

True To Form

Air Force ROTC senior paints her future

Monday, March 29, 2021

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When Virginia Walsh '21 recently went to get some of her paintings framed for an upcoming exhibition, the art store employee couldn't help but notice the skill in her landscapes – and passion. It seemed clear that Walsh's post-graduation plans would be oriented around art. "Why are you going into the military?" the framer asked.

Walsh is used to friendly puzzlement about her intersecting interests. She is aware she does not neatly fit into any one box, that her journey does not reflect a familiar trajectory. For starters, there's what she calls her "art gene," which runs deep in her family. She's also a standout humanities scholar, with two College of Liberal Arts awards to her name, and an Arabic linguist. Then, there's her proud family history of

military service: both her mother and father served in the Marine Corps, her older brother is currently serving, and her younger brother will after he graduates from college.

“There are so many things I want to do... but I also want to be sure it’s not just about me.”

True to form, Walsh’s graduation this spring will reflect the many lives she’s lived at UNH. Double majors in [psychology](#) and [humanities](#) and double minors in [Arabic](#) and [Air Force leadership](#). Art on exhibit at a café on Main Street. Commissioning as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force.

“There are so many things I want to do,” Walsh says. “but I also want to be sure it’s not just about me.”

After graduating from a competitive private high school, everyone thought Walsh would go to art school. Instead, she chose UNH because of its scale of opportunities – and the Air Force because of its leadership on inclusive representation in the armed forces.

Certainly, Air Force ROTC Detachment 475 at UNH helps to set that pace, counting Gen. Lori Robinson ’81, the first female combatant commander in the history of the U.S. Armed Forces, among its alums. And this May, the same number of women as men will be commissioned into the Air Force from UNH. Two of those graduating female cadets also happen to be Walsh’s roommates, which has given her critical social support.

Still, Walsh can never blend into the background. In the [Air Force ROTC](#), she’s a liberal arts major in an environment predominated by STEM students. In her humanities classes, Walsh says she also sticks out, particularly on Tuesdays, when ROTC cadets must wear their uniforms.

However, she credits this ever-present responsibility to “make herself known” for her academic success and personal growth. Standing out in class made it easier to forge strong relationships with her professors; becoming a mentor to ROTC underclassmen – especially women – helped her confidence skyrocket.

“The Air Force ROTC has been foundational for me at UNH,” Walsh says. “It has transformed me into the person I am.”

Today, Walsh pursues painting as a beloved hobby – and bustling side business. During her winter and summer breaks, she paints commissions, mostly portraits of people and their pets, and dabbles in her own creative self-expression.

“It’s this one thing where I can say, ‘this is mine,’” she explains.

She also stands on the cusp of her professional life. Recently, Walsh learned that she will be commissioning as a logistics readiness officer, providing real-time and detail-oriented mission support. Once she finds out the location of her first base, she can be called up at any time in the next year.

Walsh trusts that her deep understanding of culture, language and religion will be profoundly relevant to her Air Force career. Down the road, she sees herself applying for advanced training to become a country specialist, a leadership role focused on providing cultural and linguistic preparation for officers about to go overseas.

“Gen. Robinson always says, ‘yeah, I’ve had a lot of firsts, but it’s not about me. It’s about your people,’” Walsh explains. “That’s the kind of leader I want to be.”

Art, too, will always be a part of her. Watercolors, Walsh adds, are highly portable.

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THE PLACES THEY'LL GO 2021



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.

The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).

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