



Possibilities, opportunities and results

DISCUSSING THE UNIQUE MADISON EXPERIENCE



JMU alumnus Levar Stoney ('04) traveled back to campus to talk to JMU Dingledine Scholar Josh Kelaher ('10) about what makes the Madison Experience unique — the focus on students and citizenship, the hard work, the passion of professors and students, the challenging academics, the social opportunities and responsibilities, the openness of faculty and the numerous cross-disciplinary degrees and collaborative programs.

A public administration major, Stoney (above left) began laying the foundation for his career in Virginia politics while serving as SGA president for two years at JMU. Kelaher says the integrated science and technology program is the “perfect fit for his interests,” which include having a voice in environmental policy. He has tutored students through the Spanish Honor Society, volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and studied abroad in Costa Rica, getting a firsthand look at renewable energy projects.

Josh Kelaher ('10): Welcome back to JMU, Levar. What do you do?

Levar Stoney ('04): Right now, I'm working for Creigh Deeds in his campaign for Virginia governor. I'm in charge of outreach to elected officials and advocacy groups.

Kelaher: That's an accomplishment. Very cool. What was your first job like?

Stoney: Well, I got my first job in politics because the guy who ran the John Kerry presidential campaign in Virginia was a JMU grad. I worked in Gov. Mark Warner's administration, in his office of constituent services, for three or four months. Then I was a field organizer for the Kerry campaign for president. My job was to knock on a lot of doors. That year it was really exciting because I got to travel to a battleground state and see how interested people were — on both sides of the aisle — in electing the next president of the United States. I also served as executive director of the Democratic Party of Virginia. How about you Josh? What are your interests?

Kelaher: I'm an integrated science and technology major focusing on energy and sustainability.

Stoney: I've heard that JMU is really front and center on sustainability issues.

Kelaher: President Rose has led the charge to make this campus as sustainable as possible. It's tangible. The biomass incinerator is right out

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the window there; you've got the solar panel fields, and then all the work that ISAT does. And listen to this: A graduate from several years ago started his own company with his dad called Shenandoah Sustainable Technologies. They built a model house for ISAT students to live in. This doesn't exist at more than a couple other universities — a sustainable structure to live and research in as an undergrad is quite an opportunity.

Plus, last year the College of Business sponsored a sustainable business proposal contest. Students and professors developed business plans that incorporated sustainable ideas. The one deemed most plausible and effective was awarded start-up funds for the proposed business. Our university really gives you opportunities, and there are results that you cannot argue with.

Stoney: It's so cool to see that we're actually implementing some of these ideas, especially in today's economy.

Kelaher: Even the SGA is working on environmental endeavors — they supported the dining halls going trayless to stop using as much water to wash dishes. It's become a huge effort here on campus. Weren't you involved in SGA?

Stoney: Yes. I was student body president for two years. I was also in the student senate two years before that. So, Josh, why did you choose JMU?

Kelaher: I'm from Northern Virginia. Everybody from Northern Virginia applies to JMU. I was adamant about not applying to JMU. My dad knew that I was interested in sustainability, though, and he said, "You should really check out the ISAT program at JMU." And I said, "I'm just not interested. I don't want to go where everyone else is going."

So, I love Waffle House, right? And my dad loves Waffle House. One morning he wakes me up, and he says, "Hey, let's go to Waffle House." He rolls me out of bed — it's six in the morn-

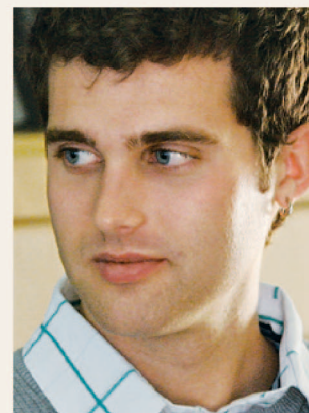
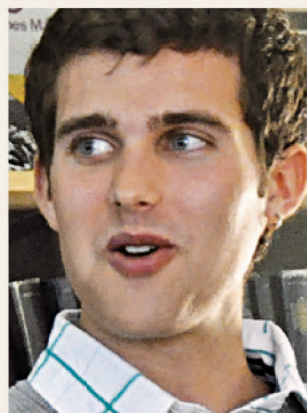
ing. I pass out in the car. I wake up, and I'm on I-81 headed toward JMU for the ISAT open house. I was so upset; and then I got here and spent three hours talking to two professors in the ISAT program. They sat down and just talked to me. I walked out of that building knowing that I was not going to apply anywhere else. I had to go to JMU. I knew beyond any doubt — just from setting foot on this campus and talking to those two professors.

Stoney: My question is, did you get the chance to go to Waffle House?

Kelaher: Oh yeah. We hit that on the way out. Students here love it. How about you; why did you choose JMU?

Stoney: Well, I applied at many schools and was recruited to play football at different schools, some in state and some out of state. On a whim — the day before the JMU admissions deadline — I got an application from a friend and filled it out that evening. When I got my acceptance package, I knew I was going to JMU. It is probably one of the best things that ever happened to me. I talk about it all the time. You meet alumni at different events, and hear them say, "Oh yeah, I went to James Madison." And I say, "Go Dukes!"

