On My Honor

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INDIVISIBLE

By Liz Nigro, Westhampton College Honor Council education chair

ON MY HON
Though Ryland Hall served as the epicenter of magic for live-action roleplayers this summer, as a member of honor council, my definition of magic in Ryland this fall would be never attending a hearing of a first-year student who has plagiarised in his or her FYS.

Walking into those dusty rooms as a member of the Hearing Board, an advocate for the university or an advocate for the accused titles that loosely translate to jury, district attorney and defense attorney in “Law and Order” terms is never pleasant for members of Honor Council or the accused student. Cases require that Honor Council members donate approximately an hour and a half or more of their time on busy school nights to scrutinize and debate how one student’s actions violate or adhere to our honor code.

Once a hearing board of the accused student’s peers renders a decision, the advocates escort the accused back into the room. The tension escalates until the Honor Council chair reads the decision, at which point members of the hearing board immediately scurry out of the classroom like ants around a spilled sugary beverage. Equally sweet is the feeling of freedom that hearing board members experience as they reach the hallway and realize that they can now change into sweatpants.

Unfortunately, this feeling of relief does not last on our small campus, where council members are destined to run into guilty students. Locking eyes with a guilty student is even more awkward than walking through D-hall. Locking eyes with a guilty student is even more awkward than walking through D-hall and catching the eye of a “that boy” from last night’s lodge.

Bottom line: as a member of the honor council, I do not find joy in watching students sigh, shake, tear up or some combination of the three as one of the council chairs reads their guilty verdicts. I recognize enforcing the honor code to hold students accountable is necessary for the functioning of the greater institution, but, selfishly, sometimes I wonder if these painstakingly long and stressful trials are necessary. They wouldn’t be, if everyone acted honorably. Wouldn’t that be magic?

The frequency of first-year students breaching the Honor Code is disheartening and frustrating. In most cases, these breaches occur because the first years do not understand the importance of honor within a university setting or they do not realize that they acted in violation of our community’s standards for academic work.

Our actions affect others within a larger web. The honor code sets forth universal standards to maintain structure on campus and promote meritocracy, equal opportunity and character formation. Beyond the physical grounds of Richmond, students’ actions build upon the legacy and reputation of our university as a whole.

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- Liz Nigro

A legacy of legitimacy benefits all of us when we list “University of Richmond” on our resumes. As individual students, we also benefit from others on campus acting honorably within a greater scheme of cooperation. We can rest assured that students work diligently and earn their grades without gaining an unfair academic advantage. We can also trust that when we leave our computer in the library or cell phone on a d-hall table no one will steal our property. I have become so accustomed to living within our community of trust that I often forget that the same rules do not apply in a hectic Chipotle, where there’s a girl leaving with stolen tabasco sauce in her purse.

I joined honor council because I wanted to protect the benefits that we as students reap from an honorable community. Acting against the Honor Code discounts the work of peers and violates the mission of higher education institutions: to inspire intellectual and moral growth. Within the contemporary climate of moral individualism, instant gratification, technological resources, rising student debt, economic uncertainty and the pressure to succeed at any cost, I can understand the temptation to cheat. But acting dishonestly in your own self-interest or taking the easy way out will not yield sustained happiness.

A 2015 Harvard study isolates three factors that contribute to happiness: doing things for others, doing things that you’re good at, and doing things that are good for you. Within the context of the honor code, we have established that it is good for others when every individual acts honorably. Furthermore, it is good for the individual because they receive benefits from the larger community and experience personal, intellectual and moral growth by acting with integrity.

These same lessons involving reciprocity and using one’s talents and skills can be applied to life beyond Richmond. Students need to be reminded of these three criteria of happiness in order to leave this institution as an informed citizen prepared to make a positive contribution to society. Enriching students’ understanding of the importance of sustained happiness and honor at Richmond and beyond prompted me to run for Westhampton College education chair of the honor council.

To address this lack of understanding, I made it my mission to revamp the honor council’s orientation presentation and test for all incoming students. After dialogues with council members and the deans last year, I received approval to implement a discussion-based presentation and test free of multiple choice questions. In our presentations last August, we split the students into small groups, asked them to name violations, and explain the honor code to us. The result was fewer test failures, and we have added information about our two-strike and student-run system, and the importance of honor in general, to build upon last year’s success.

In an attempt to increase outreach to students and our presence on campus, I have pioneered initiatives with my Richmond College education chair counterpart, like “Donut Cheat,” in which council members handing out free donuts in the library during finals weeks, and Honor Week, where professors engage in conversations on honor for student audiences in the spring semester. To further augment trust and transparency, I will leave my email, liz.nigro@richmond.edu, for anyone who would like to follow up with questions about the operations of the honor council or a situation that you think may violate the honor code.

As we begin to transition into a magical new school year, I know I am hoping to enjoy my time at Richmond like our live-action roleplaying friends this past summer. While I believe the three factors previously listed will help me find happiness, I would like to add a personalized fourth condition: I will be happy if I am able to continue to associate Ryland Hall with the LARPer’s potions lab rather than another first-year student sobbing after being found guilty of plagiarism in his or her FYS.