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Honorary Family

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the authors reflect on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; mutuality; Rogers State University (OK)—Honors Program

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It's a crisp, cool morning as the campus begins to show signs of life. Above the tittering birds and soft breeze, laughter can be heard echoing across the grounds. The sounds are coming from the self-proclaimed “nerd herd,” an eclectic group of honors students shuffling along the sidewalk to their morning classes. The conversation ranges from serious discussions regarding an upcoming biology test to light teasing about pranks pulled in the dorms. Despite, or perhaps because of, their complex array of ethnicity, majors, and ages, their interactions portray a chemistry seldom seen among such a large group of people. Their relationship can be best described with one word: “family.”

Family is a multifaceted concept that can be interpreted in numerous ways. The overall construct typically refers to a group of people who share a bond with one another. Within this group are many distinct types of relationships. In our honors family, those relationships were based on respect, rivalry, and shared growth. Though we came from different corners of the world, breaking away from the only familial ties we'd ever known, the honors program nurtured and bound us together to form a new family dynamic. The environment created by this web of interactions culminated in forming a substantial part of our character and our role in future relations.

Respect is often considered a foundational element in group settings, be it in the classroom, office, or family. Honors taught us to examine not only what it takes for someone to earn respect but how to earn the respect of others. By design, honors courses force students from various cultures and backgrounds into a room together to discuss challenging topics. Discussions among such a brilliant group of young minds on topics such as social issues often lead to raised voices, fervent opinions, and sometimes even tears. In a normal setting, this may cause students to completely shut out differing opinions. The honors seminar, however, pulls students a step further by taking these differing views in stride and using the conversations as a catalyst to conquer unconscious bias, expanding typically narrow views of what it takes to earn respect. Rather than respecting an individual simply because we agree with their opinion or trying to earn respect by bending their viewpoints to match our own, admiration can instead be garnered through the meeting of minds, appreciating the wealth of knowledge and varying perspectives others have to offer. While a family may not always see eye-to-eye, the ability to understand and respect differing opinions creates a deep bond of mutual respect.

With a foundation of respect established, honors students continue to build family bonds through healthy rivalry. All honors students entered our program with the same minimum requirements, many enhancing their résumé with an overabundance of accomplishments. While this could be intimidating, it also meant that most honors students harbored a certain amount of competitive spirit. The program fostered this innate desire for success through different forms of competition: maybe an overt challenge, such as an academic group project to determine what is happiness; or a physical sporting event like the Honors Olympics; or even laid-back events involving board games. Often, it manifested as a passive quest to build one another up by improving ourselves in and out of the classroom. Even when the intent behind this sibling rivalry was less altruistic, just as many blood-bonds may be, the family was still stronger for it as it cultivated a shared growth.

Since graduating, the honors family has grown in every way possible. There are more graduates every year, and we remain in close contact with professors and prior classmates. So close that some, like us, have even married and brought about a whole new generation to carry on the honors legacy. Our success in all aspects of life can be attributed to not only internalizing those values of respect, rivalry, and shared growth but also to treating everyone we meet like family. Not one of us walked the path to success in isolation; we all grew together to form the “nerd herd” that will forever be a part of

us, continuing to better one another no matter where our lives take us. We began as strangers with diverse backgrounds, but through success and failure we were all able to learn, grow and build each other up in a way that allowed us all to walk across that stage as a family, with honors.

[Director's Note: Joshua and Brandi wed in 2013 after meeting in honors.]

