After a long year of shutdowns and restrictions on travel, many undergraduate students are looking forward to expanding their educational horizons. Especially in the English major, students often see their studies as connected to issues that span multiple cultural and geographical contexts. This year’s English major valedictorian Mia Vance explores her interest and personal cultural connection to Ireland to deepen her studies of English literature and creative writing.

As she celebrates crossing the finish line, Vance looks back on the pandemic’s effect on travel. In early 2020, she had scheduled a trip to Ireland with her family, but travel bans prevented her dream from coming to fruition. In addition to being a full-time college student, Vance is a wife and a mother. With the increasing unknowns of the pandemic, her and her family decided that living in Ireland after she graduates will expand her family’s already deep love for Ireland and Irish culture. She expresses excitement in starting a master’s degree in Fine Arts at the National University of Ireland in Galway University.

Significant to Vance’s story is how she came to attend college for the second time. In her attempt at completing undergraduate studies straight out of high school, her theatre degree was left incomplete despite Vance walking for graduation. In the time between, Vance has changed significantly such that these past few years have shown her the breadth of her potential. Vance is an exemplary example of resilience during the pandemic. Her story shows that overcoming the odds can come in many different forms. “I’ve exceeded my own expectations,” Vance says. Despite overwhelming odds, she explains, “it feels like a redemption arc that I’ve been on, and I picked a very strange time to do it.”

Other undergrads look to political and social activism to leave their mark on the world. Vance talks about undergraduates’ growing interest in social issues and political engagement particularly on campus. Indeed, shifting classroom settings including going remote and coming back to in-person classes has left many undergrads with significant challenges, especially when finishing their degrees. Such challenges included managing mental health and financial stress during a global pandemic. But, Vance points out, undergraduates in the English program have done a great job forming a strong cohort across years to keep each other accountable and swap ideas about on-campus social issues. Students like Vance have found innovative ways to overcome the barriers of online learning and still form close connections with each other.

Vance’s story shows us that with important connections, with our families, colleagues, and fellow community members, we can work together to solve bigger issues. As Vance demonstrates, we need each other to weather the storm caused by the pandemic. These connections help us when we are struggling and especially when we are celebrating. With other people, we can make our dreams possible and find our own redemption arc.