“If I had it all to do over again, there would be no other choice for me than the Catholic Studies program. My life is totally changed by it…” - James Harris ’10, Catholic Studies major

Meet James Harris, a 23 year-old Seton Hall alumnus from Point Pleasant Borough, N.J. Like many Pirates, James chose Seton Hall in part because of its ideal location, close to home but far enough away to provide “a real college experience.” What also interested him was the University’s unique Catholic Studies major, a program he didn’t know existed before he visited the South Orange campus.

Alumni Relations asked James about his time at Seton Hall, his experience as a Catholic Studies major, and his life during and after his time as a student. His interview highlights the core values of a Seton Hall education, and tells the story of a program that you might not be familiar with, but one that will inspire you.

Seton Hall offers more than 60 undergraduate degree programs. What made you choose Catholic Studies?

The Catholic Studies major was a big influence in my decision to study at Seton Hall. I enrolled immediately with Catholic Studies as my major. I later added Catholic Theology and Spanish as minors. Originally, in high school, my thought was to study computers. However, toward the end of my time in high school, I discovered that what I was looking to obtain was not a knowledge that pertained strictly to a specific object in a limited time and place. I wanted a knowledge that permeated all things, times and places, something that pertained to everything. Catholic Studies seemed to possess that; it had something to say about everything. I loved how Catholic Studies opened every door intellectually and spiritually.

Tell us more about the Catholic Studies program. What does the program offer to its students?

The first couple classes were introductory, geared toward helping all students learn about the Catholic Christian faith. Next were classes in the Catholic tradition as seen in art, literature, social teaching and philosophy. The intellectual and cultural heritages delved into more specific topics, such as Medieval and Baroque art, Italian and Irish history, music, ecumenism, spirituality and much more.

Aside from the classes on campus, the study abroad opportunities to England, Italy and Spain are just incredible. I went on the trip to England twice. With the scholarship opportunities, it was quite affordable.

What types of careers might be available to Catholic Studies graduates?

The program allows one to continue further with master’s or doctoral work in a religious field or other areas such as nonprofit work. One can also become a religion teacher or travel to some location and help people, which is what I did.
Tell us about your recent work in Honduras.

From August 2010 to June 2011, I lived and worked in Comayagua, Honduras. I was an English teacher teaching grades seven through ten in a bilingual catholic school called “Instituto Católico Bilingüe: Nuestra Señora Reina de la Paz”, or “Catholic Bilingual Institute: Our Lady Queen of Peace”. The students knew English pretty well; it was a bilingual school after all. I taught them literature and grammar, nearly at the level of American students of the same age. I did not travel to Honduras as part of a group or organization. I did it on my own initiative, but I had some help along the way. A friend of mine who had been a missioner in Honduras helped me find the school. I knew it was a big risk, but I knew in my heart that this was something I had to do. Catholic Studies prepared me greatly for this trip in so many ways. I taught in a catholic school where many catholic events took place, so I was able to participate and help the students. Also, I was effectively able to teach the literature classes based on my extensive past experience with the integration of Catholicism and literature.

Have you participated in other missionary work?

While in Honduras, I was blessed enough to have the opportunity to go on a week long mission in the mountains. It was on the border of El Salvador and Honduras. It was a place that I had been searching for all my life but never knew existed. The people were simple farmers, living off of their produce and possessing little if not almost no technology. I was on a five-person mission team. We went about preaching the Gospel to many different catholic families. Many of them would feed us or give us whatever they had to offer out of their simple faith and generosity. One man even gave me his machete and handcrafted sheathe, a prized item for farmers in Central America. Even though I offered to pay for it, he refused. We also ran events in the tiny local church for children, teens and adults. Every part of this mission was conducted in Spanish. I believe I walked a longer distance on that mission than the rest of my life combined in the United States. It was quite an experience.

What's next for you?

I am hoping to travel to Asia very soon, possibly Taiwan. I want to teach catholic religion in a bilingual school. If I cannot find a job with that, then I will teach English again. A more long-term goal is to start my own international school or institution for the study and research of catholic religion and philosophy. I believe God will lead me to things and places I never knew before, just like He did with me and the Catholic Studies program.

What is the one thing that you would want people to know about being a Catholic Studies major?

Do not be afraid to become a part of the Catholic Studies program. For me, it made all the difference. If you are having doubts, talk to the program’s director, Monsignor Richard Liddy and students who are in the program. Think about what I have said thus far. Also, Catholic Studies is always available as a second major, minor or certificate. These options can be perfect for any student. Catholic Studies will help you put your life and what you are studying into perspective. You will begin to see everything in a new light. Many of the classes are actually quite enjoyable, and you will learn a lot at the same time.

Anything else to add?

I give my thanks to Monsignor Richard Liddy and the rest of the Catholic Studies staff for their support and for continually working hard to improve the program. I hope that by sharing my experience, many people will be benefited, even if they do not choose Catholic Studies as their major. I commend all the current students who are part of the Catholic Studies program. Regarding everything I have mentioned about the program, they know what I am talking about.

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