

*Where It All Began*

“Wherever you go in this world, go bravely. Whatever you do, do it well. Once you accomplish your dreams, be proud, but do not let success blind you. Remember where it began, where you came from, and the people who were there in the beginning, for they are what make you who you are.”

The quote above is not from a former United States president or some renowned philosopher that has been dead for centuries. It is not a cliché phrase taken off a Hallmark card or an excerpt of an inspirational speech I heard at some point in my life. It is a promise; one I made to myself several years. With only a few days remaining in my time at the Kentucky Governor’s Scholars’ Program (GSP), my teacher gave us one of those most meaningful assignments I have ever completed. We were to write a letter to ourselves, which he would keep for a full year, and then mail to us wherever we might have traveled in the world. That was the promise I made to myself as a seventeen-year-old on that sunny July afternoon. I didn’t just want to remember those words, but rather I wanted to live them. No matter what dreams I fulfill, I will never forget the people/events that molded me... the people that, just through our interactions, made my lofty ambitions into a reality. While I wrote it at an entirely different time in my life and originally intended it for a different audience, with the past semester at my back, I think it undoubtedly applies to my time and involvement with the Emerging Leaders Institute at the University of Kentucky.

I applied for admission into ELI simply out of the recommendations of friends, and for the sake of slapping the label on a resume along with a host of other activities that can be associated with my name. I never expected how meaningful the class would ultimately turn out to be. The very first day, however, my impressions were immediately altered. I can’t even describe how negative my initial feelings towards the class were, seeing as the orientation was excruciatingly early, coincidentally occurring the morning after a wild fraternity rush party. I was expecting your typical leadership seminar-type thing. A group of kids, each of whom thrives on their own accomplishments and relentlessly promoting themselves to the group, sitting together week after week while someone delivers the same leadership speeches you have sat through more times than you can count. ELI, from the first moment in the room, was something different. The students surrounding me were not infatuated with themselves, and were not, for lack of a better word, “nerds”. It was a group of very involved, bright, insightful, and for the most part fun-loving eighteen to twenty-year-olds. This was indeed an eye-opener in many ways. It showed me that I’m not alone here at UK; there are many fine students with an impressive level of involvement, goals, and potential. This revelation was good in the sense that it reminded me of my place and not to get ahead of myself, but also provided some comfort in knowing that there are many excellent, well-rounded students in my college.

From that first LONG day, my time in ELI seems to have passed in a matter of days. Looking back, it amazes me how much I’ve been through, learned, changed, and grown. As for the people, there are friends and contacts that I will maintain for years to come - - a room of kids I was dreading to meet has become a room of kids that, through some unexplainable and instant bond, relishes the time we spend together. Not only have I made good friends that I otherwise would have never known as more than strangers I passed on campus, but the quote I discussed earlier comes into play here as well. I have so much faith in the students in my ELI class and the possibilities of what we as a whole could do for the world we’ll so soon enter. The excitement to look ahead twenty years and see the impact our class has made in the lives of others is

indescribable. Years down the road, when there are so many talented, successful, still prospering and growing adults out there, one would easily be able to trace our roots back to a common place: the ELI Spring class of 2004 at the University of Kentucky. We started here together and, while we will indeed soon go our separate ways, we are leaving different people than we were before, because this class and the people in it have instilled something new in us. Through our time together, each of us has in some way affected our classmates, sharing with them our gifts, talents, ideas, and personalities. Each of us, having known the others, is now better and has obtained something that will take us farther than we ever would have foreseen before; this “something” is interactions of many exceptional people that coalesce and take on the appearance of the ELI experience.

Whether or not we saw it at the time, every presentation and activity was, in some way, beneficial to us. However, a few select ones do stand out in my mind as being my favorite or the ones I took the most from. First of all, the personality tests we took that evaluate our leadership styles, tactics, and effectiveness were both frighteningly accurate and largely beneficial. When I read the results of that survey, I felt as though someone had read my mind and looked deep into my heart. It understood me, even the parts of my personality that I conceal and rarely expose to the world. More importantly, it told me things about myself that, while I knew them to be true, I never understood or would have recognized them without reading it in those results. Once it had me analyzed, however, it was not over. With my leadership style identified, now it could be put to use, constructively explaining how to utilize traits as a leader, and ultimately enhancing my effectiveness at achieving my goals and desired results.

Another activity that stands out in my mind was Mimi Haley and Winn Stephens’ presentation about stereotypes, their accuracy, and how they affect our behavior. This was interesting not only to see the way different classifications of people are viewed, but also it allowed us as a class to discuss our own choices, showing the very different experiences and personalities our group has. I felt like we all took something from this activity because it not only gave us some practice at dealing with diversity we might encounter in our different leadership roles, but we got to have a very open discussion in which we learned stuff about the others in the room.

Whether it’s through the presentations, working together with my amazing mentor group, or simply getting to know an impressive group of people, ELI stands out as being one of the turning points in this first year of college. Though my freshman year is ending, and both this semester and ELI flew by in a heartbeat, I know that my ELI experience is not entirely over. ELI changes something in you – instills a part of itself in you that you can carry with you down the road, always calling on for answers and advice. Once you’ve been through the program, it’s always with you because it makes an impact on you. This class is, in my opinion, generating a new series of leaders to that will take control of the future and ultimately work it into something beyond all expectations. As I said before, someday people will look at all of us, and it was be painstakingly obvious where we obtained such aptitude as leaders; we were bred that way during our time in ELI.

Wherever I go in this world, I’ll go bravely. Whatever I do, I’ll do it well. Once I accomplish my dreams, I’ll be proud, but I will not let success blind me. I’ll remember where it began, where I came from, and the people who were there in the beginning, for they are the ones that have made me who I am. In short, I will remember ELI.