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# SETTING THE NETS

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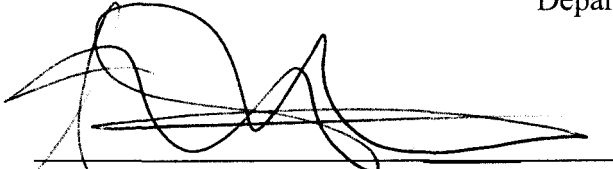
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SETTING THE NETS

By

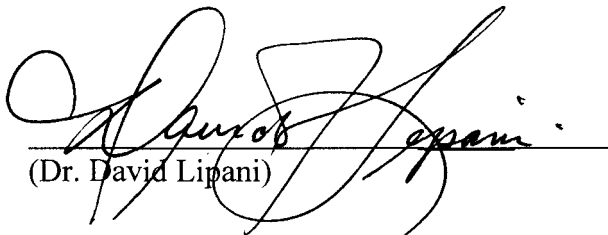
April Elizabeth Love

A paper submitted in fulfillment of the requirements to complete Honors in the English Department.




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(Allison Wilkins)



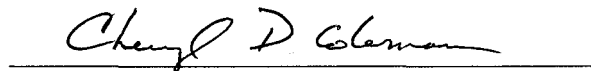
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(Dr. David Lipani)



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(Dr. Cheryl Coleman)

Lynchburg College

April 2016

**“Setting the Nets”**

by

**April Love**

**Senior Honors Thesis**

**2016**

## Introduction

I started this project thinking that it was going to be about service learning that I have experienced throughout the last couple of years. As I have been writing I realize that this piece is about joy, love, fellowship, and most importantly, people. The last couple of years has showed me my passion for people and relationships help us on our journey for discovery of self.

Discovery of self is something that has always intrigued me as a writer and a person. A few years ago, a very dear friend of mine was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, and lost his battle two years later. Because of this journey I began to see the world and myself differently. This may seem selfish, but it came from many conversations I had with Robbie during visits and stays in a small hospital room at the University of Virginia Medical Center. He was 23 years old and he knew he was dying, even though my eternal optimism was trying its best to keep him alive. The conversations I had with Robbie usually centered on all the things he had not been able to do, and how he knew he was going to be unable to fulfill the promises he had made to me. While his goals and aspirations had always been very different from mine, the underlying message was still the same, he always told me not to wait to do things. He knew how much of the world I wanted to see and how many people I wanted to help and he would often jokingly say, "Well why are you here? Get off your butt and go do something about it." At the time I would roll my eyes and tell him that I would, as soon as he got better, but that time never came.

Since Robbie died in 2014, I have gotten off of my butt many times and gone and done something about it. His voice is constantly in the back of my head telling me to "do

something about it” if I do not like something. His voice encourages me to take a leap of faith and for that reason this whole project, in a way, stems from his memory.

He, along with many others, has taught me how to love fiercely, and not shy away from being open and honest. Robbie was often honest to a fault, and I believe that is where I began to learn the value of being so open and ready to accept any difficulty with a positive attitude and turn it into a learning opportunity.



The title, “Setting the Nets,” comes from a speech I made at my Bonner graduation at the end of my junior year. At the end of our Bonner term there is a graduation ceremony where each graduating Bonner makes a speech reflecting on what they have learned during their time. The title of my speech came from a lot of mulling over with Anne about one thing that I had really taken away from my Bonner experience. One of the first times I had a meeting with Anne at the beginning of my Bonner term, I told her all about the service sites I had been going to and where I was planning to serve next. After my report, she looked at me and said, “that’s all well and good April, but what sort of relationships are you making?” That statement threw me for a loop because at that point I had not thought about what impact the people I was helping should be making on me. After she asked me that question, I left completely mystified. I realized that for my first semester of Bonner, I had breezed through just trying to get the hours done

After that conversation, I began trying to absorb my surroundings more, and really get to know the people that I was working with. I realized that what I was doing was something that I was passionate about. All my life, I felt like I was searching for

something that I loved, and something that I was good at and Bonner seemed to be that thing. I realized that Anne had taught me I needed to set the nets in order to have some sort of foundation to continue helping the community.

Since then, I have kept that philosophy in everything I do. I understand that it is important to build a foundation with people to start understanding and getting to know them. Obviously, the net metaphor also ties into my time in Greece and the traditional fishing that Stamatis and Tassos practices by throwing out a long line of nets and leaving them for hours, and then coming back to collect the nets that are now filled with fish.



I have decided to do an Honors Thesis because I like the idea of being able to look back on college and the many changes that have happened to me during my time here. I came into school thinking I was going to study English Literature and become a high school teacher and maybe one day become an English professor at a small liberal arts college much like Lynchburg College. That plan quickly dissolved for a number of reasons. The first being Robbie. The second was my experience in the Bonner Program my first semester.

The Bonner Leaders Program is a two year program at Lynchburg College that's motto is "access to education; opportunity to serve." The program consists of about 27 students at a time that work with local nonprofits. Another aspect of the program is the incentive of a tuition grant at the end of the time of enrollment in the program and the advantage of work-study that makes the program a job. The program also has weekly meetings that's purpose is to have students engage in current issues and abide by the six

common commitments of: international perspective, diversity, community building, civic engagement, spiritual exploration, and social justice.

My first semester of the program was considered an exploratory phase and that semester also coincided with my first semester in an education field class. The field classes were set up so that each class would build on the next. The first field class is meant for pure observation along with a limited interaction with students in the classroom.

My students were seventh graders at Sandusky Middle School, notorious for their behavior issues. I spent that semester with these kids that had severe anger issues, anxiety disorders, and learning disabilities and realized that I did not really want to teach them, I just wanted to hang out with them and talk to them about their stories. I wanted to talk to them so that I could try and understand them, and in turn, and help them. I believe this attitude stemmed from being a Bonner and talking to so many people about their life experiences so often.

That semester I quickly learned that being a teacher in the public school system, while extremely admirable was not going to be enough for me. I wanted to be “in the trenches” helping these kids understand that life did not always have to be like this, and that there are people in the world that want to help them and encourage them. That spring, I switched my minor to International Relations because it was most closely aligned with my new career path of attempting to help people.

