

The Importance of Family:
A Reflection on the MALS Program



UNCG

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MALS Portfolio

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Graduate Portfolio

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“Michael, I do not feel that you would ever be successful in a Graduate program.”

-Member of UNCG Faculty

I have been challenged by great obstacles and doubters my entire life. One of the benefits of this arrangement is that it gives me a determined sense of motivation to prove them otherwise. This motivation has only been strengthened by the support of my family who've instructed me to disregard those that do not believe. The MALS program has allowed me the opportunity to shine my creative light with wonderful educators, concerned students and my devoted family. Under the MALS program I have studied and interpreted great writings, radical leaders and determined reformers. I am convinced that I have connected on a deeper, more human level with my fellow man and family through these awe-inspiring discoveries in literature, history and the sciences.

The MALS program is a source of human interaction on issues of great importance that seeks to qualify and understand the actions of mankind. I am happy to say that I will graduate with a Master of Arts in Liberal Studies because I am proud of the unique viewpoint I was allowed to share with other intellectuals. The MALS program offered me the chance to show the world, my professors and my family what I am capable of. This has been the most empowering experience of my life and allowed me to appreciate those closest to me. I have been fortunate to become a part of the MALS

family. The MALS family cares about its students. It is the most unique and creative program I have ever been associated with and I am glad to be a member. In this essay I will reflect on the importance of family, both personal and academic and how each have inspired me to never give up, never stop questioning and never stop learning as I move forward as a graduate of MALS from UNCG.

One of the greatest parts of the MALS program was that it helped me realize just how fortunate I was to have a great life, a great family and a safe nation to live in. The MALS program helped me to understand the nearly unimaginable beauty man is capable of, but also reminded me of the destruction and evil that can be found in man's heart. I am fortunate to have a family that is safe from harm. However, there are some that do not have this luxury as I learned in my *Dangerous Minds* course.

The Terrorist is an example of young people growing up during a revolutionary time. They have seen their family members die for the cause of the terrorists, guerillas or rebels within their nation. Malli was willing to attempt a suicide bombing against an enemy for the sake of the cause. It surprised me that such a young woman would be willing to kill for her cause. However, I do understand that she had lost her brother to the enemy which would have been very difficult for her at a young age. The anger and fear she must have felt would have been overwhelming. (*Dangerous Minds*, Dr. William Hamilton, Essay)

I believe that we can take for granted how truly fortunate we are to live in a safe place where we can try and work on developing long-term relationships with others. The MALS program helped me to understand my fortune and ultimately helped me grow closer to those I may have taken for granted or those people that I have always had trouble understanding.

I had to come to a hard realization during my MALS course in ethics. I realized that I have always had trouble identifying with the struggles of others. Even after I

received my undergraduate in English and History (as a Spartan, nonetheless) I had trouble understanding why people were “the way they were.” One person in particular is my grandmother. She was never the type of grandmother that would spoil you. Growing up under the glow of the television screen it was my impression that grandmothers were supposed to be as sweet as possible to their grandchildren and that they should make every effort to appease them. This overbearing love would be supplemented with candy, ice cream and lazy days at Grandma’s. In my case, I was met with boiled chickens, oatmeal-raisin cookies and tons of chores. I was not a very grateful young boy. As I matured slightly there was a moment that I began to better understand my grandmother and her ways. I was able to reflect on this discovery in an ethics paper for one of my favorite classes.

“I was raised by a peculiar and fascinating set of ethics that have sculpted the man I am today. I remember one day in particular when my grandmother watched me pour out my left over milk. “Michael! I can’t believe you poured that out! Do you know how much work went into making that?” As an 11 year-old boy I felt that I did. It’s simple - I go to the store and Mom buys it. No questions asked. She goes every week or two. What followed was an hour lecture on the mountain of work it takes to make one single glass of milk. My grandmother was raised during the Great Depression on a dairy farm in Sophia, North Carolina. She had experienced it first hand. I remember the feeling I had after she finished persuading me. I felt small. I felt like I had done something wrong. Something that I never realized was wrong until that moment. I felt my moral compass tick two clicks in an unusual direction. My body dissolved into a unique experience. The feeling ran over me and then it disappeared in a moment of self-awareness and identity. I had identified myself with my grandmother, her history and her struggles. That identification led me to the understanding that what I had done was ethically wrong.” (*Ethical Decision Making*, Dr. Chris Poulos – Chapter One Essay)

This single reflection connected me with my grandmother on a deeper level. Her experiences during the Great Depression and growing up poor had shaped her ideas of ethics. It was hard not to respect her struggle. She would not think it ethically wise to spoil her grandchildren, as this would not allow them to appreciate what they had.

