

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale
Honors College)

Spring 4-30-2021

Reflecting on Our Terrain: How People and Places Create a Spirit of Home

Meagan E. Harkins
University of Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis



Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Development Studies Commons](#), [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harkins, Meagan E., "Reflecting on Our Terrain: How People and Places Create a Spirit of Home" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 1617.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1617

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

REFLECTING ON OUR TERRAIN: HOW PEOPLE AND PLACES CREATE A
SPIRIT OF HOME

by
Meagan Elizabeth Harkins

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
April 2021

Approved by

Advisor: Dr. Mark Dolan

Reader: Mr. Joseph Atkins

Reader: Dr. Debora Wenger

© 2021
Meagan Elizabeth Harkins
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

“Here the mystery of my life is unveiled. I am loved so much that I am left free to leave home. The blessing is there from the beginning. I have left it and keep on leaving it.”

-Nouwen (*The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, 44)

“Between our cradles and graves which often lie in the same place, we make other homes for our hearts; these terrains enlarge us as people but only clarify further the values the home instilled within us. And Willie Morris, in returning to Mississippi and collecting these essays on his native soil and all significant terrains and people in between, has given us all reason to pause and consider our roots.”

-A reviewer’s praise excerpted on the dust jacket of Morris’ *Terrains of the Heart and Other Essays on Home*

DEDICATION

To Dr. Dolan, who let me wander into his office one day freshman year and somehow convinced me to hold onto hope that I could find a home in Mississippi, and ultimately anywhere else if I hold tight enough to that which I confess to be important. Always having an open door and empty seat, or clearing one off, let me know I and my baggage was welcome. Thank you for encouraging me to do hard things, seeing me in ways most don't, and believing in me.

To my mom, who has edited every paper of my academic career. We are going out with a bang, aren't we? I hope these pages make you proud. Thank you for loving us so much it moves you to tears, demonstrating the value of education, and believing I would find a home in Mississippi. Thank you for encouraging me to stay, but also for always buying me a plane ticket home. My home is with y'all.

Finally, to those searching for a home, a place to feel known- I hope you stay somewhere long enough to find it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to the 14 individuals included in this thesis. Thank you not just for your willingness to share in an interview, but for your willingness to share your hearts with me daily. You are the best parts of life.

Thank you to the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College for being my first foundation at the University of Mississippi, and for the funding that allowed the travel required for this thesis. That trip opened my heart to home in a new way.

Thank you to the Ole Miss Women's Council for Philanthropy for giving me the education of a lifetime, allowing me a university experience greater than I could have asked for or imagined. Sitting in the office is what first made Oxford feel like home, and is now what makes it so hard to leave.

Thank you to every friend I have made along the way- my friends in Delight, roommates, women in my Bible study, my campers, Running Club- you all have taught me sisterhood.

Thank you to Kenmure and Turnberry Condominiums for space to play, rediscovering the gift of childhood.

Thank you to every institution I have ever called home: Rainbow Elementary School, Tuskawilla Middle School, Lake Howell High School, and the University of Mississippi. I have benefited from my teachers in ways I will uncover for the rest of my life.

Thank you to the churches I have found home in: St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, Camp Ch-Yo-Ca, and St. Stephen's Catholic Community- especially St. Stephens's, for replacing the word church with community. It was there that I first tapped into a home that is lasting.

Finally, thank you to my family's 2007 black Chrysler Town & Country minivan. The miles put on that car proved to me that home is not stationary.

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on Our Terrain: How People and Places Create a Spirit of Home
(Under the direction of Dr. Mark Dolan)

This thesis explores the nature of home. It situates the idea of home, both as a physical place and a spiritual state, where the subjects of these stories find belonging. Fourteen interviews were conducted, from December 2020 through February 2021, resulting in a series of longform stories. Eight interviews were recorded with immediate family and childhood friends in my hometown, the suburbs of Orlando, Fla. The balance of the stories derived from Zoom interviews, culminating in a 1,200-mile road journey to South Carolina, for the remaining ones.

What emerged from these oral history interviews and ensuing longform pieces are three overlapping themes: rest, healing, and belonging. These themes affirm the desires to be fully known and fully loved, finding freedom, comfort, and safety in that state. Defining home is helpful to experiencing home, as understanding the grace of it increases one's willingness to receive and celebrate it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Home as Terrain for the Heart	1
Chapter Two: My Terrain, A Personal Essay	8
Chapter Three: The Foundation	
Kathy Owen: Making a Happy Place	21
PL Harkins: The Father’s Heart	28
Beth Harkins: A Small House with Big Love	39
Brandon Harkins: The Party Planning Committee	48
Austin Harkins: A True Homebody	56
Chapter Four: The Structure	
Sidney Walters: Capacity for Love	64
Hollyn Saliga: Creating Safety	73
Jonny Lawrence: Lifelong Teammates	82
Sylvette Wittmer: Expanding Spirit	90
Chapter Five: New Walls	
Sara Costello: Creating Steadiness	98
Meredith Brown: Navigating Home	107
Haley Youngblood: Togetherness	117
Riley Brown: Coastal Town	124
Kendall Branton: Relentless Joy	131
Chapter Six: Neighboring Houses	143
Reporting on Home and Family	151

Oral History and Longform Storytelling	156
Chapter Seven: Homecoming	165
List of References	177

CHAPTER ONE

Home as Terrain for the Heart

This thesis explores the connections between one's physical home and spiritual home. Graduating college seniors owe much to home, especially when a pandemic forced so many of us back- back to the couches we fell asleep on as children, back to the rooms where we did homework in high school, back to a world of safety and dreaming, dreaming in particular about what college would be like. These pieces of home seemed ordinary at the time, yet these suburbs and streets we roamed as kids shaped who we have become.

Our eyes have seen, hands have touched, and feet have walked every square inch of the places we grew up. We know where the carpet bubbles rise and where the tile grout is cracked. This knowledge creates an internal map that allows us to walk the house at night without turning lights on, for example; a map that in turn unfurls across our entire lives. The physical structure of the house points towards an inward architecture, the foundation for that which is spiritual and relational. Home's ability to embrace us gives access to the things for which we search as we move forward in life, including our most innate desires- to be seen, to celebrate, and to feel safe. At home we also find authenticity, rest, and healing.

Mississippi native, author Willie Morris discovered these same values during a life on the road, in the constant coming and going. He left Mississippi to work from Texas to England, California to New York, always dreaming of better than the last. *New*

York Days is his 1993 novel documenting the time he spent hustling through the city, acknowledging the natural desire to adventure while articulating the importance of having a home to return to. “When I am in the South and am driven by the old urge to escape again to the city, I still feel sorry for most of my contemporaries who do not have a place like mine to go back to, or to leave,” Morris wrote (*Terrains of the Heart* 70).

Morris understands that this physical terrain contains a deep spiritual landscape. He, in addition to many other longform journalists and non-fiction writers, taps into the notion of home as the wellspring of life. These writers share personal stories with the intention that “shared experience leads to cultural change (Hudson & Townsend 63).” The cultural change they are hinting at is creating a culture where we actually give our time, energy, and attention to the things we claim to value the most. Illuminating this terrain and its accompanying sentiments is one of the goals of this thesis.

For this thesis, I conducted audio interviews with those I love and value most, family and close friends, asking about where they find home and what they define it to be. This led to discovering home as a guiding life force, at the core of each person. I asked how home has changed over time, about their favorite memories related to it, and how those memories have shaped who they are. What emerged was a picture of the complexity of home, the challenges of maintaining ties to home and simply how hard it is to even talk about home. After all, home is personal, both concrete and abstract, laden with hidden and not so hidden tensions. Some of the nation’s best writers struggle to get at the sacred essence of home, though like them, I seek to understand this essence. The recorded conversations that are the lifeblood of these stories occurred from December 2020 to February 2021, a time we are still mostly confined within native walls.

Comings and goings

As Covid-19 forced the return of college students to our original soil, we were each invited to pause and reconsider our roots. My peers and I within the School of Journalism New Media chase journalistic stories by nature, requiring new adventures. As a consequence of this substantial time away from home, we underestimate what it takes to leave home in the spiritual sense (Schmitz). Longform shows us how to stay, how to be more entangled with ideas than events, demonstrated by magazine writers like Morris.

Age and experience inevitably create a wider net cast from the nucleus, or one's home, and external forces, such as social media, glamorize the idea of frequent travel and a booked Google calendar. This distances us from the inner sanctuary, suppressing our desire for an eternal embrace. Ironically, as we stray from the house, we tend to recreate home in new places, wanting to take it with us as we leave, finding comfort in strings of similarity- routines, decor styles, and foods. People find comfort in physical things but often stop short of seeing in them a spiritual door to the Creator behind it all. The spiritual is what makes the physical more than just a motel; the spirit of life is embodied most acutely in people.

With the pandemic leading us to stay at these foundational places, my generation was forced to sit still with the lives we have feebly tried to construct. For some, the days were long and painful, as we overestimated what it takes to wholly come back home (Schmitz). For others, the days brought joy and lightheartedness, knowing the core of our

lives are not so bad after all. “A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it,” Irish novelist George Moore wrote (Shih 361).

Interviews conducted for this thesis reveal that, with age, people grow fonder of the close places- where they once graduated, learned from their parents, and felt free to make mistakes. College students are learning this fondness, as we are guilty of dismissing home and running toward the promised land of a new town with new faces. There is an inevitable letdown, as no matter how arbitrary it seems at the time, home is the most profound miracle of our lives. This same letdown was verbalized by Andy Bernard when he left his job at Dunder Mifflin Paper Company in the series finale of the American sitcom, *The Office* (Daniels).

ANDY BERNARD: The weird thing is, now I’m exactly where I want to be. I’ve got my dream job at Cornell and I’m still just thinking about my old pals, only now they’re the ones I made here (at Dunder Mifflin). I wish there was a way to know you’re in the good old days before you’ve actually left them.

Morris acknowledged that same complexity, writing that: “One of the more perplexing ironies of my life is that the longer I live in Manhattan, the more Southern I seem to become.”

Spirituality and longform storytelling

My thesis sets out to celebrate the physical place of overflowing closets and crowded corners alongside the people in these spaces. We cannot hold onto the physical though, as people sell things, landscape changes, and neighbors leave, so home has to live inside of us. Through the people in our lives, we are able to find home in ourselves,

always having a solid place to come back to, as emphasized by Catholic priest, theologian, and professor Henri Nouwen:

You have to trust the place that is solid, the place where you can say yes to God's love even when you do not feel it. Right now you feel nothing except emptiness and the lack of strength to choose... You have to choose the solid place over and over again and return to it after every failure (*The Inner Voice of Love* 8).

It is a disposition of the heart to be at home, and we learn more each day about how to unceasingly abide there. American essayist and activist James Baldwin elaborates upon the abstract choice to be home, writing that "perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition."

Longform storytelling is the logical vehicle to explore the three geographical locations of my miraculous homes- Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi- and longform as a genre grants me permission to write deeply and with description about the people I find the values of home in, giving their voices a more expansive canvas. In these people I am reminded of my core dreams, the requirement to be sincere, an invitation to rest, and the potential for healing.

These relationships naturally partner with storytelling- people gathered around the kitchen table exchanging stories, calling them to discuss daily events, elders sharing childhood stories with my generation, and the act of creating memories daily. As people age and move, they often distance themselves from these stories, expecting to make new, better ones. Yet home is the story of our lives.

Longform prizes depth and salvages detail, allowing a reader to build trust with the author and gather meaningful understandings of people and places. It is the style of journalism that I have found to yield the most fruit, as it allows for the complexity of life

to emerge. Text stories are the appropriate avenue to share these messages because they are personal, to both myself and the subjects.

There is a natural human tendency to clam up or sugarcoat information when being recorded for video distribution. Creating these walls would contradict the nature of home, as “home is where you let yourself be seen; home is where you let yourself be loved; home is where you let yourself be known” (Schmitz). Therefore, the quietness of a pen and paper interview will invite interviewees to share the vulnerable and beautiful parts of their hearts without emphasis on a recording, as natural conversation evolves. Authentic conversation allows open-ended questions from my own heart to emerge, rather than presenting a list based off of preconceived notions of what I find to be important. Additionally, emerging ideas of these stories are meant to be contemplated, as this qualitative research exposes the very texture of individual lives. As interviewees pause to reconsider their roots, others will naturally do the same. Allowing readers to enjoy from the comfort of their own couch and peruse on their own time will initiate this personal reflection and self-discovery.

What follows is a personal essay, designed to explain my own journey with home through capturing a relationship that has evolved and strengthened through time. Chapter three holds longform stories about the people who have been foundational to my life, the family members I interact with daily. These stories represent the steadiness of home, role of unconditional love, and the irreplaceable substance of the little things. Chapter four highlights early-on, formative friendships, people my life has intersected with so intentionally and deeply. Alongside these childhood friends, we have together learned the

balance of revering the old and embracing what is new. Chapter five shares the stories of those I have more recently grown to find home in. Friends from college illustrate home's ability to be stretched to new places and be formed from hard seasons.

Following the longform stories is chapter six, the literature review, the examples from which this thesis flowed. The literature review contains research on writing about home, family reporting, oral histories, and longform journalism. This provides resources for others looking to conduct similar studies, whether investigating hometowns or families. Chapter seven is the conclusion, re-evaluating what home is based upon the interviews gathered.

There is a popular saying that "beauty will save the world." In this thesis, however, I side with the reasoning of Fr. Mark Mary: "My proposal is this, is not that beauty will save the world, but that family will save the world" (Guizar & Davis).

CHAPTER TWO

My Terrain, A Personal Essay

Sixteen years ago I moved into this Oviedo, Fla. bedroom, whose walls have been every shade of pink imaginable. Through elementary school these walls held sleepovers without much sleep, band practices for the Three Divas¹, and crafts sprawled across the floor, and the adventures of Fibi Fabiano, a fictitious rockstar my friend Sidney Walters and I dreamed up. I had a friend in every house in my neighborhood, and there was a richness of diversity found around Central Florida. Kids gathered daily for kickball tournaments, planning garage sales, trampoline games, lemonade stands, playing hot lava on our swing set, and adventuring through the conservation area, the closest thing we had to woods. When we were sent back to our homes at night, Sidney and I would sit looking out our windows, I in my bedroom and her in her dining room, pictochatting one another with a Nintendo DS².

At the core of all of this, I wanted to create. Math has always been my best subject, but as a little girl my days were filled with pencil drawing, imagining stories, writing songs in a checkered purple notebook, and creating masterful crafts from

¹The Three Divas were a pop band founded in my Oviedo, Fla. home in 2009, during my ninth birthday party. The band fizzled out after just a few years later, never gaining any notoriety.

²The Nintendo DS Lite was a gaming console released in 2006, with dual cartridges for Game Boy games and DS cards. Its release followed the original Nintendo DS, short for both “Developer’s System” and “Dual Screen,” groundbreaking for its multiple screens, touchscreen, built-in microphone, and wireless network compatibility. PictoChat was the messaging service for devices within a certain radius of another (NDS-Gear). My brothers and I got ours in 2007.

whatever leftovers I could find in our house. Creation was a natural outpouring of who I was, though it seems I've always had a knack for starting projects and not finishing them. My neighbors and I spent summer days filming and editing our own video projects on Windows Movie Maker³, days I fervently desired to be on-screen, rather than the director behind. Being home was my potter's house, where I experienced the freedom to create and play.

Many weekends were spent away from this house, at my grandma's, Kathy Owen, ten minutes down Red Bug Road⁴. I recall a great sense of adventure and freedom being there with my brothers and cousins, watching movies, ordering Donatos pizza, eating her never ending Publix cookie supply⁵, swimming, and using her scanner as if it was the world's newest toy. All of us would pile into her bed at night, regardless of empty beds down the hall.

Inescapable people and changing places

In all my recollections of home, people consistently have been most important. Digging through boxes of childhood schoolwork, I'm finding drawings of my dad, PL Harkins, stories I wrote about him, and all of the gifts I made him. For as long as I can

³Windows Movie Maker was an editing software released by Microsoft in 2000. It has since been discontinued, with the rise of iMovie and Adobe Premiere.

⁴Red Bug Lake Road runs west to east from Casselberry, Fla. to Oviedo, Fla. My mom remembers it as cow pasture scenery and trees overhanging the two-lane road. Four-lane expansion and stoplights has made it the daily commute for school, restaurants, and visiting friends.

⁵George Jenkins opened the first Publix Food Store in Winter Haven, Fla. in 1930. His philosophy was "treating employees and customers like family" and decorated stores with innovations of air conditioning, fluorescent lighting, and electric doors ("History"). Their chocolate chip cookies are incredible.

remember my after-school routine was going home to sit in his lap, reviewing our days together and me begging to know what was for dinner. My dad began working from home when I was in preschool, subsequently becoming my very best friend. When I think of my dad, I realize that “my dad is the most ‘there’ person there is. Everything I do is with his voice in my head” (Aptaker & Berger). In high school, my dad worked tirelessly on his woodworking⁶, daily carving out corners in the garage in which to work, vacuuming up sawdust as he went and sensitive to the time to not wake our neighbors. I remember walking home from the bus stop with my younger brother, Austin Harkins, the few days my dad protested picking us up from the bus stop, to sit on our back porch, staining Christmas ornaments while watching Hallmark movies, pretending the screened-in porch wasn’t a sauna in October. Now living in Mississippi, I visit Home Depot when I miss my dad, the smell of sawdust bringing me back to our three-car garage.

An essential image of home for me is my family’s 2007 black Chrysler Town & Country minivan⁷ decked out with squashed gray leather seats, a sagging headliner with a green crayon mark, a Coca-Cola stain on the carpet, an overflowing supply of wipes and napkins, and one of the cool DVD players that held up to five movies⁸ at once. My childhood consisted of constant road trips- short ones to UCF football games and theme parks or week-long summer vacations. My parents are on a quest to get my brothers and I

⁶My dad began making primitive furniture and decorations from scrap wood when I was in middle school, in hopes to one day start a business.

⁷With few changes from the 2006 model, the Town & Country was front-wheel drive, had a 3.3L V-6 engine, and had Stow 'n Go seating (“2007 Chrysler Town & Country Pricing and Specs”). I did not enjoy driving it to high school.

⁸My brothers and I most frequently watched *Wild Hogs*, *Kicking & Screaming*, and *RV*.

to every U.S. state, doing something of significance in each one. Forty states in, we have seen the sequoias in California, the Alamo in Texas, the world's largest metal statues in North Dakota, the view from Mount Washington, and a whole lot of nothing in Kansas. My favorite memories from these trips were never the destinations, but the in-between moments. The van taught us that place does not matter.

When I think of these vacations I think of my mom, Beth Harkins, trying to direct us with an outdated atlas, my dad pretending to let Austin's stuffed bear drive to entertain us, Brandon asking a million questions with no answers, and Austin hosting his own talk show. I think of us making blanket forts in the back seat, Austin vomiting on the side of the road, and my brothers and I drawing pictures to hold up to the window for neighboring cars to see. Trips away from our house were a departure with them, but also a return with them. Airports and road trips now mean something much different for me, as I experience the inevitable heaviness and loneliness of walking towards adulthood.

Growing pains, growing inward

Middle and high school were hard, trying to navigate who I was at home and who I wanted to be at school. I tried to climb the social hierarchy and work for my teachers' praises. Other than in the classroom and with a few friends, Jonny Lawrence included, I found no home at school, with no friend group to invite over on the weekends or people to eat lunch with. In middle school I often ate in my video production teacher's⁹

⁹Mr. Joseph Fife's teaching style and love for his students is what led to media-creation as a possible career choice. For that, I am immensely grateful.

classroom and in high school I joined Student Government to avoid the stress of lunchtime. I had retreated inwardly, something I'm still climbing out of. Despite football being my favorite sport, I avoided games and pep rallies for fear of being alone. Senior year I went and those Friday nights were precious, though I attended only out of duty as class historian, being on the sidelines rather than among my peers in the student section. I enjoyed myself there, growing a friendship with Haley Youngblood, a classmate I was once intimidated by, but I felt another piece of my heart break every time someone spoke to me only to have their photo taken, then refusing eye contact with me the following Monday. Other than during the class periods sitting with Jonny, my soul felt homeless daily from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., feeling more safe watching life unfold from the outside.

This lack of confidence at school somehow made being home harder. I felt the heart of Nouwen: "Anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms, and rivalries are the obvious signs that I have left home" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 41). With bitterness and unsure of my place or purpose, I spent more time in my room. Our relationship with the physical home reflects our relationship with the spiritual home. When we avoid a house's communal living space, we are often avoiding something deeper within.

I thought it would magically become easy after graduation, when I could start fresh. Now that I have left home, returning for holidays, I see that what I had been working towards was shallow and the place I once dwelled, held love as deep as it gets. In *The Office*, Darryl Philbin left his job saying, "Every day when I came into work all I wanted to do was leave, so why in the world does it feel so hard to leave right now?"

(Daniels). That is how I feel about my house. We do not know how to appreciate simplicity when it is given to us, but looking back it is what matters, what has formed us, and what is worth living for. Now that I am away, “I have to believe that all the human heart desires can be found at home,” (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 132).

Home and the distant country

I had grand plans to travel and encounter people for this thesis, finding incredible stories and creating tales of my own. Then we were sent into our houses, and what is available to me now is them- the people that feel like home- and I’ve been reminded that that’s the best thing anyway. It is where we can be authentic and heal simultaneously. It is a place of rest, where one is most comfortable. This year marks the culmination of the first two decades of my life, which have consisted primarily of school and my house, neither of which will be my regular routine next year. One of the few gifts from Covid-19 is that it let this chapter of my life end the way it began- with the four most important people and other familiar souls along the way. This thesis is the meaningful cap to it all, a time capsule for all who were involved in shaping who I am and who I’m becoming.

A few years ago, I would have thought of home only as the dark and rough wood, beige walls, wide-open floor plan, sound of my mom coming home from work or my dog running down the hallway, and light shining in the sliding glass door much too bright around five in the evening. Now, I think also of new faces from college, my tiny white apartment, the camp I work at every summer¹⁴, and my coworkers. Different parts of me come alive in different places, which can become exhausting or confusing.

Moving to Oxford, Miss. to attend the University of Mississippi felt absolutely hopeless for an entire year, with no comfort or deep-rooted love. I hated it here and missed everything I once had.

Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere?... It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 43).

Yet in this quest of independence, I one day found myself growing attached to the new roads and some of the town's people. Spending days driving to Plein Air, laying at Lamar Park, and walking at Whirlpool Trails, my interior life was subtly shifting through new daily routines. With new roommates, a spiritual home at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, community found in Delight Ministries, and hours upon hours spent at the Ole Miss Women's Council's office hours, Oxford began to feel like home. Similarly, spending my college summers at Camp Ch-Yo-Ca in Calhoun, La. felt isolating and empty at first. Gradually opening myself up to be seen, I reached a freedom never before experienced. The solidity of these friendships undeniably feel like home, and I will now do anything to spend time with my camp family, specifically my first bunkmate Kendall Branton. So now I have other homes, each a gift, but none of which I can fully appreciate, and I constantly find myself longing for where I am not.

Like Nouwen, in "more or less subtle ways I have preferred the distant country to the home close by" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 36). If we are able to leave when home gets hard, we do. We run an errand, we meet up with a friend, we put in extra hours at work, or even create a whole new home altogether. There was a reason Jesus always

sent people home after a healing miracle. He knew it would not be their go-to, but that they needed a place of peace to process, as well as to witness to their families what happened. Jesus knew that it is most hard to share our hearts with those closest to us. The year 2020 came to address this, as, for the first time, we could not leave when home got hard. Home has gotten complicated in some way for each of us over the years. We try to deal with it on some level, but it is like steering towards the sun. Sometimes going towards the light can feel potentially destructive.

Home and life's hallways

Going back to Oviedo, Fla. after spring break¹⁰ was awkward at first, like trying to fit in old shoes or using my third-grade eyeglasses prescription. Oxford had just begun to feel like home. Life was slow in the childhood home that held countless memories. The silence and stillness led me to discomfort at first, like I was on a road that would inevitably take me to whatever it was I was internally avoiding. Twiddling my thumbs, staring at rows of identical houses in suburbia, attempting to engage in dry Zoom classes while working at my mom's desk¹¹ our storage room, praying with nothing to pray about other than a pandemic that seemed too massive to approach. I missed the back-to-back meetings, daily social gatherings, and never eating a meal alone. For the first time, the

¹⁰On March 12, 2020 the University of Mississippi announced spring break would extend one week, then resuming classes online (Thompson). Ironically, there were 405 new U.S. cases the day this was announced. On August 24, 2020, the day classes resumed in-person, there were 40,404 new U.S. cases (The New York Times).

¹¹This desk was originally my great grandfather's, inherited from his father's office at the New Orleans Cotton Exchange. Cotton was assessed and exchanged on it in the 1920s and 1930s.

distractions were gone.

Home was and is so good, but I had drifted far from the things most important. I felt half-incorporated with a lot of places, fully part of none. At home, I was the Ole Miss girl. At school, I am the Florida girl. At camp, I'm the girl who always has to leave early, being called to another home. Maybe I let my life get so busy because it kept me from intimacy. Rather than one place fully knowing me, a lot of places knew just parts. Being stripped of so much noise took away the piles of clutter I had allowed to build up- a list of two dozen obligations, in addition to being a sister, daughter, and friend. The things themselves were good, but I simply was not in the headspace to embrace the gift they each were, too distracted running to the next thing. Going home let me see what had always been there, at the foundation to begin with- things like my childlike desires and the freedom of being loved without requirements. The rediscovery of these made all the spheres of life finally begin to intersect.

St. Paul the Apostle wrote to early Christians: "Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. For I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We feel more comfortable seeing a warped version of ourselves, rather than the reality of who we have become. In the normality of 2019 life, I knew myself only in part, too busy to sit long enough and dissect. When retreating to where I was fully known, I saw myself more fully, in all the sin and ugliness. It takes being home, silent and still, long enough to see the ugliness, to feel safe enough to let our walls down.

Going home is a place to unpack, but we forget that we first get to be embraced. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father stops the son in the driveway not to ask questions, but to welcome him in the door and show him to his room. The questions and reflection will come later, but we first get to celebrate and be ushered in love.

In this embrace, waiting to see when the front door would reopen, I re-experienced the dynamic of daily family life, being flexible to someone else's schedule and helping with household quick-cleans. I watched cringy Hallmark movies¹² with my mom. I spent mornings talking with my dad, learning about the stock market and about life. I got to annoy my brothers. My 23-year-old brother Brandon and I played in the pool like we were seven, had dance parties, and watched a lot of TikTok¹³. Austin, 18, and I spent hours in the car exploring Orlando, Fla. I took the time to pet my dog, a golden retriever named Bailey. People began to deeply matter to me again- not in the way of checking them off my to-do list and run to the next thing, but a re-instilled conviction at my core of what matters most. "If you want to change the world, go home and love your family," St. Teresa of Calcutta said (Tierney). I wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter and sister, and for the first time I was willing to act upon it.

Gradually and without being aware of it, I retraced who I was created to be, what felt the most like me, even when it was awkward to step into since it was so far gone. I arose in the morning to stare at the beige, plastic backyard fence that had become the

¹²Hallmark Christmas movies play year-round, all utilizing the same pool of actors and sets. They are low-budget and all have happy endings.

¹³Launched by Chinese tech giant ByteDance, this video-sharing social media platform is known for becoming addictive through their groundbreaking algorithm. It has led to trending dances and songs among its 800 million active users (Galer & Tidy).

epitome of the mundaneness and boredom that made me want to lead my hometown. I learned to sit in the Lord's presence, to pray when I didn't have a particular list to pray about. I learned to take breaks to rest my eyes and reset my heart- going on bike rides, watercolor painting, reading forgotten books¹⁴, strumming my dusty guitar, and simply doing nothing for the first time in years. Every day felt like an empty canvas for me to create something beautiful with. Being in a place I was so familiar with allowed me to listen to my heart, making things reaffirmed, enlarged, subtracted, diminished, pushed, or rearranged. When we slow down the pace of our lives, we can no longer sustain high speeds, learning new contentment (Comer).

These are things I could not put on my resume, but they made the days worth living, pleasing natural internal yearnings. Home lets me dance in the arms of grace and lean into the strength of someone other than myself. I cleaned out my pastel pink and chocolate brown bedroom. In going through plastic boxes and grocery bags of my childhood treasures, I was reminded of a young girl who wasn't afraid to dream. Every drawing and personal story I recovered from elementary school was about family trips to the mountains of West Virginia¹⁵. My soul had always craved to live among the rugged terrain, even when I was too young to identify myself as out-of-place. Stories and projects were co-created with my best friend Hollyn Saliga, capturing all of our Florida

¹⁴Among these include *The Faith of Our Fathers* by James Cardinal Gibbons and *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* by John Mark Comer.

¹⁵Visiting my dad's native state and his relatives in Weston, I have memories of hiking at Blackwater Falls, snow tubing at Canaan Valley, camping at Holly River State Park, and playing freeze-out along WV-38.

adventures, from the Nickelodeon hotel's slime to days at the Magic Kingdom¹⁶ to weekend getaways at St. Pete Beach. Our adventures felt like living in a storybook, every page more vibrant than the last.

After months of contemplation, I eventually felt the freedom to throw my ancient storybooks away and even paint the room beige. The paintings and crafts I discovered are important, a window to eight-year-old me. Being home, however, I regained those childlike pieces of myself, no longer needing to hold onto the physical copies. My family and I are among the lucky ones¹⁷. We have yet to test positive for Covid-19 and we have kept our jobs. Aware of the sorrow ensuing the world around me, I am almost sure that this virus is one of the best things to happen to my family, resetting our priorities before they became too far gone.

Staying at the manger

In a noisy, divided world, we each have a calm center, a light shining through the snowstorm to welcome us in. On Christmas it was the manger, a pure bundle of hope sitting peacefully in the world of chaos. Nowadays when my vision becomes disoriented and my bones feel weary, I run back to my manger to be healed and made new in a way that looks like the old. The human heart holds great reverence towards home, even simultaneously with tension towards it. Everyone assumes their home is the way

¹⁶Gradually buying out 27,000 Central Fla. acres in 1965, Walt Disney's "Project X" led to the development of four theme parks, two water parks, and 36 hotels (Mongello). Disney changed the trajectory of our state to one of the world's top tourism destinations, rather than fields of inherited orange groves and swamps.

¹⁷The U.S. currently has a 6.9 percent unemployment rate ("Tracking the COVID-19..."). The U.S. has over 29.3 million cases total reported and 530,320 deaths (The New York Times).

everyone else's is. It is something for which we argue. There is a beautiful reluctance about letting go of Christmas, putting away the manger. There is never a time I willingly leave my house, unless the people I share it with are going out the door with me.

Implicit in the "return" is a leaving. Returning is a homecoming after a home-leaving, a coming back after having gone away... The finding has the losing in the background, the returning has the leaving under its cloak. Looking at the tender and joy-filled return, I have to dare to taste the sorrowful events that preceded it (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 34).

Our hearts are wrapped around home, whether it's the daily search for it or the embrace of it. "That which is the ideal is what God intended from the very beginning," so we walk back from the reality of our experiences to the idea that family is everything, that we are not meant to be abandoned (Guizar & Davis). This thesis is about our relationship with home, the people and places we find it in. One definition of home, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is "a place where something flourishes, is most typically found, or from which it originates." Ironically, I am finding that the place we flourish is not the place where we are typically found, as we reject what is good in search of what is better¹⁸. Anyone can buy a plane ticket and dream up a grand adventure, but do they have a true home, a manger to which they long to return once the excitement has waned? I am blessed to have a place to return to, and I am learning how to stay.

