

# Dare to Discover More



## English Honors and Pre-Law Student Marissa Rizzuto

Marissa began her academic journey at Suffolk Community College as a culinary major in restaurant management. Still, she soon realized the field's lack of work-life balance, which led her to switch to general studies to complete core requirements while exploring all her interests. Her love for literature led her to take multiple English courses, ultimately inspiring Marissa to transfer to Stony Brook University as an English major. Later, she added Political Science as a second major to strengthen her preparation for law school, with career aspirations in the legal field.

At Stony Brook, Marissa's academic interests flourished, particularly in Law and Literature. The class allowed her to explore the intersection of law and humanities, providing a new perspective on legal issues. This experience shaped her academic journey and inspired her honors thesis, which analyzes Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* in relation to historical domestic violence cases. Through this work, Marissa highlights how societal views on women's struggles, deemed "trifling matters," have influenced legal systems.

Beyond academics, she is the Chief Intern for the Department of English. She founded and managed the department's blog, conducted interviews, and wrote event reports, fostering connections with faculty, alumni, and students. Marissa is also a member of Phi Alpha Delta, a pre-law fraternity, volunteers as an event leader for Last Chance Animal Rescue, and works part-time as a paralegal at a personal injury law firm.

Marissa's English studies have honed her skills like abstract thinking and constructing well-supported arguments, which she sees as directly applicable to law practice. Drawing parallels between the discipline required in culinary arts and the legal field, she emphasizes her growth and adaptability throughout their academic and professional journey. Marissa's experiences demonstrate an evident passion for literature, advocacy, and building a meaningful career in law.



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## English and Teacher Prep Student Petrina DiSanto

Petrina's passion for visual storytelling has driven her success as an English major with double minors in Film and Screen Studies and Filmmaking. She applies her academic expertise as a videographer for Dean Ric's podcast, "What's the Tea?" and as an assistant director and producer for the independent film *Bound*, showcasing her ability to create cinematic art. Alongside her creative pursuits, Petrina is enrolled in the Teacher's Education Program and the BA/MA Program, highlighting her multifaceted talents.

Her decision to pursue English is inspired by her lifelong love of reading, shaped by her mother's career at Scholastic, and further motivated by a high school English teacher whose passion for literature and education profoundly influenced her. Petrina finds fulfillment in the shared experience of analyzing literature and media, enjoying her field's collaborative and interpretive nature.

Among her favorite classes are smaller, discussion-based ones like EGL380 and EGL301, where students explore personal interpretations and engage deeply with analysis. She appreciates the creative freedom these courses provide, contrasting with the more rigid approaches often found in high school literature studies.

Currently completing her student observations at the middle school she once attended, Petrina values the mentorship of the assistant principal and the opportunity to take on active roles in the classroom. She enjoys observing and participating in teaching dynamics, gaining hands-on experience in an environment she knows well.

Petrina is also deeply involved in campus life. As an assistant director at the Writing Center, she fosters a community of writing enthusiasts while connecting with peers across departments. She serves as the president of the film club, SBU-TV, sharing her passion for filmmaking and teaching with students. Additionally, she has worked as a TA for courses like WRT102 and SBU101 and interned for the SBU film festival "Create + Imagine," further merging her love for teaching and the arts.



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## English Honors Student Laci Burton

"Studying English just felt right." Humanities are so integral to activism and the world that being an English major gave Laci the opportunity to have an impact. Being an English Major also gave Laci the opportunity to do unique research that she would not have had outside of the English Honors Program.

Laci's work is on the queer subtext in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, but more specifically, how Jackson uses Freudian ideology to subvert the goals of psychoanalysis and hegemonic enforcement of gender roles. "I've always loved the queer gothic genre, so as soon as I got accepted into the Honors Program, I knew my thesis was going to be related to it." When she received a URECA grant to travel to the Library of Congress, where all of Shirley Jackson's notes, drafts, and manuscripts are archived, she found a letter connecting Jackson to Nandor Fodor, a Freudian scholar who theorized the psychoanalytic reasoning behind poltergeists. He was saying that ghosts only happen because your subconscious projects these events. Jackson and Fodor communicated with each other, and she took inspiration from him. When Laci started reading Fodor's cases, one of the case studies she found mirrors the events of *The Haunting of Hill House*, but the ending is different. She questioned why Jackson portrays the same arc of events and uses these Freudian techniques but writes so that it doesn't work out for the protagonist in the end. Why did Jackson choose that ending?

"The exciting thing was going to the archives in D.C. and holding Jackson's first-hand notes. She wrote these on the typewriter or by hand; they're in her handwriting—that's crazy. There were over 7,000 documents. So, getting a glimpse of not only her work but her life and dealing with these documents first-hand was incredible and unforgettable."

Laci definitely wants to teach, but she loves research and publishing equally. So, ideally, she would like to be a professor at a university.



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## English Alumnus, Attorney Amanda Korber '09

Amanda's time in Stony Brook's English Honors Program immensely helped her develop the practical skills she uses today as a Supervising Attorney for The Legal Aid Society of the District of Columbia's housing unit, where she spends most of her days researching and writing. Amanda especially values the Honors Program's opportunity, which allowed her to write her original thesis: "What an amazing luxury just to read books and think about them and think about how to frame arguments and persuasive thoughts about them; it was just so much fun."

Currently, Amanda helps and supervises new attorneys who represent tenants in eviction cases and tenant associations in rent increase cases. She is coming up on ten years of being a lawyer, so it's nice to work with new lawyers and help them get started and find their way through it. However, Amanda still sometimes represents clients because, frankly, it is one of her favorite parts of her job.

