

“Student Affairs Talk” • Noah Ashley, Senior • September 9, 2021

Q: Appreciate you being here, Noah. Let’s jump right into it. When you think back to it, what made Clemson stand out when you were considering where you wanted to attend college?

ASHLEY: Thank you for having me. Clemson has become my second home now. Both of my parents went to Clemson. Growing up, I went to all the Clemson games and have been a huge Tiger. When it came time to go to college, the decision was really easy for me. I was super interested in engineering, specifically bioengineering. Knowing the program and the academic rigor Clemson is famous for — along with the Clemson family that I’ve been a part of my entire life — made going to Clemson the easy choice for me.

Q: You are a senior bioengineering major at Clemson — and that has taken you down a lot of different roads. Describe your academic experience here.

ASHLEY: The bioengineering department here has been incredible; Dr. Martine Laberge has been our chair. She’s been able to facilitate this awesome community of people who just really want to make an impact on the world in terms of medicine and medical innovation. And our classes have reflected that. So, going through all these classes with my peers, I’ve formed a pretty good community of people that bring out the best in each other. That takes the form of research, the form of community involvement, the form of volunteer activities we’ve been able to do together. That’s been really cool, because it’s pushed me academically, but also getting outside of the classroom and doing other things as well.

Q: The MedEx Club connects pre-professional health students with networking and development opportunities — you served as the organization’s Vice President for the better part of 2 years: take me through some of your responsibilities in this role?

ASHLEY: The MedEx internship is something that’s hosted by Prisma Health every single summer. Essentially what you do is you spend your entire summer immersed in a clinical environment with Prisma. It’s for pre-health majors; you don’t have to be going to medical school or anything like that. This experience has been truly

transformative in terms of my desire to go to medical school and in giving me an inside peak of what it looks like to actually fill the shoes of a physician one day. My role as vice president of the MedEx Club was to facilitate some of the resources we get over the summer and bring them to Clemson students. What that looks like, for example, is one time I held a talk with a woman who traveled the world and gave TED Talks on mental illnesses and how that interacts with mass shooters in an academic setting. What that looks like is having CAPS come and talk to students about mental health awareness and resources on campus. It also looks like facilitating interview practice sessions for people who are going through current admissions cycles for pre-medical or pre-health schools. And then also doing application help as well, in that same vein. It’s another area of trying to foster pre-meds or pre-health students to prepare each other to go into a very difficult field and the pressures that come with that.

Q: You’ve interned with the Medical Experience Academy connected with Prisma Health a couple of summers now — what has that experience, which includes clinical rotations and job shadowing, meant to your career aspirations?

ASHLEY: I feel like everyone grows up saying they want to be a doctor. They all have this fairytale of being a kid and watching Doc McStuffins on TV and being like, ‘Oh, I want to be that one day.’ And that’s awesome, but until you’re really in a clinical environment and really see what’s going on, that’s when you start to think, ‘Wow, this profession is going to require a lot of sacrifice for me.’ And I think the COVID pandemic has been a perfect example of that. For instance, this past summer I got to do the MedEx Academy for my last year, and I was in the clinical environment for many, many hours. We would walk in to COVID-positive patients’ rooms all the time. We’d walk into COVID wings, and it was second nature for those physicians to be able to do that. I, having grown up through this pandemic, was like, ‘You cannot interact with someone who’s COVID-positive.’ Having to walk in those rooms was a small example of the sacrifice I’ll have to make every day as a physician. Without that experience, I don’t think I

would have that real-life example of the sacrifices I’ll have to make every single day. I’m so grateful for the community MedEx has given me. Every single summer you go through the program with 40 other people your age, in your class. You go through these experiences together and unpack the deaths you see, the celebrations and the births. The highs and lows that come with medicine. You get to unpack all of that together in a really accepting environment, so I’d say the MedEx Academy has been one of the most transformative experiences for me being able to solidify my career choice in medicine.

