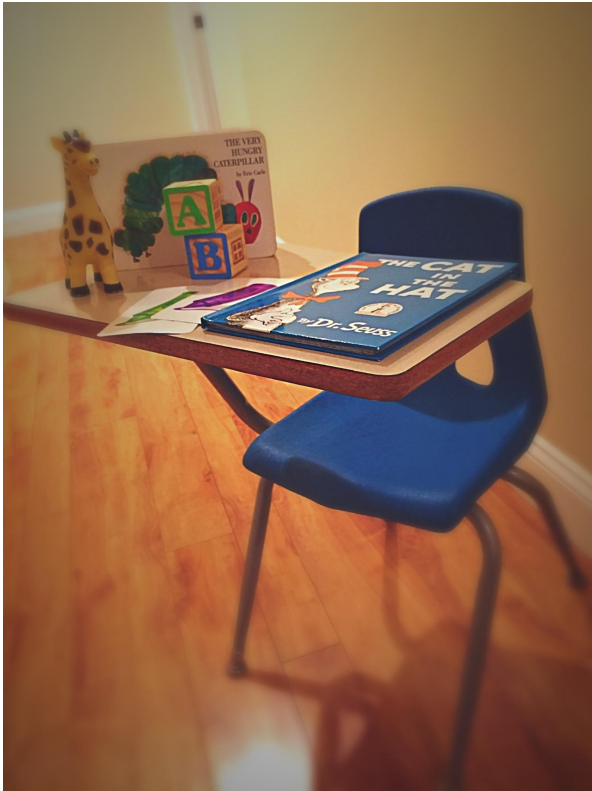




For as long as I can remember, I have known that I wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. If my parents had done the first day of school chalkboards that so many parents do today, my future career choice would have been the same on every one. For reasons unbeknownst to me, my grandma had old antique desks and a plethora of math worksheets in her basement. I would coerce my sister, brother, and cousins into spending hours in those desks, inscribing their answers onto those worksheets, while I (the teacher, naturally) stood in front of them and taught them about presidents and state capitols. No one ever questioned who would be the teacher when we played school.



School always came easily to me. When I was in Kindergarten, I was the only student in my class who could read fluently. My teacher would ask me to read to the other students in class during story time.



I was good at writing. I was the only kid I knew who never had to write a rough draft when it came time to pen an essay or short story; my work was free of mistakes on the first try. My hobbies included reading novels, and perusing my collection of flashcards and books all about American presidents and other notable figures, wars and battles, famous historical sights and landmarks. I was by any textbook definition a “nerd”, and I was proud of it.



When I was in third grade, I tested into the gifted program. During my testing, a conversation occurred that will stay with me forever. The person administering the test asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Of course my answer came quickly and easily--a teacher. Then he cautioned me. He told me that people with brains like mine don't usually make good teachers. Since things come so easily to people like me, it would be hard for me to empathize with a struggling student. Maybe I should consider becoming a doctor or lawyer, he advised. But I was never interested in practicing law or medicine. I was determined to prove this man wrong. I was different, I would make an excellent teacher.



The remainder of my elementary and middle school years continued on in much the same way. “A” after “A”, success after success. I won spelling bees, social studies fairs, writing contests. Standardized tests which caused my friends so much stress and anguish were a breeze for me. If school were a sport, I would be the undefeated champion.



In high school things got a little tougher, but it was nothing I couldn’t handle. The work wasn’t hard. I just had to learn to juggle social events, sports, relationships, and still make time for school work. I slacked a little. I didn’t study. I was no longer the star student that everyone knew when I was young, I wasn’t making straight A’s. But even without putting forth much effort, I was doing more than enough to get by. I graduated 11th in my class with a 3.6 GPA.



I was as sure about where I was going after high school as I was about what I wanted to study. The only college I had ever considered was West Virginia University. It was the only campus I toured. I knew I wanted to live in Morgantown and be a Mountaineer. Nevermind that I came from a town of 500 people, where everyone knew me and I knew them, and I’d be moving to a city with a population of over 30,000. I knew where I was going.



I started college that fall, expecting more of the same. But I was SO wrong. I had never learned how to study, because I had never had to do it before. I had no one there to ensure I woke up and went to my 8:00 AM classes every day. None of my teachers knew me, or cared to (or so I thought). I was faceless, nameless. Just another fish in a sea of thousands. This was all new to me. I had no idea how it felt to fail. I slowly started dropping courses from my 17-credit-hour load, until finally, I just stopped going to class at all.



I couldn't tell my family, or my friends. This wasn't ME. I was going to be the first person in my family to graduate from college. There was no question. I had to act like everything was smooth sailing, when in reality I was drowning, and I didn't know where to turn for help.



I realized life in Morgantown and at WVU wasn't for me. The following year I transferred to Fairmont State University. I had friends who attended school there, my aunt and uncle were both school employees. It made sense. (Ironically, my family had tried to tell me these same things a year earlier, but I swore I would NEVER attend Fairmont State. It's funny how these things work.)



I thought Fairmont State was going to be my fresh start, but it started out as a continuation of the previous year. I had moved to a place where I was more comfortable. My classes were smaller, and I felt like my teachers took a genuine interest in their students. But I still didn't know how to be a good student. The one thing I was always effortlessly good at was now my greatest struggle.



I got a part-time job waiting tables, and I began to pick up extra shifts instead of going to class. I started thinking maybe life as a waitress wouldn't be so bad. If I quit school, it wouldn't be the worst thing to ever happen. I certainly wouldn't have been the first kid who couldn't hack it. I was depressed. I had gained over 30 pounds. I picked up smoking and drinking, two things I swore I would never do. I no longer recognized the person I saw in the mirror.



They say that the darkest hour comes just before the dawn. For me, this couldn't have been more true. My dream of becoming a teacher finally re-emerged, and I realized that the only way for me to accomplish my dream was by finishing school. I had dug a very deep hole for myself, and it took a lot of work to get out of it. I had to be honest with my family and ask for help. I had to kick my bad habits, and remove all negative influences from my life. I had to completely re-do my freshman year. I had to get healthy again, body, mind, and spirit. I learned how to study, and I learned self-discipline. It was hard, but not impossible.



My perseverance paid off when I graduated from FSU with my Bachelor of Arts degree in December 2013. I chose not to walk at graduation, due to the fact that I was 37 weeks pregnant with my son. But other than his birth, I have never felt a greater sense of pride than when my diploma arrived in the mail and I held it in my hands. It was real. I had earned it. And it meant more to me than any of the trophies, awards, or accolades I received as a child, because I really had to work for it.



My dream came true. I am now a teacher, doing the work I always imagined I would be. And if I could see that man again who gave me that unsolicited advice so many years ago, I'd tell him that I think I make a pretty damn good one.

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