

My semester with the snowflakes~



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In May of 2019, at the age of 52, I was accepted to the Eli Whitney student program at Yale University.

I am the oldest freshman in the class of 2023. Before I was accepted, I didn't really know what to expect. I had seen the infamous YouTube video of students screaming at a faculty member. I had seen the news stories regarding the admissions scandal and that Yale was included in that unfortunate business. I had also heard the students at Yale referred to as "snowflakes" in various social media dumpsters and occasionally I'd seen references to Ivy League students as snowflakes in a few news sources.

I should give a bit of background information. I was an unimpressive and difficult student in public schools. I joined the military at 17 and spent close to 26 years in the US Navy. I was assigned, for 22 of those years to Naval Special Warfare Commands. I went through SEAL training twice, quit the first time and barely made it the second time. I did multiple deployments and was wounded in combat in 2009 on a mission to rescue an American hostage.

Every single day I went to work with much better humans than myself. I was brought to a higher level of existence because the standards were high and one needed to earn their slot, their membership in the unit. This wasn't a one-time deal. Every time you showed up for work, you needed to prove your worth.

The vetting process is difficult and the percentages of those who try out for special operations units and make it through the screening is very low.

In an odd parallel, I feel, in spite of my short time here, the same about Yale.

After receiving my acceptance email and returning to consciousness, I decided to move to Connecticut and do my best in this new environment. Many people have asked me why I want to attend college at 52, and why at an Ivy League institution like Yale? I could have easily stayed in Virginia and attended a community college close to my home. Well,

based on my upbringing in the military, I associated difficult vetting process' with quality and opportunity. I was correct in that guess. More importantly though, I simply want to be a better human being. I feel like getting a world class education at an amazing institution like Yale will help me reach that goal. Are there other places to get a great education? Of course, but I chose Yale.

My first class of the semester was absolutely terrifying. I don't know if it was so for the kids in my class, but it damn sure was for me. It was a literature seminar with the amazing Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature, Professor David Quint. He is an amazing human in that he has dedicated his life to literature, and he knows what he is talking about. The discussion was centered around the Iliad. I had read a bit of the Iliad in the middle part of my military career and decidedly didn't get it. Listening to Professor Quint demonstrated exactly how much I didn't "get it." The other students looked like children to me. Hell, they are children, but when they speak, and some of them speak english as their second language, they sound like very well-spoken adults. My Navy issued graduate degree in cussing wasn't going to help me out here. These young students had a good grasp of the literature and although they lacked much experience to bounce it off of, they were certainly "all in" on trying to figure out its underlying meaning.

At one point, I said; "hey, I'm just an old guy sitting here with a bunch of smart people, but I think..." And they all smiled, some of them nervously because I was essentially an alien. I was an old dude with tattoos all over his arms, and a Dutch Shepherd service Dog brandishing a subdued American flag patch on her harness, sitting next to him. Professor Quint later approached me and said "hey, don't downplay your intelligence. You are smart as well."

I thought, I've got him fooled! Turns out I didn't fool him at all when I turned in my first paper, but that is another story for another time.

After a few classes, I started to get to know some of my classmates. Each of them is a compelling human who, in spite of their youth, are quite serious about getting things done.

One young woman made a very big impact on me. She approached me after class one day and said; "I am really glad I can be here at Yale and be in class with you. My grandfather came to Yale and when WWII started, he left for the Navy and flew planes in the Pacific theater. After he came home, he came back to Yale, but he couldn't finish. He

locked himself in his room and drank and eventually had to leave, so I feel like I am helping him finish here at Yale and I'm doing it with a veteran, you."

I was surprised and quite emotional. Exceptionally emotional. She went on; "I can send you a photo of him!" and I told her I would love one. That evening she sent me this photo of her grandfather.



I used to read stories about men like him and they are heroes to me. Clearly her grandfather is a hero to her as well, and she is going to make him quite proud. This connection with a WWII vet through his amazing granddaughter is a gift. One of many I receive on an almost daily basis in this amazing institution. I think it's worth taking a moment here and acknowledging that this thing we now call "PTSD" has always been around and some of us veterans escape it while others, like me and likely this gent in the airplane, felt the sting of it.

One day in another lit class, I brought up a book I'd read a long time ago called "Taxi Driver Wisdom" by Risa Mickenberg, Joanne Dugan and Brian Lee Hughes.

After that class a couple of the students approached me and explained that their dads were cabbies when they first came to the United States, and that their fathers had told them that the things they sometimes heard from people in their cabs were amazing.

Think about that for a second. These students are first generation Americans. Their fathers immigrated to this country and started out by being taxi drivers. Now, their children are attending college at Yale University. I'm a patriotic man and those are the stories that help me understand how, in spite of the seemingly endless stream of negativity surrounding it, the American Dream is still alive and kicking. It makes my heart sing every time I see those kids.

