

Duke University

Embracing the Vivid Experience of Failure

How do you live through that moment when (from your own perspective) you absolutely, without a doubt, crash and burn? What was the occasion? What did it look like? Feel like? Did you experience public embarrassment? Shame? Quasi-nausea? Were you able to exit fast enough just so that you could catch your breath, or was the humiliation so intense that with your feet cemented solidly to the ground, your eyes pooled with tears? Perhaps it was a promise you broke, or an insensitive comment you made? Perhaps an event you organized was poorly attended, or even worse, everyone in attendance slept through your presentation? Did you fail a course? Sleep through an exam? Forget to include the narrative for a grant submission? Submit the fourth revision of a thesis? After going through your sent box no less than ten times, did the realization finally sink in that indeed you did press *send* instead of *discard* for that email, which should never, ever, EVER have been mailed? And NOTHING could console you.

When I think back on the times in my life (and there have been several) that I struggled through periods of sick-to-my-stomach failures, the first thought that comes to my mind isn't that I'm glad I went through *that*, but instead, I'm happy I'm on the other side of it. Happy because enduring the pain of a failure is agonizing. I suspect most of us



Art historian and author
Sarah Lewis

have experienced that feeling of “If I close my eyes really tight this will all go away,” or like when you were a kid wanting a “do over” because you did something so badly the first time. Finding one’s way through a catastrophe (because let’s face it, when it happens, it’s nothing short of a disaster) can be a life-altering experience. Life-altering, in that a profoundly negative experience can foster a profoundly positive change—providing you’re willing and open to doing the work. Listening to others’ and sharing my own stories of ego-shattering experiences and the down and dirty of licking wounds and battling through and forward to a new stage in life is such a delicate and sweet gift of personhood. But how often do we say “It’s okay to be a disaster sometimes,” or how often do we take the time to recount, process, and share the tools we incorporate to reconstruct our lives, thus allowing us to move into the next realm of our own existence?

On January 15, 2015 the Baldwin Scholars presented the tenth annual event in the Jean Fox O'Barr Distinguished Speaker Series with Dr. Sarah E. Lewis, author of *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. The talk was co-sponsored by the Muglia Family, the Women's Center, the Innovation Co-Lab, the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture, the Nasher Museum of Art, and Art, Art History, and Visual Studies. Senior Baldwin Bailey Sincox organized a panel discussion, which preceded Dr. Lewis' talk. Dr. Lillian Pierce of the Mathematics Department, Dana Marks of Theater Studies, and Amy Unell of Artstigators discussed how they have responded to failure and shared stories about the resources they called upon to allow them to move forward.

Getting to the other side of setbacks, obstacles, and risks requires patience and persistence. As Dr. Lewis suggests, failure is an important part of the creative process. After a period of time we find a way to reconstruct the fragments of the shattering experience and reinvent ourselves and move into the next realm. During the 2015 State of the Union Address President Obama made the statement, "It's amazing what you can bounce back from when you have to." Transforming barriers into frontiers and rising to our best BECAUSE of our failures is a choice. Why not share our stories and choose to redefine failure as a positive life-altering experience?

Ava LaVonne Vinesett, Co-Director of the Baldwin Scholars Program

#noapologies by Noura Elsayed, Class of 2016



One of the posters from the #noapologies campaign

Last semester, the Baldwin Scholars initiated a campus campaign challenging women to embolden our presence: the way we speak, pose questions, occupy space, and use social media. Our mission was to foster productive dialogue about how we as women often diminish ourselves, perpetuating insecurity and undercutting our abilities.

To kick-off the campaign, we created flyers advertising the workshop series and a social media campaign to promote the #noapologies concept. Two sophomore Baldwins, Zarah Udwadia and Roma Sonik, photographed female faculty, staff and student leaders on campus. The women featured were asked to offer a piece of advice or inspiration to women on campus about how to take ownership and become leaders. The social media campaign posted daily status updates urging women to take ownership of their lives. For instance, we asked women to reflect on their professional interactions when asking for letters of recommendation and also suggested that women reflect on the language they use in the classroom.

The campaign culminated in a Saturday morning workshop entitled The #noapologies Symposium. The event featured three workshops, #ownyourvoice, #ownyourrelationships and #ownyourcareer. Participants could attend any two of the three workshops. The workshops were co-taught by Baldwins and a faculty/staff member with areas of expertise around one of the three topics presented. Special thanks to Dr. Gary Glass from CAPS, Sanyin Siang from COLE, and Carolyn Gerber from the Office of the President for their involvement!

