

Student Voices transcripts: Sister Interview 2020

Sister 0:00

My name is Sister Emerson, um, Sister is not my given name, but I have five brothers and so growing up, I was just always called sister. Um, I'm from Florence, South Carolina and I just finished the Foundation course this past year and I will be starting at London College of Fashion doing the fashion jewellery course, this coming October.

I always thought I wanted to do biology and become a doctor - that's what my parents are and that's just kind of what I always thought I would do. And when I graduated high school over here, I went to Clemson University, which is in my home state. So, I was going to college with people that I had grown up with, so it was really not... I felt like I was living in a little bubble...and there was so much out there that I wanted to see that I wasn't getting to see. Even besides that, I knew I wasn't doing what I needed to do. Biology was not my thing you know, I... I wanted to be creating, I wanted to be getting my hands dirty and I wanted to be making things and that's not what I was doing.

(1:02)

So, I decided to study abroad in Rome where I took some art classes, just to kind of see if that's what I liked and... and I just completely fell in love with that and Europe, in general. And so, I started applying to different art schools and searched on 'best art schools in the world'... and UAL was number two... and so I just figured I'd apply. And when I got in, it was... it was just a dream come true. And now looking back on it a year into UAL I can say this was definitely the right choice for me.

Academic Support 1:30

So, what were your ...what were the biggest concerns you had before coming and what turned out to be your biggest challenges?

Sister 1:41

Let's see. I was nervous about just the public transportation and just getting around because I'm from Florence, South Carolina, it's a really small... we don't have any form of public transportation here. But it really wasn't as hard to figure out as I thought. I think, um, getting a flat it's ... it's a little bit of you know, you have to go around and find and look for a flat that works for you. But I guess I would say that was the hardest thing, but it wasn't hard. So um, even my tutor from this foundation year was really great because she helped me with everything. You know, 'how is your visa application going?' 'How is your flat?' 'Are you living alone?' ...you know, 'how's your commute to school?'...it made me feel so much more comfortable about doing this all on my own.

Academic Support 2:28

If you had tips for somebody...?

Sister 2:30

Well, I have to say it's very cold...so if you haven't been to London, definitely bring many more layers than you think you'll need. Coming from South Carolina. That was a shock.

Um, but other than that, you know, as far as school supplies and everything went, I didn't need to buy anything until I got over there because Cass Art I would visit a lot and Cowling and Wilcox had everything I needed. So, then the only other thing I needed to take care of when I got over there was getting a flat which was much easier than I thought. So...

Sister 3:03

Tell me about the first few days ... you'd already been here, haven't you?

Sister 3:07

Well, I came home after the preparation to foundation um, and that's when I had to get an expedited Visa and then I came right back over about two weeks later and that's when I moved into my flat. The one thing I definitely knew I needed was an in-flat studio, so I went out and got a big table and set that all up...my whole living room was my studio. My favourite place is the Victorian Albert Museum. I just got an email from them this morning talking about the Coronavirus updates and everything. I had visited London once before with my mom and my grandma, and that was our favourite place. And so being over there alone, I found it very comforting to go back to the places I had been with my family in London and visit. It helped me feel less homesick and all the beautiful things distracted me from the fact that I was so far from them.

(4:07)

I found so many places that I hadn't visited when I first went over to London like Portobello Road, which I highly recommend for students because you can find some really awesome things for not very expensive. I love ...I love Covent Garden just walking around, even if you're not going to spend money just walking around is so pretty and I like to say I kind of have the best of both worlds because in South Carolina, I have none of that. So, when I'm in London, even though I'm not a tourist, I do all the touristy things, all the time. Oh, and I am this year I also found Hatchards, do you Hatchards, the bookstore? Oh, I fell in love with Hatchards... I go there all the time. It is my favourite place.

Academic Support 4:42

So, what can you say to students thinking of coming to an art and design course in London?

Sister 4:49

You know, I would say the city is your greatest resource. And... it's you know, it's kind of tempting to stay in your flat and look on Pinterest and stuff, for inspiration but I think that is the greatest disservice you can do for yourself when you're in London. I mean, go walk around, sit in a park and people watch. I mean, do anything to just get out, you know, especially if you're struggling with homesickness, or being away from your family. Just totally immerse yourself in London.

(5.20)

You know, thankfully, a lot of people that are going to leave their home country and go to London are maybe the slightly more adventurous type. And I think you should play that up as much as you can.

