

Young and Scholarly

Get close up with three students in the University’s College Scholars Program and the senior projects they completed as members of the 2003 graduating class. CSP is a program for a small group of outstanding undergraduates that emphasizes broad interdisciplinary learning. For their senior projects, students apply their passions to a significant issue that’s important to the University’s surrounding community.

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Phillip’s Story

In the beginning, his plan seemed simple enough. He’d breeze into the children’s home, read them the book he’d written for his senior project and then lead a discussion with the preschoolers about the images and words spread out on the colorful pages. “I thought I was going to walk in and see two children sitting at a table, and I’d sit down and talk to them,” says Phillip Miller, who graduated last spring from CWRU with a double major in philosophy and political science.

But children will be children. And, in reality, the youngsters wanted to play checkers. And draw. And watch

Mr. Miller sketch. “So I sat there and drew for them, because they knew I’d drawn the pictures for the book. And then I had them read me a story, and after they read me a story, I read them my story. And then they wanted to play ball within ten minutes.” That’s when Mr. Miller spotted the unforeseen holes

never seen a ball before, so the bear has to describe the concept of a ball. “And there was a little too much storytelling going on for it to work out,” he says. After reflecting on the book the children had chosen to read to *him*, Mr. Miller realized the youngsters preferred a more straightforward, simple style.

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in his plan. Though the young critics “were getting what I wanted them to get, they sort of abandoned it,” he recalls.

In the original story line, he explains, a small bear is telling his friends about a ball he’d lost. But his friends had

So it was back to the drawing board—literally—for Mr. Miller. He searched for other books that might serve as models for his work, which is intended to promote philosophical thought in preschool-age children. What he unearthed, though, was only a scattering

of such works, most of which were targeted toward older children. When he stumbled upon some of the *Madeline* children's stories, he experienced an epiphany of sorts. "Essentially, *Madeline* went somewhere with her mother, and they did a couple things, and then they went home, and that was the whole story," he explains. "When I read that, I thought, oh, I guess that's all I really need to do."


His new story line, which also features a bear motif, tells the tale of young Ark and his momma bear, *Ursa* (the Greek and Latin words for bear, respectively), who are awakening from hibernation at the end of winter. Ark's mother tells her son that it's time to experience the world, and with that they venture out on their journey. After noticing a flower, the young bear remarks that the flower is small, and his mother concurs but notes that the tree is big. Later, when Ark observes that he's bigger than the flower, *Ursa* agrees, pointing out, though, that he's smaller than the tree. "So the story looks at size relationships," says Mr. Miller. "How something can be large and small at the same time."

His book is inspired by the work of Gareth Matthews, a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who studies, among other things, philosophical thinking in children. *Ark and Ursa* is designed to spark philosophical thought and dialogue in children as well. Ideally, says Mr. Miller, someone who's philosophically minded would read his book to a group of children and begin a dialogue. "But you don't want to make the children feel like you're walking them through the whole thing," he notes. "You want them to feel like you're giving them some sort of problem and you're asking them, Why is this an issue? What's going on with this?"

Mr. Miller believes the field of philosophy has reached a dead end of

sorts. He was drawn to the idea of promoting philosophical thought in children because he is convinced that it infuses the field with new life. Looking back on the evolution of his project, Mr. Miller says what he enjoyed most was creating the illustrations for the book.

Though he loves to draw and paint, his rigorous schedule at CWRU didn't afford him much time to exercise those creative muscles, he notes.

When Mr. Miller is asked what he considers the least enjoyable aspect of the project, he smiles. "Well," he says, hesitating slightly, "I wouldn't say it was the least fun, but the most challenging part was going and talking to the small children. The actual process of stepping into a room with small children and having to interact with them, that's difficult for me." 





As Told by the Staff

As a self-proclaimed procrastinator, Marcela Smid suffered some moments of angst over whether her College Scholars project would piece together on time. “I do everything last minute,” confesses the recent CWRU graduate with a sheepish grin. “It’s really a bad habit that I’ll probably never break.”

But her project, which involved spearheading an event called Student-Staff Interaction Day and creating a documentary about the experiences of select University staff, came together on time, in a seemingly seamless way. “And the feedback was amazing,” says Ms. Smid, who received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in medical anthropology at CWRU and this summer began a five-year joint medical program (MS/MD) at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, San Francisco. Staff members, who said they typically wouldn’t have attended, spotted the signs for the event and decided to participate. “They were just really thrilled that someone was paying attention to them, that students were paying attention to staff,” says Ms. Smid.

