

DREAMS, ALIVE AND WELL AND LIVING IN BOONE

A hundred students, a hundred carefully crafted life plans

By Lee Burdette Williams

IT STARTED OUT as a seemingly tedious task, one for which I don't remember volunteering. I was to read approximately a hundred "Who's Who Among American College and University Students" applications and select up to eighty I thought deserved the recognition. My lack of enthusiasm for the task stemmed from my general lack of support for the award. I know how "Who's Who" works: get students on the list and then try to convince them or their proud parents to buy a book that is no more than a list of thousands of names.

Nonetheless, there I sat at my desk, a stack of one-page biographies awaiting me. I began glancing through them and within minutes was captivated—not by grade point averages, or lists of involvement, or leadership experience, but by one item at the bottom of the page that allowed three lines' worth of response: "Briefly describe your career plans."

Most students have plans, of course, and occasionally I'm privy to them. Sometimes I hear about them in conversation; other times I'm asked to write letters of recommendation for graduate schools; or I'll get a call for a reference check for employment.

What struck me, though, as I looked through these applications, were the answers that students came up with when required to articulate those plans in just a couple of sentences. I felt as though a curtain had been pulled back from a small window in their lives, and I had a chance to glance in.

Some views revealed little: "A position in a company, in which an employer can utilize my skills in organization, leadership, and interpersonal skills," wrote one student, having read one too many sample resumes.

Of course, there were the standard answers, at least at a university with a strong education program like this one. A lot of applicants planned teaching careers. What

was interesting, though, was the specificity of some of them. Interspersed among the "I wish to teach high school mathematics" responses were geographical preference ("I plan to teach English in the Charlotte area"), type of institution ("I plan to become a secondary science teacher in an inner-city school system"), and longer-range plans ("Hopefully I can also complete a master's degree while in the classroom. I feel that this would benefit me the most as a teacher, and a lifelong seeker of knowledge").

There were also numerous law school plans. One student said she hopes to work for a "modest size legal firm." Another is likely losing sleep over her prospects: "Currently I am awaiting my LSAT results. I will apply to various law schools accordingly. Put simply, I shall apply to Yale, Harvard, etc. . . . if indeed my LSAT test result merits such an opportunity." One woman, a devoted sorority member, "would love to be the first lawyer who never attended law school, but that is unlikely." Her ultimate goal is to be the first female president of the United States, and I can't help thinking how nice it might be to have someone in that position who has no formal legal training but knows how to plan a good sorority rush.

Some plans reveal careful thought and thorough planning, not to mention some coaxing from a faculty member along the way. "I plan to begin graduate work in the field of gerontology. With my master's degree, I hope to find work in research and demographics related to aging. With the future in age-related studies becoming so necessary in our society, I feel that research and statistical studies will be both prominent and progressive."

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Here's a student destined for something great, if for no other trait than her thoroughness: "I wish to become an advertising copywriter and work in the graphic arts industry. I enjoy creating advertisements and dealing with publicity-related matters for organizations. I find that I express myself best in writing" (no doubt). "I wish to work in major markets and the mass media, but not in a large city such as New York or Chicago. I see myself beginning in the print industry and then moving into radio, television, and the Internet. My ultimate career goal is to become well-known and respected in the advertising industry so I can freelance my work, set my own schedule, and have organizations and agencies come to me when they need my talents."

Still other plans made me wonder about the paths students had followed to get to this point: "... I will then fulfill my lifelong dream of counseling cancer and leukemia patients."

We have a large ROTC program here, which was reflected in the applicant pool. In fact, reading their applications felt like reading a foreign language, so unknown to me are the traditions and structures of the military. They list on their applications activities such as "Varsity letter, Ranger Challenge," "Battalion Public Affairs Representative," and the "National Society of Scabbard and Blade." Their plans (and planning styles) are as diverse, as specific, and sometimes as vague as their nonmilitary classmates'. "My intention is to receive a commission in the United States Army immediately upon graduation." "I look forward to an exciting career in the military, managing one of America's most important institutions." In an opposite vein, another has laid out quite a detailed plan for herself: "After being commissioned as a second lieutenant, I plan to join the Army Reserve 89th Regional Support Command in Wichita, Kansas as a public affairs officer. My Officer Basic Course for Adjutant General Corps will be at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I aspire to attend law school at the University of Oklahoma with a concentration in international law. Upon completion of law school, my goal is to go Active Duty as a JAG officer with a preferred duty station overseas specializing in international treaties.