¹⁸It appears "better" can always be found because we are a forgetful people. There is always more good to find, so the fight of being home is contentment with the good at-hand, recognizing one cannot hold all the good the world has.

CHAPTER THREE
The Foundation
Kathy Owen: Making a Happy Place

When Kathy Owen moved to Florida in 1967, she had to leave behind the rolling Appalachian hills, tradition of annual wildflower pilgrimages, fresh mountain air, and the voice of John Denver inviting her home. As well as the hard part of West Virginia- gray winter days. “It pulls your spirit down when you don’t see the sunshine,” she says.

Nearly a thousand miles away, Kathy, her husband, Pat, and their two sons found year-round sunshine. “It was very hard. We had nobody here.” Yet her experience became like the Florida weather. “You might have a cold day, but you know it’s going to be gone in two days,” Kathy says.

They moved to Florida for opportunity, opening Golden Eagle Management, a company dedicated to managing health care facilities, in 1984. Their West Virginia family thought they “lived in a fairy land,” with their toes constantly in the sand. Kathy, 78, says people do not see the daily hustle and bustle to succeed, but that the possibilities really are endless for those who work diligently.

Kathy’s mother watched her two boys, PL and JP, every day while living in West Virginia. With no family in Florida, where Kathy and Pat went, the boys also went. There seemed no choice but to become an unbreakable unit.

While she adores her birthplace, the place itself is not key. “If you make your home a happy place, the people in the home are happy. In order to make that happen you have to communicate. It is not the structure of the home but what happens inside of it.”

The thing she most wants to remember are family gatherings, happy times of people sitting around laughing. “The gathering place has been the kitchen,” Kathy says. “It has been my whole life and still is today.” She takes seriously her day-long preparations for meals, delighting in the smell of garlic as she cooks Italian food, whether for just her sons’ families or one hundred guests.

Her favorite Florida memory is the process of creating their 3,000 square foot home on Lake Howell in Casselberry, Fla. “It was something Pat and I designed and built,” she says. “We put a lot of love into it.” This stained canyon grey labor of love included three-bedrooms, a long driveway, huge living room, and a pool with never-ending leaks. Their home was experienced by every neighbor, acting as the gathering place for countless parties and events.

The one thing Kathy finds more important than home is family, though she finds them inseparable. Apart from her kin, she has been gifted with a Florida-family, 45 years of friendship with Greg, Natalie, Karen, and Jeff. She keeps her circle small to be readily available and to love deeply. “We have lots of acquaintances, but one or two good friends are all you need,” she preaches to me, her granddaughter.

“It’s the greatest thing in the world, being a grandma,” Kathy says. For six grandchildren, she accepts invitations to every football game, basketball game, dance recital, and award ceremony. She celebrates along the journey. “That’s what grandparents do,” she says. “I’m proud of my grandchildren, but you didn’t ask me who my favorite grandchild was,” she jokes. I didn’t ask because I know it’s me.

Friday nights were spent hosting us for Donatos pizza, movie rentals, and a sleepover, all piling into her king-size bed. Little heads would line the pillows while

Kathy slept across the bottom at their feet. “You get to spoil them and then send them home,” she says. We remember the kitchen smelling of bacon, our hands constantly sneaking in the Publix cookie drawer, and our five-foot-one grandmother finding it impossible to be upset with her grandkids.

Down country roads

Much of this, she learned from her own grandmother, Grandma Gissy. Kathy remembers Grandma Gissy’s hands intently rolling dough on wooden countertops to her famous angel food cake, singing and humming throughout the process. When I asked Kathy if her grandma was a good singer, she responded “no” four times, laughing. The love was heard regardless of the pitch.

Grandma Gissy’s Saturday morning tradition consisted of 13 egg whites, lemon glaze, and sun pouring through the white cotton curtains. The angel food cake taunted her 18 grandchildren, temptingly displayed in the china cabinet until dinner time, 5 p.m. sharp in the white Weston, W.Va. farmhouse.

Hair-pulled-back, Grandma Gissy was never seen without her apron on, canning or cooking at all hours. She was always happy and gave lots of hugs, never being outwardly upset about anything, much like Kathy.

Kathy can picture everything that lined her grandmother’s white kitchen cabinets, with a gas four-burner stove on metal legs between the two windows. In the living room, Grandpa Gissy rocked in his rocking chair smoking a cigar, adjacent to the cabinet radio playing the news. He was a hard-worker, tending to over 800 acres of farmland.

Afternoons on the wrap-around-porch were long, gazing at her grandmother's wildflowers grown from seed.

The one-story house with a tin roof was the gathering place. "We always had fun," Kathy repeats over and over. "It was always fun to go to your grandparents house. You got away with anything and they spoiled you to death."

Running through the woods with cousins, swinging across hills on grapevine hanging from trees, throwing rotten potatoes at her brother while plowing, once accidentally hitting her grandfather- these are the memories that run through her mind. "We didn't have iPads. We didn't have computers. We didn't have any of that. That's why we had fun, because we were together."

"When I think of home, I think of being in West Virginia," Kathy says. "West Virginia will always be home to me. It's where I grew up. It's where my family is. It's where Pat is buried, my parents are buried."

"John and I did everything together," she says of her two-years elder brother. When John married, he lived down the street from Kathy while she attended nurse's training. She could see his house from her window. Among her other best friends included younger siblings Carolyn, Steve, and Mary Ellen.

"There is nothing more important than family," she says today and has repeated to her own grandchildren, me included, for two decades. She doesn't feel a need to explain why, as to her it is plain as day. Parents Paul and Kathryn taught her the value of hard work and that she could not have it all. It was working alongside her family on the Weston farm that molded her into the independent, hard-working person she is today. "It's a quiet way," she says of tending to corn, peppers, beans, and apple trees.

“Everybody helped everybody.” They found comfort in belonging to their neighbor, however many acres away they might be. “I think people in West Virginia are more friendly,” Kathy says. “If you ever have an employee from West Virginia, they’ll be the hardest working, most loyal employee you’ve ever had. People in West Virginia are different.”

Kathy’s life also became different when her husband Pat died suddenly from surgery complications on May 22, 1998. “It’s never the same,” she says. “You never get over it. You learn to adjust. It feels empty. I like the quiet, but it can be too quiet.” When being in their house got hard, she turned the music on, but soon learned it could not stay on forever. “It takes a while to adjust because you forget and you call ‘honey,’ and then say, ‘oh, honey’s not here anymore.’”

As the family business closed, Kathy began consulting work for Summit Care in 2000, travelling back and forth to New Mexico for seven years. After that she served as Avante Regional Vice President of Operations for six years, on the road every week between Jacksonville, Ocala, and Hollywood, Fla.

“Home has always been my happy place,” she says, whatever she defined it as at the time, whether where she grew up or a two-bedroom apartment or on Village Green Drive. Yet she spent these 13 years following Pat’s death on the road, consciously away from the place her soul craved and not eager to face the emptiness it held.

“I never wanted the comradery of having a good family life to change.” This is what she finds most sacred, yet it inevitably unraveled. “People drift apart, there’s animosity, feelings get hurt. If I could change anything, I’d wave a magic wand so those things never happen.”

A new solid place

Kathy met Roger Owen in 2011. “It was one of the best things to happen to me at that point in my life,” she says. In a constant cycle of travel, work, and grandchildren, Kathy had not recognized her loneliness. He “made life comfortable,” and she felt the peace to once again stay home, shifting that place two miles down the road in Wicklow, a subdivision of Tuskawilla in Winter Springs, Fla.

In their six-year marriage, they went on four cruises, travelled Europe, road tripped to 32 states at once, and visited the beach often. More importantly, she had a companion on the road with her. Roger died in 2018. In these new empty walls, Kathy once again set out in determination to foster deep belonging. Comfort, warmth, happiness, security, and love between people- she finds that the things she values most live on if we allow them to.

Being isolated for most of 2020, Kathy knows now more than ever the importance of having a solid place to go back to and the discipline to rest within its comfort. “Your body needs to have a reprieve.”

Being forced to stay she experiences new depths of healing every day. Kathy spends mornings drinking coffee, reading in her rocking chair in the kitchen’s corner. If the humidity is bearable, she moves outside to watch birds. “I love to watch my birds,” she says. “I have the most beautiful birds.” Looking for her favorite painted bunting, a form of cardinal, she thinks of her mother once watching birds in their West Virginia backyard.

The slowness has taught her to stress less and notice her neighbors in new ways. It has also so strongly rekindled her top desire for family. “I like my peace and quiet, but

what I don't like is that the evenings are very long," Kathy says. "The hardest thing is eating by yourself. I hate that."

Growing up, the heart of the day was spent around the table with loved ones. At dinner is the one time of day they recentered and reinstalled their family bond. "If you don't have that sit down time as a family to talk, you're going to have issues."

However, it is now sitting in the long, lonely evenings that Kathy's heart has the room to uncover memories of her grandmother, pray for her grandchildren, and reflect on all the gifts her life has brought forth. It also strengthens her drive to love those she encounters, giving everyone a sense of happiness, belonging, and comfort from a hug and home-cooked meal. "When I think of home, I think of how lucky I am to have it," Kathy says.

PL Harkins: The Father's Heart

PL Harkins loves the mountains. He longs to live in the countryside, with its fresh air and starry nights, revolving around a slower pace. He does not love the suburbs. He strongly dislikes the heat, gated communities, and pretentiousness. Yet he has lived in Central Florida practically as long as he can remember, now raising his three children on the same streets he once roamed.

“How do you deal with it?” I ask my dad. “How do I deal with it? It’s very simple,” he says. “It’s because that’s where you, Brandon, Austin, and your mother are. It’s as simple as that. That’s it. It’s home. That is where you all are and that is the point in my heart where I can find peace with it.” For PL, home is being a dad. For myself, home is being his daughter.

A light beige two-story concrete block house is where daily life unfolds. With antique white trim and a stable brown front door that is hard to open, the Oviedo, Fla. home is the heart of his family. “There’s many, many doors and windows throughout our house, so there’s a lot of light that comes inside,” PL says.

He sees the light most through memories as a dad. “It’s the time that’s been spent with you three kids, watching you grow up and going through all the trials and tribulations of that,” he says. PL remembers everyone's first time riding a bike, throwing a football, and swimming. “It happens too fast.” While he does not discuss it, PL reviews

memories of his three children daily, whether they are of last week or ten years ago. “If I could go back and redo it all again, I would.”

For PL, 54, life is all about people. He values place and loves to have fun, but it always comes down to relationships. For my entire life, he has sacrificed daily in love. He is steady, passionate, strong, and kind. With age he appreciates home more, tied to the joy of being a father. “The good memories with you three, it gives me a stronger feeling for what’s around,” he says. He walks down the hallway and remembers when I walked into the wall’s corner, then needing stitches. “I don’t understand how that happens, but it’s there.”

Since 2002, PL has worked from the house, either for the family business, trading stocks, or woodworking. “There were times where it was absolutely fantastic, and then there were times that it’s taxing and stressful,” he says. With a wholehearted and perfectionist nature, he finds it difficult to separate “time for work” and “time for home.”

When trying to accomplish tasks while a knock comes at the office door, PL says he knows what is most important. “It’s the knock on the door from one of the three of you all, as frustrating as that is at times.”

He uses the example of one of us wanting to play outside with a deflated ball, while he is working to get out of a stock trade. “If that’s what a kid thinks is the huge tragedy of their life at the time, I understand that that’s what’s most important. An adult is supposed to have a better grasp and understanding on things and an adult is supposed to know and understand that in a child’s eyes that flat ball is the most important thing at that time.”

PL and his wife, Beth, think every parent would rather be with their own kids than hire a babysitter, hoping it is influential for them to always know a parent is around when they need something.

Middle school was a particularly tumultuous time for me, but every day I counted on my dad being there to hug me when I got home. The best advice he has ever given me was when I was going through a friendship breakup in eighth grade. He stood in my bedroom to tell me that I should never give the other girls something bad to say about me that was true, and from then on I kept my mouth shut and attitude kind.

Only having been raised with a brother, he was excited but scared to have a daughter. Yet he is the best girl dad I have ever seen. He in every way has set the standard for how I should be loved. He is my most regular phone call and the most constant voice telling me to slow down and enjoy life.

Throwing two sons into the mix, PL caters each relationship to each child's interests. "My heart is the same for all three of you all," he says. This can mean watching sports, attending car auctions or dance recitals, or watching movies.

In 2009 he began coaching his oldest son's, my brother Brandon, flag football team. He carried on with the Bucs for three years, eventually leading two separate teams as his youngest son, Austin, began to play. The consistency created a solid foundation for his players. PL's motto was "play hard, have fun," collaborating the values of discipline and childlike jubilation. He built an environment where it was okay for people to try new things.

Ideally, he describes home as a place of peace, though he smiles knowing that is not always the truth, enjoying the banter of his kids. "Even when times go by that aren't

the best, in the end, it's really not that bad, I don't think," PL says. "Every single minute of it has been fantastic and will always be cherished." Beyond peaceful, PL identifies home as abounding in fun, love, and joy.

Decision making

He grew up with the idea of family first, though this was challenged by having parents travel weekly for business. When PL officially joined his parents' company, Golden Eagle Management, in 1989, he was working alongside his parents and brother, JP, five days a week in Winter Park, Fla. Yet on Friday nights, his parents still insisted on taking PL and Beth out to dinner, knowing they would be together for Sunday's family dinner as well.

Home as a sanctuary from loss changed in 1998 when PL's dad, Pat, died unexpectedly. This personal devastation also required PL to work overtime, purely out of the necessity to get things done. Lacking their founder, the family closed Golden Eagle Management in 2003. After working tirelessly to finalize operations, he made the decision to be around as much as possible while his kids grew up. "I want to experience every single thing that I can with you guys," he says. "It's just important to me." My dad knows milestone events or small daily interactions cannot be recreated, and he is the most "there" person there is.

"Other than the people, which that's what makes it up, I find nothing else more important than home," he says. Working from the house, PL knows the intricacies of home better than anyone else. He knows people depend on him to have clean clothes,

food to eat, broken things fixed, the lawn mowed, and the driveway pressure washed to avoid letters from Kenmure's Homeowner Association.

Sitting at his desk every morning, he takes note of the sun pouring into his office's south window. This creates a sunburn on the back of PL's neck, an impossibility to see his computer monitors, and an environment so hot that a cell phone battery once exploded on the desk. Since Beth thinks that moving his desk's direction would be visually unappealing, she jokingly gifted PL a beach umbrella to hold behind him. "It just doesn't seem like something is right about that," he laughs, finding it impossible to hold a rainbow umbrella while typing.

When building the house in 2004, PL and Beth chose the deepest lot in the neighborhood, creating the biggest backyard and driveway possible. They also chose the cul-de-sac in hopes that it would be safe and fun for their children. Seventeen years later, they laugh at how quiet and picture-perfect it looked on paper, now knowing how low airplanes fly and that living at the end of a street creates unexpected annoyances. Ironically, they experienced the same flight patterns and frustrations living at the street's end in their Greenbriar home, their first house together.

"The name of the game is that whenever I'm looking for another house, it needs to be at the end of the street so lights shine in and everything blows in," he says. "As annoying as it is, it feels like home. There's things that seem to follow us, but we don't think about them at the time."

A personal, sacred place

Twenty-nine years into their marriage, PL says not a week goes by that he is not still learning about how to create a good home. “Home is the place where you feel most comfortable, you feel secure. You know it better than anywhere else. It’s where you feel like you can be who you are.” Home is where you can walk in freedom without a shirt on or put bare feet on the table without hesitation. This points to a relaxed state, not feeling threatened or tense about outside things. “It’s important to have a place like that because it gives you inner peace,” he says. “It’s the places that you hold dear to your heart, where those that you care about the most are, and possibly feel like they care about you back.”

Naturally drawn to home, PL exerts love daily to keep home stable. Safeguarding our values and traditions, he has built a place we can always return to. Whether the return is tonight or twenty years from now, he wants it to still feel like our home.

“Home has security, love, common place, and common interests. And whatever you do there, however you live, it may not be the way other people choose to do it. The point is that it's your home, it's how you want to live while you're in your home. As long as you always remember that when you go outside of your home, you should have a greater respect for how other people feel.” He takes immense pride in caring for his house, tending to the yard and using YouTube to fix whatever is broken.

What PL has orchestrated is an environment that screams family first. While rough days at work come and hard situations with friends are inevitable, “your mother and I both hope and pray that at the end of the day that you all find peace in knowing that there’s happiness right here within your family,” PL says. That peace is one that runs deeper than seasonal tiffs. “If y’all don’t realize at this point that this is the group you can

depend on, I don't know what to tell you." He is saddened to know all families do not have that guarantee but knows the Harkins family can find it in our own household.

When something at home becomes hard, PL stewes upon it, whether for himself or for others. He hates to see those he loves slighted in any way, caring so deeply that he wakes up in the middle of the night thinking of solutions. He cares enough to talk about things for hours until there is reconciliation.

Although these serious conversations are not often, as PL prides himself on not letting age dull his vibrancy, using sarcasm to lighten serious moods or willingly joining the kids' table. "If you don't have fun, you might go prematurely gray," he says. "It's good for your heart, it's good for you inside." For enjoyment, PL fishes, reads, woodworks, and plays board games. "It doesn't take a whole lot. Sometimes fun for me is literally just sitting down and relaxing."

With his youngest son, Austin, he enjoys working on his 1972 Corvette, and whatever other cars our family happens to own at the time. They spend hours upon hours in the three-car garage, inhaling the distinct odors of carburetor cleaner, exhaust, oil, and leather wipes. "Even though sometimes you'll see me get very upset and angry about it, in the end, there's nothing better than feeling like you accomplished something or learned something in the end," PL says.

Away from the house, his favorite thing to do is travel, working to get the family to all 50 states. "There are memories from every single trip," he says. "Some of the trips that we probably had the least amount to do, we laugh at most." He references a schooner in Rhode Island during overly windy conditions, "You had three of us on one side that thought we were going down and two of us on the other side which probably thought we

were going down too but not as bad as the other ones. That was a scary time, but we laughed pretty hard after that.”

PL also laughs about walking through Tall Grass Prairie in Kansas, hiking along a dirt path. “We wanted to find something but there was just nothing to find.” Brandon was eager at the possibility of a buffalo and thought he saw one moving, making us walk what felt like three miles closer to confirm his suspicion. Austin kept sitting on the trail’s side to put his face in his hands, declaring he could not walk any further. “That was after we laughed because we had no food and we had to pay 60 dollars for five of the worst sub sandwiches we’ve ever had.”

South Dakota also lacked restaurant options. “We had to pay a stupid amount of money for hot dogs that were as big around as a baseball bat that most of us ended up throwing away because it was making us sick.”

Gathering in the kitchen

At home, PL gathers his family around food, congregating in the kitchen to eat appetizers, “eager in anticipation of what’s ahead.” PL preaches the importance of good food and believes in its ability to comfort people. Those who enjoy fixing food for others create a life-giving atmosphere and experience.

He treasures the smell of a kitchen overflowing with love, with people sitting around waiting to taste test. While his all-time favorite food is thin-crust pizza, he is a fanatic of jalapeno poppers, jambalaya, red beans and rice, chicken pot pie, steak, and pasta creation, a hodgepodge of what is left in the fridge. Even when preparing a hamburger, he wants someone to bite into it and be blown away by its flavor. He enjoys

the day-long process of smoking meat, especially brisket, but was unable to in 2020 since grocery store shelves were empty.

Family dinner is highly valued by PL. He finds that even if there is not a lot to talk about or conversation becomes tense, it is crucial to be together. “It’s really, really easy to stop doing things like that,” he says. Excuses arise over time, yet he is steadfast in discipline. It is an extremely rare occasion that the family eats in shifts. “It is sacred, because it’s important.”

Beyond his immediate family, PL maintains the tradition of gathering family together for holidays, birthdays, baptisms, confirmations, and graduations. “It’s the sacredness of trying to get everyone together to celebrate things that happen for individuals' lives or celebrate events that are happening throughout the year,” he says.

When celebrating, PL and Beth open their home to friends and family, especially individuals with no family in town. He wants people to know they are welcome and wanted. “People like that don't get to eat dinner with someone else every single day like we do,” he says. PL has also never turned away his kids’ friends, giving them a place of safety and guidance.

Simple-hearted

PL finds the safety he offers others through gathering in West Virginia. There he finds simplicity in being together, favoring time with family over time exploring the rolling hillsides. His most cherished spots are his grandparents’ house on Dry Fork Road, Aunt Carolyn’s kitchen bar, and Aunt Mary Ellen’s back porch. “When I go to West Virginia, I feel like I am home,” he says.

Spending summers there as a kid, PL played in the mountains and tended to farmland with his cousins. His grandfather always cared for a steer. As a child, PL and his cousins named him at the start of summer and visited him daily. “We didn’t realize that at the end of the summer he was going to be butchered,” he says.

Daily chores included picking beans, plowing potatoes, and feeding chickens. “We would have never gotten to do that here in Orlando.” Making new homes in new places allows one to discover new parts of themselves. Using a stick attached to a string and hook, baited with spit bread balls, PL fished off a wooden bridge into the creek-pronounced “crick”- behind his grandparents’ house. “We’d catch the fish, throw them back, and keep catching them over and over for hours,” he says.

It is this stripped back way of life where PL finds comfort. “All the bells and whistles that flash around you in a bigger area like Orlando don't exist in West Virginia,” he says. “I think it made me appreciate simpler things, closer to nature.”

Living in Florida, he searches for daily reminders of his modest West Virginia roots. This includes the family’s early 1900s cider press being stored in the garage. It is incredible to think of all the homes it has been in and all the people who used it. PL also examines the depth of textured wood around the house, searching for that which is authentic. He looks daily at the hand-made coffee table’s rough finish. “Every day I look at that table and I can feel that touch in my mind and in my heart,” he says. He contemplates how it is made and indented, bringing about something in the interior life.

Whether morning or night, PL is known for stopping by the glass sliding doors each time he walks through the hallway where he stares at the fireplace reflecting on the peanut-shaped pool, situated in the screened-in porch. Along with help from neighbors,

PL built the stone fireplace himself. “It reminds me of up north, West Virginia,” he says. “In just the right weather- which is like three days out of the year, and you may be busy those three days- it’s nice to be able to sit in front of the fireplace and just be in the outside air, rather than locked up inside.”

Inside or outside, PL can almost always be found around the house. We all grew to be like him in 2020. “Quarantine solidified the importance of everything I think you’re supposed to be doing all the time anyways,” he says. “Just as no one knew what 2020 was going to bring, no one knows what tomorrow is going to bring either.” Since PL has so actively built a home of love, being sent to it was a gift of joy.

“Home is home,” PL says. “It is where it is and it is what it is. We all have our dreams of what our idealistic place would be, but it’s when you’re within the four walls of your home that I still think most people would find peace in that.”

Beth Harkins: A Small House with Big Love

Beth Harkins' childhood house on Poinsettia Avenue was small, nestled into Winter Park, Fla., with all the living spaces merged as one. Luckily, their corner lot housed the neighborhood's largest yard, meaning kids came from every direction for games of baseball or tag. They also rode their bikes to Eastbrook Elementary School to play on the playground, or went to Beth's backyard to practice gymnastics on the balance beam her dad built for her birthday.

The house's floor plan was small, but it let the heart's square footage be expansive. Beth's world was made larger through relationships, becoming a mansion through fun experiences and memories. "Home is very important; it gives you roots. whether the building or people," she says. "It gives you a place to belong. It's part of you. It helps shape who you are."

Beth, 52, was raised sheltered, protected from the bad things. "My parents wanted us to see the world in a great way, and gradually we learned the not nice stuff, but they did an amazing job of balancing things, teaching us, helping us learn how to deal with things," she says.

Her dad, Mickey Fries, taught at Lake Howell High School, reporting for work at seven. Every morning he fumbled through the kitchen in the dark to prepare a hot breakfast for his three girls, rotations of pancakes and eggs individualized to each child's preference, accompanied by juice and coffee.

“My dad was always kind, gentle, and loving and worked really, really hard to try to make ends meet,” Beth says. Mickey worked two or three jobs at a time but always came home at some point to see everybody. Family dinner was a nonnegotiable, sometimes snacking individually until they could all gather at 9 p.m. “He did it all with a smile on his face and made it look like the easiest thing in the world. That’s love and that’s family.”

The family’s matriarch, Sandy was the glue for both immediate and extended family. “She was always supportive, guiding us, helping us, teaching us, we could always count on her,” Beth says of my grandmother, whom I never met.

Mickey and Sandy assembled lunches together every morning for their daughters, all the way through high school graduation. “At one point I asked my father, ‘Why do you all do this for us? All my friends have to make their own lunch and you have to be at work so early and yet you still get up and make our lunches. Why do you do that?’ And he said, ‘You’re going to have to make lunches for the rest of your life. If this is the least I can do until you move out, I want to do it for you.’”

Navigating the kitchen and preparing meals was taxing for Sandy, as she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) at age 28. Beth knew nothing different than having her mom in a wheelchair. “She was always focused on the positive. She never focused on her illness, she never made it the center of our lives.”

“We got more time with her than anyone else got with their parents because she was home with us,” Beth says. Sandy taught by example, believed in figuring things out together, and always ended with “I know you’ll use your best judgment.” Even after Beth moved to Starkville, Miss. for college, her childhood friends came to visit her mom and

talk through their problems. “Anybody who can be half the parent she was would be amazing.”

Sandy sometimes rode her scooter a couple of blocks to her daughters’ elementary school to volunteer, then having to rest two or three days from exhaustion. “She knew she would never be given more than she can handle, even though sometimes she would probably wonder about that,” Beth says.

The family attended Mass together weekly at Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church. “I think that helps build good people and gives you a good foundation,” Beth says. “That’s something that’s important to do as a family, and not as individuals, to support each other.”

Beth remembers always sitting in a designated pew so Sandy’s wheelchair did not block the aisle. “She was a huge part of church to me, so after she died it was really hard to go sit there because it was such a family thing,” Beth says. Sandy passed away at 42, just two weeks after Beth returned from her freshman year of college.

“My home was drastically altered after my mother passed away and it absolutely never felt the same again without her there, which shows you how important the people are because she really helped to make it a home.” Every time Beth smells Estee Lauder Youth Dew perfume or is called “Bethy” by a stranger, she stops for a moment, as it takes her back to the home she once knew.

It is interesting that she and her two sisters have different narratives of home, as Beth graduated high school with her whole family cheering her on, whereas her youngest sister, Joelle, was just starting high school when Sandy died.

However, some of their childhood narratives remained the same, including Christmas Eves at their paternal grandmother's house. Honoring tradition, the group sang "Silent Night" before opening gifts. Beth acknowledges that they found it silly as teenagers, giggling in the corner, but knew it was important. "There was just something special and magical about it. We also had to sit at the kids' table, but it turns out that was the most fun place to sit."

Foundational traditions

Her favorite memory was decorating the tree one year in the early '80s, her mom sitting and watching. The sisters began sprinkling tinsel on Sandy, calling her "tinsel woman," in their own rendition of "Hail Mary, Gentle Woman."

Beth never received presents or clothes throughout the year, so Christmas was colossal. "We didn't have a lot of money and somehow Christmas morning there were always these amazing presents under the tree," she says. "There had to be a Santa because there was no way we possibly could have gotten all that."

Extended family came to the Fries home for brunch, eating Christmas casserole. "My parents wanted us to stay home and get to be kids on Christmas day," she says. The sisters then played and ate junk food all day- Beth's request was always chips with sour cream and onion dip.

The same philosophy is applied by Beth, my mom, in creating our family's Christmases. She invites everyone to our home so we never had to leave our toys, having dinner later in the day so our cousins could enjoy the comfort of their own homes as well.

She views cousins coming together as sacred. “As we know from this Christmas where we couldn’t do any of that stuff, it just doesn’t feel the same.”

Another tradition she is insistent on, Beth rallies her sisters and my cousins to attend Christmas Eve children’s Mass at 4 p.m. as a family. Our cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents take up three pews. “We make a scene trying to get everyone seated,” Beth says. “I love that.”

In middle school, her grandmother began gifting her items for her hope chest. Birthdays and holidays were spent unwrapping serving platters, crystal bowls, or silverware. Not able to understand these gifts as a child, Beth now appreciates the sets. Partnered with inheritances from her mother and other grandparents, it allows the generations to keep celebrating together. “My grandmother’s been gone a long time, but now when we have family celebrations at our house, she’s still part of it, because I have all these special treasures that she gave me throughout the years to use as an adult.”

These treasures bring her back to childhood memories, venturing through her paternal grandparents’ grove to climb trees and pick oranges, tangerines, and grapefruits. “By the end of the day we would be a sticky mess,” Beth says of the sand glued to them.

Summers were spent in a similar mess, only this time in Pass Christian, Miss., climbing pecan and magnolia trees in her maternal grandparents’ backyard. Beth and her eight cousins would stay for one month, digging at the beach, taking sailing lessons, biking, fishing, and exploring the woods. “We had a freedom to be kids that we didn’t necessarily have at home just because there was more space.”

The Greek Cottage Revival home, 905 East Scenic Drive, has a porch across the front and back, white wood-siding, green shutters, creaky hardwood floors, an elaborate

brick chimney, and a huge yard. The backyard's detached guest house became the cousins' space to play house and have endless sleepovers.

“There was a way my grandparents, aunts, and uncles always had that made children feel special,” Beth says. “They made it feel like everybody had an important gift.” These are the people she has found home most consistently in, and the home she hopes to become for others.

“I describe home as family, as a place where you feel comfortable, can be yourself, you're accepted, have support, a loving environment,” she says. “There is nothing more important.”

From the ground up

This importance is what has kept Beth coming back to Florida. At 22, she married PL Harkins on July 6, 1991 and the couple bought a small two-story house in Greenbriar, a subdivision of Tuskawilla in Winter Springs, Fla. The beige house was decorated with dark brown trim and a burnt-orange barrel tile roof.

“It was like you got to hang out with your best friend all the time and it kind of felt like you were playing house,” Beth says. “It didn't feel real.” They were still happily near family but excited to have their own place to decorate. “We had a small pickup truck of stuff and that's all we owned. By the time we left that house, we were bursting at the seams.”

In 2004, PL and Beth moved into their current Kenmure residence, having learned a lot after overseeing construction from the ground up. “We learned that you really have to oversee it closely because nobody is going to take more pride in your home than you

are,” she says. The new home, almost double the size, was wildly exciting, but still funny looking with bare-bones furniture in it. “I couldn't imagine how we could ever fill all that space and now we're bursting at the seams again.”

Filling the space, Brandon Patrick was her firstborn in 1997, making PL and Beth more of a family, feeling responsibility for something far greater than themselves. “You learn by trial and error and do the best you can,” Beth says, having added two more children to the equation.

“Home is family. Now it is centered around the three of you and trying to support you all, hoping we can give you a place where you feel loved, comfortable, supported, and safe.”

She desperately wants us to look forward to the return of home. “As a parent, your hope is to create that for your children, that you create a place where they feel secure, loved, accepted, comfortable, and that they look forward to visiting when they move on.”

