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THE STORY OF A FOSTER YOUTH'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE MAZE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION; IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY AND STAFF
THROUGHOUT THE CAMPUS

A Thesis Presented

by

Lynn Wales

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Masters in Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

January, 2016

Defense Date: November 11, 2015
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Abstract

As educators and higher education administrators, it is important that we connect to our students. It serves us well to learn the stories behind those beautiful eyes looking back at us, as we support their navigation through the journey of higher education. This thesis, written in a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) style, will use former foster youth students, as well as at-risk youth, as the population of focus. I will relay my own personal experiences, as a former youth-in-care. I will also explore this kind of alternative upbringing, to draw closer to the conclusions and insights of the struggles and triumphs of this population's journey through higher education. I will show how the successful connections with supportive administrators, friends, and family lead to a successful student and improved human being upon graduation.

When we label our marginalized students as "at-risk" we are imposing a story upon them, that is not theirs. This stereotypes where they came from dismisses their stories, and triumphs, and places them in a box that labels them. We need to provide them the same opportunities and supports that other students get to help make their way into and through college. We must remove the label of "at-risk" but this is only part of the journey in supporting these young people while they progress toward a degree. It is our job to increase success through weaving together opportunities to connect with different departments, different leaders on campus, and different groups of their peers. From the classroom, to our offices and hallways, this will help these students to create a stronger view of themselves and the world. As a former youth in foster care, I am not at-risk. I am at-promise. All the vulnerable young adults that I talk about in this thesis are not "at-risk." Instead, they are "at-promise."

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: ESSENCE: BREAKING THROUGH THE BARRIER KNOWN AS THE GLASS CEILING FOR AT RISK YOUTH: THE PERSPECTIVES OF A FORMER AT-RISK YOUTH IN CARE.....	1
1.1 Scholarly Personal Narrative	1
1.2 Introduction.....	4
1.3 My Story	12
CHAPTER 2: ENTRUST: THE PARENTAL GUIDANCE IN MY TRANSITION AND EXPERIENCES THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION	20
2.1 My Transition to College	20
2.2 Losing a Family Member.....	25
2.3 Meaning Making.....	29
2.4 The Fight to Break the Cycle, Co-Parenting the Next Generation	48
2.5 Life Through Higher Education.....	54
CHAPTER 3: EMPOWER: CREATING CONNECTIONS AND COMPASSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION.....	63
3.1 Connections with Higher Education Staff	63
3.2 Improving Systems in Place.....	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	73

CHAPTER 1: ESSENCE: BREAKING THROUGH THE BARRIER KNOWN AS THE GLASS CEILING FOR AT RISK YOUTH: THE PERSPECTIVES OF FORMER AT-RISK YOUTH IN CARE

1.1. SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

When we write we naturally think about the subject matter as to how it relates to us, our lives, and if we can understand any or all parts of what we are reading. When we read something we do the same thing. Can we relate to this? Have I experienced something similar? Have I done the same thing? Which character do I best connect with? We want to connect with the story, and also to learn something from what we are reading. We want to understand why we have strong feelings towards the story, and its characters. For example, when reading one may find oneself hating the male lead. Why do they hate the male lead? What is it bringing up for them? Is the male lead acting in a way that is striking a nerve, bringing the reader back to a time and place where an unfortunate experience with a male took place? Are they connecting because they are upset with their father, a male lead in their own personal narrative? Understanding what you are reading means you have to connect with it, and find meaning in its pages. Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology provides this for both the writer and the reader.

I have had the same thought while writing in SPN. I am trying to give a real picture and voice to the subject matter that I have experienced in hopes someone connects or learns something from it. Who else is Scholarly about growing up without parents and making their way into college and through higher education, still without parents, but myself, or the less than 3% of foster kids that go into college? Who else can share a

narrative dealing with issues of hunger, homelessness, being poor, and personal triumphs while in college, better than someone who experienced such things? Who better to share the good and bad adventures of experiencing higher education, trying not to let the past dictate their future? Who better to help guide you through the lens of someone who actually lived it?

I once asked my professor in undergraduate school why did I have to interview a dozen people about a subject matter to write my paper, when I was the subject matter? Why could I not write and share personal stories that were just as valid and true to get my point across? The answer that I got was, “No one wants to hear your story, what does the data say?” I spent my few short years in undergraduate with the same thought process, and graduated early because “my story”, my life, was far too busy and important than to continue to surround myself with the likes of such people. I already struggled in life to find my own voice. I was already raised being told in various ways that my “story” did not matter, that I did not matter. I was constantly told my label was an “at-risk youth”. Society told me in various ways, my story did not matter, and that I did not matter. Teachers looked through me, or around me because I was just “an orphan”, “a foster kid”, “a punk”, “a pain to teach or control”. These teachers did not know me, they did not see past the big frizzy unmanaged hair, hollowed eyes, and ill fitted clothing. Society did not see me except a burden, or a punk hanging around the streets up to no good. I did not matter, and I was not going to do anything with myself to matter.

Those are the unspoken and spoken labels and stories society puts on youth in care, the children orphaned or taken away from their birth parents. I grew up infuriated

that I was being cast aside, being labeled, judged, or mislabeled. I wanted to prove them wrong. I wanted to make a difference in my own life, and those lives of others with similar backgrounds, those lives of others without parents. How could my story make a difference? How could my story be a lesson, a guiding light? How could anyone possibly hear my story and create ideas for improvement in the world of education and higher education? How could anyone possibly know my story and those like mine, and not think differently?

SPN writing gives me, as the author of this thesis, a chance to bring together my own personal meaning making opportunities and sharing a story to make a difference in my own life, and that of the educators and higher education professionals reading this thesis. My story is universal, although only a small percentage of the college students can relate to the majority of topics and stories shared in this thesis, its themes and lessons are truly universal. There are students right now, walking around your campus, with no parents, or natural support systems to turn to. These same students are walking around campus wondering how they are going to get through college, or wondering how they are going to get through the current struggle of the day? They are also wondering who cares about their story enough to help them?

My reflection in writing this SPN thesis allows a real world connection to a real world problem, with the “data” being taken from real life. The data is taken directly from what is experienced; it is the truth of a lot of former youth in care attending higher education, and it is my truth. It is a real story that happened, that took place in real life, and has real world implications. It is the real story, creating a message and a real healing.

Telling our stories through SPN creates healing and connection within the classroom as well. How important is it for teachers to connect with their students, and for students to connect with each other? If through the sharing of our stories, we connect on different levels, we are also able to open ourselves up to a deeper meaning making. Providing this space allows for improved learning in the classroom as well.¹

Like many thesis or scholarly written articles, we as students spent countless hours reading, falling asleep to, skimming just to get a piece of data to put in our papers, SPN has the energy to teach the reader. It also has the power to help connect real life issues and shine a light on outcomes and improved ideology to make the world better. It is equally powerful to qualitative and quantitative research thesis, in giving a gift to the world once published.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

While my journey in life is what I like to call an alternative upbringing, filled with negatives experiences and emotions, it has also had loving, motivating, and passionate connections and adventures. As a young woman, I have spent my life putting a positive spin, productive outcomes, and uplifting spirit to even the most traumatic and dramatic life events any human has had to endure. Doing this started out when I was little as a form of what I now know was survival, and my brain's ability to quickly adapt, read body language and facial features for protective measures, and an ability that still surprises me; my brain's easy way to compartmentalize.

I prefer to look at the cup as half full; that outlook has always been within my

¹ Nash, Robert J., and Sydnee Viray. *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning & Wholeness in the Academy*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2014.

power. I may have not had the power to prevent the abuse and neglect that crossed my path growing up, but my mind is very powerful. I am a woman who was born to a teenage mother, never knowing my father, in poverty, and raised primarily by other people, all strangers, not connected by blood. Some of those people were bad, and some were good. I moved around a lot, more than a dozen times, changing homes, group homes, families, roofs, schools, friendships and relationships. Sometimes staying with people for a few weeks, sometimes a few years.