Bonner has continued to help me learn and grow and become the person I am today. There is more to Bonner than just service. Bonner is as much about us as the people we serve. It is an avenue to do service but also reflect on that service. I worked for

a nonprofit called Interfaith Outreach. This experience allowed me to work in dilapidated homes in the Lynchburg area and try and help fix them, in order to make them livable again. I have also worked with Puppets A La Mode, a puppet artistry program for adults with intellectual disabilities; I have been a coach at the YWCA, served tea for the Adult Care Center, and many other various tasks. Through these service sites and a couple of internships, I have completed over 1000 hours of service. Every hour of service was a new occasion to discover and be thrown in uncomfortable situations to teach me how to handle different people.



I have never second-guessed my English major, I have wanted to study English Literature since my junior year of high school and it has rewarded me in so many different ways. One of those ways has been through Writing Workshops in Greece. This is the second experience that is being presented in the piece. It also came into play during my sophomore year of college. I had always wanted to study abroad but I never knew where it would be or how I would get there. Allison Wilkins, my advisor, told me about a program in Greece where students like myself could go write. I never considered myself a writer and was extremely nervous at the thought of exposing myself so vulnerably to a group of people I had never met. This program was a way for me to travel and learn more about writing because it was an interest I had picked up in the last year. I had taken a creative writing class with Professor Wilkins and had fumbled my way through writing poetry and short stories. While I will not say they were good, I learned that it is okay if



what you write is complete crap, because the process itself is something fun and engaging.

I was interested in going to Greece to explore more about my writing skills and myself. The program is four weeks long on the island of Thassos. The group all meets in Thessaloniki, a city in northern Greece, and spends a few days acquainting themselves with the culture. Once we moved to the island we would begin class. A normal day on the island would include, class from 10-1 everyday, and contrary to popular belief we did actually have class and learn about writing, as well as workshop pieces that I wrote on the island and pieces I had written in previous classes. After class we would eat lunch together because part of my class was learning about Greek Food. The workshop I had chosen to take was Food and Travel Writing with Christopher. Christopher had written a book titled Honey, Olives, Octopus, which was centered on the island of Thassos, told through traditional Greek dishes. His book had many different characters with a few of those characters being the Kouzis family.

The Kouzis family owns the restaurant that I was staying above, as well as having class at, so the book was coming to life before my eyes. Tassos of Thassos, Christopher's Greek brother would often join us in class and teach us about a dish he was fixing for the restaurant that day. Since our class was with Christopher and Tassos, my cohort would also get lunch because we helped to make it. After lunch, we would head down the goat path to the beach and read or write for the rest of the afternoon in front of the Aegean. At the end of the afternoon we would head up to our rooms, take a brief nap, and get ready for dinner, which we knew would last until the early morning hours. These dinners that would start at nine and go until one or two o'clock in the morning was where we really

got to know the people on the island. With wine and food flowing generously, it was a time for deep conversation and dancing. We would end our night and do the same thing over again and it was complete bliss.



Smith Mountain Lake Good Neighbors Inc. is a school/camp hybrid that operates in Bedford County and Franklin County, Virginia. With these counties being two of the most poverty-ridden places in Virginia, the camp aims to help bridge the gap for low income students in the area during the summer, so that going back to school is a little easier. The camp centers around four themes that correlate with the four weeks of camp: peace education, nature week, diversity week, and a week where the Roanoke Children's Theatre comes and choreographs a routine for campers to perform at the end of the week for their families. The camp focuses on reading and writing skills in order to possibly improve their performance once they return to school in the fall. SML recruits college volunteers to come live in rural Moneta, Virginia, in a house with nine interns and a stipend of 2000 dollars. The summer is spent partnered up with another intern with 8 weeks of planning and implementing ideas fostered between the team to instruct campers in the most beneficial way possible. As a teaching staff member, I took on the third and fourth graders along with Miss Tori, a Virginia Tech student who was one of the kindest people I had ever met.

Tori is small, very soft spoken, shy at first, but she has a sincerity unmatched by anyone I've ever met. I knew we would get along as soon as I met her, and I thought it would be a blast to have her as a teaching partner. As I worked with Tori through the

summer I also learned about her ability to talk to and relate with the students on many different levels, which was often our saving grace when we had a chaotic day, when the kids just would not listen to us. I also got to see the disciplinarian side of Tori, which the campers and me quickly found out, is not something that should be messed with.

I often think that one of the only reasons I was able to keep my sanity during those tumultuous nine weeks was because of her. Together, we were constantly trying to figure out a way to make something click with our class, or what was the best way to keep them focused and on task. I did not even realize until the end of the summer how much she and camp had affected me.



This project is formed in vignettes with important scenes that took place throughout each experience. They are important simply because they stand out in my head as times where I was very affected by my surroundings. After writing and reading what I wrote, I realized that the major themes presented in the piece are love, joy, fellowship and people. It is about how people have affected me and how I have learned so much about myself and love. There have been so many people that I have met along the way in my experience that have taught me so much.

All of the people I have mentioned in the piece are people that have made a great impact on my life for many different reasons. I find myself pulled towards different people because they offer me so much insight into how love and relationships work.



A huge inspiration I have had for this piece is Hope Collins. Hope is mentioned multiple times in the project and was my first friend in Greece. Hope and I met and fell in love in the same instance. We were almost the same people, and she made me feel comfortable at a time when I was very nervous about going somewhere and not being able to make friends quickly. From the moment we met I don't think we stopped talking until it was time to leave. Actually, there was one time Hope and I separated on the island. We thought that since we had been spending 24/7 together it would be wise to take some time apart to make sure we didn't get sick of each other. I spent a very enjoyable Friday afternoon in my hammock on a secluded spot on the island while Hope spent the afternoon writing and reading. After about six hours of separation I walked back to the Archondissa, and Hope, in her very loud and animated voice said, "APRIL! Don't leave me again, I missed you!!!" For the rest of our time in Greece we were inseparable. Hope and I talked about anything and everything you could possibly imagine. We spent our afternoons walking and swimming and being quiet together. Hope and I are both very talkative individuals, but I knew I had found a lifelong friend when I realized that we could be silent and comfortable in our own thoughts together.

Leaving Hope was one of the hardest parts about leaving Greece, but since Greece I have been able to stay in touch with her, and see her once when I visited her at her school in Meadville, Pennsylvania. During that visit, Hope was finishing up Alleghany College's definition of an Honors Thesis called a comp. She explained to me that her comp was a creative nonfiction piece that she was writing about her life experiences.

