



FROM HARLAN TO LEXINGTON, TO ITALY AND BEYOND

HOW ONE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT'S TIME AT GATTON AND ABROAD HAVE IMPACTED HER EDUCATION AND FUTURE PLANS

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Ashton West is a senior at Gatton majoring in management with an international business minor. Originally from beautiful Harlan, Kentucky and being one of only 42 graduates in her high school class, she is a first-generation college student with big dreams. After completing her studies at Gatton, she plans to attend law school to further her education, which has been her plan since she was in the fifth grade.

West has been a very active student, taking advantage of nearly every opportunity that has come her way. Since coming to UK, she has been incredibly involved in many activities and organizations including the Gamma Phi Beta sorority, the Dean's Advisory Panel for Gatton, the Women in Business Leadership Program and Gatton Ambassadors. These groups,

along with Gatton faculty and staff, have been instrumental in making her time here memorable and valuable. "They have been so impactful and I never thought I was going to find that," said West.

Among the most influential to West have been Dean Simon Sheather and Professor Jane Wells. When West was taking Accounting 201 during the height of COVID and struggling to learn remotely, Wells went out of her way to help her get caught up and feel confident with the material, meeting with her via Zoom late at night just to make sure she was understanding the content. "She was dedicated, she was great," West said, elaborating on how Wells still speaks to her in the halls and continues to make sure she's doing well.



Her connection with Dean Sheather, however, has different origins. She was able to form an initial connection by being a part of his student ambassador advisory panel, but what helped her connect with him even more was his willingness to meet one-on-one with her. During finals week, West found herself in his office just having a casual conversation to foster a connection. It was through this meeting that she learned that she would be getting to spend a little more time with the dean...in Italy.

"I knew when I got here that I wanted to study abroad. I have always loved to travel, but I'm from a small town; my family doesn't have much, by any means. The furthest I've ever been has been to Florida; I've not really traveled much."

When an Undergraduate Resource Center announcement about a trip to Italy for management students appeared in her email, West wasted no time in deciding she wanted to go. She started the application and passport process very quickly, anxious for the opportunity. "I was laying in my bed, and I checked my email...and I started crying, I called my mom and said 'Mom, I got in! I'm going abroad!'"

It was on this three-and-a-half-week trip where West got to spend more personal time with the dean. Upon arrival, he recognized her and then walked and talked with her on their first day there. "Out of the 40 kids who were on this trip, he sat and talked with me, and we really grew a personal relationship so much that he offered to write me a letter of recommendation for law school."

While getting to know the dean was a highlight of her time in Italy, the trip was a pivotal point in West's time at UK. "The experience of it all was so much fun because I didn't know anybody going on that trip and I came back with 37 best friends. I have a person from that trip in every single one of my classes who I sit with." West highlighted the people she met along with the classwork as two main reasons why education abroad was such a great choice for her. The classwork was flexible while still giving her meaningful and

valuable knowledge from Gatton professors. Through the Education Abroad program, she was able to earn necessary class credits while seeing other cultures and developing a greater appreciation for the world. "Seeing all the aspects of international business was crazy and it was awesome--I enjoyed every second of it."

Although she wishes it could have, West's time in Italy couldn't last forever, and she had to come back to Lexington to finish up her undergraduate studies. As graduation rounds the corner for Ashton, her goal of going to law school is quickly becoming a reality. Since the fifth grade, law school has been in her sights. Although teaching was her childhood dream job, career research in elementary school quickly opened her eyes to other opportunities--and the legal profession caught her eye. As she continued in elementary, middle and high school, West discovered that she thoroughly enjoyed learning about history and our nation's laws as well as debating and defending her stance on issues. Because of this, West knows that she has chosen the best career path for her. "I'm going to enjoy it; I want to spend my whole life doing it."

Although law school is her next step, she feels strongly that Gatton provided the necessary foundation and network to allow her to succeed there. Additionally, the sense of home and community she has felt here has influenced her life greatly. "Once I toured, it just felt so much more like home compared to other schools."

"It's a pretty building where everything is paid for by our alumni and donors. It's so nice that every room is labeled with an alumni or donor who went to school here that wanted to give back to their college. I think when you see that and see how everything is in-house and you don't have to go 15 minutes across campus from class to class--your professors, advisors, and the Undergraduate Resource Center are located here - - you're like, 'It's so nice! Why would I not want to stay here?!'"