Kelaher: One of the many things I love about JMU is the sense of camaraderie. With almost 18,000 students, it's not a small school; yet it doesn't have the feel of a big campus.



Stoney: I agree. When people see college on TV or in the movies, they're thinking large lecture halls or graduate assistants. I had maybe two or three large lecture classes. Most other times it was 25 people to a class — an intimate relationship setting where you could engage your professor.

Kelaher: It's still that way. Especially ISAT. And the GenEd program is great; it gives you insight into other sectors of academia.

Stoney: Is JMU challenging you?

Kelaher: Oh yeah. I'd have to say that I certainly do find some nights at 2 a.m. in the East Campus Library to be a little difficult to power through. And it certainly is challenging to grasp some concepts; but the professors are always there to help, and that's a wonderful thing. I can't tell you how many professors' open office hours I've used, or how available they make themselves. There's one professor in ISAT — no matter what he's doing, he'll drop his stuff and talk to me. And it could be about anything — his class, someone else's class, stuff that's going on in life. It doesn't matter.

JMU professors are there for you. And that's a really cool thing. But by the end of the semester you look back and think, "I've come away with so much more than I ever thought I could from this class."

Stoney: It was a challenging experience for me, too, but that's what you want out of your academic career. I remember one professor telling me, "I gave you a B because you can do better." That type of challenge is something that motivates you to try harder and bring out the potential you really do have. JMU has always had that open door policy where you were always able to just walk up, see an open door, stop in and ask a question. In the beginning, someone

told me that the key to being comfortable with your course is to have a conversation with your professor. I took that to heart. I made sure for every class that I took that I would stop by and visit and have a true relationship with the person who was actually instructing the course.

Kelaher: Yeah, and even professors who you may not have or you've never had. If their door is open, they'll talk to you. It's a really beautiful thing. I can't tell you how much help I've gotten from professors who I've never had in a class. But, another student will say something like: "Hey, this professor really gets it. You should go talk to him or her." The professors are not here to just do research.

They're here because they love teaching. And that makes courses more challenging because they want to see you succeed. They will help you through a class the whole way. They're in the back pushing you, and when you're standing at the end of a course and you know your stuff, there's really not a better feeling than that.

Stoney: I see a lot of people who get good grades, yet they have nothing else to show for it. But if you talk to JMU grads there's always something additional. I have friends from other universities, and I don't hear them talk about the same experience. I hear of fun times, but I don't hear of the passion. JMU takes a different approach to student affairs, and that's just obvious in the students it produces. JMU gives you those challenging opportunities.

You want to go to college where the professors and administrators and other students are going to challenge you, not only academically, but socially, as well. As student body president, JMU really helped with my interpersonal communication skills, allowed me to manage an office, manage projects and also motivate indi-

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viduals. I use those skills today. I always consider JMU an institution that helped push me out there. I came to JMU knowing that I wanted to get involved with politics. I just didn't know whether or not JMU was going to provide me the launch pad. And it has done that more than I ever thought it would have done. I'm appreciative every day that I got that type of education at JMU.

Kelahr: I think JMU is really pushing students to places they never thought they could go. JMU sets you up on this edge, and says, "Look at all this. This is your domain. You are able to do something with this." Learning at JMU is so much more than just a lecture hall or a classroom. ...

Stoney: It's a community.

Kelahr: And it's real-world focused. JMU sees something that they can bring out in every student. They see hope and the ability for every student to change the world. You're not going to be successful unless you can really interact with people and communi-

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cate ideas. I have a professor who says a ridiculous majority of business graduates lose their jobs in the first six months because they are unable to communicate ideas effectively. Our College of Business focuses on interpersonal relationships. JMU grads are known for that skill.

JMU wants you to go out and get a real-world experience, communicate with people, interact with people, be social. They're not cooping you up in a study lounge all the time. Everyone makes you work hard but part of that work is emphasizing that you've got to learn what the world's about, too.

Stoney: I think JMU's definitely perfected the recipe for that. And I'll tell you

this, Josh; there has not been a day that I've been intimidated in a room full of colleagues who have degrees from Cornell or Harvard or U.Va. I'm just as prepared as these guys from Ivy League schools. That says a lot about the Madison Experience.

Kelahr: I certainly see that. So many professors have this real sincere desire for you to become a cultivated member of society, a refined citizen of whatever you choose to be a part of.

Stoney: I love that JMU puts it in the mission statement — that students are to become educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives. I think that's one reason JMU emphasizes

undergraduate education, and why undergraduate research opportunities are so important. They're known for it. What are you involved in at JMU, Josh?

Kelahr: I'm talking with Dr. C.J. Broderick Hartman about sustainability efforts on campus. My good friend was on a graduate research team working on developing biodiesel from pond algae — as a freshman! That's right on the edge of alternative fuel research, and she was there — as a student — pulling her weight. It wasn't just gofer work. She was responsible for doing research and filing reports. She was able to get onto this graduate research team with an ISAT professor and other graduate students. And that's a phenomenal thing to recognize. JMU recognized her ability to contribute and extended her that opportunity. You can have a lot of brilliance in your student body that goes untapped unless you have the opportunity to really give what you have to give. It's wide open at JMU.

Stoney: JMU definitely puts the ball in your court. 