At the end of the semester, Hope sent me her comp upon my request and I read it in my hammock one afternoon. After I read it, I was inspired to do something similar.

Hope was inspired by the book Eat, Pray, Love and I am too, by proxy. Hope also wrote in vignettes and scenes that showed her first hand experience on a Tall Ship museum piece on Lake Erie and her time on the island of Thassos.



Another reason I have chosen to format the project the way it is is because I think there is a lot of value in combining the many different scenes together. It gives me an opportunity to look back and see how the three very different experiences overlap and work together to become something whole. I see Bonner as gateway to the experiences that I had in Greece and at Smith Mountain Lake.

Bonner taught me, like Robbie, the value of being open and connected to the people around you. It taught me that going out of my comfort zone and doing something different is good for my soul and my brain and that there is so much in this world to be explored and learned. That is where I began to see those themes of love and fellowships develop. Bonner was a gateway for Greece for sure, but Greece and Bonner combined to really see the value of what I learned at Smith Mountain Lake. Going from halfway across the world one summer, to rural Moneta, Virginia the next was a difficult transition.

I have missed Greece every single day since the day I left and watching another cohort head off to Greece was very difficult. As I went through the summer at SML, I began to try and apply what I learned the last two years into my daily life. A huge part of SML was learning to be patient and flexible with the kids. I consider myself a very patient person, but that summer tested every ounce of patience I had. After learning more

about the campers and where they come from, I realized that I could really apply my ability to form relationships and connect with people to the campers because that's all they really needed. These kids needed someone to talk to and listen to them. They wanted someone to tell them of other places and different lives because they so badly wanted to escape from their own lives and I was able to transport them to the island with me and tell them stories about Tassos of Thassos, and his father Stamatis.

This is where I see overlap. Each experience has taught me something new and different and in each one I was thrown out of my comfort zone and forced to adapt. Therefore, this is a story of love, fellowship, and being able to adapt to new places.



As I reflect and collect the ideas I have for this piece I also recognize the value that my liberal arts education has had on my ability to form this project. The Hellenistic approach to education allows for students to study and have some experience in many different subject areas and then find an area that is interesting and focus on it more thoroughly.

I see my liberal arts education, as an opportunity to be a student of the world and really push myself beyond my limits in order to see what my mind is capable of. Not only am I able to problem solve and critically think, but I can apply this problem solving and critical thinking to something as random as building a ramp, or reading a book and finding what the author might really mean.

This project is an opportunity for me to collect my life over the past few years pages and see my growth. I see it as a collection of insights into my intellectual and

emotional parts of myself because they have changed so much over the years. The liberal arts education has taught me that change and adaptability is good and that it is something that should be learned from rather than resented, like so many people do.

Instead, I have realized that change should be welcomed because it keeps life interesting. Every change and curveball that has been thrown my way has been a chance to flourish and become better. The people that I have met along the way are people that have offered me something new and some insight into how to handle change and adventure.

My freshman year of college I heard someone say, "don't live a life of success, live a life of significance." Since then I have decided to do just that, and so far I have found much satisfaction and significance in really absorbing the world around me and doing my best to make it a better place.

### “Setting the Nets”

Everyone around me scurries around to find their seats. Some sit in yoga poses on the floor; others try to decide who is going to get a spot on the most comfy couch in the room. Others decide to suck it up and sit in hard plastic chairs because they know it will help to keep them awake. I choose a spot on the floor and sit cross-legged as if I am about to begin meditating. But meditating would be impossible in this place. There is too much buzz and activity. It must be getting close to seven o'clock almost everyone is here, except for the normally late ones. The weekly Bonner meeting begins.

It is sophomore year and I have joined the Bonner Leader program. From what I have learned so far, Bonner is a bunch of passionate people, trying to look as Hippie-like as possible, working in local non-profits, and spending a lot of time trying to solve the world's problems. Despite only first meeting in August, we've somehow, miraculously, and very strangely, become a family. We all work in different organizations. All of us come from different ethnic backgrounds, weird families, and tragic situations, but we all find something that we can love in this program.

Anne walks in with her usual notepad, fruit-infused water, and her arms waving around with excitement. The projector is turned on to get ready for announcements and I observe and watch these people and feel so excited that I get to keep getting to know them.





I was a girl with a plan to “save the babies in Africa,” but with no idea how to actually do that. I thought it would be as simple as finding some random group of people who wanted to go, and buying a plane ticket. It is not that simple.



I get off the plane and wipe my sweaty palms on my cargo vest, second guess my entire outfit choice, and realize that since my stuff is locked away in a cargo hold for an indefinite amount of time, I’m stuck wearing the very dorky t-shirt, sandals, and vest that I thought were a great idea back in the United States. I look around and see all of the men and women dressed in a very bohemian way and become immediately jealous since they are able to pull off at the airport what I have been trying to pull off for years. They remind me of a few of the hippie Bonners at home.

The first time flying for me has been a breeze. As a girl who had never even left the country, never been on an airplane I was pretty anxious about my eighteen-hour flight across the world. I quickly realized how fun it was going to be though, since I enjoyed people watching and looking at how other people interact with each other. Traveling is a pot of gold as far as people watching is concerned.

One of my favorite movies is “Love Actually.” It is a series of stories set in London around Christmas. All of the stories are interwoven in some way and the movie begins with a scene in Heathrow airport. The scene starts with men and women getting off of the plane and running to reunite with their families after a trip. There is a man narrating in the background, saying:

“Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrival's gate at Heathrow airport. General opinion started to make out that we live in a world of

hatred and greed, but I don't see that. Seems to me that love is everywhere. Often it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy but it's always there..." "When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from people on board were messages of hate or revenge, they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling, you'll find that love actually is all around."

In that moment, the airport looked like a scene from "Love Actually, and I felt like I could maybe be like one of those people one day, with the ability to fly off somewhere exciting and fun, and then come back to a family that loves and misses me. As I watch people rush around with their briefcases and hiking backpacks I make up a story about each of them and what they could possibly be doing in the Frankfurt and Athens airports.



