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Exploring Big Things in Far Away Places

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Office of University
Communications

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Gardner-Webb Degree Guides Alumna on Career Journey

By Mariana Mellado, Intern for University Communications

Upon closing the last box, she packed it into her two-door Toyota Yaris. All of her essential belongings—her clothes, a laptop, and several books—were inside the car. She shut the door, put the key in the ignition, and drove ahead. This was the start of a four-day journey of travelling over 2,000 miles to reach her new home of Salt Lake City.

Elizabeth “Liz” Van Halsema attended Gardner-Webb University and returned to her hometown of Charlotte, N.C., following her graduation in 2013. In her first year as a graduate she worked as a cookie decorator for a bakery and as a freelance writer for various publications. After some time, she realized she had lived in the same city her whole life. “I remember hearing about people going off and doing awesome things and seeing the world with a Gardner-Webb degree. So I thought, ‘Why am I not taking advantage of this?’”

With this epiphany, Van Halsema enhanced her resumé and spent months searching for jobs that were outside of North Carolina. She had never been beyond the state of Tennessee, so she was intrigued by the idea of moving out west. She was thrilled when she was offered a job as a marketing writer in Lehi, Utah, approximately 30 minutes south of Salt Lake City. She immediately felt the pressure of the time crunch. “I received the offer on July 1 and I was supposed to start the job on July 23. I had no travel plans, no places to stay along the way and no place to live in Utah.” But these circumstances did not stop her.

Van Halsema decided she would take the opportunity and left on her first ever cross-country trip on July 15, 2014. “What made the situation even more crazy was that my parents were out on vacation around the time I got the news, so when they came back I had already moved out.” She headed west and drove through Nashville, Tenn., Kansas City, Miss., and Cheyenne, Wyo., staying with family and friends along the way.

Upon arriving in Utah, she started out by serving as the marketing content writer for a company called SirsiDynix. Her role there helped her gain experience in composing content intended for whitepapers, website copy and advertising copy, as well as managing social media and creating press releases for a broader audience. She discovered that her English degree and background could expand to public relations, communications and marketing.

After a year, Van Halsema decided that she would seek a new job where she could work in communications, but with a concentration in healthcare. She landed the communications coordinator position with CHG Healthcare Services, a company that was featured in FORTUNE Magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For." The field of healthcare was an interest that grew and developed while she was at Gardner-Webb. One of the many influential courses she took was Dr. June Hobbs' Death and Dying class. "No pun intended, but it was life-changing! We talked to a lot of nurses," she says. Van Halsema proceeded to engage in hospice volunteering due to that experience and now she works for a company that staffs nurses across the country.

Looking back at her education, Van Halsema claims that choosing to major in English was one of the best decisions of her life. As a student in the English department at Gardner-Webb, she found a support system among the professors—with whom she still keeps in touch. "If it weren't for Dr. David Parker, who pushed me into English, I wouldn't have moved to Salt Lake City," she proclaims. Van Halsema believes that "Taking that leap of faith and going where your degree is guiding you—you should follow that."

The mountains that Van Halsema passes each day on her drive from downtown Salt Lake City to work are a constant reminder of the long journey she had to endure to reach these heights. Her boldness that brought her to this point is tied to the strong foundations that were established at her alma mater. "Gardner-Webb is a small place, but it teaches you some big things that can take you to far places," she says. "I'm already thinking about where I could move to in the next few years."

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University offers a comprehensive academic experience that introduces students to the diverse world of ideas and to the people who think them, preparing them not only for professional success but for lives marked with empathy, compassion and a commitment to service on the broadest scale.