In reflection, I am glad that she did not spoil us. I believe that if she had I may not have the same work ethic, patience and gratitude necessary for completing a graduate degree. My understanding of her was reignited through a MALS assignment and I am thankful for all she has done for our family. She has been a constant source of support and love during challenging times. My MALS family had reminded me of how much I appreciate her drive, humility and patience through a short assignment. The hard winters she spent in Sophia, North Carolina allowed her to be grateful for what she had. I learned from her to be grateful and it was this same gratitude that allowed me to understand the limitless opportunity that the MALS program offered me. Through hard work, long nights and the wisdom of my grandmother I was able to push forward and attain my degree. My grandmother instilled a value in me that has led to my success as an individual and as a MALS student. However, there have been other people even more influential than her.

My father is an interesting man. One of the traits that I love about him is his enthusiasm for art. He instilled a sense of passion for me in the artistic treasures our world has to offer. When I told him that I was going for a MALS degree he was enthusiastic. My father has always been an artistic-like dreamer. One of his dreams was to start an art business in North Carolina. I remember going to Art Museums and craft shows with him when I was a little boy. MALS cemented my artistic connection with my father through an assignment that allowed me to understand why those art trips with my father were so important to me.

“The art I remember the most from travels with my father wasn't that of great paintings or pottery, it was the artful sound of his happiness. Upon reflection, I understood my behavior of "making special" and realized I'd reformed my father's laugh into a particular “specialness”. I effectively understood my father's laughter as a valuable

and significant part of my life. This was an important moment of “specialness” in my life because it brought me closer to my Dad.” (*Global Arts*, Dr. Larry Lavender, Final)

John Donne once wrote “No man is an Island”. I have come to interpret this to mean that man must rely on others in order to survive and progress. My father has helped me come to this realization through his continued support. When I was struggling with an assignment or stretched for time due to a long work schedule he was there to see me through. His passion for the arts is a large reason I will graduate as a MALS student. MALS provided the platform for me to understand and appreciate this.

My father was instrumental in my success. He also played a strong role in my love for literature. I remember

“. . . growing up, whenever I had problems or worries he would often quote one of David’s Psalms to me. To this day I remember the overwhelming enlightenment and peace I felt after hearing him recite one particular to my troubles. I have long admired the poetic nature of the Bible and its teachings. When I argue with my atheist friends about the possibility of a God we often disagree. However, we all agree that the poetic nature of the Bible is a timeless, beautiful and moral landmark.” (*Literature and the Religious Imagination*, Dr. William Hamilton, Essay)

During the MALS program I would seek advice from my father. He has always seemed so wise to me and I believe it is because he has studied great writings like the Bible. He was fortunate enough to study seminary for a few years after college. Religion aside, my father and I both find strength in the timeless poetry and encouragement that the Bible offers. His support for me and his love for literature is just one more reason why I believe family can play a significant and powerful role in an individual’s success. My father is my best friend, but I wouldn’t be nearly as driven if it weren’t for the importance that my mother has played in my upbringing from a little boy to a Masters graduate.

My mother played a special role in my development. Being the daughter of the woman who survived the Great Depression was no easy task. She was taught from a

young age how valuable a strong work ethic is. She worked as a nurse's aid in high school and was given a grant to study nursing in Charlotte from that same hospital where she had volunteered. She has since worked the last 30 years and grown to become the Nurse Manager of a large hospital in Charlotte. Growing up she never let me make excuses for not being at work or school. It just simply wasn't an option. She believed in me and had plans for me. She taught me that if I worked hard I could attain anything I wanted. She has been a driving force of support and it is all those late nights she put in at the hospital that reminded me anything is possible. The belief she had in me started from a young age as I reflected in my MALS Admission Essay.