Despite the early morning start, almost 100 participants were present at The #noapologies Symposium. The evaluations indicated that most attendees were pleased and will return to similar events held by Baldwin.

We all learned a lot from this campaign and to this day we still get “likes” on the #noapologies Facebook page. The campaign really seems to have had an impact on campus. I even hear people saying #noapologies casually as part of their conversations!



Gifts to the Program

We offer our sincere thanks to the following donors for their gifts; we appreciate their leadership and their belief in all that our Scholars can become.

If you are interested in making a gift to the Baldwin Scholars, please contact Colleen Scott at colleen.scott@duke.edu. Gifts can be targeted toward any area of the program.

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Class of 2018 Baldwin Scholars profiles

Meet the eleventh class of Baldwin Scholars! The class includes 16 Trinity, two Pratt engineers, and one member of the athletic community. The new Baldwin Scholars hail from eleven states and three foreign countries. Their interests include writing, global health, technology, and dance.

Anika Ayyar is from Saratoga, California. She attended boarding school in the Northeast and studied abroad in the Bahamas. Anika is interested in computer science, club running, debate, and a cappella.

Elizabeth Barahona is a first-generation college student from Orlando, Florida. She was awarded the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship for students with high academic and leadership potential. She attended the Alternative Fall Break program on women and immigration organized by the Women's Center and sees herself as an activist.

Evan Bell hails from Columbia, Maryland. In high school, she created a non-profit organization to raise funds for children to visit their incarcerated parents. She is interested in art and activism. Evan has created an on-line photo initiative called "The Resistance Project."


Erin Butrico, from Warren, New Jersey, has an identical twin who attends Vanderbilt. She is interested in neuroscience and participated in the Exploring the Mind Focus program. Erin is considering a pre-pharmacy track at Duke. She belongs to club running and Best Buddies.

Anita Desai hails from Virginia Beach, Virginia. She is a Pratt engineer interested in women's health. She plays club field hockey and performs with Duke Dhamaka, a vibrant Indian dance organization.

Riyanka Ganguly was born in Saudi Arabia and grew up in Bellevue, Washington. She is passionate about global health issues and is considering a Program II in reproductive health. She belongs to the Duke Student Government committee on equity and outreach and WISER.

Katie Hammond is from Summit, New Jersey and attended an all-girls high school. At Duke, she was selected for Chorale and Deja Blue a cappella. She is potentially interested in sociology, business, and women's studies.

Samantha Holmes recently moved from Georgia to Ridgefield, Connecticut. She found community within the virtual Spark Summit non-profit, a feminist organization, and presented her blog at the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women. Samantha is a Reginaldo Howard Memorial Scholar, interested in presenting gender equity issues through theater, slam poetry, and dance.



Sydney Jeffs hails from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Academically, she is interested in biomedical engineering and neuroscience. She participates in competitive yoga, ESL tutoring, and the Society for Women Engineers.

Anna Kaul, from Stillwater, Minnesota, is pre-law. She understands the power of a single voice and wants to make an impact on the world through writing. Anna is an apprentice at the Women's Center and is interested in gender and politics.

Chloe McLain, from London, England, compared the experiences of her American and Danish grandmothers for her senior project in high school. She took a gap year to study in Paris, work, and travel. With interests in government and women's issues, Chloe is considering a Public Policy major.

Ogechi Onyeka is from Lagos, Nigeria and studied at the African Leadership Academy in South Africa. With academic preparation in economics and finance, she eventually wants to return to Africa to challenge corruption. Ogechi is also a Robertson Scholar at Duke.

Chandler Phillips is from Lawrenceville, Georgia. She is interested in human rights issues and storytelling. Chandler works two campus jobs and belongs to the Black Student Alliance, Girls Club, and Spoken Verb, a spoken word performance organization.

Shruti Rao moved a lot growing up and now calls Plano, Texas home. She is passionate about social justice issues and had leadership roles in the teen court system in her county. At Duke, Shruti is involved with Kenan Institute for Ethics and Business Oriented Women.

Mali Shimojo is a Japanese-American dual citizen who has spent the last eight years in Tokyo. She is passionate about vocal jazz and is a Duke cheerleader.

Samantha Siegel is from Montclair, New Jersey. Sammi already has a track record as an activist. In high school, she led a campaign asking the Presidential Debate Commission to select a woman to moderate the 2012 presidential debates; her petition gathered 17,000+ signatures. She is interested in math, computer science, and women's studies.