I had a few wonderful families that I lived with, connected with, and stayed connected with during my growing up years for varied periods of times. None of the good or bad places that I stayed filled me, while even the good homes gave me basic shelter, and sometimes love, I never truly felt connected. They were not my family. I would sometimes watch their interactions with each other, and feel like an outsider, like standing on the outside of a family photo, which did happen. I was often gone, or not invited to be in those family photos. I would often ask myself what does this mean? Do they not love me? Do they not see me? Why is this not my forever home, my forever family? What did I do wrong this time? While I know they have photos of family events, holidays, and birthdays with me inside those photos, the official family photo, I was not involved in. I was not their family, and they were not mine.

Many people are born and raised by parents that are not their birth parents. While thousands are raised in foster care, some of those children are raised in kinship care (a grandparent or other family member) arrangements, set up through social services, or just by staying in the family, without involving social services. Family members, or other

families, adopt many young people after the loss or losing their parents or primary parent to death or incarceration. Any growing up situation with others, that are not their own parents, has or can have side effects to the child, short term and long, and even for them into adulthood. Have you ever felt out of place at an event for a few hours, only connected with the people you came with, or the host? Have you ever experienced the same feeling, of feeling out of place for longer periods of time? Imagine that feeling for months, and/or years? Imagine never receiving healthy affection, and having to think about how to even hug a person? How long to hold them? Do you hug with two arms? Imagine even having to push aside the thought of even wanting a hug, continually craving human contact and connection, but not knowing how to get it or what to do when you have it.

It must be said that there is also the other side of being raised under the classification of “at-risk”, those children being raised in poverty by loving parents, or parents trying to do the best they can in impoverished areas, throughout the United States and worldwide. The classification of “at-risk” youth, or “under-privileged”, and the experiences they go through are not an individual state problem or even a U.S. problem, but a worldly problem. These young people matter.

Children and youth who are orphaned or taken from their parents and are raised in foster care have varying experiences in foster care. Like from personal experience, some foster parents are good, and some are bad. Many are not rich, and many are low-income families themselves. Over 400,000 children in the US are being raised in foster care. While being raised in foster care, these children experience continued uncertainty and

instability. Most experience having to move around to different homes, families, living arrangements, and for a young person this forces them to also change schools. As you can conclude while reading that if a young person is moving, how are they being shown consistency and stability in home life and in school with their friends? How are they learning in school? How are they being prepared for passing the national exams? Are they learning everything to prepare them to take the SATs, and get into college? Beyond lessons learned in the classroom, they struggle with maintaining, strengthening, and even in obtaining true connections and lasting relationships, which is the backbone for stability and success.

For the sake of this thesis, I am writing about the population of youth being raised outside of their parents and families, and those being raised in social service programs. When a child is orphaned or taken away from their parents, a huge array of problems can arise beyond those shared above. While a lot of those problems stem from experiences of trauma, abuse of many kinds, and neglect, a huge problem comes from just not being raised by the child's birth parents or birth family. Breaking that bond, that natural connection, gives the child a disadvantage immediately, even if their parents are the ones abusing them. Beyond my own personal experience, I have talked to dozens of young people, who were orphaned, pulled out of their parent's homes for their safety, who share similar stories and questions. Would I have been better off mentally, if I stayed with my abusive family? Would I be able to keep a job, stay out of jail, go to college if I stayed? Did social services mess with my mental state more than if I was just raised with the neglect? Is keeping the bond between parent(s) and child better in the long term for the

child, than forcing them to be raised in foster homes, group homes, and juvenile facilities with strangers? Had I stayed with my birth parents, no matter what, would that have helped me maintain and formulate relationships now as an adult? Am I destined to continue to cycle? Imagine having that daunting question loom over you, your whole life, even as you try to navigate the life as a college student?

For the most part, the answers to those questions vary with circumstance and varying degrees of abuse, trauma, and neglect in the home. I have had a few social workers state that they have asked themselves after seeing a former youth in care, as an adult, if they made the right decision by taking them out of the home, and having them raised in social services. Social workers have large caseloads, often spending most of their time in court. They work hard, try their best, and they see awful things, which they then have to take home with them at night, every night.

Foster parents are primarily left to their own, often dealing with foster children with various mental health needs, physical needs, and behavior problems. Most become foster parents because they want to have a baby or small child placed with them in hopes to lead to adoption, but they get children and teenagers instead. Many children entering their home have various emotional needs and behavioral problems stemming from the abuse and neglect they experienced, but also from being pulled out of their homes.

Growing up as at-risk youth in foster care, these young people are often lacking healthy role models and genuine love. Wanting to feel loved by your parents and others is a basic human emotion; some even say a need to survive in today's world. If this is missing in a young person's life, it is only natural to seek those things out. Sometimes

they are sought out in healthy ways, but often they are sought out in unhealthy ways. Formulating healthy relationships can be hard, when your examples are not healthy ones or consistent ones. More than 70% of young woman having experienced being raised in social services will become pregnant before the age of 21. More than half of those who have aged out of foster care will struggle to maintain employment as young adults, experiencing periods of homelessness and incarceration. Of these precious young people, 25% are likely to experience homelessness with the first four years from graduating high school or turning 18. Less than 25% of at-risk youth will go on to college and less than 3% that age out of foster care will earn a college degree.² But those percentages are equal to thousands of young people still entering college and university campuses all over the US. This means that while they may be attending college, they are still significantly more at risk in experiencing drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness, hunger, and difficulty in entering and maintaining connections and friendships during their college experience.

This is where as educators, and higher education professionals, we can help create opportunities to connect to these students, promote, advocate, and help direct their college experience in healthy ways. These young people do not need to be handled with kid gloves, if they are sitting in your classroom or across from you at your desk; they are already strong enough, from having to overcome all they have had to endure to get to that seat they are sitting in. Most likely they have already scanned the faces in the room, read body languages to scan for their safety, and most likely are sitting near an exit or their

² *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY 2014 data.*

back to a wall. This does not mean they do not want to be there, or will be the most difficult young person in the room, but it just means that those instincts that they have highly tuned through many years of abuse, neglect, and failed relationships has created certain behaviors in public, that they may do, even subconsciously. If you find them across from your desk, they have done all of the above, scanned what you are wearing, read your degrees and awards posted on your office walls, and searched for meaning in why their butt is sitting against a hard seat, with a barrier of the desk between you two. The barrier can instantly put up a defensive wall within the student, who struggles with the desk being correlated with authority figures, which often youth in care struggle with growing up. Authority figures have abused them, neglected them, taken them away from their families, forced them to move from home, forced them to lose friends, and schools. Can you see why this could be a barrier for connecting with these students? They are scanning the room, your face, trying to make meaning, and trying to figure out if you can be trusted, if they can let you in, if they can connect with you, if you are a supporter or a hater.

Young people often use the word “hater” as a slang term not just for people who may hate them, but for those who have often been mean, called them names, put them down, and who did not support them. So, as a college or university professional, are you a supporter or a hater? Are you a friend or foe? How can you relay to these students to make the best of a beginning of your connection with them in their higher education journey?

“Every Keystroke has the chance to break someone’s heart.” A classmate in

graduate school once said this out loud in a class, and I was stunned into silence. These words rang true, but for me it was a double-edged sword. The keystrokes were hit hard as I slammed out smaller and bigger pieces of writing but those keystrokes hurt me, and healed me at the same time. I have asked myself how, dozens of times while typing, how I can be hurting, remembering, sometimes tears stroking my cheeks as they float down, pooling below my chin and feeling better at the same time. In the beginning of this process my energies at defining it were futile. I would spend more time trying to break down the feelings without getting enough writing done. I thought this was the path to healing. Eventually I gave up and just kept writing, just kept typing, slamming the keystrokes until words kept flowing; paragraphs lined the pages onto the next and the next. I found a balance and improved energies but giving up to the process instead of concentrating on holding back the emotions and then letting it throw me off my writing game. I kept flowing, my words kept flowing, and my heart kept flowing.

