Alumni Spotlight: Justin Hall

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Justin Hall

Utah State University presents Justin Hall, alumnus of USU’s history and philosophy departments. Hailing from Alaska, Justin first came to Utah State to study psychology, but quickly turned to philosophy, classics and then history. “It didn’t take me long as a psychology major to distinguish between the brain and the mind,” he said. “I was just personally more interested in the mind.”

Justin first decided to take Latin as an intro to learning the modern Romance languages, but stopped before he ever got there, saying, “I just got so enveloped in classics.” After graduating with his B.A. in philosophy, Justin decided to join the Master’s program in history and “continue the trajectory” of his study in ancient philosophy and classics. He noted that, “the faculty of the history department specifically stood out and was very welcoming.”

Justin received his Master’s degree in history from Utah State and subsequently returned to school for a Master’s in museum studies, seeking for “a framework” through which he could apply his degrees. Of his decision to pursue museum work, he said, “Once I found out a little bit more about the kind of work that goes on in museums and how history and philosophy could translate into this kind of work, it has been great.”

Justin is currently a curator for the Department of Defense at Hill Aerospace Museum in Riverdale, Utah. Outside from his career working with historical artifacts, Justin enjoys the outdoors, hockey, and football.

Read our edited interview below.

What year did you graduate from Utah State University, and what was your field of interest?

I finished my BA in philosophy and classics in 2006 and my MA in ancient history 2009.

What was your favorite part of being a student at Utah State University?

The faculty and living in Logan. Both of those were really great. The faculty of the history department specifically, as I came into contact with them through classics, really stood out and was very welcoming. The community of history majors there, I thought, was really welcoming. By the end of it, I knew more people in the history department than I knew in the philosophy department that I was actually graduating in. So that was really appealing and fun.

Did you have a least favorite part?

I’m sure I did. Different faculty have different teaching styles that can make individual classes more or less challenging than they need to be. So that could get frustrating sometimes. Just as part of the university experience you have to sort of re-learn who you are working with every semester. You get this new group of faculty and after you have been there for a while you build a certain rapport with certain faculty and kind of know what you’re getting into. But there’s always that questioning of “What’s this person about?”

How has your career progressed since your time as a student?

So I was really lucky. After I finished my master’s in history at Utah State I started a second Master’s in museum studies. I had started looking at things to do with a Master’s degree in history that were outside of academia and that’s what sort of led me to the degree in Museum studies. I had been looking at library science, archives, and all these different ways of how you organize and make accessible information. The museum field is just incidentally more tangible pieces of history so that really interested me and I went that direction. As I started working on my Master’s degree in museum studies I had an opportunity to start working as a museum tech for the National Park Service in Southern Utah and through their student program. It turned into a full-time permanent job eventually as I finished my second Master’s. So I stuck
with them for about six years before taking the job I have now as a curator for the Department of Defense.

Has your career progressed the way you thought it would?

No. I didn’t really expect to lean towards history so heavily as I started my academic experience. But then I didn’t really think of museum work as a possibility until I was already in grad-school and started looking at what other things there are to do with a history degree and what kind of things you can couple that with to make it a hard skill. I think museum studies really provided that framework to apply the history degree in. Once I found out a little bit more about the kind of work that goes on in museums and how that history and philosophy could translate into this kind of work it has been great.

How do you feel that your history, classics and philosophy training at Utah State University has helped you in your career? Are there any specific skills that have been useful to you?

I think history and philosophy both really teach you to look at a problem or an account of something objectively and try to tell a story from a neutral standpoint. Those kind of things are really important in exhibit development in museums when you have the research skills to look into what should be said for a story line in an exhibit, but also in how you tell that story and being able to make it accessible to a wide range of people still kind of neutral, so that you’re not biasing people to certain perspectives and that kind of stuff.

If you had one piece of career advice to a student following in your footsteps, what would that be?

Start looking at volunteer and internship opportunities as early as you can. Don’t be married to one path, even within the museum field. There’s a lot of tracks between exhibit development or education or curation or all these different things you can do with the museum field. Take what you can get early on and then parlay that into where you want to be down the road. Just getting that early experience in addition to the academics is really important.

If interested individuals want to follow you on social media or find you on the web, what is a good website or twitter handle for you?

You can find Justin Hall at Facebook.com, or email him at justin.hall.37@us.af.mil