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Following Her Passion: Student Commencement Speaker Finds Inspiration through Life's Challenges

Victoria Davis '18 combines her love for science and writing to create her own science communication major



May 1, 2018 | Courtney Dell'Agnese '19

BRISTOL, R.I. – When she first visited the Boston Museum of Science as a child, Victoria (Tori) Davis fell in love with science and wanted to learn everything she could to share her joy with the rest of the world. Even when life threw her significant challenges along the way, she never wavered in following her passion, pursuing a courageous path that brought her to Roger Williams University where she met professors who helped her create her own individualized undergraduate major in science communication.

Not only did she take a chance on developing her own academic journey, the graduating senior will also seize the opportunity to offer parting words and inspiration to her peers as the 2018 RWU Commencement student speaker. Davis says she is honored to be selected for the role and has a lot to be thankful for during her years at Roger Williams.

Finding Opportunity within a Challenge

When Davis arrived at RWU as a biology major, she dreamt of going into microbiology with the goal of creating a cure for her genetic condition, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), a connective tissue disorder that causes her joints to dislocate and requires the use of a wheelchair. But her path quickly faced setbacks. For instance, she found that using certain lab equipment, such as microscopes, caused her neck to dislocate.

“It was a bunch of little ways that was pretty much telling me that this was the wrong life choice,” said Davis. “So I decided that because I still wanted to be involved with as much science as possible, I just had to change the way I did it.”



Tori Davis and her service dog, Tony, in North Campus.

So she began exploring her options for bridging her passions for science and writing. At first, Davis considered switching her major to creative writing with biology as her minor, but felt this would sideline her love of science.

When she brought the dilemma to her faculty advisor, Associate Professor of Biology Dale Leavitt, he saw a talented writer with a “great mind for science” – and an opportunity to co-create a curriculum with the communications department. Leavitt teamed up with Associate Professor of Communication Michael Scully, and they encouraged Davis to consider an individualized major in science communication.

With many options for blending a liberal arts with a professional degree and the flexibility of creating individualized majors at RWU, Davis saw her dilemma transform into her dream. She and her professors crafted a 14-course curriculum combining marine science and journalism courses that perfectly tailored the major to her personal interests and career aspirations. She said the courses offered her a wide range of knowledge in both fields, greatly expanding what she would have learned if she had only focused on biology or writing.

Landing Her Dream Job

That academic foundation set her up for an exciting next step in her journey – writing for the American Association of the Advancement of Science’s *Science Magazine*. After she delivers her Commencement address, she’ll begin her dream job.

“The Science and Communication departments are excited to learn that one of our more talented students has attracted the attention of this storied science association,” Scully said. “Tori has earned this accolade, and, in doing so, has demonstrated that our entrepreneurial interdisciplinary culture continues to yield startling successes.”

Davis says she feels exceedingly well-prepared to take on this position because she not only has the science background but also the journalism skills to supplement it. Along with her academic work, Davis has worked for both the university yearbook and newspaper, allowing her to gain valuable writing skills that will transfer to her writing at *Science*.

“I’m really looking forward to being able to write about what I love full-time,” Davis says, “And when you’re out in the real world, you’re finally able to do what you’ve wanted to do this whole time. So I feel like it’s finally all coming together and I’ll get to see if I have *it* – if I’m actually built for this.”

Life After RWU

In addition to dedicating herself to her academics, Davis took as many opportunities as possible to get involved in student activities on campus. She says that what she learned from being a member in clubs and organizations, such as Sexuality Advocacy for Everyone (SAFE) and the Campus Entertainment Network (CEN), as well as participating in and being on the winning team of the 2017 Mr. RWU pageant, also prepared her for life after RWU.

"I tried to do as much as possible while I was here. I figured if there was an opportunity, just take it," she said. "All these different clubs and cocurriculars really helped me with time management and understanding the pace of things when it comes to entering the real world."

She will miss the university and all the people who helped her along the way. In addition to her professors she also appreciates facilities crew, who went above and beyond to create a safe and welcoming environment for her to travel campus in a wheelchair. It's that kind of thoughtfulness and dedication to the students here that Davis said made her "find a family away from home."

As she wraps up her final semester at RWU, Davis looks forward to the adventure that awaits her and can't wait to see where she ends up. She says that if she can impart one thing to her classmates as the student Commencement speaker, it would be to "just keep learning and go after all the knowledge you possibly can."

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