Q: I’m also fascinated, from the academic side of things, in your undergraduate research with the NICU project — take us through that innovation.

ASHLEY: Yes; I get to participate in a creative inquiry through the bioengineering department, working with professor John DesJardins. What he does is partners us with a physician or clinician in the environment, and we get to work on a novel medical device. So, we got partnered up a couple of years ago with a nurse in the neonatal ICU at Prisma Health in Greenville. What she challenged us to do was to create a device that would automatically shift babies within the crib they’re in while in the NICU to prevent pressure sores. The issues with these infants is that their brains have not developed yet, because they were born so prematurely. Every single time that you pick them up, you run the risk of brain damage or trauma to the baby. Essentially, what we’ve created is an automatic mattress that inflates with various air pockets at different intervals that will slowly shift the pressure points on the babies, to be able to prevent these pressure sores without having direct human contact. It eliminates some of the dangerous aspects of moving a baby born that prematurely. This experience has definitely been a lot of highs and lows, a lot of what it means to design a medical device. We’ve run into failure, run into budget constraints, run into the business side of the world. Have to work with someone who has a lot of their own ideas and things they want to contribute to the project. Last semester, we actually got it almost completed. We’re working on testing it right now. We hope to submit it for a publication soon, this semester. But it’s

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another example of how the bioengineering department has supported our creativity and our passions and our drive to make an impact on the world — while also giving us real-world experience with clinicians that are going to actually implement the things we’re designing as an undergraduate student.

Q: One non-academic experience that has been a big part of your time at Clemson is with Undergraduate Student Government and specifically, as chair for the Academic Integrity Board? How fulfilling has overseeing that group been to your time here?

ASHLEY: That has definitely been something that has shaped my time here at Clemson pretty significantly as well. Essentially, what the Academic Integrity Board does is we’re in charge of hearing all of the cases that come with any cheating or academic dishonesty here on campus. The Clemson degree is something I believe we can all agree we want to preserve the value of and respect of across industry and across the nation. It’s our job to protect that value. It’s our job to make sure that when an employer sees our name come across their desk — in terms of a résumé — they know that they earned this degree, they worked for it and that they’re going to be really capable to fulfill the job they’re applying for. So, this role has had a lot of very hard decisions. A lot of ethical considerations. I get to serve on a board with other students and faculty to make these decisions, but it has been really rewarding to see how students have embraced the COVID-19 pandemic and really taken it upon themselves to uphold the honor code we all agree to by being a Clemson student. But also, it’s been very rewarding to protect that degree for other students as well by addressing cases as we see them.

Q: Some of your most important experiences outside of the classroom have occurred within your fraternity, Beta Upsilon Chi — better known as BYX. It is the only Christian-based fraternity on campus — what can you tell us about this group of individuals?

ASHLEY: Like you said, BYX is the only Christian fraternity on campus. We’re fully Greek and fully Christian. We’re 100-percent IFC (Interfraternity Council). So what that

kind of looks like is that we hold everything a normal fraternity would have — we have mixers, socials, formals, semi formals, brotherhood retreats. They just have a Christian aspect to them. It’s been really cool to be able to unpack that side of my life, given how important my faith is to me, in a fraternity here on campus. It just goes to show that at Clemson, there’s an organization for you. There is always going to be something that can align with your values and something you can plug into pretty deeply. That’s what BYX has been for me. I found it as a sophomore, rushed as a sophomore and got involved. Ever since then, I was treasurer and president — I’m going out as president. This is my last semester now. This organization and experience has been probably the most transformative of my college experience. Just in terms of the community I’ve been able to build, in terms of the highs and lows and hardships of life I’ve been able to live with these guys that are my brothers now. Those are experiences and memories I’ll take with me for the rest of my life. It’s been one of the hardest and also most rewarding things to be able to lead this organization as president this year. I’m really excited to finish out the semester strong.

Q: You wrote recently that you’ve discovered ‘Leadership is less about administrative and logistical tasks, and more about investing in the people around me.’ What did you mean by that?

