

“Student Affairs Talk” • John Gressette, Senior • July 9, 2020

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Gressette: I’ve actually gotten the opportunity to intern for an Anheuser-Busch distributor here in Piedmont, South Carolina. I’m loving it; it’s awesome. I’m getting a bottom-to-top view of the company. Being an economics guy and knowing alcohol is one of the few recession-proof goods, I figured it would be a good industry to get into and try and learn more about. But I’m having a blast and loving it. Luckily, we’ve been able to keep going and stay in business. I know a lot of people’s internships have been cancelled and I hate that. I’m very thankful to still have mine.

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Q: You’re originally from the Columbia area; how have your folks been back home, health-wise?

Gressette: They’re doing well. They’re keeping their social distance. My dad has luckily been able to work from home, which is another thing to count my blessings for.

Q: I often ask students right off the bat how they first gained an interest in Clemson, but I imagine with you it was literally in your blood from Day One. Your grandfather, Lawrence, was a member of the Board of Trustees and former chairperson --- how influential was he on your decision to attend Clemson?

Gressette: Oh, he was vital. An absolutely

integral part of that. We always have a joke in the family that, “You can go wherever you want, but we’re still going to send your money to Clemson.” Something along those lines. I toured Clemson and several other schools. I was more open-minded than my two older brothers, who only applied to Clemson and only wanted to go here. But really, it just felt like home. I know people say that and it almost sounds cliché, but it’s the truth. I love it here. It’s a big football school and has given me a chance to be a leader. It’s an opportunity not just to be a small fish in a big pond, but also to make an impact on other people and grow as an individual.

Q: You have two older brothers. Are you the youngest sibling? Did you all spend time at Clemson together?

Gressette: I am the youngest of three. My oldest brother, Lawrence, graduated in 2017. And my middle brother, Paul, graduated this past May. Both are happy as can be and had great experiences, just like I’m having. Lawrence did not overlap me. I came in the Fall of 2017 and I just missed him; he’s probably thankful for that (laughs). Either way, Paul and I have had three good years together.

Q: Before we move on from your family’s involvement with the University, I wanted to mention the naming ceremony that took place last April --- the Core Campus residence halls and Stadium Suites were named in memory of 5 deceased trustees. Core A --- the area above the entrance to the dining hall --- now bears the Gressette name. You were able to attend the ceremony with your family, how cool and meaningful was that experience?

Gressette: It was absolutely incredible. Just a continual reminder of the big shoes we have to fill. My grandfather is one of my biggest role models in life, to say the least. I wish I’d gotten a little more time with him. It’s been wonderful to not only learn about the things he achieved, but also meet people he’s impacted or to spend time with. Just to see the culmination of all his love and time and dedication to Clemson is really meaningful to all of us.

Q: You’re carving out your own legacy at Clemson. Did you get involved right away on campus or feel your way out?

Gressette: I certainly looked for as many avenues for involvement as I could, from the day I got here. I remember moving into McCabe 206 my first day. President (Jim) Clements walked in and said as long as I spend a little bit of time in the library and dedicated myself to my studies, he was sure I’d be okay. He wanted all of us to get involved and do our part and I’ve been thankful to have that opportunity. I applied to join Student Alumni Council my freshman year and luckily was awarded a spot. I’ve really enjoyed being a part of such a wonderful group of people, but also a group that continues some of Clemson’s most prized traditions has been really awesome.

Q: You explained the traditions Student Alumni Council is involved with; what are some of those?

Gressette: The Student Alumni Council puts on Senior Week, Ring Ceremony, Welcome Back Festival and the Alumni Master Teacher award. I got four of the five, so that’s an 80. I’m passing at least. It’s a wonderful group of people involved in all kinds of alumni events. We get an opportunity to meet people who have dedicated their lives to Clemson and shown what it means to be a contributing member of the Clemson Family. That’s not just cool to be a part of, but it’s inspiring as an individual coming up through the University now who will hopefully continue to be involved with the rest of my life.

Q: You joined a fraternity freshman year, is that right?

Gressette: Yes sir. I rushed the fall of my freshman year and joined Kappa Sigma. I’ve had a wonderful experience. I love all my brothers. But really and truly, going Greek is not just about the one chapter that you join, it’s being able to meet all kinds of people from all kinds of different backgrounds. And, it’s about establishing a network of people who aren’t just there to get a job, or whatever, but that are there to support you and help you grow as an individual. I’ve met some of my best friends randomly through rush.

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Certainly, I acknowledge the Greek community is a higher-risk population in terms of certain things that have happened. It's inspired me to be a leader, stand up and want to make changes within our community. That led to me joining IFC (Interfraternity Council), where I ran for a position my sophomore year, which was vice president of risk management. Since then, I've tried to work to sure up the safety and security and work on things that need work within our community. And it's been awesome.

Q: For folks who don't know, IFC sort of serves as an umbrella for the fraternity chapters here at Clemson. Can you explain a little more about its purpose?

Gressette: IFC is one of four Greek councils at Clemson. We've got the MGC, the Multicultural Greek Council. NPHC is the National Panhellenic Council. And the CPA is the College Panhellenic Association. But IFC is the governing body of the 23 on-campus chapters at Clemson. Basically, what we have tried to do in terms of things recently is re-evaluate how we view certain things within our community. Specifically, making sure we condemn anything that comes across as culturally insensitive. Making sure our risk management procedures are up-to-date. All kinds of other things we can get into. IFC is a wonderful thing and I'd encourage anyone to join who may be interested. The Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life has tons of information on its website.

