

It seemed that there was a global continuum of anxiety-ridden seconds ticking by as I awaited an incoming letter that would truly change my life for the better...or the worse. December 15 was the day that I find out I was accepted by Duke University, the post-secondary institution of my dreams. While lingering doubt left me apprehensive in the time leading up to the decision, everybody around me was strong in their conviction that I would be granted admission. I was going to go to the school of my dreams—the school that I had dreamt of attending since I was twelve years old. December 15, 2017. 7:15 pm. Logging onto my email. I sat on the floor in the cafeteria of my school as my trembling fingers struggled to enter my password. Some of my closest friends were closing in, watching over my shoulder as I awaited the text that would come across the screen reading “Congratulations! Welcome to the Duke class of 2022.” Two minutes worth of internet lag had never seemed so lengthy. The silence that surrounded me in the crowded cafeteria full of art appreciators as the first annual photography contest was coming to a close was the most deafening noise that has ever pierced my ears. I was shaking as my heart beat with such intensity that I thought I would faint. The page had loaded. My shoulder was squeezed by someone. I focused my eyes on the screen. This was it.

Two words. That is all it took.
“We regret...”

The room around me started spinning and tears threatened to expose my internal rapport as brittle and weak. I could not believe that I did not get in. Everybody said I would. The world was ending. All of my hard work. It was for nothing. I was not going to Duke. This was the beginning of what I had foreseen as a downward spiral.

To this day, I am at a loss for words. That day greeted me with such perplexity that it is inexplicable. Duke day is minuscule in comparison to the following day in which I had the greatest epiphany of my adolescence. I came to the revelation that I did not need Duke, nor did I really want it. I came to the revelation that, had I pursued a higher level of education at Duke, I would have studied environmental engineering, drowning in calculus curriculum for four years until I found an entry-level job with some solar panel manufacturing company. While my passion for environmental sustainability is of prominence in my life, it certainly is not the most prevalent. I came to the revelation that, if I had been accepted into Duke University, deciding to go would be the biggest mistake of my life. I was not supposed to go to Duke. I was denied acceptance in order to recognize that my passion for journalism far outweighs any other aspect of my current being.

To assert that dealing with rejection is difficult would be a conventional understatement. I was heartbroken when I found out that I would not be going to the school of my dreams but I also took solace in the fact that rejection in one of its most devastating forms was the reality check that truly exemplified my potential as much more than a scholastic journalist. I was meant to carry my passion for journalism beyond the confines of my high school.

Somewhere along my journey as a scholastic journalist, I often contemplated whether or not my efforts were really worth anything. I knew that my talents for writing, photography and design were being recognized as I had won four All-Florida awards (two for yearbook content, one for sports action photography, one fall digital quick-turn for summer spread) amongst several excellent awards and honorable mentions. However, I did not foresee a future for myself that involved journalism. It was not until I was faced with rejection that I realized every single hour

that I have spent in front of a computer screen, behind a camera lens, and in between the covers of my favorite interviewing notebook was mounting. I was practicing my future profession before I was physically cognizant of my behaviors. I was never taking the yearbook or newspaper classes all those years because writing, photography and design were hobbies; I had enrolled in the yearbook journalism class in my freshman year because there had always been a part of me that was passionate about writing—I made a decision that had a profound impact on not only my career choices but who I am as a person. Because I am a journalist, I stand for truth. I believe that integrity and humility are the cornerstone of storytelling. I believe that upholding the ideals of ethical use of information and deviating from bias are the greatest constituents of just reporting. Because I am a journalist, I am one of few who will dedicate my life to telling the stories that need to be heard, the stories that will have profound impacts on the world, just as journalism itself has had on me.

Scholastic journalism has been one of the greatest contributors to my personal development in that I practice empathy, patience, persistence, hard-working candor and a drive to help others, whether that be through sharing my own stories or assisting them in telling theirs. Having a voice is empowering. As I have risen to leadership in both *The Bird's Eye* yearbook and *The Talon* newspaper, I have become increasingly aware of the significance that one voice can be in a world so full of noise. I encourage the members of each staff to find their voice through the practice of ethical reporting, gentle approach and thorough research. I advise the members of each publication to speak on behalf of those who cannot or will not speak for themselves. I request that each of the staff members that I have had the privilege of working with take at least one thing away from their time with me as the editor in chief of *The Bird's Eye* and as an editor for *The Talon*: do not let obstacles deter them from pushing forward. Obstacles can pose a threat to progression but it is the decision of the pursuer to fall and stay down or get back up. I fell. Hard. I stood back up. What was in front of me? A pad of paper. A pen. A laptop. A camera. All of these material objects have a sum much greater than their parts: a voice. I am so glad that I have found mine and will spend the rest of my days helping others find theirs.

Journalism is empowering. It gave me the strength to hold my world together when I felt it start to crumble. I thank my lucky stars that I am not going to the school that I once believed was that of my wildest dreams. I would have lived a lie. I found my truth. I found journalism.