“Having you guys around has taught me how you'll do anything for your kids. I don't know if you realize that before you have kids but the only thing that matters is that they're successful and that they're happy. You'll do whatever you need to do in your world to facilitate that.”

Beth delights in celebrating her children, taking us for milkshakes or slurpees when we receive report cards, serving family fiestas to watch our favorite sporting events, camping out with us in the family room as kids, and decorating our bathroom mirrors on our birthdays. “I want that to be the first thing you see when you get up, whether we're up or not, is us wishing you a happy birthday,” she says.

These little things have become more important with age and change. “You’ve got to make the most of it because you only have today.” More and more, Beth finds herself embracing the scents of hickory wood on the smoker or of vanilla candles in the family room. There is a fondness for the daily irritation when our Amazon Alexa loudly plays “It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere” as a reminder to feed the dog.

Naturally drawn to home, she acknowledges the innate desires to feel comfortable, accepted, and loved. “There’s no pressure to be anything but yourself,” Beth says. “You can just be.” For my mom, this means lying on the couch napping, waking up to say off-the-wall jokes about TV shows she is half watching.

Other than the couch, her favorite part of the house is the patio, where she sits to overlook the fireplace, pool, and blooming bird of paradise. “It’s a place you just want to hang out,” invited by the smells of jasmine, gardenia, and orange blossoms.

Beth spends her days as a physical therapist, becoming one for the very reason her mom had to stop being one. After the long hours, she rejoices in the daily homecoming of family dinner, though youngest child Austin is the one to decide when dinner ends. “He says ‘ohhhkayy’ and that means dinner is over and he’s ready to get up.”

“To me the best part of home is when everybody’s there together and spending time together, whether it’s watching TV, or going on vacation,” she says.

Months before summer she sits with PL at the wooden dinner table reviewing paper maps, creating vacation itineraries, and scheduling reservations. “Although it’s not necessarily the destination, it’s the time in the car when it’s just the five of us and y’all are cutting up and being silly, whether you’re five years old or 16 years old. I think some of

the most significant memories of our vacations are in the car on the way there or on the way home.”

It is the people of home that make it sacred and having everyone there is irreplaceable. As a parent, 2020 was a sweet reunion with her kids home again. Beth felt that spring was like a vacation, the old times before college. “That was the silver lining for us,” she says, as she was with Covid-19 patients daily.

This family-wide homecoming proved the nostalgic importance related to place, but that home is ultimately a refuge in people. “There are sentimental memories whether it's your house or your yard or your grandparents house- all of those things are home to me because of the people that made it that way, not necessarily the structure,” Beth says. “I think the main thing is having love, stability, and acceptance, and that you have somewhere you can go where you know everything is going to be okay.”

Brandon Harkins: The Party Planning Committee

Though he seems shy, and as a child he was, Brandon Harkins has become the family's social butterfly. He bounces around from work to restaurants to sporting events in never-ending cycles. Between professional experience and his education, he has grown to more comfortable speaking his mind, leaving behind the shy ways of his earlier years.

"I think my classes helped a lot with that," he says of the transformation. "Everyone had to present, so might as well get it out of the way. Then I realized that there's no reason to not speak up. If someone doesn't like what I have to say, then that's their opinion."

A routine involving non-stop social activity changed suddenly in 2020 when Brandon, 23, was constrained to the walls of the house for about two months. Returning to the comfort of home, he reconnected with the buried part of himself who still loves to play and dance like a kid. With rediscovered priorities, the rooms that once seemed constrained grew bigger.

Due to Covid-19 stay-at-home orders, my brother, Brandon, and I remember a specific outing to Publix, the first time our mom let us join her. We lamented together about how we had been confined for an eternity and how exciting a simple trip to the grocery store seemed. At the end of 2020 we remembered the excursion as liberating, how freedom had felt so far gone. We then checked my camera roll to watch the video we made at Publix... it was only three days into quarantine.

Brandon felt March rolled by slowly, but April passed with shocking speed. With nothing but his imagination to resort to, he reinstated his reputation as a resourceful, fun big brother. He was head of the family party planning committee, daily creating new activities to keep us engaged and entertained.

Brandon opened a barbershop for the family, cutting hair far too short but without remorse since we were hidden from the world. He created a driving range in the front yard and recruited me to film his audition tape for *Survivor*. Working from home, Brandon moved his desk into my bedroom, waking me at 8 a.m. to the sound of his phone calls. Other times, he could be found standing in the shallow end of the pool with his computer safely on the deck, an umbrella protecting him from the sun, working in a most unconventional office.

A sports enthusiast, he led the family in passionately watching horse racing, marble rolling, dart tournaments, corn hole, and virtual NASCAR on ESPN, as our regular programming was cancelled. He directed numerous TikToks, lost to me in poker, and played *Rock Band* on the Wii. Reinstating the family's Complaint Box, Covid-edition, Brandon eagerly took over for our dad reading the weekly complaints, made in jest, during dinner.

He sang and danced all around the house, especially during my Zoom classes, and frequently entered the room to just stare at me, trying to subtly communicate his boredom. These stares almost always led to me joining him at the pool, floating on rafts and listening to a vast array of music, each song for only 45 seconds. A more notable pool day was finding a Spotify playlist of songs heard by guests waiting in lines at the Walt Disney World parks, then making me guess which ride they represented. As Disney

annual passholders, we have spent hours upon hours listening to these songs while waiting in maze-like admission lines.

Since age 16, Brandon has worked as many hours as possible, prioritizing saving money, yet his joy has remained light-hearted. “Everyone is always so serious, so you have to have time to be fun,” he says. “If you’re not having fun, then what are you doing?” Brandon is like our dad in this way, a little kid in a man’s body.

This time of quarantine was life-giving and reaffirming to the friendship shared with my brother. With no regular sports to watch, no friends to entertain, and far shorter workdays, Brandon taught us how to once more play and enjoy life in ways we had long forgotten. Reverting back to our core family and having less pressure from the outside world, he somehow made the two months feel like a vacation.

Leaving the house

Vacations are always the best time to be with Brandon, stripped back of the distractions and daily routines, able to experience the world together. We usually end up next to each other on the plane, I sleep on his shoulder in the car, and we create a hotel tour video every night featuring “My House” by Flo Rida. As we pass through cities, he requests detours off the beaten path to achieve his quest to see as many collegiate and professional sporting venues as possible.

Our New England trip in 2017 is among his favorites, though he still complains about not having seen a moose in Maine. Brandon’s memories from that trip include driving three hours to a closed ropes course and venturing through Acadia National Park at night just to see a starless, foggy sky. That same fog obscured the view of the 4 a.m.

sunrise he was pried out of bed to enjoy. Later in the day, he recalls walking across the disappearing land bridge to Bar Island, only to have shoes that smelled of fish and our father's shirt to smell of spilled coffee the rest of the day. Dehydrated, we possibly walked an entire marathon in Boston on that same trip, as Brandon attempted to direct us around the city holding a map upside down.

He also treasures our 2019 California trip, enjoying the range of scenery from forests to coasts to cities. He recalls some particularly sketchy hotels, using a suitcase from the '80s, and singing "Time After Time" by Cyndi Lauper in the car. One night Brandon and I ate mac and cheese in our hotel with a cut-up plastic cup because we had no fork. On the same trip, Brandon found human feces laying in the parking garage's staircase. He remembers the little things of his travels and the relationships they have fostered. "You have to have someone to pick on," he says of the importance of siblings. He jokes that if he does not bully us, we will get too soft.

A heart for family

Living at home during college, Brandon has never had to face the loneliness of young adulthood away from the nuclear family. He has yet to realize how special our physical togetherness is, saying "You could have picked a more exciting topic" when I explained we would be talking about home.

"I like being around people," he says. "After I've been awake for an hour," he adds. When in the house, Brandon never spends time in his bedroom, always found in a communal space. "It's good to have people around you that care about what's going on."

Like most siblings, Brandon and I fought aggressively in high school, but since I have moved away for college, he is the family member to call me most frequently. At the end of the day, he feels a great duty to his family and those around them, knowing what is most important. Despite being the oldest child, he does not view himself as the ringleader, recognizing “we are each very much our own person.”

When he thinks of home, he thinks of dinner time. “That is when we always sit down together and catch up on the day.” His favorite tradition is when younger brother Austin exclaims a prolonged “okay,” meaning it is time to begin washing dishes.

Arriving home from work daily, Brandon has childlike excitement about his homecoming, consistently having a crazy story to offer and stopping at the brown leather couch to tell anyone within range. I tease him for his constant need to share play-by-plays. “Sometimes I feel like saying what’s going on,” he responds smiling. Our mom’s favorite is when he comes home to narrate the events of his adult-league sporting events, with the same excitement he had at age nine.

In his pure love for the family room, he campaigns his aggravation that it is connected to the kitchen. We laugh about the war of turning up the television's volume, the dog barking, microwave running, oven timer beeping, sink running, and someone telling someone to stop talking so they can hear. If Brandon is not trying to hear sports commentary, he can be found watching *The Office*.

As the oldest, Brandon has been the role model among cousins during gatherings, whether playing hide-and-seek, swimming, or having Nerf gun wars. In high school, Brandon invited his friends over for birthdays, after dances, and graduation, hosting ping

pong games with an abundance of food, namely smoked brisket, hashbrown casserole, and seven-layer dip. His friends are an extension of his family and he stands up for them.

Honoring his childhood

His favorite memory in our house is his third-grade birthday party, the summer our neighborhood was built, meaning every kid on the block was invited. For this birthday, 30 children and their families, all of his closest friends and cousins, gathered with one hundred hamburgers and hotdogs and a waterslide in the backyard. Our parents were adamant that no one in the neighborhood felt left out.

Brandon thrived growing up in the Oviedo, Fla. gated-community Kenmure, always having people to play sports and video games with. He rallied the kids for nightly summer activities, whether it be manhunt, kickball, or tee-ball. Having the neighborhood's largest driveway and living on the cul-de-sac, Brandon made it the gathering place, giving others a place to go and people to belong to.

Regular sleepovers with neighbor Justin may have taken place inside a bedroom, outside in a handmade tent, or even in an oversized pantry. As budding entrepreneurs, they created a carwash business, organized garage sales, and sold art door-to-door. On Halloween, they drew a map of the neighborhood, which is only a circle, to plan how to trick-or-treat most effectively. Other adventures included designing a minigolf course, carving a trail in the woods to a secret hangout spot, and crafting websites.

Brandon and Justin created fictional characters, Bob and Heffay, in late elementary school. As the younger sister, I was coerced into being videographer and assistant editor for their video series. Bob and Heffay had sporting tournaments, hosted

parties, and made music video spoofs. Best of all was the summer series, titled “Bob and Heffay: The Quest for Friends.” “It honestly looks like something that someone on drugs would make that has no plotline and they don’t know what they’re doing,” Brandon says. He begged our parents to upload the episodes to YouTube but is now grateful the videos never surfaced.

These adventures with Justin were Brandon’s safe haven while also making home a place of great adventure. He used to be scared of roller coasters and strangers, but these small daily affairs were like practice for him to go out and do hard things within the context of the real world.

Justin and Brandon attended the University of Central Florida (UCF) together, fulfilling their childhood dreams, and now even have a podcast analyzing UCF sports. Brandon is fiercely loyal. We grew up with season tickets to UCF football games. He attended his first game as a three-month-old and we later tailgated with Justin’s family.

We tailgated at the Citrus Bowl, banging on the chain link fence to show spirit as team buses arrived. In 2007, a stadium was built on UCF’s campus, adding to the sense of comradery as festivities ensued at the campus of our parents’ alma mater. After a disastrous year of tailgating on Memory Mall, we relocated to the more family-friendly softball fields. Brandon rallied together friends and strangers for football games, pausing only to eat a freshly grilled hotdog or to snack on brownies, a tradition he carried on into his college years.

Without hesitation, Brandon can list the score and details of every UCF game, never having missed a home game and scheduling his weekends around watching those played away. He gets excited talking about the time UCF beat Houston when Houston

was ranked. He remembers the first time UCF won a conference championship, the 2007 Conference USA game against Tulsa, 25-44. Another notable endeavor was the monsoon weeknight game against Marshall.

Brandon is the kind of fan every team needs, as he stayed through the last second of every game in 2015, the season the team went 0-12. A photo of him among empty stands, next to his friend with a paper bag on his head, has since gone viral in the sports world and remains a stock photo, surfacing occasionally on ESPN. That season of heartbreak was brought to redemption in 2017 when the team went 13-0, defeating Auburn in the Peach Bowl. These events as a student were even more special to Brandon because they were the culmination of his childhood dreams.

Loving Central Florida and UCF, Brandon is happy to call Florida home forever, with vast entertainment opportunities including an array of restaurants, sporting arenas, beaches, theme parks, and concerts. With the recent stay at home orders for Covid, however, I have seen that he can find joy without these things, making every environment a playground when he embraces simplicity. “You can focus on being happy, as mom says, or you can focus on sad stuff,” Brandon says.

My first friend in this world, Brandon is the embodiment of finding comfort in home. He is there when we want home to be fun or when we want to celebrate. He is home in the downtime and the in-between moments. Every time I ask to interview him, he says, “Meagan, you already know my life story.”

Austin Harkins: A True Homebody

The upstairs bonus room has become Austin Harkins' designated area, home to his Xbox One and the desktop computer he built himself. His go-to games are *Minecraft* and *Call of Duty*, playing them from the blue-cushioned rocking chair he was held in as a baby. Austin has a willingness to simply play, obeying his desires to sit still and enjoy the day. This teaches me a lot about the willingness to celebrate life.

Austin, 18, is most comfortable within the beige and burgundy walls of our family's Oviedo, Fla. house, without the need to prove himself. While he will tell anyone that he hates Florida heat and gated-communities, he unarguably loves the house itself. It gives him the freedom to do what makes him happy- fish, research cars, and play video games.

The youngest of three siblings, Austin has shared a bathroom with Brandon since age two, growing up with bedrooms next to each other. "I guess siblings are important," he says with sarcasm. "You've got to live with what you're dealt."

Austin is the family member least likely to leave the house, as he is content simply being together, but he is the most likely to tell Brandon or me to stop talking. He has never had to leave home to recognize the gift that is, yet says he would not miss the place itself, just his family and dog. A gift of the spirit, Austin is unmatched to things, learning from the deeper meanings and joys rather than the things themselves.

He jokes about the stereotypical “live, laugh, love” sign hanging above the pantry and the overflow of plastic cups in the corner cabinet. A heart of gold, Austin pets and plays with Bailey, a seven-year-old golden retriever, religiously. He lives life slowly enough to truly see her. “I also feel obligated to give her more attention,” he says, as we claim that she is the dog from hell, with constant behavioral and medical issues.

Beyond love for our canine, Austin appreciates his family more as he gets older. As he travels and sees other places, he learns to prefer his home. “They take care of me,” he says. He sees that home’s largest impact upon his personality and the trajectory of his life was that “our parents taught us well.” Austin was also the least resistant to being taught. He is servant-hearted, naturally inclined to help around the house. He picks on me, his older sister, relentlessly, yet he would do anything for me.

Early Saturday mornings are spent on the back patio helping our dad smoke meats on their Oklahoma Joe’s Longhorn Offset Smoker, most famously brisket, the mouth-watering aroma drifting on the breeze through the whole cul-de-sac. Like our dad, Austin loves good food and is prized as the least picky eater in the house. “I like everything except grits or salad,” he adds.

During family dinners, Austin views his role as the “funny guy.” “I just say the occasional joke, you know,” he says dryly. “When everyone is all serious, I lighten the mood a little bit, or it can make it more serious because the joke doesn’t go over well. That’s never happened to me though.”

The family funny guy

The Austin one sees at home is the same Austin presented elsewhere.

Unashamedly honest, he calls it like it is, and he is the only one who can cuss at the dinner table and get away with it because he asks for “permission to speak freely.”

When asked his favorite memory, he answers with a multitude of tragically hysterical inside jokes from our childhood that our mom will not let me write. Austin references numerous lines from *Impractical Jokers* and *Nathan for You* throughout the interview that would also sound wildly inappropriate if included.

Always ready to lighten the mood, he was the little boy who would run around the house naked but is now grown and offers comic relief through Jon Sudano’s renditions of Smash Mouth’s “All Star” on YouTube. He once rapped the *Minecraft* version of Drake’s “God’s Plan” coming back from a failed St. Augustine, Fla. dinner. While Christmas shopping he tried on a jacket, hanger included, from a display at Bass Pro Shops after too much Mello Yello. When our mom starts reading entertainment news in the car, Austin begins talking about Rickrolling or playing the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* theme song “Frolic” with the windows down to add noise. He knows how to create togetherness wherever he goes.

Among his most treasured memories are going to Walt Disney World parks, whether on an extensive Saturday trip or just on a Tuesday evening after school. One of these evenings, Austin fainted in an Epcot line waiting for dinner. He lightheartedly refers to the incident as “the time I almost died.” Regardless, he still loves Mickey Mouse shaped ice cream. “I’ve had over one hundred dollars’ worth of Mickey Mouse ice creams in my life,” he says. “Looking back, it probably wasn’t a good use of money.”

The rest of the family recalls images of four-year-old Austin sitting on the curb at Magic Kingdom, pouting that he longed for home while ice cream melted down his arm.

Comings and goings

While Austin always vocalizes his want to return to the house, he has always wanted to move out of Florida. “It’s hot, it’s humid,” he says. “There’s a lot of weird people in Florida, you know, like ‘Florida man.’”

He has grown up loving West Virginia, building stick forts on the mountainside and going to ramp festivals. He loves the refreshing air, friendly neighbors, and tradition of T&L Hot Dogs. Most notably for the family, the first time he saw snow, he ended up sitting in our aunt’s Jeep slightly smiling and slightly pouting with his wet socks and shoes off, claiming he was too cold to continue in the snowball fight.

As a family, we spend a myriad of hours in the car each summer and Austin manages to create home within the confined space. The only one who could not fall asleep in the car, as a child he secured a white pillow to his head to become a chef, hosted Talk Time with Austin, and brought a Winnie the Pooh suitcase filled with his forest friends, specifically Boris the Bear. Now he entertains with “Rock Lobster” and his own rendition of “Your Love” by The Outfield. He is also our dad’s favorite copilot, the only one attentive to the map and keeping our dad awake.

Austin lists his favorite vacations, saying “it was sometimes a letdown when we actually got to the destination.” He boasts of New York dollar slice pizza, the world’s largest metal statues in North Dakota, driving through Kansas cornfields to buy \$60 sandwiches, and discovering Buc-ee’s in Texas, whose beef jerky caused him to throw up

on the side of Interstate 10. He usually throws up around day eight, probably because of too many greasy meals and sodas.

“I like going out and seeing different places, but at some point, you just get sick of it and you’re ready to go home,” he says. Austin is the first example I’ve ever known of someone in my generation willing to admit they want to be home, as he is always the first to surrender on vacation, longing for his own shower, clean bed sheets, and dog.

Despite how he feels about Florida, he has found a lot there.

Like father like son

In Austin’s schedule, he is entirely considerate of our dad. Whether he admits it or not, he feels responsibility for the house, desiring to be able to fix and care for it himself. He is notorious for mowing the lawn, fixing sprinklers, or doing anything else needed before a parent has to ask. Two minutes into this interview, our dad came into the family room to ask for help, and Austin rushed off without hesitation- though I know the enthusiasm came from escaping an interview.

For years he has been learning from our dad about fixing cars, and he takes it upon himself to detail their 2015 Ram 1500 Laramie above professional standard. In Austin’s diligence, he sets a higher standard for his big sister in being taken care of, as he changes my oil and fixes my air conditioning.

Driving down Red Bug Lake Road or an interstate hundreds of miles away, Austin always finds conversation-piece cars. Whether they be vintage or new, big trucks or fast cars, he loves anything with a specific draw.

Other than Pixar's *Cars*, his fascination began with a Steel Cities Gray 1972 Chevrolet Corvette with black interior, the same one our dad drove at his age. After sitting in our grandma's garage for 17 years, it came to rest at our house. Slowly tackling this project over years, as time and money allowed, it became a daily activity during quarantine.

In 18 years, I have never seen Austin more genuinely excited about something than the first time the engine started in April 2020. This event, of course, was followed by accidentally having the car in reverse instead of neutral, the Corvette then sliding off the dollies. Luckily, Austin reacted fast, probably a reflex learned through video games.

"I have actually grown fond of the smell of gasoline or exhaust," he says. "Not too much of it, though, because it's unhealthy, but it makes me think of the Corvette and working on it."

Slowly beginning the hobby in elementary school, by high school he arrived home every day to microwave a snack, get a juice bag from the outdoor fridge, and sit on the brown leather couch with the iPad to research cars. "You do something so much to the point where you like it," Austin says. No one realizes how much knowledge he has gathered until he casually mentions the make and model of every car on the road, telling you what sets that model apart.

When Austin was 14-years-old, he wrote a letter to the West Virginia Department of Transportation, explaining he was trying to locate our deceased grandfather's Ermine White 1962 Corvette. Surprising our dad with his investigation, he was put in contact with the car's current owner, allowing our father to speak with this gentleman and touch upon something sacred to our family.

He offered to share his top 30 favorite cars for the interview but settled on five. “My first would be our dad’s 1972 Corvette,” Austin says. Following are 1959 Chevy trucks with a fleetside bed and any new Dodge or RAM products with a hellcat engine. “It’s a 6.2 liter supercharged V8 with 707 horsepower, and the truck does zero to 60 in about a little over four seconds.” Austin is conflicted between the 1970 and 1972 Chevilles, as the ‘70 has more horsepower and the ‘72 looks better.

Recent Craigslist searches have been for 1989-1991 Jeep Grand Wagoneers. “If you don’t know what that is, for your viewers out there listening,” he says, overly aware that he’s being recorded, “It’s a Jeep SUV that’s a 4-door with wood paneling on the sides. An interesting thing about those is they were originally made by American Motor Company, AMC, which Mitt Romney’s father was part of that company in the early days and helped found it. It was built with parts from Chevy, Ford, and Chrysler.”

Spirit of invitation

Beyond automobiles, Austin thinks of holidays when he thinks of home and his people. Growing up, our family hosted Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and, later on, Christmas Eve, with rotations of Easter and Thanksgiving.

Austin loves telling people about sitting outside at the kids’ table on Easter, with a decorated ham, an Easter egg hunt with kids from all over, and harvesting carrots planted by our great aunt for the enjoyment of her nieces and nephews.

This spirit of celebration is something he carries to the hallways of school. Once downcast in spirit, the culture of Lake Howell High School was instrumentally changed by Austin, as he took great pride in the school his parents and older siblings attended.

Afternoons of junior year were spent constructing fatheads to bring to pep rallies, some holding the face of celebrities, others of teachers and principals. Their display was accompanied by the sound of air horns. Austin organized tailgates before football games, resembling every Saturday of his childhood at UCF games. “It was kind of as a joke, because it’s high school football and it doesn’t really matter, but it was still fun,” he says.

“People enjoyed going to school there for the most part and that made all of the extra events outside of the classroom more fun, whether that be a football game or a pep rally. Actually, those are the only two events I ever went to- let's not get that construed.” In 2019 they were voted the most spirited school for the Florida High School Athletic Association, a stark contrast to the energy of when I first began attending Lake Howell.

Onlookers assume Austin would be the shyest in class yet was voted Honors Speaker for graduation. Spurring from the comfort he finds in himself, he is the spirit of home personified, a walking little house. He makes people feel seen, no matter what social sphere they operate in. His actions, however silly they seem, embody comradery and togetherness.

For Austin, home is family, meaning where he is free to be himself- the honest, hardworking person who speaks his mind but also feels so deeply. Much of this story consists of my own memories pieced together, as my baby brother will not give sincere answers. He enjoys the sarcasm of our relationship too much to compromise it for becoming sappy. He wanted to spend an hour making me laugh, just having a good time. It has taken time for me to realize, but he loves and cares intentionally, and I learn far more from him than he could learn from me.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Structure
Sidney Walters: Capacity for Love

Sidney Walters grew up in Kenmure, a subdivision on the outskirts of Oviedo, Fla. She says she will always associate home with her family's two-story chocolate brown home with palm trees out front, where she lived from second through ninth grade. Now 23, Sidney has moved six times since then. Routinely packing her life into cardboard boxes, she has since rediscovered home in ways apart from concrete buildings and wide backyards. She now carries the refuge, love, and peace of the picturesque childhood home in her heart.

"We walked outside and every house we could see was another friend," she recalls. "That's so rich. I don't think a lot of people get to experience that. It was like one village of people who all knew each other so well. I can't thank God enough for growing up in that neighborhood."

The web of families intermingled, parents eating pizza in lawn chairs in the driveway while kids roamed barefoot. Living in the cul-de-sac, Hidden Springs Cove was the gathering place, where anyone could wander for friends to play manhunt or kickball with. "We got really lucky to live in the spot that we did, even in that neighborhood, because not every part of that neighborhood was so close," Sidney says of the 172 houses.

We learned from each other with vast diversity in personality, hobbies, and family dynamics, Sidney says. "Without it, I honestly don't think I would have the capacity for

love that I do now,” she says. “You, your family, your brothers were a huge part of that,” she tells me. I am her adopted little sister who lived next door, one house to the left. Coming to our home, Sidney loved having brothers to pick on and play with but wants to apologize to my younger brother for the ridicule he endured. My dad picked us up every day from school and we spent hours together every afternoon, and sometimes even woke up early enough to play the purple controller game before leaving for Rainbow Elementary.

“You guys were my second family at that point,” Sidney says. After opening her own gifts on Christmas morning, she came next door to share mine. We spent afternoons playing Nintendo DS through our windows, sharing our Girl Tech Im-mes, messaging systems made by Mattel, and watching Amy Lang on *American Idol*, one of the less talented auditions of season nine.

Sidney and I daily role-played as Fibi Fabiano, her undercover rock star identity, or wrote songs. The top hits were “West 67 Degrees Fahrenheit” and “6 Years Old.” We printed the lyrics using WordArt on Microsoft Word, using as much ink as possible, and created a binder of our work. “We’re destined to be famous one day,” Sidney says. There is beauty in how we so firmly believed that fame was inevitable.

Spending countless hours together, “our parents would discipline the other kids.” Sidney remembers my dad, Mr. PL, saying “I think it’s probably time for you to go home” after being mean to me while playing Hot Lava on the swing set. What a gift it was to know you would be invited back the next day and have friends who, like siblings, know the tensions would be gone by morning.

There was freedom to be authentic in being surrounded by the same kids for years, as the neighborhood had low turnover. The longer one stays home, the deeper-rooted relationships become. “We were always who we were from the start because we weren’t constantly around all of these different people influencing us,” Sidney says. “When you have a lot of different friend groups throughout the years, your personality wavers a little bit.”

She taught me that authenticity, as we one day walked by the stop sign between our houses. I was around age nine and said, “Sometimes I tell people things that aren’t true to make them like me.” Sidney responded, “Don’t do that because you don’t want someone to like you for anything other than yourself.” Her attention made girls feel special, valued, and loved. For 18 years, she was the only sister I had known. Sisterhood was demonstrated through hair beading, nail painting, and the overpowering scent of too much Brittany Spears perfume. “We’ve always been little creators together,” she says.

Going next door when Sidney fought with her own sister, she is prone to leave when home gets hard. She was not the kid to lock herself in her room, but wanted to leave the whole house, sometimes sitting by herself at the neighborhood’s park. “I guess I’m a runner,” she says. “I like to run away when things get hard, not for good but to temporarily clear my mind.”

Growing to love the table

Her favorite memories are of family dinners. “I feel like a lot of people don’t do that, but it is the perfect place to spark conversation of substance,” Sidney says. “Everyone had to share, even if they were not in the mood. If you don’t have those

important conversations, you don't have that quality time, you can easily lose touch with the people that you're living in the same house with. You're living under the same roof but suddenly you feel like they don't even know you."

Like many her age, she questioned at times if her family really knew her. "But it really was those nights where we would all be forced to sit and look at each other and talk to each other that I realized these are actually the only people who are going to be here for me for the rest of my life. And they probably know me a little more than I liked to believe."

"No shade or judgement whatsoever, but you can really tell when somebody didn't have that experience. I feel like other people have to do a lot more healing in their heart and their soul to heal those wounds that they got as kids, and we're just so blessed to have had that structure and to have had that love around us at all times."

The neighborhood's magic changed when Sidney left in 2011, though it might have worn off eventually. The time was ordained, lasting just long enough to teach her the expectations of comfort and friendship to hold for home in the future. Catapulting into five chaotic years, the Walters jumped around to five different houses. Some houses she hated and happily left, while others she had to be pried away from.

The moves, partnered with teenage angst, made Sidney feel lonely, abandoning her blissful love for home and life. "I felt like I hated being there," she says, inspired by Tumblr to buy a ticket and run away. "Never say hate, that's such a strong word," her parents always said in reply.

Moving from place to place, away from a street of people she loved, encouraged Sidney to find stability within herself, as the feeling of home is not a guarantee. "I'm not

always going to have it in the room next to me or in the house next to me,” she says. “So I think that made me realize that I have to become comfortable in my own skin and with who I am as a person. That kick started healing everything that I felt I wasn’t okay with in the past, so that really shaped me actually.”

Sidney learned the importance of finding a sense of home in oneself, as positive financial, relational, and physical conditions are not promised. “You still have to find a sense of belonging, wherever you are. As I get older, that gets a little easier for me, figuring out who I am even though I don’t know that I’ll ever know for sure. Even having a better sense of who I want to be at least gives me a sense of home, peace, and stability.”

Even though the space itself seemed most important while moving, Sidney now says place does not matter. “Even though the environment affects how you feel, the only person you for sure have around all the time is yourself. In a sense, home can be my body, that I live in. Wherever I am is home because I’m always there.”

Making space for God

Aside from herself, she has found faith to be the only other guarantee of life. “When I was younger, I feel like I was searching for this grand gesture, like this grandiose idea of God or angels or all of these things. But really, just walk outside and look around you. He's everywhere, literally in everything. Once that really clicked for me, I started to feel it coming from within me and that's when it was proof to me.”

It is the one thing she finds more important than home. “No matter what you believe in, if you have a sense of always serving a higher purpose, that is what really

leads life.” This motivates Sidney in benevolence. “You have to find that altruistic corner of your heart,” she says.

“We’ve always gone to church and been people of faith,” Sidney says. “That was structural, but it was never something I thought about every single day.” Hard things made her realize the weight.

For Sidney, it was a horrific car accident with the miracle of only scratches and bruises to show. “There was no way there wasn’t someone in there with their arms wrapped around me,” she says, with a dream a few nights later of her guardian angel. “That really changed my life and catapulted me. Once the switch happens in you, it is a domino effect, every single thing changes for the better.”

Sidney makes physical space for God in her life, with a prayer corner of her room decorated with potted plants, candles, and angel statues, specifically a white and gold one from her Mema. Sometimes feeling trapped in a tiny apartment, this is her sacred space. “I needed to make sure I had a corner where I could just sit, focus, and forget that I’m home. With everything in front of me that has different meanings to me personally, I can just tap into that space.”

Working towards becoming a physician assistant, Sidney works at AdventHealth. Their faith-based approach to healing helps her see God’s love clearer than ever. “Working in healthcare, I’m trying to be a vessel for His healing,” she says. “People have physical diseases, but a lot of the time pain in our body manifests from emotional pain. That’s a fact, it’s not a theory.”