So much of Amanda's day is spent researching, writing, and trying to make persuasive arguments—whether it's for court or for policy-making. The English Program helped significantly develop those practical skills. Working on her thesis was probably one of my favorite things she did at Stony Brook; what an amazing luxury to just read books and think about them and think about how to frame arguments and persuasive thoughts about them. Looking back at her academic career, it was one of the best things she did.

One piece of advice for students is, "I don't think there is one right way to get anywhere, and that the best way to land somewhere good for you is to follow your interests and things you love. Working every day is hard— and it's hard even when you have a job you love— so you want to make sure you land not where you think you're supposed to land but where you want to land."



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## English Alumnus, Speechwriter Courtney Taylor '19

After graduation, Courtney initially felt uncertain about her next step and worked various short-term roles, including as an Expert English Literature Content Creator for Slader.com. However, she found her niche in speechwriting and began an internship with West Wing Writers in January 2020. This internship led to her becoming a Speechwriting Fellow and an Account Executive at the firm's West Wing Communications division. For over a year and a half, Courtney contributed to writing speeches, op-eds, and talking points for high-profile clients, including Fortune 500 CEOs, political figures, and nonprofit leaders. She currently works on a team scripting events in the tech sector.

Courtney attributes much of her career success to her experiences at Stony Brook University, particularly the English Honors program, which honed her research skills—vital for speechwriting. Additionally, her playwriting courses with Professor Ken Weitzman and her involvement in Pocket Theatre provided essential writing, leadership, and collaboration skills. She also credits her participation in the Edward Guiliano Global Travel Fellowship, which allowed her to conduct research for a new play at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and The Sixth Floor Museum, as a key experience that opened doors for her.

Looking ahead, Courtney is set to pursue a Master's degree in English at Lehigh University on a full scholarship with a Teaching Assistantship. Her decision to return to school is motivated by a long-standing interest in academia and a desire to deepen her expertise in English and communications, especially in social justice and literature. She was drawn to Lehigh's program because of its focus on these areas and its substantial graduate student research projects.

Reflecting on her undergraduate experience, Courtney wishes she had taken more advantage of study abroad opportunities but acknowledges that her post-graduation path, though initially uncertain, ultimately led her to exciting academic and professional opportunities in speechwriting and beyond.



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## English Alumnus, Secondary Teacher Tina Costanza '24

Tina Costanza is a Junior High School English teacher in her alma mater's school district. She strongly values the lessons she learned in Stony Brook's Teacher Education Program. Finding fulfillment in her career, she urges future teachers to work hard and remember why they pursue education: "Kids want someone to show up for them every day with a smile."

Tina's experience in the English Department and Teacher Education Program at Stony Brook provided her with a strong foundation for her teaching career. She is grateful for the core values instilled by the program, which she shares with many of her colleagues who also went through Stony Brook's Teacher Preparation Programs. Tina often applies the resources and teaching techniques she learned from her professors, whether they were specific pedagogical methods or personal anecdotes from their own teaching experiences. These elements have contributed significantly to her success as a teacher.

Tina finds many aspects of teaching fulfilling, but the most rewarding is seeing a student's "aha" moment when something clicks, and they finally understand a concept. She also enjoys the personal connections she forms with students, especially when they ask her about her life. Tina recalls a moment when two students wrote her an entire story using the vocabulary words from a quiz. That kind of engagement means a lot to her and is one of the most gratifying parts of her job.

Tina advises current English majors at Stony Brook who are interested in a career in education to work hard, emphasizing that this may sound cliché but essential. She believes teachers must always go the extra mile for their students, making teaching a unique profession. Tina reminds future teachers that kids want someone to show up for them every day with a smile, so being positive and consistently demonstrating care and dedication is key to making a lasting impact on their students.



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## English Alumna, Editor Jessica Vestuto '18

Jessica Vestuto is a Stony Brook English BA alum and serves as an editor for Mariner Books, a HarperCollins imprint. A former writer for The Stony Brook Press, Jessica has always believed in “the power of the pen.”

Jessica’s path to publishing began with her connection to Stony Brook, where her mother and sister had attended as English majors. Their positive experiences with the program and professors made it a clear choice for her. She valued the opportunity to receive a high-quality education without accumulating significant debt. Throughout high school, she was deeply involved in writing and the school paper, which fueled her passion for the written word. During her undergraduate studies, she discovered the concept of an MFA in creative nonfiction, which became her goal. Jessica took English courses, wrote on the side, and focused on getting into MFA programs. After completing her undergrad, she attended Emerson for her MFA but decided to intern at FSG, a Macmillan imprint, during the summer before starting the program. There, she experienced the editorial process firsthand and fell in love with publishing. While continuing her MFA studies, she worked for a publisher in Boston, blending her academic pursuits and her new career path.

Jessica’s undergraduate experience at Stony Brook played a significant role in shaping her career at HarperCollins. It taught her how to speak and write about books, an essential skill for her current role. Much of her work involves persuading others—whether through jacket copy or meetings with sales reps—to invest time and resources into books. She is grateful for the professors who encouraged her to read what she loved, organize her thoughts, and express them effectively, significantly influencing her editorial sensibilities. Additionally, her time writing for The Stony Brook Press introduced her to publishing, which sparked her love for seeing her writing transform into a tangible object that others could engage with. This feeling remains the same when she sees a book she’s acquired come off the printer.



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