As a young professional, I have certainly had my share of ups and downs, and a unique growing up experience that is unique but not rare. My experiences and positive drive for an improved future continues to make for prolific ideas and days in my life. From the age of three I was raised by people who were not my biological parents, I was raised in poverty, moments of trauma, drama, and abuse; interspersed with moments of love and kindness. Moving around, changing schools, relationships, human connections I struggled with finding a balance of age appropriate growing up experiences and feelings of safety.

I in turn grew up faster and harder than most, but pushed forward, grasping at the

good moments and forcing the horrible experiences into a changed energy, nothing discouraged my need for a better future and better human connections. Grabbing them, pulling, pushing, twisting, and tying them up into something that gave me energy to work harder, do better, give more. I love harder, and to always be willing to encourage others. I live my days in a continued supererogatory lifestyle, always showing those relationships in my life, that I will continue to go above and beyond in my life in order to connect with them further. I acknowledge today that this stems from my upbringing, and indeed leads to my continued struggle with putting myself first. I wish that these patterns were all altruistic, expecting nothing in return, but in a sense I am expecting something in return. I am expecting a deeper connection, support, and ultimately love in return.

1.3 MY STORY

Since I was a young girl I have always wanted to make connections. Always writing about the man on a great horse coming to save me, or the make-believe parents who would bend over backwards to raise me, support me, encourage me, help me wipe my tears and clean the scrapes on my knees after a hard fall from my bicycle, heck I dreamed of a bicycle of my own. I would spend hours in a quiet place, laying on a cool grass, feeling the warmth of the sun, as I would write in my private sanctuary. My sanctuary was accessed no matter what town I lived in, no matter who was providing the roof over my head, no matter what stressors and sadness I was surrounded by. My sanctuary was quiet, peaceful, and held history and connections. The history and connections were not mine, but they were of others. The words of books like I am

Regina,³ *Pippy Longstocking*,⁴ and *Island of the Blue Dolphins*⁵ held close to the reflection of how I saw myself. I was young, adventurous, dealing with various hardships, survival, and loss but always looking for adventure, love, and a family. These young girls in these stories did just that. They were alone, separated from family, and learned to adapt and survive. They built their “family”, with strangers, and friends. They created things from nothing, learning how to search out how to do things, finding beautiful treasures in nature. The strength of these girls and women gave me continued feelings of power. I connected with them, and their stories of struggle. I triumphed at finding a connection when I read Pippy tell her friends she was a “thing-searcher”.

“I don’t know what you’ve got in mind,” said Pippy, “but I’m not the sort to lie around. I’m a thing-searcher, you see. And that means I never have a moment to spare.”

“What did you say you were?” asked Annika.

“A thing-searcher.”

“What’s that?” asked Tommy.

“Someone who goes searching for things, of course! What else would it be?” said Pippy as she swept all the flour onto the floor into a little pile. “The whole world is full of things, which means there’s a real need for someone to go searching for them, and that’s exactly what a thing-searcher does.”⁶

This story helped give me healing. It helped me glimpse a sense of adventure and a different way of thinking while dealing with feelings of loneliness, pains from

³ Keehn, Sally M. *I Am Regina*. New York: Philomel Books, 1991

⁴ Lindren, Astrid, and Larn Child. *Pippy Longstocking*. New York: Viking 1959

⁵ Dell, Scott. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.

⁶ Lindren, and Child.

abuse and neglect and of not belonging. This story had the power to help heal me, and give me the spirit to move forward. This among many other books I have read throughout the years always had a message to give, and a purpose in helping me see a more positive perspective. I have gleaned something from every story I have read. This is why I believe in the fact that stories heal, that they have the power to heal. We learn something from them, no matter how big or small.

SPN writing does this on a more scholarly level. The SPNs we read tell a story and give us new meaning to truly hear a person, connect with them, make meaning with something we connect to the story with, and teach us a different way to move forward in our world.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do”.

My sanctuary gave me a safe place to explore these readings, and to try to heal. My sanctuary was a cemetery. I could curl up with a good book of the week, and read, or lay on my belly and write. I felt safe, comforted, the quietness surrounded me and did not yell at me. The sticks stayed on the trees and did not bite into my flesh, the cement of the stones would cool my aches and pains both physically by laying on them and mentally by the made up stories I would dream up about them. Sometimes I would be at my sanctuary and find a stone with a short date on it, listing that a child died too young, and I would feel awful for that family, out loud saying, “I’m so sorry” to no one except the universe. A child taken too soon. This was my first realization that other people had

it worse than I did. My sanctuary gave me gifts that I know play a role in who I am today, although growing up it was a safe place that no one would think to look for me and that made me feel protected. The time spent there gave me a stiffer backbone to face the not so pleasant happenings going on at home, wherever that was at the time. I would visit dozens of these sanctuaries through my years growing up, moving around. I would ride my bicycle to them, and then hide the bike, so that if the family I was living with were to drive by for any reason, they would not be signaled that I was in there. These were private, and in most places I had little to no privacy.

The reading I did in these places filled me, energized me, and helped me raise myself. I would read poetry, learn new words, writing them on note cards that I would stick on the ceiling of my bunk bed so I could read them as I drifted to sleep, pulling the sheets from the top bunk down as far as they could to make a fourth wall of my cave bed. Kim Kiyosaki writes in her book *Rich Woman*, “Words are powerful tools. Master them and your comprehension level of new information increases dramatically. When you come across a word you don’t understand...find it in a dictionary, understand what the word means and then continue reading”.⁷ I loved my bunk bed; it felt like a cave, it was small. To this day I love small spaces, but I love being out in nature. I would also read books researching human connections, and typical age appropriate books with their pages filled with adventure, family connections, love, passion, and compassion. The books taught me to connect, filled my head and my heart with dreams. These books made me feel safe, and made me strive for more education in whatever forms I could get

⁷ Kiyosaki, Kim. *Rich Woman: A Book on Investing for Women: Because I Hate Being Told What to Do!* Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007.

it. When I had a question or curiosity about life or the world, I went to books for the answer.

This led me to start working in libraries from a young age. I was lucky enough to be able to volunteer in the library twice a week in elementary school, and again in middle school. The middle school work in the library was fun, interactive with adults who loved reading, and they gave me compliments and encouragement as well as money. This was my first paying job and I was in the seventh grade. I would work afterschool and on Saturdays, putting books away, writing down the titles of books that caught my eye, eventually making a multi page list, now long forgotten, but one in which the librarian regularly added to. This list stayed at the library, posted all to see, and I liked it that way. I liked other people, and teachers seeing this list, and knowing what I was doing. This gave them new views of me, their eyes were less stern and concerned when they looked at me. I was not just the energized hormonal girl, listening to Nine Inch Nails, and 2pac, easily distracted, talking too much in class and study hall. They would be surprised that beneath all of the things they saw with their two eyes, I was someone who loved to read, loved the library, and sought out more written words than I had time for. Our students are more than what we see. One teacher made the connection of where I would spend my time when I skipped class every once in a while. This teacher would check on me, visually seeking me out in the library, but never would say a word. I never got into trouble, and when I realized this was going on, I started skipping class less often. Just this gesture of kindness made me feel connected to her, and in turn I wanted to give her my attention. I did not want to disappoint her. I once made full eye contact with her

while laying on my stomach, reading in the library, my feet bobbing back and forth, bent at the knee. I was reading a book on science experiments one could do easily, and glancing up, caught her eye. My heart skipped a beat, as I was busted, but she walked away and I did not get called into study hall, or to the principal's office. Because I was more talk than walk, and had more bark than bite, I never asked her why, I was too chicken to do so, and figured I may not want to call attention to my behavior anymore than was already noticed.