“Growing up, there wasn't a night my parents didn't read to me. I was a lucky child. When Christmas and birthdays came around I found myself asking for Dr. Seuss books instead of Legos or Transformers. The varying stories captivated me and I knew from a young age that reading would be a major part of my life. As I grew older I learned the importance of an education and the deep truths that lies within the text of great writers.” (MALS, Admission Essay)

My mother spent countless nights staying up and reading to me as a child. I still have many of my original fairy tales. She has devoted her life to her work and her family. I learned from her the importance of putting in the hard work to achieve something great. I noticed that my mother and Copernicus had many similarities because they were both willing to step up to a challenge when others doubted them. I remember sharing a paper I wrote on Copernicus with my mother.

“When Copernicus argued that the Earth revolved around the Sun he was arguing against what the Catholic Church and the government had understood as the truth for centuries. Protestants also responded negatively to Copernicus's views. “...Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, when he heard of Copernicus's publication, is reported to have said, “There is talk of a new astrologer who wants to prove that the Earth moves and goes around instead of the sky, the Sun, the Moon . . . the fool wants to turn the whole art of astronomy upside down.” (*Revolutions in Scientific Thought*, Dr. Young, Final)

My mother has taught me to always ask questions and challenge what I understand as truth. I believe that Copernicus must have had the same type of mother because he wouldn't accept what others believed. He worked hard researching to overturn years of scientific belief. I am proud to say that after 30 years of professional Nursing she has gone from being a candy-striper to recently being asked and accepted for her Masters of Science in Nursing. I doubt she ever truly believed how far her hard work would take her and the influence it has had on her children. When I was nervous about being accepted into the MALS program she was there to encourage me not to worry and to do the best possible. When I told her and my father about my plans to become a MALS student I think they realized that:

“All of the early mornings rushing me to school and long nights of reading with me had paid off. They were even more proud when I announced to them my plans to continue my education through the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program at my alma mater.”
(MALS, Admission Essay)

I remember how wonderful it felt when I heard that I had been accepted into the MALS program. I was leaving my little house to go on a well-deserved vacation with my lovely girlfriend. I specifically remember her calming my nerves as my excitement continued to grow. I actually had to sit for a moment to let it sink in. I had made it. I had been given a new opportunity to prove myself. I knew I was ready to be part of the MALS family. I had done extensive research on the program and knew it would be a perfect fit for me. One of the greatest aspects of the MALS program is the relationship that you build with your advisers, professors and fellow students. MALS is a family. It is a group of individuals who have similar goals and want each person's experience to be as successful and unique as possible.

When writing my portfolio I found it difficult to decide which papers I should include. Throughout my progression as a MALS student I have had to face great ethical dilemmas and make small personal sacrifices to better the world and ultimately myself. I was fortunate enough to end my Graduate career with Professor Chris Poulos and his *Ethical-Decision Making* course. The reason I chose to highlight a paper from this course is because it has been a course of personal closure. I feel like I am leaving the MALS program with greater academic discipline and a stronger moral fiber. This course has left me feeling ethically centered and prepared to face any dilemma I encounter as I move further into the professional and social jungle of life.

I decided to use a paper from the *Dangerous Minds* course because it opened my eyes to the horrors that mankind is capable of. I believe that at times we get aggravated with our families over simple, ridiculous things. We at times forget how important family is because we do not have to worry about the most important aspects of survival (i.e. political stability, food, water and shelter). We take for granted the most important elements of safety and survival because they become mundane. The MALS program taught me not to take anything or anyone for granted because you never know when you may need them for support, encouragement or wisdom in the future.

I chose my paper on “Making Special” from *Global Arts* because this course in particular helped me to connect deeper with my father and engage him in my studies. The beauty of art has always enchanted my father. When I realized I was using art in my day-to-day life through a close study of the phenomenon of “making special” I was able to share that idea with him and he was then able to implement it into his life. I shared many of my papers with him, but I feel that he related most with *Global Arts*. The fact that this

connection strengthened his support for my studies allowed him to better motivate me further and ultimately help me finish my degree.

I chose my essay from *Literature and the Religious Imagination* because this was by far one of my favorite courses. Having a background in creative writing I was able to use those skills to better interpret texts from major religions. I was excited that Professor Hamilton gave us room for creative writing throughout the course. I was able to share my creativity and my belief in God with other students. In fact, after his course I found myself spiritually stronger and I believe it was just the push I needed to continue seeking my MALS degree.

