

Michael Croley, B.A. Government, Minor in Writing, 2000

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For any student majoring or minoring with an English degree, there is a fear reiterated and often wrongly reaffirmed by countless individuals questioning and critiquing the degree's merit value. To squash those misplaced accusations and theories, *First Floor Cherry* brings you the alumni success story of Michael Croley.



A member of WKU's Honors Program, Michael Croley graduated with a degree in government and a minor in writing in 2000. After graduation from WKU, Croley worked briefly before deciding to pursue a master's in creative writing at Florida State University. He then attended the University of Memphis where he received his Master of Fine Arts. Croley began his teaching career in 2007 at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and later moved to John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio. Today, he is a professor at Denison University in Granville, Ohio.

In December of 2015, Croley received notification that he was one of 37 winners—out of an extensive 1,763 applicants—who was selected for National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants for 2016. NEA grants are given to individuals for continued work on research topics or creative work. They are highly competitive and to be selected is a prestigious honor. "It's less about the money than the acknowledgement that the work I sent in was deemed worthy of an award," Croley said. Croley will be using his grant to finish the research and writing of his third novel, set to focus on Lyndon B. Johnson and his presidency. He also has hopes that his NEA grant will give him the necessary time and space to get his other novels "out the door."

When asked about the greatest learning experience WKU offered him, Croley cited his time spent in leadership positions in his fraternity, Lambda Chi. The fraternity experience allowed Croley to discover his own moral compass and the values that he believed were essential to "the kind of person [he] wanted to be." Not only did his membership in Lambda Chi allow him to improve his own character, but it also related

on a deeper level to his studies and academic interests. "I also think the fraternity experience was emblematic of me searching for something we often find in literature, which is a connection to humanity," Croley reflected. "We understand that the human family is connected through these stories. What moves us and confounds us, brings us joy and sadness, is often not very different from the person sitting next to us in class. We just don't know that yet."

Croley also acknowledged the influence that the late WKU Professor Mary Ellen Miller had on him, saying, "There isn't enough time to talk about how important Mary Ellen Miller has been in my life. She did the thing that all great teachers do: she took me seriously." Through Professor Miller, Croley learned that to be a great writer, he must focus on great writing. While he acknowledged such advice may sound "a bit smug and elitist," Croley also believes it is "absolutely correct." He believes that even though writers like J.K. Rowling may have written popular stories, more could be learned from writers like Tolstoy and Chekhov. "We have a misguided notion that because we deal in art and we deal in human emotion that we have to level everything, that we have to be diplomatic and make sure everyone feels justified in his or her taste, but that seems a bit wrongheaded to me," Croley said. Other individuals from WKU that Croley cited as influential to his career included Walker Rutledge, Frank Steele, Patti Minter, Dan Myers, Cassandra Pinnick, and Charley Pride.

For English students hoping to achieve success post-graduation, Croley is optimistic. He said that while English students are often the most belittling towards themselves and to their degrees, he knows the real worth of an English degree, and he wants desperately for graduates to realize their strengths and understand that they are valuable. "An English major is a student who can synthesize information, can think critically, and can form connections that most people either miss or couldn't make in the first place. If you're graduating with a degree in English (and you've been a smart, engaged student), I actually think your options are pretty limitless, but you have to believe that," Croley said.

He discussed the importance of graduates being able to effectively convince a potential employer of their personal strengths and capacities that their English degree has given them. "You know that stories are the keys to how we see ourselves and the world, and that the distillation of poetry harnesses those truths." Croley continued, "What companies need are folks that understand that, I think, and then can wade through those stories to the truth of them." Most importantly, Croley noted, "Don't be afraid."