Growing up I always felt a little different. I was never one to really get involved in sports, not because I didn't want to, but just because I could not seem to connect my limbs with my brain. It is hard work to be successful in standing upright. I did, however, find out that I liked dancing. Sort of. Despite the difficulty of having to stand in a straight line, and flutter my feet around, nothing gave me more of an adrenaline rush than being onstage in front of a bunch of people, attempting to strut my stuff. I'm sure to others it just looked like I was a pecking chicken, but that was the only part of dancing that I really loved. As I grew into being a teenager I watched so many girls around me fall in love with different genres of dance, and find this intense passion for it. But I did not attach myself to dance, but rather to the idea that I should be around for comic relief. I think that is really where I began to realize my affinity for being around and talking to people. I went to dance, I would make my rounds and talk to people, and in class I would

be the one cutting up a little bit to lighten the mood and try and make others laugh. Sometimes I was successful and sometimes I wasn't but the times I was, whether people were laughing with me or at me, I just soaked it all up. Don't get me wrong, I did genuinely love dance, but there is a difference between loving something and being passionate about it.



The cheerful chaos of the tiny kitchen is contagious. Nine of us, from many different colleges and ethnic backgrounds are living together in a tiny house in rural Moneta, Virginia. My summer has led me here to teach at a day camp in two elementary schools for nine weeks. The summer promised to be extremely exhausting and exciting. Training has not prepared us for the actual camp, but it has brought us together in moments while laughing awkwardly at our very exaggerated first aid training.

Our nightly ritual involves coming home from camp and heating up dinner that volunteers provide way too early. We live as if we are in our golden years, and the golden years seem to be exhausting. At dinner, we discuss how one of the kids tried to throw a desk, or how one had left the classroom and hid himself somewhere, causing us to try and find him for an hour trying to find him. We talked about how Casey and Kevin's students locked them out of the building, and how Antoine, our student with a lot of anger issues, tried to hit another girl with a swing chain because his anger got out of control once again. We witness and do things together that a lot of people would not really believe. That type of bond, formed between these people is special, and hard to explain. Chaos is the only word to describe the way that the house operates because with so many people in

a small little house it is bound to happen. That small little house and that small little kitchen table brought us together into this weird world of Smith Mountain Lake Good Neighbors.



Everyone is bustling and stirring trying to find their place at the table. Where we sit is important because we wanted to be able to see all the action happening out on the dance floor. The famous Tasos of Thassos is finally going to introduce us to life at the Archondissa Pension. I decide to sit with my roommate Hope, and Christopher. Since meeting Christopher, I have felt drawn to him. He is extremely comforting to be around and he really knows what he is doing as far as Greece is concerned, after visiting the country countless times in the last twenty years. All the food on the island is grown or caught within a mile, and cooked in the wood oven to perfection. During our welcome dinner I am bombarded with a perfect feast. Hope, Rachel, and I eat sweet revithia, taste the sea in the octopus, and soak up the oil with bread; we taste last summer's grapes in the wine. The fellowship begins with the music and we soon find ourselves dancing in a circle, fumbling through traditional Greek dances.

I begin to feel myself relax into the rhythm of the island. Carolina and Tasos begin dancing and, in keeping with the tradition, napkins shower over them (the napkins a cheaper and easier to clean up alternative to breaking plates). Carolina is a force to be reckoned with. She is nine months pregnant, due the next day, and is as light on her feet as a bird. The love between the two of them emanates in their movement. Tasos looks

joyful, Carolina looks struck by love, and I feel like we are lucky to witness such a fierce devotion between two people.

This is our first real night on the island. I have never known people to be so boisterous, happy, and totally out of control. I love absolutely every minute of it.



The joy of this island can be tasted in every olive oil soaked bite of octopus.



I find myself coming to back to school a nervous wreck. I have had the whole summer to mull over this new thing. I am going back early for orientation, and I am beginning my sophomore year. I am diving into a whole new group of people that I do not know at all. I do not know what the dynamic will be like and I do not know if my normal position as goofball will work for this group. They seem so intelligent and informed. Our first order of business is to pull off a couple minute routine that will introduce our group of Bonners... the 10s, to the old group of Bonners.... The 9s. This group has had whole years of experience under their belts. The idea of performing a little “ditty” in front of them is terrifying.

Evy Keeney-Ritchie, is the first person to talk to me after the terribly awkward dancing and she is one of the kindest and most sincere people I’ve ever met. Three years later, 900 hours of community service under our belt, and half a year as a senior intern we are still very close. Evy is balanced, and intelligent, witty and fun, and easy to be around; she is basically what everyone wants to be when they grow up. My time with Evy is

usually spent goofing off or having these really serious life conversations where we usually impart some sort of knowledge on each other. Evy has taught me so much in the last couple of years, and often reminds me of some of those boisterous and carefree people that I met in Greece.



We leave Thessaloniki on a hot day; it feels as the heat is weighing us down with stickiness. We are departing for the island of Thassos. We board and the boat starts moving. Hope, my quirky, newfound friend, is thrilled to be on a boat again because she has come to Thessaloniki from working on a tall ship in Lake Erie.

Hope Collins and I basically experience love at first site, it is an unexplainable relationship. This girl is crazy and fun; her energy is infectious, and I love it.



A charter bus takes us from the ferry in Thasos Town to the pension Archondissa, which will be our home for the next month. The bus navigates the thing and winding island roads. It seems as if I could put my finger outside of the window and be able to touch the wall of the building next to us. After many blind turns, and much Greek music, we roll to a stop in the middle of a road, and are instructed to get out as fast as we can and get to the other side of the road and trudge up the large hill to get to the top of the patio.

As I and the other workshop participants do as instructed, Tasos and Stamatis immediately come hurling down the hill to greet Christopher and Allison, and the rest of us. They welcome us with open arms and help us with our suitcases. I know from this moment, they will hold a special place in my heart forever. Never have I ever been more right about anything.



The patio of the Archondissa is covered in flowers, grape vines, and herbs that Eva, the matriarch of the Kouzis family, likes to grow naturally for the kitchen. It smells like Greece: herbal and soothing. I look around and see where the oven is built, and realize that I am feeling the heat coming off of it halfway across the patio.

The Archondissa sits on top of a large hill overlooking Alyki Bay. When I turn towards the water, I see the view that I will see every day for the next twenty-some days. I see the sea. Alyki peninsula. Mt. Athos is visible in the distance, and I can even see the small goat path that leads to the beach.

But first, Tasos and Stamatis greet us with warm hugs and lots of water, before sending us to our rooms to change into our bathing suits so we can take a swim to cool ourselves off before the welcome dinner.



