

Back on Campus

What I learned after my first graduation from UL Lafayette • by *Katie Risher*

WHEN I WAS A KID, MY MOM and I played a little game. She would whisper in my ear, “Guess what day it is?” I would curl my ear into my shoulder against the tickle of her breath and, even though I knew the answer, I would whisper back, “What is it, Mama?” She always said, “It’s the first day of the rest of your life.”

Back then, I had no idea what she meant. It was just a ritual that we shared, but it still left a chill in my stomach. It was important, even if I didn’t know why.

Her words have stayed with me for all these years. What did she know that I didn’t? I think she was trying to tell me something she was only starting to grasp herself. That today, whatever day it is, can always be a new beginning.

It was a lesson I have taken to heart, and it is one of the reasons I decided to return to school last year as an undergraduate even though I already have a bachelor’s degree. I graduated from UL Lafayette in December 2000 in general studies, with a concentration in behavioral sciences and no idea what I would do next. It was not a pleasant feeling, but that was not entirely uncharacteristic of my college experience. I had several majors and many interests, but nothing stuck. I was a Jill of many trades, but a master of none.

I worked in social services for a while after graduation, applied to LSU’s School of Social Work, got in and turned the acceptance down. By then, I knew it was a terrible fit, career-wise and in all ways otherwise, for me. Nothing seemed to be working like I thought it should. I was in a state of flux and the uneasiness I felt would turn out to be something I had to learn to live with.

I spent the next couple of years trying to “find myself,” for lack of a

better cliché. And, if Dr. Cliff Huxtable is out there in the land of *Cosby Show* reruns asking his children how much “finding yourself” pays, I have the answer: not much. I worked in a pottery painting shop, learned how to meditate, wrote the first 200 pages of an as-yet

not using my intellectual potential and I was not preparing myself for a rewarding future. I wanted to be proud to say what my job was, and as time passed, doing so became increasingly more difficult.

His comments were not something I had not heard before. My parents supported me in my choices but their occasional questions and concerns let me know that they wanted something more for me. I was capable of something more.

I sent off for copies of my old GRE scores and started researching graduate programs that might suit me. I researched undergraduate programs, too.

I remembered a meeting with Dr. Phebe Hayes, dean of the College of General Studies, just before I received my first degree. I told her about my uncertainty about the future.

She suggested that I not rule out getting another undergraduate degree. I recalled her picking up her UL Lafayette course catalog, ruffling quickly through it and urging me to look at all the possibilities.

I was not ready for that then but four years later her voice came back to me and I picked up my course

catalog again. I spent weeks searching the Internet, making phone calls, going to meetings, trying to learn all I could about those possibilities. I eventually narrowed my choice to public relations. It was a field so very different from anything I had chosen years ago. But somehow, it fit.



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unfinished novel and got a dog. I was searching for something; I just did not know what.

One day, one of my best friends gently asked if this was to be my path. Was I going to continue to drift about, hoping to eventually find my way? I understood why he was asking. I was

I also learned that UL Lafayette has top-rated undergraduate and graduate public relations programs. I chose to become an undergraduate again because I felt like I had missed something my first time. I had been too shy, too obsessed with getting As, too afraid. I wanted a second chance.

It did not take long to realize that UL Lafayette would offer me that. It again said, "Bienvenue. We are glad to have you here."

I knew for sure that I made the right choice when I met Dr. Mike Maher, head of the Communication Department. His encouragement and knowledge of public relations were inspiring. He told me about internship opportunities and campaign class work. He showed me what my future could be if I should choose it.

I did choose it and it has been an amazing experience. I have heard profes-

sors explain communication concepts by describing their career experiences. I have professors and advisers who know me, encourage me, seek me out with new opportunities. I have worked in public relations with Hospice of Acadiana and the Games of Acadiana. I have this chance to work on a magazine. Several articles I have written are in print! It is everything I did not have the nerve to attempt before.

I am incredibly grateful for this second chance. A lot of the credit is due to my parents and family who have supported me in everything I have been through. Much is due, as well, to people at this university.

Writing this article has made me think about what I have learned from the curvy path I have taken so far. I learned that fear does not have to control my life. I know that I never want to forget where I come

from. And I learned that the game my mom and I used to play actually meant that each day holds a thousand second chances, a thousand opportunities for a fresh start. Now I know that even as I try to achieve balance, flux will always be there. The trick, I think, is to learn to embrace it.

I'm beginning to see promise almost everywhere I look lately. I see it in my new nephew and godson now. He was born in October, so I know he can't understand me yet, but for practice, the other day I held him close and whispered, "Just so you know, it's always the first day of the rest of your life." Then I pulled a little Ragin' Cajun cap, with its giant red pom-pom, onto his little head. No pressure, I promise. Just enthusiasm. ■

Katie Risher is student editor of La Louisiane.

STUDENTS' SATELLITE EDGES CLOSER TOWARD LAUNCH INTO ORBIT

AS LA LOUISIANE WAS GOING TO PRESS, the immediate fate of a small satellite built by UL Lafayette students was hinging on some final shakedown tests.

The device was undergoing tests in California to make sure it meets standards for vibration, heat and thermal extremes.

Best case scenario: the "picosatellite," which weighs about two pounds, will be allowed to take a ride on a Russian intercontinental ballistic missile in December.

"If we don't pass the tests, we don't go. I'm confident we'll make it," said Dr. Robert Henry, head of the William Hansen Hall Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at UL Lafayette. He has worked with the students on the Cajun Advanced Picosatellite Experiment for the past three years.

The UL Lafayette picosatellite was supposed to have been carried into outer space by an ICBM from the Republic of Kazakhstan this summer. But it got bumped from the flight.

That turned out to be a lucky break.

Henry explained that the ICBM had been launched

successfully about 200 times before. But in July, it crashed 200 kilometers down range of the launch site.

"If our satellite had been on there, it would have ended up in a crater in the Republic of Kazakhstan. So, in one sense, we were fortunate to be bumped," he said.



TRAVIS GAUTHIER

"There were about 15 other satellites from around the world that went down in flames."

If the CAPE satellite makes it into outer space and settles into orbit, it will be the first working satellite to be designed, built and maintained by students at a Louisiana university.

It will circle the Earth every 90 minutes at about 17,000 mph while transmitting data. It will travel in Lower Earth Orbit, which is about 60 to 450 nautical miles above the Earth's surface.

The UL Lafayette students will track the satellite on a large display board that has been constructed in Madison Hall.

The CAPE is associated with programs at Stanford University and California Polytechnic State University. Cal Poly conducted the tests that would show whether the UL Lafayette picosatellite could withstand the launch without damaging the missile that would carry it. ■



A team of UL Lafayette engineering students has spent the past three years developing a small satellite with the help of some advisers. Shown, from left, are: Robert Brown; Nick Pugh, adviser; Jonathan Harrist; Jacob Delahoussaye; Jason LaBerteaux; Dr. Robert Henry, adviser; Jonathan Wagner; and Wade Falcon.

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