



Mural of woman on building

"As I got more involved in things, made more friends, and made more connections, I was able to put that aside, and think of more where I was than where I wanted to be."

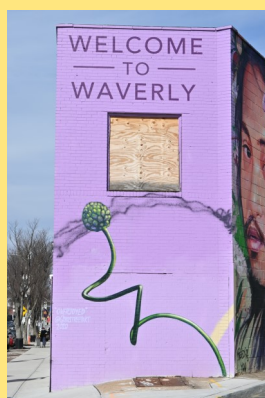
John Marino



Mural of children

"Try to meet people, join events, clubs, just do something."

Josue Urbina



Artwork accompanied
by mural of a man

The Yellow-Brick Road by Kat Zranchev

There's no place like home. For me, home is Edison, New Jersey—a large town with enough students to need two separate high schools. The main attachment to my hometown was my family, the only thing my current home lacks. Before I left for college, I had big aspirations to go halfway across the country. Now, a semester has passed and Baltimore and I are good friends; I'm content with being three hours away by car and two and a half by train. I realized I needed to make a great effort to get to know Baltimore like I know my home in New Jersey. I needed to connect the two. I needed to find a reliable bookstore I can escape to, tasty restaurants, and a downtown area I can resort to for hours without getting bored. Dorothy had to get used to being in a strange place like Oz, the same way I had to get used to Baltimore. The twister seemed to drop me off here without a furry companion, making it all the harder to find my purpose. *Home is where your heart is.* While my family resides in New Jersey, my heart belongs to Baltimore.

We all seem to long for an "authentic" college experience. For some people this may mean achieving academic recognition, service and volunteer work, partying and all nighters, or just surviving as a functioning wallflower. The sudden drop in Baltimore startled me like it did Dorothy when she landed in Oz. I was overwhelmed, stressed, and scared. And frankly, I didn't know where to begin. Homesickness didn't limit itself to my family; I also missed the physical home. Senior, John Marino, of the Class of 2022, had this to add when asked, *What makes a place a home?* He responded, "For me it's familiarity, knowing your surroundings, knowing a decent amount of people in the area." First-year, Teonna Johnson, of the Class of 2025, also said that "Feeling comfortable, being aware of where you're at," makes a place a home. Like John and Teonna, my favorite places and people were no longer within a three mile radius. It wasn't until everything was out of my reach that I realized how much I missed them. As difficult as it was to leave it all behind, the distance forced me to get acquainted with a new environment and has helped me adjust to living in a new city. Although my homesickness has subsided, I still find myself missing my home in New Jersey. Home is so far away and I couldn't just copy and paste my favorite places in Baltimore.

Cultural Haven

However, my feet started moving and the yellow-brick road led me to one place after another. The first destination I was brave enough to explore was St. Paul Street. One place in particular caught my attention. Busboys and Poets—a restaurant and bookstore dedicated to celebrating "a community where racial and cultural connections are consciously uplifted" ([Busboys and Poets](#)). Baltimore is home to many businesses celebrating Black voices but Busboys and Poets was one of the first places I noticed to have influential Black people painted on its windows. The restaurant doubles as a bookstore that celebrates Black authors as well as hosts events pertaining to book signings, karaoke, and open mics. The culture inhabited in the space reminds me of the rich abundance of different cultures at home. Attending a PWI university can be intimidating to anyone not used to a diverse space, but knowing that there are places in support of cultural differences brings the same warmth home does. Sophomore Josue Urbina of the Class of 2024 also expresses that getting used to a PWI university had been an adjustment for him as well. But, when asked about his favorite place he mentions, "[Alana Services](#) in general, I see a lot of faces I would most likely see when I'm home, so it feels homier."