The event, which attracted about 400 people to the Hovorka Atrium (in the Agnar Pytte Center for Science Education and Research) in April, featured finger food, giveaways, activities designed to encourage discussions between staff and students, and several viewings of the premiere of Ms. Smid’s documentary.

Making the movie, Ms. Smid admits, presented a challenge, because she had never undertaken such an endeavor. But her friend and cohort, Micah Waldstein, a producer for CWRU’s student-run TV station, Ignite, was

by her side all the way, filming the piece and helping Ms. Smid edit the documentary. The film spotlighted the experiences of five University staff members: Hugh Marshall, equipment manager in the physical education and

has grown fervent about how University staff members deserve to receive more respect and recognition, she says. “I definitely had political reasons for doing this project, especially the documentary.”

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athletics department; Kathryn Howard, a research assistant in the Department of Infectious Diseases (and the president of CWRU’s Staff Advisory Council, or SAC); Kathleen Dowdell, a department assistant in the Department of Anthropology; Willie Dudley, a building service worker; and Andre Gaines, an employee of the campus food-service provider, the Wood Company.

In the film, Ms. Smid interviews each of the subjects, who talk candidly about their experiences at CWRU and to what degree they felt supported and appreciated. Some also discuss their personal lives.

Ms. Smid cherished getting to know her subjects on a more personal level. “I felt like I knew these people well, but I saw them in a different light,” she explains. “I’ve known Dre [Andre] for three years, and we talk and stuff, but we never sat down and talked about ‘What do you think about “blank”?’ Or, ‘Tell me where you live and what’s your family like.’”

When Ms. Smid is asked why she selected student-staff interaction for her project, she leans forward in her seat, her lighthearted attitude turning serious. It all began, she says, with her involvement in Catalyst, a campus organization dedicated to justice and peace. As a founding member of the group, which organized around campus cafeteria workers’ right to unionize, she

And what was the impetus for her to launch Student-Staff Interaction Day, which was sponsored by the SAC, the College Scholars Program, and the Office of the President and Provost? “I honestly just wanted to put staff and students into a room together where they could talk, because that just doesn’t happen here,” she says. Ms. Smid also wanted students to realize that staff members aren’t “robots who are here to serve you. They have families and friends, they go on vacations, and have interests outside the realm of their work.”

Though it’s been sad to say goodbye to the people she’s come to know, she feels as though her project has allowed her to create something tangible and lasting through her documentary, something she hopes people on campus will be able to use as a resource. One professor, she notes, has already expressed an interest in showing her film to students in her political philosophy class. And she hopes that the documentary might be screened during orientation to acquaint students with staff. “I think the documentary is a legacy of the impact Catalyst has had on this campus,” she says. “I keep saying Catalyst because I think that’s been the most important thing I’ve done at Case.” 

For more about Catalyst, see the cover feature, “Committed to the Cause.”

Journey of a Lifetime

Have I found myself yet? Probably not. Will I ever completely? I have no idea. But I do know that I have uncovered something, the breadcrumb on the path to self-enlightenment. It is only a breadcrumb, but I am grateful for it. I will follow it in hopes of finding a few more crumbs. I don't suppose this will be a straight, simple path. Perhaps a few misplaced crumbs will lead me astray, only for me to realize that the wrong path is a gift of knowledge, too. —an excerpt from Marwa Sabe's epilogue in her book, *Ma'lish*

Finding yourself. Some people search for years, only to come up empty-handed. And while Marwa Sabe doesn't claim to have found herself while studying abroad in Cairo, the recent CWRU graduate does believe she discovered her other half, an essential part of herself, yearning to be unearthed. Her roots. Her culture. Her Egyptian identity.

It was that journey of discovery, undertaken last fall semester, that would serve as the seeds for her College Scholars senior project. She would bring her experience back with her, the biology (pre-med) and psychology major thought, and later decide what form it would take. What resulted was a ninety-four-page book that quilts together her experience in Egypt with the culture and customs she found there. Many of the chapters begin with a vignette—a story about herself or someone else—that helps ease readers into the themes in the book, which include social life, religion, and the state of healthcare in Egypt.

