

Two students spend all day in Lenoir: “an insurmountable mountain”



UNC juniors Lainey Albright and Alex Gast kissing the ground in celebration of completing the “all day in Lenoir Dining Hall” challenge.

By Colin Franco

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Two UNC students spent their entire day at Lenoir Dining Hall, from open to close, testing the limits of their mental resilience and fortitude.

Riding the escalator up to Top of Lenoir, junior Alex Gast recounts, “It reminded me a lot of religion. I realized that there was something much larger than myself out there.”

In life, every man must do something greater than himself.

For some it’s in sport: making a clutch play to secure a championship for their team. For others, it’s art: devoting all of their entire soul to a beautiful masterpiece. And for a more select few, it’s science: taking a step on the moon or creating a life-saving vaccine. Junior Lainey Albright and her roommate, Gast, believe they’ve recently reached this pinnacle, accomplishing their lifetime’s achievement.

“It’s absurd,” chirped classmate Olivia Jones on the matter.

“It’s a waste of time,” scoffed roommate Sarah Edmonds.

Even still, these self-proclaimed heroes persisted and triumphed.

On Wednesday, September 18th, Albright and Gast undertook a task they previously thought impossible, staying in Lenoir Dining Hall from the moment it opened at 7 a.m. until it closed at 8:30 p.m.—a total of 13.5 hours.

For such a demanding test, the two devised their own strategies. Gast adopted a formless tactic, in a sense, supposing, “I guess a lack of strategy was my strategy. I shouldn’t think too critically about what I’m doing at any point in time.” He also joked, “When I want to eat something, I’ll go eat something, like a dog grazing throughout the day.”

Albright’s plan was to pace herself, “Alex and I are going to yap each others’ ear off, but we can’t do that the whole 12 hours. We’re gonna take breaks for studying and writing essays, too.”

The journey began first for her, waking up early at 5:40 a.m. “Before such a great trial, one must mentally prepare themselves,” she said.

By 6:20, she was meditated and suited up in her shirt for the day, which read in Sharpie, “I spent thirteen and a half hours at lenoir dining hall and all I got was this lousy t-shirt!!!!!!” Gast wore a shirt that said the same, and the two set out on the 30-minute walk to the dining hall—their final breaths of fresh air before facing their new forever.

Early in the challenge, Gast reminded himself of his inspiration dating back to when he was 5 years old, “My mom sat me down and said, ‘Alex, I think there’s no limit to what you can accomplish.’”

Ironically, though, this positive reinforcement did not have the intended effect on the young boy’s mind, with Gast claiming it “watered a seed of doubt” within him: “How can I be unstoppable if I can’t do things like this?”

Albright's motivations were more light and abstract. "I wanted to do something to look like a social deviant. What could we do that isn't illegal, but would make people think about us as freaks?" she wondered.

Through such positive thinking, she was able to drown out some of Gast's uncertainties, who remarked, "Lainey is my muse, my inspiration, the light at the end of every tunnel. I could not have done this without her."

Despite the optimism, there were still many battles to be fought at the Top of Lenoir on that fateful day.

The two broadcasted their adventure on their Instagram page, [@alex.lainey.lenoirday](#), where they amassed 239 followers through 20 posts and consistent story updates. With the goal of being featured on the account, many students visited them. For Albright, three and a half hours into the challenge, these visitors were her first pitfall.

She recalled, "There were a ton of people that were interacting with us and I had no clue who they were. I think when word got out, it was like people knew who they were approaching, but we still didn't know them."

As Jones puts it, "I think grappling with the immense cultural sway they were able to amass in one short day was really tough for the two of them."

Albright mirrored this. "Honestly I kind of started tweaking. The feeling that I would have to sit down for, like, 10 more hours and constantly socialize and not ever be off was a lot to deal with," she stressed. However, she also found her primary coping method amidst this issue: going to the bathroom.

"When I took bathroom breaks, I'd gain my sense of self again. Before, it felt like I was the center of the universe in a computer somewhere, and everyone else was like a little character. But then I'd go to the bathroom, see myself and my stupid shirt in the mirror, and be like, 'Whoa, wait. I'm just a small little ant on this campus doing something dumb right now,'" Albright explained.

The two of them, according to Gast, faced their highest hurdle at around 3 p.m.— “the light lunch stretch,” as he calls it, where he “hit rock bottom.”

Here, what rescued them from their hopeless boredom were their friends. Despite previously facing issues with visitors, they ended up being just what Albright and Gast needed to leap over the hurdle and get their second wind.

“Having people who stayed for a long time made it feel like a hangout. We weren’t just, like, eating together. It was more of a genuine talk,” Albright said.

Gast furthered her sentiment, also mentioning how friends would wave to them from outside the building’s windows, “To me, it was a vote of confidence in our mission, without which I might have crumbled. It also reminded me that there is a real world out there, and one that I would get to return to soon.”

Jones, who joined the pair for dinner, marveled, “Honestly it felt a bit like performance art and it was great to be able to witness and take part in it.”

Eventually, with the support of people like Jones, the pair of Albright and Gast made it through the final stretch.

Facing the conclusion of their venture, the two shared a bittersweet moment of reflection. “In the last 15 minutes, I was really overcome with clarity and gratitude, and I felt I was being given a second chance to re-enter my life and be grateful for all things, the breeze on my face, the dew between my toes, things of that sort,” Gast shared.

Through their fatigue, the two packed up their belongings and went down the escalator, bringing a close to the day.

As Albright wrapped up her thoughts about the end of the journey, she remarked “The escalator was kind of sad. We were finishing up our little bit, which had brought me joy, for good. Then, as soon as we opened those doors, I was like, ‘Okay, I’m ready to go home.’”

And so they went.

Reveling in his achievement and personal growth, Gast mused, "During the challenge, I experienced ego death. Now, I'm experiencing ego birth; where, as the Phoenix is reborn from the ashes, I am re-entering the world more powerful than I could have ever possibly imagined," before concluding, "I feel once one climbs an insurmountable mountain. The rest of the world is tiny hills."

He added to this, chortling to himself, "I feel like a superhero... and this was my Lenoir-igin story."

Albright hopes to inspire people with this challenge, saying, "People at Chapel Hill are too serious, and I think everyone should do something stupid and let everyone know about it. They should commit to a bit more. That's a little life skill to have fun."