A Bookstore for Escaping

A few blocks away from Busboys and Poets is one of my favorite places in Baltimore. Although I'm hesitant to share this place with other people, I know this place deserves all the love in the world. [Normal's Book and Records](#) is quite literally a trip through time and space without ever leaving Baltimore. Normal's Book and Records temporarily houses used vinyls and books of all genres, decades, and authors. My knees nearly buckled as I crossed the threshold into the store. You can be listening to Bruce Springsteen in one room, then cross the store and read a Jane Austin classic in the next. With enough time, you can get lost in



next. With enough time, you can get lost in between worlds. Normal's brings the same warmth and comfort the Barnes and Nobles back home does. The best thing about Normal's is that I had to discover it for myself; the Barnes and Nobles back home was always there, a place I've been going to since I attended the story times as a toddler. Discovering a new place for yourself as an adult is like finding your very own ruby slippers, a true hidden gem. The Indie bookstore is one of *my places*; I stumbled upon it because of pure fate.

A Place to Get Lost In

Baltimore warms up to me and I to her. Another piece of my heart belongs to Fells Point. The Cobblestone street makes you believe you're somewhere in Europe. At night, the streets light up in a beautiful array. There are restaurants, bars, shops, and bookstores. I was out with my friends when [Kilwins](#) caught my attention. The ice cream shop lit up like it was under a spotlight. And like a moth drawn to a flame, my feet started moving like I was hypnotized. The minute that the brownie chocolate ice cream hit my tongue, I nearly melted myself. Access to a delicious ice cream shop is like having access to another life line. The stress of college can be tolling, and when the tough gets going, you go to your favorite ice cream shop. Back in New Jersey, I had a town I could go to just like Fells Point. Westfield, New Jersey, is like Fells Point in a way that it is littered with delicious restaurants, ice cream shops, bookstores, and one of my favorites being its very own Trader Joe's. Fells Point supplies the familiarity I was lacking when I first moved to Baltimore, mirroring Westfield back home.

Delicious Experiences

I'm sure Dorothy got hungry along the way to the Emerald City. And in Baltimore you'll find a surplus of great restaurants and food to try. But, let's be honest. Most of us are on a fixed budget. Most of us have to get creative with what we have and most of us tend to make do with the microwave we have in our dorms. But, when the universe allows, spend your money on the experience of having a nice meal. I won't be hypocritical and tell you that I don't indulge in affairs with UberEats and Grubhub, because I do. But luckily, you're a student and the university gives you a free Grubhub-plus account, so do with that information what you will. Although I don't condone any underage gambling, if there's something you should gamble on, it's a new restaurant. One of my favorite restaurants is [Be-One](#), a Korean barbeque restaurant. The Korean barbeque restaurant back home was always the back-up plan restaurant. I went to Be-One with a large group of friends once and it was like a grand Thanksgiving dinner. We all sat at a long table and talked, while we watched some of our friends try Korean food for the first time. It was at this moment I realized that everything was going to be okay. When I asked junior Nathalie Gomez-Vergara of the Class of 2023, *How do you deal with homesickness: Now versus a first-year?* she responded by saying, "I kind of learned how to self-soothe in a way, when I felt homesick, I kind of went to my friends and we talked about it." The way my friends all surrounded me like they were my family reminded me that just because I was away from home didn't mean I was alone. You'll find that the people you surround yourself with will eventually become your family.

Emerald City

Dorothy eventually made it to the Emerald City. Even though she worried about her destination, she seemed to have quite the journey. Along the way she made the most amazing friends, and had enough adventure for a lifetime. Life away from home in a new place can be hard on everyone, and a lot of us worry about where we're going to end up instead of enjoying the journey. The yellow-brick road was full of cracks and turns and hills, and along the way Dorothy met the Wicked Witch and fell asleep in a poppy field. But, she also met Glinda and Tinman, The Cowardly Lion, and Scarecrow. The journey is not without its faults, things will get hard, then they'll get harder. Dorothy eventually woke up from her dream: but you and I aren't waking up for another four years. So, keep following the yellow-brick road and you'll find your Emerald City.

Photos of the murals taken of Baltimore as well as Kilwins and Normal's Book and Records were captured by Stephanie Hills, Class of 2025.



Window display of Normal's

"Check up on your family, call them, they worry about you too."

Teonna Johnson



Outside of Kilwins

"Be vocal about it, don't internalize it."

Nathalie Gomez-Vergara



Fells Point at night



Glass Emerald City