Sheep, Cliffs, Murals: The Northern Ireland Experience

—By Charles Strehlo SAS ’24

**Picture it**—two years of masks, regulations and ambiguity. You are tired of things being canceled and life being postponed, but now things are reverting. You are on an Honors Program Global Experience to Ireland.

During the spring ’22 semester, I took Professor Paul Blaney’s class, *The Troubles: Partition, Sectarianism, Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*. Using books, plays, music and stories, we worked our way through the history of Northern Ireland from the Troubles up until modern day. The class taught me that there was a rich, dark, still-living history that bled into the soil we would soon be hiking on.

Over spring break, we took three connecting flights to begin our eight-day global experience of Northern Ireland. A bus into Belfast led us to a small coffee shop where we met Professor Blaney’s aunt and her dog. Soon, we were taking bus rides around Ireland that fell into the exact archetype you’d expect of the country; rolling green fields, sheep grazing, and stretched skies often scattered with rain.

The following day, we took a tour of the Linen Hall Library, and later went up to Stormont and spoke to politicians from both Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party. When it came time to ask questions, each politician let us know with fervor how they really felt towards their friends on the other side.

Day four was one of our best. After a tour of the Titanic Museum, we hopped on a Black Cab tour around the city. They drove us between all the murals, and most importantly brought us to a large wall that stood between a Protestant and a Catholic neighborhood. The history we’d learned in class had felt like something from the distant past, but the sight of that wall still separating neighborhoods reminded us of a conflict that still lay dormant below the floorboards of Belfast.

The next day, we took a bus to the homeplace of Seamus Haney and visited his grave site. Standing over it made me think about what’s still here when we’re gone. Seamus Haney had left copious works for generations to come; what might I leave?

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Message from the Honors Dean

Like so many others, we in the SAS Honors Program are working to define a new normal that blends the best aspects of physical and virtual interaction. It has been wonderful to have students meeting each other again in classrooms and dorms, discovering shared interests and forming lifelong friendships. It has been exciting to offer global experiences in Ireland and Spain this spring, and to begin planning new faculty-led programs for coming years. And it was a real joy to gather with alumni—both newly minted and long established—on a beautiful April afternoon in Deiner Park.

Yet we have also come to appreciate the vast array of possibilities available online. We are particularly grateful to all of you who took the time to connect with our students from around the country. Our students drew some wonderful insights about the variety of paths they can follow. One theme stood out to me: students discovered that—contrary to Apollo 13—failure is an option, and that’s okay! Trying and failing is part of the learning process. That is a profound lesson for students to hear from people they can relate to—honors alumni whose example they can follow!

Charles R. Keeton

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School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program

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Afterwards, we went to Derry and took a patriotic photo in front of a wall that let us know we were now entering “Free Derry.”

On Saint Patrick’s Day, we took a bus to hike Giant’s Causeway. The view was breathtaking. Cliff faces were scattered with nature’s artwork from millions of years of erosion. Wind fresh and clean whipped through our hair and lungs like a slap. And sheep nearby, of course.

I’d be remiss not to mention that our wonderful navigator, Catherine, who we fondly called our “vacation-Mom,” helped get us through Northern Ireland every step of the way.

When it comes to studying abroad, the experience defies any ability to be put into words. There were a thousand little moments, laughs, memories, and smiles that will stick with me for a lifetime. I wish I had more time to explain it all, but instead I’ll simply say that you should get yourself to Belfast if you ever have the chance.

A Lifelong Friendship Begins in Honors Housing

What are the key ingredients to a great friendship? For rising sophomores Justin Han and Devin Fox, it boils down to loyalty, bonding over similar interests, and spending time together. Therefore, despite their different cultural backgrounds, a genuine friendship formed.

It was honors housing that brought the duo together. During their first year at Rutgers University the honors students resided in McCormick Suites, one of the four residence halls at the university dedicated to the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program community. Located on Busch campus, the suites often acted as a place of solace for Han and Fox after long hours spent in class.

“I thought that was really special, that I could just come home after a long day to my friends who are also my roommates and just talk to them,” Han recalls, after taking a bus back to the suites alone after dark.

As the only two suitemates in the Rutgers Business School—both double majoring in Finance and Business Analytics and Information Technology—Fox and Han spent as much time in their dorms as they did in their shared courses and clubs. They participated in honors courses such as Honors Colloquium, and applied for competitive opportunities like Road to Wall Street.

But even outside of the classroom, what makes their friendship truly special are the times when they are there for each other. Han could rely on Fox—the only suitemate with a car—for a ride home late at night just as much as Fox could rely on him for advice.

“To have somebody that really cares about you but not just ‘talk the talk’ that’s what builds friendships,” Fox says, after explaining how Han dropped his plans for an

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evening out with friends to stay with him during a tough time in his personal life.

Their strong bond grew even more when Han brought Fox over to meet his family in Fort Lee, NJ—a city well known for being predominantly Asian. Han remembered how great it was for his friend to experience different Korean dishes and similarly, the duo also attended a baseball game in Fox’s hometown of Lumberton, NJ. Though their differences in backgrounds may seem glaringly obvious at first, they have never allowed it to affect their friendship.