I'm sitting in a house full of paper. It is stacked in piles on the floor, piles in boxes, piles under the stairs. There are newspapers from 1965, which are stacked in the closet. The woman I am working for, Miss Berta, is confined to an in home hospital bed and she is close to being evicted from her house because of her hoarded paper. It is a sanitation issue.

My job this morning is to try and clear out and clean up her home. Miss Berta tells me where to put her various items so that she can remain comfortable with their location. She is exhibiting classic signs of a hoarder and my desire to clean up the clutter. I have been working with Rebuilding Together Lynchburg for over a year now and I have encountered many different types of people all throughout the city of Lynchburg. Most of them live in less than desirable areas. Through my work with this organization I have had the opportunity to do a bit of everything: from repairing holes in floors to running electrical wires, from trying to fix plumbing to building a wheelchair ramp on the side of a steep hill. Miss Berta's case is unique simply because I am able to spend more time with her rather than just work in quiet with the other Bonners.

Miss Berta seemed very curt at first. She is extremely territorial of her stuff and she is very invested in the location of each piece of paper and her many lamps and salt and peppershakers. After several days of working, Miss Berta and I finally reach some sort of unspoken agreement. I will ask her about each pile and where she wants it, but I have the freedom to make the decision about which pile we tackled next. This system works well, and we chat as if we are old friends.

I learn she is from Brooklyn and was a middle school teacher for many years. She ended up in Lynchburg because her son was here, and she wanted to help raise her three



grandchildren. Miss Berta made many sacrifices for her children, and ended up hospitalized by a cut on her toe that led to an amputation because of her diabetes. She spent her life in the hospital bed next to the window surrounded by her papers and newspaper clippings of her former life.

I realized that she kept all of her stuff as a way to remember the life when she was not confined to a hospital bed.



The Kouzis family does not know us, but they treat us like their own. Greeks are the most hospitable people I've ever met and that's saying something because I grew up in the South. In Greece, strangers will instantly feed you out of their own kitchen. They make you feel as at home as possible.

Hope's face is full of giddy surprise. She is already just as in love with Tasos and Stamatis as I am. I look around again to see what the others are looking like and realize our faces are all mirrors of each other. We are relieved to finally be here, excited to see what is going to happen next, and already completely obsessed with this enchanting place.



Christopher begins explaining Thassian folklore. He explains Alyki Peninsula and tells of virgin sacrifices and the well where the severed heads of virgin men were

discarded. Despite deciding right then and there that I will never venture to that well, it turns out I am wrong.



The Goathort has fallen into a rhythm of eating, writing, and swimming. The Goathort is composed of the Josh, Taylor, Hannah, Hope and myself. We have called ourselves this in order to show the strong bond of friendship between the five of us, and it helps to make me feel even more at home on the island. I am still reveling in the fact that I am here. The mountains beg for exploration, and the marble quarry pops out against the shoreline. The Aegean Sea is so clear, sometimes you wonder if it is even there.

The island is a mixture of scents: the fishy smell when you pass by the boats, the smell of olives coming from the grove right outside of our window, the smell of the gardenias that greet you every time you return from the sea, and of course the smell of the dinner that has been cooking in the wood oven all day long.



Along with the writing that we are doing here, we also have the opportunity to learn a little Greek along the way, and even though we sometimes butcher these graceful and ancient words, we practice with each other every chance we get... as loud as we can.

Everyone is here for something it seems; we all come with expectations of fulfilling something, or letting something go by throwing that burden like a smooth ivory stone into the sea.



It is hot. It is the middle of the afternoon and I know my hair is achieving something akin to mad scientist hair as a result of the sweat, frustration, and a heat drenched elementary school classroom. The kids will not stop arguing.

We have attempted a peace training exercise that entails having the kids create a town and the rules for living in that town. It is the first week of camp and we are beginning to get to know these kids pretty well in this short amount of time. The most important thing we know about them is that they do not get along in the least bit.

Our kids seemed predestined to have some sort of fight with each other every day. Combine that with a couple nosy girls who like to gossip and out comes a class that cannot stand being around each other. Somehow in the 3 days we have been at camp, our class has already become known as the trouble group and no one wants to hang out with them. This afternoon our plans are not going according to schedule. We are off our timetable, and the carefully set up room has been completely transformed into a scene of chaos from a movie, like one of those car chase scenes with a bunch of explosions, and Miss Tori and I are the one's that feel like we are getting run over. Our plan has not gone the way we wanted to at all.

Miss Tori, my partner for the summer, looks at me with a very frantic look in her eyes that tells me that this very kind and sweet girl is on the verge of a breakdown.

All of a sudden I yell as loud as I can, "WHO WANTS TO LEARN GREEK???" In that instance 18 hands fly up in the air and for a moment there is some semblance of peace.

Eager to learn a new language, they begin shouting and yelling. I summon what little Greek I remember and begin instructing them about basic greetings, and "please," and "thank you." For the two minutes that it takes to explain and sound out the complicated Greek letters, there is complete silence. The kids put on faces of determination that make my heart melt a little bit. Within the next couple of minutes, the chaos returns, but this time it is not so bad because for a couple of minutes we were able to have a moment of unity, and the air conditioning has switched back on.



Next to the grill, Stamatis starts crooning about the Turks and the Greeks. The music quiets a bit while everyone stands, breathing heavily from dancing, to listen to the man himself. His voice gets soft enough that you can hear the sea down below. The faint, chilly breeze comes through the patio, and we are mesmerized. We have been able to occupy this space on this island, are still just as entranced by the people and the food as on day one. Our time here is not done, it is not time to leave yet, it could not possibly be time to say goodbye, but as we look around at each other, take another sip of wine, we realize this is it.

The rest of the night goes by in a blur, more twirling, more shaking, more fingers snapping and only two broken glasses (this time). The night wears on and people begin trickling away after realizing that making the party last longer will not extend our stay on the island.

The Goathort attempts to hang on in vain; we all stay around the table, retelling everything that has happened, laughing at memories, and dreaming about what will happen when we come back. We make promises to each other over another glass of Tsipouro that we will come back in November. We know that it is far out of our price range, but we console ourselves that we will be back in a few short months to make the pain of departure something less.

