

Finding Forever at Richard Bland College

SOUTH PRINCE GEORGE, VA, UNITED STATES, February 20, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A Butterfinger candy bar led to forever for Jacob Howe ('17) and Cecilia Gonzales ('17).

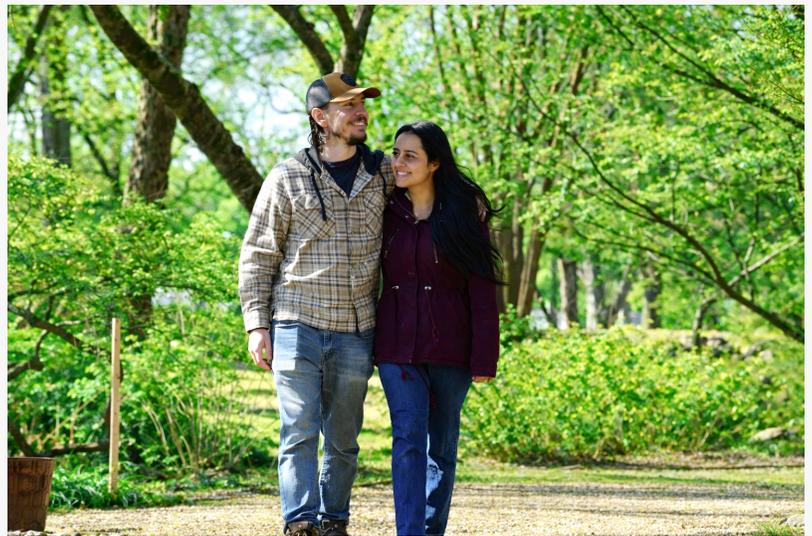
On a school field trip, Jacob bought the candy bar from a vending machine and decided to give Cecilia a piece of it, which naturally sparked conversation. But after the field trip through the rest of that third-grade year, the two didn't interact again until more than 18 years later as students at [Richard Bland College](#) (RBC).

By a stroke of fate, Jacob and Cecilia were bunkmates on the inaugural RBC Alternative Spring Break trip at Hobcaw Barony in South Carolina. The Alternative Spring Break was founded by Dr. Michael Rogers—the Assistant Director of Student Activities and Leadership at the time—in 2017. The experience invites students to locations across the country to experience the sciences out of the classroom. The learners often engage in service work on these trips as well.

The COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately idled the program for several years, until Dr. Miller revived it in 2023. Back in 2017, both Dr. Miller and Dr. Birdsong, who had a great rapport with Jacob and Cecilia respectively, nudged them to go on the spring break trip. The two were thrilled about changing course from their routine spring break vacations and experiencing something new.



Jacob Howe ('17) and Cecilia Gonzales ('17) first met in the third grade and once again as students at Richard Bland College.



Jacob and Cecilia sparked their relationship at the inaugural RBC Alternative Spring Break.

Jacob and Cecilia were both students at Richard Bland College. They met again as students at RBC and eventually got married. They are now a happily married couple.

“At first, it seemed like a way to network with my professors,” Howe admitted. “But it turned into more than that—it was really something special.” On the first night at Hobcaw Barony, Jacob and Cecilia did introductions—and there seemed to be an air of familiarity.

“We broke the ice and she asked if I gave her a Butterfinger back in elementary school,” Howe said with a smirk. “We also had a lot of similarities and the same aspirations of what we wanted out of life.”

During the trip, Jacob, Cecilia and a dozen of their classmates created and rebuilt trails surrounding the historic Hampton Plantation. Additionally, they learned about the local history and ecology. Finally, Clemson University and the University of South Carolina welcomed the students and offered guided tours of their marine and forestry labs.

“This is an opportunity for these students to try new things, to gain new life lessons and it has the potential to lead to lifelong relationships,” Dr. Miller said.

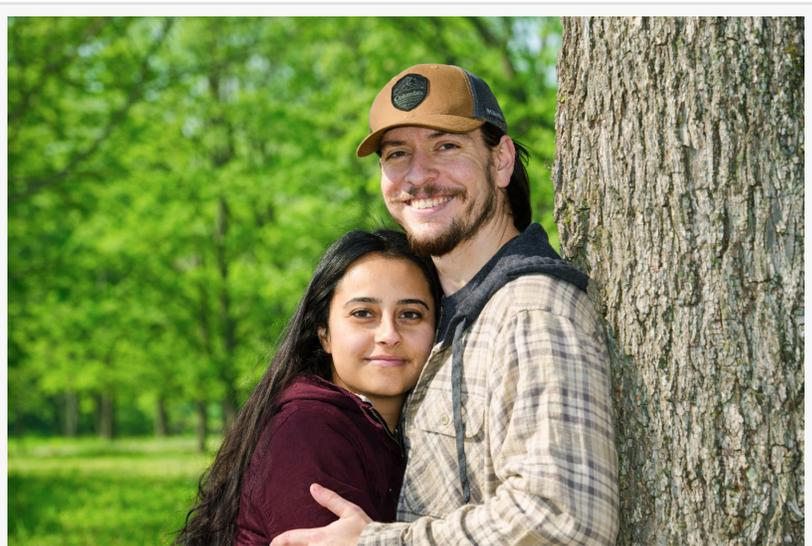
Over the course of the trip, Jacob and Cecilia learned more about one another and the sparks began to fly.

“It was like a butterfly effect situation,” Howe said. “Giving her that Butterfinger in third grade ended up being an icebreaker when we met again in college.

“There’s a few decisions you make in life that completely changes it.”

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Both Dr. Miller and Dr. Birdsong took Jacob and Cecilia under their wings as they contemplated their desired fields of study. Dr. Miller who described Jacob as a “phenomenal student,” exposed him to local habitats and wildlife because of his interest in environmental science. Cecilia, a first-generation student, was inspired to pursue psychology because of Dr. Birdsong’s love of the



Jacob and Cecilia are now happily married, raising two young daughters and thriving in their dream careers.



Cecilia and Jacob looking skyward during the 2017 RBC Alternative Spring Break at Hobcaw Barony in South Carolina.

profession.

“Cecilia was the kind of student every professor hopes for, curious, focused and deeply compassionate,” Dr. Birdsong said. “Watching her confidence grow—something I deeply understood as a first-generation college student myself—was incredibly rewarding.

“Our relationship didn’t end in the classroom—it evolved into mentorship that has lasted beyond her time at RBC. Cecilia’s decision to major in psychology and eventually nursing with such purpose in serving others has been one of the greatest joys of my career.”

By graduation, thanks to Dr. Birdsong, Dr. Miller and a host of other professors, Jacob and Cecilia were fully equipped to transfer to their next destination—VCU (Virginia Commonwealth University). As anticipated, Jacob and Cecilia received their degrees in environmental science and psychology, respectively. A few years later, Cecilia garnered an accelerated bachelor’s degree in nursing.

The duo made the most of their VCU experience, but they longed for RBC’s cordial learning environment.

“Honestly, we wish Richard Bland was a four-year college,” Gonzales said. “We really liked the teaching styles and the small classroom sizes.”

Presently, Cecilia works as a registered nurse in the St. Francis Hospital emergency department. Jacob works as a laboratory analyst at the Henrico County Water Reclamation Facility. The couple tied the knot in December 2021 and currently live in Chesterfield with their two daughters.

To this day, the couple credits RBC for positively impacting their lives in myriads of ways.

“The decision to go on the spring break trip really changed the trajectory of our lives,” Gonzales said.

“Everyone is not going to have our story,” Howe added. “But you must go out of your comfort zone to experience a major change in your life.”

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