“I think in the beginning we just looked past that and sort of just saw each other for the people we are,” Han says. What’s next for these two besties? Fox and Han plan to dorm together as they enter their sophomore year. They have also set out to begin a sports betting club at the university, an idea sparked from countless evenings playing fantasy football and pouring over sports analytics. As for the future? Han and Fox expect nothing but success for themselves and each other—and hope to create enough fond memories together to last a lifetime.

SASHP Senior Leader Award Recipients

The SASHP Senior Leader Award acknowledges the contributions of Honors students in their final year of undergraduate study who have made significant contributions to campus life at Rutgers, with particular emphasis on service to Honors Program organizations and initiatives. Eleven of the 13 recipients from the Class of ’22 share their reflections below. (Not pictured: Steven Arnold and Aishwarya Ramaswamy)

**Jusleen Basra**
I will definitely miss being able to connect with other students in SASHP. SASHP has such a diverse student body (in every sense of the word) and it was really fun getting to know and learn from others! I am excited to keep in touch with those I connected with and can’t wait to see what they do in the world!

**Fiona Chen**
The SASHP Peer Mentor Program made the biggest impact on my college career as it is what really encouraged me to go out, attend events, and meet other people. The program also really helped me stay engaged and connect with the college community as I transitioned from living in the dorms to commuting from home.

**Khushi Gandhi**
Being a part of the SASHP Peer Mentor Program helped me so much as an incoming freshman, and serving as a mentor to so many students over the past three years has been such an amazing way to give back to the Rutgers and SASHP communities!

**Ahri Han**
The SASHP student body, deans, and administrators that make up this incredible community had the biggest impact on my time at Rutgers. Whether it was taking honors classes or taking trips to NYC for Honors Colloquium, I loved getting to know my peers and knowing that my academic and professional goals were supported and encouraged. I’m excited to bring the memories that I’ve made at Rutgers with me as I start my MD/PhD this fall.

**Samantha Lee**
The support and community from those around me—mentors, professors, clubs and SASHP networks, friends, and more—allowed me to thrive. With their guidance and influence, I had full access to academic and career resources, as well as various opportunities to shape and pursue my own specific interests, and I was able to become a better scholar, leader, and person.

**Thomas Newton**
Despite initial hesitation about succumbing to the stigma of being “just another number” at a large institution, I am so appreciative of my time at Rutgers. Most notably, I cannot express how thankful I am for the opportunity to work in and around SASHP, specifically alongside Dean Kim-Lee, creating all of the events put on to make McCormick Suites a more welcoming and fun home away from home.

**Kishan Patel**
I am going to miss the community that SASHP and the Honors Peer Mentor Program, specifically, offered. Luckily, I will be sticking with Rutgers during the next phase of my journey, as a part of the NJMS Class of 2027!

**Shruthi Thiagarajan**
The support and community I found within SASHP were the heart of my Rutgers experience. The leadership experiences I gained have been crucial to my self-growth and allowed me to contribute back to this program in a meaningful way. I’m so grateful for the opportunities, my fellow honors students, and the honors deans I found.
through SASHP; it really made Rutgers feel like home.

**Monica Tschang**
I thought I couldn’t find my way in such a big school like Rutgers but in fact, it was because Rutgers is so big that I was able to find and create so many supportive communities to grow and excel. If you’re looking for something at Rutgers, chances are you’ll find it or people who are willing to help you create it for yourself.

**Anna Zhang**
Through SASHP, I found a smaller community within Rutgers with driven and like-minded people. SASHP encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and take risks. From taking challenging honors courses to pursuing my honors thesis, I have been able to meet the most amazing and supportive people from my professors, to the honors deans, and to my friends.

**Franchesca Zilinski**
I am going to miss the support system provided by the SASHP community. I met some of the most amazing people through SASHP, and I am grateful for these lifelong friendships.

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**2022 SASHP Senior Speakers**

**Gloria Abbas-Zadeh**

**School of Arts and Sciences Convocation Speaker**
Gloria Abbas-Zadeh was one of two Honors Scholars selected as student speakers for the School of Arts and Sciences Convocations. The following is an excerpt of Abbas-Zadeh’s graduation speech. Watch the class of 2022 SAS Convocation online:

[go.rutgers.edu/RUSASConvocation](go.rutgers.edu/RUSASConvocation).

“So, human connection is the thread which ties us all together, and we really depend on our differences to not only better understand each other, but ourselves as well...We’ve all faced our own challenges these past few years. We can use the memories of these difficulties to be more compassionate towards others.”

**Joshua Gole**

**Honors Senior Gathering Speaker**
Joshua Gole delivered the senior speech to the class of 2022 honors scholars at the Honors Senior Gathering in May. The following is an excerpt from the full speech which you can read on the SASHP Student Blog at [go.rutgers.edu/RUSASHPSeniorSpeaker](go.rutgers.edu/RUSASHPSeniorSpeaker).