This I believe is what pushed forward my belief that education is important and empowering. Without the *Boxcar Children*, Laura Ingalls Wilder,⁸ and as I grew older, Walt Whitman, and other poets and the dozens of authors, my path may have been different. Stories of western love overcoming obstacles educated me too, and without the stories filling my head, empowering me to read and learn more, the seeds of education may not have kept getting dropped in the garden of stress and overgrowth that was my brain.

As I ended my junior year, just one credit shy from graduating a full year early from high school, I started applying for college. I was living on my own, with roommates in a small apartment in my beautiful small city. I was working multiple jobs, saving for college and a car, calculating hours weekly that equaled over one and a half fulltime jobs. I would read while standing, waiting for the city bus, would read while walking up the steps, swiping my card, and finding a seat without a second glance off the pages. I would read, and keep reading, transferring buses, while walking to the next job,

⁸ Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House on the Prairie*. New York: Harper, 1953.

while walking the hour home after work. The words kept me distracted and made me safe, even while walking in the neighborhoods I did not feel the most comfortable in. I would continue to read and dream about the future.

I wanted better connections to others, I wanted more access to more books, I wanted to make more money and have the American dream of some day having a career, family, a home I owned myself, and a car. I knew that education not only made me feel better but also made sense to support my enthusiasms of continuing to encourage others to seek higher education. I simply wanted to help others, wanted to be around to encourage reading of books, supporting improved career paths, and skill building.

Books, and articles found from magazines like the *Times*, *Entrepreneur*, and others, helped me learn about the cultures around the world, helped me learn how to best improve conversations and connections with others. I learned how to ask three questions of the person I was talking to in order to better connect with them, showing them I was more interested in what they were saying and in turn increasing feelings of warmth and friendliness to myself, making new friendships, new connections. I learned how to budget, save money, make better eye contact, how to shake a hand, how to make business plans, and how to set goals.

I read books to learn about budgeting, investing, running businesses and how to lead people. Books like *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, which gave me the message, “The single most powerful asset we all have is our mind. If it is trained well, it can create enormous wealth in what seems to be an instant.”⁹ and *Rich Woman*,¹⁰ taught me that there is a

⁹ Kiyosaki, Robert T., and Sharon L. Lechter. *Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids about*

different language around money being taught to the next generation of the people who have money. The Kiyosakis taught me how to budget, invest, and to pay myself first and then my creditors. I grasped these concepts, which helped me save thousands of dollars for college, helped me save thousands of dollars a year later for a newer car. They told me that while fear can warn us of life-threatening events, it can also be a killer – a killer of dreams, of opportunities of our own personal growth and passion, of living our life to its absolute fullest. I feared being poor and hungry again, I feared not finishing law school or graduate school. I feared never making enough money to feel comfortable enough to travel or take adventures around the world. I feared not finding a partner strong enough to partner with me in marriage, business, and in the raising of children. I feared not having the opportunity to be a leader to both my future peers, but also the next generation.

In closing, the larger message is that learning to read, and providing opportunities for children to connect with their personal stories, the stories of others, can help the individual to get through hard times, learn new things, and to think about the many possibilities for improvement in both themselves and the world, just from the power of reading. Our stories connect us, which only make our community and world a better place, through compassion and understanding.

Money-- That the Poor and Middle Class Do Not! New York: Warner Business Books, 2000.

¹⁰Kiyosaki, Kim. *Rich Woman*.

CHAPTER TWO: ENTRUST: THEIR PARENTAL GUIDANCE

IN MY TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

2.1 MY TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Books were my parents. They were the parents that inspired me, taught me things, got me excited to write, and told me through comparison the safest way to save money and the benefits of taking small risks with the stock market. They taught me how to grocery shop, make meals, build cabinets and trunks, and even a house. I learned how to make clothes, rugs, and how to raise and process animals for food. Things that the average person in America does not have to even think about with its privileges to have all of this at a store within driving distance, but as a young woman, poor, trying to make my dreams of higher education happen, learning these things came in handy in my survival and saving from day to day.

These parents taught me that society as a whole can be awful but good at the same time, that most of the people in the world want to love and be loved, they want someone to listen to them, and encourage them, and they want to be inspired, dream big, and live happy. They taught me that college was the path to continued learning and success, and so with the help of these parents I applied to Johnson State College. I read and researched what to include in an essay, what the process and steps were. I had human connections also that contributed to who I am and how I came to be, but the fulltime job of raising me came from books.

I remember moving day in undergraduate school. I drove up the hill in my “new to me”, purchased for \$400, spray painted black Plymouth Sundance. With its peeling

paint, loud muffler, exposed wires where someone had robbed me taking out my radio, and squeaky doors, I pulled up to my dorm, putting the four ways on, but my legs refusing to get out. Gazing out the front window, this being the only window I could see out as my car was packed with all my possessions. I watched parents of my new peers unpacking vehicles, laughing, mothers tearing up as they gazed at their young adult child moving to college, out of the family home for the first time. I momentarily flitted through snapshots of thoughts, and feelings, feeling the pain and loneliness of having no parents to experience this huge life change with me. No parents to help me move in, buy me my lunch pass, and help me get the various items needed to fill my backpack for classes. I had to navigate all of this alone, I would have to find my way, I would have to take care of myself, as I was used to doing. I momentarily felt the weight of it, and thought of turning back, and quitting college before I started. I was here, I was a college student, I had been accepted, and the admissions staff had looked at my grades, my GPA, my written essay and said they wanted me. I was wanted here, and I was going to stay. I felt as if I would be safe here. I was away from the lifestyle that surrounded me, away from drugs, dealers, guns, and away from the environment that had acquaintances shot to death in my driveway outside my building. I would no longer have to worry about my safety, or going down the wrong path like most of my friends. I wanted to survive from making my own money from using a college degree. I wanted a better life for myself. I lost many friends along the way, they thought I was better than them. I did not want to surround myself with people who constantly threatened to jump me, because they hated my dreams of a better future. I tried to talk to them, tried to ask them why could not they

too go to college, but in turn those conversations fell on deaf ears, as drugs, guns, and a harder life had the greater pull for them, a greater excitement.

In reality I was afraid, I was afraid constantly; I was afraid of my girlfriends' pimps, the drug dealers who at times made me feel safer, but who also made sure I had what they called a healthy sense of fear for them as well. I was afraid of how quickly I had surrounded myself with a community, which made me feel wanted, connected, but which also made me look over my shoulder daily. While I was not "deep in", I still wanted a better future. I wanted to get away, go to college and try to save myself. I had a steady roof, food to fill my belly, and a library full of new books and articles to explore, awaiting me at college. My past was not going to dictate my future.

I exited the vehicle and grabbed some stuff making the first trek of the two hundred yards that would lead me to my dorm building. My first spill came as I was walking with two garbage bags tied to the backpack on my back, as I rolled a full plastic multi-drawer cart, with another plastic bag sitting on top of it. The bumps of the pavement blocked the cheap wheel of the cart and down went the cart, my items spilling all over the pavement walkway. Struggling to pick up everything, in a short time, but in a time that felt like an hour, I hurried into my dorm and into my room before the first tear popped out. My "parents", through their thousands of pages of various stories, taught me that people in other places in the world are going through more. They taught me and inspired me that I was stronger, and would get through these moments, and most importantly they taught me that the tear of embarrassment for the splatter of belongings in front of a hundred strangers was small compared to the tears of accomplishment that I

was now a college student making my dreams of higher education and a better future happen. Those tears were bigger and much stronger. I missed my community greatly, I felt alone, but knew I had to leave them behind in order to save myself and to break the cycle of my birth family. I would go to college and I would rely on myself to make my own path.

