

# THE Voice



By Heather Darrow

## Former Collin College Student Studying Opera at Juilliard

You could say Jake Nelson has had a dramatic change in perspective. For years, he called a dusty, steel warehouse home. After school, he opened two immense bay doors, walked past the fork lift, skids of steel, shelves of pipe, saws and drill presses to the entrance of the efficiency his uncle built for him and his mother. The humble abode lacks windows and carpet and central air. It is hot in the summer and cold in the winter, but there are portable air conditioning units, space heaters and lots of love. Recently, he left it all behind in exchange for a view of the New York City skyline and an opportunity to study opera at Juilliard.

"To wake up to the view I have now is amazing. I can see the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Metropolitan Opera House, the New York Philharmonic, the ABC and CBS buildings and Rockefeller Center. Everything is so grand and on such a large scale

here. From a steel warehouse to this view is shocking," Nelson said.

Before making his move, Nelson received opera training at Collin College. A finalist for three years in the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) Texoma Region, he was awarded second





place in the Men's Senior Division. As a full-time student, Nelson worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, ranging from concrete work to serving as the DJ for the Allen Americans hockey team to building theater sets at Collin College. His diligence paid off. He was the recipient of a Collin College Emerson Music Scholarship and was ultimately awarded a full scholarship to one of the most prestigious schools in America.

"I came to Collin for the theatre department. The shows are just so much better than other places. For me, Collin

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College is home. It is kind of where I grew up. I took composition and rhetoric at the college my senior year of high school. Later, along with my core classes, music and theatre classes, I took astrobiology and loved it."

At the college, Nelson's professors taught him acting, scene building, music theory and ear training, opera, Russian and much more. He recalls the day he won a competition for singing a Russian Opera. One of the members of the audience came up and began to speak to him in Russian. Humbled because he did not know the language, he turned to his music professor who is fluent in Russian and had spent hours perfecting the nuances of his pronunciation, and grinned from ear to ear.

"Collin College is awesome. It has so many U.S. Professors of the Year, and I studied with several of them. If I didn't attend Collin, I wouldn't be at Juilliard — that is for sure. Brian J. Smith ["Stargate Universe," Broadway's "The Columnist" with John Lithgow] and Michael Urie ["Ugly Betty," Broadway's "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" with Daniel Radcliffe and John Larroquette] also were accepted at Juilliard after attending Collin College. That's three people in the last 10 years that came to Juilliard from Collin," Nelson said.

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tan Opera and Juilliard production. He was part of the off-stage chorus and was an extra for the gardener role in Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte." Today, Nelson is juggling 23 credit hours. He says he did not realize how intense his musical training would be. The fact that every word he sings must evoke an emotion is draining, and he is continually learning different languages and the nuances of various dialects.

"We have to translate and convince Germans that we are German and Italians that we are Italian, and we have to learn dialects like Venetian. It is like a Yankee accent versus a southern accent, but it is like that in every country. Every class gives me an adrenaline rush. The stakes are so high because we're not allowed to make a lot of mistakes. In my ear training we have an exam in every class. My mind gets blown away everyday by some of the things the students and professors say. The amount of knowledge they have about this tradition that is opera is astounding."

"There is one thing that all the students have in common. It is a specific, hungry look in their eyes. I think I have that too. I am constantly trying to learn what to do next to improve myself and be the best."

Whatever the challenge, Nelson is used to overcoming struggles and ultimately thrives in adversity. Before he lived in the warehouse, he and his mother, who was diagnosed with breast cancer, moved in with his ailing grandparents. At the time, even Nelson was sick and ultimately required surgery.

"We definitely lived simply, but I feel like I lived a normal life. I got to goof around a lot because it is a warehouse, and I had my own shop where I kept my tools. My mom is awesome. She has always taken care of me no matter where we were. We've had to live without some things sometimes, but I've never felt poor and now I am able to appreciate things more," he said, with sincerity.

There is no doubt that this Juilliard student remembers where he came from and who helped him along the way when he awakens and gazes out his window. The picture-perfect view of his future stares right back at him.

"You get up and four billion people are outside moving. Every day when I wake up here for a minute I feel as though my heart



stops beating. I can't believe I am here."

To watch a video about Jake, visit <http://binged.it/U7eeZy>

For more information about music and theatre at Collin College, visit [collin.edu](http://collin.edu).