Because I really think you would really regret it if you got to the end of your course and realise that there was a part of London you didn't see. There's just so much I think you should fully take advantage of it ...and that's what I tried to do. And even travelling outside of London I um... I went to Cambridge and that was great, you know, the architecture, what people are wearing, everything is so inspiring. Again, that's something I do not have here and so I recommend doing that.

Academic Support 5:55

Let's talk about the first few days of university starting and what was your experience of that?

Sister 6:02

Well, so when I came over here, I didn't know anybody. And so, when I came into my course, I was really thinking that I was going to have to go out of my way to make new friends. But the course... the way that it was set up, it was very kind of group oriented. And so, I had no problem meeting so many new people. And on our very last day that we were in Foundation, we were like, 'hey, do you remember the very first day of class when we were grouped up together?' It felt like we were kind of a family. I feel like that sounds kind of cheesy to say, but foundation year really was that. You know, we were all there because we wanted to do something in art and design...so you already have that to bond over. And so, I just felt like, you know, I made so many great friends that I'm going to keep up with ...that's what I remember from the very first couple days was just all the new faces I met.

Academic Support 6:51

In a way you're in advantage in that your English is your first language (Yes). What would you say to students... international students whose English is not their first language and what do you get from students from other cultures...international students?

Sister 7:07

Yeah, I made a lot of international student friends and English was not all of their first languages. And, some of my friends would go to the English help classes that you UAL would offer and then some of them wouldn't. And I would say, if English is not your first language, even if you think that on your own, you can better your English, I would go to the UAL classes that help because the students ... my friends that went to those classes excelled with their English much, much faster than the ones that did it and just kind of tried to better their English on their own.

(7:43)

I would also say um, I noticed kind of grouping...for instance, there were a lot of Chinese students and they would kind of naturally gravitate towards each other because it's scary to not speak your first language. You know, um, I've been trying to learn Spanish and I'm even afraid to speak Spanish when there are aren't Spanish speakers around me. So, I understand it is so intimidating. But if I were them, I would try to speak to some English, you know... English as their first language students because, you know, getting outside of your comfort zone, I think, is the hardest part. And once you do that, it's much easier.

(8.20)

I'm really interested in everyone else's home life, especially when Coronavirus came around because we were all kind of anticipating, okay, when are we going to go home to our home countries ...you know, when are we going to have to leave? And so, I remember, one conversation where we were all talking... one student's home country was India, China, Egypt, and then I'm from the US. And so, we were all talking about just what it's like in our different home countries. And I remember thinking, wow, if I had stayed in the United States and gone to college, I would have never even had this type of conversation. And I just love things like that where... I realise I'm so acutely aware of the fact that what I'm experiencing is, you know, priceless, you know what I mean? So that's what I would say.

Academic Support. 8:58

Cool. So, let's talk a little bit about lockdown, about when the virus sort of emerged and what happened both personally and also as far as your classes and your learning is concerned.

Sister 9:14

When the coronavirus kind of started emerging, the classes carried on as usual. But, a lot of students were afraid which I totally understand... I was afraid everyone was ...because nobody knew what was going on. Um, but um, a lot of students started going to their home countries or just staying in their flats because they didn't want to get on the tube because, you know... germy..., so... the classes did carry on as usual but there were a lot less students in the class. Um, for me personally, I was kind of wondering, you know, what am I going to go home you know, we were working on our final major project and so I didn't want to leave in the middle of that project and have to come home and quarantine and nobody knew what was going on or what to do.

(09:58)

But um, I think it was around like March 16 was our last day in class. I flew out on March 18. And um I did end up getting the virus which changed a lot because I was expecting to come home and start working on my final major project remotely from home but wasn't able to do that because of the virus which affected me for about a month. Um, but I know I was talking to my friends that a lot of students came home and tried to continue working on their projects from home but it's not the same because at UAL you know, on our campus, we had the workshops and the tutors and even just the environment...you know, it's so on motivating, if that's the word, to be working from home by yourself without... you know ... that community. Yes, it was definitely a struggle for everyone I would say.

Academic Support 10:47

Sounds like it was pretty bad if you had it for a month.