Let me address this "snowflake" thing. According to the "Urban Dictionary" a "snowflake" is a "term for someone that thinks they are unique and special, but really are not. It gained popularity after the movie "Fight Club" from the quote "You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else."

I hear the term occasionally from buddies of mine who I love, they say things like; "how are things up there with the liberal snowflakes?"

Let me assure you, I have not met one kid who fits that description. None of the kids I've met seem to think that they are "special" any more than any other 18–22-year-old. These kids work their ass off. I have asked a couple of them to help me with my writing. One young woman volunteered to help me by proof-reading my "prose" and, for the record, I believe she will be the President someday. I recently listened while one of my closer pals, a kid from Portland, Oregon, talked to me about the beauty of this insane mathematics problem set he is working on. There is a young man in our group who grew up in Alaska working on fishing boats from a young age and who plays the cello. There is an exceptional young woman from Chicago who wrote a piece for the Yale Daily news expressing the importance of public demonstrations in the light of a recent police shooting. She and I are polar opposites. I am the "patriarchy" at first glance, and she is a young black woman who is keen on public protests. Not the type of soul I generally find myself in a conversation with. We come from different worlds and yet we both read classic works with open hearts and minds.

We recently met with a prominent writer from a think tank who is researching the state of the humanities in the university setting. There were four of us students, two other young men, the young woman from Chicago, and me, the old guy. As the younger students started to express their thoughts, the young woman (truly a unicorn of a

human) used the word “safe space” and it hit me forcefully. I come from a place where when I hear that term, I roll my eyes into the back of my vacant skull and laugh from the bottom of my potbelly. This time, I was literally in shock. It hit me that what I thought a “safe space” meant, was not accurate. This young woman, the one who used the phrase, “Safe Space” isn’t scared of anything. She is a life-force of goodness and strength. She doesn’t need anyone to provide a comfortable environment for her. What she meant by “safe space” was that she was happy to be in an environment where difficult subjects can be discussed openly, without the risk of **disrespect or harsh judgement**. This works both ways. What I mean is, this young woman was comfortable, in this University setting, wrestling with things like the Aristotelian idea of some humans being born as “natural slaves.” She was quite comfortable in that space. The question was, how comfortable was the 52-year-old white guy in that discussion? Did it make me uncomfortable? Yes. I’m grateful for the discomfort. Thinking about things I don’t understand or have, for most of my life, written off, is a good thing.

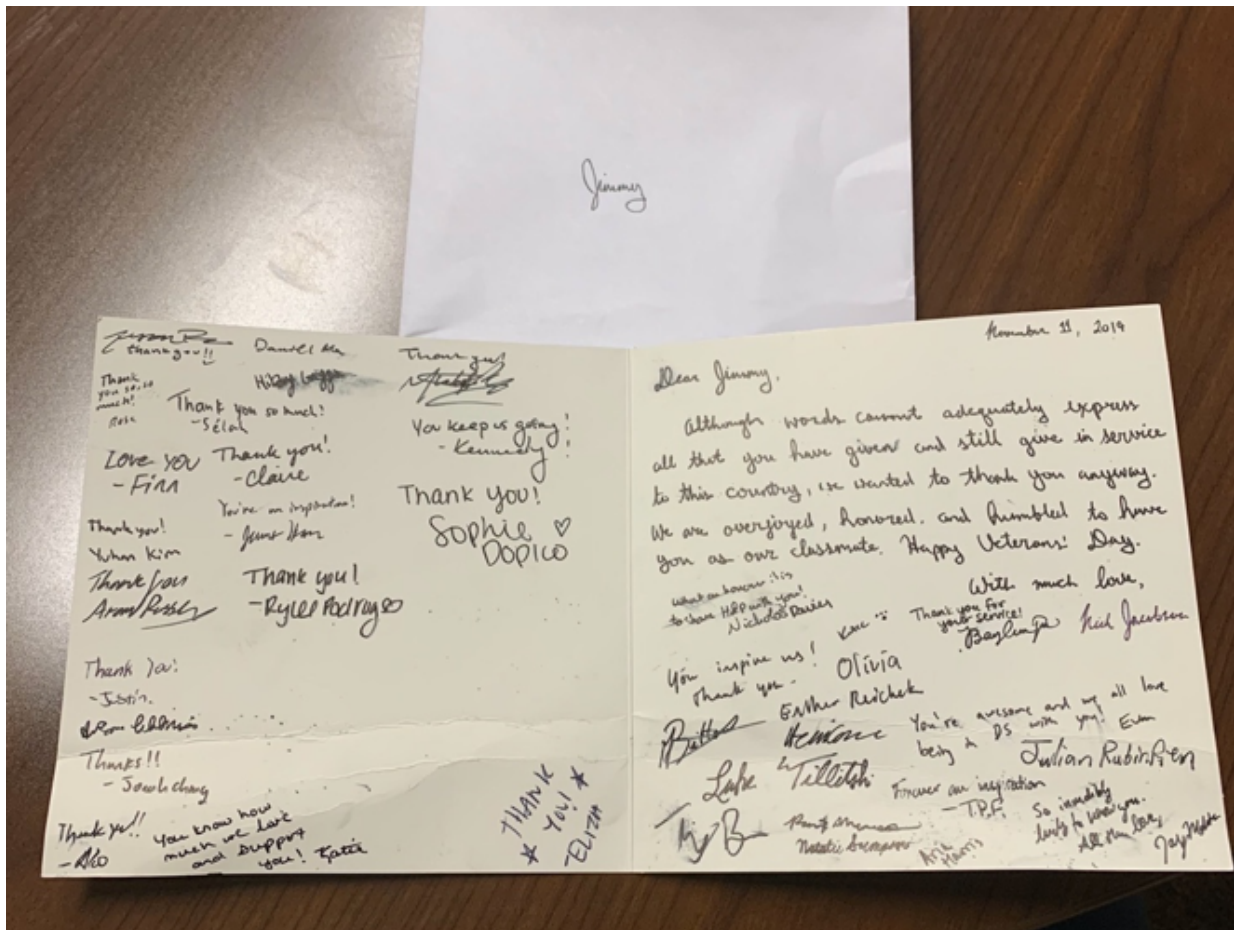
Being uncomfortable is KEY in this world of ours. Not altogether different from the world of special operations, where the work needs to be done, regardless of weather or personal feelings. The climate in this educational institution is one where most students understand that there HAS to be a place where people can assault ideas openly and discuss them vigorously and respectfully in order to improve the state of humanity. I’ll call that a “safe space” and I’m glad those places exist.