Christopher tries to explain how to acclimate back to real life, and ends up crying with us. I know that there is nothing that can really be said to make it better. This place has taken all my insecurities and thrown them out into the open, and has made me feel more at home in one place than I have in years.



Leaving the island.

Leaving the island is leaving a piece of yourself behind.

It makes returning to normal life seem impossible.



In my second week in Greece, Christopher decides we should take a little road trip to a different beach where, according to word around the restaurant, the octopus hunting is prime that day. We all load into Christopher's little jeep and take off.

The jeep is made for riding with the top down, the music blaring, and letting the wind whip through your hair. The new beach is only about three miles down the road and looked very similar to the beach we just came from. The only difference is the restaurant.

We sit down to get a bite to eat before we take our afternoon swim. Whether it is fate or just the fact that we want to eat the same things, Josh and I sit next to each other. I have not spent much time with Josh yet. When we were in Thessaloniki the first thing I learned about him was that had to go to H&M because he had not brought enough clothes with him on the trip.

Josh and I begin our menu deliberations, and after a few minutes we discover our mutual love for tzatziki and grilled octopus. We begin to talk about our lives and what has brought us to Greece.

After about fifteen minutes the conversation heads towards the C word, meaning C for cancer. I am amazed at how quickly I open up to him. I discover that Josh has been affected by cancer as much as I have, which is what has ultimately led us to this place. Josh tells me about his family and the last couple of years. He shares all of what his mom has gone through as a result of her breast cancer. I tell him about my childhood friend that was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, and the years after that which involved me going back and forth between hospitals to make sure that Robbie was doing okay. Josh and I sit for hours and talk about everything under the sun.

I know that Josh has hitchhiked his way through Fiji, I know that he got lost during his Freshman year of college and was still on a quest to find himself. I find out how sensitive and caring this big teddy bear of a fellow is, and how much he wants to help people, because I feel it within myself. I feel a connection with Josh. One that I have experienced with few people in the world. Before I know it, I feel like I have found my male counterpart, and as cheesy as it sounds I know that I have found a lifelong friend. We eat for hours and discover all the many things that we have in common. Our ultimate goal is to make a difference.



The third week of camp arrives so quickly, Tori and I have no time to take a breath. We are swamped with trying to plan for next camp and make sure that our classroom is comfortable and ready for a new group of third and fourth graders.

International food day is approaching. I have decided to make Tzatziki for everyone. In preparation for my dish, I go to a normal Kroger and get normal ingredients for one of my favorite Greek dishes. I know it will not taste as good on cracker-like pita chips. But, it is worth a try in order to expose the kids to something new and different.

I explain to the kids what I did in Greece and why I went, but they give me lots of confused looks and say “when do we get a snack?” rather than, “please Miss April, tell us more about the great adventure you took across the world.” So I move quickly through my presentation and passed around Tzatziki filled pita chips.

As I pass them around, I begin to hear the uncanny sounds of spitting food out into a napkin. I turn around and see faces twisted up in looks of disgust, but some are

curious as to what they are eating. I explain to them the Greek practice of mezedes, meaning they constantly have food ready in case guests come over to have an afternoon of eating and visiting. Their faces all looked confused, as if they do not understand why people would come over to visit and eat with each other.

I realize in that moment that company and fun is not something these kids know well. They do not know what it is like for a huge extended family to come over and dance and eat the night away. Some of them do not even know where their family is and may be in some sort of alternative living situation. Many of the conversations I have with these kids involve their lives: how their parents have left them in the care of their grandparents, or how they may not even know their parents. It makes me sad that they do not understand what it means to be a part of a community, much less a family.

I begin to understand how truly brave these kids are. They are brave because they have seen some things that I cannot possibly imagine, and yet they are getting through it. Each day is something new and something different and despite the occasional speed bumps, they keep going, and they keep trying. They get angry and they get confused and they run, but it is my job to provide them a safe space for trying something new, for getting out of their comfort zones, and for helping them explore.



One of the first non-Archonidissa people I meet on Thasso is the Gyro Lady. I notice her striking blue eyes that do not match any of the other islanders' eyes. They are



clear, blue, and seem to know the exact type of gyro you want as soon you walk up to her glass window.

Most of the time when you walk up to the stand to order your food, you have to catch her attention because she is busy doing some sort of work behind the Kantina, but as soon as you do she greets you with a smile, a wave, and a questioning look that says it is time to order. At first glance you can tell about the amount of time that she spends doing labor to build up her strength and stamina outside of working at the stand. She is built with the grace of a Greek woman. She is not artificially strong because she spends hours at the gym, but because she knows what hard work is. Her limbs are strong, and adept from doing manual labor and we watch her while we eat the delicious gyros she made. She sweeps the area outside her home, washes and dries the laundry, and makes sure her customers are happy, every single day. It must be exhausting.

Yet, she is cheerful and happy, and greets us hesitant young writers with an exaggerated “Barakolo” when we thank her in Greek. Every time we walk up to order our food, she looks just as excited to be able to cook for people as she would be for sitting down to eat a feast for herself. She has a motherly presence, and this is I think, is what helps her sell many souvlakis and gyros every single summer season. Many days she has crowds of people coming up to her window to order more food and thank her for her kindness. It seems that tourists and travelers alike, are drawn to her because the energy she gives off is welcoming and warm. Her smile says she wants us to make Thassos our home, as much as it is hers.

Later, when I see the man who owns the Mini Mart, I notice that their eyes match. I wonder if they are siblings?

All of a sudden the gyro lady is gone. I haven't seen her for a week. Then a week and half. Stories start to fly among us crazy writers. We want to know what happened. We want more gyros, but I also want to make sure she is okay. In my head I come up with many explanations as to why she is gone. Did she get picked up and given a prize for her outrageously delicious gyros? Has she gone on a quest to find a change of scenery, or a new and secret recipe to make her gyros even better?

After wondering and worrying for a week, then two weeks, we hear through the Thassos grape vine that this woman has been shut down due to changes in the EU policy. I am saddened by this because from the bits of interaction that I have had with her, I would never want her to go out of business but I'm sure that she is off somewhere figuring out what to do next, and how to provide gyros to the people as soon as possible.