Sister 10:50

It was, yes Ma'am. I feel bad because I can remember being in my class before I left London thinking, this is horrible that people are dying from this, but thankfully, I'm young, and I don't have any pre-existing health conditions, so I should be fine. But that was just completely not the case. I think I contracted the virus in London because as soon as I flew back here, I started showing symptoms and I got tested. And ... it was it was bad... I had to go to the ER a couple of times. I ended up being on oxygen home, which helps but um, it was, it was not easy. And I was so upset because I felt so horribly and I had gone from being in London being so motivated to finish my final major project, and then come home and be forced to just not do anything. So, it was hard physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Yeah.

Academic Support 11:42

So how did you ...or did you keep in contact with the course and with your colleagues?

Sister 11:47

Yes, my tutor was really great about emailing me. There were a couple of days where we just emailed every single day just... you know... because things were changing so quickly, that you needed that constant flow of communication ...to even understand what's happening. And then um, our Course Leader actually did a Zoom, so that we could kind of talk about how we were going to be graded for the course and how we'll proceed to our degree courses the following year and things like that. So, if I was ever confused about what was going on with the course, I have to say it only lasted for a day maybe, because then I would be talking to my tutor who would help clarify everything. And, you know, even they didn't have all the answers because everything was changing so quickly but the constant communication was definitely helpful.

Academic Support 12:32

And so now what's happening? Next stages? You've just heard about your course. So, tell us a bit about what's going to be happening.

Sister 12:39

So, for my course, specifically, it's going to be definitely a blended approach. So, I know lectures and tutorials will be online but there will be... two days a week will be in the studio, which is great. They said "On campus you will spend time in the jewellery studios in a group of maximum 21 students" which is great because, um ...you know, I think... I think we have to see the positive in this and the positive is that we will be split up into smaller groups and so, you know, you'll really get a chance to form like, you know, relationships with these students that will be in the smaller groups with you and ... even get more one-on-one with tutors... I think that'll be a nice positive to it. More one-on-one time with tutors and the smaller groups. It'll be a different learning experience, but I think a lot of parts of it will be better.

Academic Support 13:29

So, what do you think it's important to develop in order to get the most out of this experience? I'm thinking of like time management and communication...

Sister 13:39

You know, it's hard for your living space all of a sudden become your workspace. And so that's what I'm kind of already anticipating in my head. I'm thinking, Okay, I'm gonna try to set up my flat in a way that I can kind of divide my living space and my workspace, because they're now the same thing.

And also, um... the research period ... that used to be my favourite part, when you would get a brief and before you started working on your project, you would go out to the museums and around London, and just kind of research. So, that will be harder since museums are limiting access and not everything is open. And ... so that will be harder, I'll have to find some kind of online resources that can help me get my research in. So that will be different...but everything else I'm going to try to make it as similar as I can to, if I was in class working,

Academic Support 14:31

It feels to me students have to become more organised. So, you research what's exhibitions are around that might relate to your project?

Sister 14:41

Yeah, that's definitely true. You know, I really will have to be more organised with everything from research to making and... you know ...kind of saying 'Okay, I know, I'll need the resources in the workshop to do this, but this I can do at home. So, kind of prioritising when you do what so that you know, you have the resources and the time to get it done.

Academic Support 15:01

And looking back on your time... you've been at UAL a year. (Yes) How have you changed? What is the experience given you?

Sister 15:11

Well, all my traditional, you know, education had been in biology. And so, art was just such a different field. There was so much I didn't know, and I remember going into preparation to Foundation and I didn't even keep ... keep a sketchbook at that time. And um... when my tutors told me I needed to, I remember thinking, Oh, I don't really think I need to... but um, you know, they ...they opened my eyes to how much that can change your practice. And, you know, coming from biology, my research period from my biology projects was so different from my research period for art and I didn't know research was even a part of it and it ended up being my favourite part. Um, the importance of going and seeing other people's work... going and seeing exhibitions and the museum's ... and I learned how to use inspiration from other people's work...um, take little parts of their work and be inspired by that. And, you know, also dig deeper. Like if I would be in a museum and I'd see something... let's say it's like a Chinese textile... I wouldn't just go home and look up Chinese textiles, I would then say, 'hum...those Chinese textiles were really interesting...let me look at Japan or Indonesia or... you know, my mind was just so much more broadened.

Academic Support 16:28

And what about your approach to the importance of experimentation...(Yes) ...the idea of perfection and yet only through failing and experimenting that you move forward.

