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May X

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MAY

Three hundred forty-six students. Thirty-seven courses. Three weeks in May. Two hours of credit.

Such were the numbers for Furman's first "May Experience" — or "May X," as students quickly dubbed it. The optional program, part of the university's revamped academic calendar, offers students (including members of the graduating class) the chance to devote themselves fully to one area of study while picking up two extra credits without the "distraction" of other courses.

It all begins the Monday after Commencement. Start date for 2010: May 10.

This spring's May X pioneers chose from on- and off-campus offerings in 20 academic areas. The eight travel programs included a trip to China to examine the country's business practices, which with 21 students proved to be the first year's most popular course. Among the other travel options were a service learning program in New Orleans to assist with the ongoing Hurricane Katrina cleanup, a geologic field study in the Appalachian Mountains, and visits to Scandinavia and Germany.

On campus, students delved into research methods and techniques in such areas as chemistry, neuroscience, psychology and biology, developed their own video documentaries, studied creative writing with novelist Bret Lott, and engaged in an in-depth examination of Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Furman officials deemed the program a success and, given the rave reviews students offered, expressed confidence that its popularity will grow as word of mouth spreads. History professor Lloyd Benson says he expects the May Experience to "create new kinds of course-related academic encounters between students and our broader Furman community of alumni, donors, parents, businesses and non-profit organizations."

Furman magazine invited several students to offer their reflections about the inaugural May X. Their accounts follow.

The simple cabin by the Furman lake

Twelve Furman students left their mark on campus during this year's inaugural May Experience, participating in a course that represents the best of what engaged learning offers.

During the first week of our "Replicating Walden" class led by David Bernardy of the English department, we read and discussed Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. This book describes Thoreau's experiment living for two years in a rustic cabin he built in the woods by Walden Pond in Massachusetts in the early 1850s.

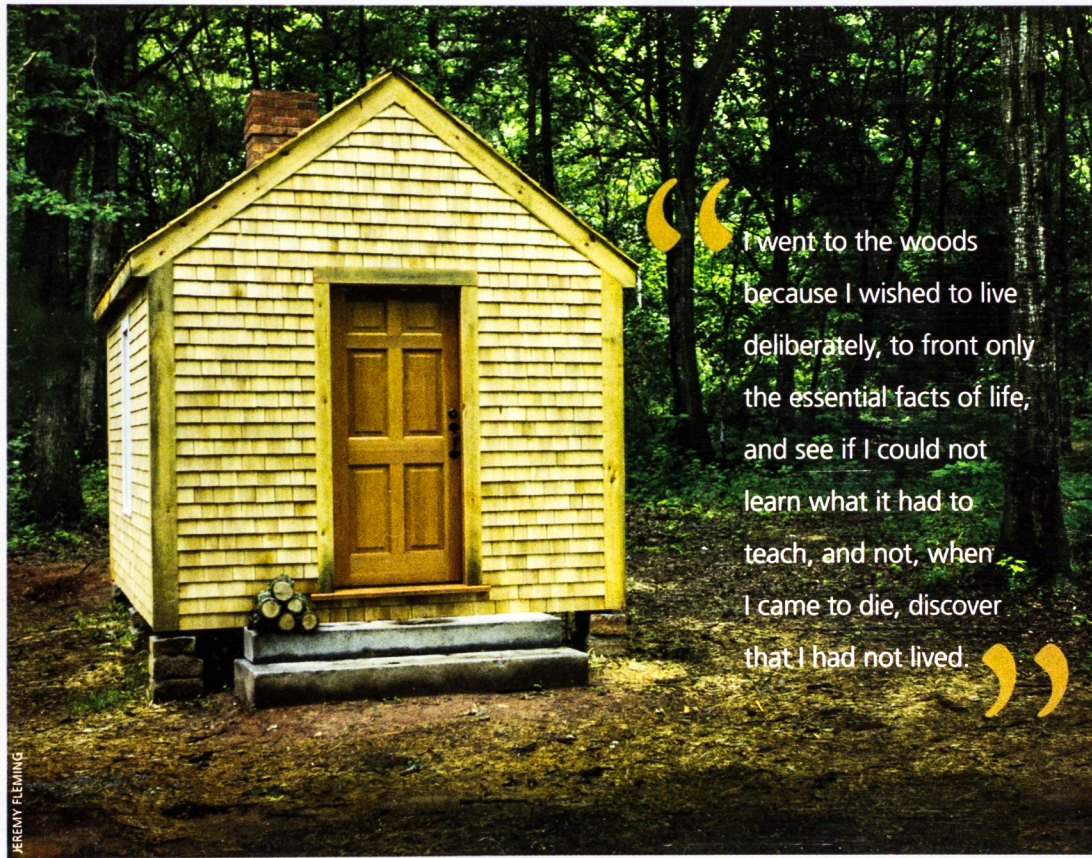
Explaining the experiment, Thoreau wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." By simplifying his existence so drastically, Thoreau aimed to make time to write and reflect on life and nature. *Walden* has been inspiring others to do the same ever since.