Those strangers unpacking their vehicles would not know that I had no parents; they just saw me, a young 18-year-old female moving into college for freshman weekend. I entered a new stage of belonging, that late day. I entered blending into the setting where no one could see my scars, physically or emotionally. I looked at the various scars on my body, remembering the trauma and drama that made them appear and thought to myself, I would take a couple more physical scars than any more emotional scars. This was a new start, a new chapter, a new adventure and I was ready for anything. I was creating a better future for myself, and would in turn, make myself available to continue to inspire and encourage my future students to do the same.

That first weekend, freshman weekend, I spent more time in the library getting acquainted with my “new parents” than I did in the prescribed activities planned for entering students. I still met new friends that weekend which helped me pass the time, but I had a goal to complete undergrad school as quickly as possible to move onto law school or graduate school. While working hard, eventually most of my friends moved away, due to the lack of diversity on campus, and dropped out, moving back in with their parents or their boyfriends out of stress or pure laziness. I kept moving forward, facing fears, dealing with issues and stressors head on as I had been taught, taking classes,

working part-time both on campus and part-time at a transportation company. I was making my own path. I struggled during college, like other young people. I struggled to make meaning out of stressors, friendships, break-ups with boyfriends, and a poor grade a teacher gave me. I struggled sometimes with self-doubt and belonging. I struggled with fears of finishing or even if I could do college at all.

I have the power to make my own meaning. Meaning making in my life is a constant connection to my past. I forced myself to remind myself where I came from and how far I had come. I had come a long way from being that dark frizzy haired, caramel colored skin, gray-hazel eyed, tiny girl to being an educated young woman. I was no longer frail both mentally and physically. What did this mean for me? It meant that I had the power to take charge of my life and had since I was 17. I had made my life and my family from what I decided to put in it, and, without the help of my real family. I often wonder if I was better off not having a typical family, but then, and still today, I know I cannot let that thought sit long in my conscious mind. I am who I am, and I grew up without a family; without my own family.

During my time in college, in a particularly rough spot, my birth mother's father, my grandfather, became deathly sick in his elderly care home, and it was communicated through a train of family members that I should go to his bedside to say a farewell. I went of course, fearing that I would regret it if I did not, but also felt out of place as I really did not know this man. I drove through the winding roads, hoping to get there in time, not sure of what I would say or do when I got there. After the long drive, I got out of my car, straightened my outfit, wishing my unruly hair would cooperate, as I was

walking into a room where my maternal side of my family was fair skinned, blue eyed, and blond. I was the standout, and that had always made me slightly uneasy, even more so in times when I was told I was standing out among them. My super dry hair and skin, shades darker than the rest of that side of my birth family was another example of how I was indeed different, and increased feelings of loneliness and of feeling separate.

2.2 LOSING A FAMILY MEMBER

When I received that call that my grandfather had less than 24 hours to live, I sat in my car at that gas station, wondering if I should go right or left, right being towards the highway, and left being towards my grandfather's bedside. I contemplated how I would feel if he passed away without me saying goodbye. I had never uttered the words, "I love you" to him, even the one time he said it to me, the previous year. I questioned if this was a sign from God? Did I want to see him? I did not know him, but he was still blood. This may have been a test to see if I could stand being in a room with a woman who had abused me, and put me in harm's way, along with others who never had given me much love or affection to begin with.

This lack of affection I have realized has affected me, as I am not an affectionate person, although I crave to be on an often daily basis. I force myself to think through how to give people who are close to me hugs. My mind works through the step by step motions on how to hug my loved ones, or a friend who is crying. I have taken some of my grandfather's traits passed down through the bloodlines, I have been told.

Stubbornness and being "hard" are those traits. Racing thoughts rushing around bouncing from my left and right hemisphere of my brain, I finally decided that I would

go left.

I walked into the nursing home, giving the name of who I was here to see, and was directed to follow the nurse down the hallway. As I entered the room, I heard the nurse announce my presence, “Your daughter is here.” I wanted to throw up, the back of my neck got hot, my throat burned, and anxiety felt like it was filling my lungs, decreasing my breaths. I felt alone, I felt betrayed by my close friends, and boyfriend, who I did not even invite or ask to come with me. I was put in a situation where I came face to face with one of my abusers – my birth mother. My head screamed to run, with my back to the wall, I pushed the instant feeling of fear, hatred, and disgust from the front of my brain, and made eye contact with her for the first time in years. I missed the safety of campus and my books deeply at this moment. Campus through the years had become a safe haven for me, away from trauma, drama, and struggles, although it had its own. It is a weird kind of thought that flitted into my head at the moment.

I thought about how weird it was that as a young adult, I had just realized I may have only made eye contact with this woman a handful of times, literally, in more than two decades. I did not know her, she did not know me, and I wanted to say out loud, to the nurse, “I am not her daughter”. The thickness of the saliva coating my now burning throat stopped me from saying it out loud as I held eye contact for a few seconds. I let her look me in the eye, as I moved to the other side of the room, thanking the nurse for seeing me in, as she left the room. I was forced to sit in a room with her, a half sister and my maternal grandmother. All blood relatives and all women who make my blood boil. There was a time when I was a youngster where all I wanted was for my birth family to

love me, to step up and take care of me, to put aside their life, and be the family that I needed. This was never to be, as I grew up without this and found and made my own “family”.

When I walked to my grandfather’s side, placing my hand on his shoulder, tuning out the woman, my birth mother talking in baby talk, creeping me out from across the bed, I felt like I made the right decision. I was here for this man, my grandfather and only him. She was trying to talk to me like I was a child, because in her mind, this is where she left off with me. This was part of her illness, her twisted mind, to treat me like a child, like “her child”, and maybe she would get me to talk to her, to love her. My head ached, and my brain stayed in the moment, as my heart hurt. I wanted to drown her out, and I did what I knew best, I reached for comfort, in “my parents”. I walked over to my purse, my heels clicking on the hard floor, breathing in the smell of antiseptic and death. I knew what I needed to do for both myself and my grandfather. I lay my hand on my grandfather’s shoulder, and could hear his rough breaths, while I read to him parts from Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. He shuttered at one point when I read him Frankl’s meaning of suffering on page 112. “We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed.”¹¹ My mind raced as I was trying to think about my feelings of my 81 year old grandfather passing away at my fingertips, literally. This man I had a year ago had a conversation with, where he proceeded to tell me he loved me and was proud of me, at the last of the few times he had ever seen me. This man so frail looking,

¹¹ Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

rasping for air as his lungs filled up with liquid, had said a few nice things to his grandchildren or children for that matter. Always a selfish, hard man, my grandmother divorced him, young and with four children, my mother being the youngest, to escape him, and his mental illness after he came home from war. My grandmother raised her children, worked, and built a life of her own. She is the real hero in my maternal birth families' legacy. But yet I found myself saddened by the fact that I chose to push my birth family away and have no relationship with them, particularly my grandparents, because I could not handle nor wanted to surround myself with ridicule, abuse, and the constant feeling of being the black sheep, the standout, even as an adult.

I allowed the abuse that I had received from my birth mother, and her constant string of boyfriends, and friends, to keep me apart from family members, as an adult. Growing up, being in foster care gave me that distance, and I was grateful. While I saw my grandmother as strong, she was also my birth mother's advocate, and all too often pointed out my outside looks as being different from others in the family, never giving me the feeling of full love that I was looking for.

