (The Shining). However, in one of his more recent works, Hearts in Atlantis, King explores a different kind of horror—a real horror: the Vietnam War. The book is divided into five sections and spans over 40 years. The first section, which is set in 1960, tells the story of a magical summer experienced by a boy named Bobby Garfield. In three months, Bobby meets his telepathic upstairs neighbor, defends against the threat of “Low Men” who may come to steal his new friend away and enjoys the first true kiss of his lifetime. King conveys the innocence, fear, passion and regret surrounding the 1960s before the book dives from the innocence of pre-war America into rebellious college life—a time of protests, peace signs and the threat of the draft. The story then jumps forward to the 1990s, telling of tired veterans who are still haunted by the atrocities they committed while serving their country. These spellbinding stories create a nostalgic book with horror lurking in every margin.
Words: Will Collicott

**Hot Water Music**

*No Division*

Some Records—$12

Florida’s Hot Water Music embraced an idealistic regionalism and put the entire Southeast on their collective shoulders with the 1999 release of *No Division*. Heralded by many as their magnum opus, *No Division* is undoubtedly the band’s most seminal work, as it has inspired countless other artists (such as Lock & Key, Latterman and Signal Home) to follow in their creative footsteps. The band’s sound can best be described as anthemic and passionate post-hardcore. Songs marked by powerful progressions and subtle melodies are juxtaposed with the desperately harsh, honest vocals of Chuck Ragan and Chris Wollard. The two singer/guitarists often implement a kind of call and response vocal structure that lends itself nicely to the rhythm of the choruses. With lyrical themes ranging from local unity (“Southeast First”) to overcoming depression (“Driving Home”) and unapologetic individualism (“Our Own Way”), the band transcends a tired and shallow genre. *No Division* is a vessel for many messages, none more resonant than the chorus of “It’s Hard to Know,” which encourages you to “live your heart and never follow!”

Words: Caroline P. Smith

**The Doors**

*Strange Days*

Elektra/Asylum Records—$18

Although critics might say that The Doors’ sophomore album isn’t as good as their first, self-titled album, it can just as easily be argued that the two are equal. *Strange Days* upholds the sound and the mesmerizing lyrics that The Doors boasted in their first album, partly because several of the songs on *Strange Days* are ones that simply didn’t make it onto that first album. For example, “Moonlight Drive” was one of the first songs Jim Morrison wrote for The Doors that was recorded in 1966 to go on their debut album. Other songs from *Strange Days* include “Love Me Two Times” and “When the Music’s Over.” Their second album proves that a band doesn’t need a bass player to produce original music (or a sober singer, for that matter). Keyboardist Ray Manzarek plays all the notes that a bass player would normally play, an aspect of the band that adds to their rare, one-of-a-kind style. The Doors’ members wrote all the songs on this album, and each song possesses its own eccentric vibe, courtesy of Morrison’s deep, evocative voice. *Strange Days* embodies all that The Doors were—different, hypnotic and a powerful representation of their age.

Words: Lauren Formalarie

**Sublime**

*Sublime*

Skunk Records—$9.99

The music is just as sublime as the name. Although the band stopped creating music in 1996 due to band member Bradley Nowell’s tragic death, the West Coast vibe of Sublime still lives on. The music of Sublime encompasses all genres; it can be classified as anything from punk-rock to hip-hop to reggae. With many Bob Marley-inspired lyrics, Sublime’s songs run deep with the passion Nowell felt for his music. Most of the lyrics represent Nowell’s hardcore drug addiction, twisted love life, questionnaire sexual experiences and his beloved Dalmatian, Louie. *Sublime* encompasses the distinctness of each song, with rhythms that can be slow and laid back or fast and loud. Listeners may be familiar with some of the album’s upbeat and catchy hits, such as “What I Got,” “Wrong Way” and “Santeria.” The album also includes lesser-known songs like “Same In The End,” “Pawn Shop” and “Doin’ Time” that capture Sublime’s true essence. Sublime supporters should look for Badfish in concert, a Sublime tribute band that sometimes plays in Myrtle Beach. To learn more about Sublime, visit their Web site, www.sublimespot.com.

