

## Chalik Law Community Engagement Scholarship

Lily Sweet King

1000 words

In 2018, I marched at the Florida capitol with Parkland students to support gun safety. Like thousands of other students in attendance—and the 17 who were not—I should have been worried about grades and prom. Instead, I experienced a pivotal moment: I could be a spectator and watch as others took a stand against injustice, or I could be a participant and fight for what I believe in.

The problem is, I'm painfully shy. While I'm good at identifying issues and creating solutions, I have a phobia about speaking up to share my ideas—especially in front of big groups. Rather than present to my class, I'll take the O. Rather than defend my place in line, I'll let people step right in front of me.

I was profoundly influenced by the Parkland students. They shared their stories respectfully but forcefully with lawmakers. They spoke up.

Their example confirmed an opinion that I've had for quite a while: that action in the form of civil discourse—genuinely communicating with each other—is the key to solving many, if not all of the world's problems.



My insight is derived from firsthand experience. In high school, I was appalled to learn of racism and anti-Semitism in area schools. It awakened a desire within me to DO something. I'm really good at planning and I love Southern hospitality, so I decided to create and host THE LONGEST TABLE to bring students from all area high schools

together for the first time in Tallahassee's history to combat intolerance and divisiveness by sharing dinner and conversation about community issues. Many of my peers were not part of diverse communities. I hoped the dinner would create a path for peace, spark change, and foster understanding.

I was terrified to speak up, but I felt strongly about the need for an event like this. I wish I could tell you that my conviction trumped my fear, but I threw up before presenting my plan to the mayor. Still, I pushed through the obstacles and did the hard things

The night of my event, THE LONGEST TABLE broke down geographic, economic, social, and racial barriers. It became a safe space for students to see each other as full human beings, more alike than different. We discovered a newfound respect for people with different experiences. Community issues came to life when we realized they affect the new friends sitting beside us—and when problems become personal, so do solutions.

I didn't speak at the event but I did talk with news crews who came to cover it for television. While I didn't conquer my fear, I learned to work around it.

I also learned that giving back to my community feels natural to me. Most people think of volunteering as a responsibility but committing so much time and energy to this cause was invigorating—and it helped me discover my passion: using my unique talents to build bridges and link people to important ideas and causes. I love bringing people together, a love rooted in my family's emphasis on service and my personal experience in creating and organizing community events. Our lives are richer when surrounded by people of all backgrounds and beliefs.

President Reagan said, “All great change in America begins at the dinner table.” I know exactly what he means. Few leaders command armies or countries; most exercise the greatest influence in the small moments of everyday life—often by something as simple as inviting people to “break bread.”

I’ve worked hard to be a community leader and sustain conversations started by the original LONGEST TABLE event. This past year (2019) I mentored the student chair for my county’s THE LONGEST



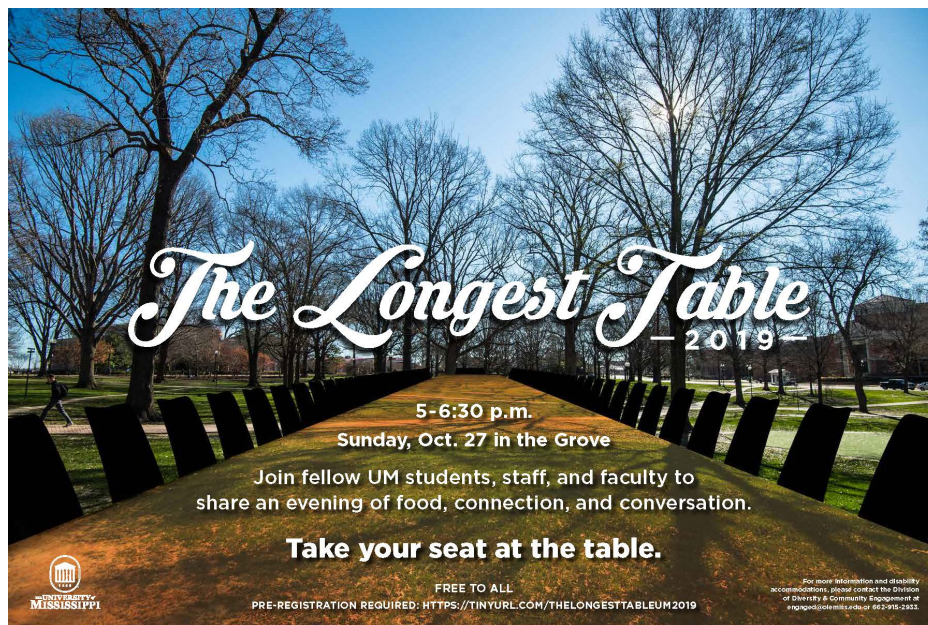
TABLE. We doubled attendance to 250 students and because of our success, our superintendent has scheduled it as an annual event in our county. I also created a LONGEST TABLE DIY guide to share at workshops nationwide with other students.

I am now a college sophomore at the University of Mississippi and wouldn’t you know, soon after I landed at school as a freshman, the KKK decided to march through campus. I really didn’t want to speak out, but despite my crippling phobia, that little inner voice inside me began to scream. And so.... I emailed our Chancellor about hosting the first LONGEST TABLE event on the Grove, the very place where segregationists

gathered to prevent James Meredith from entering school and what some historians call the last battle of the Civil War.

He said yes.

A few weeks ago, I hosted the inaugural LONGEST TABLE event at Ole Miss with 400 people in attendance! To see the tables lined up and down the Grove gave me chills. As a university, we came together to celebrate the amazing diversity of experience,



geography, religion, ethnicity, and intellect that is Ole Miss. The Chancellor called it “the university’s dinner table” and said it was the start of a new tradition at Ole Miss! It is this kind of genuine connection that has the greatest potential for change.

There are so many ways to change the world, but I have only my passion for hospitality and my desire to building and strengthen relationships by bringing people together to use for transformation. And I know I can be better by getting an education to equip me with strategic administrative skills, the know-how to help people better communicate, and the marketing savvy so that I can sell the idea of communication as a force for good. It will also allow me to perfect my event planning, sharpen my hospitality abilities, and spread the idea of the Longest Table, both literal and figurative, where people can come together to the table—the dinner table—as one.



At the Ole Miss LONGEST TABLE event, I didn't address the group; I was happy to defer to the Chancellor. Besides, I've learned that my voice isn't the only way to speak out. My actions said everything I needed to say, loud and clear.

(Click to watch [Chancellor Boyce discuss a new tradition at Ole Miss](#) / <https://youtu.be/pCRBQ9e9Oes> )