In her introduction to *Ma'lish*, Ms. Sabe explains that she wrote the book so she could share her experiences with

other students who may not realize the impact a study-abroad program can have on their lives, particularly if they become “natives” rather than tourists on their trips.

The Story Behind the Story

The fact is that until Ms. Sabe joined the Middle Eastern Club at CWRU, she had little connection to her native land. While she and her parents, who were both born and raised in Egypt, spoke Arabic at home and celebrated major holidays such as Ramadan, she'd never had any very close Middle Eastern friends in Canton, Ohio, or any of the other places she'd lived during her life. In fact, when she visited her native land when she was younger, she recalls feeling like she didn't fit in. With each visit, in recent times, she felt increasingly more comfortable. But it wasn't until the last time she traveled there that she yearned to return, not as a visitor or tourist, but as an Egyptian coming home.

It was always Ms. Sabe's intent to fit in to the culture, to be “one of them,” she explains. So instead of settling into the dorms like many of the other American students at American University in Cairo, she stayed with her grandmother—or Nana Bisa, as she calls her—in the city. This decision guaranteed her immersion in the culture. “I knew the guy who worked the shop downstairs under her building, and I'd say ‘good morning’ to him every morning. I could hear the sounds of the street. And the neighbors. It was really wonderful.”

Often, she would walk to school. Though it was a forty-minute walk, it was along the Nile, “so it was worth it,” she says, smiling. She also enjoyed popping into some of the shops along the way to talk with people.

In her book, Ms. Sabe explains how she spun herself into the fabric of the

culture. She made friends with other Egyptian students (with whom she still stays in touch), hung out with her grandmother and her entourage of friends who stopped by and called seemingly all day long. And it didn't hurt that she also landed herself a spot on the basketball team at the university, joined the Arabic Choral, and volunteered at an NGO Baby Clinic in Cairo.

“Don't Worry”

One of the cultural threads Ms. Sabe laces through her work is the concept of “ma'lish,” an Arabic word that means “it's OK, don't worry about it.” That word, she says, seemed to permeate the culture and captures the essence of the Egyptian lifestyle. “Parents would say it to exonerate their remorseful children for breaking a rule,” she writes. “Friends would say it to one another as consolation for loss of a loved one.” People would also repeat it while sitting in traffic or when someone was late for an appointment.

“The attitude of Ma'lish is so wonderful, because it can slow down our crazy, speedy lives,” she writes in her chapter on traffic. “It helps us enjoy each day for what it is. It makes us happy. It made me happy.”

Ma'lish allowed Ms. Sabe to feel calm and centered during most of her stay in Egypt. When her parents came to visit during the Christmas break, her mother said, “You just seem so happy. You should stay.”

Epilogue

It was that feeling of Ma'lish that evaporated most quickly when she returned to the States, in the winter, as she relates in the epilogue of her book:

I loved living in Cairo...I felt a sense of belonging, of hope, of love. It was really hard to let go of that feeling, and my first

week back in the US left me a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle all piled up into a big messy cardboard mountain. I knew my physical body was here...it had to be, or else I wouldn't be walking down the streets of Cleveland visiting friends and going to my classes on campus. But, my spirit was elsewhere.

In her book, she describes almost bursting into tears when she watched people at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, buzzing around in their own personal bubbles, a concept that was entirely foreign to people in Cairo (though Ms. Sabe tried to explain it to them). "This was the first time in my life that I think I could actually *see* everyone's 'personal bubble,'" she writes. "I had always thought it was this invisible dome that inconspicuously shielded you from too much personal intrusion. But I swear I saw those things—big bubbles just floating around the airport, with these little busy people inside, looking down at

the floor worrying about their flights, thinking about what they'd eaten that day, wondering how many bills were waiting for them in their mailboxes, replaying that emotionally charged

conversation they had had the night before...."

Still, Ms. Sabe is grateful for her experience in Egypt, thankful that she took the time to find the part of herself that had been missing all of these years.



Ms. Sabe's story has a happy ending, and not just because of her self discovery. This

summer, before returning to CWRU to begin medical school, she went back to Egypt, to serve as a research assistant at the National Cancer Institute in Cairo. In that role, Ms. Sabe worked with families of terminally ill children, helping to ease their pain. 