As an undergraduate sophomore, I had never attended an academic conference before the 166th ASA Meeting. Luckily, at Rhodes College, a small liberal arts school in Memphis, TN, all students have the opportunity to do research beginning in their freshmen year. I began research on an ultrasonic assessment of bone density during the second semester of my freshman year, and then spent half the summer of 2013 in the lab with another student, Morgan Smathers, continuing that research. As my project concluded, my research advisor suggested that Morgan and I apply to present posters at the ASA conference. On a whim, we did, and then we did not really think about it again.

As the summer was coming to a close, an acceptance e-mail arrived. “Dear Catherine Miller,” began the text, “it is our pleasure to inform you that your abstract…has been accepted for lecture presentation…” I immediately texted Morgan and asked her whether we applied for poster sessions or lecture presentations. Morgan confirmed we had applied for posters, but jokingly suggested our abstracts were too good. I excitedly agreed with her, but we had a major issue to overcome—the conference was scheduled during finals week. Long story short, we made it happen!

The evening before the 166th Meeting of the Acoustical Society of America, Morgan and I collapsed on our respective hotel beds, jet-lagged like never before, and rested our feet after spending the better part of a day in airplanes from Ohio and South Carolina. As Morgan skimmed through the meeting program she read talk titles aloud and waited for me to say ‘yay’ or ‘nay’. After four titles about whales in a session on acoustic monitoring of marine mammals, we laughed at how many there were. “We should just stay for that whole session, it looks like the most interest—Wait,” Morgan proclaimed, “actually, there is another session on bubble detection at the same time. We really should go to that…”

We woke around 6 AM the first day of the conference. Still groggy and jet-lagged, we ate breakfast at a small convenience store in lieu of waiting 2 hours at the hotel Starbucks. Afterwards, we trooped back to the registration hall, picked up our name tags and student packets, and then found the Monitoring of Marine Mammals room at 7:59 AM. Thus began the first day of the conference.

Miraculously, there were two open seats next to each other in the tiny room. There were maybe forty chairs total, laid out so tightly there was barely any room to walk. Before we even sat down more attendees followed us in, pressing against the back wall and trying not to get in the way of the door. What struck me first was the number of women in the room. I expected a predominantly male conference, but the majority of people in the room were female. I felt this bode well for the rest of my time at the meeting and
it eased my nerves a bit—particularly after noticing a woman with impressively purple hair. Clearly, acousticians weren’t as stuffy as I’d thought. I almost began to regret bringing such formal attire.

When the talks began, I was blown away by how many of the presenters seemed to be “winging it”. Not to say that the presentations were not good, most of the talks were excellent, and the slides were put together well, it just seemed less rehearsed than I had anticipated. For example, several presenters seemed unsure of what each subsequent slide contained as they progressed. This didn’t detract from the quality of the science being presented, but it was definitely not what I was expecting. That said, after watching three or four talks in the marine mammal monitoring section, I felt I had a pretty good handle on what the typical presentation pacing felt like, and I adopted some ideas from presenters that gave excellent talks.

In the weeks leading up to the conference, I had practiced my 15-minute presentation daily. In the middle of calculus class I would catch myself muttering, “I'd like to begin by addressing the motivation behind this study...” Even with all of my preparation, by the time I landed in San Francisco I was a nervous wreck. I drank too much coffee and was intimidated by everyone wearing a conference nametag. Luckily, I was not alone, thanks to Morgan. If the ASA meeting had been anything like my idea of a conference, I do not know how it could be endured without at least one friend in tow. Having someone to help process presentations, act as a wingman while networking, and eat dinner with when all I wanted was to wear sweatpants and relax was invaluable.

Morgan reminded me, on more than one occasion, “It’s your first conference, you haven’t learned yet you don’t have to go to everything.” That became a mantra that really made the conference an excellent experience, instead of just a good one. The first day of the conference I thought it was necessary to run around and attend a presentation every fifteen minutes. It was exhausting. After this revelation, I found that a more relaxed approach made it easier to truly engage with what I was doing (rather than worrying about what was next). The first day, Morgan and I would whisper to each other through a talk, trying to figure out where the next room was and whether it was rude to leave early if the speaker ran over. The second day, we abandoned that idea and had a far better time because of it. (I think it says something that I don’t remember much from those whale talks, but I remember perfectly the slides from the talk on architectural acoustics I randomly wandered into while looking for a water fountain on the second day.)

Looking back, I remember an eclectic mix of the talks. Several presentations on architectural acoustics were fascinating, and learning about the importance of acoustics in building design was something that had never occurred to me before. One presenter talked about some condos that were built without consulting an acoustician, and the tenants complained about being able to hear everything from adjoining condos. A professor from Rollins College gave an excellent overview of a course they tried to implement at the school, in which students designed, built, and performed with their own musical instruments.
One contrast that took me by surprise was the difference between presentations given by academics and by representatives of companies. I saw several talks given by professors that left me less than impressed with their communication skills, but most of the presentations on new technologies or new analysis techniques by company representatives were given smoothly and professionally. One speaker, who discussed developing ultrasonic therapies to treat open wounds with a private company, really impressed me with how well he paced himself. He also responded well to several aggressive questions. At first I was confused by this gap in presentation styles, but it made sense after I realized that most of these non-academic presenters were probably hired for their presentation skills.

Although we attended at least five talks daily, what stuck with me most from the ASA meeting were the interactions I had with other attendees. My mentor recommended I meet a friend of his from Paris. She and I ended up getting lunch on the first day with a graduate student also working in France. They were both brilliant. I felt more than a little out of my league when they were discussing their research, but that did not detract from a really enjoyable lunch. That same night there was a student social. At first it seemed like nobody was willing to initiate conversation, but then a graduate student invited me to join a random group of attendees for dinner. A couple of the people I met that first night I ended up seeing through the conference and spending time with, which made the entire conference feel less overwhelming and more personal. At a second student social I managed to find a group of undergraduates from Colombia College to spend the evening with. We hit it off really well, talking all through a conference jam session and well into the night. I am still in touch with one of those students. The socials were a nice component of the ASA meeting, and I can attest to them working since I made a new friend through the experience.

When I wore my Rhodes College SPS t-shirt, the Columbia students asked what SPS was, and had genuinely never heard of it. I thought that was odd because the Rhodes SPS chapter and physics department are essentially synonymous. The thought of studying physics without the camaraderie and support of SPS was unsettling. Our group hosts a lot of outreach events for both students and the general public in Memphis, a concept that the Colombia students seemed surprised by. It turns out that Colombia has an acoustics program, so they have an ASA student chapter that serves a similar function, but it was an unexpected difference between our college experiences.

In full, the ASA meeting was a fantastic first conference. There were plenty of talks on a variety of topics, and when there were not talks going on we were free to explore San Francisco—a beautiful city. There were a few talks that required caffeine for me to get through, but the fun moments and other conference experiences made those long talks worthwhile.