People enter the hospital daily with complaints of pain, yet nothing physically wrong can be identified. It is the patients’ anxiousness apart from the steadiness of home

that hurts. “If you can help heal their heart a little bit in those two days you see them, you can actually do a lot for them physically as well.”

People of comfort

With Sidney being healed as well through the spiritual life, she is once again able to fully appreciate her family. “I’m really lucky in that sense, to associate such a great family with the word home,” she says, wanting to remember the unshakable sense of belonging. “It really is a huge sense of comfort.”

Still having a childlike urge to call her mom Patti when things get hard, Sidney knows her mom will do absolutely anything to help those she loves. “She’s just the overcompensating mother, in a nutshell.”

“She’s the absolute most overwhelmingly loving person I’ve ever met, but at the same time she has a sharpness to her, like you just don’t want to cross her. It takes a lot for her to get there, but when you get there, you should be scared.”

Bob, Sidney’s dad, is extremely laid back, the glue that holds them together. In a house with three girls, he is the peacemaker and voice of reason. “My dad is pretty much the best person I know. I will always describe him that way.” Distancing herself some as a teenager, she thought Bob could “never understand” the daily adversities. Later on situations arose in Sidney’s life in which her dad was the only one home to witness, and he was there to help without hesitation. She sees those times of vulnerability as what grew their relationship.

Sidney and her sister Taylor were different growing up, their relationship suffering because of it. The fighting was tumultuous, but it clicked one day, dropping the ego of who was the big and little sister and the fear of who would tattletale.

When Taylor began living on her own, Sidney constantly spent the night. "That's when we really, really got close." It was through that they decided they could be roommates, now occupying an overly organized, clean, symmetrically-designed apartment, decorated with plants and angelic figures.

"I'm so thankful she's become my best friend finally because we fought for so long," Sidney says. The redemption is life-giving and inspiring, home can never be too far gone. Every Sunday, the sisters go to their parents' house for dinner, sitting around the pool patio covered with Bob's plants, staying after to watch a movie. "It's going to be a sad day when that can't happen anymore, when someone moves away or something like that but as of now, we're still very much a unit."

Sidney's favorite thing about her family is her parents' marriage. "I know so many people whose parents don't have a solid partnership. As much as you can still have a fulfilling love life and a fulfilling family life without having seen that, it's so important. I can just tell they fall more and more in love as they get older. I'm just so thankful that I got to see what love really is before having to accept it into my life in that way."

Despite the love Sidney's heart holds for home and family, all around her agree she is extremely drawn to leaving. "It honestly has a lot to do with me feeling like I'm only going to live on this earth for a certain number of years and I don't want to be in Orlando, Florida for all of them. I don't think I would feel fulfilled whatsoever if I didn't go and immerse myself in different parts of the world in different cultures and see

everywhere else. I want to make my home in a bunch of different little corners of the world.”

Home is not a place for Sidney. “Home is more of a feeling for me, but if I could put it into words it would be family, friendship, comfort, warmth, and also sisterhood.”

Hollyn Saliga: Creating Safety

“Every single place I've lived has always felt like home to me,” Hollyn Saliga says. “After that little bit of transition time, it’s like that’s where I’ve always been because it’s the people that I’m with.”

Hollyn, 21, has moved three times in the past three years- not in a careless way, but like any other college student moving from dorm to apartment. “Home will always be Oviedo, Florida because my core group of people and family is there, but truly now I see Tallahassee is home.” She recognizes the peace, comfort, and familiarity with the present version of her found in her college town, among her classmates at Florida State University.

Finding this sense of safety was a process, as Hollyn desired a fresh start when starting college, seeking to befriend everyone in the hallway or classroom. A fresh start can be more overwhelming than the natural relationship building that takes place among immediate family members or over swapping lunches in elementary school. Yet she finds these conscious friendship decisions to be important and exciting.

Hollyn experienced freedom and joy outside the box of peers having preconceived expectations for her. From this newness, she realized home was not about the place, but more so who she was becoming and who lived alongside her for that journey. “You watch everyone around you grow, too, which is crazy.”

Shyly admitted, joining the Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority was crucial to her experience. Even if the girls were strangers, the sisterhood provided familiar faces, people looking out for her, friends to eat meals with, and a foundation to gain confidence in joining other organizations.

“It gave me the comfortability, definitely in a more awkward period of my life, to make the mistakes and do the awkwardness of freshman year in a safe space,” Hollyn says. “I am a big believer that the environment you learn in 100 percent makes or breaks it. If you don't feel like you're in a safe environment, you're not going to ask questions, you're not going to be free to make mistakes.” She knows intimately that it is through trials and tribulations we grow and learn something of value.

Hardships also grow friendship, as she has experienced with roommates Clara and Birk. Clara, her sophomore roommate, has experienced similar trials as Hollyn, giving common understanding. “We literally are like sisters. It's actually hard for us living together sometimes because we're so close that we'll be mean to each other.”

Another sweet blessing, Birk was a last-minute junior year roommate decision. “Our lives are eerily similar,” Hollyn says, as they talked until 3 a.m. the night of move-in. “She is one of those people that was super unexpected and I didn't see coming.”

In each of Hollyn's residencies, she lives primarily in the common areas, craving to be around people even if they aren't conversing. “I've never been the kind of person to spend a lot of time in my room,” she says. Every apartment she rented has been a gathering place, bringing different friend groups together. “The house itself is really not that important. It's truly the people and the energy that the group brings.” Some of her favorite and most intimate memories in Tallahassee are from gathering in little

apartments, sparsely decorated and occupied by the current residents for only eight months.

Wherever Hollyn is, she seeks communal space, valuing the exchange of ideas and love. She is willing to work through hard conversations and feelings to achieve that.

Catapulted from tradition

A knack for hospitality was ingrained in Hollyn through her childhood, as their Oviedo yellow-paneled home with black shutters was the destination for every holiday and party. Most iconic was the Saliga's New Year's Eve celebration, a house and yard packed with friends and family.

The party's staple was an ice cream tower constructed with boxes of ice cream, becoming a contest of the last man standing. Hollyn was the reigning champion. "I finessed it the whole time, I took the smallest bites from the tip of my spoon and acted like I was chewing it for a while," she says. As she grew older and desired to hang out with her friends, she began kindly relinquishing her title and tapping out earlier.

Her favorite location on their property is the pool house, consisting of an office, bedroom, kitchen, and living room, a building accessed from the main house by an outdoor walkway. "All of my formative memories of growing up are there," she says. "That was the space where I really had the opportunity to try new things, try out different personalities, and hang out with different people without being under the watch of my mother," she says, as her mom, Wendy, came in only intermittently with a bowl of seedless grapes to offer as she scoped out the situation. The pool house is where Hollyn

and I pulled our first all-nighters, orchestrated dances, produced a state-competitor National History Day performance, and became best friends.

Her most formative memories she calls cliché, as she treasures regular trips to Walt Disney World, specifically the Magic Kingdom. Hollyn has always been a Winnie the Pooh fanatic, but also loves Astro Orbiter. “It’s a little bit of adrenaline because you’re not really strapped in well.”

She remembers a middle school birthday in a Disney hotel, as well as going with family friends, the Del Rosarios, every weekend. While on the PeopleMover, Hollyn schmoozed off Mrs. Del Rosario’s backpack full of junk food, quite different from the organic fruit she snacked on at home. “That’s always been the one place that when we go there as a family, especially because my mom has a lot of family roots there it has always been a positive experience,” Hollyn says.

Hidden tensions

Her family was idealized by outsiders, their home looking picturesque with coordinating décor and sitting on the water. Hollyn now admits home was a hard place growing up. Her early memories are hiding in her room or wiping herself of personality and emotion to not rock the boat. “I was such an aggressive people-pleaser because I just wanted to make everybody happy,” Hollyn says. “I’ve now learned that when things get tough at home or with family, a lot of times it has nothing to do with you.”

This journey has been one of wrestling, as Hollyn used to find a large part of her identity in the family. “Sometimes you’re lucky and family just gets better, but most of

the time stuff like that simply doesn't get better. It's going to be an issue and it's going to be a hard topic for the rest of that person's life."

By the time she arrived at her parents' alma mater for college, Hollyn hated that parental division became an essential conversation piece with others as friendships deepened. After reflection, therapy, and healing, "It got to the point that talking about what happened was just a part of my story, not something horrible that happened to me."

Hollyn has learned to take family members off a pedestal and recognized their shared humanity and imperfections. In a willingness to move forward, Hollyn has found lasting rest in herself. She is able to be with her family during school breaks and feel at home with them, but they are not necessary to her security.

At her house, Hollyn has learned to set boundaries to her empathy so they are not lamenting together. She has also found it easier to love once realizing that anger is a response to being scared. "If somebody is scared, you're going to be there for them."

"I'm still physically at home, but it doesn't give me that same fight or flight, literal fight or flight, that I used to have," Hollyn says. "I've become more at home with myself. I know that regardless of where I go, I have myself. I know it sounds bad, but it's so true. I know there will be some sort of consistency."

Reevaluating identity

Her soul finds refuge in parks, reading, painting, writing poetry, and listening to music. "Music is my biggest grounding thing," Hollyn says. She spends hours on Spotify curating playlists, a relief from anxiety and a form of personal diary. "Even if I don't listen to all of them more than once or twice after, just the act of making them is really

expressive for me. Music is the biggest way I have maintained my creativity as I've gotten older."

As a child, Hollyn's career aspirations were an artist, singer, or musical theater performer. "It was always something artistic and I feel like I've always had that inside of me. I came up with these other things to almost mask that aspect of me to the public because I thought it made me look weak or incompetent or not as successful."

A behavioral neuroscience major, Hollyn has always appreciated science, even when she excelled further in English and writing. She describes it as creative and philosophical, viewpoints seldom discussed. "There's so much that has not been discovered yet and most of the things that have been discovered are not positive."

"Creative things are things that I've always loved but that I've been putting to the side, because you're taught that those things aren't of greater importance." Since graduating high school, Hollyn has found herself unlearning and reverting to her childlike self, the one who loved to play, create, and dream. "Honestly, it's so awkward and kind of scary, too," she says, discussing lots of self-doubt, therapy, and breakdowns.

Hollyn has forged a path from the physical home to create an introspective space from which to work. "I have to reckon with the fact that who I am is false in a lot of ways," Hollyn says. She used to describe herself as a Type A person, but now sees that her achiever, organized mindset was only a yearning to please others.

In re-discovering herself, she points back to her favorite books, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz. "It takes simple gut things that you know in your soul, like what you should do and the way you should look at life,

but it puts it into terms that just makes so much sense and resonates with you on a deeper level. I feel like it brings you back, showing you what your true soul is supposed to be.”

Hollyn is internally reevaluating acquired ideas of productivity, climbing the ladder, and attitudes towards others. “I’m a big sucker for constantly learning and I never want to be just siloed into whatever my major is and whatever the people around me are doing,” she says. This reversal attitude is constantly being tested by the stereotypical expectations of her academic school. “Pre-med is literally the definition of basing your worth off grades or achievements,” she says.

Alongside her vibrant passions, Hollyn has grown to recognize that she truly is laid back. “At the end of the day, I’m just trying to live life and enjoy it,” she says, learning to stop planning and begin playing, embracing the plan that will naturally unfold.

People still matter

Now returning to her Oviedo stomping grounds, her yellow house does not hold large gatherings, but more sweet, private moments hammocking besides the pond, reading under the shade of oaks, and watching her brother, Brendan, fish.

Brendan, 30, is a pillar of home for the Saliga family, as he is almost always there to welcome everyone home. Since he has special needs, a parent or sibling constantly accompanies him at the house. Brendan brings joy to every room. Hollyn finds herself calling him often from school to share details about their days. When together, they go to restaurants or watch cooking shows.

She also says that this relationship has taught her to make the best out of what life hands her. “It gave me an understanding from a younger age that, simply put, life isn’t fair. Yet I can’t imagine who I’d be without him because he’s shown me a different level of patience, gratitude, of being happy and content with the little things, and not valuing my worth off all the things I can do, but the fact that I can just be.”

She and her sister, Logan, 24, share a significant amount of things in common - they are politically and socially active, well-versed in astrology, share an affinity for writing and music, and are faithfully independent. “Our relationship has gotten a lot stronger as we’ve gotten older, since we’ve been able to find our own space,” Hollyn says.

Anyone who knows Hollyn knows how much she loves her black doxin-jack russell terrier-mix with a snaggletooth, though thought to be a mix between a snake and pig. “Pepper is obviously a phenomenal animal. I think she’s 12 or 13 now, which is kind of old, but it doesn’t matter because she’s immortal,” she says. “Pepper has never changed, she is the most reliable,” Hollyn says.

She also finds refuge in the friendships that have aged with her- Brooke, Sheridan, Julia, Sarah, and me. “We’ve all gone through the wringer together but it’s crazy because we’re all really good friends now,” she says. Hollyn makes us feel ushered into home, yet recognizes how we have changed and grown, not confining us to our pasts or setting expectations for the future.

Hollyn’s graduation speech from Lake Howell High School included a quote from *The Alchemist*: “Life is eternal. We have stopped for a moment to encounter each other, to meet, to love, to share. This is a precious moment. It is a little parenthesis in eternity.”

Finding safety in these little things and creating comfort with herself, Hollyn feels the freedom to grow, love, and gather in any place life calls her. “The idea of graduating and having absolutely no idea where I’m going to live doesn’t even scare me the way it should. I’m comfortable with it because regardless, I’ll find my people.”

Jonny Lawrence: Lifelong Teammates

Jonny Lawrence plays forward on the Furman University basketball team, standing six-ten as a redshirt freshman. “You want it hard, but it’s super hard, especially the conditioning side of it,” Jonny says. “I still don’t always appreciate that, but I know that I need it to succeed.” His favorite thing about playing is connecting with his teammates during plays, celebrating on the court. It resembles the unity of family.

Outsiders first see Jonny as an athlete, which makes it harder for people to see where his heart lies, which is with his family and friends of Oviedo, Fla. There is a constant tension between the inherited public persona and the actuality of who athletes are. Jonny values home more than any acquaintance would guess, and a pandemic allowed him to return to that foundation, being sent to the walls that shaped his heart.

“I definitely don’t feel home here at all,” he says of Greenville, S.C., currently living in a cream dorm room with cinder block walls. Having moved around campus three times just this year, Jonny holds on to the minimum and his suitcase remains open on the ground, always awaiting his next away game.

He identifies Furman as just the place he goes to school and lives out an athletic career, as his schedule does not permit the creation of deep roots. In his new town Jonny feels most at home in Timmons Arena, where he spends most of his time. He finds it stress-relieving to be in the gym. “Something about bouncing the ball by yourself is definitely relaxing and peaceful,” he says.

“Why do you play basketball?” I ask him. “I think I play basketball for other people,” Jonny responds. “I obviously love it, but I think I play it for people that have believed in me since I started playing, like my past coaches and my dad. I feel like they are counting on me to make the most of what I have. Obviously I started playing for myself, but that’s what keeps me going if I have a bad day. If I just played for myself, I’d probably quit, but I have other people counting on me.”

The foundation of family

Apart from family, Jonny, 20, finds nothing more important than home, finding the people so deeply integrated with the place. “Since I left high school, home has definitely become more of a treasure,” he says. “As it started getting closer to the time for me to leave, I was really sad because I grew to love Oviedo so much. I don’t like Greenville nearly as much.” Jonny is drawn to home and being away is difficult. “I feel like I always know what I’m missing.” His absolute favorite things are to “hang out with friends and spend time with family.”

What Jonny adores most about his family is how different they are, creating humor from four strong personalities. He feels at home just being around them, whether around town or watching television. While watching movies, Jonny and his brother, Stephen, constantly pause to evaluate or rewind to take it in again. Despite my fighting with them for the remote, their analysis is usually more entertaining than the show.

While most people spend whole summers in their hometowns, Jonny does not get that privilege due to his training schedule. So when his freshman year of college was cut short due to Covid-19, he found it to be a blessing in disguise. Other than being

discouraged with his career pausing, he soaked up every second of being in Florida. Jonny thought he would never get more than two weeks off in the summer, much less five months. “It was like a real, full summer, like we were in high school,” he says.

With Stephen attending the University of Florida and his cousins- Kyle, Mike, and Bill- at Florida State University, they still get together often. “We used to all do that and now I’m the only one not there,” Jonny says. “It was good to be at home for five months because I could be a part of all that again. I miss that a lot.”

His favorite childhood memories are of visiting his cousins’ lake house in Lake Placid, Fla. These long weekends are infused with nostalgia, occurring for longer than Jonny can remember. In earlier years, the families went four or five times a year. “It felt like a trip every time because it was two hours away,” Jonny says. “That felt like a long car ride when I was little.” While the regularity of trips dwindled with the rise of sports and school, their value remained strong.

“That was such a cherished, precious time to get to do that away from home. We knew exactly what we were going to do every time, there was no variation. It was just something stable and unchangeable, the same cycle every day.” The tradition included the dads golfing in the morning, while the five boys woke up at noon to eat breakfast. After putting on sunscreen, they went to the water for the day, tubing and fishing until the sun began to set. The parents then grilled out for dinner, the sons playing poker and video games into the night. “We stayed up until four in the morning just because we loved hanging out with each other and we didn’t get to see each other very often,” Jonny says.

Jonny has always been close with Stephen, 22, admiring his kindness towards others. “He’s been a great big brother,” Jonny says. “He’s just a great kid. Everybody

liked him and he was friends with a lot of people just because he was so nice.” Together the brothers talk, play *Super Smash Bros.* or *Call of Duty*, and watch comedies until Stephen decides they are wasting time. “Then he turns on some productive YouTube video that will teach us something.”

Stephen was honored by Disney’s Dreamers and Doers, as Lake Howell High School valedictorian, National Honor Society President, and played on the school’s baseball team. “Even though my mom was the one pushing me to do well in school, I saw him actually do it,” Jonny says. In 2019 Jonny joined his brother’s tradition as valedictorian, one-upping their parents who were both salutatorians. He says his family has shaped his values and work ethic.

Undoubtedly, Jonny is most like his dad, Pat. “My dad’s really sarcastic and apathetic, but he’s hilarious,” Jonny says. “He was more disciplinary when we were kids, but since we’ve grown to high school and beyond he’s just been more of a friend.” From Pat, Jonny has learned about not taking life too seriously. They regularly golf together and watch old movies. “Even if I don’t enjoy it, I’ll just sit there and talk with him and watch it,” Jonny says.

Pat also guides Jonny in basketball, as Pat played with his brother, Jonny’s uncle, while attending the University of Florida. Jonny switched from baseball to basketball when starting high school, partially for enjoyment but definitely driven to honor his family’s legacy.

The family’s matriarch, Marcia, is overly giving and loving, pushing her boys to excel in all they do. While Jonny had tension with her early in high school, realizing the

discipline school now required, he still never found his relationship with home to be in a bad spot. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a part where I didn’t want to be home.”

As their relationship has strengthened, Jonny loves talking with his mom and hanging out, watching every Marvel movie together during quarantine, and appreciates how actively she volunteered at his schools. “My mom is always wanting to talk to me, be around me, and come visit me,” he says. “At times, I don’t even know what I did to deserve all that love. She just loves me so much, it’s kind of crazy. My mom teaches me to be more caring, even though I don’t reflect that a lot.” Those who know Jonny would beg to differ.

“I definitely like my family, I definitely love my family,” he corrects himself. “They’re always going to be in my corner, no matter what. That’s the big thing I’ve found since I left for college.” Losing touch with friends from Florida, his family remains consistent. “They’re always going to still love me, talk to me, and just be there for me.”

Pat and Marcia drive to Greenville for every basketball game possible and Marcia calls Jonny often. “It sounds bad, but I don’t really miss my mom and my dad,” he says. “But I really miss my brother and I really miss my friends.” Apart from these core relationships, Jonny loves his cats wholeheartedly, missing snuggling with them. Other than Snackins, Agent Craig, and Mullins, the Lawrences have a constant cycle of fosters outside.

Extended family

Jonny’s circle of close friends also has an open invitation to the Lawrence home. “A lot of the friends that I still have are the ones that I’ve known since elementary

school,” he says, listing off Gavin and Mason from second grade. He includes Evan, Chris, and me as sixth grade additions. “It’s the same sort of family thing- they’re people I know that will be with me through whatever.”

“Every time I come home I try to see everybody for as long as I can,” Jonny says, usually only travelling to Florida for a few days at a time. Together, the group constantly gathers around food or just hangs out at one another’s homes. Jonny says they encourage him to simply enjoy life, goofing off every chance they get.

He had been such a core part of daily life that I never thought about how different it would be without him by my side after graduating. Stephen introduced Jonny and I on the bus after his first day at Tuskawilla Middle School. Over the years I have come to see the reverence with which he treats home, acting unexpectedly loyal and tender-hearted. While I have a constant need to reaffirm friendships, Jonny has the confident trust to pick up with people where they left off.

When I was going through a difficult time running for Student Council President in eighth grade, 12-year-old Jonny went home and designed his own fliers on Microsoft Word for my campaign, hanging them around campus early in the morning. We had almost every class together my junior and senior years of high school, keeping each other entertained through the daily routine. Outside of school, for us home was walks around our neighborhood, watching movies, eating Jeremiah’s ice cream, and playing games, me staying for hours upon end regardless of how allergic I am to his cats. He has provided a house I feel at home in other than my own, as the Lawrences love me as their own.

Outside of his immediate friends, Jonny finds home in the comradery of strangers around the public schools he attended. “You were an extremely good influence on me,

others were not as influential,” he laughs. He loved the dynamic of passing familiar faces in the halls, growing relationships with teachers, and learning in an energetic environment.

For his whole life, Jonny has been formed by the bonds of sports teams. Most family-like was the Outlaws, his baseball team from age 10 to 14. Many weekends were spent winning tournaments, hanging out at hotel pools with his teammates while the parents bonded.

Familiar roads

“The people are the main thing, but I definitely would have a different experience if I grew up somewhere else,” Jonny says. “I just love Oviedo, I don't know if I would have gotten that same feeling anywhere else.”

One can feel the sentimentality driving down Red Bug or Tuskawilla Road. Jonny feels an overwhelming sense of pride passing old schools, smelling the humidity, driving by his favorite restaurants, and working out with his OHoops trainer. Jonny’s favorite restaurants are Chipotle, Huey Magoo’s, and Chick-fil-a. Even though they are chains, the Central Florida locations are especially important. “I’ve been going to the same ones since I was little,” Jonny says. “One time my mom brought me the Huey Magoo’s sauce to dip my chicken in up here in Greenville. It was pretty awesome.”

Even when touring Furman and knowing it was the right place, he knew he would never love it like Oviedo. There is something about the familiar streets and shopping plazas that strike his heart differently. Every time he hears the University of Central

Florida's anthem, "Kernkraft 400" by Zombie Nation, he is taken back to his hometown. His love for Oviedo is ironic, since he lives on the dead outskirts of town.

"My house is a big piece of that," he says. The Lawrences have lived in Kenmure for 16 years, their beige house decorated with stone, with the same floor plan of my own, is positioned on the cul-de-sac and backing up to the retention pond. "It's a place to come back to at the end of a tough day," Jonny says of their army green couches. "I definitely appreciated it more after I graduated high school, but I've always really liked it." He often wanders out the back sliding glass door, standing on the concrete patio overlooking the swimming pool and pond. "I like that view a lot," Jonny says. "Sometimes I just take one of my cats out there to hold and look around."

In Greenville, Jonny enjoys having room to focus but misses the familiarity of the people he comes home to. "I definitely grow to miss that, and then I'm ready for all of it by the time I eventually come home."

When asked if home is important, Jonny responds "absolutely." He finds strong identity connected to home. "I feel like it's where I belong when I'm home." He identifies belonging as a deep-rooted goodness and security. "I guess I could identify it with any place, but there's just something about Oviedo that I love. I don't know if I would have connected with another place as much, but how would I know?"

Sylvette Wittmer: Expanding Spirit

Sylvette Wittmer lives in a stucco house in Winter Park, Fla. where she raised her two children, both grown and living away now, leaving her an empty-nester. Sylvette, 62, especially treasures days when her kids come home. She has lived here since 1986, and for her, and many in the community, the Wittmer home is a place of physical and spiritual comfort.

It's also a place for spiritual expansion with an always open door- to students, her kids' friends, strangers even- all who find it in this home and in her presence a widening spiritual vista. The same living room in which people gather is where Sylvette sits each morning for prayer. Allowing guests to enter into that blessed space, she lets them find a moment of rest in their own day.

For decades she wakes up at five to pray. Sylvette enjoys watching creation reawaken. Sitting in her green, blue, and purple armchair, clothed in pajamas and her fiercely curly hair tied in a bun, she begins her day with a consecration to our Blessed Mother and mouthing a lengthy list of intentions- a list of names from relatives to friends to students. She seeks wisdom and truth in the Church's daily Scripture as the sun begins to break over the clouds, then pondering emailed reflections about the readings.

Copying a prayer from one of the reflections, she sends it to 12 people daily via text, myself being one of them, and posts it on Facebook. More recently, she began posting it in Spanish, as well, due to the request of a seventh-grade classmate from Puerto

Rico. “There’s a lot of people who that’s the only faith-based anything they’re going to see for the day.” Her consistency gives people a steady place to return to every day, as they subconsciously expect to see it. “People tell me how I’ve helped them grow so much in their faith and they don’t realize that I’m the one that’s being helped,” she says.

Sylvette receives a call from a young lady at 7 a.m. who has asked to pray with her every morning since January. They pray a novena, say a rosary, or read through an advent book, partaking in steadiness.

On the rare occasion Sylvette misses her morning prayer time her soul feels an orphan all day, away from its dwelling place and released into the arms of stress. “I don’t feel complete,” she says. She finds herself constantly invoking Jesus’ name, repeating the Our Father, Hail Mary, or “Jesus, I trust in you.”

It is from this relationship with Jesus that Sylvette finds reason to invite people into her home. Jesus shared meals and attended parties. She wants to steward conversations to include everyone. Sylvette’s diligence in seeking spiritual peace each morning makes her home personified for others, ready to embrace them on their journey.

A heart for hospitality

This is an experience thousands of community members have partaken in since the Wittmer family moved into Quail Run. The two-tone gray house on an acre backing up to Bear Gully Lake has seen dinner parties with dress up themes, Memorial Day barbeques, Christmas parties, New Year’s Eve countdowns, eight weddings, and surprise birthdays for anyone needing a place to host. The priest from our church invites his own

family from Ireland to the Wittmers' house for meals when they visit, knowing they will be welcomed with open arms.

To remain a joyful celebration instead of becoming a hectic frenzy, cleaning the house and arranging tables and chairs is a multi-day process. "I mainly see home as this community, where I'm wanting to share what I'm blessed with," Sylvette says. "Feeding people not only physically, but emotionally."

"The rule in our house is the first drink that I give you, that's my invitation for you to come, and then from that point on you feel like you're in your home and get your own drink," she says.

Easter is her favorite day, watching a circle of hundreds of friends and family members hold hands, encircling the St. Augustine-grassed backyard to pray before eating. Kids and adults alike peak for hidden eggs during prayer, preparing to find the largest of the 700 eggs. Following the egg hunt, her husband takes Seminar, their boat, out on the picturesque lake for tubing.

The Wittmers also host annual end-of-the-year parties for Sunday school students, with teens asking to transfer to Sylvette's class to partake in this comradery. She taught classes for 16 years, watching students grow in multiple cycles from age eight to 16, including myself. "Even though I'm done teaching, they know that my house is always open to them," she says. "I hope it feels more of a home than a house, a safe haven. It's a safe place, they enjoy coming here because they know that there's not going to be any judgement."

In preparation for gatherings, she cooks while listening to Christian music. "It's a way of me blessing the food so that when people get ready to eat it, they're not only

being nourished physically, but they're being nourished spiritually as well because the food has been prayed over.”

Owner of Cakes by Design for 21 years, Sylvette finds that “food always seems to bring people together.” Despite no longer calling her birthplace, Puerto Rico, home, she finds herself serving a combination of Puerto Rican and American food. Even in difficult memories, the human spirit still manages finding something to treasure.

“Home in Puerto Rico is very painful. There's a lot of pain, especially after my dad died. Home was a house, it wasn't what I consider home here.” Her dad died when she was 12, but Sylvette had felt the weight of her parents' struggling marriage since age seven. With age and healing, she has learned to celebrate the sacrifices her eldest sister made to care for her.

Her heart for hospitality is rooted in Puerto Rico. People always ended up at their house, especially her cousins. Her godmother's house was also another home for them.

At Sylvette's Florida gatherings, after sweet friends help clean up, she lays on her chair to unwind. “I start thinking of everything that transpired and different conversations I had with people. It just fills my heart because I know a lot of the people who left, even though they might be having personal problems, had just had a really nice time.”

Daily homecomings

When the couple built the house from the ground up 35 years ago, just one year into their marriage, they closed the entire left side off. “It was overwhelming at first,” Sylvette says of her new world, much grander than their prior one-bedroom condo. Closing off the hallway and extra bedrooms made it feel a little less intimidating.

Two years later, the left side of the house opened. Sylvette traced up and down the hallway feeling her pregnant stomach, the hallway that would one day be celebrated in an array of colorful frames covering the walls with memories.

Sylvette loves celebrating her kids like any mom. She always smiles when talking about Marissa, 32, and Anthony, 23, as well as her husband, Scott, affectionately referred to as her third child. “You see what I mean by my child,” she asks, as Scott paces the room during our conversation, whether obliviously on a phone call or to come chat.

She talks about how nothing bothers Scott and that he cannot sit still, constantly tinkering with his boat or guns. “He wakes up happy and he goes to sleep happy,” Sylvette says. “He loves helping other people, sometimes I think a little bit too much.” She finds great refuge in his presence. “It’s like a safe haven, having your partner next to you,” she says.

“Marissa is my quiet soul,” Sylvette says. Marissa is more reserved, with a heart of gold, and Scott’s patient personality. “Anthony is another very kind soul, but he has my Puerto Rican temper,” Sylvette says laughing. She once worried about the age difference between her children but is now overwhelmed by the love they have for one another. “Just thinking of them fills my heart.”

Walking into Marissa’s childhood bedroom, there are 11 sets of colorful handprints above the closet from her 13th birthday party. In the bathroom next door is where Sylvette styled Marissa’s hair for her quinceañera and prom. In the front room, the Train Room, Sylvette remembers Scott assembling the built-in train set prior to Anthony’s birth. Cousins later used the adjacent bunk beds as a stage for their plays, performing alongside their stuffed animals. The Mickey Room, the former nursery lined

with '80s Mickey Mouse wallpaper, is where Sylvette rocked her babies and dealt with Anthony's constant resistance to the crib.

When Sylvette's children were young, mornings were hectic with rushed hugs and kisses, but they always reconvened at dinner time. It was sometimes delayed from work or soccer practice or eaten in two shifts when necessary, but they were always together. "It lets everybody know that no matter what's going on in life that you're there for them."

Scott is the family's chef, making chicken piccata, clam linguini, or bourbon maple salmon on a good night, or a hamburger cooked to perfection for the more rushed evenings. The rest of the family scurries around the kitchen in preparation, awaiting the promised communal exhale. Their genuine love for another is evident in their gentle touching and tones of kindness.

Entering the dining room, she remembers Eucharist, bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Jesus, as Mass was once celebrated there, alongside Anointing of the Sick before her son's knee surgery. "All of the sudden, the entire room had a glow to it and there was a warmth," Sylvette says. "Not hot, but a warmth that just went throughout the room. At first I thought I was crazy."