Our week of exploring Thoreau's philosophy in the classroom was preparation for what was to come. Thoreau believed that students "should not *play* life, or *study* it merely . . . but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end."

For the final two weeks of class, we lived the physical part of *Walden*. Our group, with the help of experienced carpenters from Furman's facilities services department, built a replica of Thoreau's cabin provided, in kit form, by the New England Nests company.

Each day we came together on the far side of the Furman lake to frame and roof the simple house, nail hundreds of shakes to the exterior, and furnish the inside. What better camaraderie is there than a group of students swapping Thoreau quotes amid the pounding of hammers?

As the cabin started to look less like a pile of wood and more like a house, I began to think about what it would be like to live in this shady spot and watch the surface of the lake sparkle from my front door. Could I be like Thoreau and spend a day sitting in a chair in the doorway, simply listening to the natural world around me? Could I remove the superfluities of life and



JEREMY FLEMING

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

instead look within myself, and at nature, for both intellectual challenge and amusement?

Thoreau created an experiment, and we were called to repeat it. In the breaks between hammering and cutting shakes, I found the need to make my own experiment — to step back and reflect on the way I live and how that compares to the way I think I should live. I do not want to live a life of "quiet desperation." I am willing to put in the effort for enlightenment. This was an energizing revelation for me, a rising senior who is considering what career and lifestyle to pursue after graduation.

At the conclusion of *Walden*, Thoreau tells us, "I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."

We hope that by replicating his experiment at Walden Pond, we have honored his sentiments and created a place where others can visit to stop and think a moment about nature and about their own lives. "Replicating Walden" offered me the chance to think about how I want to enter into the "real" world, and for that I will be forever grateful to the simple cabin by Furman lake.

— LAUREN OSCHMAN '10

The author is a history and French major from Knoxville, Tenn.

Food, glorious food

On a sunny Friday afternoon in May, a group of Furman students gathered around an outdoor grill at the North Village apartments.

Some students stoked the fire, while others sliced fresh bread and chopped vegetables on a nearby picnic table. As the students prepared the traditional Spanish dish *paella* and enjoyed each other's company, they couldn't believe they were also actually getting class credit.

This may not seem like the typical Furman class — and it wasn't. Spanish 352 — “Hispanic Cultures Through Food” — was part of Furman's first May Experience. We were lucky enough to take it, as it quickly became the envy of all May Experience classes.

A typical day would consist of a discussion of the previous night's assigned reading, a group presentation regarding a specific Hispanic country, shopping and preparation of that day's *plato* (food), and perhaps an informational DVD or two.

The first week we focused on the culture and food of Spain. Under the direction of professor Ron Friis, we covered a brief history of the country and the cultural influences that affect the different flavors and products of Spanish cuisine. We tasted traditional Spanish cheeses, olive oils and olives, and prepared the *tortilla Espanola*, *pintxos* (appetizers) and *paella*.

The second week was devoted to the food of Mexico, which included chicken and beef tacos and homemade tortillas. We also discussed the important differences between the Hispanic tradition of “slow food” and American fast food, while learning about Mexican culture and business practices. The final week, we focused on Cuban cuisine.

In the true spirit of Furman professors, Dr. Friis took advantage of the long Memorial Day weekend to assign group projects, such as

having us compare our prepared Mexican food to that of a local Mexican restaurant.

Besides the obvious benefits of our culinary work, the class taught us how to work together as a team and to plan for the unexpected.

Oftentimes organizing the tasks that needed to be completed necessitated a list called “*Menú del día*,” in which the day's chores were laid out. Certain people would then be assigned to each chore, and we would set to work.

Surprises were few, but when they occurred we discovered the value of improvising. When we overcooked lentils for our salad, for example, we made a soup from the remains.

