

## Felicity Martin

Ever since middle school, I've always been obsessed with the concept of a *friend group*—and arguably more obsessed with the fact that I had never belonged to one. I was always the person that someone brings along. And never the other way around. Don't get me wrong, I had plenty of friends. But when they'd invite me to hang out with *their* group, I always felt like an intruder.

I thought that would change at college. The pile of brochures I shoved into my backpack at the college fair flaunted collages of ~cool older~ people sitting on picnic blankets on the quad; doing community service at a local farm; diligently studying at the library. Whenever graduates from my high school came back to visit, they seemed to have a different air about them, constantly telling stories about their new friends and their crazy shenanigans.

From the beginning, I struggled to find community at the University of Virginia. I was the only freshman in my hall who had a job. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights, along with Sunday mornings (the infamous brunch shift), I'd take the free Trolley to the Downtown Mall. (Sidenote: The Downtown Mall is a long, walkable strip with restaurants, cafes, niche good stores, such as envelopes, and a bookstore).

Something important to understand about Charlottesville, Virginia, is the pronounced division between UVA students and the wider community (which is, sadly, not at all unique). Students referred to residents of Charlottesville as “townies,” always in a condescending tone. And anytime I heard it, all bets would be off.

It felt like I never really bonded with my suitemates the way that they bonded with each other. While I spent my three nights a week bussing tables and catering to every customer's request, everyone around me was going to picturesque darties (daytime parties) and forging ~lifelong connections~. My entire Instagram feed was filled with group photos, all holding red solo cups, with cringey captions like “cold beer warm hearts.” (Admittedly, I would have loved to have a reason to post a picture and caption like that). It didn't take long for me to feel othered.

But, as weeks at my job turned into months, and then years, I found community, for what felt like the first time in my life, in the many warm (not physically warm, but something like warm fuzzies), dimly lit spaces spanning Charlottesville's Downtown Mall. I worked with people of all ages from all walks of life, each with their own unique quirks, and from the beginning found that it was easier to talk to any of my coworkers than to try to strike up a conversation with the person sitting next to me in class. After the first shift that rendered me crying in the corner by the industrial dishwasher, one of my coworkers found me and

dragged me down to Jack Brown's for Greg Brady burgers and a beer (a cheeseburger with bbq chips and mac and cheese—with extra JB's sauce, of course). After that, my “work bestie” (read: actual bestie) and I developed a regular routine of going to Jack Brown's for our usual or to Lampo for the Hellboy (a pizza with hot honey—before it became trendy—soppressata, and fresh mozz).

During opening, service hours, and closing, we worked as one unit. No one was too good to bus a table, or take out the trash. We relied on each other and ourselves were relied on. When a customer would be rude, or creepy, or both, we'd commiserate together, as if we all served that table (and stare daggers at them from the server station). Even when we'd step on someone's toes, there would be a quick jab, and then you'd both be over it. We couldn't afford to hold grudges. At the end of the night, we'd celebrate good shifts; on the bad nights, we'd celebrate simply because we survived. Between serving tables, we'd talk about anything and everything with each other. I felt an unspoken sense of camaraderie deep in my bones—the kind only gained through comforting someone crying in the walk-in (or being the one comforted), taking post-shift tequila shots, and walking up and down the stairs to the patio in the Virginia August heat (my record was climbing the equivalent of 90 flights of stairs during a brunch shift).

My coworkers (and other industry workers across the Downtown Mall) weren't the only part of that community. Regulars came to remember my name, and I theirs'. Countless people shared their stories with me, and they wanted to hear mine, too. We'd exchange banter, making each other laugh loud enough that the rest of the room stared. As much as being a waitress can be unbearable at times—and there are always those...less than great customers...I learned how important it is to me to make others around me feel welcomed, at ease, and happy.

Throughout my four-ish years of serving tables, going to dinner with friends (and arguing with everyone about who is buying dinner [note: we *wanted* to be the person that treated everyone else]), and floating the river together, I, for the first time in my life, understood what it means—what it feels like—to belong to a community. Together, we faced the aftermath of Nazis marching the streets of Charlottesville on August 11th and 12th; we mourned together for the losses in our community throughout the years.

I learned that belonging in a community doesn't mean that everything is perfect or easy all of the time; that it's okay to bash heads sometimes and that it doesn't mean the end of a relationship. In fact, being able to talk about these things only strengthens relationships. Our community is vibrant *because of*, and not *despite*, our differences. But I also learned that I had more in common with people than I thought, whether it was the 55-year old bar regular or the young mom of two. I learned how to listen and be heard. I learned what it

means to show up for others and how it feels when people show up for me, whether it was bringing me freshly baked cookies while I crammed for midterms in the Alderman stacks or giving my friends rides home in the middle of the night.

I felt way more like a “townie” than I ever did a UVA student, and I wouldn’t change that for the world.