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Four Years Later

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Four Years Later

Students profiled in *IWU Magazine* as first-year students reflect on their journey to graduation this May.

Story by Rachel Hatch



Melissa Ramirez, Janette Abbasi and Matt LaLonde (from left), pictured during their first year of college. Much had changed for the three in the time since.

Seated near the front of a busy coffee shop in downtown Bloomington, I watch the door, waiting to see familiar faces.

It's been years.

In the flurry of the days before the May 2014 Commencement, I was able to reconnect with three of the students I had profiled in 2011 for *IWU Magazine*.

In my memory, they were still the first-year students I'd interviewed — soccer player Matt LaLonde, who was sidelined with illness his first year; Melissa Ramirez, whose homesickness for Los Angeles nearly overwhelmed her; and Janette Abbasi, who labored through the demands of her biology classes to pursue her dream of becoming an ophthalmologist.

As I take a sip of my soy chai latte, I spot Matt, who is nodding intently as he speaks to a fellow coffee-shop patron. I notice his confident half-smile has returned, unsullied by the battle against mono that took most of his first year. Giving me a wave of recognition, he continues his conversation, which turns out to be about playground equipment. "I'm part of the West Bloomington Revitalization Project," he offers in explanation as he joins me at my table. "They might be tearing down an old park, and we may be able to use the equipment somewhere else." He quickly types a reminder note in his laptop and closes the lid.

Our conversation begins with his laid-back laugh. “I reread the old story on us. I’d forgotten how much we went through,” he says, pausing for a moment. “You know, when I first got here, I thought I would study, get my degree and get out. I had no idea the direction my life would take.”

Matt found his path starting in his sophomore year. “That’s when I walked into the University’s Action Research Center (ARC). I found my passion.”

Though he returned to soccer — even playing despite hip surgery — Matt’s passion emerged through community involvement. Along with his work for the West Bloomington revitalization project through ARC, he initiated a Tool Library, which loans power tools to low-income residents. “A lot of the homes in West Bloomington are old, yet there is not a lot of money to buy tools to fix them,” explains Matt, who knows about tools, having worked at ACE Hardware since high school. The project was selected as a winner for a \$25,000 grant through the online voting “Improve Your Community Challenge,” organized by State Farm’s Youth Advisory Board. The funds were used to purchase more tools and a new space to house the Tool Library.



Matt LaLonde launched a local Tool Library, which loans power tools to low-income residents.

Discovering his major in accounting, Matt was one of only two interns selected for the KPMG LLP firm for its 2013 Global Internship Program. He interned in KPMG’s Paris office. “I spent a month living five blocks from the Eiffel Tower. That was surreal,” he laughs. The firm has since hired him to work full-time after graduation. Melissa Ramirez (her friends call her Mel) arrives, sliding into the seat next to me. The shy smile of the girl who once ached for home can still be seen, but is overshadowed by a steady confidence that shines through her warm eyes. We talk of family and friends, and when the conversation turns to the future, she smiles again. “I’m staying,” she says simply. Unable to contain my surprise, I ask how the quiet L.A. girl found a home in Bloomington.

Like Matt, Mel was inspired by an off-campus experience. A volunteer gig with Heartland Head Start led to involvement with the Immigration Project at Western Avenue Community Center on Bloomington’s west side. She then took a lead to help Western Avenue redesign its after-school program. That led to assisting the YWCA

with their programs, which resulted in a post-graduation job. “I’ll be working with the after-school and day-care programs at the YWCA,” she explains.

Mel’s newfound passion meant a change in major from biology to psychology with a minor in Hispanic studies. Along with her work at the Y, she plans to apply for graduate school at Illinois State’s College of Education in the fall. “You know, it is amazing, but I have more contacts here than I do back home. It’s not what I expected.”

Matt and Mel commiserate about moving on from projects they helped start. “It’s like letting go of a child you helped raise,” said Mel of her time at Western Avenue.

“Exactly,” agrees Matt. “I am thinking now about who to ask to take over the Tool Library when I go to Chicago. It’s tough to think about letting go.” The conversation veers to Matt asking Mel for advice on how to get the word out about the Tool Library to local Hispanic community members. She offers translation services and provides names. Unable to help myself, I begin to throw in local contacts I know as well. And then it hits me — I am no longer talking with students, but fellow members of the community.



Janette Abbasi and Melissa Ramirez, who remained friends throughout college, celebrate graduation.

Later that same day, I meet a third former first-year, someone who has remained friends with Mel since their early days of involvement in the Spanish and Latino Student Association (SALSA). My memories of Janette Abbasi are of a vivacious Chicago girl who bounded down the steps to the Dugout, a streak of pink in her auburn hair. In our early talks, she remarked how she was unnerved by the relative quiet of Bloomington but reveled in the friendly atmosphere of the campus. It is back at the Dugout — mostly vacant at the semester’s end — where I met Janette again. This time her pace is calm, relaying a sense of serenity. “No color,” she says with a laugh, motioning to her hair.

Janette survived her first year of biology, “just barely,” but felt something was missing in her plan to become an eye doctor. “I shadowed someone at a local eye clinic for a day, and he asked me, ‘What do you like about ophthalmology?’ And you know what? I did not have an answer.” A stint with the University’s 10-week Summer Enrichment Program for MALANA students connected her with Marcfirst, a local non-profit group

that assists people with developmental disabilities. The experience sparked her interest in occupational therapy as a possible career. “I want to connect with people who really need help, especially older and younger people. Sometimes I think they get forgotten.”

During her time at IWU, Janette also became more involved with her faith. “Most people say they become less spiritual in school. I found the opposite,” she says. Service trips to Alabama with an Alternative Spring Break and to Honduras with Illinois Wesleyan’s chapter of the Global Medical Brigade led her to consider the possibility of combining her loves of occupational therapy and spirituality through mission work. “But first I have to get through graduate school,” she says with a sigh.

The conversation turns to the GREs and that fateful walk across the stage to finally receive the diploma she set out to earn four years earlier. Janette pauses. “I never did get used to the quiet,” she says, almost in a whisper. “That’s the thing about being here. I haven’t really changed, I’ve just become someone with a lot of different priorities.”

It occurs to me that, in that phrase, Janette reflects something essential about our journeys, both in college and beyond. Though essential parts of us may never truly change, with the right combination of encouragement, guidance and experiences, we can evolve, grow and find our life’s passion.