

Testimonial from Emily Brandenburg (Center '13)

As I began my undergraduate journey, I like many wide-eyed and eager freshmen, was uncertain about what to expect over the next four years. I knew my life would include a lot of intense practicing and studying. But the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings turned out to be more than just an educational institution; it was a place where I had such an invaluable support system of teachers and a closely knit group of peers who pushed me to reach my highest potential and encouraged me to be myself and follow my dreams.

The Center had many amazing aspects, one of which was the student body. My peers and I spent most of our daily lives together, getting to know each other on a personal level. We laughed together, cried together and practiced together and therefore made some of the best memories. When I was excited about an opportunity or an achievement my peers were excited for me and when I was having a bad day and needed someone to talk to, there was always someone who was ready and willing to listen to me and encourage me.

Secondly, the Center had and continues to have today, an outstanding group of teachers. The faculty at the Center were eager get to know each one of their students personally which was possible because of the small size of each studio. I received a lot of personal attention, not just by my primary instrument teacher but by the entire faculty of the school. After each performance, I always received extremely valuable feedback so that I could correct my mistakes and make sure that each performance was better than my last. Over my undergraduate career, my primary teachers on violin included Robert McDuffie, Amy Moretti and David Halen and for viola, Larry Dutton, Rebecca Albers and Paul Murphy. These six teachers were extremely instrumental in my growth and success not only as a musician, but as a person. If it were not for their continual encouragement and high expectations, my life would be drastically different today and for that I am ever grateful to them.

Thirdly, the Center provided amazing experiences that have become some of my lifelong memories. These included spontaneous trips to the local coffee shop during rehearsal breaks, Center road trips to play concerts with Mr. McDuffie, 3-hour-long master classes which were full of laughter and stories, the chaos of filming a Christmas PBS special, and trips to the gorgeous city of Rome, Italy to attend the Rome Chamber Music Festival. While at the Center, I was exposed to some of the most inspiring artists and amazing concerts, which included the Emerson, St. Lawrence, Miro and Ehnes String quartets to name a few. I also had the privilege on numerous occasions to perform on the professional concert series with various faculty members. While the performances with the faculty were amazing, the best part was getting to learn from them by watching and interacting with them during rehearsals.

Lastly, the Center encouraged me to follow my heart and dreams even if it meant taking huge risks. As a freshman, I began my studies as a violinist but it was not until my junior year that I realized my life's calling and passion for the viola. I played a viola for the first time in a chamber music group in August of my junior year and I immediately fell in love with the richness and color of the instrument. I knew right away that I wanted to learn the basics of viola alongside my major studies on violin. As the weeks progressed and I began to play the viola more and more, it became crystal clear to me and the coaches who I worked with that I had a real understanding for the viola. Reading the clef, producing a rich viola sound and understanding my role as a violist in my chamber music group came very natural for me. I was encouraged by the faculty to follow my heart and if I wanted to, to explore and embrace life as a violist and I did. In October of my junior year I officially changed my area of study from violin performance to viola performance. I cannot express in words how encouraging and helpful my teachers were throughout this transition. It was not an easy decision for me especially because I had degree recitals and graduate school fast approaching. But, through it all, I had the greatest support system who encouraged through the inevitable ups and downs of learning a new instrument. They wanted me to succeed and to follow what my heart was telling me to do.

As I look back at where I was four years ago, I never thought or dreamed I would be where I am today. The Robert McDuffie Center for Strings deeply impacted not just my life as a musician but as a person as well. It is a very unique place that has extremely high expectations for their students in both music and academics. These expectations taught me to work hard, prioritize and never give up even when things seemed impossible. The Center taught me to be bold and to confidently chase after my goals. You really never know what is possible when you work your hardest and even if you fail, you never give up. The Center is an absolutely amazing place!

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