Anthony asked hours later, "Mom, did you feel that?" "What?" she replied. "Did you see how the room glowed? And how hot it got?" Anthony asked. "I felt it, too," she said. "I felt that heaven and earth had come together."

Sylvette finds the new stage of life harder than Scott, because he is constantly on the go. "I like being home more often, so I find myself by myself here a lot."

When Sylvette was younger, she left the house when hard feelings surfaced or conflict arose. “I’d just drive, but now I don’t want to waste the gas,” she jokes. “I find there’s no sense going anywhere because the situation isn’t going to change.”

From learning to stay, she has become more at peace with the silence, seeking prayer and letting time heal. “I’ve become very comfortable with my home to where sometimes I don’t even want to leave. I don’t have a desire to have to be out of the home like a lot of people do.”

She speaks with sadness regarding the tension others experienced while stuck in their houses to quarantine. “I never felt that,” she says. “I think it’s because I was already used to being home. I have found comfort in these walls for quite a few years already.”

Yet that desire is often neglected, as she selflessly spends her days delivering meals to friends, driving her nephew to work, visiting hospital patients, distributing food with Catholic Charities, bringing food to local public schools, and sharing meals and conversations with former Sunday school students.

No matter who she is visiting or where she is travelling, she always looks forward to its inevitable end, her daily homecoming. “As soon as I walk through that door, I just feel a sense of peace,” she says. Guests feel the calming presence, too. Something about the combination of vanilla wafting from the kitchen, soft blankets inviting neighbors to the couch, and constant food being offered makes everyone feel as if they stumbled upon something they craved.

Sylvette’s favorite days are spent reading or baking, looking at the backyard’s reflection on the sliding glass door. Music is usually paused and the television is not powered on until late in the afternoon to watch a Hallmark movie.

“The silence really helps me put things into perspective,” she says. It is her discipline to sit in the silence and in-between moments that let her actively love and soak in home, not putting it off for a later date, now that their house is on the market. “I have my earthly home here. It may not be all good all the time, but I know that my home, my heavenly home, it’s going to be all good all the time.”

“For we know that if our earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens... Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.”

-2 Corinthians 5:1, 9

CHAPTER FIVE
NEW WALLS
Sara Costello: Creating Steadiness

When Sara Costello thinks of home, she is first brought back to her family's Winter Park, Fla. house. "It gives me a lot of peace to walk around my living space and everything is in its place," she says. Sara did not know that her definition of messy was different than other people's until she left for college.

Since moving to Atlanta, Ga. to attend Georgia Tech, Sara's idea of home has expanded to include a multitude of apartment buildings, grassy parks, and friends who were recently strangers. With this enlarged viewpoint, Sara finds herself striving to recreate aspects of her Winter Park, Fla. childhood home among these new places and people, always finding comfort from the first foundation.

Passing the neighborhood's gazebo, Sara finds herself running back to her light purple bedroom, a time capsule of what once was. "Going home within my four walls is always so good," she says. Sara loves the Florida house's fresh smell when entering. "I notice it once or twice a year, so I couldn't tell you what it smells like." Sara feels solitude from having her shoes off and laying on the carpet, which she swears is significantly squishier than most. "I'm not making this up, it has been documented by other people."

Sara's heart finds known terrain with her gray cat, George, at 4120 Waterview Loop, strolling the hallways while she sits on the kitchen counters, talk radio always playing in the background. She prefers the house's dark granite countertops to the lighter

ones in her various college apartments. Adjacent to the kitchen is the room with her favorite light brown cloth couch, where she fell asleep after every Friday *Shark Tank* and pizza night in high school. Sara says no one is ever loud and the family's comfort is shown in their meekness, contrary to many of her friends' families. "But we could do all of that in a different place," Sara admits. In 21 years, she knows it takes establishing for walls to be comfortable, but that the walls could be different.

"The thing I find funny about my house and that I never understood growing up is which one was the den and which was the living room, because we did more living in the den and not in the living room." The den's couch was positioned perfectly to stop by after entering the front door, dropping off all her baggage from the day, physically and metaphorically.

Like most adults, Sara has a specific collection of morning sounds that she associates with elementary and middle school. "It's just all the doors, clicks and clacks, with the radio in the background, and my mom yelling at us to get up," she says, combined with bathroom sinks running and her mom going in and out of the laundry room ironing. "It's an incredibly specific sound that I haven't heard for years. It all just combines at once."

Another daily occurrence was family dinner. "When I think of home I think of my kitchen table and my family having dinner at my kitchen table every night," Sara says. After everyone had a long day at work or school, the Costellos found it important to come together. "They weren't particularly the best conversations of my life or that anyone was particularly joyful. Even if everyone is mad or not happy, you still talk about what happened that day. That's where you share it. It's not even all emotional or

anything, it's just where you share, where people want to know you. And I like being loved by being known."

A staple of gathering at their wooden dinner table is everyone drinking milk, which Sara did not know was weird until later in life. "Describing our dinner table when we were younger is how often the milk would be spilled, and that would just ruin dinner," she says, including that even sometimes it was spilled by her dad. Since her younger brother, Patrick, always sat closest to the milk, Sara daily asked him to pour it.

"We're not big food people, so it wasn't really about the food ever," Sara says. Although, she admits her favorite entree is salmon, as her mom never cooks red meat. "It's those funny things that don't really matter much in the long run, but it's us and it'll always be us."

Sara's favorite dinners are the nights everyone is in a good mood and her parents laugh together. "My favorite thing in the whole world is when someone says something at dinner that everyone thinks is so funny and my mom laughs uncontrollably." She wants to remember little moments like that, just being together.

"The reason why I like being home is because home is where we're the calmest," Sara says. "It's about the familiarity of something, it's not about the thing itself."

Meaningful routines

The Costello's culture is summarized through Sara's reference of "B-spray," a joking threat used against poor academic performance. "The fact that B-spray is a joke but kind of not is a really good descriptor," she says. "My parents know what we can

achieve, so they know if we're not doing it." Regardless, the running joke is Sara's dad, Tom, always exclaiming how proud he is of her.

"My parents just made things really special or made us feel really loved growing up, in so many ways," Sara says. "I feel bad for people who don't find home in the people who raised them. It's really convenient."

Kathleen, Sara's mom, always decorates for birthdays after her children fall asleep the night before, so that they can wake up to the annual surprise. "It's funny how that's been passed on to me because now I do that for anybody I ever live with, even if I barely know them," Sara says. "I don't know if anyone else actually cares, but it makes me happy to do it for other people. It's an element of love in a living space. It doesn't have to be a particular living space for someone loving you through your four walls."

Beyond the celebration of parents, Sara has found an extended family through next-door neighbors, Wayne and Lorraine Smith. Their physical presence embodied the virtues of home. "They're basically my grandparents not-by-blood," Sara says. Without having grandparents around growing up, the Smiths made her feel deeply loved. "They're emotionally home because they love us like their own kids and they're always there for us." Summer mornings were spent doing yard work together, followed by Sara and her brother, Patrick, using their pool while Wayne grilled hotdogs. On a good day, Lorraine brought out Klondike bars.

A tradition the Costellos share with the Smiths is going to Columbia Restaurant in Celebration, Fla. for dinner on Christmas Eve, following Mass at St. Stephen Catholic Community. "The gifts don't matter as much, just the act of that day and togetherness. It's the only day of the year that we slow down together officially in our home."

Changing addresses

“Being drawn away from home makes the being drawn to home that much more special,” Sara says. “Home is not a challenge. Relationships are a challenge sometimes, but home is the ultimate comfort and I’m very big on challenging myself. That’s why I’m drawn away, because home is so comfortable.” Sara moved to Atlanta for college in 2017, skipping around high-rise apartment buildings for three years, and is now stationed in Greer, S.C. for an internship.

“I didn’t know that Florida was a weird state until I left it,” she says. “We’re really in a bubble down there.” Sara enjoys the comradery of being from Florida, joking about the constant rain, sensitivity to cold weather, and alligators in bizarre places. “I identify with Florida as a state with those stereotypes that are kind of fun to play into, but I do not feel tied to Central Florida at all.” She ties the childhood memories of growing up more to the people than to the place, also noting that neither of her parents are Florida-natives.

“Atlanta allowed me to learn a lot about myself- which I think translates to Atlanta allowed me to figure out how I felt about my original four walls home,” Sara says. “Atlanta showed me that your bedroom is not your home, but at the same time how much I enjoyed having it the way I wanted it.” Sara learned there is a process of moving and making a space your own, “making your four walls make you feel comfortable.” She likes “the combination of being able to try new things and make new homes while visiting and going back to old things.”

Moving into her South Carolina apartment two months ago, she remembers feeling stressed and uncomfortable first walking in. It was not her aesthetic. “Once I

establish that in a place, of how I like it, and I'm used to it, it is like being home.”

Coming home daily is never a source of stress, but a daily comfort in how she has shaped the space. Sara truly values making her new living spaces resemble her original house, making it clean, tidy, calm, and loving.

“I enjoy being able to make new places my physical homes,” she says. “I don't know what I would do without being able to look forward to going back to my original physical home, but one day in the relative near future that will happen. But that doesn't actually scare me as much as I thought it would because my emotional home in people, and their hearts and souls, will join me in other places. And that's what you do.”

Until college, the only move Sara had ever experienced was the day she was born, from the hospital to their Winter Park house. She was fascinated with moving, glamorizing the fun of packing, labeling, and organizing boxes. So becoming an adult, she did it again and again, now realizing she hates moving. It hinders the ability to be deep-rooted and grow with a place. Sara finds herself becoming less materialistic, throwing more things away each time. “We circle back around to the idea of people in that, because the objects don't matter.” She is giddy with excitement thinking about the day of having a new permanent home with new permanent home people, but she is growing through lots of homes in the waiting.

She has found her most lasting home to be at the Georgia Tech Catholic Center, a physical manifestation of her spiritual home. “I know my spiritual home needs to be in Jesus, His word, and the fact that He's everywhere, but I don't know if anybody ever fully gets there,” she says. Seeing that fullness of relationship on the horizon and pressing forward, Sara clings to the way the physical space opens her heart to spiritual belonging.

“I do rely a lot more on the physical homes and their worldly representation of Jesus. Sometimes I view that as a bad thing, but you take it where you can get it.”

“It’s the hours I’ve spent with the people in the Catholic Center and it’s the hours I’ve spent with Jesus in it. It’s not the walls, but it’ll get me every time.” Sara says her prayers there have not been deeply transformative or particularly enlightening, rather something used to sustain, becoming her lifeline.

Safety nets

Her other lifelong lifeline, Sara is immensely close to her mom. The two can talk for countless hours about literally anything. Sara has adapted much of her habits, tastes, and sense of humor from her mom, Kathleen, understanding each other deeply. Kathleen loves her daughter as close to Jesus’ magnitude of love as possible, demonstrating it in all of Sara’s favorite ways, she says. This includes talking for hours on the phone or overnighting a shipment of popcorn. “My mom is also selfless to a fault, which annoys me sometimes,” Sara says. “She loves people who don’t love her back- don’t love her back well. She still loves them well.”

Until Sara’s junior year of high school, her dad lived in California for work, only able to visit Florida some weekends. “I always wonder if I would be as close to my mom if I hadn’t grown up like that, and I think I would,” she says.

“Since my mother encompasses my definition of home, when my mom and I are mad at each other, home is hard,” Sara says. She also found home difficult at the end of high school, anticipating what was to come. Yet Sara has never left home during a time of tension. “Purely because I didn’t drive for most of the time that home got hard,” she

says. Instead, she shut her bedroom door to shut herself off. “It was never a leaving thing. Some people leave for college because home is hard, but I didn't. I left because home was so beautiful, and I just needed to grow outside of it because otherwise I never would.”

Moving to college, though, Sara laid on her twin bed in a beautifully decorated freshman dorm room on a Sunday afternoon to realize she has absolutely no one there. “Walls are nothing without the people and an area is nothing without the people,” Sara says, reinforcing the place's irrelevance. In these new walls, Sara found a new safety net on move-in day of college with her new friend group. “It was everything. I don't know what I'd do without the people. What do you do at that point?” Growing in relationship with strangers in a foreign area can build something beautiful so quickly. “As you learn about it and become familiar with it, it can feel like your home.”

The friend she grew closest to is Carolina Howell. Sara finds it funny that even the walls of Carolina's family's home in Marietta, Ga. have become a safe place for her. “Even without that, she's just there, and that's what matters.” Carolina's presence has become comfortable to Sara, as they have spent so much time hanging out, studying, napping on each other's floors, or talking on the phone. “That's home.”

“She's 50 percent exactly like me and 50 percent the exact opposite of me,” Sara says. “I think that's why we click so well.” Emotionally, they are the same and comprehend one another. Yet they are stretched through their largely different personalities, contrasting Sara's order to Carolina's frenzied style. “Part of me does crave spontaneity from other people because I didn't have that very much growing up and I'm not good at that. So I enjoy when other people are like that, but that'll never be my base. I still need my foundation of home and calm.”

The other friend to pull Sara into chaos is myself, and she refers to me in the group as someone who has always been there. “We know how to love each other instinctually,” she says. Sara and I grew up going to the same church, St. Stephen’s, but did not meet until going to Catholic Heart Workcamp together in high school. She is one of the first examples I have known of authentic friendship, willing to have honest conversations, being intentional in loving from afar, and remembering all the details so I do not have to remind her of backstories. Now having been long-distance friends far longer than neighboring friends, the foundation remains solid.

We now sit together for an interview in South Carolina, a state that neither of us call a physical home, yet it feels entirely like we are at Oviedo on the Park in Florida-like the most natural thing in the world. “When I think of home I think of conversations I’ve had with people in locations that don’t really matter,” Sara says. This includes talking in the car in Target parking lots or inviting each other grocery shopping at Publix. Sara says she finds comfort in people when they can do anything together and have fun.

“Home can be going places with them, as long as I’m with certain people,” she says of her rocks. “That’s what is important for me, is people who are always there. We leave because we’re blessed and we can. We can make visiting work and we have FaceTime, but when it comes down to it, there’s nothing more important.”

“I don’t think I really cared that much about my home before I left it,” Sara says. “I mean I did but coming back to it is such a beautiful feeling that you don’t know until you leave.”

Meredith Brown: Navigating Home

“I think the physical home can allow us to feel the spiritual home more,”

Meredith Brown says. Certain places remind her of an eternal embrace like St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Marshall, Ill. or St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Oxford, Miss. “Something about those really special physical places reminds me of my spiritual home, but my home is also everywhere else as long as I’m at home with the Father.”

Meredith, 20, describes the desire of home as a longing to be fully seen and known. Even in spectacular friendships and the strength of family, she finds there is never enough time to hang out or know each other as deeply as desired. “With the Father, being home with Him, He already knows us, more than we know ourselves. Nothing could ever limit Him from that. That is what home means to me, is being so known, seen, and accepted by Him. You then feel safe to be your truest, most authentic self.”

Since beauty is universal, and beauty shows the heart of God, Meredith says she can find home anywhere and actively pursues adventures, little and big. “God’s creation and God’s beauty look different everywhere you go, but it’s still all beautiful,” she says.

In exploring, she seeks a way to not let the feeling of home sway, finding comfort and acceptance within herself. She wants to constantly embrace people from the identity of known and loved, rather than waiting for them to provide the affirmation.

Always welcome

Growing up, however, Meredith knew one place to be home. The Brown residence is on Marshall, Ill.'s outskirts, with one immediate neighbor but the other being one mile away. The white paneled two-story house has a basement and dark green roof. A tall green hedge hides away the cement porch with ivy wrapping around the front. "I don't want the place to affect whether I feel at home or not, but I think it still does."

Her father's office is her favorite room. Paperwork scattered across his desk, she finds refuge in the brown leather recliner in the corner. A chest sits between the chair and his desk, decorated with pictures of family and grandparents. Enhanced with plants, a window stretches across the west wall and "the sunset always bleeds into the room." Meredith finds it the perfect place to pray, read, and reflect.

Now in college, Meredith accepts that she and her hometown friends are not running the same race. "I really just want to be at home with my family more than anything," she says. "Every year I'm away from home, they become more and more of my favorite people." This shifted priority means she spends more time within their shared structure.

The middle child between two boys, she describes her brothers, Reed and Nick, as being shy, men of few words. Meredith finds herself spoiled as the only girl, but also the glue that holds them all together. Quite outgoing, her parents always stayed for extended periods after Mass or dinners talking to friends. "They've always been very social and personable. I feel like I've gotten that from them."

From them, Meredith has also gained her love for adventure. She commends their commitment to taking the family to new places, whether it be San Francisco, Mexico,

Florida, a Billy Joel concert, or a Cardinals game every summer. “My parents also showed me so much of what I am for in my future marriage and future family,” Meredith says. With age she has grown to appreciate how they sacrifice in love, make family a priority, and maintain a strong marriage as the family’s foundation. Traits instilled by parents have not left her, as she credits them to why Mass is a priority in her life and why she continues to write thank you letters after special events.

“There is something special about knowing my mom and dad will never have another daughter,” she explains. Their mother-daughter bond is especially vibrant, as they have increasingly similar interests and personalities. “She’ll always be my mom, but I see her even more as a friend.”

Meredith’s mom, Leslie, is now her go-to weekend phone call, as she recalls childhood memories of the boys watching sports on Saturday mornings while she snuck into her parents’ room in pajamas, snuggling in bed to read with her mom. Meredith also remembers sitting in her parents’ bathroom to get makeup done for school dances, smelling her mom’s sweet and rosy perfume.

“Home has shaped me in realizing that family is one of the most important things we could ever have and it should be a priority for me,” she says. Meredith sees much of the world’s brokenness as spurring from decreased strength of family units and the decline of family dinners. “It was always just routine that we all eat together but I’d taken that for granted.”

“I never think of my home as being anything special but talking about it now makes me feel empowered,” Meredith says. “Our homes are special.” It is the

togetherness that she finds to be most sacred, as each person is crucial to the dynamic.

“Every year it happens less and less that we’re all together.”

The beauty of home, however, is that Meredith knows she never needs to ask to come, as she is always welcome. “There’s an invitation to come back, but then to go back out. If we have felt love in our homes, then we’re called to go off and give that love to other people who haven’t. I can carry my small town with me wherever I go through hospitality and kindness.”

Wide open spaces

“I always call it my cornfields,” she says of Marshall. “It’s just a lot of farming land.” Tucked in east central Illinois, the town holds 3,500 neighbors. The Brown family cannot run into a stranger.

“Whenever tragedies strike in our hometown, the whole community will have that family’s back,” she says. “The outpouring of love in a hometown is amazing.” This commonality of neighbor is largely to credit for the way Meredith loves people. If she meets someone she does not know, she is sure to get to know them, notoriously late for stopping to talk to those she passes. A lifelong door holder, she knows how to encounter people in day-to-day routines.

With five fast-food options, everything is positioned off Highway 1. Growing up, Meredith found this one road boring. “But now it is refreshing to think there’s something new to anyone who hasn’t been there.”

When Meredith returns home from college, the first place she goes is the We Li Kit, a hot-pink ice cream stand 15 minutes away down country roads. Known for their

homemade ice cream and waffle cones, Meredith's go-to flavors are Mill Creek Mud and Purple Cow. She and friends gather at the plastic tables and chairs to watch the sunset over the open field. "We get eaten alive by bugs but it's always worth it," she says.

She would go to McDonalds after basketball games and Walmart for scavenger hunts. Fall nights after football games were spent on hay bales enjoying the smell of smoke from a bonfire. Part of Marshall High School band, Meredith has a fondness for the rhythm of their drum cadence that kicked off every game.

The same simplicity followed at the Brown house. Sports were a constant on the television, and reruns of *Family Feud* during quarantine. A lab or golden retriever always ran around the house, leaving plenty of hair on the carpet. Meredith's mom routinely prepared friendship bread, a cinnamon Amish bread that requires multiple days of preparation. Afternoons are spent lying in the grass on a towel or running around, feeling small in the vast openness.

"I'm so easy to please because of that," Meredith says. With no places to go, she is known for making her own fun. "It's taught me very humble beginnings. I always jokingly say that but it's true."

Some students view the move to attend the University of Mississippi as downsizing to a small town, but to Meredith, Oxford is a magical wonderland, stocked with everything she could ever need and more.

Exploring a new home

Meredith was first overwhelmed by Oxford. "Coming here was eye-opening but very beautiful to realize we all grew up in different places, but God brought us each here

for different reasons,” she says. “We all ended up in this velvet ditch, all from different places on the map and with different values, different family lives, different homes.”

To immerse herself, Meredith began building her own communities, and thus extensions of home, through RebelTHON, Catholic Campus Ministry, Campus Recreation, and leading her sisterhood well at Pi Beta Phi. “Those were big sparks in creating deeper relationships. Realizing that even though we are all so different, I saw that we all have so much in common.”

Most transformative, Bridget McMillan led our FOCUS Bible study at Turnberry B305. Sitting on the carpet near the door is where Meredith and I first hung out. She had never had such intimate friendships in high school, where she felt girls were running with each other towards that which is good. “Once you relate on faith you relate on so many other values and I can share the things that are so close to my heart.”

This girl gang has shaped her through witnessing their personal walks with Jesus, showing Meredith how suffering can lead closer to Jesus and that hard things can be a source of strength. She was also encouraged to begin attending daily Mass.

Having an apartment off-campus, she says, is what solidified Mississippi as a home, experiencing it beyond the college realm. Meredith found herself returning to Oxford after finals in May 2020, following being sent to Illinois in March to quarantine. “Oxford is always a place that when you leave, you’ll miss it, even more than you think you will,” Meredith says. “The people make Oxford what it is.”

Returning to a boarded-up and peopleless town at first felt like a house without furniture, but she fell in love with Mississippi in new ways. Taking daily walks with roommates at Lamar Park, laying out by The Hub pool, watercolor painting at Plein Air,

picnicking at Sardis Lake, watching sunsets at the airport every night, lapping the empty town square, and driving around looking for fireflies, she became in-tune with her inner-Mississippi Meredith. “All the little things seem so magical over that summer,” she says. One of her favorite memories was going to St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in New Albany for her first Mass in-person since Covid-19.

That summer she also visited friends in Jackson, hiked at Red Bluff, spent a weekend on the coast, and went to Starkville for a day. She remembers longing for her friends to return and for school to start in August, but now misses those special summer days. “I think with Covid, I’ve always thought that when we hit the next season, everything will be normal again. But I wish I had soaked it up even more in the moment. We realize as it continues to go on, that we’re never promised an instant switch to normalcy.”

When fall came, Meredith moved into her sorority house among 39 other sisters. She adores the nightly sleepovers, fun of sharing a bathroom, forming an exercising club, and conversing over meals. Together they hosted an in-house derby party and scheduled regular girls’ nights out to explore restaurants in town. Her other favorite part is the Christmas lights that line the top wall of her shared bedroom. “They just make life so magical,” she says, looking forward to plugging them in each morning.

Her constant home in college has been at Turnberry Condominiums in apartment B305, as she has been adopted as my fourth roommate. Doing everyday things together “we can always make it a party no matter what.” She says she feels seen and known sitting on the couch to be asked hard questions, laugh a lot, or complete homework.

“Turnberry is so cool because it’s been something different each year, yet it’s been so constant. It really is my home away from home. My roommates know that if I’m not there, I’m at Turnberry.” In three years we have had Bible study, danced, watched movies, played tennis, pierced ears, performed karaoke, hosted Christmas parties, and created a gratitude wall.

“One thing I always think about Turnberry is celebration. We’re always celebrating something even if nothing’s going on. There’s always something to celebrate. I think that says so much about home and the Father’s heart. One of His qualities is celebrating and He’s always going to celebrate us coming back to him. He’s celebrating and rejoicing. Turnberry reflects that so much. I always feel like I’ve been missed at Turnberry. I feel so valued in that way.”

Being home for others

Meredith makes others feel valued in that same way. She loves through big hugs, planning parties, giving compliments, writing notes, having coffee dates, and just making time for people. If she had a talent, it would be reciting people’s birthdays. She is always looking to satisfy the needs of others, to give them home if even for a fleeting moment. “I want people to know of the love Jesus has for them and the love beyond the love I can give them. In order to show that I just have to show them through me.”

“Everybody is somebody’s everything,” she says to herself constantly. In the few instances Meredith forgets the value of a stranger, she remembers they have a family, someone waiting for them to come home. “Passing by strangers on campus, it is easy to consider them another face in the crowd. “But we all run back to our families and our

parents hug us and have missed us so much. We mean everything to our families and I just think home reminds me that we all mean everything to someone.”

“However we go out into the world and treat the world and the people around us all stems from what our family dynamic was like,” Meredith says. “How our family loves determines how we will know to love out in the big world beyond our home. I just want people to feel loved and seen in the quick encounter we have.”

Meredith finds it important to open her mind and heart to love people from different places. In leaving home, she sees how each home has shaped her friends and built their worldviews. “Someone else’s home is just as valid as mine,” Meredith says.

With age and experience, she has seen home can be multiple places, and that it is not the place itself but more so who she is with. Some places and people bring about anxiousness, insecurity, and doubt. “If I were really home, I would not be feeling that way,” she adds.

“Wherever we are at home, we will truly thrive because wherever we are home is where we can be our truest selves. That’s where we’ll feel the most loved, supported, and cared for to go out and do what we were called to do. We all need home, no matter where it is. It’s where our longing is satisfied. If we don’t have a home, we’re always going to be running in circles.”

Yet, the desire to leave remains. Unlike her brothers, Meredith loved summer camp as a kid, making new friends in a new place. This translates to her present-day love for road trips. “I’m still more drawn to being away from home for some reason, but I know I need to be home to remember who I am, to humble me, and to remember where I came from.”

In growing up and traveling, “we just have to remember that no place on earth could ever be our ultimate home,” Meredith says. “That gives me a lot of comfort, that it’s okay if I don’t feel fully satisfied and fulfilled right now because I was never meant to be.”

Haley Youngblood: Togetherness

Haley Youngblood is one of those people who takes immense pride in decorating her bedroom, knowing where every little thing is and filling each corner with great intention. “My room represents me,” she says of the space scattered with vibrant plants, scented candles, books, decorative mugs, and paintings.

“Painting has been my longest hobby,” she says. Growing up, every Tuesday her family went out to eat with their grandparents. Always sitting down next to her grandfather, he drew her a picture on a square napkin, whether it be balloons or dogs or a portrait. “He drew a picture for me every single week, and then he would fold it up and put it in his pocket,” Haley says. “I guess that’s why I like drawing.”

Haley’s concept of home has been formed by the consistency of people and place throughout her life. Their beige one-story home, on the outskirts of Casselberry, Fla. has held the core of her life- her parents and three sisters- allowing them to live as a team. Over time, the consistency of place has become a sanctuary for the soul.

Haley grew up sharing a room with Madalyn, her one-year elder sister. The light purple room was covered with toys and stuffed animals, the gateways to pure memories.

After inevitable fights, they would depart from their bunk beds, Haley taking the room down the hall. “We decided we didn’t want to be friends anymore,” she says. “Then we’d get back together, be best friends again, and want to share a room because we were

like the best sisters ever. Then my dad so graciously rebuilt the bunk beds, back and forth.” It was a reliable cycle through fifth grade.

Haley is the second oldest of four sisters. Having sisters, she says, is as stereotypical as thought. The majority of their fights include: “You took my clothes; that’s mine; take it off.” Yet at 20 she is experiencing the rock-solid friendships that siblings offer.

With work and school schedules, it is difficult for the four of them to be in the same place at the same time, making it all the more special when they are, especially on vacations. “The other day I hung out with Madalyn just to hang out which is unheard of.”

With every family member but Haley being musically inclined, the tuba, piano, electric guitar, acoustic guitar, drumbox, or clarinet can be heard at any moment, accompanied by lots of singing and dancing. “There’s always a production of some sort,” she says. Each sister has their go-to Disney song and they especially treasure “You’ll Be in My Heart” from Tarzan. Haley’s favorite moments are sitting around the living room choreographing “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton or producing “Shallow” by Lady Gaga, their go-to quarantine jam.

For years, Haley has found herself walking down the hallway, door to door, to stare at each sister, comment on their rooms’ cleanliness, and ask about their days. “If I act unlike myself, I have three people to keep me in check very quickly,” she jokes. “They just keep me humble, which is good because you need people to keep you in check. Sometimes I don’t like it because I’m sensitive, but I need it.”

Haley, Olivia, Madalyn, Emma- these are the Youngblood sisters, and, unintentionally, an acronym for “H.O.M.E.” “We’re together, we’re home,” Haley says.

The bigger picture

"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand," Haley quotes Matthew 12:25. "There it is from Jesus himself, y'all. It will not stand." With six people roaming the halls, different opinions are inevitable, but Haley has been learning how to navigate difference with unity. She finds they always settle if people are given space and the freedom to stop being stubborn. "Yeah, home gets hard, but you've got to get over it," she says.

"Family is everything, family is everything. Friends come and go for sure. People really underestimate family because throughout life people say family is not cool, but honestly I have a really cool family."

"It's not about the actual physical house, it's the people who make it up," she says. Home is healing because it points towards the constant, that it all will be okay.

Haley finds steadiness in seeing her dad praying in the living room chair each morning, surrounded by a bookcase that reaches the ceiling. He retreats to that same place every afternoon, setting his books and backpacks down when arriving home to pause again.

The Youngbloods always ate dinner together when they were younger, but the nights became stretched with a rotation of Lake Howell High School band and sports practices, all at different fields at different times. "Yet when we all get home, we venture out into the kitchen and family room," Haley says. Her dad sits in the adjacent living room reading, her mom on the family room's couch paying bills or folding laundry, the girls scavenging the kitchen for snacks, and an unfinished puzzle sitting on the kitchen

table. “That is lucky about my house- that the kitchen, living room, and family room are all together,” Haley says.

“Something else I love about my home is it is very chaotic all the time.” She hates the silence of other homes, finding comfort in the commotion and constant influx of people.

Sticking with the same bookstores, coffee shops, and routines, Haley does not like change. “I guess the house’s consistency has shaped me in the way of how I do life.” Living in her present house since age three, her Casselberry address is her primary connection to home other than its people. The consistency of the concrete block walls and family keep her steady, then able to embrace those whose paths she crosses.

Haley’s favorite memory in the house was when she was finally awarded her own room, which she chose to paint lime green. “It was horrible and it was so ugly, but I literally loved it,” she says. The whole family gathered to paint it Sunday after church, grandma included, accidentally painting some of the popcorn ceiling.

“Home is where the heart is,” Haley says, referencing the Hallmark movies we watch. What is admirable about Haley is that, unlike the Hallmark leads, she did not have to leave her hometown to discover its beauty. She embraces and appreciates home for what it is. Content with what she has, she loves the people around her, not scheming for different surroundings or better circumstances.

Inspired by a legacy of educators

A deeper appreciation has grown with age, partially due to realizing the expenses of life. “I also realize how much my mom has put effort into establishing a home for us,”

she says. “I think that’s something that I took for granted when I was little, or I just didn’t realize how much work and effort you put into something to have something that people love to come home to.”

The outpouring of time and love create an atmosphere she does not wish to soon leave. She remembers when Madalyn moved out for a short time, and it always felt like a part was missing. One day, she will inevitably know a new normal, but now her desire is for togetherness. “What I want to remember most is just everyone being together,” Haley says. “That’s the most important thing about my house, is that we’re all together.”

