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Recent Grad Found Hope & Healing at GWU in the Midst of Tremendous Loss

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Office of University Communications

August 12, 2014

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. — As a high school senior, Talea Sturdivant never imagined that while touring college campuses with her mom and sharing dreams about the future, she would soon face a tragic loss. She had no idea her college choice would help sustain her through a time of crisis and significant sorrow.

“I thought I wanted the big state-school experience,” the recent healthcare management graduate says now. “But I remember while I was visiting Gardner-Webb with my parents, everybody walking around campus seemed so genuine, so warm and welcoming. I just had a good sense, a good feeling that this was the place for me.”

Talea was thriving at Gardner-Webb during her freshman year, building friendships not only with countless peers but also with professors and staff members who she says began to take a personal interest in her future. Still, it wasn't until her second semester—and in the midst of tragedy—that Talea realized just how sincerely the Gardner-Webb community cared.

“I was actually home when it happened,” Talea remembers. “I had started going home every weekend that spring to take care of my mom when she was so sick. She passed away on a Sunday morning. I think she planned it that way so I could be with her.”

After emailing her professors to share what happened, Talea says she was amazed by the University's response to the news.

“Dr. Tracy Jessup and the other campus ministers began emailing and Facebooking me to see if I was ok,” Talea says. “I wasn't really checking any of that, so they actually called me and my dad.” Jessup, the University's senior minister, prayed with Talea over the phone and inquired about funeral arrangements. He then shared the news with faculty and staff, who sent more than a hundred encouraging emails that Talea has saved to this day.

“Several people from the University even came to the funeral. They prayed with me and my brothers outside the church before the service started, just asking God to give us peace of mind,” Talea says. “I'll never forget how encouraging it was, and how proud it made my family, to know that my University cared for us so much.”

When she returned to campus, Talea began meeting regularly with Patricia Robbins, an admissions officer, and Stacy Mahler, an associate minister, women who have both become “like mothers to me,” Talea says. She also joined with fellow student Katie Huff ('13) and

Mahler to begin a new club on campus called Grief Share, a support group for people who have lost loved ones. “It’s been incredibly helpful through Grief Share to be able to talk with others who have experienced something similar to what I was going through,” Talea says.

In the years since her mother’s death, Talea pursued a college experience that would make her mom proud. A phenomenal student, she served as an officer with a student entrepreneurship club, through which she helped residents of a local women’s shelter develop professional skills and find job opportunities. She volunteered and served internships with the local Hospice. She even served as a student-recruiting ambassador in the admissions office, where shared her personal story of how the Gardner- Webb community helped renew her hope and faith.

“There are lots of different people here,” Talea says. “It’s a very diverse community, and I’ve been able to learn from so many people’s different perspectives. But I always tell people, I chose Gardner-Webb because of the family feel. We’re just so close.”

After graduation, Talea planned to find a job in the healthcare industry or attend graduate school for public health. Gardner-Webb prepared her for yet another season of transition by equipping her academically and helping her mature. Still, as she walked across the stage during commencement, she realized she would miss the community she’s come to call her “family.”

“Everything hasn’t gone the way I wanted it to,” Talea says of her college years. “But if I had to choose over again, I’d choose Gardner-Webb over everywhere else. This has been the best time of my life.”

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