

English grad perseveres in ‘unrelenting pursuit of story’

By Kristen LaRue-Sandler, ASU News
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Editor’s note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

You can take the girl out of the South — but not for long.

Mary Ryan Kirsch was born and raised in the Southern U.S. You might say that the particular ways of her home region — the unique flora and fauna, the lilting drawl of inhabitants’ speech, the smoky, savory food — are part of her DNA.

Currently a resident of Mobile, Alabama, Kirsch shares her love of Southern culture, especially Southern food, as an editorial assistant at a lifestyle magazine. Kirsch is also a former chef, a wife and a devoted dog mom.

All those descriptors, while seeming fairly conventional, are part of her unconventional student success story.

Kirsch is an Arizona State University student, and she’s graduating this summer with a [Master of Arts in English](#), which she’s earned online. The story of how she finished her degree is a meandering one, with many asides.

This particular chapter began in her senior year of college at the University of South Alabama in 2013, when she was diagnosed with epilepsy.

“I had to drop out of school,” she said. “I didn’t have seizures until I was an adult. My hometown doesn’t have a great public transit system and my (driver’s) license was suspended after I got my diagnosis. It just wasn’t possible for me to finish school at that time.”

Mourning her lost independence, Kirsch applied through [Service Dogs of Alabama](#) for a seizure alert and response animal. A year and a half later, she was placed with Earl, a loveable [yellow Labrador retriever](#).

Kirsch got married in 2014. The couple moved with Earl to Salt Lake City in 2016. It was a career move for her husband, but Kirsch felt like a fish out of water — or a [blue crab](#) out of its estuary.

“Having never previously lived outside the American South, we experienced quite a culture shock,” she said. “While we enjoyed living in a place with four actual seasons and reliable public transit, I missed much of what I left behind in Alabama.”

Terribly homesick, Kirsch tried to re-create her favorite Southern recipes. But after a slew of mishaps, she decided to take on cooking as an academic pursuit, enrolling in the Salt Lake City Community College’s culinary arts program. Her service dog, Earl, accompanied her on her daily commutes.

“Earl gave me extra confidence to ride public transit and move through the world alone. He sat just outside the kitchen during lab days so he could see me in case I needed him.”

Kirsch eventually found her groove and graduated from that program. Her first job was as the head chef at a University of Utah sorority house. Earl was, of course, by her side and enjoyed getting pats from the sorority girls.

Kirsch remembers thinking she had found her place.

Then came March 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Kirsch was furloughed from her job.

“The girls were sent home, and there was no reason to pay a chef to cook for an empty house,” she said.

Later that same year, Kirsch’s beloved Earl died from cancer.

Kirsch felt lost. With no one but her immediate family to cook for and her culinary inspiration thousands of miles away, Kirsch turned her attention to writing about cooking instead. Could she make a career of this? She decided to try.

She re-enrolled in school and graduated from Salt Lake Community College with a 4.0 GPA in 2020. She then transferred to the University of Utah in 2021, where she completed a bachelor’s degree in writing and rhetoric, and was named an outstanding alum. Not long after, Kirsch was paired with a new service dog named Shasta, this time through [Assistance Dogs of the West](#).

After six years in Utah, Kirsch, her husband, Caleb, and Shasta returned to Alabama to re-engage with Southern life. Once there, everything seemed to fall into place. She was home.

Note: Answers have been edited for length and or clarity.

Question: What was your “aha” moment, when you realized you wanted to study in your field?

Answer: There’s always been a part of me that has been drawn to storytelling. I had a penchant for making up stories to fill silence as a child, and I failed many times to write my own young adult fiction novels in middle school. As I aged, I fell in love with creative nonfiction stories through magazines like [Garden & Gun](#) and collections of essays from Southern authors. I eventually found an appetite for op-eds and investigative journalism with a romantic bent. Despite my enthusiasm for narrative, I didn’t see myself as a wordsmith. Reading was a hobby, and I hid any and all of my writing where I hoped no one would even I would find it. I pursued other scholastic interests and didn’t entertain the notion of working with words professionally. There wasn’t room for me in that

world.

My creative interests grew as I did. I attended culinary school in Utah despite not being able to cook a hot dog — a decision that is still beyond me. My first post-graduation position was as the head chef at a sorority house where I was able to experiment with ingredients and share a piece of myself with “my girls” through my cooking.