Haley’s mom, Julie, is one of seven kids and each sibling has at least three kids. She knows if she calls any of her cousins they would help her immediately. Alan, her dad, is the loudest. “He likes to argue that it’s the girls, but it’s definitely him,” she says. Haley views her parents as a perfect fit. Alan is outgoing, spontaneous, and a visionary. Julie is a practical-thinker, executer, and planner. Being asked how each of her parents interact with her, she responds, “This is such a good question, because it is everything.”

Alan constantly checks on people, always telling them to call when they arrive at their destination. His lightheartedness lifts spirits instantly. “It’s really easy to be happy around him because he’s so silly,” Haley says. “Something funny that my dad does is every single day he just comes in my room and stares at me, for no reason.”

Daily adventures are headed by Julie, getting their quality time in. She loves her daughters by going shopping, chatting about everything, walking on trails, doing puzzles, and going to Disney World. Haley is daily in awe of her mom’s work ethic, as Julie played sports to get scholarships and was the first in her family to graduate college.

“I’ve always had that mindset that no one is going to do it for me,” Haley says. “So if I want to do something, I’m going to have to get it myself. A lot of people think they can depend on other people, but that’s really given me my own independence. Life isn’t easy, yet if you work hard, you’re going to be able to get it.”

Both of her parents are educators. The Youngblood girls grew up watching their parents teach and love others, whether in school or ministry, leading to Haley’s desire to be an elementary school teacher. “I’ve seen how many lives they’ve impacted, and how many lives they continue to impact without exactly meaning to. I want to impact people the way they have.” Haley is regularly at restaurants with friends as strangers approach her to tell her how wonderful her parents are.

In 2001, Alan and Julie opened the non-denominational Faith Outreach Church in Central Florida. “The church family is all I’ve ever known,” Haley says. “A church home is important because it keeps you grounded and it keeps you accountable to people,” Haley says. Her church is close-knit, evident in their annual Fall Festival, weekly Sunday lunches, or in parishioners who watched Haley grow up, now knowing what car she drives, her boyfriend, and the right questions to ask about school.

Faith Outreach has always rented buildings, relocating cyclically. “Yet the same people follow us wherever we go,” Haley says. “No matter what location we’re at, that’s our church family. The church was never meant to be a location, it was meant to exceed the four walls. Our church is living proof of that.”

As an extrovert, Haley is constantly drawn to people, making her home beyond walls. “I like to go have fun, not really think about things, and just enjoy life. I really, really like to have fun. I’m just like my dad.”

Though Julie knows when Haley has been gone for too long, encouraging her to retreat and rest. “You need to be able to have fun but go home and decompress, collect your thoughts, and appreciate what's around you,” Haley says. “You have to get caught up mentally because physically you can keep going, but mentally you slow down before you physically do.”

The homecoming is one of Haley’s favorite things, always ready to embrace the routine of lighting a candle, lying in bed, and reading a book, or hanging out with her family in the living room. “If you’re gone too long, you miss something.”

“When I say family is everything and that’s all I can say about it, it’s because they’re the only people who can truly help me,” she says of the people who seek what is best for her and know her deeply. “I can’t imagine what it’s like for other people who don't have good home lives and don't have good examples. I have the highest respect and the highest regard for them because I don't know how they do it.”

Riley Brown: Coastal Town

When Riley Brown thinks of home, she is brought back to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. She thinks of going to the barrier islands by boat, then running her toes through the sand, listening to underwhelmingly small waves. She thinks of driving down Highway 90 with her sister, windows down and singing along to Jimmy Buffet. Growing up, she knew she wanted to stay, hoping to buy her parents' property.

Considering the vastness of the United States, and really the world, Riley recognizes how random the Mississippi coast is for a dream home. "Being from there instilled in me that I want to go back to the coast," she says. "It's this random, little spot and it's a hidden gem of the United States. Why would I want to live anywhere else? That is my home."

Riley's first concept of home was destroyed when Category 5 Hurricane Katrina hit Gautier, Miss in 2005. "I remember our old house remarkably well, especially for only being six-years-old," she says. Riley describes a staircase with four steps then a platform, followed by more steps leading into the house. Her bedroom had just been redone with pink swirls painted on the wall and a princess canopy crowning her bed.

With her mom, Rusty, and siblings, they evacuated to Jackson, Miss. Meanwhile, Riley's dad, OW, stayed behind at his parents' house. Waters rose past the second-floor cabinets, all while they were camped out on the third floor.

The Brown's house was reduced to its foundation. Scattered cinder blocks were all that remained. Her dad's truck was long gone, but it was a miracle that their boats stayed tied to firmly rooted trees.

Rusty drove her kids back to Gautier, one week after the storm passed. When her husband called to announce that there was nothing left, Rusty could not hold back tears. She remembers her oldest son, Wil, exclaiming: "I can't wait to see Blue Bear," a stuffed animal he left behind that was now somewhere in the Gulf. Six-months-pregnant, Rusty did not have the heart to tell him before turning onto Seacrest Drive. Massive confusion ensued the car once they set eyes on their concrete slab and wood beams. "We got out and walked around the property," Riley says. "I found little pieces of the wall that was in my room with the pink swirls scattered throughout the yard." Their dog, Ollie, had also been buried under an uprooted willow tree three years earlier, now with bones lying around.

Regardless of the devastation, Riley remembers the months following as a fun family vacation. "The FEMA trailer was so much fun because we had bunk beds and we had never had bunk beds," she says. Following the trailer, the Browns lived with their grandparents. Losing her house at such a young age, Riley finds Katrina immensely formative to her appreciation of both place and people. "I always think about how my family went through all that together. That has to have shaped our family in so many different ways." Home was their foundation; ironically, only the foundation was left.

Today at age 21, Riley is in awe of how her parents made Hurricane Katrina a bittersweet time, masking their heartbreak so well. They did not lose a home just because they lost their house. "I remember very little sadness associated with that, which is

awesome,” she says, reflecting the childlike wonder of receiving an even newer bedroom with all new toys.

While fumbling with plans for the future, the vacation house next to the Brown’s property was put on the market. Due to increased elevation, the house had far less damage in the upper floors. Riley’s parents bought the house immediately, extending their own property. The Browns moved in on December 4, 2005 and Riley’s youngest sister, Faith, was born three days later. In hindsight, Riley sees the goodness of God in the timing of moving and the new house hitting the market. The sellers even left it stocked, dishes and towels included.

Moving next door

The vibrant blue three-story home with white trim still lies at the end of Seacrest Drive, next to the slab of their original house. The circular driveway is ideal for riding bikes and scooters down. With a large oak tree out front, Riley finds the house looks bigger on the outside than it really is. The yard seems smaller with each passing year. “I remember thinking it was so much space for me to run around and be,” she says. There is a white staircase up the front, yet the Browns only use the side staircase. “It confuses so many people that we go in through the kitchen.”

The sunset reflecting on the Graveline Bayou is Riley’s favorite sight, viewed from the wraparound porch’s wooden swing. The bayou dumps out of Gautier into the Gulf of Mexico. From the second story, Riley also sees her dad’s shrimp boat and grill, as well as Horne Island on clear days.

In Gautier, Riley enjoyed the extreme diversity of her classmates. People from all sorts of backgrounds were friends. When thinking back to home, Riley thinks of being with her high school classmates in the cafeteria while eating chicken nuggets and carton milk. “It’s definitely a combination of the people and the place.”

“Home is what shapes you growing up,” she explains. Even if home was not stable or moved around geographically, memories are still associated with home. “The memories are really what’s home.”

She associates those memories with sitting on the beach, walking downtown Ocean Springs, or getting Ben & Jerry’s from the Hard Rock Casino. Another place of familiarity is a coffee shop called Delo’s. “It’s all warm colors,” she says of the browns and oranges, with an upstairs area housing couches. “The coffee isn’t very good, but it’s a local business, so we’re here for it.” Riley also runs back to Edd's Drive-In, ordering a chili cheeseburger with a hot fudge malt. For family nostalgia they visit Anderson’s Bakery, where her dad went as a kid.

“Gathering around food is all we do,” Riley says. As her former college roommate, I adore the Brown family’s warm embrace displayed through a full plate of southern cooking. “Every time a guest is invited to our house, there has to be a big meal.” The most reoccurring menu items are shrimp or crawfish boils, shrimp and grits, and shrimp hibachi on their new blackstone grill.

“That’s always my family’s way of sitting and spending time with each other.” With increased involvements and hectic schedules, family dinners became less common. “As we’ve gotten older, we’ve kind of made our way away from the table,” Riley says, wishing to one day return.

Family time

Currently attending the University of Mississippi, she misses the ordinary, daily interactions of family. It is funny that despite acting as the mediator among typical sibling arguments and teenage angst, she still values time home above time anywhere else. She always longs for the return but finds it interesting that upon the return she is ready for another adventure of independence and self-growth.

What she wants to remember most is “the feeling of being super-duper happy.” She recalls specific instances over summer when everyone was in the house together and in a good mood, just having returned from boating to the islands. On those days, the sun is shining and they pick-up crab po’ boys from Killer Crab & Seafood.

Having all six family members present is what creates joy. “Wil still likes to have fun with all of us, so he is always trying to pick on us,” she says of her older brother. Riley knows that her sister, Anna Grace, is the funniest and that the youngest, Faith, is an ally. “She has always been the person that everyone goes to when they’re mad at someone else. She makes you feel like you have a friend in your fight.”

Of course denied by Rusty and OW, Riley’s siblings recognize her as their parents’ favorite. “My mom is southern momma to the max,” Riley says, specifically of her cooking skills and kind heart. “When I say she would give everything she has to us, she already has done that.” As for her dad, OW, he comes off stern, but Riley knows how deeply goofy he is- “not goofy in the stereotypical dad way but in a whole different way.” He offers random but funny comments and loves his children deeply. Riley’s favorite thing about the personalities intermingled is her family’s ability to laugh about tensions and banter. “It’s a quick turnaround all the time,” she says. During one evening hang, the

kids made their mom pee her pants from laughing so hard. “I don’t remember what we were doing, but it was just so stupid and she would not stop laughing.”

Their most treasured times are goofing off in the kitchen or living room. The living room has a chocolate brown L-shaped couch and recliner in the corner, set-up around the white-tiled fireplace with gray grout. The walls are currently transitioning colors, half of them painted light blue and the other half tan. There is no coffee table or rug, offering the most space possible to hang out. Riley used to play *Wii Sports* there every night, but now spends downtime making TikToks with her sisters.

Coastal living

Aside from the house, they all find home on boats, as OW builds them from scratch. Riley did not fully appreciate the freedom of the long, relaxing afternoons in salty air as a kid. “You have a portal to your childhood by going out on the boat,” she says. This is proven by OW’s newest boat, Flashback ‘82, as it is modeled after the same boat he and his friends took to the islands in 1982. The family is equipped with seven boats, a jet ski, and a kayak.

Riley’s favorite is their Grady-White fishing boat, spanning 28-feet with a center console. “Anytime we’re on the boat, it’s very slow. You have no sense of time.” This carefree life is evident on the Fourth of July, as the whole family embarks on two shrimp boats with a couple of cousins. They spend all day at the islands, playing and jet skiing. Rusty packs sandwiches on everything bread from Rouses Market, dressed in combinations of ham, turkey, mayo, mustard, and spicy mustard. “Everyone has what they like,” Riley says, including tons of chips, cookies, and Gatorades.

Later on Riley finds herself at their house's pier under a tin roof, the shrimp boat docked as she swings. "When I'm picturing it, I'm seeing my dad sitting on an ice chest filleting a fish," she says, imagining a fresh-caught spotted seatrout.

Now living in Oxford, Miss., little things are able to bring Riley back to her native scenery, whether it be the smell of beach candles, grease of fried foods, or noises of seagulls. "I could have sworn I heard a seagull the other day when it was snowing in Oxford. It brought me back, like I was on the beach."

Growing up, Riley had always felt Oxford to be a home-away-from-home, visiting for football games. "I've never had a point where I don't want to be here," she says. "I always miss Oxford when I'm not here." Within the place, she finds home with the girls with whom she has shared a roof- Emma, Bridget, Sofia, and me.

The only thing Riley finds more important than home is her relationship with Christ. "It definitely gives you a foundation, just like your childhood home gives you a foundation for life," she says. "A spiritual home gives you a place to come back to and it comes with you wherever you go."

Kendall Branton: Relentless Joy

Kendall Branton grew up in a big teal blue house in Folly Beach, S.C., where a staircase led visitors to the southern porch adorned with rocking chairs. The red door had a B for Branton, behind it lying eight additional steps leading into the foyer. “When I think of home, the first thing that comes to mind is my childhood home, which is still my home I guess,” Kendall says. “You know the smell that you can’t explain because it’s what your home smells like? That’s the smell I think of. And so many memories come to mind of my parents and my brother.”

Entering the residence, her parents’ master bedroom is to the left and their kitchen to the right, an island sitting in the center. Kendall, 21, remembers her parents hosting get-togethers there, as well as riding through the room on tricycles with her younger brother, Garrett. They rode through the kitchen and living room, and Kendall laughs remembering when Garrett rode down the stairs.

“Something that is so beautiful about my home is the tall ceilings,” Kendall says. “It’s just so magical.” With a loft upstairs, the ceiling is painted sky blue with clouds. “It’s just so magical.” Always laying on the floor and looking up, Kendall treasures the hallway’s hardwood, upstairs’ carpet, and kitchen’s tile. The living room houses a woven carpet, Kendall’s knees always imprinted after kneeling on it.

The Brantons built the house when Kendall was 2-years-old, just a five-minute walk from the beach, which Kendall travelled to by red wagon. “Even though the wagon

was so full, my dad would still manage to find us a seat so we could sit in the wagon.”

After her dad, Chris, got them to shore, the family stayed the whole day, eating their packed sandwiches and snacks. “I feel Jesus so much at the beach,” through the warmth, sound of waves, and peaceful wind.

Another sanctuary was Kendall’s lavender bedroom, decked out with a queen bed, lime green lantern, and a pink princess canopy. In the corner is the yellow cloth rocking chair she was rocked in as a child, later used for bedtime stories, with fluffy blankets sitting nearby. “I was so spoiled and had my own bathroom and my own walk-in closet,” she says, with outdoor balconies on both sides of the bedroom. It was in this bedroom she had solo dance parties with her silver and blue boombox. “I would jump up and down and dance it out.”

One of Kendall’s favorite parts of home is the annual ordeal of decorating for Christmas, blasting music while getting boxes out of the attic. “It was a team effort of my dad going up there and passing boxes down,” she says. “You know how when you’re little, you think that things are bigger because you’re little? It felt like so many boxes, but I don’t know how many it really was.” The family spent days unboxing and putting the regular decor away, to be replaced by yards and yards of garland. Chris put lights on the house’s exterior and the family went together to choose a Christmas tree, becoming the focal point of the living room. “I just loved days like those.”

“Those memories make me appreciate family so much, especially growing up and feeling like your world was so broken, even when you were little,” Kendall says, remembering her parents walking through many valleys and arguments. “As a little girl, I

always felt like there was so much chaos and so much upsettedness. Being able to reflect on those memories, I realize that there's so much joy in those times."

When things are different

Now returning home from the University of South Carolina, Kendall is greeted by a quieter residence, as only her dad currently lives there. "It's just hard. It's so hard when things are different." She spent quarantine in Folly Beach with her dad, feeling once more like a little girl, only without her mom and brother. "The year has been a year of mourning my childhood, being sad that I didn't embrace the chaos or just be thankful."

Starting in high school there were seasons that the family was not living in the same house. Kendall remembers thinking, "Why can't we get it together?" or "Why can't it be normal?" She now wishes she would have enjoyed any nights spent under the same roof, now asking the Lord for a heart that savors the moments, "moments that feel hard, but are still sweet in some way." She is confident these moments are shaping her for growth, even if bearing fruit is in the distant future.

"It makes you think about what you wish could be and what you wish was," she adds. "We're all allowed to think about those things, it's okay. But when I go back home, I still love it. I don't sit and fester in anger or frustration because my parents are walking through a valley. I just hug my dad when I see him and I remember all the sweet memories to define my childhood, not the other moments."

Even when home is hard, Kendall knows it is important, still the place for her feet to land. Kendall finds herself growing in love and appreciation with age. "With growing in love, I've grown in recognizing that home is outside of the physical house and it's

what you do with it.” What she is doing with it is increasingly investing in family by prioritizing their relationships.

“As messy as 2020 felt, there was so much growth,” Kendall says. In love, quarantine made her come to terms with the state of her home and her people. She already finds herself treasuring time with her dad during quarantine. “I’m never going to get that back, and there’s something so hard about realizing that we’re never going to get that back.”

Slowing down, she more often embraces silence, sitting to reflect on the moments. “Cherish them, they’re treasures. No, they’re not the answer to everything, but they’re like little hugs from the Lord, little memories that you get to cherish in your time here on earth.” Kendall knows home is not meant to be held onto, but a gift acting as a portal to the Giver.

Mourning her childhood she defines as contemplating life, being thankful for what transpired while dreaming about the childhood she wants to give her kids. “It’s hard to mourn your childhood and it feels unfair. People don’t prepare you for that. It looks different for everyone, but I have been mourning it for a long time and didn’t realize.” High school years were spent in anger at what could have been. Now processing, “I’m missing what actually was and I wouldn’t want to change it.”

Run to the Father

“When home gets hard, I run to the Father and I run to Jesus, my Savior, my hiding place, my safe place.” For some reason, Kendall as a little girl so easily entered

into prayer when tensions arose, finding Jesus to be her best friend who told her not to be afraid or worry.

As early as elementary school, she began leaving her boombox playing *His Radio* 100.5 FM, a Christian radio station, all day while she was at school. “I couldn’t leave the house and not know that the room that I live in and sleep in is being filled with truth and comfort.” This ritual carried on until the boombox broke in high school.

To this day, Kendall fills her bedroom with nothing but truth. The pale-yellow paint is hardly visible as the walls are covered with Scripture and encouragement. “I don’t like empty space, I want it to be filled with purpose and power, and that is found in Jesus. The enemy is around us and that’s not something to ignore.” When she writes words on paper and puts that truth tangibly on the wall, she says: “This is the truth that my life has been founded on and this is the truth I want to stand on when things get hard.” The index cards and sticky notes make the physical space a threshold to spiritual safety. Kendall references Ephesians 6:10-18, prayerfully putting on the armor of God.

Kendall knows her spiritual home to be the only one that is lasting. “He is what satisfies and He sustains,” she says, quoting Psalm 3:5. “The Lord sustains, not your childhood home, not my parents that are broken and did the best that they could and are doing the best that they can. You can’t expect the world to sustain you, we’re all in need of a savior.”

“We don’t have to think about our home wavering because our home with the Lord is for forever,” Kendall says. From that unshakable confidence comes her will to serve others. “There’s so much joy in thinking about yourself less and not thinking about how much you miss the home that was.” After giving herself time to sit in sadness or

nostalgia, she then stands up and runs towards truth. “Then you dance in every day, dance in the sun, talk to the stranger next to you, and buy the Starbucks drink for the car behind you. Just be intentional because we only have this little blip of time on earth where we get the chance to love people and be home for other people.”

Some people never had a true home or parents to call them their child. “So for me, I want to take those sweet memories of home that I have and share them and let those memories and my relationship with the Lord fuel the things that I do with my life. God is the reason that I want to love people, because He loved me first and I want to pay it forward.” Kendall dreams to one day have a home constantly open to people, so they never have to question if they can stop by or have a place to sleep.

The landing place

Kendall is hopeful that home will permanently return to her Charleston, S.C. stomping grounds. “The comfort of home is so tender, sweet, warm, and all things nostalgic. There’s something so sweet about running into people that you haven’t seen in years and being so excited to ask them what’s new or how they are.” She finds her community to be genuinely kind, full of daily reunions and waving at neighbors.

The wind through palmetto trees ignites the reminder to live carefree. The local Morris Island Lighthouse is her favorite place in the world, accompanied by memories of her roller skating while her brother skateboards around the island. Similar memories include Saturdays at her aunt’s barstool shop and running into Mr. Eddie every time she goes to Starbucks. “There’s something about home that’s so special.”

Looking back, Kendall wishes someone would have said to her, “Take a moment and look around, because this is a moment that you’re going to want to cherish forever. Sit in it a little longer.”

“Charleston as a whole is beautiful,” she says. “There’s lots of diversity, which is beautiful,” she says of all the cities that merge together. There is something about driving down Interstate 26, crossing through downtown and over the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge that makes Kendall feel lightweight. “Everyone from Charleston will tell you that they get chills. That is how you know that you’re home.” There is something remarkable about a child who just wants to go home.

Regardless, Kendall knows the physical place of home can be anywhere. “It becomes a home when there’s memories and pictures there and people know the place that you’re talking about. Even going a step beyond that, home is also where the tears were and the place that you landed when things felt whack.”

When Kendall was in fifth grade, her parents entered a phase of renting out their house, sending them into a cycle of moving. “I knew the place didn’t matter but to me, it just felt like if we could get back to the Folly Beach house, if we could be back at where it all started, it would all be okay again. The bottom line is, that wasn’t true, because that’s not the answer. The place isn’t the answer, it’s the people and the relationships, and it’s what you’re going to do with those people that are home to you.”

Forever friends

With the Branton family, “what you see is what you get.” Kendall loves that everyone is completely themselves all the time. “We’re all so different, but we come together as one and we love each other,” she says.

Mary, Kendall’s mom, is a nurse, translating to how she cares for her children. “Be good, be kind, be gentle, but always be yourself,” Mary says constantly to her kids. Mary is also honest and fearless in speaking her mind. “I have so many memories just sitting on her bathroom’s cold tile floor while she’s getting ready for her and my dad to go on a date or do the next thing,” Kendall says. She loved her parents’ bathroom, including the enormous bathtub and shower.

Another dear childhood memory was running down the stairs on Saturday mornings to her parents’ room. “I just have that vision of tiptoeing and peeking to see if they’re awake, and they’re asleep, like two lumps in the bed, with their big headboard.”

She says Chris, her dad, is the smartest person she knows, working around the globe with data and technology for years. “He is strong and so smart,” Kendall says. “Whenever there’s a problem, he’s going to figure out how to fix it. He’s a problem solver, analyzer, and dreamer.” The constant mantra Chris repeats to Kendall is: “There’s three perspectives: yours, the other person’s, and the third party’s perspective.”

Garrett is two years younger than Kendall, yet she learns from him. “He’s not afraid to be himself, he loves people so big, and is the least judgmental person I know. He has challenged me to call out my internal judgements and recognize that people don’t deserve that.” Garrett loves video games and his online community. “He is the sweetest type of nerdiness, and he would say that himself,” Kendall says.

Their longest-standing tradition was Friday night pizza nights. Although Chris is a Pizza Hut fan, Kendall and Garrett always talked him into Papa John's. Together they would watch a movie on their CRT TV, Kendall sitting on the far left of the leather couch.

She has also spent ample time at her Aunt Lisa's house laying on green carpet. "She is home, too," Kendall says of her fierce and selfless aunt. "She is the literal definition of a girl boss and I will never be able to repay her for all she has done for me, and she would never want me to. She does for others before ever doing for herself."

"I love everyone," Kendall says of all the people she finds home in. She gets excited to see her third-grade classmate or a family from church when out shopping. "You get to pick up right where you left off." There is a massive web of families who have taken Kendall in as their own and propelled her in understanding that family is forever. "I don't want to name anyone because I don't want to forget anyone. My friends' parents love me so well and so intentionally." These people, accompanied by mentors, friends, aunts, uncles, and cousins, have embodied home in all corners of the U.S.

Emma Katherine Grech has been Kendall's best friend since middle school, and they are in awe of the growth from preteen awkwardness to high school adventures to the boldness required for college friendship. "It is now such a deep-rooted sisterhood in Jesus. We don't expect anything from each other but we're both excited to love each other where we're at." Knowing they will keep choosing each other, they are confident in their abilities to open up and ask hard questions. "People that really are your home and are your rock, they're going to be with you forever," Kendall says.

Together they love Dick Van Dyke, acai bowls, all things Disney, *Mamma Mia!*, and being home in Charleston. Emma Katherine has taught Kendall to love the royal family, tradition and liturgy, and bike rides. Inspired by Emma Katherine's analogy that "conflict is like an Oreo- when you squish it, the good stuff comes out," she has helped cultivate a boldness in Kendall.

Staying golden

For the past four years, Kendall has considered Columbia, S.C. to be home. "I just think of how much God has blessed me with people as my home," she says, attending the University of South Carolina. This is especially evident through her Young Life teammates and the middle schoolers she leads through WyldLife at Hand Middle School.

Every year she has found her roommates to be a place of security and safety. "It's where you're able to rest and be loved," Kendall says. Her freshman year roommate was like a sister to share life with every day. Sophomore year's apartment was celebrated through watching *Grey's Anatomy*, a chubby bunny meme, and screaming One Direction. "Those are going to be fun memories that we all get to tell our kids one day. It's so sad that it's gone, but those memories are going to stay golden forever in my heart." Kendall references a post written by Indy Blue, how we never realize the goodness of a season until it's over and that we will one day miss the smallest details of those days.

Currently a senior, she is trying her best to recognize the golden moments as they happen. For the past two years she has lived in a three-bedroom home on Burney Drive, sharing this space with Isabelle Headrick. "She is kind of a chance friendship that you didn't know you'd actually become best friends," Kendall says. "I can't explain what it

would be like to not live with Isabelle. I love her so much and she is like a sister to me. We've built this home." When Kendall's grandfather passed away this year, she was home with her roommates, Isabelle and Mary Cooper, when she found out. "They just held me in the middle of the hallway on the ground while I just cried. They didn't have to say anything. They were just there."

"You have to take a leap of faith, you have to trust God when you go to a new place," Kendall says. "You have to be bold in making new friends, and what is cool now is that we have homes all over the place." From this boldness, Kendall has spent the past two summers living and working at Camp Ch-Yo-Ca in Calhoun, La. After the initial fear of the unknown, she now finds total contentment walking down camp's long driveway.

Similar to Columbia, Camp Ch-Yo-Ca became home through the people. "Those friendships are forever friendships. If something's going on and I need prayer warriors, I know who I'm going to call. And if I have a hard question that I might be scared to ask, I'm not afraid to ask my camp family. I believe that when you are rooted deeper on a spiritual level, like we're brothers and sisters in the eyes of God, that just gives home this whole new meaning."

Kendall and I met through camp in 2019, bonding over pretzel M&M's, Disney, and Jesus, squealing with excitement during our first sleepover at Mrs. Chrys', also known as '2 mama,' house. "Your and I's friendship was just a kiss on the face from Jesus Himself," Kendall says. "That's the only way I know how to describe it." Her presence is the embodiment of being embraced by home. She does not let those she loves sit in the unknown but fosters conversation and vulnerability. She gives me the courage

to let myself be seen, loves me enough to acknowledge tensions within, and brings about total abandon and fun.

Camp strengthens Kendall's understanding of the eternal home. "When you talk about home, home feels closer than it is far," Kendall says. "So if you're ever alone and wondering the next time you'll be home, just talk about it and remember that home is not far."

CHAPTER SIX

Neighboring Houses

Longform journalism is a powerful medium to explore the concept of home. It allows the writer ample space to explore oral history, sensory detail, and extended narratives. What follows is a discussion of sources that inform my thesis, namely Rick Bragg, Susan Orlean, and Willie Morris. “Writing a book, just like building a library, is an act of sheer defiance. It is a declaration that you believe in the persistence of memory,” Orlean wrote (*The Library Book* 93). Each of these authors believe in the power of personal memory.

Bragg has been referenced because of his raw honesty regarding home and his experiences there. In writing novels, he does not shy away from the truth but shares stories without fear of judgement, knowing the lessons from both good and bad memories are useful and relatable to the audience. Orlean is of particular interest due to her ability to write about others in their own space of home. Her writing shows that she understands the great diversity of home settings, with no one experience of home being more dignified than another. I have looked to Mississippi-native Morris for an understanding of Mississippi, the place I have grown to call home. He, too, experienced the great longings for travel, adventure, and accomplishment, yet came back to the solid place of his childhood. In a life of chaos and distraction, this thesis is my attempt to return to the solid place. Together, these authors illustrate how home shapes us all.

The first sentence of Orlean's bio affirms that home has influenced her, saying she is "the product of a happy and relatively uneventful childhood" (*About Me*). She went on to describe herself by hobbies and geographic locations, categorized by the people she shares these happenings with. These people are the gateway to her soul, accompanying her in discovering desires. Like Orlean, Morris also acknowledged nine individuals who are constantly repeated throughout his work, for the transformative and foundational nature of the relationships, writing that they "helped bind (his) life together" (*Terrains of the Heart* xi). Within these pages are stories of the 14 individuals who have helped bind my life together. As interviews unfolded for my thesis, self-identity always spurred from relationships, whether it meant being a daughter, brother, or friend. Both the authors studied and my interviewees find people irreplaceable from the basis of home. "To gather like this, people said, was how you heal," Bragg wrote ("There Is Nothing More Un-Southern Than Social Distance").

Bragg expands upon this people-centered mindset, specifically through his focus on childhood relationships, hinting that these are more formative than others. After decades of adulthood and success as an author, one would assume Bragg's most treasured memories are from the life he has built for himself. Yet he continues to write of his earliest friendships, as in his *Southern Living* article, "Rick Bragg Remembers the Christmas Eve With His Late Uncle Ed." Bragg spends the most wonderful time of the year reflecting on the Christmas of 1969 as the unbeatable best. With age, success, and shiny experiences, he now recognizes the simplicity of family time as more important than the career he worked toward. Stories of home and the people there are the stories we return to for our whole lives, despite countless unfoldings since then. This came up in

Sidney Walters and Jonny Lawrence's relentless preference for their childhood neighborhood and Kathy Owen treasuring mornings with her grandmother over stories of climbing the corporate ladder. These are the good moments and good stories, "the kind you would like to press between the pages of a book, or hide in your sock drawer, so you could touch it again" (*All Over but the Shoutin'* 292).

Writing about that which is most formative is difficult. "When a writer knows home in his heart, his heart must remain subtly apart from it," Morris advised (*Terrains of the Heart* 38). This was practiced during my interviews, as I avoided questions directly about the interviewee's relationship with myself. However, due to the nature of these stories and what emerged during interviews, it felt essential to let myself stand in the background of the written stories. Orlean is a trailblazer in this regard, reporting in a way that lets the reader know her relationship with the subject. This is evidenced by her *The New Yorker* piece, "Thinking in the Rain," beginning the essay with the lens through which she relates to the subject, her neighbor. Inserting oneself into their writing is considered a risky move, but Orlean's lack of hesitation to do so by being present in the third sentence is affirming to the reader. This keeps her from startling readers if she were to sneak in later or leaving them confused as to where her authority on the subject comes from. Inserting myself in stories, like to describe the dynamic with my brothers, Brandon and Austin Harkins, gives the audience the most authentic image I can create. It also provides insight regarding an author's personal limitations to understand the interviewee.

When creating stories so core to our beings, it is overwhelming with much context and content to sift through. It is tempting to overshare due to the journalist's personal attachment. Morris wrote longform pieces about people and ideas extremely dear to him,

finding that “when one writes, there is danger of too much” (*Terrains of the Heart* xii). For this reason, I was encouraged to keep in mind the goal, a concept map of home to relate all content back to for this thesis. These concepts include: innate desires, authenticity, rest, and healing. Desires most commonly emerged as the need to be fully known and fully loved, then feeling safe and comfortable to be one’s authentic self, to rest, and to heal.