Carine Torres, from Greenwich, Connecticut, is also a twin. She is interested in applying human/computer interaction and wants to learn how to apply technology to autism issues. Carine is active with the Catholic Center, FEMMES, and Autism Speaks.

Amir Williams is a local, from Raleigh, North Carolina. Amir represents her house council on East Campus Council. She participated in the pre-orientation Project BUILD program and tutors in the Durham community. Amir is a gifted writer and stepped into the "real Amir" by creating a blog.

BALDWIN SCHOLARS



Class of 2018

Baldwin Alumnae Spotlight: Sarah Sham, Class of 2009

Since graduating from Duke in 2009 with a degree in Art History, I have had quite a whirlwind journey and my life has come full circle. From the day I graduated, I knew that my heart was in Mumbai, India, where I've lived my entire life. I got on the first plane back home to be with my family and start a life in the only place I have ever called home. The adjustment was much harder than I had anticipated; I didn't realize how much Duke had changed me.

I come from a family with a 120 year old history of dealing in art, antiques and collectibles, a business started by my great grandfather, Mr. Essajee. My father has further expanded the business and we also work with some of the world's top designers to execute projects for large homes and hotels. Some of his clients include the world's leading luxury hotel chains as well as Saudi princes and Indian royalty.

For the first time in four generations, a female has been heir to the business, and naturally I felt a lot of pressure to take charge. After almost a year of working with my father, I felt like something was not quite right and I asked him for permission to try something else out that was perhaps a better fit.

With his blessing, I made up a list of all the things I dreamed of doing as a child. First one was to learn playing the violin. I bought a violin, found an

instructor, and began with a whole bunch of enthusiasm. Sadly, I was so horrible at the violin that screaming babies sounded better than I did. Accepting defeat, I moved onto the next idea, which was to be a news anchor for a television news channel. The first one I applied to was Bloomberg, and magically I got in within a week of cold calling the organization. I started out at the news desk, and knowing literally nothing about finance or the stock market, I worked hard at learning the ropes and practicing being in front of the camera after hours in the studio. Within two months, I was on TV, and was soon entrusted with 3 shows to anchor, including one on the commodity and currency markets that I produced as well.

While the glamour of saying I worked for television was exciting, the job was really dull and tedious. Long days that started at the office at 5am and high stress levels were enough to make me realize that this too, did not make me happy. Coincidentally around the time I had completed a year at Bloomberg, my father was going through a severe financial crisis. He said he needed me back at Essajees, the family business, and so I quit Bloomberg and went back to help him out in whatever way I could.

The financial crisis turned out to be one of the best learning lessons of my life. We had lost pretty much all of our money and my father was unable to dedicate any time to work since he was trying to sort through the massive debt. I was left to take charge of a few huge ongoing projects. One of these projects was the complete renovation of the presidential suite at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai right before President Obama was coming to stay. We were supplying a large amount of interior products and none of it was ready. We were working in the room while secret service agents looked on suspiciously and in retrospect it all seems so surreal. I had to take charge of finances too, and at the age of 22 this was a very difficult learning process.

The silver lining was that it taught me so much so quickly and gave me a chance to interact with so many clients that it gave my father the faith that I have what it takes to run the business. There is no amount of money or time that can buy you something like that and it really changed everything about how my father viewed me- from being his fragile youngest daughter, to a formidable businesswoman. It was the best thing to have happened to us.



From that point onwards, things have just been on the upswing. My father and I took the organization out of all debt within the next year. We completed the world's largest Tikri work art panel, which is an ancient Indian art using hand blown mirror. It measured approximately 65 feet by 45 feet and is featured in an upcoming 5-star hotel at Mumbai's international airport. We completed work on the world's most expensive home, as well as a huge furniture order for a 5 star hotel in Dubai.

During my time at Essajees and my interactions with clients, I was often asked for my design ideas for spaces and, through a very organic process, I became involved in interior design. I thoroughly enjoyed this, so I took it one step further and completed a two-year interior design degree in Mumbai, where I graduated at the top of my class and with a first-class first ranking. While completing my degree, I worked on a home renovation project for a luxurious 16,000 square foot bungalow in South Mumbai. Since graduating earlier this year, I've already completed two more projects and am starting on my third.

Even though many may think that it is very predictable that I'm taking over the family business and perhaps it is something that was always in my destiny to do, I took a long time to reach this point where I feel like I am in the right job and doing what makes me completely happy. I am so happy that I didn't just settle in a mediocre job just because it paid well or it seemed glamorous on paper. I'm thankful I stuck to my instinct and moved away from anything and everything that didn't feel 100% right.

Essajees is featured in
Architectural Digest in
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