When I was furloughed from my job due to the coronavirus pandemic, I enrolled at the University of Utah and found that writing came more naturally to me than cooking initially did. It was there that I realized that I’d found my professional calling. It was my two-year-long “aha” moment when I finally realized I’d found what I was meant to be doing.

I returned to Alabama and was overwhelmed by a sense of connection to the things that had fueled my writing and cooking from a distance. I enrolled in Arizona State University’s Master of Arts in English program so that I could one day inspire young minds to fall in love with literature and composition. Around the same time, I came across an opening for an editorial assistant at [Mobile Bay Magazine](#). I applied on a whim, fairly certain I wouldn’t receive a response to my submission. To my delight, they extended a job offer to me just after I began my first semester of grad school. Balancing the two has been a challenge I’ve been thrilled to take on.

My education and my career allow me to play with words in different realms. As a writer, I tell stories about the people and places in my little world as I see it. I get to try to have readers fall in love with what I love. My academic work pushes me to expand my knowledge and pursue deeper meaning in text and research. The two complement each other, and I’m a better writer in each space because of how different they are.

Q: What’s something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you, that changed your perspective?

A: One of the biggest perspective shifts I had at ASU came from listening to the K–12 teachers enrolled in my classes. I knew that they worked tirelessly and enthusiastically, but I hadn’t realized just how much they pour into their students — and how much they have to navigate behind the scenes to do it well. They’re constantly supporting, adapting and sacrificing in ways that often go unseen. Their grit and compassion made me want to be a better student and a stronger advocate for the people and causes that deserve to be uplifted.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: When I was ready to apply to graduate programs, I was looking for something in the veins of English studies or writing that would give me the flexibility to balance my studies and my extracurricular commitments. There were options at nearby schools, but I knew from attending college during the pandemic that I could get a great education asynchronously, and I wanted to explore other opportunities. ASU’s master’s program in English was highly ranked across multiple platforms. I was convinced by my research that ASU was the right school for me, and my application to their graduate program was the only one I submitted. It’s been a wonderful chapter of my academic career.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: My internship coordinator, (Instructional Professional in English) [Ruby Macksoud](#), impressed upon me the value of curiosity and the importance of intuition during our first semester together. I enrolled at ASU just before I accepted a position as a writer and editorial assistant at a magazine. I was pursuing a master's degree because I'd felt called to a career in academia, but I also didn't anticipate having the opportunity to work in the glamorous world of print media. At first, I decided that I would earn my degree but would ultimately keep it in my back pocket while I continued working for my publisher. My job gave me an outlet for creativity on my terms and taught me practical skills that would serve me well professionally and personally. I'd dreamed of working for a magazine since I was in high school, and I didn't see myself wanting anything more.

Still, there was something gnawing at me around the time I started my internship semester with Ruby. I loved what I was doing, but I felt intimacy with my schoolwork that was lacking in my professional writing. There were constraints on my ability to conduct thorough research and have full autonomy over my job-related compositions that I didn't feel in my scholastic endeavors. Ruby encouraged me to pay attention to those persistent thoughts and consider what might be at the root of them. She supported my exploration of new ideas and potential career paths, engaging with me as I chased clarity on what life would look like following graduation. I also learned through her to embrace bold curiosity in my writing. When I felt stunted by my slate of work, she inspired me to investigate new ideas and projects that might make good use of my time and unspent creative energy. I've discovered through our conversations that I feel called to academia, which I may not have ever realized — or admitted to myself — if not for Ruby.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: Sometimes it's worth choosing curiosity over certainty. Follow your abstract interests and use the unknown to create space to grow.

Q: What was your favorite spot for power studying?

A: My favorite study spot is in my bed next to my dog. Unfortunately, it's also my favorite place to not study.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: Following graduation, I plan to continue writing for Mobile Bay Magazine while exploring opportunities in higher education and applying to PhD programs.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: If I had \$40 million to tackle one problem on our planet, I would invest it in accessible mental healthcare through organizations like [The Jed Foundation](#) and [StrongMinds](#). Access to mental health services should be a right. When we take care of our emotional wellbeing, we're better able to care for our neighbors and our communities.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Text image(s)



Graduating ASU student Mary Ryan Kirsch said that her service dog Shasta, a Wirehaired Pointing Griffon, "has been a wonderful helper as I've transitioned to a new career." Photo courtesy Mary Ryan Kirsch