

User Submission: What Penn State Means to Me

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Cross-posted submission from [phillyBlurbs](#) writer, Jillian Harding.

I'm going to be completely honest: Penn State was my back-up school. As a scared high school senior sifting through my college options, I settled on the idea of going to a secluded liberal arts college where I could read Victorian literature under a tree and continue to be the scared and insecure high schooler I'd always been. This is what I'd always assumed college would be like. I figured I'd form a close-knit group of intellectual friends in a small environment where I felt cushioned by the fact that I didn't have to try- that I could continue to be the person I was all throughout high school- shy, defensive, scholarly. I didn't know it at the time, but ultimately, if I had chosen Vassar, or the University of Vermont, or any place that allowed me to be an extension of the person I was in high school, I would have also been miserable.

As fate would have it, I ended up at Penn State. It wasn't too far from home, and I got directly into main campus. Vassar proved too expensive, and it just didn't feel right. University of Vermont was too far away. "Football school" and "Party school" was what I'd heard when I ultimately decided on PSU. And while the idea of going to a football game was laughable to me and I wasn't a partier in high school, I reasoned with myself that if I would be able to find a group of friends that closely mimicked those I surrounded myself with in high school I would eventually feel safe again. Still miserable and stifled, but I would be safe in my usual bubble.

So I went to Penn State. And my first semester was exactly as I'd anticipated- depressing and scary. I rarely left my dorm room. The school spirit that seemed innate in all of my floor mates eluded me. I was afraid to talk to anyone, I skipped out on floor activities, and I hid behind my work. It was easy to do this- the coursework, even as basic as freshman-year studies can be, was illuminating. There was theatre, and art history, and English lit, and French. And I felt like I was finally surrounded by people who were cool with the fact that I was a nerd. Even so, I had the transfer papers to Temple filled out and ready to mail. 75% of my high school went to Temple, and so I decided that I would join them. Penn State, I decided, was not for me.

Then I met Derek, who lived just a few doors down the hall from my room.

Derek was a gymnast and a cheerleader- the antithesis of what I had come to expect in a best friend, and the epitome of the type of friend I'd always wished to have but feared would reject me- an athlete. He became the best friend I'd ever had, and together our journey began.

In my four years at Penn State, my experience was never about football. I didn't go to Penn State for football, and if we're being no-holds-barred honest, I didn't even know who Joe Paterno was before I got there. I am not foolish enough to assume this is the norm. I realize that the football program was the selling point for a massive amount of people who affiliate with Penn State, but I am living proof that for some people, it wasn't everything. Just as PSU was never about football for me before I arrived, it still isn't now that I'm a graduate. I'll never lose the amazing education that led me to my dream job. Those freshman art and English classes led way to advanced classes in Public Relations and marketing, creative writing workshops and linguistic seminars. The education I received at Penn State was top-notch, and opened the door for me to work in the market I've always hoped for.

What was allowed to take place at PSU was terrible, reprehensible, and disgusting, and I am reluctant to offer an opinion when I can barely sort out all of the facts for myself, but I will say that while I am all for any punishment that offers solace to the victims and one that punishes those responsible for allowing these awful crimes to take place, what I do have trouble being okay with is the sort of punishment that devolves into a Crucible-style witch hunt that at best, barely and tangentially affects those responsible, but instead penalizes a large group of the current and future student body, athletes and non-athletes alike, for the acts of a select group of people who failed to be decent human beings.

Regardless of what the NCAA decided, Penn State never was, and never will be, about football for me. I'll never lose the best friends I made as a direct result of deciding to go to this school. After meeting Derek, I was fortunate enough to encounter a diverse and multifaceted group of people- writers, and cheerleaders, and scientists, swimmers, literary minds, gymnasts, future teachers, athletes and non-athletes, who became my family, who made me feel, at long last, like I had a place where I belonged, where I wasn't afraid to be who I was. Penn State was never just about football for me. These people, whether athletes or non-athletes, football players or research assistants, current PSU students, future students, should not face penalties for crimes they had nothing to do with.

In the end, who are these sanctions hurting? Those responsible have been removed, and are no longer in positions of power. They can no longer abuse these positions of power. They can no longer sweep their misdeeds under the rug. As a good friend of mine, Karen Moroski, eloquently stated,

"What [people] are missing entirely is that while a dozen or so people are in need of punishment, there are over half a million living alumni, not to mention almost 100,000 current students, who see the school as a place of integrity, commitment, and dignity. Those minds won't be changed because a few men none of us ever met made wretched mistakes/are deprived."

The students of Penn State continue to rally for the victims. They held a school-wide "blue out" against child abuse. They held candlelight vigils. They continue to devote themselves to causes meant to help children, to defend them. Student commitment to the idea that we are way more than football is more apparent now than it has ever been. We are proud to be philanthropists, activists, humanitarians, and leaders, and we are fully committed to restoring Penn State to the place it once was, to the place it should be.

My heart will continue to ache for the victims. I hope each and every day that those responsible for committing these crimes will be brought to justice. But I will never be ashamed of my Penn State experience. I will never be sorry for the education I received, the people I met, the things I got to experience. So don't assume that those who are upset with the NCAA sanctions are standing idly by with their heads in the sand. I am not offering blind support to members of an institution that failed to do what any person should have done in their place. I am simply offering this idea- that Penn State is not just about the football program. That even if the idea of filing into Beaver Stadium on a Saturday was what brought some to Penn State, on the long list of memorable experiences each graduate takes with them, Penn State was never about football for me. It was about education, friendship, loyalty, and love. This is the Penn State I will carry with me. This is the Penn State I will always defend. This is the Penn State I hope will be restored, a Penn State built first and foremost on success with honor.

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