

ORIGIN STORIES

by John Syme and Lisa Patterson
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The moments that define us—sometimes abrupt, sometimes devastating, sometimes unexpected and wonderful—also define our community. The life experiences and cultural heritage of our students enrich our campus, and challenge and change the way we see the world.

We invited students to share their origin stories and the moments that have helped define who they are and where they are going. All of the students share perspectives shaped by circumstance and unbound by place.





Bruna Siqueira '17

Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil, moved to the United States at nine, lived in Utah and Colorado.

My family legally immigrated from Brazil. My dad was a lawyer in Brazil, but he brought us to the United States to open a franchise of a family business. We lived in Utah for a year and then moved to Colorado, where my dad found out he had an arterial blockage. We were doing okay financially, but we didn't have health insurance. He needed surgery for his condition, and while he was looking into doctors and "surgeon shopping," he had a fatal heart attack at home.

Defining Moment

My dad had had a work visa, but my mom wasn't allowed to work under that. With him gone, mom started cleaning houses—she was a dentist in Brazil. We lost our home, which led us to a series of moves. We hit a dead end when my mom could no longer find housing she could afford. When I was a senior in high school, the most bittersweet day happened. On the day we became essentially homeless and moved into an RV with one bed, I found out I had been granted DACA status (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), and that I received a Questbridge scholarship. I called my mom from school, and she was crying so hard. She was so glad I had a plan, and she didn't have to worry about me having opportunities. I came to Davidson with the college's first cohort of Questbridge Scholars.

Siqueira is a sociology and biology double major. She is in the process of applying for full citizenship and plans to attend graduate school to become a physician's assistant in an underserved area. Siqueira lives with her husband, Jack, and her dog, Dwight.

Hani Zaitoun '20

Born in Damascus, Syria

In Damascus, we felt like we were relatively safer than Aleppo or Azor or those cities where a lot of things were going on when I was in high school. But you'd wake up in the morning with the sound of mortars and rockets. Electricity was off 16 hours a day and there were water shortages. My dad died in a car accident. The economic situation was not the best and there was the threat of conscription in the military. I wanted to pursue journalism. It was hard to be there, to be unable to tell the parts [of the story] you want to tell.

Defining Moment

I was at the airport in Germany and I went to the police and told them I wanted asylum. I called my mom from the airport. It hit her when I told her I did it, but she said, "You should not come back. Just watch the news and you'll know."

You have to be rational and take the risk. That was the turning point in my life.

My first 40 days in Germany I stayed with 12 people in a room designed for three people. Then I got a job with CNN, through contacts from Damascus. One day on the State Department's Facebook page, I saw a post from the Davidson Refugee Network.... I got admission in November and my visa in December and flew in three weeks before Donald Trump was inaugurated....

I didn't come here just to be in the United States. I came to Davidson College. At first people would ask me how I'm "settling in." I'm settled in since the first day! It's just not a problem anymore. You start losing nostalgia and attachment to the places you've been.... Later, you don't care about the place as much anymore. You care about the people.

This summer, Zaitoun will work for "Die Zeit" in Berlin, where he previously worked for CNN and "The Washington Post." His fellow student and creative partner AJ Naddaff '19 will visit him in Berlin to continue their work on a film about Syrian refugees living in exile.





Colin Bye '17

Born in Allentown, Pa., moved to Singapore at five, then back to America at six, mom's native Austria at seven, followed by England.... My home is in Austria: Seefeld-n-Tyrol.

With an American dad and Austrian mom, we had a bilingual household that was more European than American in culture. I went from suburban America to being immersed in different languages and food and cities and cultures and learning that not everyone is white, not everyone thinks like I do.

Defining Moment

A summer internship at Penumbra Theatre Company in Minneapolis, which put all the things I care about together: social justice, education, theatre.... It was the hardest application I've ever written, three questions that forced me to look very deeply at my positionality, and my past, and prejudices that I might have. What does it mean to go on a quest for what Paolo Freires called "mutual humanization"? I was the only white person on staff. Mutual humanization comes in theatre almost automatically by having people come together. Theatre that really gets me going is theatre that makes you ask questions. Every theatre production and class at Davidson has challenged me on that, too. I am auditing a class called "Austria, 1900 to Now." What gives me the right to say I'm Austrian? Is it my passport? My travel schedule? My family?