This afternoon we are spending time in the super retro van, as Christopher carts Victoria to the port on the other side of the island. She has decided to go to Athens for a weekend and we are along for the ride. I am very excited because I could not get enough of this island and this place and these people, I can't wait to see what it looks like over here. Christopher zooms around in the giant circle that is the island and blasts my favorite song. When 24/7 comes on, he yells, "April Love! Let me hear you back there!" I laugh and sing at the top of my lungs. The windows whip air into my face. Hope and Josh turn around and smile at me and I realize how happy I am to be in that moment, with these people, feeling warm and happy and ready to go swimming.



The crowd is still slipping away like sand through our fingers, and we are really beginning to realize that this might be it. But inspiration strikes and we decide to move the party down to the sea for our last hurrah. I rush through the flower laden patio and use memory and the moonlight to help me remember my way down the goat path. It has become old habit in the past month and I now move down with speed and only few bumps and bruises, rather than slipping and sliding all the way down. The moon is up high, and the water is black glass on the shore. As I step in I notice that for once the water is not too chilly and does not make me immediately shiver. I think that this is the island's way of wishing me luck, luck for what? I'm not exactly sure. I keep getting deeper into the water and begin moving my hands around in a breaststroke and see all the stars shimmer around me in the water. While Hope is gasping at the shiny little plankton that I have disrupted I laugh loudly because I am just so happy to be.



Hope and I wake up after a night of serious celebration with the heavy cloud of exhaustion and feel the loss of the island already.

The night before we yelled, Hope and I cried, every one of us laughed, some, like Josh, even fell asleep at the table. Even the food quantity of food seemed to suggest farewell. Tasos and Stamatis went all out in giving us a feast to remember with plates of chickpeas, piles of mussels, and so many octopus tentacles. I rejoiced in the fact that this

whole month was able to happen with these wonderful people; we enjoyed each other's company for one of the last times. The sun went down, and so did many of our spirits.

But then Tasos started singing. We brought our own light and sound. Hands went into the air, feet began stomping, and Craig started doing his weird jumping and twirling in the air with the sombrero. Billy began showing us more of the moves that the German dancers had taught him; Hope reenacted Beyonce's music videos and Josh learned more about the macho man dance from the Other Tasos. I took a moment to absorb the joy. The party was on, and the goodbyes were stalled.

Today, the sun is hot, and all I want to do is go take a dip in the sea, but that is not an option today. Craig regrets all of his jumping and twirling with his sombrero as he nurses the biggest glass of water we can find. Everyone laughs with each other easily, because that's what we've done the past month and don't want anything to change just because we're leaving. We hug and kiss Tasos, Eva, and Stamatis good-bye, we thank them in our still choppy but understandable Greek because we want them to know how much we appreciate it. I know that I will probably cry all the way back to Thessaloniki.

Tasos sees the tears in my eyes and grabs me by the arm to tell me "Abrilly Mou, you will come back, you will be back. This place, this place is a part of you now, you are always welcome here. It is like the man from that long poem that goes away from his home for many years but he returns one day." Later, I realized he was quoting the Odyssey to me, and I hope that his words are true. I'd be a fool not to believe Tasos, because he is Tasos of Thassos, after all.



Anne, Cindy and I are sitting outside on a spring day towards the end of the school year. I have almost completed my 900 hours of community service and I am beginning to prepare for my senior year. As part of that preparation I have decided to apply to be a Bonner Senior Intern.

I have wanted to be an intern since the day I started Orientation. I'm interviewing with Anne and Cindy.

"What do you think you would bring to the Bonner Leadership Team?" Anne asks me. I begin oozing about how much I want this job, and how much I think my positive attitude and adventurous spirit will be a good fit for the program. Since we are pretty close, we slip into easy conversation about goals and ideas for the next year, and I begin to feel more comfortable.

In the back of my mind I know that this job is not necessarily a given, and there is a chance I may not get this opportunity.



As we travel from the coast inward to the city limits, the landscapes begin to change from fields of sunflowers to old buildings full of graffiti. The city is still strange to me but coming into it this time isn't as jarring as it was the first time. It seems more familiar. When we arrive our hotel, the El Greco, everyone is tired from the day and all begin to wander off in different directions for naps and to rest up for dinner. Being in the hotel again makes us all feel separated.

The first night back in Thessaloniki is hard because we all want to be back on the island.



After the farewell dinner, Christopher tells us about a taverna that he went to the previous night where they played the traditional Greek music we have come to love on the island. He offers to take us there until I need to leave for my flight at 3 AM.

Once we are there, the Goathort begins to slowly dissolve into more tears. We have endless conversations about trying to see each other again, trying to hammer out all the logistics. It is all too much.

Christopher requests Stamatis's song and then we know that the night must end.



Coming home is harder than I ever imagined. In fact, I still don't think that I have fully come home. Finding how to fit this new person into the same world has been difficult. I am still trying to find my stride in my own life, but I am so grateful for the time that I have had, and I am counting down the days for the opportunity to go back. Thassos is a part of me now and I don't want it any other way. I am still trying to figure out everything that happened to me there, but I think that will only come with time. I have chalked up my time in Greece to something transformative and enlightening and I realize that Lawrence Durrell said it best, "other countries offer you discoveries in manners, love, or landscape. Greece offers you something harder: the discovery of yourself."



Word on the street is there are new Bonner Interns, and they only chose three. Four of us interviewed and they have only taken three on for next year. Evy and Daniel have their letters so I ran to my mailbox to see if I have a rejection or acceptance letter.

My hands shake as I open the envelope and scan quickly to see any words that were either affirmative or negative. Finally, I saw a congratulations, and jumped for joy. I got the job.



The new Bonners walk in and we are about to begin Orientation. Daniel, Evy and I have been working nonstop for the last week to make Bonner Orientation fun, challenging, and informational. Bonner Orientation usually begins with the new Bonner class coming to meet the interns, the GA, and Anne before the old Bonner class comes to join them for dinner. Our job is to prepare them for the next couple days because they promise fun and challenging activities. As they walk in they resemble how I am sure I looked in their spots three years ago. Splotchy and nervous. They seem to be unsure of this new thing they have taken on for their sophomore year, and very uncomfortable.

Daniel begins introductions and we tell them that we are going to be their senior interns for the years. Their faces look confused and we realize that they have no idea what being a senior intern means because some of them are still not all the ways sure what Bonner is. I see their nervous faces change to confusion and I chime in and tell them

not to worry that we have all been in the same spot before and that we were here to teach them the ropes and make their transition to Bonner as easy and fluid as possible.

