

McKenzie Hightower

Graduation Year: Senior

College: Arts & Letters

Major(s): English, Film

Minors(s): None

Scholar Group Membership: No

Did you received other funding for this project?: No

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance? I would not have been able to go without CUSE as it would have been too much money.

Project Title: Collaborative Learning at Martha's Vineyard

Project Location: Martha's Vineyard, Mass

ND Faculty Mentor: Johannes Goransson

Project Type: Creative Endeavor

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Very Much

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: Very Much

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

The Creative Writing Institute of Martha's Vineyard started their first workshop at 10AM and it lasted for two hours. Some of the topics we discussed were publishing, editing, a writers life, what exactly good writing is, flash fiction, emotion in writing, and future graduate work in creative writing. After the first workshop lecture the poetry students had their workshop while the rest of the students were given free time to write and have lunch. I wrote more on this trip towards my senior thesis than I have in a long time, so the experience would have been worth it right there. Perhaps it was being surrounded by a community of writers or perhaps it was the fact that I could write out on the deck by the Atlantic Ocean. It was truly breathtaking. After the free-writing period all of the participants gathered together for the faculty readings. There were three fiction writers and each of them were phenomenal. Micheal Martone, the director of the MFA program at the University of Alabama, read and he also was the faculty member who talked to me one-on-one about my manuscript and my future plans for graduate school. It was an overwhelming amount of information to take in, but I think I learned more about publishing and the exact places I should apply to continue my education than I ever have. I also made some great connections for my future career and some great friends in the writing world at large.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

First off, I just want to say this was an INCREDIBLE experience that was one of the most beneficial moments of my Notre Dame career. For the first time, I was surrounded by people who wanted to do exactly what I dreamed of doing and I gained so much knowledge through them. For my senior thesis, I learned of nearly ten new authors to read to help me with my fairy tale form, I learned of new structural forms for my existing stories to make the forward action seem more pressing, and I learned how best to go about getting a collection of short stories published. Ultimately though, I came to realize so much more than my initial goals of my senior thesis. For the first time I was surrounded by a group of female writers as well. We talked about the challenges we all face as women in this career path and we shared our work with each other. I definitely have made some valuable friends that I can continue to communicate with for the rest of my life. Honestly, I would have to say this trip was one of the best in my life. There was a moment, after a day of writing, learning, and talking about grotesque book recommendation, where we were all on the beach watching the sun set. It was perfect not only because I still couldn't believe I had been afforded the opportunity to be at this amazing workshop, but because I was doing exactly what I wished to do with my entire life. As people clapped and horns went off after the sun set, I remember texting my mother that it had been not only one of the best weeks of my life, but that particular day had been especially meaningful as I looked back on my Notre Dame experience and my writing career.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

This project is intricately tied to my senior thesis, my national fellowship application, my graduate school applications, and my future career simultaneously. I could not have imagined a more beneficial experience that touched on so many aspects of my life right now. The workshop directly tied to my senior thesis, because I had the opportunity to not only talk one-on-one about my existing stories with the head of the Alabama MFA program, but I had the chance to write two new stories for my collection as well. That is hard to do in just one week as well! The connection this project has to my national fellowship, the Marshall Scholarship, is palatable. My fellowship has to do with transgressive texts empowering woman and I was studying grotesque and gothic texts at the workshop--two genres that are often transgressive in nature--and I had the chance to ask other woman what these texts did to them emotionally. My trip to Martha's Vineyard benefited my graduate school applications and my future career goals similarly. I am going to use parts of my senior thesis to apply for my MFA in creative writing, so the added time and oversight I had for that project benefited my applications. Ultimately, I wish to be a professor of creative writing, and at this workshop I had the opportunity to suggest revisions for some peoples work and teach one particular woman everything I already knew about the publishing world and grotesque fiction.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

I think many more students should pursue creative endeavors at Notre Dame. Often, art is a solitary process and getting the opportunity, through CUSE's generous funding, to spend time in

