

Every day I walk to work, I take a sidewalk past Huntington's Heritage Station. Appropriately themed for that attraction, that particular sidewalk has a subtle pattern of railroad tracks going along it. The minimal decoration is, to be sure, neither artistically impressive nor especially aesthetically pleasant, and through most of my life, I would have rolled my eyes at the cheesiness of it and kept on walking.

However, my partner, Elizabeth, studied history. Unlike many history majors or aficionados I've encountered, though, our conversations don't tend toward wartime strategies or grand social movements. She instead pursues the untold story—the lost letters from overseas soldiers or the diaries of those who struggled as the unnamed parts of better-known social movements. She likes finding lockets and old photos and the sort of antiques and antiquities that survived not because someone wanted them to someday be rare and valuable, but because their value was sentimental, and that alone made them worth protecting.

She reminds me that the broad strokes of history are a backdrop for the stories of real people, everyday Janes and Joes living their lives. She reminds me that many of the stories worth telling are the ones we most often would never think to tell. She reminds me of how human and personal the world can be, despite how large and unfamiliar it can seem too often.

Most relevantly, and at times most importantly, she's reminded me to love the small town charm so many places in WV have. She helps me see the new growth sprouting from the skeletons of abandoned industries. She gives me an excuse to celebrate local artists, restaurants, organizations, historical sites, and, above all else, stories.

Because of her, then, I smile on the days when my mind is not too far away to take note of the railroad-track sidewalk. But this is not a story of my partner, nor of the charms of Huntington, but of something else I learned one day from that sidewalk: We spend so much of our time looking for common interests that we forget that an interest someone has that we do not yet is not a missed connection but an opportunity.

Each person sees the world through different eyes and appreciates it differently. This colors the untold stories throughout history, but, moreover, each person we get to know can teach us to enjoy something new—not merely the hobbies and interests we never encountered before, but the ones we simply failed to grasp the beauty of. Looking back, everyone in my life has taught me to see the world a little differently, teaching me to look for the secrets of life and language, little loves and lost lore. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so we should let the beholders share the beauty with us when we cannot find it ourselves.

Life is too short to be afraid to make new friends, especially when each one can teach us so much about the world. As part of Generation WV, I met so many great people this past year, and my world grew so much because of it. There are too many I have had too few conversations with, and too many more conversations I would yet like to continue. There is a vast world out there, but it is woven out of each of our threads—our stories, our perspectives, our lives.

When asked what the best memory I had of the past year was, it was difficult to choose. From crawling through the treetop rope courses when first meeting the Impact Fellowship cohort, to those times when I finally puzzled out a difficult piece of code, to the antics of the dog I have had for barely longer than that year, there were plenty of candidates. So, too, have there been the bad memories, from trying to rescue some papers and works I have collected through my own life from sudden flooding to the more

gradual creep of COVID-19 into all of our lives and the day it all blurred together so much I forgot if I had walked my dog – and I had, only an hour before. Through it all, though, that realization that each new friend is a chance to make new memories has stuck with me (especially when the rest of life is blurring together).

I have been working from home for the better part of five months now. Although I would love to see some of my coworkers face-to-face again, I have not found myself missing the office. I do, however, from time to time miss that short, quiet trek from the parking garage to my desk, where I let my mind wander for just a few moments before delving into the tasks of the day. I do, also, on rare occasion, miss that sidewalk, and the lesson it reminds me of when I walk along it.

-Carter Edge

Impact Fellowship Cohort 3