

2nd Place -

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Midsteeple Campus

With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet, And each for
other's weelfare kindly speirs:
The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet: Each tells the
uncos that he sees or hears.
- Robert Burns

Abby Solway thinks back to the year 2020 when the University of the West of Scotland had just relocated to its Midsteeple Quarter Campus. At the time, Abby was 17, and living with her family in Auldgirth and was excited by the Dumfries transformation from the dreary ex-market town it had become. She remembered that this was the turning point for the High Street - after being derelict for so long, each of the buildings bustled with life. On a trip into town with her Mum, she remembered hearing students laughing and buskers playing music. At 18, she was eager to further her education and enrolled in the Professional Catering course at UWS – it was taught at 137 High Street, near Business Studies and Hospitality.

The top floors of these High Street buildings served as halls of residence during term times, the mid floors often operated as study rooms but the ground floor, where most of Abby's learning took place, served as a bar and restaurant for the town and was called 'The Oven'. The students from all three disciplines worked as there as chefs, front of house and junior management under tutelage of experienced University staff.

The menu changed every month, not only responding to locally sourced, seasonal produce but also evolving in tandem with what Abby and her fellow classmates were learning at that time. The Oven offered mutual support to local businesses such as Frugaldom who supplied eggs, Townfoot Farm's Bruce Goldie supplied the exceptional meats, Roans Dairy in Dalbeattie who often brought some cows fresh produce to the Midsteeple Market on a Saturday and Mrs Greene's Tea lounge who supplied the most incredible scones. During non-term times, the students were employed in The Oven and its pop-up food vans across Dumfries and Galloway to meet the demand of the out-of-towners who descended en masse not just to be part of the extremely successful Electric Fields Festival or the more recent Foodie Festival, but sometimes just to enjoy the creative Dumfries vibe that has been established here.

Abby's Gran, who remembered the hotels (and their bars!) on the High Street, once told her the town was starting to 'feel like





its old self'. Every weekend the Midsteeple theatre, an island on the street, was packed out - there was always something to see! When the venue wasn't showing UWS-led productions (arranged by Drama students working in collaboration with their Set Designer and Sound and Lighting technology classmates) it hosted a drama group for school children and, once a year, showed movies in conjunction with the nearby Odeon as part of Dumfries Film Festival.

Across the way, Beauty, Holistic Therapy and Physiotherapy courses shared a ground floor premises called 'Ciùin' (Calm) catering to all of Dumfries' spray-tan and deep tissue needs... and the Health Centre operated drop-in clinics run by Optometry, Podiatry and Dental students. The Stove Network continued to manage their extensive operations from 100 High Street but had also been gifted the building adjacent, offering residencies to artists and creatives from across the country. The 'Stove Stalls' was a seasonal event which drew art enthusiasts to the town. Along the street, another long time empty property was converted to provide University Library services, also available for public use. The library staff have a strong focus on improving adult literacy and numeracy in the district which continues to have a very positive community response from attendees and volunteers.

Her student days now 12 years behind her, Abby has just celebrated her 2nd year of operation of 'Solways', the first Michelin Star restaurant in the Borders . Working with UWS and The Oven, she offers year-long paid internships to two lucky graduates from the University each year, retaining talent in the area. The place is booked out months in advance, with a menu that celebrates local produce and culinary excellence. The restaurant crockery and glassware is redesigned annually with local business We Make Pots and furniture was made by joinery graduates of the university using facilities at MakLab.

All in all, the Solway's together with the collective Dumfries and Galloway community are delighted with how the town centre has regenerated and grown in recent years. Their success and forward thinking attitude installs every confidence that they will continue provide a sense of purpose and enjoyment for so many for years to come.