Bye, a theatre major, is going this summer on a post-graduate European pilgrimage with his brother, a student of virtual reality at SCAD (watch for their documentary), before returning to big dreams in the Big Apple.

Yangzi Jiang '19

Born in Tianjin, China, moved to nearby Beijing for medical treatment at 14, followed by two months at M.D. Anderson in Houston, then Philadelphia through high school.

When I was 14, I was in pain every time I was running or playing soccer. Doctors found a tumor in my leg. They thought it was benign at first, then I had chemotherapy. Yes, I lost all my hair. My parents kept asking around for doctors. They sacrificed a lot for me. We went from Tianjin to Beijing, then to Houston and Philadelphia.

Defining Moment

In Houston and in Philadelphia, we stayed at Ronald MacDonald House. Being in the place where people share the same struggle can help. It's nice to know you're not the only one. Doctors said amputation is probably the safest choice. My tumor was in the ankle and the end of my tibia. To put it shortly, it was not an easy adjustment. Now I just don't pay attention to the limitation. I had my five-year bloodwork checkup and I'm cancer-free. I'm going to be a trip leader with Davidson Outdoors Summer Odyssey. When you're doing those trips, you can connect with people much better. It's the same theory as Ronald MacDonald House. When people face challenges together, they can be genuinely happy about a struggle.

Jiang, a computer science and economics double major, has secured an internship in data analysis this summer, and will be a trip leader on session three of Davidson Outdoors Summer Odyssey.





Derian Cespedes Vega '20

Born in Guapiles, in the province of Limon, Costa Rica

I got an honorific mention at the national science fair competition in 9th grade with a project about the psychological effect of placebo, but they told me to win the national science fair and qualify for the international science fair I had to present a scientific innovation. The next year, I won the national science fair with an inventory, taxonomic classification and georeferentiation of microfungi. I went on to Arizona to compete internationally. That trip changed my life. I knew I wanted to go beyond Costa Rica in my life. I got into United World College Costa Rica and studied the IB for two years.

Defining Moment

In 2012, my dad got cancer. He was only sick for three months, and then he died. I realized life is short. We need to live and take advantage of the moment. I just want to improve in anything I do. I want to be educated, I want to travel, I want to have fun, I want to know people, I am interested in social and environmental issues. I'm gay and I grew up in a religious environment that told me: If you're gay you're going to Hell. I thought Jesus would not like me. I went to church and had a girlfriend for a year trying to change my sexuality, but it didn't work. I've been openly gay since I moved to my boarding school, United World College. Now I can talk about this without feeling that there is something wrong with me. I feel more confident, more me. I love my life in Davidson and I love my life in Costa Rica. I have two homes.

Cespedes Vega is an SGA senator on the diversity committee, the chair for multicultural activities in the Davidson International Association, a Spanish AT and Spanish tutor on campus and a volunteer in the local elementary school.

Mariem Bchir '20

Born in Tunis, Tunisia

In March 2015, I was admitted to Davidson College. The college allowed me to take a gap year, so I could continue to work on a teacher training program I'd developed as a student at the African Leadership Academy (ALA). I interned with the impact measurement department at Education For Employment, a Tunisian non-profit that provides soft skills training, and then I worked in Slovakia at the LEAF Academy in the context of reviewing and editing their Entrepreneurial Leadership program and helping with admissions campaigns in neighboring countries. Then I went to Mauritius, a small island in eastern Africa, where I worked in the African Leadership University helping design and review an English language course for students. The third day after I arrived at Davidson, I broke my hand playing capture the flag. I came here as a 21-year-old freshman, and I was a little apprehensive about that, but I received a lot of support when I got here, and breaking my hand allowed me to meet a lot of amazing people.