I prayed that God would protect me. I was like that little abused girl when I walked into that room, quiet, shy, and bright eyed. I had said my hellos and had walked to my grandfather's side, I was in the moment, I was present, and no one was going to take this away from me. I paused from reading a few moments later, and said "Grandpa, I am here, it's Lynn, your eldest grandchild. I chose you. I came here to tell you I love you. I want to read you this book I am reading for class." I did not know if that was the right time to read to him, but I could not just sit there, and not do anything. I could not sit

and listen to his rough breathing, and the breaths of my abusers. I had to choose to live next to death and move forward, instead of any other options that may come up. I had chosen family, as hard as it was; I chose to make a decision based on feelings...my feelings...my heart and not my head. An hour later my grandfather shuttered and took his last breath, as my hand remained on his shoulder, my own left tricep hurt with its position. I was next to my grandfather, whom I loved, even if only in a small way and I had told him so. I was capable of loving, giving love, and I wished I would always remember this. The only time I had uttered those “I love you” words was on his deathbed, but I had done it. I had let it go freely and let the weight of that jump off my chest. I finally realized at that very moment that I could fully be there for someone in need and touch him or her, hug him or her, I could connect to them on a physical and emotional level at the same time. I came to forgive him. It has taken over 20 years to get that weight off my chest, and in a moment it was gone and I did not feel awkward. I had finally understood some of my own meaning making, which I know will lead me to my own happiness.

2.3 MEANING MAKING

“The Secret of happiness is good love and good work...in this order.” It is important that an individual come together with their own meaning making in order for it to be true for them. When individuals struggle creating their own meaning of life, situations or of general happenings, it becomes easy for them to grab onto other’s meaning, by asking them what they think or feel of it, like I had been doing for over 20 years. I had always asked my social workers what they thought about my birth family. I

had always asked whether or not I should pursue a relationship with those in my birth family who had not abused me. No one had ever given me a yes or no answer. They had only said that it was a difficult decision and that in time I would make it on my own. These women were always great teachers; teaching me but without telling me the answers.

I stand firm in believing that as teachers who come from all kinds of meaning, we will teach and lead in many different ways. It is important to try and make sure we are not pushing our own meaning on our students. These students look up to us to show them the many diverse paths that could be taken and it is up to them to take one path or several in search for an end or a conclusion of their own meaning. This is in fact, their own meaning making. We are just the supporters and cheerleaders along the way.

“The meaning of life is this: try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, have regular bowel movements, have people in your life you can love, get some walking in, but, most of all, try to live in harmony with folks of all creeds and nations. Oh, and it doesn’t hurt to have a cuddly pet.” This is originally from Monty Python and is quoted in the book *Helping College Students Find Purpose*.¹² This quote is so simple but rings so true. It is stated simply, but yet takes on such a deep meaning, it really packs a wallop on you.

As a quarter-lifer myself I can relate to working hard at school and then years later lifting my head up from the books and from my career only to find this space of loneliness in my life, which leads me to question my life, career, and my own choices,

¹² Nash, Robert J. and Michele Murray. *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*. John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

what makes me happy, and how to make it all mean something which can lead to changing it for a more positive outcome. I find it hard to make connections to other students as I have begun to recognize I tend to be drawn to others similar to myself, I try to make friendships with them and it does not fulfill me due to the lack of closeness that I long for. Those friendships are what I am familiar with, it is what I have always had since putting my nose to the grindstone and pushing forward to get ahead both in my education and careers. It is almost as if I straddle two worlds. My past, of unhealthy and dangerous surroundings and relationships, and the other of healthy relationships and dreams of a better future filled with adventure and love. I want and crave a different kind of relationship with friendships, a different kind of closeness and bond, but yet I continue seeking the same type of peers to have these relationships with.

I put all my libidinal energy forward and at the end of the day I have nothing else to share with anyone, let alone my partner. So how do I change this? I have worked so hard for a stronger future, a strong career. I find myself questioning whether or not the career I let others persuade me into is really what I want. How did I not take a breather to explore my passions, my creativity? Where was the adventure that led me to live for life? Is this career really what I want for myself? Sometimes I feel as if it is more comfortable to stick with being a social worker for now, to keep the safety net there. I think the safest thing for me to do right now, although I always do what is safe, is to take more risks. I feel as if graduate school, more education, has taught me that a change in my career is a healthy risk

I once felt lost, but in graduate school I was found. "The way to value life, the

way to feel compassion for others, the way to love anything with greatest depth is to be aware that these experiences are destined to be lost.”¹³ I read this partway through graduate school, and as soon as I read the last word, “lost”, I found myself in tears. How can this small quote from Nash and Murray’s book make me tear up in a split second? Is it because the words resonate within? Is it because I do not have much to lose? Growing up without a family, bouncing around as an orphan, in and out of placements, I found myself to be “better” off without a family. When I became a teen and was asked if I wanted to be adopted at age 13 I said no. I was not connected with a family at that time, and had no need to be a part of one.

I had already been pushed around, abused and lost a handful of relationships, which created feelings of loss and then what one social worker called a hardened heart. She told me that I would keep the “cycle” going, I would be like my mother due to my behaviors and hardened heart. I told her to go to hell, and picked up my head. Placing my steel gray-yellow eyes on her “baby blues”, I softened my voice with the last energy I could muster before tears and said, “Mark my words lady, I will not keep the cycle going, I am better than that, just because I want to be. I will prove to you that I can make it through life with few connections, I don’t need anybody, I will go onto college and make something of myself.” I turned quickly around, tears stinging my eyes and I briskly walked to my foster mother’s car. I jumped into the back seat and told her to please drive away quickly. Later on when we got home I went straight to bed, cried, and repeated to myself those words until I fell asleep.

¹³ Ibid.

I worked hard after that, getting good grades, and misbehaving like a typical teenager. Talking on my cell phone during school, skipping class, smoking across the street from school grounds, drinking alcohol, and even smoking weed. All the while getting good grades, I was a star pupil during French class, helped cover books at the library, and repeatedly got kicked out of algebra for reading books. Eventually my teacher worked out a plan that since my homework was always done, and I seemed to finish my work ahead of everyone else, that when my work was done, I could leave class instead of reading and disturbing others. I was a bit nerdy, but I wanted to graduate early to go onto college.

During these bad behaviors, I had good grades, making scholastic journeys of my own and I attended church. Many of my different foster homes, and group homes, either did not attend regularly or just on holidays, but no matter where I lived I found a congregational church to connect with. I participated in church youth groups and activities, always trying to make meaning of my horrible life, but without making strong relationships.

Going to church made me feel closer to God, and God was my one constant in my life. “Secure personal attachments are a necessary prerequisite for making meaning.”¹⁴ I wonder if I have struggled with secure personal relationships in my life. This stems from a rough time obtaining them growing up due to changing schools and placements so often, sometimes yearly. As a grownup I struggle still with obtaining or maintaining them. I try but sometimes feel as if I do not have time. I have constantly worked hard at

¹⁴ Ibid.

getting through my education, graduating high school and undergrad early, to work on my professional career, to get ahead of my peers and to prove that social worker wrong. To prove the millions of people around the world wrong. To prove the belief that as a former kid in care, I will never make something of myself, because I am “at-risk”, or disadvantaged. But this finds me at a crossroads of quarter-life crisis. I look up and find that I have few secure personal attachments. I have put all my energy into my career as a social worker. On page 188 of *Helping College Students Find Purpose*, the quote, “They cathect their work with all their libidinal (sexual) energy, with nothing left over to share with an intimate partner”, this is me. I work so hard sometimes 50 to 100 hours a week that I have nothing for anyone, especially myself. I make little time to reflect and when free time allows, I find myself drowning out in front of a television for hours to escape. Have a made it yet? Have I broken the cycle? The simple answer is yes.

I think to myself if I am at the same stage as those I am trying to help find meaning and purpose, can I really be helpful? Is it okay to ask meaning making philosophical open-ended questions to others, when I feel I need to answer them myself? If I am a college student, grad student really, who is searching for purpose and meaning making in my life, can I help my peers do the same? Will I always be on a meaning making journey? Does meaning making in our lives ever end? Is this something that in the end can help me not only find purpose and meaning making in my life, but also something that can pull me closer to peers in hopes to develop more personal relationships and secure personal attachments to signal the answer to what is meaning in my life?

