

Picture taken by author, November 2023 in Baltimore City outside of Italian History Museum, about 40 mins car ride from campus

A Family of Your Choosing By Anisa Fox

My final night in my family's home in Florida was one of the most stressful nights of my life. My mother was tense over final plans and my father was packing the last items of my life into a moving van. We were all preparing for our 18-hour drive from FL to MD. In the backseat, my two younger siblings were alive with questions as I tried to fit my final items into boxes, kiss my three cats goodbye and get some closure from my 16-year-old brother—with whom I have a strained relationship. This is my family, a funky mix of biology that had, with great yet imperfect love, carried me through 18 years of change and growth culminating in freshman move-in day.

Freshman Move-In Day

The theme of Loyola move-in was undoubtedly family, as for the first time newly fledged adults were running out of their parents' arms and into the messy, terrifying world of college to meet the open arms of their chosen family: administrators, soon-to-be friends, councilors, clubs, classes and the Messina first-year program.

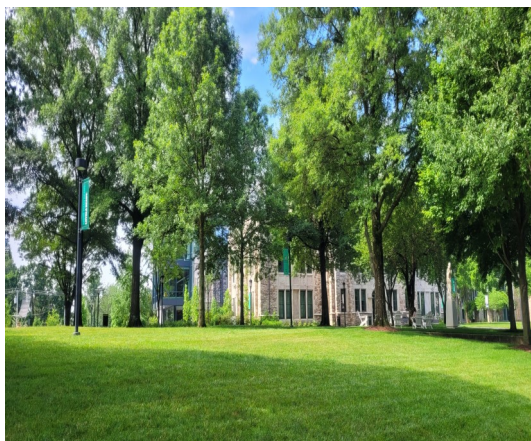
Every family is different and every chosen family is twice as diverse, exciting and dedicated, which is why as a first-year living in the dorms, a "chosen family" matters as much as a biological one. Loyola is a great place to develop that. For many of my Baltimore native friends, family is never far and it isn't unusual for campus to be barren on the weekends as many people commute home for a few days. It is inspiring to watch as families come together in this time of change to maintain bonds that mean the world to them. However, if you're like me and come from a family with strained relationships, or have family that lives out of state, then you understand the struggle of finding your people in a place where everyone already seems so set. It is important to remember, however, that college is a time of absolute new-ness and no one is as 'set' as they seem. It is perfectly okay to go through the motions of making and losing friends, changing interests and leaning into the fluidity that college life fosters.

Campus Life and Resources

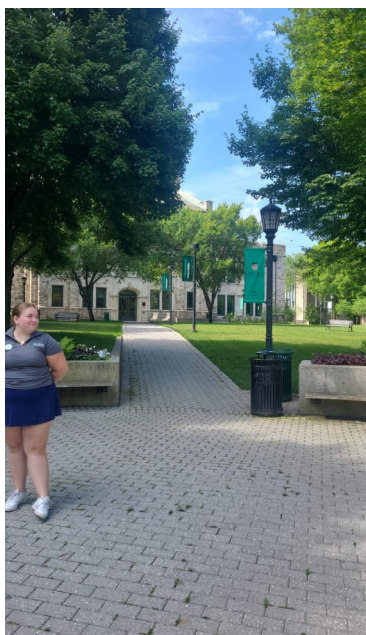
Being open to the changes college brings can help in developing a family away from home and expanding your social connections. To me, Loyola is a perfect place to do just that. As Loyola senior and Evergreen Abby Kiewe says, "The academic transition from high school to college can be more seamless if a student is aware of their resources on campus. Loyola offers many programs such as [The Study](#) which allows students to take a class that teaches them what kind of learner they are so that when they are doing homework or studying, they can be more productive. The more students use the resources around them, the easier the transition to college can be." Kiewe finds that students can help to set themselves up as an active community member by first engaging their own interests through Loyola resources. These resources include the [Loyola Fitness Center](#), [Counseling Center](#) and spaces designed with Diversity and Equity in the forefront. Loyola freshman Summer Skanes explored these resources over summer and



Ayana Thompson (left), Summer Skanes (middle), Anisa Fox (right), Loyola student center orientation in June 2023. None of us knew each other prior, but are best friends as of today.



Outside The Study on Loyola's Quad



An Evergreen outside on the Quad

discovered that "Loyola has a bunch of clubs and summer programs that will help anyone find a sense of family. I want to highlight that the [ALANA](#) program has helped me find my Loyola family from friends to faculty. They provide us with our own space to be ourselves and enjoy one another." ALANA is a campus group that caters towards POC students helping them find affinity groups and develop a chosen family that spans many languages and cultures.