I used a paper from *Revolutions in Scientific Thought* because I had always struggled with the Sciences. I was more nervous about this course than any other course I had ever taken. I was happy when I joined the course and realized how supportive the Professors were. One of the great benefits of the MALS program is that the online courses offer flexibility and support. Dr. Young was there to support me anytime I had a question. I was also able to relate with my mother because I studied great scientists that were met with overwhelming obstacles. I believe that my mother is a woman who has done the same and taught me that anything is possible.

I shared my Admissions Essay because it was a time of great stress and unknowing for me. If I wasn't accepted to the program I believe my life would be drastically different today. The admissions essay to me is a powerful statement of UNCG's commitment to the arts because someone read my essay and believed that I could contribute to this program. It was a sense of acknowledgement I had been seeking that was filled when I was given the opportunity to share my story and be accepted into

the MALS family. This family has been crucial to my personal, academic and spiritual satisfaction. There is one other person in particular I would like to highlight in my reflection. She was the one that made it all possible for me.

One of the greatest mentors I have had throughout the program has been Julee Johnson. I have asked her every question I could possibly ask in regards to the program. I have been floored by her compassion, patience and encouragement she has shared with me throughout my time as a MALS student. I remember one day specifically when I was first applying. I must have called her four times that day with every question imaginable. Each time she was happy to help me. I am afraid that in many large Universities we at times forget those in the background. Well, I wanted to make it a point in my portfolio to mention just how helpful and professional Julee Johnson has been throughout my MALS experience. Whenever I have had an issue she has been there to support me. Julee Johnson is truly an asset to UNCG. I would consider Julee the leader of our MALS family.

One of the greatest moments I have had in both my academic and professional career was when Julee invited me to be part of the MALS 25th anniversary celebration. For the record, I have worn a suit three times in my life. I wore one once at prom, once at my grandfathers funeral and once at the MALS celebration. I knew I was a part of a true family that night. My parents, sister and girlfriend were able to make it as well. I was surrounded with people that cared about me and wanted me to succeed. Each individual I met from the MALS program was engaged, supportive and open to conversation. The faculty and staff of the 25-year-old program were there to encourage me. They practiced patience as they answered even more of the curious questions I had. I knew for the first

time in my life I was part of something that was bigger than me. I was part of an academic family that accepted me for who I am.



My family, girlfriend and I at the MALS 25th Anniversary (Nov. 2012)

I am truly thankful for the opportunities that the MALS family has shared with me. I have had the full support of the faculty and staff throughout my time as a student. If you had told me 5 years ago that I would be graduating as a Master from one of the best Universities in North Carolina I wouldn't have believed you. It is only because of the support of my personal family, my MALS family and my closest friends that I was able to succeed in such a rigorous academic program. As I reflect on my adventures as a MALS student I have come to realize that not only has it been an empowering two-years for me, but it has also created a great sense of happiness in my life. I believe the quote from the first book I had to read for MALS in *Pulitzer Prize-Winning-Fiction* sums up my feelings on the MALS program. "A family and love . . . "That's what makes a man happy, not just playing the mambo." (Oscar Hijuelos, *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*,

pg. 38) I have never been as happy as I am today. Knowing that I have accomplished a monument in my life has created a sense of peace, happiness and empowerment that will only be strengthened as I continue my personal, academic and professional goals supported by my family and the one I have in MALS. I sincerely thank every member of the faculty and staff at UNCG that has made this dream come true for me. It is hard to believe it is over, but I know I am now prepared for anything I encounter thanks to the devotion and love that has been shared with me.

I would like to thank Professor Roskelley, Professor Rosenblum, Professor Lavendar, Professor Moore, Professor Hamilton, Professor Young, Professor O'Goode, Professor Saab, Professor Thomas, Professor Poulos and Julee for their dedication to me as their student of Liberal Studies. I have a great amount of respect for these individuals that have taught me some of the greatest lessons I know I will ever learn. It has truly been a pleasure to be part of such a remarkable program.

Thank You,

-Michael Ryan Gaskin

MALS Graduate

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