In some cases, even a well-detailed plan did not account for the amount of time it would take to prepare certain foods, such as tamales. It was not uncommon to have more on our list than could be done during class time, but between presentations, discussions about food-related videos and readings, and shopping for the next day's groceries, we were almost always able to gather afterwards to share our creations.

While we enjoyed the food we made, we were reminded that it is impossible to talk about food without discussing hunger. Among the many controversial issues tackled by our class, several important topics were addressed by guest speaker Adela Mendoza, a community advocate. By hearing about the plight of impoverished Hispanic families in Greenville, we also learned how we could help to improve the conditions of these people, whether through political activism or donations of money or food.

While we cooked, ate, talked and ate some more, we realized the importance of keeping an open mind when learning about and experiencing different types of food — and especially when interacting with other cultures. And isn't that what a college education (and a May experience) is really all about?

For those who are interested — and who can read Spanish — enjoy a taste of our course at <http://archivogastronomico.blogspot.com>.

— EMILY MYERS AND SARAH WEATHERFORD

Emily Myers '10 is a history major from Hagerstown, Md.; Sarah Weatherford '11 is a Spanish major from Decatur, Ga.



A trip to Carter Country

I never really understood why Furman insisted on calling the new “Maymester” a “May Experience” — until I had the opportunity to take a course for myself. After my three weeks in Helen Lee Turner’s class titled “Jimmy Carter and Southern Baptists,” I came to fully appreciate the meaning of “May Experience.”

As spring semester flew by and the plans for the course began to solidify, I grew more and more excited to learn about what our small class of nine students would be doing. Not only would we learn about President Carter and the way in which his personal theology had developed and influenced his life, but we were actually going to meet the man himself!

Being the nerd that I am, I tend to be especially star-struck by “presidential sightings,” so I was more thrilled about this aspect of the class than any other. As if I weren’t excited enough, Dr. Turner had one more idea that surfaced only a couple of days before we left for Plains, Ga., the president’s hometown. She suggested that my mother, Charlotte Evans Finnegan ’86 (a former student of hers), come along for the trip. I had told Dr. Turner my mom was jealous that I was going to meet President Carter, so when I called with Dr. Turner’s proposition, Mom said yes immediately.

So it was that on Saturday, May 9, we left Greenville for the five-hour journey to Plains. The time passed quickly as our anticipation built.

Early Sunday morning, we headed to Maranatha Baptist Church where President Carter would be teaching Sunday school. We arrived early so that we could have the best seats in the house, and we were successful. What an amazing experience! At 85, President Carter still has it all together, which was very evident from his personal interactions with the congregation as he tried to get a feel for where everyone was from. His lesson was well taught and was followed by a traditional Southern Baptist church service.

After church, we were able to talk briefly with the president and have our picture taken with him. Later we saw the Carters eating lunch at a local restaurant, and he and Rosalynn once again spoke to us.

We spent the rest of the day exploring Plains

and getting a glimpse into the former president’s life, past and present. We visited the farm where he grew up and the school he attended, as well as his campaign headquarters. On our way home, we stopped at the Carter Center in Atlanta and were able to learn more about his activities in such areas as diplomacy, social justice and Habitat for Humanity.

Upon arriving back in Greenville, our class commenced as would any other, and we engaged in in-depth discussions of President Carter and Southern Baptists in general. We learned that his core beliefs of advancing human rights and alleviating suffering are deeply rooted in his Southern Baptist upbringing and in such traditional denominational principles as “priesthood of all believers” and “unity in diversity.” Yet one

of the main reasons he cited in making the difficult decision to disassociate himself from the SBC after 65 years was that he no longer saw those core beliefs reflected in what he considered the rigid creeds espoused by the national convention.

Although the classroom work was educational and enjoyable, it was the trip to Plains and the personal encounter with President Carter that set this class apart from any that I have taken. It was by no means a typical class, but it is for that very reason that it is one of the best Furman experiences I have had.

— ELIZABETH STELL ’10

The author is a Spanish major from Fayetteville, Ga.

Furman folks meet the president. From left, President Carter, Daniel Spisak ’12, Courtney Orr ’11, Elizabeth Stell ’10, Charlotte Evans Finnegan ’86, Betsy Moseley ’74, Caitlin Sylvester ’12, Helen Lee Turner, Rosalynn Carter. Photo courtesy Helen Lee Turner.