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After attaining the rank of major, my ultimate goal is to work for the State Department at a foreign embassy."

Perhaps it's the process initiated by this task, the process of looking back myself, trying to remember my dreams as a junior and senior in college, that so amazes me about some of their grand and detailed plans. I don't think I was like that. I recall having a vague notion that I wanted to join the Peace Corps and eventually work in social service, but I really had no path laid out to get there. I went to a liberal arts college, so perhaps the emphasis on career development and planning wasn't as strong as it is here and at other public universities. I certainly had no idea I'd end up where I am now, a mere thirteen years after graduating. These students plan to enter fields I didn't even know existed back then: "I plan to be a meeting and convention planner." "I plan to pursue a joint career in pastoral ministry and medical ethics; through overseeing ethics committees at hospitals, being actively involved in public policy issues, and serving on medical ethics commissions at a national and international level."

I think I just wanted to serve humanity in a, well, a more general sense.

A real treat during this process was coming across applications of students I know. One young woman I recognized has written, for example, "After graduation, I am teaching English to Mexican students in Puebla, Mexico. After teaching for six months, I am planning to return to Ecuador to teach English and work with human rights campaigns and grassroots political organizing in indigenous villages." But wait, there's more for this funny, bright, spirited woman: "I would like to grant write and/or write for and edit publications for non-profit groups involving environmental or women's issues. Eventually, I would like to do ethnographic research and/or applied anthropological projects with South American indigenous communities." I, personally, would someday like to write her biography.

Another student applicant I know is the editor of the university's newspaper. "I would like to help bring ethics back into journalism." He will. I have no doubts

about his commitment. What remains to be seen is just how he goes about such a formidable task.

The stack of applications and their articulated dreams seem endless, but each page I turn makes me smile.

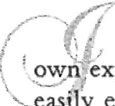
"I plan to design golf courses."

"I want to produce commercial video and educational television."

"I hope to play in the Canadian Football League."

"I hope to work for a major textbook company, training new and old teachers how to use new textbooks."

"I plan to attend graduate school to receive a master's degree in campaign management."

 SMILE, but it's a wistful smile. I know from my own experience, and the experiences of friends, how easily even careful plans are derailed by life and its vagaries. An illness, a romance, an unanticipated job opportunity (or loss), an unplanned pregnancy, a single terribly bad (or remarkably good) decision, and one's life plans just fall away to nothing. The carefully constructed path crumbles into disarray. The thoughtfully drawn-out map is rendered obsolete. The whole process of planning anything, in fact, becomes suspect. All that's left is a less-than-certain hope that the future might hold something good.

I find myself thinking of Thomas Cole's series of paintings, "The Journey of Life." In the second painting of the series, "Youth," a young man is about to assume control of a boat being launched on a river. Ahead, the youth sees a shining castle, and his confidence in reaching that castle is so strong that he brashly dismisses the Guardian Angel who watches

from the riverbank. What he doesn't see is that the river actually bends to the right, away from the castle, toward much more turbulent waters. These students, like Cole's protagonist, see the castle clearly and are beckoned by it. They are blissfully unaware of the inevitable bends in the river ahead, and seemingly impervious to the white water.

I guess that's why I have found myself thumbing through these hundred pages over and over. These are the dreams of my students, frozen in time like a textual photograph. Whatever they end up doing, wherever they end up going, this precise moment, when they so carefully crafted their life's plan, will always exist in their memories, just like the friends, the fun, the best, and the hardest times they had while they were here. Thanks to our fine capitalistic friends at Who's Who, those same moments are now mine—once-removed and vicarious, but still mine.

These are, I think, among the best moments for them, as well as for us: when the past and future intersect, when a lifetime of education finally seems not like an endless road, but a bridge to a place full of promise and possibility. They don't have the perspective that we old and jaded folks have, and for that they should be grateful. As far as they're concerned, all that stands between them and their planned success is time and hard work. They do not yet know how both serendipity and capriciousness will intervene and leave their dreams on the roadside like an old rust-covered pickup truck. Nor, for that matter, do they know of the unimaginably wondrous detours and destinations that await them. At this moment, what they see before them is just a path, clearly marked and well lit.

I wish them well.

