

## History major rights the wrongs at local cemetery



When Richard “RJ” Warren ’07 walked into Dr. John Selby’s office last year to discuss his Summer Scholars project, Selby suggested he visit East Hill North Cemetery on Main Street in Salem. “Just walk through it. You’ll know what I mean,” said his history professor and advisor.

What Warren saw was knee-high grass and gravestones missing, knocked over or even smashed. But what he uncovered through last summer’s research was even worse — hundreds of African-Americans whose names were not recorded after they were buried in this historical cemetery that was

used from 1870 until the 1930s. For his project, Warren interviewed Salem families, culled records in a local funeral home and went through obituaries to compile a list of omitted names. The list grew from about 200 to more than 800, and Warren suspects there actually are as many as 1,100 or 1,200 people buried there, some literally on top of each other. At the end of the summer, the city of Salem and the Citizens League of Salem installed a plaque on a new stone wall at the cemetery listing all of the names, and Warren’s work helped start a healing process for old wounds.

“I was here three years and didn’t even know that cemetery existed,” Warren says. “But in the end, the seriousness of this whole project actually had me dealing with people’s lives.”

Selby praises Warren for “breaking new ground” with his research. “This is the first level of history,” Selby says. “It was absolutely critical that RJ did this, and it was just hard work. What’s wonderful about this is that it now gives these people a place — they would have been lost to history.”

Warren, a history major from Covington, Virginia, says the experience changed him as well. During the project, a woman called him, crying because she had just seen a segment on the local news station about Warren’s work.

“She said she never knew anything about her home or her ancestors,” Warren says. “It was then that I saw this project would help more than just me. I did it, at first, for my academic career, but this has touched way more people than myself.”

It also changed Warren’s direction. He has been a noted leader on the Roanoke College campus almost from his start. He had been named the “outstanding new freshman leader” by the Student Life Council and Student Government Association, was his junior class president and later the external vice president of the fraternity Pi Kappa Alpha and its resident advisor. He’s also become involved in six theater productions, was made a member of the Omicron Delta Kappa national leadership society and the Alpha Psi Omega national theater honor society and in April received the history department’s Roy H. Ritter Southern History Prize for outstanding work in studying the history of the South. But now Warren wants to put his leadership skills and Summer Scholars experience to use in the field of law.

“I first wanted to go to grad school for history, but after this project and dealing with the City of Salem, its city manager, the mayor and members of the city council, I got inspired to be more involved with the community,” he says. Warren is moving to Richmond, Virginia, after graduation and plans to work for a year or two as a legal aide for state courts or the justice department. He then plans to attend a law school and prepare for a career with the courts — preferably in prosecution. He also says at some point he might want to get involved in state politics.

“Law is an extremely powerful ally,” Warren says. “It can be a great tool in working with the city and its citizens.”

Selby credits Warren’s Summer Scholars project not only with helping the community and the families whose ancestors had been forgotten but also with bringing home to Roanoke College students an important lesson.

“In terms of public policy, it wasn’t history alone that got the plaques up,” Selby says. “That’s where (Warren) sees this at a very practical, operational level — that law and politics are crucial in getting the task done.”

But ultimately, it was a hard-working student who made it all possible.



## Bulgarian explores the world from Roanoke

Ivanka Barzashka ’08, who was a little girl in Bulgaria when her country changed from a communist nation to a democracy, couldn’t resist the pull of politics from an early age. Even her dolls had political parties, and Barzashka’s fascination for politics has only grown stronger. Now, she’s a physics major with minors in math and foreign politics and a special interest in philosophy.

“Physics and math give an explanation of the laws of nature ... whereas philosophy gives you the laws of logic and of the mind. Knowing that, you know how the world works, and that is the primary foundation for everything else,” she says. Barzashka plans to incorporate them all in a career working with international law or security policy.

To help prepare, she is president of the Rotaract Club, a junior version of the Rotary Club, which recently put “service above self” by helping the Virginia Tech Rotaract Club with a vigil after the university’s April 16 tragedy. Barzashka also is involved in the freshman mentoring program and the International Club, for which her sister, **Nina Barzashka ’03**, was one of its founding members. (Nina is now pursuing a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Virginia.) Ivanka also has been president of the College’s Model United Nations Club, attending conferences in Boston and New York, and this summer will be doing campus research in astrophysics.

She also squeezes in a part-time job at the College’s public relations office and says Roanoke College initially attracted her with the strength of its physics major. But now, she says even the extracurricular activities are turning out as a real plus. “They help you define yourself in ways that classes just can’t,” she says. “Through them, you can get real hands-on experience.”