What began as a childhood interest in performing and writing short stories has developed into a passion that led University of Massachusetts senior Stephen Margelony-Lajoie to travel to Oxford, and to begin writing his own book reflecting on his difficult childhood, and how the challenges he faced have shaped who he is today.

The English major from Sturbridge, Mass. grew up doing a lot of theater and performing in general, including singing, acting, and writing.

“I started writing short stories and they were really terrible,” he said of his beginning in writing. “In third grade I had to read out a short story because my teacher liked it. That really made me want to pursue writing.”

Margelony-Lajoie attended Tantasqua Regional High School, where he began writing for the high school paper and singing in the chorus. His piano instructor and vocal coach Mrs. Costello, encouraged him to accompany the chorus on a trip to Spain and Portugal to perform when Margelony-Lajoie was a sophomore, which spurred his interest in traveling. Later, he joined the show choir directed by Costello.

“I’d be at the school from 7 a.m. and practices would start at 4 or 5 and sometimes end at 10 p.m.,” he said. “It was a competitive schedule.”

Margelony-Lajoie attributes his interest in acting to his most influential high school teacher, Mr. von Bleicken, who directed him in his first acting role in the play “The Importance of Being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde. Within a year, Margelony-Lajoie played the lead role as George in “Our Town” by Thornton Wilder.

When Margelony-Lajoie graduated high school, he knew he wanted to pursue artistic discipline in college. He applied to UMass as a theater major. After realizing his true passion was not theater, he pursued journalism, before deciding to major in English.

“My biggest field of studies is ethnic-American literature. I got really interested in African American literature and slave narratives in my sophomore year when I took Intro to African American History. We talked about the trans-Atlantic slave trade and read a lot of documents, and I learned how important writing was for the end of slavery and spreading awareness. I saw the power of writing and what it could do,” he said.

Margelony-Lajoie, whose biological father is Vietnamese and Samoan, decided to study a part of his own history, and took an Introduction to Asian American Literature course. Taking courses with Asha Nadkarni, Margelony-Lajoie also read about Indian American writing and Southeast Asian female writers.
The ambitious senior is currently writing a novel with his half-brother Anthony. Margelony-Lajoie and his brother share the same mother, but didn’t grow up together – Margelony-Lajoie’s birth mother had substance abuse issues, alcohol addiction and mental health problems. When Margelony-Lajoie’s mother lost custody of him, he was put into foster care and later adopted; his brother’s biological father got custody of him.

The brothers reunited when Margelony-Lajoie was in high school in the most unlikely of places: Facebook. He searched his brother by first name (he didn’t know his last name) and found his brother, who is three years older.

“The amazing part about Facebook is that it can reconnect you with people you might have lost otherwise,” he said.

Now, the brothers are teaming up to write a book about their story.

“We wanted to talk about the different paths our lives took – starting together then branching apart to different parts of the country,” Margelony-Lajoie said.

Margelony-Lajoie and Anthony share chapters of their book via Facebook.

“A big part of the book is going to be about our mother who was abusive, a heroin addict, and an alcoholic. She did a lot of messed up things to my brother and me – the book is about how that affected us and how we overcame it. I hope it gives people hope.”

In an effort to improve his writing, Margelony-Lajoie applied and was accepted to a creative writing summer seminar at Trinity College at the University of Oxford in England. The course was taught by Claire Morgan, an author in the United Kingdom known for her short stories.

“Writing was something I had put off as something that wouldn’t work as a job. The program pushed me to take writing more seriously,” he said. “I came back a more independent person.”

Margelony-Lajoie said living at Oxford was like a fantasy world.

“It was like living in a castle for two months. It was just gorgeous. Living in the city and being a part of that life was amazing, especially meeting people from all over the world. It was a very maturing experience.”

Margelony-Lajoie said that he had misconceptions going abroad about how the people would be at Oxford.

“You think prestigious, snooty, better than you and they know it – but people are just people. I learned the dangers of getting caught up in preconceived notions of how people are going to be – it makes you anxious and you forget people are just humans. It’s beautiful when people from different backgrounds and upbringings can live together.”

Margelony-Lajoie said seeing how successful he was in the creative writing course he took at Oxford was one of his greatest accomplishments.

“It helped me overcome insecurities in my writing. My years at UMass and studying with Claire taught me that it’s possible to actually write, and to not underestimate the power of writing – communication is a powerful tool. I didn’t think we’re ever going to live in a world where you don’t need to write. If you can write you’ll find a place in the world,” he said.
One of Marjelony-Lajoie’s greatest sources of motivation is seeing injustice in the world.

“There’s a huge part of me that wants to figure out how to combat injustice,” he said. “Bad things in the world motivate me because I want to find the power to stop it – hopefully through writing.”

Margelony-Lajoie said he defines “success” as people discussing your work – not necessarily selling a lot of copies.

“If your work can inspire conversation and be talked about by students – or is something that has substance and can be dissected and criticized – for a writer that would make me feel successful.”

His goal for the next ten years is to have his book published.

“I don’t care if it sells well, but I hope a publishing house recognizes something I’ve written as good enough to be published.”

For now, he hopes to make the most of his senior year at UMass. “I need to finish the UMass bucket list,” he said. “I have a lot of items I need to check off.”