

# Students share how UMHB helped them find faith

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Not every student who ends up at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor comes as a believer in Christ. There are students from both ends of the belief spectrum—and everywhere in between.

Some never have set foot in a church and have no idea how to look up a Bible verse until they walk into their first Old Testament class. Others seem so mature in their walk with Jesus that it's hard to believe they're only in their teens.

Some students, like 2023 alumnus Isaiah Johnson, arrive at UMHB with more questions than answers about their futures and faith but leave changed, healed and saved.

One Sunday morning, when he was 7 or 8 years old, Isaiah's mom took him to church and told him to give his life to Christ and get baptized. The preacher dipped the youngster under the baptismal water, the congregation cheered and the family went home to celebrate.

Years later, Johnson found himself celebrating on the football field, where the defensive tackle helped UMHB bring home the 2018 NCAA DIII National Championship title. He loved every second of playing football there and earning his massive NCAA Championship ring, but his time at UMHB gained him something he treasures far more.

On Sept. 30, 2022, he became much more than a warrior on the football field. He became a warrior for Christ.

Johnson realized he had been living a lie since his baptism as a child. He

knew he simply had “gone through the motions” that day.

“I was so lost,” Johnson said, remembering the months leading up to that fateful day he committed his life to Christ.

He recalled his dilemma after graduating with his associate’s degree from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M University, where he played defensive tackle for two years.

Johnson wanted to continue his football career but decided going into the Air Force was a better decision financially. His brother-in-law laughed at the thought and said: “Isaiah, you’re not going to the Air Force. You’re going to go play football.”

He was torn and remembers getting on his knees and praying long hours that night for God to help him. God answered his prayer the next day when UMHB Coach Steven Thrash, a Northeastern alumnus, called Isaiah and told him if he came to Belton, he would win a national championship.

Taking a leap of faith, Johnson scraped together money for a plane ticket to Texas and hasn’t looked back since.

“From that point on, my journey restarted with Christ,” he said, but it took a lot of long nights before he figured this out. “I was so lost. I would find myself waking up in the middle of the night crying.”

As a starting defensive tackle for UMHB, Johnson became part of the team that brought home the 2018 national championship trophy.

One afternoon during his senior year at UMHB, strolling through campus, he passed 1974 alumnus Bobby Johnson, and the pair struck up a conversation.

“He sat me down and said: “Isaiah, you’ve done so much for UMHB. Now, let’s do something for you. What’s your relationship with Christ?””

He followed up with a question: "Isaiah, if you were to die today, where would you go?"

"Then, he asked me if I'd like to give my life to Christ to ensure I'd go to heaven. He told me to go home, pray on it and talk to my family."

Excited to share the conversation, Isaiah told his girlfriend, MaryAlice Hernandez, catering manager for Sodexo at UMHB.

On Sept. 30, 2022, Bobby Johnson invited Isaiah to talk with him and UMHB President Randy O'Rear and Steve Theodore, chief operating officer and senior vice president for administration. The trio led the senior student-athlete to accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

"It changed me. It changed me to this day," he said. "I am a warrior for Christ."

A couple of weeks later, MaryAlice also gave her life to Christ. Bobby Johnson married the couple on May 27, 2023, and then baptized both on Nov. 12, 2023. Johnson still disciples Isaiah weekly, and the young family attends church every Sunday with their baby boy, Isaias Johnson.



Shelbie Meyer (UMHB Photo)

## **The right reasons**

When Shelbie Meyer was in the fifth or sixth grade, she watched several of her family members making the decision to get baptized, and she thought she needed to be baptized as well.

“I didn’t want to be the only one left out,” she said. So, she was baptized along with them. Meyer said she did all the “churchy” things she thought Christians were supposed to do, and when she got to college, one of the first things she did was set out to find a church.

However, from the first day she stepped onto campus, she noticed the atmosphere and people at UMHB were different.

“The world has a general, generic view of the way they think Christians should act, which I was used to, but the people at UMHB were different,” she said.

She loved going to chapel services and got involved in serving at her new church. After just a few months, she realized something had changed in her. She realized she hadn’t been saved that day at her church back home.

Meyer wanted to ask Jesus into her life and profess her love for him. But this time, she was sure she was doing it for the right reasons.

“I hit that point where I actually knew why I’m doing this,” said Meyer, who is now a junior in exercise and sport science. “And now my life is definitely better.”

## **Never alone again**

Emily Crocker never again has to experience the feeling of being alone. Since she found Christ during her freshman year at UMHB, she now sees God in everything.

“He’s not just in the Bible. He’s everywhere. He’s in the people I’m around, and I feel his presence constantly,” she said.

There was a time when she didn’t.

“I was in such a dark place, and I just felt so alone,” Crocker said. “I didn’t really have very many friends, and the ones I did have drove me to get caught up in the drama. And that pushed me into being really anxious and depressed.

“I felt so alone. And when things would happen, I blamed God, like it was his fault.”



Emily Crocker (UMHB Photo)

Crocker believed there was a God, but she didn't grow up going to church regularly and didn't know much about him. She's thankful all of that changed after coming to UMHB, where she found God everywhere—in church, her classes and an on-campus revival.

She looks back now and can see how God laid out a plan for her to come to UMHB. It all started on the many trips she took with her parents from Cedar Park to Waco to visit her grandparents—passing the green highway sign on I-35 for the turnoff to the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

One afternoon during her senior year, Emily's mom, who had gone to Baylor University, announced they were going to stop for a visit to check out UMHB. Emily protested.

She knew nothing about this "little school in Belton" and wasn't interested in stopping. But her mom insisted, and the second they arrived on campus, Emily liked what she saw.

“This is my school,” she announced. “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

When she arrived, she and her roommates went “church hopping,” and she soon landed at Vista Community Church, which she attended every Sunday.

She also fell in love with her Old Testament classes.

“All the stories were so interesting, and I wanted to learn more,” she realized. She and her roommates often met with UMHB Chaplain Jason Palmer to bombard him with their questions about Scripture and get suggestions on reading passages.

“It was overwhelming. I kept thinking: ‘Wow, this is amazing! Where has this been my entire life?’” she said. “It really opened my eyes to see the world completely differently.”

“After attending church regularly during her first semester and then experiencing UMHB Revival her second semester, she knew there was no going back.

“I thought it was so amazing. There was no way I could go back to how I was before. This is going to be how I’m living now. I have to have this relationship. It was just eye-opening to realize I’m not alone.”

Her moment of conviction came one morning while sitting in church when she finally realized everyone goes through hardships, but she didn’t have to be alone during hers. With tears pouring down her face, she knew she was “finally not alone.”

“I can grow from these hard times and be strong from this with the help of Christ,” she remembers thinking.

On a Sunday soon after, Palmer baptized Crocker during a morning service at her church.

She realized admitting she needed Christ in her life wasn't something to be ashamed of and wanted to share her love for him with everyone.

Crocker, now a junior exercise and sport science major, is thankful her mom convinced her to detour off I-35 to check out the campus where she now has good friends and enjoys the activities and traditions, especially Easter Pageant which brings up overwhelming feelings about how she felt about God.

"I can never be in the Easter Pageant. ... I've already been there where the crowd is yelling and cursing at Jesus and saying all these terrible things to him while he is on the cross. I've already said all of those things, and I can never go back and do that again."