Sister 16:39

Yeah, that was the hardest part for me. I would be doing a project and I would get an idea. And I would just take that idea all the way through to the end. And my tutor... I remember her saying, 'you know, you're putting yourself at such a disadvantage by doing this'... I was nervous to experiment with other ideas that maybe weren't as good... or, you know, needed development, because I didn't want to... I didn't want to fail. Now, it's my favourite phase ...I, I love when I, you know, try something and it ends up so horribly... I just kind of laugh and say, 'Okay, well what can I take from this that did work and go from there'?

(17.15)

So, I remember I was trying to design shoes and I was designing a heel of a shoe that kind of looked like honey dripping. And I tried to do resin and it ended up incredibly horribly... it was just a huge drippy mess... and I remember all my classmates around me...we were just kind of looking at it like 'okay, well what do I do from here because this did not work'? And so, my friend showed me her attempt at resin which was also horrible. And so, you know, we kind of worked together on 'okay, well, where do we go from here?' And I ended up mastering resin, if I do say so myself, by the end of that project. You know, if I had just given up that first time that it ended up horribly, I wouldn't have had that end product that I was so pleased with.

Academic Support 18:05

When you say now I know I've mastered resin what was involved in going from a mess to being able to say that now?

Sister 18:08

My friend Libby was the one that helped me. We looked at other artists that had used resin and YouTube videos and I ... I'd never worked with resin but I kind of thought it was something that I could mould but that's not the case. So, what we figured out would work was taking a heel that I already liked and taking a little block of clay and sticking that heel into the clay to create a mould and then mixing that resin and pouring it into that mould. And I ended up taking it a step further and I dripped hot glue down the base of the heel to look like honey dripping. And so that... that's what took it from a horrible sticky mess to something that worked ...and you know, I never would have thought of that on my own...you know, my friends and looking at other artists that had done similar things that helped me.

Academic Support 18:56

Given the uncertainty, how do you view the next few years in UAL doing this course?

Sister 19:04

The attitude I'm going to try to take into these next three years is that I, specifically, cannot really control anything that goes on...but I can control myself. And so, I'm going to try to go into this course and get the absolute most out of it. I..the uncertainty of it all ... the uncertainty of, you know, next year, is this still going to be the case...the year after that... You know, how else is this gonna change... am I going to have to go home again?... I can't control any of that. And so, you know, what I just keep reminding myself and definitely what I'm going to remind myself during this course, is that all I can control is myself and my work. And so, I'm going to try to focus on that and um... I can no longer just kind of wander around London going to different museums, I'll have to plan ahead a little more ... and there'll be some other changes that I'll have to make but I'm just going to try to make those changes so that I can get the most out of it. Just focus on what I can do. Take this course and just do the most with it ... and look at the advantages.

Academic Support 20:02

And what would you say to somebody who is at the point where they haven't confirmed the place? What would you say to them?

Sister 20:12

Well, ...I am already a little bit behind. I'm 20 and I'm just now starting my BA course. And I just don't want to waste any more time. And I don't want to look back and think, wow, those students that did go into that course, were completely fine. In fact, the changes that were made actually ended up being beneficial....I don't want to look back on that and regret putting off a year... you know... and if they do put off a year and they stay home, they'll have to take online classes if they want to do anything. So, why not go ahead and start doing what you love taking online classes? I don't feel like the changes are going to be that much where it's worth deferring. I'm still going to get to go to the workshop two times a week. I can book places in the workshop extra days which actually will be an advantage because I won't be having to fight over the machines and workshop area. It will be... you know ... we'll have tons of room, you know, so that's an advantage I'm looking at. Also, the small groups, I'll get to know my classmates much better. I'm kind of just thinking that it's gonna be almost like it was a smaller school than it really is.

(21:23)

Um, now if you're considering deferring because of fear of the Coronavirus that a lot of places around the world are suffering with this...and the United States is actually doing worse than the UK...so I'm better off in the UK. But if that's not your case, I don't think you should let the fear dictate what you do. And look at the science ... of masks and being six feet apart and that kind of thing ...to help comfort you, and know, if you follow those guidelines...you will be okay, you know.

Academic Support 21:51

It's been fascinating and so enlightening talking to you and so positive. (Oh, thank you). I wish you every success in the big start of your new course.

Sister 22:01

Thank you, thank you... try to keep the positive attitudes as I start the course because I think we're all going to need it but if we do, we'll be ... we'll be fine.