I can sit still finally and realize that I do have my own power to make my own meaning, and that my future holds what I will make of it. I may have started my life's journey surrounded by negative energies, and influences, but instead of being just positive energy for others, I will be a positive and loving energy to others and myself. After all I deserve it. Always the problem solver and the researcher, I can comfortably say I have solved that problem.

A simple six step collaborative problem solving method from the book *People Skills* by Doctor Robert Bolton¹⁵ written in the late eighties supported my day-to-day life both with school, and work. The six steps are simple and are as follows. Step one is to define the problem in terms of needs, not solutions. The second step is to brainstorm possible solutions. The third step is to select the solutions or a combination of solutions that will best meet both parties' needs. The fourth step is to plan who will do what, where, and by when. The fifth step is to implement that plan, and the final step is to evaluate the problem solving process and at a later date how well the solution turned out. I remember struggling at school with a class, and writing down these steps in order and bringing them to my professor who helped me lock in the answers and helped me complete the class successfully, and to seek out supports in which helped me not only finish but feel successful. The same professor checked in with me on the process and it helped us overcome our conflict together and I passed with a B. These six steps have an affirming quality in every step. Working to overcome conflict and complete the task or problem makes everyone involved feel heard and supported. I continue to give these six-

¹⁵ Bolton, Robert. *People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts*. Touchstone: 1986.

step collaborative problem solving method process to friends, and when I remember it use it, and I use it myself still today. I hope to continue to use it in the future both as a higher education professional, but also as a future business owner.

After graduating with my bachelor's degree I continued my work at a crisis detox and public inebriant center. My nights were filled with the drunk homeless, the typical opiate addict detoxing, and the influx of college students from the surrounding universities who were taken to my program to get assessed. While sitting in the back of a police car, coming from anywhere in our small city, and the other towns throughout the county, officers would pull in the back of the building to maintain confidentiality. Giving me brief synapses of what took place to get them placed in protective custody and in the back seat of a police cruiser, the officer would relay the story and step aside.

Stepping up to the open back door, or the window of the cruiser, which was rolled down, I would talk to the individual about what brought them to me. I would listen to their side of the story, sometimes freezing, in the varied wet elements of what is a typical six months of a cold, wet, winter.

Options for anyone being driven to detox to get an assessment was to either come into the program, sobering up in a warm building and warm bed, and sobering up until they reached below the legal limit to be discharged and go back to the dorms, or to their apartments, or to get sent to sober up in jail. Sobering up in jail meant no guarantee of a bed or blanket and sleeping alongside other inebriated individuals waiting until they too had reached the magic number to get released. Only this magic number if sent to jail was zero.

My first six months on the job had me constantly surprised at the fact that the college students were always the ones more mouthy in the back of the squad car but more needy upon entering the building. Most of the threats I got were “my dad is a lawyer and will sue you for everything you have if you don’t let me out of here right now!” Most of the time, I would repeat in a forced parental tone, although close to their age, that if they did not simmer down and stop threatening then they would be sobering up in jail laying on the floor next to a homeless man until they reached zero, on the breathalyzer machine, or they could stay calm, agree to stay in their room and be released in a few hours when they were below the legal limit.

Most of the time this was successful and I was able to convince them to come inside to sober up. I spent hundreds of my nights in the eight years working there, talking to young students about their drinking and partying. I listened as dozens of girls said they just kept drinking and then decided to walk home, being picked up by the police while stumbling home or being found laying on the ground. The next morning those same kids, more sober, but still intoxicated, made promises to never drink again. They talked about their struggles with school, classes, the pressures from their parents, and the struggle to handle being overloaded with schoolwork in a regimented format, forced to not have the flexibility to explore more of their passions, and how this would ultimately lead them to partying harder than initially planned. They just wanted to let loose, make connections, party with their friends, make new friends, be cool, have fun, and to forget their stressors both of the past and the pressures of the future.

This job at the crisis substance abuse program supported my thought that I wanted

to become a counselor and work in higher education. Soon though I began to realize that I wanted to listen, encourage, and motivate students in college but I also wanted to take part in the happenings, I wanted to help them pick out their schedules, I wanted to be a physical presence to their college career, and their success. I was too drained seeing people at the rough end, too tired of cleaning up vomit, dealing with the continued stress of such a short term solution to a crisis. I wanted to work in a college or university setting to continue to do all of this, plus setting up the fun events that allowed them to have enjoyable and healthy college experiences. I believe that this turns out successful college students to dream success for themselves, but also supports them in finding themselves and making meaning out of their college experience that will lead them to a future, hopefully filled with positive experiences, a sturdy backbone, and a continued drive for happiness stemming from their college experiences and the support they received while in college.

College students today come from a wide variety of backgrounds, holding different and varying depths of emotional and physical scars. They strive for a better future, adventure, and the continued search for meaning making in their lives.

In Dennis Ford's book, *The Search for Meaning*, he makes perfect and simple sense when he writes, "The purpose and meaning of play is play, just as the purpose of joy is joy. Life is meaningful so long as we are fully engaged in intrinsically satisfying experiences."¹⁶ This quote is posted on yet another sticky note, in my home, to remind me to live simply. My past has formed how I make decisions, it has shaped what I

¹⁶ Ford, Dennis. *The Search for Meaning*. University of California Press: 2008.

believe to be right and wrong, it has created a sense of self that I have helped build to be stronger, but still struggle with similar things as the typical college student, or adult woman struggles with on top of my own unique current ups and downs of adulthood.

As an adult in graduate school, I have taken the full five years to complete it, I will finish by the end of this fall. I have worked fulltime and more than an hour away from school for the majority of my graduate career. I have faced the continued fears that are small, such as will I make it to class on time, and I have stressed multiple times a week driving to classes from work. The anxiety filling the car like helium in a balloon, almost choking me, as I push the pedal to go faster, going through the various to do lists in my brain and reviewing what I did for class, what I still need to get done, what homework I need to do in the 24 hour open study room on campus after class for tomorrow's class.

I have also taken time off from graduate school in order to work to afford to keep a roof over my head, support my family, co-parenting my niece and nephew and this forced me to be home at a certain times for them, for our animals – canines and the farm animals I was raising to put food on the table and to sell for another avenue of bringing in income. I sacrificed my dreams and myself for my loved ones, encouraging and supporting them. I stayed at home at night, making sure that dinner was processed, made, baked, and plated for everyone to eat. Sometimes I felt as if cooking and baking, and keeping house was a fulltime job. In today's world women or even men rarely have the financial opportunities to make this kind of life their only fulltime job. My subconscious said if I continued to make everyone happy, eventually my dreams of

having a family of my own and finishing graduate school to work in higher education would eventually never come to fruition.

As every fine young adult does, I turned to my “parents” for support. I searched through books, searched out the pages of words, spending dozens of hours in the library and Barnes and Noble getting the support and parental guidance to changing my current situation and struggle and to help boost my gumption to go back to school and to push for my dreams to once again take center stage. My “parents”, turned out great pages of advice as I read *The Happiness Project* by Gretchen Rubin.¹⁷

In her book Gretchen writes about her journey to creating a deeper happiness. She is already happy but wants to be happier. I identified with that. I was happy, although on the low end of a scale, and I wanted to be happier. What a great parent!! She told me to make a resolution chart, and I did. I made a list of resolutions that I would post and check off. Much to the annoyance of my partner at the time, who did not find my sense of adventure, and resolution completion project helpful. I made a resolution to connect with members of my birth family, and visited them for two weeks, twice in a year. I spent my days during the visit, driving their car, watching my cousin’s little boys, cooking dinners for them, baking and enjoying myself. They were healthy members of my family, and how immediate was their love, and trust. It was a beautiful opportunity for me to vacation in a warmer climate, which the south offered, a connection to family, and space to make adventures and explore. Other than my time in Nicaragua, and my various road trips around New England, I had not done much traveling.

¹⁷ Rubin, Gretchen. *The Happiness Project*. Harper, 2011.