“Life is more than a destination—it’s an adventure that we should soak in every minute of. We should all strive to live life knowing that living is enough. There will be hard times, and with those will come good times. We, the Rutgers University SAS Honors Program Class of 2022, have been through it all before. We are the resilient. We are the Scarlet Knights!”

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**SAS Honors Program by the Numbers**

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<th><strong>173</strong></th>
<th><strong>160</strong> &amp; <strong>13</strong></th>
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<td>Class of 2022 Honors Scholar graduates</td>
<td>SAS &amp; RBS</td>
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**Top 3 Majors**
1. Cell Biology and Neuroscience
2. Computer Science
3. Tie: Biological Sciences and Psychology

**Top 3 Minors**
1. Spanish
2. Psychology
3. Economics

**Graduated with 4.0 cumulative GPA**

**27**
SASHP Class of 2022 Henry Rutgers Scholars

**72**
SASHP Class of 2022 Paul Robeson Scholars

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Across Two Generations, Honors Program Shapes Student Lives

When Paul Dicker RC’88 looks back on his days in the honors program, the veteran physician recalls forging friendships, receiving mentoring from top scholars, and enjoying the environment of a small liberal arts college within a larger research university.

So, it’s no surprise that his daughter Jessica Dicker decided to seek a similar experience even while pursuing a different career path.

“I learned from my father how the honors program made a big school seem small while providing all the resources and opportunities,” says Jessica, who majored in economics in the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program (SASHP) and graduated in 2021.

The Dickers are not the only Rutgers alums who have made the SASHP a family affair. George Rears RC’89, an IT executive, was an honors program student, and so was his son Andy, a software engineer and a 2020 SASHP graduate.

For both families, the strengths of the honors program endure from one generation to another. The four alums say the program served as their homebase at Rutgers—a diverse, friendly community where the deans knew their names—a place that nurtured their intellectual and personal growth, enhancing their undergraduate experience and shaping their lives.

“I always tell people I think in bullet points and processes,” says George Rears, who majored in computer science and economics. “Yet I can’t tell you how many midnight conversations we’d have in the Brett Hall lounge with people who had a more intuitive or philosophical way of communicating and could unpack a powerful story.”

Those encounters with students from different majors and backgrounds influenced Rears throughout his career. He is currently a project manager and fractional CIO at Achurch Consulting.

“The honors program was a great way to spend time with people who had different ways of coming to conclusions,” Rears said. “And that prepared me for working in system development where I encounter people all the time who come at problems differently.”

Andy Rears also found the honors program fertile ground for creative collaborations. A computer science major, Andy worked with fellow SASHP student and Brett Hall resident Brad Kizar on a video game—Space Crab. They designed the game for HackRU, then released it through Google.

“I brought the technical knowhow for game coding, and Brad brought the art and animation,” says Andy, a software engineer at the Beumer Group, a German logistics company. “Getting to meet people outside my discipline through the honors program was really a good thing.”

Besides meeting an eclectic and talented cohort of friends, the alums say another major advantage of the honors program was faculty mentoring.

Jessica Dicker was introduced through the program to economics professors Tom Prusa and Colin Campbell who became her mentors. Prusa nominated her to work as a First Year Interest Group instructor, and Campbell offered advice on courses and careers. Today Jessica works as financial analyst for a nonprofit healthcare company in Manhattan.

“The ability to meet and work with faculty such as professors Prusa and Campbell really stands out for me,” Jessica said. “I learned so much from them that continues to influence me today.”

Paul Dicker, who went on to attend New York University Medical School and become an Ob-Gyn, had much the same experience.

He immediately hit it off in his first semester with Lionel Goodman, a chemistry professor who taught an honors class on the philosophy of science and did an independent study with him.

“I would sit in his office and the two of us would just talk about these books that he had assigned me to read,” says Dicker. “It was the quintessential small college experience, and I had it at one of the largest universities.”
In Spring Honors Colloquium, we examined President Holloway’s vision of Rutgers as a beloved community. We explored how images have been used to depict communities and their values in different places and time periods, and challenged ourselves to consider how some groups can feel excluded from common depictions of or discourse around community. We discussed how Rutgers already offers a beloved community and what we can do to make it even stronger. Working in groups, students then created images that display what makes Rutgers and the Honors Program a beloved community for them. The images were displayed in an exhibition at the Rutgers Art Library, and also online: sites.rutgers.edu/sashp-beloved-community

Welcome, Celina Deflorimonte!

Celina is the Administrative Assistant to Dean Kim-Lee on Busch Campus. She received her Associates Degree in Liberal Arts from Bard High School Early College in 2016. As an undergrad at Rutgers–Newark she worked as an Administrative Assistant for Rutgers Future Scholars. Her role there sparked her love for mentoring and working in higher education. She received her Bachelors of Arts in Journalism and Media Studies from Rutgers–Newark in 2019. When she isn’t working, Celina enjoys reading, traveling, and binge-watching her favorite TV shows.