This positive campus ethos is reflected in Loyola's infrastructure and compact size, with dorm buildings having common spaces complete with snack stations, comfortable couches and glorious TVs. Here students can quickly bump into new people, sit and share a "family" dinner and immerse themselves in the warm campus environment. An environment that Kiewe finds allowed her to create her "chosen family" during her four years at Loyola. During this time, Kiewe has defined family as "...the support system that is always there for you. Family does not necessarily need to be the people you see when you go home for break. Family can be chosen, the people that make a house feel like a home. Family is baking cookies together on a rainy day. Family is screaming in the car together because you all have midterms. Family is baking a turkey together on Thanksgiving. Family can look different for many people but when you are around family, you will feel it." Her expression of care towards her chosen family is reflected in her dedication to her Evergreen role. Evergreens are on-campus student leaders who help to provide Loyola freshmen with a grounding point whether for simple questions or complex concerns. The Evergreens provide a sense of security; whether you've found your people yet or not, your Evergreen is someone who will support you.

Friendships and Roomies

In more academic spaces on campus such as official events hosted in McGuire Hall or sitting in class, you'll have many opportunities to meet like-minded people and to hear stories from peers that guide and comfort you as a first-year. For example, arriving early to class—well rested—and choosing a comfortable seat can help me be more personable and attentive. Additionally, speaking up in class or during group work can help you find your voice as a college student. Outside of academia, however, crafting a chosen family for me started with my roommate. It was thankfully really simple through the Zee Me app to meet my future classmates and start up meaningful conversations. There I met my current roommate Summer, who I describe as a kind of 'weird sibling.' As a fellow freshman, Summer found "The hardest part about living away from family in the beginning of college was trying to re-find that genuine sense of love and joy that I have

with my family... It definitely takes some time to find those people, but a good thing about living away from home is that you're able to rediscover yourself and allow yourself to be more open." Summer shared her journey of rediscovery when we became roommates. We learned how to navigate our first steps into the adult world, the importance of communication and supporting each other's needs.

Another place I began developing my chosen family was at freshman orientation in late June 2023. Orientation was the first place I met my roommate in person, but it was also where I was reluctantly forced into ice breakers. Ice breakers are fun social games that help you learn a few quick facts about a peer, *but* if you've ever been in a room of anxious, sweaty teens and just wanted to escape you will feel that here. You might for a second think "Why in the world am I here at college! This is nerve-wracking." As I learned however, all it takes is a "hello", a compliment, a moment of compassion or friendliness to overcome that anxiety and make bonds that could last a lifetime.

On the steps of the chapel, exhausted from traveling and completely overwhelmed by the day's activities, I passed a girl shorter than me, bopping along in her converse and rocking a set of lavender nails. I complimented those nails and now three months later I have a chosen family member who I can enjoy morning meals with, support when we need, chatting late at night. I also have company for those harder days where you just need a little compassion—trust me we all have them, and chosen family can make all the difference.

Final Thoughts

A chosen family isn't a replacement for the family you leave behind when you move out, but they can "validate...concerns [and] can provide much-needed support" (Lederer). Anyone can create a chosen family as "Even people who have good relationships with their biological family can have a chosen family...This simply lends itself to double the love and support that one receives and provides." (Lederer). In her own life, Kiewe finds this to be true, saying that "As a senior this year I like living independently because it makes it easier to have a routine. However, there is nothing that feels better than when I am able to go home for break and see my family. Nothing beats a home-cooked meal and sitting on the couch watching the Peanut movies with family." Despite her occasional home-sickness and the distance of loved ones, being a part of a healthy campus like Loyola's can have a positive impact. In college, a chosen family can



Mom (Left), Me (right), June 2023, Loyola Campus in front of

Jada (right) Summer (middle)
Anisa (left)



Cider farm. Loyola weekend events are frequently hosted and serve as a great time filler and social catalyst, enabling you to explore your independence, potential interests and create lasting "family" memories.

be key to developing as an emotional and compassionate adult. College work and exams in my experience are akin to that of high school high level courses; however, there is also a lot more physical, financial and academic independence as a freshman that can be hard to navigate. Going it alone often intensifies that struggle. A chosen family can be an outlet for supporting others that helps build a sense of community and takes you from 'baby-adult' to strutting in your 'big-person-pants'. As in any family "What you are receiving, you should also give back. Let each chosen family member know how much they mean to you, and tell them that you are here to support them however you can. Offer up your help when they're going through hard times, be a shoulder to cry on, and cheer them on through their victories" (Lederer).

By being an active 'family'/community member, you as a Loyola first-year expand yourself and open your "Mind, Body and Spirit" up to new experiences/expressions of love. So, I would advise new freshmen to be excited regardless of your origins or closeness to home because in my experience no matter how awkward, alone, or nervous you feel, your chosen family will find you the moment you take on the Grey Hound title.



You can make a chosen family with your Messina group.



Your chosen family can help when you're missing your pets from home.



My Messina group family having a gingerbread house-making contest.



You can always find friends at events on campus, like One Question.