Q: Let's talk a little about the position with risk management --- in that role you were instrumental in creating new policies and procedures to ensure safety and transparency. Tell us a little more about that.

Gressette: I was the social chair of my fraternity before I joined IFC. I was in charge of putting on the events Kappa Sigma had, whether it was a brotherhood event or a social event. I realized there was a lot of liability and potential for — I wouldn't say bad things — but potential for things to go wrong. And I didn't want to see that for any of our chapters or people who would be attending our events. My main initiative as vice president for

risk management was to create a social registration software. What that means is any time a chapter has an event — instead of people showing up as a free-for-all — we established a software through CCIT, where we paid them to develop it. Any time we have an event, people are scanned in and it takes attendance. It's registered through a University system. It really just helps to enforce the social procedures and bylaws that already exist within our community. We have a guest-to-member ratio, lots of things about alcohol, such as open source. It really is a way of ensuring we have mutual accountability within our system, from chapters up through IFC. I would say that, in and of itself, the software doesn't change anything. But it makes you think before you have events, and that's probably the most important part of it.

Q: Now you've moved into the role of IFC president. How did that come about and when did you get started?

Gressette: Through my time as risk manager, acknowledging that changes don't happen overnight. Specifically in the Greek community, people aren't always receptive to change. I knew coming in that it wasn't going to be just a one-year term. I wanted to see some of the changes I made take effect. During that time, the person I followed as president — Mitch Steiner, who was very influential to me and was a huge role model — really helped build my character a lot. As part of that, I really wanted to continue the initiatives that we started. But also, move into something more. This year, our main focus has been developing a new member program we're calling Clemson Man. It really highlights what we aim to do as a Greek community, which is not to throw parties. It's not solely to be “frat guys” or anything like that. It's to develop young men of high character with a focus on integrity and academics and to create bonds that fraternities were formed in the beginning to create. Through that, my No. 1 focus has been mental health. As men, we really don't talk about it very much, but it's very prevalent. Following some events at peer institutions where certain members of the Greek community had unfortunate things occur — a fellow brother of mine at a nearby

university took his life this past year — and that really brought it to terms for me. I've always wanted us to start that conversation. I think we've finally begun to really get into the open about that.

Q: This term will be unlike any seen by previous IFC presidents in Clemson history. How has COVID-19 affected your planning for the upcoming academic year and all of the unknowns?

Gressette: It certainly will be unlike any others. We are hoping for the best, of course. We have our normal plan in place, but we've created five or six alternative plans. We met a week ago, on July 2, to discuss really everything. What came out of that was us highlighting the fact that leadership was especially important now from our chapter presidents. We had a vote and decided to suspend social events until the start of school, until we get the state's guidelines and University's guidelines to make sure we're not contributing to the chaos already existing in this world. Health and safety is our No. 1 priority at the end of the day. My advisor, Joe Strickland, as well as Gary Wiser in Fraternity and Sorority Life will tell you that it really all gears around that. We've made five or six different plans in terms of recruitment. It's such an interpersonal thing, so it's hard to do it over Zoom. I'm enjoying having this conversation with you, but it would be entirely different if we could be together in a room having it as opposed to over Zoom. We are prepared for just about anything. We're really asking everyone to be patient, be calm and use good judgment.

Q: We're talking about early rounds of Panhellenic recruitment being in this virtual setting, so how do you see for fraternities that part of the process potentially changing under the current conditions?

Gressette: Luckily I have a great vice president over recruitment, Jake Robert Meyer. He's done a great job of focusing on what things would be depending on what the statistics look like and what the University is saying. As of right now, we're planning to have tiers. We'll have a somewhat normal, but socially distanced with masks recruitment. Or a very scattered

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type of recruitment, where of course a chapter with 150 couldn't have all of their brothers come. But, if 10 of them could come and we could do it in a socially distanced manner where it would be safe, we would love to do that. As I said, the interpersonal setting is the priority. But, we of course have plans for recruitment, just like Panhellenic. It's definitely been our primary conversation recently. Let's just see where this goes; let's hope the surge dies down and we'll continue to abide by the guidelines. We certainly don't want to contribute to any of this.

Q: Academically, you are enrolled in economics. You told us earlier about your internship with Anheuser-Busch. Ultimately, what do you want to do with your degree when you move on from Clemson?

Gressette: That's a wonderful question. I seem to change my mind almost weekly. Law school is still certainly on my mind. I'll graduate this December. I've got 12 hours left to take, and then I'll be finished with my undergrad requirements. I think I'm going to take at least a year or two to work and really think and speak to my mentors and close family friends to determine if that's the way I want to go. It could be law school or getting my MBA. Making a serious financial commitment like that is not something I want to take lightly. Being the person that I am — which is kind of sporadic in some things — I really want to be calculated in this. My plan is to graduate in December, work for a little bit and figure some things out.

Q: We have to talk about athletics because it's such a big part of the Clemson experience. Dating back to your earliest days, what are some of your fondest memories of Tiger football?

Gressette: Coming up and spending time with my Gigi and Pop Pop ... we had a couple of opportunities to sit in the trustee box with them. Just to see how happy he was really is one of my fondest memories with Pop Pop. Just being up here in Clemson and seeing a smile on his face constantly. I've been coming up here since I was able to bear the deafening roar of Death Valley. Athletics is when everyone

comes together, it seems like. It's hard to bring the whole Clemson Family back together, but it's about as close as we can get sometimes. It's just so inspiring, to see so many people united for one purpose is not something we see too often these days. It's one of those few moments you really get to smile and enjoy in a genuine manner, and that's something I think is really special.