

Alum Jamie O'Leary '14 Shares Her Feminist Research & Activism With Students

Liz Torrey, Jan 6 2017

Alum Jamie O'Leary '14 was back on St. Andrew's campus this Thursday to give a presentation on feminism to students and faculty at School Meeting. While on campus, she also visited with various classrooms (History of Religious Thought, History of Social Reform, and Global Studies), and led a discussion on gender relations with faculty. Jamie is a sophomore at Princeton, and during her time there has become very involved in feminist activism and gender studies research, both at Princeton and in her off-campus life. She credits the gap year she took before matriculating at Princeton as being foundational to her interest in gender dynamics.

"After St. Andrew's, I went to Senegal," Jamie said. "Princeton has this program called the [Bridge Year Program](#), where you can take a year off and do service work and learn another language. I taught English at an NGO [in Senegal] called SOS Children's Villages, and learned French and Wolof, and lived with a homestay family. I loved it, and I feel like it helped me figure out what I want to do—it started my interest in feminism. I spent a lot of time noticing gender-power dynamics while I was in Senegal, and when I came back to the States, I continued noticing the same kind of dynamics. I thought—Wow, there's so much going on here that I never noticed before, that maybe I've been programmed not to notice. So that kind of got me going."

Jamie plans to declare as an Anthropology major with a Gender and Sexuality Studies minor (and perhaps an African Studies minor as well). Since arriving at Princeton in the fall of 2015, she's spent many of her school breaks traveling and continuing to explore gender relations around the world. She participated in a week-long exchange program with Cambridge University, traveled to South Africa with the Princeton Glee Club (of which she is a member), and has participated in a Princeton-led "alternative break" in New York City, through which students explored potential careers in feminism and met with a number of feminist NGOs—"that was another thing that kind of got me started on my feminist trajectory," Jamie noted. This past summer, Jamie studied abroad in Spain, then returned to New York to spend two months working at [UN Women](#) (the UN's gender rights advocacy organization), where she conducted research on religion's impact on gender equality.

"Princeton has given me *so* many opportunities to get funding and travel," Jamie said. She recalled how, while visiting a St. Andrew's Global Studies class earlier in the day, she had encouraged students to follow her strategy of applying for as many of these kinds of opportunities as possible. "My advice was, just fill out every application that comes in front of you, even if you're not totally sure you want to do it, even if it's going to take some time to apply. You might as well apply and see where it leads."

This past fall, Jamie organized a "Why Feminism" photo campaign for Princeton students, in which she asked students to write their reasons for being a feminist on whiteboards, then take a photo of themselves holding the whiteboard. (You can see the results at <https://princetonfeminists.wordpress.com/>.) "More than 350 people participated," Jamie said. "We got people talking about the word feminism and the pros and cons of it." As an outgrowth of that project, Jamie then founded (with support from the university's Women's Center) Princeton Students for Gender Equality, an undergraduate organization that facilitates feminist-focused discussions and events.

"I knew a ton of feminists [at Princeton], I heard all of these great feminist conversations happening, there were feminist speakers coming to campus—feminism was present, but it wasn't centralized," Jamie explained. "There was no weekly space for undergrads to discuss issues, there was no network. What Princeton Students for Gender Equality does is provides a space for discourse, and shares information about feminist events and opportunities of interest." The group has also hosted its own events, including a "Menstruation Celebration" designed to demystify and destigmatize the period.

St. Andrew's physics teacher John Burk invited Jamie back to campus to speak to students after learning of her involvement in gender equality work through the [Princeton Students for Gender Equality Facebook page](#). In her presentation at School Meeting, Jamie asked students to consider the ways in which gender "norms" might impact their own behavior, how they perceive and discuss others, and the School's culture as a whole. She also shared some simple actions students can take to support gender equity in their everyday lives. On Thursday evening, Jamie hosted a pizza dinner for interested students in the Dining Hall and led further discussion on ways both girls and boys can not only identify as a feminist but actually engage in feminist actions and work.

"Feminism was not at the top of my priority list when I was a student at St. Andrew's," Jamie recalled. "I do think that there's a lot of space where feminist conversations can be had at St. Andrew's. On sports teams and dorms, there's a really great built-in structure where these conversations could be placed. And a lot of the teachers I spoke with today mentioned that a lot of students at the School today are very vocal about feminist issues, which is awesome."

When asked to reflect further on her own experience at St. Andrew's, Jamie acknowledged that the School has had "a huge impact on my life. Was I prepared to handle the work at Princeton? Yes—way more than a lot of my peers, thanks to St. Andrew's. I transitioned into college having the writing skills to write really strong papers, and even present at conferences. But also socially and personal growth-wise, St. Andrew's set me up to have the confidence to speak up in class and to feel like what I had to say was valuable; to have the confidence to take risks; to have the confidence to be a leader and have experience and practice with that. St. Andrew's taught me to trust myself; taught me that I could take something on—to start a project and complete it; taught me how to approach adults, ask for help, talk to teachers; taught me how to live with others."

"It's taken up to about now to realize just what an impact it really has been," Jamie concluded.