

Around the Bend



Text by Shayna Walia

As winter's chill settles in, a good daily routine becomes essential for staying energised. From cozy indoor hobbies to outdoor adventures in brilliant snowscapes, winter offers a unique opportunity to explore new ways of passing the time. Others have found solace in indoor pursuits including baking, reading, knitting and even starting new creative projects.

But it is not just about staying busy, it is about keeping spirits high as we navigate through the darker months. In this edition, we dive into the activities that have kept our members engaged through the long nights and fleeting days. Entering into this new year, we take a peek into Wildon's exciting plans and hopeful moments as he talks about what he is looking forward to the rest of this winter season.

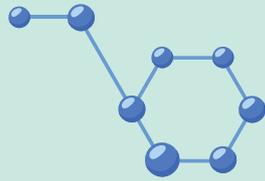
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Wildon at a gathering with friends!



St. Edmund's College Boat Club event



Text and photos by Wildon Tan

The opening of the Union of European Football Associations Champions League anthem plays. It is 5.30 in the morning. What started out as a joke to wake up to the “anthem of champions” as my alarm tone has turned to regret as I am starting to dislike the tune. I get out of bed, brush my teeth, have some breakfast, then get on my bicycle to ride to the boathouse. Like many others before me, I have been duped into believing that joining the college rowing team is quintessential to the Cambridge experience. This routine is definitely not normal – some may classify it as madness – just like the career path I am taking right now.

A different route

Most medical students would complete five years of medical school to become a junior doctor. I have however decided to pause my medical studies after having completed my third year, to pursue a master’s programme in a different university. The three-hour drive from Bristol to Cambridge was not a distant memory, and upon settling into the new student accommodation that my college had allocated me, there was a sense of déjà vu. It all seemed familiar, just like when I moved into my first-year student accommodation. Here was a new environment, with new friends to make and a new challenge to take on. This year, instead of stethoscopes, my weapon of choice was the micropipette, the bread and butter of cell biology. There was a whole new learning curve to take on.

The first time I got to the laboratory, I had a meeting with my supervisor, who explained what my project was about. I then spent the week shadowing the post-doctorate student who was conducting experiments with the same technique I needed for my project. It looked easy, or so I thought. In the following weeks, I struggled with pipetting technique, and my ability to keep a steady hand was tested. I asked myself a myriad of questions cell biologists would be familiar with: “Is this micropipette calibrated properly?”, “Did I already add reagent to this particular well?”

I was told that a good cell biologist should possess the ability to have checks and good technique in place to ensure a smooth workflow – both of which I felt were areas I was lacking in. Once, I had forgotten to dilute my permeabilisation buffer, which rendered the cells I had cultured for a week unusable. However, even as I was struggling, I started to get the hang of things after getting tips from more experienced students and felt a lot more confident with what worked and what did not!

Beyond the work

Outside of the laboratory, I experienced the Cambridge collegiate life, which I felt was a funny one. Over the term, I found that each college differed in its tradition, resources and atmosphere. I was part of the St. Edmund’s College, one of the smaller mature colleges in Cambridge. Though we may be small, the college makes up for it with its welcoming and friendly people. Joining the boat club, I made friends from across the globe. It was especially ironic that we only had one local in the boat, with the rest of us from all around the world! Despite being a small team (with arguably not as many resources as the bigger colleges), we managed to put up a fight against the better-funded boat clubs, which made the weeks of getting up early in the morning all worth it!

Looking back, I applied for this programme because I wanted to understand the science behind medicine, as well as the research that is put in place to determine the direction of the clinical guidelines we use. Although I have only been here for a short while, I can say truly that I have the utmost respect for academics who dedicate their career to understanding the science behind medicine. I now appreciate that behind each scientific breakthrough, there are countless demoralising failures, but the grit and tenacity these clinicians demonstrated has inspired me to do the same.

All in all, the Cambridge experience has truly been magical, from punting down the River Cam to having formal dinners

with friends. What I am most excited for next is the Festival of Nine Lessons, which King’s College holds every year. I am sure that this experience, being broadcast live by the British Broadcasting Corporation on Christmas Eve, would be one to behold. As we enter the new year, I am thankful to my supervisor and the friends who stuck by me listening to my endless complaints about my experimental failures. I hope that the break will serve as a chance for me to recharge as I continue tackling the research project I have been given, and maybe even make a scientific breakthrough! ♦

Wildon is a University of Bristol medic currently intercalating for a Master of Philosophy in Medical Sciences at the University of Cambridge.

