

After the Award

Florida's top students talk about real life

By Jen Miller

Florida Leader magazine's annual Florida College Student of the Year competition honors outstanding college students across the state and chooses the best of the best. But after graduation, you know these aren't people that are going to rest on their laurels. What happens to our top student leaders after graduation? We talk to three past winners about life after being tapped as Student of the Year.

Taryn Fielder A Successful Balance

Taryn Fielder, 1999's Florida College Student Leader of the Year and graduate of Eckerd College, has made quite a geographic leap. This Florida native now lives in New York City and works as a real estate associate at Simpson Thatcher & Bartlett LLP.

"It seems like the craziest city on the planet to anyone who has never lived here but quickly feels like home to anyone who does," Fielder says of the Big Apple. She's not a stranger to traveling, though. As an undergraduate, she went abroad to places such as China, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. She values her experiences abroad as the most important thing she did in college.

In law school, Fielder didn't stop her extra-curricular activities. After all, just taking courses at Harvard Law isn't enough for some students. "At law school, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the

school had a drama society," she says. "I performed in shows every semester and had the opportunity to produce, direct, write, sing, dance, and act in the law school's blow-out spring *Parody* production." Again, though, Fielder says that it's a balance, having more than just one thing—in this case, law classes—to keep your stress low.

Now, as in college, she sometimes feels overloaded, but she knows what comes first. "Recognizing your limitations is a very important part of growing as a leader," Fielder says. "Probably one of the biggest mistakes we leaders

make is not giving others the chance to prove their own leadership potential for fear that things won't get done right."

Daniel McCabe A Job, a Wife, and a Brand New Life

For Daniel McCabe, involvement as a student leader turned into a career. This Florida State

University graduate and Florida College Student of the Year honorable mention winner in 1998 and 1999 serves as executive director of Break Away, a national nonprofit organization that plans alternative breaks and leadership training.

"A freshman year alternative break experience literally changed my life," McCabe says. McCabe started college with a lucrative business

career in mind. But that all changed when he joined his local Break Away chapter. Not only did he end up leading the group, but he found that his business degree could help him run a nonprofit organization. He also points to this and other leadership opportunities as teaching him to write, how to communicate, and how to work with a diverse group of people. "These are invaluable skills in my career and professional networking opportunities," he says.

His college experiences taught him to take chances, even if it means making mistakes. "If I hadn't learned then that I could succeed by taking big chances and that honest mistakes wouldn't kill me, I'd probably be more timid in my professional career, something that would not bode well in my line of work," he says.

For current student leaders, McCabe stresses the importance of strong mentors.

"They talked me through challenges, supported my successes, and pushed me forward," he says.

Ramona Creel Following Her Own Lead

Ramona Creel was living the life she thought she was meant to lead. This Florida State University graduate and 1993 Florida College Student of the Year worked for three years in a welfare-to-work program at the Atlanta Housing Authority after graduate school, but she wasn't happy. She felt limited working in a government setting and wanted more, so she quit her job to work as a professional



Time Out: On-line organizer and entrepreneur Ramona Creel hasn't been afraid to blaze her own trail since graduation.

organizer. Two years after she embarked on her new career path, she founded the web site, www.onlineorganizing.com, which has done nothing but blossom.

She points to her experience as a student leader as a big factor in helping her escape from the nine-to-five world. "It was scary to quit my job—I'd never openly quit anything in my life," Creel says. "I had been trained to look at success in a certain way. It's all about how good your grades are and how fast you can move up the job ladder and how many awards you win and how much money you're making. And one day, at the ripe old age of 23, I woke up and realized that I was living exactly the life everyone thought I should but wasn't the least bit happy with it."

She adds that her "leap into entrepreneurialism and the lifestyle it has afforded me can be directly linked to earlier boosts in my confidence—like being a student leader."

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Jen Miller, who in 2002 led the University of Tampa's Minaret to "Best Newspaper" status in Florida Leader's annual "Best of Florida Schools" competition, now serves as editor of SJ Magazine. Her freelance articles are frequently featured in Florida Leader and Student Leader magazines. She graduated from Rutgers University-Camden with an MA in English in 2002.

Break Away: Executive Director Daniel McCabe helps students break new ground during an alternative break trip.