Words: Sandra Broughton

**Loreena McKennitt**

*An Ancient Muse*

Quinlan Road—$13.99

Loreena McKennitt’s sixth album, *An Ancient Muse*, carries on this artist’s tradition of melodic music infused with international flair and haunting, poetic lyrics. This album, which chronicles McKennitt’s passion for cultural integration, is inspired by her interest in Celtic culture and Mediterranean sounds. The track “Caravanserai” follows a group of nomads across the Turkish desert on their way to a bazaar, reflecting the journey for home that all people strive for. “Penelope’s Song” looks at Odysseus’s journey through his wife’s eyes (you may remember this tale from Homer’s *Odyssey*). Barnes and Noble released an exclusive version of this album for $15.99, which features a bonus track called “Raglan Road” that is not available anywhere else. This track is based on Patrick Kavanagh’s poem and is well worth the extra money. McKennitt never disappoints, and this album is no exception. It is a highly complex and beautiful compilation that transcends boundaries both musically and culturally.
TALES OF A JEDI

One Star Wars enthusiast explains why she simply couldn’t resist the Force

Words: Jessica Saffran
Photography: Stephanie Hutto

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, a young boy was born that would change the entire galaxy. This boy, Anakin Skywalker, would become one of the greatest heroes the galaxy had ever known... until he was seduced by the dark side and became the very evil he was raised to fight.

I have my parents to thank for the fact that Star Wars was probably the first movie I ever watched. When I was five years old, my mom would do laundry on the weekend while I watched Star Wars. I realize now that I was actually too young to understand most of what was going on beneath the surface of the film when I first saw it. I just loved watching the light saber battles, and my brother and I had countless pretend light saber fights as a result.

I think that growing up on the old trilogy was definitely preferable to how today’s youth will see it. George Lucas, the genius behind Star Wars, started with the original trilogy (Episodes IV, V and VI, as they are often called) in the 1970s. He originally wrote it this way so he could go back later and release the prequel trilogy (Episodes I, II and III). Lucas wanted his audience to have a fear of Darth Vader before they found out who he really was and what actually happened to him. (If you’re lost, this means you haven’t seen the films, which means you need to stop reading this immediately, rent the movies and start watching them.)

It wasn’t until the release of the prequel trilogy that my fanaticism exploded, specifically after the second film. I thought that Lucas cast the role of Anakin Skywalker perfectly when Hayden Christensen came on the screen as the young teenager who would rock the entire galaxy. Once Episode III was about to come out, my obsession reached its current level. My friend and I went to see the midnight showing of Revenge of the Sith, complete with our own impromptu light saber battle. I only saw it three times—a sad fact I blame on being a poor college student.

A few years ago, my mom gave me some books that were released the same time as the movies, which are currently sitting on my bookcase with all of my other Star Wars memorabilia. To this day, my parents get on my case for my massive love of Star Wars, but I simply remind them that it’s technically their fault—they’re the ones who introduced me!

It would probably be boring and cliché if I listed all of my Star Wars memorabilia... but I’m going to anyway. My most prized possessions are definitely my DVDs. I don’t just have all six episodes, but also the lesser-known Ewok movies and a bonus DVD that came with the Episode III soundtrack. There’s the light saber, the Episode III PEZ dispensers, books, posters, calendars, magazines, newspaper clippings and other items I’ve received for being a Star Wars fan club member.

Being a fan club member means you get your own Star Wars e-mail address and a custom Web blog. You also get a letter and some random toys from Lucas, and you’re granted special privileges such as access to certain online articles, videos and discounts. Fan club members also get to attend Celebration early and have their very own day or two. Celebration is a yearly convention that began in 2004 to commemorate all things Star Wars. The first three festivals focused on each episode, and the May 2007 Celebration will focus on all six episodes and celebrate the 30-year anniversary of Star Wars’ release.

There are two items that prove my obsession. The first is my Star Wars Trivial Pursuit DVD Saga Edition. I’ve played countless games and I’ve never lost. Not once. The second item is, surprisingly enough, my cell phone. I have the official Star Wars cell phone from Cingular that has the Episode III faceplates, a handful of ring tones and pictures. And let’s not forget about my Star Wars fan fiction. You heard that right. I’m currently writing my own story that takes place during Episode III. It’s about what would have happened had Anakin not turned to the dark side.

I also currently have three Star Wars tattoos planned out. I’m getting the Rebel Insignia, the Jedi symbol and a shot from Episode III that everyone is trying to talk me out of. This summer I will be getting my first one as a birthday present to myself.

My favorite part about the Star Wars universe is all of the friends I’ve made through it. I’ve got all of my Hyperspace blogger friends who I talk to regularly. These ladies—my LILWA, LILWL, and LILWH (“Ladies in love with Anakin, Luke or Han”)—are amazing and have been such an inspiration to me.

