

Laura Darlak
B.A. Gerontology and Journalism
Ithaca College Class of 2010

March 1, 2021

Laura Darlak's life is one of agrarian romanticism, contemplation, and authenticity. Since graduating from Ithaca College in 2010 with a dual major in Gerontology and Journalism, Laura and her partner, Elyse, have travelled the country, worked on farms, lived in a motorhome, owned homes, started and departed graduate school and entrepreneurial endeavors, and adjusted course when they saw in others a vision of their future selves that was not aligned with their deepest desires.

Laura applied to Ithaca College to pursue Journalism at the Park School of Communications. By the end of her first semester, Laura struggled to find community among her Journalism peers and did not find the major's curriculum engaging. Laura considered leaving Ithaca College, until she was introduced to the Gerontology Institute. An acquaintance told Laura about Intro to Gerontology with Dr. Patricia Lynott. "GeroWHAT?" Laura asked. She took her first gerontology class and the rest is history. Brian Karafin, who taught religion and transpersonal psychology, also mentored Laura. His classes influenced Laura's spiritual practice and the way she approaches altered states of consciousness, including dementia.

Laura pursued these interests after graduation, though, upon reflection, she said, "I was clueless." She grew up in a rural town in Western New York and, like many of us, was strongly oriented by society toward achieving the next goal, the next academic or career milestone. "There was always an end goal..." she said. "Graduate high school, go to college. I finished college and thought, *that's it. Now what?* Life became a moving target."

Laura wanted to change policy. "I saw it as the most direct way to make an impact," she said. Upon graduating from IC, she took an internship in Washington D.C. with the National Academy of Social Insurance. From there, Laura went to Cleveland, Ohio and worked as a research assistant from 2011-2014 at the Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging. While there, she worked on data collection with Dr. David M. Bass, making phone calls to caregivers and veterans living with dementia, and disseminating research findings to older adults and service providers. While gathering this quantitative data, Laura realized that the people she was calling had a lot more to say than quantitative data could capture, and the implementation and monitoring of research-based programming took a perpetual flow of time and money and was based on findings from data that didn't necessarily honor the whole person. This was not an environment that best suited Laura's talents and passions.

So, Laura considered graduate school. She was drawn to a mentor at San Francisco State who was a gay counselor for older adults. Not ready for a move to California, Laura decided to stay in Ohio and study Adult Development and Aging at Cleveland State University. But this wasn't the right fit for Laura, either, so she and her partner pulled up stakes, sold their house, quit their jobs, and hit the road in a vintage Toyota motorhome.

From 2015-2019, Laura and her partner lived and worked on several farms throughout New York, Ohio, and Kentucky. They returned to Ithaca a time or two, where Laura led tours at Ithaca Brewery and started a business called Contemplative Caregiving. It was her hope that she could provide spiritual support to older adults through meditation and contemplation. As a one-woman show, the reality was that she ended up tending to other daily needs of her clients like shopping, cooking, cleaning, and toileting. Not only was the outcome different than intended, but Laura had no formal caregiving training and worried about providing the most appropriate care to meet the needs of her clients.

In 2017, Laura and her partner lived on a permaculture homestead in southern Kentucky. The homestead was established during the Womyn's Land movement of the 1970s, and preserves the legacy of Lesbians living in community on the land. While these years were filled with meaningful soul-searching adventures, they were also marked by hard work without a lot of pay. Laura and her partner were growing tired of being on the move.

Laura transitioned to the Tech industry in 2018 and completed a software engineering program online. She and her partner have since bought a home in Buffalo, NY where they enjoy being close to family and spending time with their niece and nephew. Laura's been working as a web developer ever since.

The work satisfaction for a web developer is dependent on the work environment. "Tech is so young and constantly evolving," Laura said. "Sometimes I felt like there was no adult in the room. Life experience and wisdom were lacking." While Laura didn't find these environments the most nurturing, they honed her skills as a leader in the workplace. "Life experience and wisdom shape the organizational structure," she said. "We need more self-aware leadership in tech." Her years spent in traveling provided life experience and perspective that the young tech world lacked. These years also developed more skills in critical thinking and lifelong learning, something Laura wished she developed earlier in her life. Laura is starting a new web developer job this week at a fully distributed company that better reflects her values through developing web solutions for mission driven organizations.

When asked to imagine where Laura sees herself 10 years from now, she imagines living in New Mexico or Idaho with her partner and having a small home on some land. By then, she will be certified in a healing modality, will be writing, and perhaps working as a tech consultant or working in a leadership position in a tech firm.

It is conviction that gave Laura and her partner the courage to explore possibilities and to adjust course when something in their life was not in alignment. If she could give any advice to an Aging Studies graduating senior, she'd say:

- "If it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be worth it."
- "Don't give up early. Sometimes you have to fight, have to push, have to be alone."
- "Remain open in the path of love. It'll work out. You'll find your people."
- "Everything happens for a reason."
- "Don't worry, you can always come back to Ithaca."