

Alumni News

A place to call home

BY CARRIE COMBS ('07, '09M), *alumni relations director*

How in the world did you end up at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia?

I've come to anticipate that question whenever a fellow Duke asks where I'm from or where I grew up. I've refined my Madison Experience story over the years, but I'd like to share with you why this place holds such a special place in my heart and why I strongly believe in the work that we're doing as a university and as an Alumni Association.

I spent the first 17 years of my life in Southern California. And for full disclosure, even the mild Virginia winters can make me a bit grumpy—come on, spring!

My college search wasn't much different than anyone else's. As a 17-year-old, my independent and stubborn heart was set on finding myself in college. I applied to eight schools: four West Coast, four East Coast. While I didn't have the vocabulary

to describe it at the time, what I was really looking for was a mid-size, liberal arts school with a small-town college community. Sound familiar?

When I sent in my deposit, I still had yet to set foot on campus. I took a leap of faith and trusted in the visits my mom and sister had made on my behalf. Fast forward to freshman move-in when I stepped onto campus for the first time. To this day, every August I find myself calling my mom and reminiscing about that emotional day for both of us. And every year we affirm that it's the best decision we ever made.

The next four years were spent dabbling in a variety of student activities and employment experiences on campus. I meandered my way through five majors before finding my passion and home in technical and scientific communication (now writing, rhetoric and technical communication). My four years of undergraduate education shaped

me—through my course work, faculty interactions and adjustment to the culture of the Shenandoah Valley. It opened my eyes to what could be. So, at the end of four years, I decided I wanted more.

I applied and was accepted to the technical and scientific communication master's program. As with most graduate programs, I had the opportunity to fund the experience through an assistantship—in my case, with University Rec-

(Below, L-R): Office of Alumni Relations staff members Sarah Chase ('17), communications and marketing coordinator; Alysia Davis, assistant director for chapter programs; Stephanie Whitson ('06), assistant director for reunion programming; Carrie Combs ('07, '09M), alumni relations director; Jessica Savoie ('14), assistant director for communications and marketing; Sarah Orem ('05), associate director for student engagement and philanthropy; and Emma Maynard ('07, '16M), assistant director for career and networking programming.



ALUMNI NEWS

reaction. Between my course work, research and professional development at UREC, my Madison Experience grew exponentially. By the end of my master's program, I felt that JMU had fully equipped me to take on the professional world. It provided an unmatched undergraduate experience, a rigorous and dynamic graduate program and an introduction to my future husband, Aaron. Thank you, UREC!

I spent the next two years gaining invaluable career experience in the private sector before heading back “home” to start my professional career at JMU. I joined the ranks of a full-time employee in 2011 as the university's inaugural content strategist. In 2013, I had the opportunity to be the founding director of advancement relations. I spent four years building a program focused on campus relationships, helping support a growing culture of philanthropy and supporting the work of faculty and staff through the Madison Trust, a program focused on investing in innovation and creativity across campus. Each of my experiences since I stepped foot on campus in 2003 led me to where I am today. Each step, each interaction with faculty and staff, each relationship and conversation with a fellow alum inspired and led me to where I am today.

In December 2017, I had the privilege and honor of becoming the director of alumni relations and executive director of the JMU Alumni Association. I cannot contain a smile when I think and dream about the opportunities ahead for our 135,000-plus alumni.

We all have our own Madison Experiences, and while

our stories are different, our home here at JMU is the same. We each have this profound sense of connection when we see purple and gold. I found a place to call my home, and my hope is that you can do the same, even after graduation. The Office of Alumni Relations and the JMU Alumni Association are here to extend the invitation. We have six full-time staff and 20 Alumni Board of Directors members dedicated to creating personal connections, growth opportunities and shared experiences for alumni worldwide. Whether it's encouraging a current student to engage with the Student Alumni Association, plugging into one of our 36 alumni chapters or maybe activating your Madison Network through group conversation, connection and engagement—there is a place to call home.

No matter where or how you choose to plug in, we want you to feel that your Madison Experience extends far beyond the 721 acres of campus and a four-year experience. I challenge you in the coming year to attend an event, engage on social media or listen to a webinar. Make an investment in the life of the university now.

Come visit us on campus or meet us on the road. We'll be traveling to five cities in May, partnering with the Duke Club on the 2018 Spring Tour. Check in with your local chapter for an array of summer programming and, most importantly, save the date for Homecoming 2018: Oct. 26–28. This year will be history in the making, and you won't want to miss it. We will welcome you home with open arms and a warm smile. 



Purple presence

BY HEATHER HEDRICK ('00), *Alumni Association president*

JMU wouldn't be the community that we all know and love without the unending support of our alumni chapters and executive board volunteers. Over the years, our purple presence has grown to over 36 chapters and 17 regional ambassadors across the U.S.—and even one in London!

Our alumni chapters are groups of JMU alumni who live within the same geographic region and stay connected to the university by enjoying social, educational and service events together. In 2017 alone, our chapters held more than 150 events. These volunteers give their time, energy and passion to ensure that the JMU community, post-graduation, is still as vibrant, intentional and welcoming as it was freshman year.

One way of thanking our alumni for all the work they do is through our annual Madison Alumni Conference, where chapter volunteers and regional ambassadors come back to campus to network, learn new tools for their chapters and celebrate their accomplishments. This year, for the first time ever, MAC will be presented in conjunction with the Executive Volunteer Summit! We're planning a whole weekend (June 1–3) for our chapter, regional and executive board volunteers to come together, network, collaborate and create meaningful relationships with Dukes from all over the country.

A great institution like JMU requires a strong network of volunteers. So whether you serve as a corporate champion in your workplace, help with recruiting in your area or volunteer with a board or chapter, let me say, “Thank you for all you do!” 



(Above): Hedrick attended the Madison Alumni Conference in the Student Success Center with dozens of volunteers from the JMU Alumni Association and its chapters.