These concepts are illustrated by trivial, daily stories. Morris believes they are a larger window to the human experience and state of affairs.

I believe that what happens in a small Mississippi town with less of a population than three or four apartment complexes on the West Side of Manhattan Island will be of enduring importance to America. It is people trying: loving, hating, enduring cruelties and perpetrating them, all caught, bedeviled, and dramatized by our brighter and darker impulses... We love it and we hate it, and we cannot turn our backs upon it (*Terrains of the Heart* 75).

These seemingly insignificant interactions are critical to the state of our nation.

Confessing all at once our love, hate, and loyalty towards our homes provides an invitation to understand how influential it is to society as a whole.

Bragg, Orlean, Morris, and I utilize writing as a way to survey home in a thorough way. I saw attention to detail most concretely in Bragg’s documentation of home during quarantine, written by request of *The Los Angeles Times*. In his reflection, titled “Mom, 13 Cats, Bogart, a Restless Dog and No WiFi: Rick Bragg Self-Isolates in Alabama,” he includes the television shows he watched, songs his mother sang, and the actions of their pets, all things that would have been insignificant prior to 2020. The books we read and movies we rewatch are sacred, inseparable from our hearts related to home. Conveying the deep meaning of little things to a reader is difficult, but Bragg reminds that these

details matter to the truth. For this reason, countless songs, books, movies, and video games are listed in my longform stories, as they are features of home that bring unparalleled comfort to the subject. Orlean endorses this idea through her approach to *Saturday Night* and *The Orchid Thief*, vividly describing seemingly ordinary restaurants, the tempo of songs, and flowers, all because they are vital details to each interviewee's memories.

“Our history seemed comparatively insignificant and all too easy to deny,” Morris wrote (*Terrains of the Heart* 81). Yet personal stories of great detail are ways to explore entire experiences and existences with profundity, conveyed through Bragg's non-fiction books, primarily written about his Alabama family. *Somebody Told Me* includes stories from his own childhood, examining how their commitment to overcoming adverse circumstances exemplifies the resilience of the human spirit. In *Ava's Man* Bragg had the chance to learn his grandfather's story, whom he had never met. From this investigation, Bragg was granted a more substantive understanding of his own home. Similarly, each interview I conducted reminded me that the individuals formative to me have also been formed by others. This endeavor allowed me to learn from those people I have never met, yet they have impacted me substantially.

Along with this theme of self-discovery, Morris also reflected upon his own childhood in *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town* and *My Dog Skip*. *My Dog Skip* offers recollections of his childhood that point towards the greater themes learned, including friendship, devotion, and courage. While the stories seem personal, they can flourish when shared with others.

It is something that no one else can entirely share, one that burns down and disappears when we die. But if you can take something from that internal collection and share it- with one person or with the larger world, on the page or in a story recited- it takes on a life of its own (Orlean, *The Library Book* 93).

As people of relationships, we are struck by pathos, as it allows the ability to see whole people and encounter them through their experiences. “Nostalgia is a strong thing,” Bragg said (Howorth).

In diving into personal stories, it is crucial to incorporate the complexity of events, relationships, and ultimately the dynamic of home. “There is something that matters in a state which elicits in its sons and daughters of both races, wherever they live, such emotions of fidelity and rage and passion,” Morris wrote (*Terrains of the Heart* 8). Bragg captures joy alongside sorrow well, specifically in *All Over but the Shoutin’* as he boldly published stories of his impoverished childhood among cotton mills, relationship with an angry father, and a heroic mother. “I would love to do it all over again,” he wrote (137). This notion is similar to that of PL Harkins and Kendall Branton. Bragg’s publisher, Penguin Random House, described his work as bringing “home the love and suffering that lie at the heart of every family.” In an interview with Square Books, Bragg said family is easy to write about because there is nothing of which he is “deeply ashamed” (Howorth). Regarding family members, he said that if he will hurt someone with the story, he omits it. However, he went on to say:

I think sometimes we think people are going to be upset about things that they’re not upset about. You can never underestimate how much people enjoy being a cornerstone, or just one of the bricks in the story, so they might be more forgiving than you think (Howorth).

In all honesty, sharing the suffering of home has not been fully explored in this thesis, as that could constitute a whole other endeavor. People are hesitant to share how home is

hard and, lacking the confidence of Bragg, I am hesitant to write it. I admire the boldness of Hollyn Saliga and Kendall Branton in sharing it.

Regardless, the simple idea of home and the feelings it generates for those I love are the focal points of my work. Orlean also goes down this rabbit hole of ideas about home, whether in libraries as noted in *The Library Book* or among animals as recorded in *Animalish*. In describing the reason for writing each book, Orlean points back to memories and desires, much as my interviewees did when asked about home, specifically Sara Costello and Haley Youngblood. These memories and desires are home to Orlean, and they provide both comfort and challenge in exploring them deeper. On her personal website Orlean describes the heart behind *My Kind of Place*, a collection of her experiences related to place:

I decided to gather the pieces I'd written in which "place" was the protagonist... These certainly aren't typical travel pieces — you will find no hotel or restaurant suggestions, that's for sure — but in each one, I felt the sense of where the story unfolded was almost as important as the story itself ("Books, Books and More Books").

The place of home is important, defining memories and individual identity. Therefore, the exploration of place, in addition to people and memories, is vital.

In analyzing these details, it becomes evident that leaving home is natural, denying the comfort and safety in search of adventure and fresh beauty. This action is seen in Meredith and Riley Brown. "You do not hate the time you waste; it evokes a much more passive emotion than that. You only wish you had it back, like a quarter in an unlucky slot machine," Bragg wrote (*All Over but the Shoutin'* 147). In coming face-to-face with the reality of mismanaged time and restless self-seeking, I have been most encouraged by Morris, who insistently professed the truth of internal resentment. "My

homecoming seems somehow to bring together the shattered fragments of all those old comings and goings,” he wrote (*Terrains of the Heart* 38). The leaving part of homecoming was discussed in the longform essays when relevant, especially with Sara Costello and Jonny Lawrence, but it has yet to be fully dissected as I am processing its complexity myself. The refusal to stay is hard to put into words, but we can use the positive stories as a way to navigate the inexpressible places of our hearts.

Each of the stated authors have published books compiling their stories illustrating the concept of home- Bragg’s *Where I Come From: Stories from the Deep South*; Orlean’s *My Kind of Place*; and Morris’ *Terrains of the Heart and Other Essays on Home*. These compilations show that stories of home are best viewed in correlation with another. This spurred the decision to write many longform pieces to be viewed alongside another for this thesis, rather than investigating the idea of home for just one individual.

Home is where the heart is- the spaces, memories, people, and ideas in which our hearts reside, as “societies are shaped by the land from which they emerge” (Morris, *Terrains of the Heart* 71). These authors step alongside me in creating an argument for home, its importance in our lives, the very core of us that we neglect daily, and an opportunity to explore it deeper. Other than being guided by these craftsmen, additional sources have been instrumental in accomplishing the task at hand. These sources follow, discussing reporting on home and family, as well as oral history and longform storytelling.

Reporting on Home and Family

Bragg, Orlean, and Morris represent the natural tendency to write about home, leaving it, and attempting to return to it, both as a physical and spiritual destination. “The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned,” Maya Angelou wrote. Dutch Catholic priest, writer, and theologian Henri Nouwen’s work evidences this ache, as his writings often tie back to the status of his spiritual home among his physical homes, most specifically in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, an in-depth reflection on the Gospel of Luke parable.

I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe. The son-come-home was all I was and all that I wanted to be. For so long I had been going from place to place: confronting, beseeching, admonishing, and consoling. Now I desired only to rest safely in a place where I could feel a sense of belonging, a place where I could feel at home (5).

Reporting on the desire for safety and comfort almost calls an emotional response from the reader, as they are invited back to their own roots. Recognizing the author’s willingness to be transparent and share, the audience is encouraged to be still and reflect upon their own experiences of discovering home, often in unexpected places. This outside encouragement to look deeper is often required for the reflection to happen, as the idea of home becomes monotonous, which makes it unlikely to see beauty at first-glance.

As published in “Building Research & Information,” leading construction and design journal, home is “idealized as a place of rest, family, continuity, control and security” (Ellsworth-Krebs, Hunter, & Reid). These feelings are triggered by memories,

emotions, color schemes, sounds, textures, tastes, and even lighting. For this reason, I join a long lineage of writers when including memories, architectural details, and foods in longform stories about home. Specifically, details from memories of the childhood home are most sacred and most formative, seen in memories of Sidney Walters and Brandon Harkins. Psychologist David Rubin found that “from middle age on, most people have more memories from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood than from the most recent years of their lives” (Yow 40). He credits this importance to the defining-nature of these impressionable years.

Through my interviews, home is a constant physical act and a relentless internal longing. One of the most physical manifestations of this is the family unit, and reporting on family is of significant importance when reporting on home. Genealogies are in existence for their proven benefit of understanding present-day dynamics. The popularity of exploring family histories surges during “times of change” or “periods of public concern about the function and future of the family as an institution” (O’Hare).

For those with stable childhoods, nothing could be more important than family, said by Jonny Lawrence and Haley Youngblood. According to an article in the journal, *Child Development*, founded in 1930, children studied with a “Close Family profile” experienced the lowest levels of symptoms of depression throughout childhood, yet they “exhibited the steepest increase over time” (Antonucci and Manalel). For those finding safety at home, it insinuates the refuge of a child being held by their mother, being pursued by their siblings, and being championed by their grandparents.

“The concept ‘coming home’ is filled with sentimentality in American society, and adages that capture these feelings abound: home is where the heart is; home is where

one belongs; homeward bound,” Tamar Kremer-Sadlik and Elinor Ochs wrote in *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America* (28). These warm feelings, however, are not guaranteed, as interviews show intentional behaviors are required to maintain this state of comfort. This can include greeting family members in the house, emphasized by Haley Youngblood, or having meals prepared in love, experienced by Beth Harkins. Later in life, there is also a learned safety in home stemming from the familiarity of the physical space itself, as Kathy Owen has learned living by herself.

Despite this affection, homecoming is subtly woven in the everyday, as routines create comings and goings, whether work meetings or social gatherings. Americans specifically are used to leaving home for at least six hours a day during the week, whereas members of other societies often return midday (Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs 30). This daily distance is something to be further explored in reporting about home. “Leaving home is, then, much more than an historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong,” Nouwen wrote (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 37). Additionally relevant to understanding one’s homecoming is the stress of the workday. Studies show that the more stressful the hours prior, the greater amount of irritability is displayed upon returning to the house, then inhibiting the freedom of joy in simple pleasures (Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs 197). Beyond stress, American workaholism, heightened divorce rates, and increased cases of abuse means that family time is less commonplace.

Even within seemingly steady house environments, it is extremely rare, if ever, that every member of a nuclear family gathers simultaneously in their house (Kremer-

Sadlik and Ochs 47). Each individual has their own agenda or a filled schedule, neglecting the relationships that are the core of their lives. Nigel Marsh observes:

The reality of the society that we're in is there are thousands and thousands of people out there leading lives of quiet, screaming desperation, where they work long, hard hours at jobs they hate to enable them to buy things they don't need to impress people they don't like.

While many profess family values to be of utmost importance, Marsh sees that time is dedicated to almost everything else. We spend our days building with clay and sticks, yet we often already have the solid place, where our feet do not slip (Chris Renzema). This concept came to life in conversations with Meredith Brown, Sidney Walters, and Riley Brown, as they each acknowledged the irony of talking about their love for home followed by recognizing that they constantly seek a new place with new adventure. In the new spaces, they grow fonder of what they once had.

With increased opportunities over time, the regulation of togetherness in a household often fades.

In recent decades in the United States the notion of family quality time gained popularity to make up in quality for what may be missed in quantity... This time is often viewed as unstressed and uninterrupted, a time when the whole family engages together in family activities, typically geared to children's interests (Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs 248).

With decreased quantity of family time, these stories of quality time are held dear to hearts, demonstrated through each of my interviewees' most treasured memories, whether it be Hollyn Saliga's trips to the Magic Kingdom or Sidney Walters' family dinners.

There is a traced decline in family dinners nationwide, accredited to overcrowded schedules and "convenience foods," allowing for individual snacking and avoidance of conflict regarding a child's food palette (Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs 56). It is notable that its importance and practice was mentioned in 79 percent of interviews conducted for this

thesis. As I have grown up with daily family dinner, it is interesting that those who love me best have practiced that same ritual. An additional saving grace for family disunity, based upon interviews with Haley Youngblood, Kathy Owen, and Brandon Harkins, is the centrality of a kitchen. In the kitchen is the majority of instances that both parents and at least one child are together in their house (Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs 56).

Writing about these things, no matter how trivial a kitchen seems or how irrelevant workaholicism appears, is essential to understanding a person's sense of belonging. It "preserves for future generations a sound portrait of who we are in the present and what we remember about the past" (Baylor University Institute for Oral History). Family is a sacred thing, even when family is hard, and many would choose the same people time and time again (James 13).

Family reporting presents the opportunity to point to something greater, giving life to distant concepts. As encouraged by the American Press Institute and the aim of this thesis, individual profiles can track issue and trend stories ("8 Paths to Defining a Storytelling Approach"). The goal is that individual profiles personify the concept of home, giving readers something to hold onto, something to find themselves within.

In recounting others' experiences, writers have a tendency to prove themselves unbiased. However, when writing about family members and friends, people one knows intimately, there is no way to rid one's soul of bias. The concept of home in and of itself insinuates bias, good or bad. Luckily, the American Press Institute affirms that "bias is embedded in the culture and language of the society on which the journalist reports" ("Understanding Bias"). The removal of bias would rid a story of all humanity. Therefore, it is not a thing to be removed, but an idea to be properly managed.

Oral History and Longform Storytelling

The nostalgia of home and bond of family ties are captured through oral histories. As published by *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, the gathering of oral material dates back to ancient Greek historians. Cicero considered Herodotus a liar for confidently sharing his radical stories. Herodotus was later named an “oral historian” who customized recollections, creating the form of “logoi,” a hybrid between logos and mythos. Herodotus believed his accounts “produced a true vision of the past.” Despite heavy criticism, oral histories later took root once more in Scotland (Evans). Oral histories have since been used to preserve an individual’s account of time from an openly subjective viewpoint.

The act of collecting oral histories is organic, as storytelling is one of the most natural functions of human beings. Tracing back to cave paintings which became parables which became books, this oldest profession binds humanity together in a way that transcends time, space, and culture. A societal necessity, storytelling is taught across campuses within anthropology, communication, sociology, writing, history, journalism, and literature departments (Call & Kramer preface). The crossroads of this discipline makes it a skillset practiced with children in schools, as they are sent home to interview grandparents and neighbors. It is considered “active learning” for students about different time periods or ways of life (Ritchie 2).

The University of North Carolina believes in the value of preserving stories, founding the Southern Oral History Program through the Center for the Study of the American South in 1973. Since then, they have conducted 6,000 interviews (“About SOHP”). Their publication “A Practical Guide to Oral History” is a comprehensive tool for learning the practicalities of gathering oral history. It includes conducting background research, writing field notes of what the interview location looked like, and evaluating the usefulness of follow-up interviews. The guide reminds journalists to ask open-ended questions, not interrupt the narrator, and properly audio record the conversation. From experience, it is also compelling to recognize that most interviewees only answer questions briefly, then drifting to loosely related topics. These thoughts are especially important, as these thoughts are the stories they most want to tell.

Oral histories provide an alternative to a wide and shallow information-based society. They encourage meaningful memory, conversing in depth spurred from intentional questions. Collected interviews capture a specific time in history with daily moments that would otherwise be forgotten due to the noise of social media and other news outlets. The daily routines that seem insignificant are crucial to who we are becoming; recording these things is a profound way to photograph time. “Oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change, from the simple things of life,” the Baylor University Institute for Oral History published. I see this most strongly through the oral histories conducted with my immediate family, as what happened at our dinner table each night has become of utmost importance to the trajectory of our lives. The International Oral History Association endorses the use of oral histories during times of social upheaval, and the dismantling of family life would constitute as that (Ritchie 1).

The very details of daily schedules and intricacies of family interactions matter a great deal to history. Other profile reports filled with jargon and showy facts fail to illustrate the subject's humanity (Keulen and Kroeze 19). As published by the Baylor University Institute for Oral History:

Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by augmenting the information provided by public records, statistical data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials. Eyewitnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record.

The telling of a person's story can transcend to ideals and implications much larger than themselves in the context of history. Oral histories "make up a rich record of life" ("About SOHP").

Oral histories are also useful to outline what the human heart treasures and values. While lives are spent in pursuit of larger salaries and bigger houses, the topics interviewees delight in discussing tend to be about relationships and fond memories in ordinary corners of the world. Oral histories show that after seeking bigger, better things we grow only to treasure the past, yet somehow never using that as a lesson to appreciate the present. "They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived," novelist Paul Coelho wrote. "They climb up the mountain to see the castle, and they wind up thinking that the past was better than what we have now."

We fail to appreciate the profound impact of daily family routines because we find our stories arbitrary. "The problem is that they don't even realize that they're walking a new road every day," Coelho wrote (10-11). Oral histories are a gateway to deeper thought about where one has been and where they are going, allowing Sidney

Walters to register that home really has changed through the years and helping Brandon Harkins see how his relationship with siblings has grown over time. These thoughts encourage the opening of eyes to witness the miracles tangled up in life. As journalists, “we work to capture priceless memories before they are lost, and we present these stories to the public in creative forms” (“About SOHP”). The focal point is not even whether the events are factually accurate, but whether the story is true to the narrator.

Sharing oral histories has also been found to have therapeutic value, reported by *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*. Oral histories are being conducted while working with the elderly in order to recement things that feel distant, strengthen their cognitive abilities, and enhance their quality of life. Ironically, “the less ‘therapeutic’ the goal, the more therapeutic the result will be” (Baum). The therapeutic effect is beneficial in “allowing older people to express what they have been thinking, and providing some validation because someone was willing to listen to and record their stories for posterity” (Ritchie 3). The International Oral History Association finds oral histories of the elderly to be of dual benefit, as they are said to be filled with candor and serenity, making for better interviews. “People tend to give more reflective interviews in old age rather than mid-career,” Ritchie wrote (3). Within my thesis this was seen most evidently through Kathy Owen in her keen attention to detail. Even adults her children’s age offer a similar reflective nature, revealed in the words of PL Harkins, Beth Harkins, and Sylvette Wittmer.

The concept of home in the age of Covid-19 is complex. Thus, individual accounts and oral histories helped me paint this picture. Reviewing statistics for the present period of history would create an image of sorrow, from the unemployment rate

to the death toll. For many, this is a time of heartache. Although for myself and those I love, this time was home. Oral histories allow these outliers to be heard, as it is too easy to “overlook important variables in the historical context” (Baylor University Institute for Oral History). For example, this is evident in the first oral history I ever came across, spotlighting Joel Blass, conducted by the Mississippi Oral History Program at the University of Southern Mississippi. Blass was a representative outlier. His time serving in the Mississippi legislature during the 1950s provided a stark contrast to generalized historical records of all public officials acting with racism, as Blass fought for the recognized dignity of every individual (Caudill).

This historic use of oral histories is even recognized at America’s highest office. “The White House operates largely as an oral culture. Although written decision memos are the norm, much of the most important business there occurs only in spoken, not written, words,” *The Oral History Review* published (Keulen and Kroeze 18). The article goes on to mention the importance of oral accounts regarding the Watergate tapes, a possible impeachment against President Ronald Reagan, and the Kenneth Starr report on President Bill Clinton. It is most beneficial to learn history from firsthand accounts, those “who have staked their lives and values in it” (“About SOHP”). Oral histories continue to be used in a multitude of ways over centuries of time, proving their effectiveness for capturing the essence of what matters.

Due to the depth of oral histories and the nature of home, they are most effectively shared through longform journalism. Like oral histories, longform is an opportunity to make interviewees feel seen and heard, feelings seldom experienced in a fast-paced world. The power of this was noted by Meredith Brown, saying: “I never think

of my home as being anything special but talking about it now makes me feel empowered.”

Narrative nonfiction “mixes human content with academic theory and observed fact” (Call & Kramer xv). Longform’s structure dates back to Greek mythology, but it has regained footing in the last few decades (Marsh 295). This is not for being popularized as a retro look at the past, but because of its established legitimacy and importance in the current information climate (Bennet). Journalist Amber Healy agrees on the *It’s All Journalism* podcast, understanding that the long-view of a story strengthens it and provides depth in a time where an overwhelming amount of stories are emerging. The discipline is “always open and willing to foster a dialogue with other fields of knowledge” and, in this case, with other fields of experiences communicated in stories to be read alongside one another (Bak and Martinez). Longform journalism can “anchor storytelling to a contingent world in a way that is more persuasive and trustworthy,” simply because it allows for the word count to do so (Greenberg 168).

Skeptics criticize longform as a shortcut to journalistic credibility through a few lengthy pieces, while others see that quality as what entices readers. Focus on quality is key, as length should not be idolized. James Bennet wrote in *The Best American Magazine Writing 2013*, compiled by the American Society of Magazine Editors, “Journalists presumably care about words as much as anyone, so it is mysterious that they would choose to promote their stories by ballyhooing one of their less inherently appealing attributes.” He also pointed out that baseball does not promote itself as a “long-form sport” and that entitling something longform can send the wrong message to the world about a magazine’s self-identified purpose. Length does not guarantee a good story

and idolizing length sends the wrong message to writers and readers. The Writers Grotto encourages content creators to not aim for a certain method, but to stop when they feel the whole story has been told (Rosen, Larry, & Quinn). This is the best way to honor the people I find home in, by sharing what is necessary of their stories but not oversharing or overcomplicating to meet a quota. If one clings to length, they risk losing the art of cutting away nonessentials to create the most beautiful end package possible. Cutting away excessive words and anecdotes is best accomplished by outside eyes.

Journalist Ethan Watters writes for publications such as *The New York Times Magazine*, *Glamour*, and *Esquire*. After having spent the past two years working on a single magazine article, he notes that every story commissioned should have the potential to become a movie. In a podcast interview on *GrottoPod* he described himself as surrounded by whiteboards during that time period, looking like an FBI agent retracing a storyline day after day looking for unnoticed details. In working on long term projects such as this, Watters found it important to fact-check his memory versus actual happenings, as it was easy to distort his interpretations into facts. Longform journalists hold a great deal of responsibility, as the narrative writing “makes a truth claim about people, places and events” (Greenberg and Wheelwright 511).

In writing lengthy articles about stories I am already familiar with, backtracking is a constant necessity to be as honest as possible to my own perception. In addition to my own memories, historical fiction dialogue can be completed from reworking subjects’ journal contents and personal memos (Rosen & Quinn). Writing to such depth “demands courage, patience, humility, erudition, savvy, stubbornness, wisdom, and aesthetic sense—all summoned at your lonely desk” (Call & Kramer xv). The loneliness of that desk can

be difficult, but it is sustainable if done right. “What we create in turn creates something back in us,” my thesis advisor Dr. Mark Dolan told me. “The output is matched by an input, and so our work sustains us, at least one hopes.”

In working on lengthy projects, it is easy to become distracted in the day-to-day nuances of working- responding to emails or fixing grammatical errors, for example- that the long-term importance of the story is forgotten by the writer. To not get caught up in these technicalities, it is imperative when embarking on lengthy projects that it attracts the writer’s interest.

Choose a subject for research that is of great interest to you. In the old view of research, the researcher was objective, uninvolved... The best research was done by people much involved because they were highly motivated to do a good job and were intensely committed to the project. They could thus endure the setbacks. They had an intrinsic interest in the topics under discussion, and the (interviewees) sensed this (Yow 67).

In writing about those I love, I could not devote my work to anything of greater interest. I am hopeful both interviewees and readers sense this.

Creating human-interest pieces reveals greater issues. An author makes thousands of decisions as to how to balance the individual’s experiences with the overarching plot, in this case, the idea of home. The Writers Grotto reports to their storytelling community that “chronological is almost always a mistake,” as writers should move things around to emphasize the story they wish to tell. They preach that “the readers have much more respect for the narrator who has control over time” (Rosen & Quinn). Writing about someone’s relationship with home is a tricky business with many interdependent events. These must be shared selectively and with grace to illustrate the picture fully but without information overload. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Diana Marcum exemplifies straying away from unnecessary information, as she keeps her paragraphs short to keep the story

moving, letting the facts speak for themselves rather than adding her own analysis and explanations (“Diana Marcum of Los Angeles Times”). Her conciseness adds empathy, giving readers room to experience feelings with her that are not adequately put in words.

These stories are shared in longform format because the overarching theme of home is built up over a lifetime, with limitless stories to tell and feelings to communicate. Each interviewee’s definition of home will be a culmination of every experience to this moment, whether living in five different houses or just one. As humans, we are dependent on our past experiences in defining the new- as a past relationship with a specific house or parent defines where a heart finds resting ground today.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Homecoming

Luke 12:48 reads, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.” For purposes I am unsure of, I have been blessed with a rock-solid home through the people journeying alongside me, “limited human expressions of an unlimited divine love” (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 41). For this reason, I know that much is required of me. Usually this looks like inviting people physically in, for a couch to sleep on, warm food in their stomach, or a space in which to dance. I learned this through my parents who always welcome people in, making them feel so seen with a multitude of questions. During a pandemic, however, I hope to honor this commandment by letting people in spiritually, inviting them into the house of my heart through this thesis. Our homes are meant to be shared, not too precious for dirty feet or strangers. “Our homes are not castles,” Butterfield wrote. “Indeed, they are not even ours.” Hopefully, these words give a place to sit for a while, feeling like refreshing water and fertilizer for the heart’s roots. Like a good mother, I want to welcome people into my home.

Home is the cathedral of our lives, the most sacred place, where a miracle was born yet the place we could not stay. “I would look into the delta at the evening star bright and high in the skies and think to myself: There is The Star itself, the one that guided them there to the new child,” Morris wrote. “To this day when I hear ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem,’ that town for me is really Yazoo” (*Terrains of the Heart* 95). My

Bethlehem is Oviedo, Fla., Oxford, Miss., and Calhoun, La. At these homes, I always find a seat at the table and am received with arms of joy (Josh Garrels).

“That which is deeper is that what we are more deeply made for, which is not just the appreciation of beautiful things through the senses, but the beauty of belonging,” Fr. Mary said (Guizar & Davis). Home is unshakable belonging, but home can be hard.

We have this desire for home, but other desires also live in our hearts. What do we do with both, how do we reckon those? I long for nothing more than to be in the embrace of my family, but I have wanted to live in the Appalachian Mountains since I was a little girl. I have to believe that if God allows the desires to rest there, they have to somehow compliment and honor one another. I am waiting in anticipation for those desires to be reconciled.

Home can also be hard due to the raw emotion one may harbor. The moment my mom starts talking about her mom, she begins to cry. That is something that has been sitting on her heart for 33 years, yet it still sits close enough to the surface to allow such an immediate reaction. I was home for eight weeks writing this thesis. Every single day interviewing my dad was postponed, eventually running out of time, because my dad is my best friend. Interviewing him would mean going to beautiful but deep places, crying along the way.

That is what home does to you: it brings about the most fragile and intimate memories and feelings. Maybe that is why we avoid home, out of fear of vulnerability. Hard conversations are necessary, parents fight, and people change. Yet it is in the messiness of family, in communion, that we are shaped, formed, and made holy (Schmitz). I run away from these heavy processes, afraid to be at the one place I am

brought to my knees. That fear was faced in going back to Florida and writing this thesis, writing about people I am close to, flirting with the truth but unsure of how to say it or if anyone could even benefit from it. “You’ll know what you’re not talking about,” Dr. Dolan told me. “What’s the thing you know, that no one else could know? You can’t tell it right away, but it’s important to say.” Pulitzer-prize winning novelist Eudora Welty encourages the necessity of this. “I think that as you learn more about writing you learn to be direct,” she said (Gelder).

Leaving home

Not only did this project set me up to be direct with the people I love, but I had to come face-to-face with my own tendencies. What did I do when home got hard? I left. I desired better. I went to new places and found new people. If I had never left, I could not fully taste the joy of being home, growing in resentment (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 21). “Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one,” Nouwen wrote (37).

As soon as I left, I began missing what I once had. As an 18-year-old, 785 miles away from home, a switch flipped, and I began to view my past life as sacred. Listening to classic rock with my dad, playing *Just Dance* with my brothers, my mom singing her own parody of “Copacabana” every morning, a childhood spent shoeless running around the cul-de-sac, my grandma constantly entering through the garage, baking in the Florida sun- it all felt sacred, yet it did not feel like anyone else had something to miss so deeply. Only if someone’s family was in a different state did I feel we could relate (The Head and the Heart).

“The ‘distant country’ is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded,” Nouwen wrote (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 36). Being away, I tried desperately to re-engage, no longer blinded by the light or praises, wanting only to come home (Gracey). I travelled back to Florida four times during the spring of freshman year, for a total of 25 of the 109 days of the semester. Today, I am grateful for every professor who let me extend weekends into full weeks. “There is a primacy or a priority of that which is most foundational. You do have more responsibility to your spouse and to your family than you do to other people” Mary said. This priority became evident even in my journalistic work, as I created *Long Story Short*, a weekly radio show in which I got to ask friends and family about their childhoods, their homes, and how those things shaped who they are.

After looking far and wide, the miraculous thing is, the new places I ran to were good- I would argue my spaces in Mississippi and Louisiana are very good. That is the resiliency of the human spirit and the commonality of neighborhood, as “no matter how you get there or where you end up, human beings have this miraculous gift to make that place home” (Daniels). In theory, we could spend every year building a new house in a new place among new faces, or we could do something wildly different and stay. The place does not become home until we stay long enough for it to be hard, long enough to see the ugly and become okay with it. For that reason, I am also grateful for the professors who would not accommodate my schedule, making me go to class freshman year, staying in Mississippi long enough to see the other side of the difficulties. We can stay when there are growing pains or unfulfilled desires or hurt that seems irreconcilable, learning to view them alongside the graces. When we stay and come face-to-face with

our own brokenness, we eventually see home provides a strength beyond ourselves. There are always more places and people to discover, but it cannot be enjoyed if we spread ourselves so thin in this world. When will the good be enough?

A time capsule

The end of high school was like a song playing in the car and I was so rushed that I exited the car without letting it finish. God forced me back into the car, through Covid-19, to learn that it was the longest, yet sweetest song I have ever heard. Like the shepherd in *The Alchemist*: “He recognized that he was feeling something he had never experienced before: the desire to live in one place forever” (Coelho 6). I forgot that I had always hated sleepovers because I wanted nothing more than to be in my own place with my own people. Upon resettling in Florida, there is no denying it to be the greatest gift He has given me besides Himself. Home has “brought me into touch with something within me that lies far beyond the ups and downs of a busy life, something that represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home” (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 5).

It was not until this year during quarantine that I understood Matthew 10:37: “The one who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and the one who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” God is the author of family, therefore loving family more than we ever could. Family is the greatest bond a person can have; this is Jesus acknowledging that, saying He is the only gift greater than a parent and child.