From being a Hyperspace member, I’ve gotten to know a lot of awesome people. Sadly, the amount of females who are as fanatic as I am are highly outnumbered by the males. But that’s OK—it doesn’t mean we love it any less than them. And while there isn’t a term that describes Star Wars geeks (you know, like how Star Trek fans are “Trekkies”), it doesn’t mean we aren’t as serious as anyone else about this.

So how far does my obsession go? Let’s just say that the past few paragraphs basically just skim the surface. My fanaticism outranks almost everyone I know, and my friends will tell you that I’m the most Star Wars obsessed person they’ve ever met.

Although the Star Wars saga has ended, my obsession continues and (at least for me) the galaxy goes on forever and ever. So although like all things in life, this story must end, just remember—there is a galaxy far, far away that is waiting for you. And may the Force be with you.
I know what you're thinking. You're asking yourself how in the blue hell a girl gets sucked into a pornographic world of degradation and filth. Well, picture this. The year is 1995. It's 3 a.m. in my father's new house and I am behind the living room couch. Not knowing that I am still awake, Daddy puts a tape into the VCR and pushes play. Big bright blue letters slide across the screen: THE BOOTY SISTERS.

Words: Ebone Ridley

Please believe me when I say I had no idea what I was getting myself into. Sure, I had the sex talk when I was five after I witnessed Mommy laying the smack down on Daddy, but that "birds and bees" discussion had little effect on me. You see, Mommy never taught me the definitions of words like "ménage à trois" and "double penetration." From that fateful night on, all of my sexual questions were answered by watching porn. After my first encounter with free-for-all orgies, I found myself gathering a porn collection that I kept secret from my parents.

By the time I was 10, I had at least seven different pornographic movies. Yes, this means I was still underage. I got the porn back then by copying it off porn channels at home or getting it from my friends who were older. It's fun because around that same time I also started masturbating—not because I was horny or anything. I was just curious.

I remember telling my Sunday school teacher that porn was absolutely normal and that she shouldn't knock it if she hasn't tried it. Try explaining that to your mom when a special prayer is said for you during praise and worship.

Personally, I like porn because it takes me to a fantasy world where I can be as freaky and naughty as I want to be. This may seem like a total paradox, but pornography and my parents have made me the well-rounded person I am today. Of course, my mom didn't agree with what I thought about porn until I was 19 years old when she finally said that as long as I keep my grades up, don't drink or do drugs and keep the sex to a minimum, there isn't a huge problem with getting my kicks off that way.

Good porn leaves my mind open for new things, whether it's new positions or a new joke. Nine times out of 10, if I'm not masturbating to porn, I'm critiquing every move they make. My favorite porn to watch is series porn: College F*** Fest, Shane's World and the Bang Bros. Company tickle my fancy.

I'm just now getting into Ebony porn (or for the porn illiterate, "African American porn"). When I was growing up, I refused to watch "black porn" because it reminded me too much of my sisters having sex. Now I can watch Ebony vids without a problem. Porn that still holds no interest for me are tranny (transvestite), granny, little people, animal (I mean interspecies erotica), water sports and gay porn (lesbian porn not included).

I believe everyone should try something at least twice before they decide whether or not they like it, and that is exactly what I did. My porn collection is now 10 times bigger than it used to be; I think I even have more DVDs than most of my guy friends. My craving for porn keeps growing, especially now that my mom approves... sort of.

Does porn really make the world go 'round? Some people have seen it all, from gangbangs to bondage to the things that would disturb most people. Some people refuse to explore the wild side of pornographic erotica. Here is what some students think about the "P-word"...

"I really don't think there is anything wrong with pornography. Sex can be a stress reliever for some people, and if that's how they do it, who am I to say they're wrong? I mean, pretty much everyone watches it at some point in their lives." ~ Lottie Carlin, Sophomore, Musical Theater

"I think watching porn is a personal choice. Personally, I don't normally watch porn but I definitely don't think it's wrong to watch it. I mean, if you enjoy it, go for it." ~ Amber O'Brien, Senior, Finance

"Pornography is tragically addictive; it leads people to experiment and seek more powerful stimulations. Those who experiment with it and allow themselves to remain caught in its trap will find that it will destroy them, degrading their minds, hearts and spirits. It will rob them of self-respect and their sense of the beauties of life. It will tear them down and lead them to evil thoughts and possibly evil actions. It will cause terrible damage to their family relationships." ~ Brett Branham, Senior, Biology and Business Management
Thanks:

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-Krystin

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-Stephanie

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-Greg
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