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Aumni Spotlight

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As a Jefferson student, Don Patterson, class of 1990, was an active participant in drama and a member of the gymnastics team. Fast forward 15 years, and you can find Professor Patterson teaching at the University of California at Irvine.

He now finds his passion in informatics, but in high school Patterson appreciated the humanities and found those classes just as enjoyable as the science classes that he was taking.

As an active participant in the drama department at Jefferson, Patterson wasn't a star actor but instead found his calling in small roles and behind the scenes jobs.

"[Patterson] was very helpful in lots of ways around the productions," said then drama sponsor Roger Green. "He made the most of small roles and was a team player."

To help him pay his way through his undergraduate education at Cornell, where he got his Bachelor of Science and Masters in Electrical Engineering, Patterson entered the ROTC program and after completing college did five years in the U.S. Navy.

"I did it because I think that [in high school] I really identified with a lot of the values of the military- loyalty, duty, giving back to the country that has given so much to me, " said Patterson.

Patterson was commissioned as an ensign in 1995 and traveled all over the world as a surface warship officer. He spent the majority of his time in Sardinia, Italy and Japan and then resigned his commission as a lieutenant in 1999. He was able to travel around the world in ships and had the opportunity to explore the Mediterranean as well as the Pacific Rim.

"I felt kind of like if I was going to be in the Navy, I might as well go and live in all these incredible places. I had the American things on base, but I could also go see all of the culture," he said. "I didn't join the Navy because I wanted to live in Northern Virginia the whole time."

While in the military, Patterson found himself using computers frequently, but also realized that wasn't all he wanted to do. He remembers using the technology and becoming frustrated with it because it was sometimes inadequate.

"I really loved learning [about computers and computer science] and teaching it. I really loved pushing the limits of computers. I remember being in the South China Sea and realized that becoming a professor was a combination of all the things that I wanted to do," he said.

Patterson now works at U.C. Irvine in the Department of Informatics, a type of computer science that does evaluations of new technology with people involved. He will become a Ph.D. next week.

Now, Patterson is married and has two children, but has advice to offer to high school students.

"I encourage high school students to think about what's important. The longer you continue to do what you're doing, you have less time to think about what's important," he said, "It's important to decide what's important to you earlier so that you have more time to make an impact."