Defining Moment

Before I left Tunisia to attend the African Leadership Academy in South Africa, I had some very terrible experiences in school, along with the positive experiences. I grew up as an introvert who enjoyed her reading bubble. Because I was that introverted girl, those experiences made me afraid of my teachers. My father enrolled me in Tae Kwon Do classes when I was 10 or 11, which gave me a lot of confidence. But those experiences stayed in my mind—and I've always had issues with the educational system in Tunisia, not just teachers. The year I woke up I was 16—it was the year of the revolution. At that time, I had two teachers—one was an Arabic classics literature teacher, and one was an English teacher... I noticed that the young English teacher was teaching a popular language and could not get anyone to come to class—she was great in that she mastered the language. Everyone showed up for the Arabic teacher, who was near retirement, creating a gap in our age and a gap in interest in the subject. So I thought, okay, what's the difference? It was his art of teaching and the relationships he built even with the most difficult students, and it clicked in my mind that there's something there to explore... yes the curriculum is not amazing, yes the environment is not the best, but still this teacher, despite all these conditions, could make them appreciate and engage with the material and the subject he's teaching. That was the thing that sparked my interest. I don't want the younger generations to go to a class where they feel afraid of teachers or where they go out of fear and not out of love of learning. I also want teachers to feel empowered and enjoy their role in society, which would eventually affect students positively.

Bchir is a Belk Scholar pursuing a computer science major and educational studies minor. This summer she'll pilot an online edX course for teachers in Tunisia. After Davidson, she plans to return to Tunisia to open a teacher training institute.





Layan Anabtawi '19

Born in Ramallah, Palestine

I lived in an apartment in Ramallah with my parents and three siblings. Ramallah is one of the most liberal cities in the West Bank. A lot of tourists come to Ramallah, and a lot of non-governmental organizations are based there. I attended the only IB high school in the West Bank. It's a Quaker affiliated school, so college admission counselors from all over the world visit. Before I arrived at Davidson, my idea of America came from the movies—that's where I picked up my English. When I got here, I realized a lot of the movies I watched were set in the north, where they have subways and taxis.

Defining Moment

I never liked documentaries until I watched *The Imposter*. I went to the Durham documentary festival [Full Frame] and really enjoyed it. So now I want to try to make a documentary. My original idea was to do a mockumentary about the West Bank that would explore what it would be like now if it had never been occupied. At the festival, I watched a film from Qatar that followed a guy going to a falconry competition—it was stunning, and I liked the idea of just following someone around. So I've decided to make a documentary about my grandmother. She lives outside of Nablus. She's 94 years old and has been living on her own for almost two decades—my grandfather died when I was a baby. She's done a lot—she started a school in her village, she was a teacher. There's a lot I personally want to know. How many documentaries are out there about a Palestinian grandmother? She has a great memory. I feel like the film would have a great balance between the political part and the personal, and it's also going to have a comedic part because my grandma's hilarious. She still has a lot of my grandfather's old documents. I have one with me—his passport from the British mandate. There are all these documents I want to document. I want to document her routine, her life.

Anabtawi, a Presidential Scholar, is majoring in film and middle eastern studies through the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies. She wants to bring a new genre of film to the middle east and is interested in how politics—gender, race, economics, government policy—play out in film.



Jimmy Plaut '19

Born in Colorado, lived in Idaho until age eight; moved to Shanghai, China and later to Chengdu.

My mom was Taiwanese and my dad is a Davidson alumnus. They met teaching English in Taiwan. I came here for July Experience in high school and have vague memories of brick and green grass, and some kid about my age talking about Newtonian physics. That impressed me. But I came for my college tour with my granddad, not my dad, because he's so frickin' biased. He loves this place.

Defining Moment

The most aha moment that happened during July Experience was that professors and other students who went to Davidson didn't seem so alien and above me anymore. I was socially introverted and a bit awkward, so that meant a lot. I came here and I liked it, grudgingly at first, even though I felt like a middle finger sewn on to where a thumb goes.

And culturally I'm still the very mixed person that I was. I think it's a good statement on Davidson that it has allowed me to stay that way. I'm so dry and sarcastic I can sound like I hate something when actually I love it. It was finding the right people, for me, to hang out with. It's nothing complicated.

Plaut was an early adopter of Davidson's new computer science major, formalized last fall. His dad visits from Chengdu often.