ASHLEY: This past semester — in conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic and also life going on — our fraternity has been hit with a ton of loss. A lot of guys have lost parents or siblings, grandparents and other family members. There’s also a ton of guys that have been struggling in terms of their mental health. Being in isolation or quarantine was tough for a ton of guys. So, I would say as chapter president, I have a lot of logistical responsibilities. I have IFC meetings to attend, organizational things I have to do on a day-to-day basis. But, the thing that is most rewarding about my job is being able to foster community that comes around these guys when things do get hard. The funerals we’ve attended as a brotherhood — all of us will go to funerals together — those things stick out in my head. Coming around a guy when he’s at his lowest and making sure he

knows he’s loved and supported and that we have his back forever and always. The personal aspects that come into people’s lives as a college student, having community around you that will catch you before you fall in those moments, has been awesome for me to be able to organize as chapter president.

Q: BYX facilitated a partnership with ClemsonLIFE — a well-known program for students with intellectual disabilities. How meaningful has that been to your Clemson experience?

ASHLEY: Man, that has probably been the most fun thing I’ve gotten to do here at Clemson. Coming into my presidency, I knew this was something I wanted to do. I worked with Joe Strickland (Fraternity and Sorority Life) and Hunter Gossett (ClemsonLIFE). We said we were going to make it happen. It came down to the wire, but in Spring 2021 we were able to rush four ClemsonLIFE men. These guys have been transformational for our fraternity. I remember going into the first pre-rush event with them and watching our guys. Even if you’re just talking to a guy for that long who has an intellectual disability and you’ve never really done that before, sometimes it can be uncomfortable because you haven’t been in that situation. I’ve been able to watch the growth in our members from those pre-rush conversations to now us grabbing lunch with them once a week or taking them to church. Them coming to chapter and forming genuine, long-lasting relationships we might not have had without this partnership. The four ClemsonLIFE men we were able to take have changed our fraternity more than we’ve been able to change them. It’s an awesome position to be in, and I’m super excited for the partnership we’ve been able to foster between IFC and ClemsonLIFE. Hopefully, we’ll expand that this coming spring during rush. It’s been probably one of the most rewarding and fun experiences of my time here at Clemson. The memories I have with some of those LIFE guys is something I’ll take with me for the rest of my life. I’m super thankful for Clemson and administration for entrusting us with this partnership; it’s not something we take lightly.

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Q: This past summer, you and others from BYX attended a 2-week national leadership summit — I’m told you went to Washington, DC and even as far as Israel. That had to be an amazing experience?

ASHLEY: BYX nationally does this thing every year called Core Leadership Retreat. Essentially, through the application process they take 40 guys across all the chapters in the nation. It’s a two-week long intensive retreat in Washington, DC, New York City and it ends in Israel. It’s definitely the most life-changing experience I’ve had during my undergraduate career. What that looked like day to day was we met with industry leaders, military generals, congressmen and elected officials in DC. So, we met with a four-star general at the Pentagon one day. He was a UGA fan, so he heckled me about being a Clemson Tiger. We put a bet on the game, and I lost (laughs). Then, we met with some senators on Capitol Hill. I met an NHL hockey player who taught me how to play hockey on an ice rink. A lot of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities with people I’ll never be able to meet again, facilitated by our national staff and our board of directors. When we would meet them, we would have talks about leadership. Obviously, they’re super successful in their field, industry and government leaders. We talked about their leadership philosophies, what made them leaders they are today and what allowed them to amass such loyal and supportive backgrounds of people. What’s allowed them to integrate their faith with their leadership style. Just a lot of practical tips of what it’s going to look like for us as we transition into the next phase of our lives and go on to our careers one day. How do we take the skills we’re learning here in college and continue to be impactful men that are going to make a difference in this world in whatever industry we end up in. That was the first part of the trip, in DC. We met with Steve Forbes in New York City, other super-high presidential candidate kind of people. We had the exact same kinds of leadership conversations. One of my favorite parts of the trip was spending a little over a week in Israel. That was definitely a transformative experience as well. We explored all of Israel, from top to bottom. We explored neighboring countries and discussed with locals the conflicts there. We went to Lebanon, went into the