However, there is one thing that I really want to convey to them, one very important thing that I have learned over the past three years. It is good to be uncomfortable. I told them the last three years have shown me challenges and adventures and that I find the more uncomfortable I am, the better the outcome usually is. Their faces still looked confused and I laughed at myself because I was probably making them even more nervous. I promised them that the next two years were going to be some of the best years of their lives because not only had they join the Bonner Leader Program, but they had also joined a family.

I looked them all in the eye and said, "trust us." After that it was this new class's turn to perform their thirty second routine for the Bonner 11s and I encouraged and helped them where I could, but smiled to myself when I saw the hesitant friendships begin to form and I knew these new baby Bonners would be just fine.



It is 7:45 and it is way too early to be pulling out Jenga blocks and puzzles. The day promises to be hot and muggy and I am not looking forward to hearing complaints from little eight year olds about how hot and tired they are. I go sit down at my normal table of coloring books and crayons, cradle my cup of coffee and grunt at Casey because we know that morning games are about to begin.

Morning games was an hour long period at camp where the kids begin their days eating breakfast and playing games with the other campers and the teaching staff. They



loved it, but it also meant many fights about who gets to play Four-Square first, and who gets to put the last piece of the puzzle into place. Kevin was smart about morning games because he would sit at the breakfast table and monitor the food and that was a good time to hang out with the campers because they were happy that they were getting food in their belly rather than being obsessive over the Go Fish cards.

This morning though, a new little boy came to sit at the coloring table. He was sad because the bigger boys had kicked him out of the Four Square battle and there was one little tear that rolled down his face while he was telling me how mean they had been to him. This boy's name was Trey and he was one of our campers that had Aspergers and because of this he was very small in size, looked very frail, and did not follow social cues well. We had a policy at camp, "Stay in control of your body," and Trey did not follow that policy so well because he always wanted to run and jump on people, or hug them. He was a spunky little guy, but his feelings were easily hurt and he just did not understand why no one wanted to play with him.

I was trying to console him and tell him that we could go back over there and tell those boys to let him play, but he looked up at me with his small brown eyes and said, "Miss April, is it okay if I stay over here with you and show you how I draw all of my favorite dinosaurs?" I answered him and said I would love to see his favorite dinosaurs. For the rest of camp, Trey and I would spend morning games drawing dinosaurs and making up stories about them. After that day, morning games were one of my favorite times at camp.



I am sitting around a fire in 98 degree weather, wondering why we had to light a fire in the first place and Evy is making fun of me saying that it is all for ambiance. Daniel is playing his ukulele as usual, and everyone is belting out some rendition of Wagon Wheel. I look at Evy and tell her I don't really like this ambiance and she laughs and says "it's tradition April." She is right, every year all of the Bonners go to Claytor Nature Center and have Bonner Olympics, a series of weird competitions that pit Bonners against Bonners and get their competitive juices flowing, a cookout, and then share time. Everybody is supposed to bring a special item with them to orientation and at the end of the night, and three days worth of bonding things are supposed to get a little more serious.

The special item is something that can expose a very vulnerable side of the Bonners to each other and there are many different special items. In my time in Bonner I have brought the same special item: a map. I always bring a map because maps for me mean adventure and fun. My first year I brought an Appalachian Trail Map, my second year a world map and my Greece guidebook, and this year I brought my Greece guidebook with a map of Thassos. We go around the circle, the flames illuminating everyone's faces with an orange glow and it is my turn. Michael went before me, and he has brought his grandfather's Purple Heart he received during World War II and I make a little joke about how that act is pretty hard to follow. Everyone laughs, and I begin to explain why I brought my guidebook.

I tell them how it is very easy for me to get lost, and maps make me feel like it is less possible to get lost. Greece was the place that I was able to find myself, so I always make sure to keep my guidebook with me just in case. Having that guidebook with me

always reminds me that I did go there by myself, and I was completely capable of being out in the world alone, and make new friends and be so challenged by a place it hurt. It is a time where I went out of my comfort zone and learned so much about myself and how Bonner had give me the courage to do all of that.

After I start to feel tears welling in my eyes, I decide that is enough and I pass the book around the circle. Evy rubs my back and pulls out her bracelets she got from Morocco and begins to explain their importance.



I am floating in the lake by myself. I swam away from the dock because I needed a minute alone. A minute of solitude that had been so rare in the last nine weeks. I was not at all afraid of how deep the water was and how far out I was because I knew how to swim well and I had done this many times in the Aegean. I figured if I could take on the Aegean on a rough day all by myself, then Smith Mountain Lake would be a small feat. We were about to begin the last week of camp and I was having many mixed emotions. I decided I was excited to be going back to school to start my job as Senior Intern, I was very sad because I would not be seeing my crazy kids everyday anymore, and nostalgic because I would be leaving my newfound friends for the whole school year. Obviously I would not have to say goodbye to all of them, but the majority of them were going off somewhere different and new and I wasn't sure the next time I would see them again.

I thought about this summer and how much Miss Tori and I had overcome as a team. We had been given the most difficult class and we had succeeded in breaking through their tough eight-year-old exteriors and formed relationships with them that

revolved around respect. There were still days where we got very angry and frustrated, and there were still days that the classroom would dissolve into total chaos but the difference was we had changed. I realized that the kids had taught us just as much as we had tried to teach them.

In the beginning of camp, we were so bent on changing them and their attitude and behaviors we had not even realize that we were going to have to change and adapt too. It is easy to say you are going to go in and change these kids' lives and make them better, but you forget that they have the capacity to change your life and teach you.

It is interesting how much a little love and encouragement will go with these campers. They do not often get shown love everyday, or respect. They are pressed on every side by difficult home situations, divorces, abandonment, alcohol abuse, and drugs. They don't always know what it is like to come home to hot meal, or a warm house and yet they are trying to do the best they can with what they have. Our job is to show them they can be even better and that this situation is not permanent.

As I continue to float I realize that I was different and I was learning. I was learning what type of impact I can make, and what I want out of life. I want to feel the same as I do right now, excited to make a difference and vulnerable enough to let the opportunities I pursue affect me the way Smith Mountain Lake Good Neighbors, the Bonner Leader Program, and Greece have, and continue that cycle of love and friendship. I swim back to the dock with a smile on my face because someone had put out guacamole, and I had to make sure I beat the other interns to it so they did not eat it all.