For myself, I had to be forced into this truth by a pandemic, and for that I am forever grateful. Those months of quarantine were like stepping into a time capsule, reawakening my truest, childlike self and no longer needing my bedroom to be pink to be reminded of who I am. “All the kids were hanging out again, cracking jokes and playing in the den, sitting around talking with my parents- I miss the way it used to be back then,” Matthew Hendley sings. “Though I know I’m grown, I miss the way my mother tucked me in and prayed... I miss the way it used to be back then.”

I have learned to feel like a little girl again, invited to dream, laugh, and play. We are no longer like children because we do not exert ourselves through normal human behaviors- we do not jump on a trampoline or pick up things that we think are cool, whether a shell on a beach or a penny in a parking lot. There is a human emotion released in jumping that cannot be released in conversing, now our only means of communication. I used to communicate with Sidney through a series of jumps and screams on a trampoline. We now have too much self-control to do that, as well as too much self-control to pick up anything on the ground, as we think someone is watching or our brain is too busy to care or we are drained of wonder and curiosity. We stop running to our dads to sit in their laps, as dads become a business partner to check in and out with when leaving home. We spend more hours online, limiting our expression and becoming less human. We once played out the dreams of our heads through imaginative games like Fibi Fabiano and Bob and Heffay; now we play out our fears. We knew how to play by ourselves for periods of time. The act of discovering new people in a new place, or even rediscovering home during a pandemic, invites the human heart to once again play,

explore, and imagine. This is all because we are able to lay our burdens down (Cory Asbury).

Expanding spaces

Home is a physical place, but as a concept it is watery, hard to define. Yet whatever or wherever it is, we want to be there. Despite this relentless desire, college students find categorizing home problematic. Our mailing address does not match our physical address which does not match the home address listed on our drivers' licenses. Home is a confusing question, as the reality is that many of us still find ourselves away from the houses we can walk in the dark. The included interviews suggest that the best thing to do when we find ourselves away is honor the place and the people who served us so well. This dilemma was explored by Randall Pearson in NBC's *This Is Us*.

RANDALL PEARSON: For days, I've been plagued by the question: how do I honor my father's legacy? Then I realized, I honor his legacy by taking what I learned from the way he lived his life and use it to shape the way I go on living mine," Randall said (Herbert & Steinberg).

Every day at the University of Mississippi I hope to honor what my father and mother taught me and, more importantly, showed me by the way they conduct themselves. To them I credit my efforts to always say 'thank you,' not scroll on my phone while spending time with people, to vacuum weekly, and to always say 'yes' to making my home the gathering place. These are the lessons which allow me to spread my home to other places, as the community grows within me rather than around me.

The more you have loved and have allowed yourself to suffer because of your love, the more you will be able to let your heart grow wider and deeper. When your love is truly giving and receiving, those whom you love will not leave your heart even when they depart from you. They will become part of yourself and thus gradually build a community within you. Those you have deeply loved become part of you (Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* 59).

My apartment, Turnberry B305, has held my tears and joys the past three years. My space is decorated with mementos from every event and every place, so I never have to let go of home or feel far away. Turnberry also proves to me that the space itself does not matter, as the paper-thin walls, peeling painted tile, and tiny living space are not ideal. Yet it is easier to hide in a big house, with lots of hallways and wings. Doug Stone's "Little Houses" articulates this well:

But you know, love grows best in little houses,
With fewer walls to separate,
Where you eat and sleep so close together.
You can't help but communicate,
Oh, and if we had more room between us, think of all we'd miss.
Love grows best, in houses just like this (Cate & Ewing).

In this tiny space I have lived with six strangers who have become sisters, a type of relationship I never imagined myself having. We have decorated a home together, laid on beds chatting, watched scary movies, shared clothes, hosted parties, had hard conversations, and simply loved one another. No little thing is wasted, and I am immensely grateful for the past three years teaching me the heart of sisterhood, particularly through Riley and Meredith. Leaving home for the first time is good and important. It is the first time we must choose to let people see us.

Growing to love places outside of Central Florida, I find myself desperately longing to be in two places at one time (Zac Brown Band). Since that task is impossible, we resolve to faith, and "faith is the radical trust that home has always been there and

always will be there” (Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 39). Home becomes an interior place, a state maintained by our souls. That changes everything.

Those abiding in a spiritual space of home, like Sylvette Wittmer, feeling both seen and loved, enter rooms without waiting for acceptance and love others without needing to feel invited. They already know they are chosen, loved, and enough. “As the Beloved, I can confront, console, admonish, and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation,” Nouwen wrote (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* 39). From that, we become home for others, “a house of charity rather than a fortress” (Tonos).

Home changes everything, and people embody the ultimate love already existing. Comforting to me, home is a process from the dawn of this life and into the next. Nouwen spent his life as a priest and spiritual father yet wrestled for 64 years with not yet being there, his longing not yet fulfilled despite being deeply and widely loved. Rest, safety, and home are processes of becoming.

The greatest show

In writing this thesis, I travelled to South Carolina to interview three of my closest friends. It is the longest road trip I have made solo, so it taught me a lot about home. Leaving Oxford, I accidentally missed the Birmingham exit. I laughed out loud thinking of how it honored my mom repeatedly missing it when driving me to college.

My dad drives the whole way on family vacations. He takes control of the radio to stay awake during the last stint of a road trip, always listening to classic rock. Pulling into South Carolina, it felt so wrong to listen to anything other than Queen and The Beatles.

Once I arrived at my destination, as soon as funny stories emerged, I facetedimed my older brother immediately, as he is usually my partner in comedic analysis.

Also on road trips, my younger brother researches restaurants in-depth, finding us the best food surrounded by walls of character. Since I had a day to myself exploring Columbia, S.C., I asked him to find me a restaurant. He sent me to Harbor Inn Seafood.

It felt silly driving fourteen minutes to a restaurant just for myself, but it was a Friday in Lent so my options were limited. Sitting down in the midnight blue booth, I wrote the following:

I'm trying to soak in this experience without distracting myself, but I pulled out my computer so I don't forget the moment as it is. This is my first time sitting in a restaurant by myself. With no one to sit across from, no one to talk to, no one who cares that I'm here. In this moment, I am now sure more than ever that home, on this earth, is found in people. My family and I have sat at restaurants in 40 different states across the U.S. together, anywhere from fine dining steaks to absolute dives to simple places in between. In every restaurant, though we had never met a soul there and didn't prepare the food ourselves, I had never not felt at home.

I love my alone time- in coffee shops, churches, and living rooms- but when it comes to the things that matter- like meals, graduations, and thesis defenses- they are nothing if we do not have people to share them with. There are 14 people who always have a seat at my table, and I trust that I have one at theirs (2/26/21).

Going to South Carolina, I stood on Harden Street with Kendall, sat in Legacy Park with Sara, and walked the top of Bald Rock with Jonny. In those moments, I felt no difference between South Carolina or Mississippi or Florida or Louisiana. All that mattered was the person in front of me, that I felt entirely at home in their presence. I had always planned to travel for my thesis, to talk to cool people and see cool things. To some degree I did what I set out to do, only I did it for what matters most.

My favorite movie, the one I watch every time I go home, is *The Greatest Showman*. The film follows American showman P. T. Barnum, played by Hugh Jackman,

in his endeavors to build an empire-like business, leaving home for travels and neglecting his family to make a fortune for them. After revamping his priorities, the last scene shows Barnum watching his young daughters on-stage at their ballet recital, much slower pace to the shows he had grown accustomed to. As Barnum watches in awe, he sings quietly, “It’s everything you ever want, it’s everything you ever need, and it’s here right in front of you” (Gracey). That is the greatest show, living alongside those we love in the little and big things.

Novelist Gustave Flaubert said that “the act of writing is the art of discovering what you believe” (Nikolopoulos). This thesis has let me discover what I believe, what matters, what is true to me. If I had one song to sing, one road to drive, one show to watch- home would be it for all my days. Yet there are so many songs and roads to choose from, so I divert and choose, but nothing satisfies quite like that first love. Not everyone looks forward to the return and I am sorry for those who do not, whose experiences do not shepherd them in that understanding, but this is my understanding of it with the one wild and precious life I have been given. We are ultimately seeking the home that is to come, but we are designed to have roots, staying at the table long enough for them to be watered, withered, frozen, and grow back all over again.

“And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal. And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.”

-Kitty O'Meara

LIST OF REFERENCES

- “2007 Chrysler Town & Country Specs and Prices.” *Autoblog*, Verizon Media, www.autoblog.com/buy/2007-Chrysler-Town_Country/specs/.
Information regarding this minivan provides background information on the vessel that I, similar to thousands of others, consider one of my physical homes.
- “8 Paths to Defining a Storytelling Approach.” *American Press Institute*, American Press Institute.
The *American Press Institute* published this piece to explore how profiles can track issue and trend stories. Recognizing the use of profiles in tracking larger issues is the idea on which my thesis was constructed.
- “A Practical Guide to Oral History.” Southern Oral History Program, May 2018.
The University of North Carolina’s guide to oral history is a starting point for conducting oral histories, walking through the preparation, interview, and final steps. It includes examples of field notes, abstracts, and suggested paperwork.
- “About COVID-19.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1 Sept. 2020, www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cdcresponse/about-COVID-19.html.
Covid-19 is a disease first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019, then appearing in the U.S. by January. This historical information is necessary for future readers to understand the circumstances in which we were sent to our homes.
- “About SOHP.” *Southern Oral History Program*, Center for the Study of the American South, sohp.org/about-sohp/.
The history of UNC’s Southern Oral History Program explains the heart behind oral histories and their usefulness for preserving life, offering 6,000 examples.
- Angelou, Maya. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. Vintage, 1991.
A part of Angelou’s autobiography series, she recounts her years spent living in Ghana. This abroad experience brought her to reflections regarding the importance of home and its guaranteed safety.
- Antonucci, Toni C, and Jasmine A Manalel. “Beyond the Nuclear Family: Children’s Social Networks and Depressive Symptomology.” *Child Development*, vol. 91, no. 4, 1 Oct. 2019, pp. 1302–1316., doi:10.1111/cdev.13307.
This study tracks characteristics of childhood upbringings with compared depressive symptomology. The reasoning for research is that developmental psychology has undeniably shown correlation with developmental outcomes.

Aptaker, Isaac, and Elizabeth Berger. "There." *This Is Us*, season 5, episode 7, NBC, 9 Feb. 2021.

This *This Is Us* episode emphasizes the importance of simply being available to people by showing the profound impact it has on personal identity and growth. Kevin Pearson's reflections on his dad resonated deeply with me relating to my dad.

Bak, John S, and Monica Martinez. "Introduction: Literary Journalism as a Discipline." *Brazilian Journalism Research*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1 Dec. 2018, pp. 620–627., doi:10.25200/BJR.v14n3.2018.1163.

The *Brazilian Journalism Research* addresses the conversations required for new ideas and longform journalism's ability to do so.

Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room*. Vintage Books, 2013.

Baldwin is known for exploring complex social issues, including sexuality, race, and class, through the lens of being an African American in the mid-1900s. Amid writing about these and the inherent displacement they bring, he contemplates home as a condition, rather than a physical structure.

Baum, Willa. "Therapeutic Value of Oral History." *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1 Jan. 1981, pp. 49–53., doi:10.2190/BYPE-EE50-J1TP-HV2V.

The International Journal of Aging and Human Development published studies regarding the health benefits to elderly individuals through oral histories, including improved cognitive abilities and an overall enhanced quality of life. This therapeutic value is important to include to understand the overall usefulness of oral histories.

Baylor University Institute for Oral History. "Understanding Oral History: Why Do It?" *Baylor University Institute for Oral History*, 2012, www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/66420.pdf.

This document states that oral histories often capture information usually overlooked through other means of data-gathering, which is not commonly thought about in relation to oral histories. Beyond acknowledging this, the Baylor University Institute for Oral History recognizes the use of oral histories in exploring personal change within the context of world events.

Bennet, James. "Introduction." *The Best American Magazine Writing 2013*, edited by Sid Holt, Columbia University Press, 2013.

Bennet discusses the oxymoron of advertising pieces as lengthy when lengthy pieces are not most practical or desired. While he does see longform reemerging, he emphasizes the importance of quality over length.

Bragg, Rick. "All Over but the Shoutin'." *Penguin Random House*, Penguin Random House, www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/17370/all-over-but-the-shoutin-by-rick-bragg/.

Bragg's novel is an example of exploring the complexity of childhood adventures alongside both hard and beautiful relationships. His publisher's review summarizes the incredible nature of what he did, stating that the novel brings "home the love and suffering that lie at the heart of every family."

---. "Mom, 13 Cats, Bogart, a Restless Dog and No WiFi: Rick Bragg Self-Isolates in Alabama." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 18 Apr. 2020. Bragg provided an account of his days in quarantine, sharing the logistics of what happens when locked away at home. This is an example of what I wish to capture for my interviewees, but I do not plan to stop at actual happenings. My stories will explore the deeper meaning of what the physical activities point to, the inner tensions Bragg alluded to but did not address.

---. "Rick Bragg Remembers the Christmas Eve With His Late Uncle Ed." *Southern Living*, 12 Nov. 2019, www.southernliving.com/christmas/rick-bragg-uncle-ed.

Despite building a family and life of his own, at the most special time of year, what Bragg continues to treasure most is the Christmas of 1969. This is yet another example that what we once had is far better than what we keep seeking to build.

---. "There Is Nothing More Un-Southern Than Social Distance." *Southern Living*, Meredith Corporation, 23 Mar. 2020.

This article recognizes people coming together in hard times and how the South is accustomed to making it through hardship with neighbors they have never met. The complexity of Covid-19, though, means we are not able to gather as we used to, losing part of our own identity, the home we find in people.

---. "Where Alabama Inmates Fade Into Old Age." *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1995, p. 1.

Bragg's writing shows the humanity of prisoners, a people group often overlooked. His graphic descriptions of their wounds and living conditions allows readers to see their suffering in a new way. Bragg has the courage to show the whole picture, their wounds alongside their crimes. This wholeness is required when writing about people we love.

Butterfield, Rosaria. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*. Crossway, 2018. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* shares stories that provide proof of the power of home and family. Its reflections stress that homes are meant to be shared.

Call, Wendy, and Mark Kramer. *Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University*. 1st ed., Plume, 2007.

Call and Kramer appreciate the art of storytelling more than any other. They acknowledge its widespread uses, widespread playmakers, and the miracle of mixing humanity with academic theory.

Caudill, Orley B. *An Oral History with Mr. William Joel Blass*. Vol. 639, Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi, 1977.

This is the first oral history I ever read, teaching me what an oral history is, the beauty of it, and the gift of reading my great grandfather's words. Its personal depth and variety of conversation topics is what I aspire to emulate. Caudill's work also offers examples of outlier stories among overgeneralized news headlines.

Chris Renzema. "Tear My House Down." *Let The Ground Rest B-Sides*, Paul Moak.

Renzema's lyrics point towards our feeble attempts at creating lives for ourselves and the need for a solid place to return to.

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. 1st ed., HarperCollins, 1993.

This best-selling novel consisting of travellers and shepherds contains characters exploring the world for something better, not settling for the comfort of their homes. Coelho also captures the human condition of being unchanged from experiences, unfulfilled by the present, and idolizing the past.

Comer, John Mark. *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World*. WaterBrook, 2019.

This book delves into the importance of a slower-paced life, one where home is embraced and celebrated.

Cory Asbury. "The Father's House." *To Love a Fool*, Ed Cash.

Asbury's lyrics coincide with the interviews of many conducted for this thesis, finding a good house to be one free of burdens, a refuge to run to.

Daniels, Greg. "Finale." *The Office*, season 9, episode 25, 13 May 2013.

The television show that acts as the constant background noise in my house and the distraction used when home gets hard, the characters Daniels created show what a gift the arbitrary is. These scenes remind me to soak up the daily interactions. Specifically as the show ends and the Dunder Mifflin work family parts ways, the characters perfectly sum up feelings of sentimentality regarding the ordinary places in which our lives unfold. That's what she said.

Davis, Beth, and Jenna Guizar. "We Belong to Each Other." *The Gathering Place*, episode 106, Blessed Is She.

In this interview with Fr. Mark Mary, the group discusses the importance of family as the foundation to life and honoring the original design. They also elaborate on the importance of belonging.

“Diana Marcum of Los Angeles Times.” *The Pulitzer Prizes*,
www.pulitzer.org/winners/diana-marcum.

The Pulitzer Prizes reflects on Marcum’s work as empathetic. Upon reviewing her pieces, from the briefness of her writing, it is impressive that this is the consensus. I hope readers of my work feel invited to read in-between the lines of my writing as they feel compelled to in her articles.

Ellsworth-Krebs, Katherine, et al. “Integrated Framework of Home Comfort: Relaxation, Companionship and Control.” *Building Research & Information*, vol. 47, no. 2, 17 Jan. 2018, pp. 202–218., doi:10.1080/09613218.2017.1410375.

Leading construction and design journal, the writers establish what is important to the public regarding the creation of a house. As designers of the physical environment, it is interesting that they also recognize the emotional sphere it leads to.

Evans, James Allan S. “The Father of Oral History.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 61, no. 3, 12 Dec. 2003, www.vqronline.org/father-oral-history.

Evans wrote about the origin of oral histories, all the way back to ancient Greece. Recognizing the centuries through which these have upheld shows the inherent credibility of the work, adding my stories to an ocean of tradition.

Galer, Sophia, and Joe Tidy. “TikTok: The Story of a Social Media Giant.” *BBC News*, BBC, 5 Aug. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/technology-53640724.

TikTok was the focal point of entertainment, other than the news, during quarantine. Knowledge of its history and userbase is important for future readers to understand its unprecedented use.

Gelder, Robert. “An Interview with Eudora Welty.” *Literary Ladies Guide*, 26 Jan. 2015, www.literaryladiesguide.com/literary-musings/an-interview-with-eudora-welty/.

The published interview with Welty verbalizes the process of writing in length and writing about hard things, learning to be direct.

Gracey, Michael, director. *The Greatest Showman*. 20th Century Fox, 2017.

The Greatest Showman follows the story of a man blinded by light and idolizing fame over the very gifts of family and home lying before him. It takes him hitting rock bottom to turn back to what is of true importance and value.

Greenberg, Susan. “Personal Experience, Turned Outward: Responses to Alienated Subjectivity.” *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics*, vol. 62, Sept. 2011, pp. 151–174.

With negative emotions towards media coverage, Greenberg evaluates perspectives regarding trusting the media and works to identify the best ways to establish credibility among literary nonfiction.

Greenberg, Susan, and Julie Wheelwright. "Literary Journalism: Ethics in Three Dimensions." *Journalism*, vol. 15, no. 5, 23 Apr. 2014, pp. 511–516., doi:10.1177/1464884914529210.

Greenberg and Wheelwright delve into the ethics of longform journalism, specifically in relation to truth claims, consequences of lengthy pieces, and the balance of art and truth.

Harkins, Meagan. *Long Story Short*. Spotify, Rebel Radio, open.spotify.com/show/6CodwyV9lnW0belM0sIyg?si=44ufA-hVSZmamJwBEWU12w.

The episodes of this radio series illustrate how events of childhood and home shape the people we become. These interviews reveal the tension of missing that which we do not have and they are the first recorded insight I have to the people I find home in.

Healy, Amber. "How to cover the coronavirus pandemic." Audio blog post. *It's All Journalism*. 14 May 2020. Web.

Healy said the longview of a story strengthens it and gives depth, while an overwhelming amount of stories emerge. There are an immense number of people I could write about who have influenced my heart, but it is more beneficial to provide fewer in-depth articles to provide the necessary context.

Herbert, Vera, and K.J. Steinberg. "What Now?" *This Is Us*, season 1, episode 17, NBC, 7 Mar. 2017.

NBC's *This Is Us* shows the complexity and deep-heartedness of home in every episode. Randall Pearson's experiences cause him to finally terminate an overbearing work environment in pursuit of the people he loves. In this pursuit, he honors home.

"History." *Publix*, Publix Asset Management Company, corporate.publix.com/about-publix/culture/history.

One of the largest indicators of home, I assume everyone knows the glory of Publix. Including its history lets them in on my secret to appreciate Publix's long-standing tradition.

Howorth, Richard. "Rick Bragg in Conversation with Richard Howorth for Where I Come From." *YouTube*, Square Books, 29 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=emFF3nQKMIY.

Howorth's interview with Bragg is useful to capture his raw and personal thoughts, rather than myself trying to understand his technique solely through reading his work. Since Bragg writes from personal experiences, his input on writing about family with both love and truth is extremely useful advice.

Hudson, Berkley, and Rebecca Townsend. "Unraveling the Webs of Intimacy and Influence: Willie Morris and Harper's Magazine, 1967–1971." *Literary Journalism Studies*, pp. 63–78.

Reflections on Morris provide insight as to why his reporting style was revolutionary, as he had the courage to report on the deeper culture and changed the trajectory of magazine writing.

James, Kathryn, and Julia James. "Daughters Well-Loved." *Honors Report 2020*, University of Mississippi, Aug. 2020.

The James sisters' account of their father's death illustrates its personal effects on their lives. Death is described as making one feel "off balance" and changing relationships with those still living. The process also took away their patience, interest in schoolwork and led to lessened friendships. The authors utilize personal essays to describe more personal effects, but also include a co-authored piece to illustrate their universal story being told.

Josh Garrels. "At The Table." *Home*, Mason Jar Music.

Garrels' imagery is resemblant of that of a family, with each person having a permanent seat at the table, a chair known to be theirs. He also touches on the coming and going, calling his loved ones for their homecoming.

Keulen, Sjoerd, and Ronald Kroeze. "Back to Business: A Next Step in the Field of Oral History—The Usefulness of Oral History for Leadership and Organizational Research." *The Oral History Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, pp. 15–36.

The Oral History Review recognizes the myth that businesses and elites are widely heard, as they fail to be asked meaningful questions, hidden behind statistics and methodology. The article examines the usefulness of archiving these conversations and the void it fills.

Kremer-Sadlik, Tamar, and Elinor Ochs. *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2013.

Kremer-Sadlik and Ochs discuss the idea of home and the nuclear family in American society. Their commentary expands upon research regarding work-life balance, stress, quality time, spaces in houses, and mealtimes.

Marsh, Charles. "Deeper than the Fictional Model." *Journalism Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, June 2010, pp. 295–310., doi:10.1080/14616700903481937.

Marsh traces the origins of longform journalism to ancient Greece, adapting from their mix of history, oral tradition, and necessary structural changes.

Marsh, Nigel. "How to Make Work-Life Balance Work." *TED*, TED Conferences, May 2010, www.ted.com/talks/nigel_marshall_how_to_make_work_life_balance_work/transcript?language=en.
Marsh's honest insight to the unhealthy American worklife is helpful in understanding the disconnect between Americans and their homes or places of rest.

Matthew Hendley. "All the Kids." Madison, Mississippi, 31 Dec. 2020.
This song, written and recorded by Hendley, illustrates the rediscovery underwent during quarantine, appreciating the days of playing in our neighborhoods and the formational nature of early years.

Mongello, Lou. "WDW History 101 - 'How to Buy 27,000 Acres of Land and No One Notice.'" WDW Radio, *TIME Magazine*, 11 Feb. 2005, www.wdwradio.com/2005/02/wdw-history-101-how-to-buy-27000-acres-of-land-and-no-one-noticeq/.
Visiting Walt Disney World was a staple of my childhood, among my most formative and regular memories. The history of it is important to the history of my family and home state.

Morris, Willie. *My Dog Skip*. Vintage, 1996.
Morris recognizes the simple things of his childhood, from his dog to adventures to his earliest friendships. It is in retrospect that he is able to recognize how formative these memories are.

---. *New York Days*. Back Bay Books, 1994.
New York Days shares adventures away from home, living out childhood dreams. Yet it articulates the emptiness these dreams often have, pointing Morris back to his first foundation.

---. *Terrains of the Heart and Other Essays on Home*. Yoknapatawpha Press, 1981.
Morris returned to his original home of Mississippi, writing about man's natural tendency to return, as well as the homes we make for ourselves in other places. He recognizes the people and places more deeply for having left, something I resonate with after leaving Florida. He discusses the complexity of home, finding it something to be treasured, something I hope to illustrate in my stories.

---. *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep-Southern Town*. Ballantine Books, 1972.
This work is another example of writing about one's own childhood, specifically significant for the complexity of integration in the south. It is interesting that in Morris' great travels, he is found returning to earlier subject matters.

NDS-Gear. "The History of the Nintendo DS Console." *NDS-Gear*,
www.nds-gear.com/history-nintendo-ds-console/.

Iconic to my childhood, the history of the Nintendo DS is useful for context to unknowing readers. It is funny how revolutionary it was to my childhood, considering the technology we have now. This was one of the core activities completed with my brothers.

Nikolopoulos, Stephanie. "Writing Wednesday: The Art of Discovering What You Believe." *Stephanie Nikolopoulos*, 11 Apr. 2012,
stephanienikolopoulos.com/2012/04/11/writing-wednesday-the-art-of-discovering-what-you-believe/.

The Flaubert quote cited by Nikolopoulos embodies the process of writing about home and writing about family.

Nouwen, Henri. *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*. 1st ed., Doubleday, 1996.

My favorite book in the world, pondered frequently during quarantine, Nouwen's reflections have caused me to recognize it is okay to be comfortable in one's own home. There is not a need to constantly seek better if we have been given a place of refuge and comfort.

---. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. 1st ed., Doubleday, 1992.

Nouwen's search of a spiritual home points back to a needed sense of belonging and consolation, as well as the childlike freedom to run home. Nouwen explores our desires and what is required to make home a solid place. He also touches on our call to be home to others.

O'Hare, Sheila. "Genealogy and History." *Commonplace*, American Antiquarian Society and Omohundro Institute, Apr. 2002, commonplace.online/article/genealogy-and-history/.

The history of genealogy shows the proven usefulness of the discipline over time in preserving family history and navigating the present day.

Orlean, Susan. "About Me." *Susan Orlean*, www.susanorlean.com/author/about/.

The way a writer chooses to describe themselves is a clear look at what they find important. Orlean must recognize this might be the only description some ever see of her, and it is therefore interesting that she describes herself first in relation to her childhood.

---. "Books, Books and More Books." *Susan Orlean*,
www.susanorlean.com/author/books/.

In describing her reason for writing each book, Orlean points back to childhood memories and innate desires. She talks about how she once loved libraries and animals, now using her time to investigate those things deeper.

---. *Saturday Night*. Simon & Schuster , 2011.

Orlean’s work shows the home that many find in a singular day of the week, expressing the universality of home. She captures the miracle of the ordinary and displays impressive ability to capture people in their natural environments.

---. *The Library Book*. 1st ed., Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Orlean saw that when we had books on borrowed time, we had the motivation to finish them. She examined the discipline in checking social media versus reading physical books. People began to remember books during quarantine. That is demonstrative of a larger cultural shift in remembering what matters, as well as appreciating home more when we know the timeframe.

---. *The Orchid Thief: A True Story of Beauty and Obsession*. Ballantine Books, 2000.

In an extremely niche approach, Orlean expands the idea of where home can be found and does so through capturing the story of Laroche. Laroche’s passion and home became important to Orlean, simply due to the nature of home.

---. “Thinking in the Rain.” *The New Yorker*, 4 Feb. 2008.

Orlean wrote beginning with the lens through which she knew the subject, then following a timeline of basic life events for context. Her writing demonstrated the complexity of ordinary topics. Long chunks of text were used to create a natural flow, rather than aiming to institute plot twists and personas. Orlean’s ability to demonstrate complexity while including a personal relationship is something I hope to achieve in my writing.

Ritchie, Donald A. “What in the World? A Status Report on Oral History.” *Words and Silences*, vol. 6, no. 1, Dec. 2011, pp. 1–5.

This International Oral History Association publication analyzes the use of oral histories for preservation, therapy, and educational learning.

Rosen, Larry, and Bridget Quinn. “Episode 91: Ethan Watters On Longform Journalism.” Grotto Partners, 6 Nov. 2018.

This podcast is important to longform journalism as it dissects how to keep it relevant in a technological age. The hosts discuss discerning a story’s hook, multi-year journalistic projects, and logistics of tracking lengthy stories. This is useful to my thesis when evaluating how to efficiently and effectively write a large volume of lengthy stories.

Schmitz, Mike. “Keynotes: Hilary Draftz & Fr. Mike Schmitz.” *SEEK21*, Fellowship of Catholic University Students, 6 Feb. 2021,

seek21.live/conferences/seek21/keynotes-hilary-draftz-fr-mike-schmitz.

Fr. Schmitz’s keynote explored the difficulties of leaving home and coming back, analyzing the heart behind each tendency. He also talked about what home, in its most perfect form, is meant to be.

- Shih, Yingtien. *Bleating In Southern California: Confucius, Lao-Tzu, M. Twain, O. Wilde, Etc.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.
Shih's book contains an excellent reflection about man's tendency to leave home and return empty-handed: "A man travels the world over in search of what he needs and returns home to find it."
- Stone, Doug. *Little Houses*, James Stroud.
Stone's reflection on the ability of little spaces rings true to an acquired understanding of home, that the place itself is not important.
- The Head and the Heart. "Rivers & Roads." *The Head and the Heart*.
These lyrics discuss the sentimentality of knowing seasons are changing and people are moving, trying to soak up time with friends while remembering the distance of family. This song holds sincere value to my senior year.
- The New York Times. "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Nov. 2020,
www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html.
Including the Covid-19 cases recorded and death tolls adds context for future readers, to know the events unfolding outside the walls of our houses.
- Thompson, Jake. "IHL Announces All Universities Will Extend Spring Break; Classes to Resume Online." *The Oxford Eagle*, The Oxford Eagle, 12 Mar. 2020,
www.oxfordeagle.com/2020/03/12/ihl-announces-all-universities-will-extend-spring-break-classes-to-resume-online/.
This adds historical context to the daily events unfolding that led me back home. This announcement is one I will remember forever.
- Tierney, Kendra. "Things Mother Teresa Never Actually Said." *Blessed Is She*, Blessed Is She, 12 July 2017.
Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, St. Teresa of Calcutta said the love of prayer should first overflow into our homes, then next door, and then to the whole world. She starts with the most difficult.
- Tonos, Joe. *Sunday Mass*. Facebook, St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church, Oxford, Miss., 17 Jan. 2021,
www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=769697703756518&ref=watch_permalink.
Fr. Tonos' homily reflected on how an individual can be discovered through their home and the way they live. He then offers the invitation to become a home for others, welcoming them in.

“Tracking the COVID-19 Recession's Effects on Food, Housing, and Employment Hardships.” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 9 Nov. 2020, www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-recessions-effects-on-food-housing-and.

This report adds further context to what was happening in many houses at the time, as people struggled to make ends meet.

“Understanding Bias.” *American Press Institute*, American Press Institute.

The *American Press Institute* acknowledges a tendency to prove authorship as unbiased, despite bias being embedded in all journalistic pieces on the basis of reporters’ lives and experiences. With this inevitability, the institute believes the approach is not to remove, but to properly manage bias. Awareness of my own biases and outside input on how to properly navigate them is a key foundation for all I write.

Yow, Valerie R. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 3rd ed., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

Yow’s book serves as a wholistic guide to oral histories, covering interview preparation, the process of interviewing, research, ethics, and legality.

Zac Brown Band. “2 Places At 1 Time.” *Welcome Home*, Dave Cobb.

While the whole album illustrates the good things about home and family, this song in particular explains the inner tension resulting from loving multiple places, creating conflicting desires.