border and talked with locals there what their thoughts and opinions were with the crisis going on. It’s funny, because three days after we left that spot in Lebanon, it got hit with 10 rockets. If we left three days later, we could have been involved in that. So, first of all it gave me a huge understanding and new respect for the crisis that’s going on in the Middle East right now. It also gave me two very different sides and perspectives in terms of how deeply complex and entrenched these conflicts are. There is no simple solution for anyone. We went to Gaza and looked over the strip, one of the most dangerous areas of the world. We watched a bomb go off standing in the West Bank, watching the smoke go up from about a mile south. We practice bomb drills on playgrounds with Israeli children. It was definitely a humbling and eye-opening experience of how a lot of the Middle East is living right now in terms of the conflict day to day they’re dealing with. We got perspectives from both sides. We met with Palestinians and Israelis and talked about what they feel the path is moving forward for their respective countries. Getting that difference in perspective definitely opened my eyes that it’s not a black and white issue. All world conflict is a gray issue, but this is not an easy said and done kind of deal. After we did all those things, we explored Biblical sites as well. We had a tour guide and walked through a lot of the New Testament locations, explored spots mentioned throughout the Bible. Seeing what that was like in Israel — we got to visit the empty tomb, we visited the Sea of Galilee, we did all of those things. It was huge for my own faith and deepening that and having a new appreciation and understanding of the Bible and my own faith as a Christian.

Q: Joe Strickland, who helps advise Interfraternity Council and works with chapter leadership at Clemson, told me, ‘Noah is a phenomenal representative of what the FSL community brings to the Clemson experience and how it provides and develops leaders ...’ What is your reaction to those words from Joe?

ASHLEY: Joe Strickland is amazing. That man works tirelessly every single day to make sure the FSL and IFC communities are provided the best experience possible,

and that it will uplift its members. Me and Joe have worked tirelessly the past couple of years to hone in on what it truly means to embody an IFC man, someone who will make a positive impact on the community at Clemson and beyond, once you graduate. We talked about doing workshops with IFC men. We run ideas past each other in terms of philanthropy events, changes to the Greek community we feel are needed as we continue to grow and adapt to the challenges we face here at Clemson. Joe has been huge and a sounding board for me in my own chapter for different ideas and initiatives I want to take on to my guys. I’ll come to Joe with an idea and he’ll figure out a way to make it pretty and something that will stick with my guys. And then hopefully those are things we can then turn around and transfer to other Greek chapters in the community. He’s also phenomenal at connecting chapters and making sure you have that inter-Greek relationship. That’s something we’ve worked with, in terms of ClemsonLIFE, making sure other chapters can get involved in that partnership. So, I’m super thankful for Joe for the leadership advice and initiative he’s taught me, in terms of making sure I transfer skills I’m learning as a chapter president to not only my members, but also others within the Greek community.

Q: What’s next for you — it looks like you’re slated to graduate in May? Have you begun applying to medical schools?

ASHLEY: Yeah, I’m sad about it. It seems like yesterday I was sitting in Core C, or what’s now DesChamps Hall. Just a little ol’ freshman not knowing what was going on in the world. I graduate in May 2022. I’m applying to medical school now, so I’m in the process of filling out all that stuff. I’ll be interviewing here shortly. Obviously, becoming a physician is the dream for me. That’s what is immediately next up on the radar. In terms of turning over all the chapter leadership positions, making sure the next president and leaders are set up and ready to go, it’s kind of on the front of my mind right now. I’m definitely sad this is my last year of Clemson Football and walking the hills of Clemson’s campus, but I’m excited with how Clemson has prepared me to go out in the world and prepared me to make an impact.