

Ashley Overhouse  
History Celebration Speech  
June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012

### History Celebration Speech 2012

Greek playwright Aeschylus argued that “Memory is the mother of all wisdom”. I would agree with Aeschylus in this matter and even take it one step further, for historians are not only the masters of memory; they are the masters of wisdom. With your permission, I will tell you a few memories I have made with this department and it’s amazing staff.

Let me preface what I am about to say with a personal admission. For some of you, it will come as no surprise that I am perfectionist, and can be an annoying one at that. Even worse, I hate being ignorant, because not knowing often leads to mistakes...and I hate making mistakes.

As long as I can remember I believed that mistakes meant failure, and, showed personal weakness. But the truth is, the only reason why I am standing here today speaking at the 2012 History Department Graduation is due to a long series of mistakes.

My very first mistake was declaring a Theater Minor as a freshman. I loved theater in high school and performed in several productions throughout Middle School and High School. I was convinced that my Broadway musical and glamorous extracurricular experience would mesh well with Santa Cruz Theater. Unfortunately, I was mistaken. I then searched to find some other minor that complimented Literature. Since I also enjoyed History I turned my attention to finding a class to peak my interest. I took an inter-disciplinary course the last quarter of my freshman year: The History of the Holocaust. It was co-taught by both a History and a Literature professor, Peter Kenez and Murray Baumgarten. I not only thoroughly enjoyed that class; I fell in love with the concept of the combined disciplines. More importantly, I found myself enjoying researching and writing the history papers for the class more than the Literature. For the first time in a year, I found myself passionate about learning again.

And then I made my second mistake – I went to a History Declaration Workshop. I went to the workshop because I was considering a minor in History. I had no idea that the workshop was for History Majors until Stephanie Sawyer was half way through her wonderful presentation. I think Stephanie must have seen my confused look even where I was at the back of the room because she sought me out at the end of the workshop. That fateful encounter was the beginning of a three-month long conversion to the History Major, and more importantly, to declaring a Double Major in History and Literature. It should also be no surprise to anyone here that Stephanie can be quite convincing. Not only did she appeal to my logical side of mapping out my ENTIRE timeline of four years to show how plausible a Double Major was, but she appealed to my interests – offering me a number of different faculty names that specialized in various different regions of the world.

My mistakes were far from over, however. The next series of mistakes I made led me to meet some of the most influential faculty in my undergraduate career – Cindy Polecritti, Alan Christy, Jonathon Beecher, just to name a few. I crashed courses on a whim, went to office hours because

I felt comfortable approaching people who could help me, and lastly I wrote and re-wrote papers, quizzes, applications – until all my mistakes were seen as progress rather than failure.

I have had the opportunity to present research papers in front of faculty, the chance to win scholarships, work with over 30 students to explore individual narratives and put them into an e-book, and lastly even sit on a student advisory committee to help with hiring new faculty for the History Department. By the end of this year, I felt overwhelmed and even questioned whether the Department had been making the mistake this time by choosing me. But when reflecting about my experience, it wasn't about me personally. It was about the various opportunities the History Department itself gives undergraduate students. The History Major is not just a four-year track degree. It is a personable, interactive, engaging and most importantly – rewarding experience.

In the end, I have what is called a “European History” Major on paper. In reality, I have an eclectic mix of interests that fall all over the timeline and virtually all over the globe. Renaissance Italy, WWII and post-WWII Japan, Modern British and American Literature and of course, Ancient Roman history. Rather than being embarrassed about the contradictory or erratic disciplines, I think that these interests are a legacy, a testament to the incredible professors I have had the pleasure of learning from.

I stated in an application and I am going to say it again - the only decision that was more pivotal in my life than deciding to go abroad to Rome was declaring the history major. It wasn't well planned in advance, complimentary to my Modern Literature Major or even a consideration into my future career in Law. Rather it was the best mistake I ever made – one that helped me grow as a person, intellectually and mentally.

From the History Major, I have taken away intelligence, perseverance, and hopefully wisdom. Thank you so much to everyone in this room for helping me be the person I am today. Thank you so much professors for continuing to teach, live and promote history at this University. You have helped change and improve the lives of so many students just like me. Lastly, thank you graduating class of 2012, you give me hope for the future. Congratulations new Historians, Class of 2012!