Here in the “Directed Studies” program, instead of “tuning in” to our favorite self-confirming “news” source, we are given a timeless text with heavy ideas and then we throw them out on the floor and discuss them with people who have, as I mentioned earlier, made these works and their meaning, their vocation.

In my opinion, the real snowflakes are the people who are afraid of that situation. The poor souls who never take the opportunity to discuss ideas in a group of people who will very likely respectfully disagree with them. I challenge any of you hyper-opinionated zealots out there to actually sit down with a group of people who disagree with you and be open to having your mind changed. I’m not talking about submitting your deeply held beliefs to your twitter/facebook/instagram feeds for agreement from those who “follow” you. That unreal “safe space” where the accountability for ones words is essentially null. I have sure had my mind changed here at Yale. To me there is no dishonor in being wrong and learning. There is dishonor in willful ignorance and **there is dishonor in disrespect**.

On veteran's day, there was a great scene on cross campus. A bunch of American flags had been placed there and I stopped on my morning walk to class and took photos of my dog in front of them and sent them to my friends. Later at some point during the day, a young student placed a glove with red paint on it on one of the flags as she wanted to demonstrate her displeasure with something...I'm not quite sure what.

That same afternoon, some of my fellow students from "Directed Studies," after a lecture, gave me this:



It is a card thanking me for my service to our nation. I was humbled and amazed.

These hardworking kids are very kind and thoughtful. A far cry from the picture that is often painted of them.

One of my Professors, a Professor of Philosophy, told me once "a good leader is a bridge builder." Professor David Charles is a man who has been teaching bright young people and some slow and old ones like me, the most difficult subject for me, at Oxford and now Yale. He's been doing this for over 30 years. He is extremely humble and very kind, in addition to being brilliant. I'm motivated by his words and I want to build bridges and

lead, in some small way, a new conversation where we stop pointing out the perceived differences in each other, or this group vs that group, and start pointing out similarities. We don't need more condescending friction in humanity. We need less. One step in the direction of less societal friction is to seek commonalities. Another step, and one that is sorely needed, is **respect**.

Now before you think I'm preaching, please know that I come from a place where I was distinctly the opposite of this ideal. I looked for reasons to disregard the opinions of those I didn't respect. I discounted the ideas of people I felt like hadn't earned the right to share what was in their mind. Particularly when it came to national security issues, I felt that if you hadn't taken a gun into combat, I didn't give a damn what your opinion was.

I'd like to count this as my first brick in attempting to build a bridge between the people here at Yale and those like me before I arrived here. We need everyone who gives a damn about this American experiment to contribute and make it succeed. We humans have much more in common than we have different. Thanks Yale, for helping me to become an aspiring bridge-builder at the age of 52,

In our welcome speech at the beginning of this semester, with all of us Freshman sitting in Woolsey Hall, me sitting next to another veteran, one who'd served in the 82nd Airborne, President Salovey said;

“There is so much we do not know. Let us embrace, together, our humility — our willingness to admit what we have yet to discover. After all, if you knew all the answers, you would not need Yale. And if humanity knew all the answers, the world would not need Yale.”

Now back to that bridge. I need to figure out how to actually build one. Good thing I've found a place where I can get help. If this place is peopled by “snowflakes” I'm proudly one of them. I'm a snowflake with a purple heart.

Peace-