



COLONIAL NC
BRANCH

The English-Speaking Union

P.O. Box 645
New Bern, NC 28563
colonialnc@esuus.org
www.esuus.org/colonialnc
facebook.com/ESUColonialNCBranch

Contact: Bob Husson, bob.husson@gmail.com

My ESU Shakespeare Experience

Hannah (Gracie) Tyson

I first learned about the English-Speaking Union's Shakespeare competition from an English teacher at my high school (JH Rose in Greenville), Mrs. Boccia. I was honored to be considered for the audition, especially since I was a freshman. With a lot of hard work and a little bit of luck (a couple of my classmates had to drop out of the competition), I moved on to regionals in New Bern. All of a sudden I blinked, and I won the branch level, and the following night I was buying plane tickets to the "greatest city in the world!"

Everything was happening so fast, and I had this uncertain feeling that perhaps I didn't deserve my dream coming true or this amazing experience. *Shouldn't it be somebody else in my shoes?* I mean, let's face it... one second I'm a typical 15-year-old talking about boys and singing at the top of my lungs to Taylor Swift while doing my math homework, and the next, I'm paying 48 dollars for a chocolate cake at the Plaza Hotel after getting back from an off-Broadway show that was fully complementary to me, thanks to the ESU. Those three nights in New York, I would lie down and contemplate the same questions, *Who even am I? How did I get here? What life am I going to live?* The night before the national competition, my mom was nagging me to study my lines, but I found it hard to concentrate. I couldn't silence the myriad of thoughts and questions whirling through my mind.

The next morning, I woke up, but it felt like I didn't even fall asleep. A bit flustered, we scurried off toward the Lincoln Center as I found myself trying to part the busy, early-morning New York streets like a red sea, pushing people and saying "Sorry, I have to be somewhere!" I ended up sitting in an assigned seat beside two people who I had not had time to interact with previously. *Why didn't I talk to these people? Why was I so consumed with this mid-teen-life crisis I was having?* Before I knew it, they were announcing all of these prestigious judges who have won all kinds of awards and nominated for even more. I vividly remember my leg starting to shake, as I felt so small and insignificant to these established people.

They were dashing through all the contestants and then I heard “Gracie Tyson, number 9!” All of my thoughts were eerily hushed, and it felt like I was weightlessly walking up to the podium. I begin with my monologue, the piece that always gave me the most trouble. I breeze through it, but still, my mind is blank. I get to the middle of my second piece, my sonnet. Then, everything, my breath, my heartbeat, my train of thought, all slams on breaks. I make eye contact with a blonde woman who’s won more Tonys than I could count, and then my mom, whose eyes soften when she realizes her daughter wasn’t as prepared as she swore she was. I ended up calling line. Not once, not twice, but three times in a row. It was the worst performance I’ve ever had, but I got the loudest applause. I turned around and my friend whom I had made the day prior, embraced me and just said “You got through it”, in a loving tone. *I had just “gotten through it?” I’m at Lincoln Center, the performing center of my dreams, and at Julliard, which I am almost certain everyone dreams will be their campus someday.*

Afterward, we do a small tour, take photos, and then we’re back to see who won. I hear a couple of names and I’m not surprised I wasn’t called up. Then as I see everyone rushing to greet their families with awards and certificates in hand, I walk over to my mom and Mr. Bob Husson, with my head hanging. My mom squeezes me and says, “I’m so proud of you.” I think I just would have rather her yelled at me. Then, Mr. Bob talked to me about how he was proud of me, too, and about how it wasn’t about winning because I was already a winner. I had already completed what I had originally wanted to accomplish. He *was* right. I *was* a winner. Maybe I was not sent to Oxford University, but I did not leave without an amazing experience and so much growth – not only as an actress, but also as a small teenage girl who’s scared to drive because she just got her permit. I also was not a winner in the way people say to show they pity you, but I genuinely was. I genuinely had won to go to New Bern, and then New York, but the second I doubted myself into thinking I did not belong in a room full of impressive people, was the same moment all of my hard work halted. I recognized that I was just as important as everyone else. I could see myself for *who I am*, even in light of *where I am going*.

Who am I?... I am both a fifteen-year-old girl who thinks Chemistry might be the end of me *and* a young, accomplished actress with plenty of Julliard performances waiting ahead of her. Fingers crossed; I’ll be the small blonde judge sitting in Lincoln Center waiting for my accomplishments to be announced before a group of hand-picked, ambitious teens. Then, I’ll turn around, look at the young girl whose legs are shaking while clamping on to her script, and think, *Wow, I’m excited to see what’s ahead of her... boy problems and Broadway, drama rehearsals and driving hours... all of it.* Through this experience, I realized that I have had the opportunity to live a dual existence and be a gregarious teenage girl on the surface, and already be a successful Shakespearean at heart. That is why I will be forever grateful to the English-Speaking Union, and especially Mr. Bob Husson, for the experience.