I made a resolution to get out more, to make connections to other people besides that of my clients I was working with as a community mental health case worker. This resolution list had me spending less time at home, fulfilling myself with adventure, and feeling connected to the true Lynn, the happier Lynn, the Lynn that was filled with compassion, and passion.

This eventually led me to a broken long term relationship. I stayed in it too long, due to feeling as if I could not strike out on my own because I did not make enough money. Would I find another relationship, would I find true love, would I find a real partner who loved all of me? I had hoped that my future would lead to me having children and a deeper love that I dreamed of – the family, my family. The words of parental guidance from *Rich Woman* came back to me. Too many woman alike do this out of fear. I was not facing my fear, and I was not moving forward towards dreams of higher education, working in higher education, and even of having children. Thinking about calculating cash on cash return on investments, I formulated my own rendition of what opportunities were to give me a greater return on investment or ROI. After calculating in a rough manner I had decided that completing graduate school, and changing jobs would give me a greater ROI over staying in relationships that only drained me instead of built me up.

With the return of attending graduate school, a new job, my long-term relationship ended, putting me face to face with the fears. I was working, and attending school, continuing to live by a budget, which when heating oil came due, the food budget got pinched real hard, and I was constantly living in 50 degrees. I spent my sleeping

hours, although limited due to traveling from work and school, having a long commute, were spent in sweats, double layers of pants and hoodies, and a hat. I refused to let the heat be set above 50 degrees. It was only me, and I could not afford the oil at even that temperature. While living like this does not afford guests to visit, it was a fear I faced everyday. I struggled with the fact that it was 2015 and I should be living life to the fullest above 50 degrees. Winter was hard, but like the Regina from Keehn's book, I am Regina, I could deal with it. I had many blessings. I was in school, connecting with others, I had a roof over my head, and I would say out loud to myself, "for crying out loud Lynn, you have dealt with worse, and there are millions of people in the world with a quarter of what you have." I never forget the blessings in my life. I am thankful for what I have, the opportunities that have led me to where I am. I continue to push forward with the cup being half full. I smile, laugh, make others smile and laugh, and continue to have an inner drive in me that stiffens my neck, that supports my head being held high. I am thankful and blessed that the guidance of "my parents" have taught me people skills, how to assert myself, listen to others, strive for a better future, and to continue to lead with compassion and kindness towards everyone that crosses my path. I refuse to feel feelings of hopelessness, because they are futile. My emotivism has continued to lead me on a path of adventure and success in various shades.

As a future college administrative staff, I hope to continue to support my students in creating and participating in experiences, that will help them make college fun, enjoyable, and connected to others. Parents such as Piero Ferrucci¹⁸ and the Dalai

¹⁸ Ferrucci, Piero. *The Power of Kindness: The Benefits of Leading a Compassionate Life*. Tarcher, 2007.

Lama¹⁹ cultivated an inner equanimity that I hope to do both with my future students and my own children. These students will come to my office with tears, and anxieties, and will receive support, encouragement, and plans of next steps forward to get them over their bumps in the road and will end up winning the day. I will encourage continued reflection and contemplation of their interactions with their peers and experiences. I believe part of my daily mottos of “winning the day”, and “Inomnia Paratus”, meaning ready or prepared for anything have helped me create a triumphant spirit that leads me to continuous wins and an improved push towards a better future. I hope to connect and inspire my students do find the same. Below is a letter to the current students and future students I am referring to.

Dear Student,

You are beautiful, you deserve to be here, you are a champion, and although you are away from your community, your supports, however they may look, you have a beautiful opportunity to not only create a community here on campus, but also to create community that has the potential to become like family, and can carry you after college.

The struggle that you went through to get to this place was hard, tiring, and sometimes felt defeating. While I don't want to diminish those struggles of your past, I don't want to diminish the potential you have to create an improved future for yourself and for future generations of students and young adults who will cross your path after you receive your diploma from your college or university. You will have days where you feel defeated, tired from your coursework, the emotions of a young person as they travel

¹⁹ Dalai Lama. *Beyond Religion*. Mariner Books, 2012.

through their relationships and friendships, and sometimes you will even have times when the tears running down your cheeks make you struggle to make a stronger step forward. I struggled at times feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, even during grad school. Not only was I trying to get through school, but I was also working to pay for school, and the roof over my head. Without parents I had no one to help me, neither financially nor with providing a place for me to live. I looked at each struggle with a lens that I would get through it, even though I may be was crying, lacking sleep, crunching down on school work, missing work, missing sleep, trying to balance all of that, while struggling with the thoughts creeping into my head, that I wanted to be more like those other students I saw, more carefree, more able to do what I thought to be normal activities.

Here's the real answer, we do!! Our unique upbringing does provide a challenge, does create more emotions and potential feelings of loneliness, as well as educational struggles, but we have access to great resources on campus in the student support services offices that can at least help us with the struggles we come across with reading, writing, studying...etc. This office supported me during my undergraduate education, I connected with my student support services professional, and would come to her many times crying that I was struggling to write this paper, couldn't figure out the meaning in a book assigned for class, that I had reread but felt like was way above my head. This woman helped me sign up for classes, helped me write a resume, and more importantly was a great listener and a champion of me. Yes, I found a champion! I felt supported, motivated, and connected to another human being, who supported me in many

ways just as a parent would do, when their student called home with the same feelings and frustrations. She saw me, knew me, and listened to me.

To the college students who are similar to me, bi-racial but blendable, as I was once referred as, those with hidden physical and emotional scars, and those that have continued struggles with basic needs being met beyond their childhood and into their college years, I am and will be here for you. We are not invisible, we are here, are human, and our stories of struggle and future positive adventures and experiences will be real and full of meaning making opportunities. These positive experiences in college will soon outweigh those negative experiences of the past and in turn create an improved future.

Create friendships, and connections with adults on campus. Professors and professionals also went to college, and while they may not have the same background as we do, they too went to college and struggled with many of the same things you will. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there, and be open to support, feedback, and above all else boundary setting. Part of the biggest lessons I learned in undergraduate school was setting boundaries, and keeping to more of a timeline and schedule. This was learned in large part through the support and modeling of my professors, campus staff, as well as my peers. They may not have known what they were doing, but through watching them, and being held accountable by both my professors, and myself, I learned this.

The biggest comfort to me, was hearing other students, and professionals share similar struggles. This normalized a lot of my struggles. Every college student feels lonely, left behind, or feels tired after late nights studying or cramming for exams. THIS

IS NORMAL; THIS IS THE LIFE OF A COLLEGE STUDENT. You are no different, and if you look at it in a more positive light, it feels good to acknowledge that we have aspects about us that are normal. Live it, dive into it and thrive. Your past doesn't have to dictate your future. You are not alone, you are beautiful and powerful, and can make a difference in your life, and also in the world. The world is our oyster, and while I may have never eaten one, I know that my experience in college gave me the confidence to not only try one if I want to, but also to learn to dig one up, and create a experience out of it.

So my college champions; what are you going to do with your experiences? Experience life, outside of the classroom, blast silly music and dance around your dorm room, music to me was and is powerful, go to a sports game, buy some college swag that has your college or university name on it, schedule time in your calendar to experience the wonderful opportunities your campus has to offer, join a club or sports team, and more importantly try something new, all the while keeping your chin up, and harness the inner power of being the champion you are. You can do this! Erik Hutchinson sings a song named, "Okay it's alright with me", this song I have played often. It's about a guy going through a crazy busy life, and his wanting to share it. I played it when I felt down, when I needed inspiration, when I needed a champion, when I needed an energy boost. While you may not connect with it, the lyrics are up for interpretation, and you still may get into the beat. Please download his song, and listen to it! I hope you have a handful of songs that make you feel the same, maybe even words, poetry, or other forms of art that help create warmth, positive feelings, and inner inspiration. Entrust in the process of

exploration into making meaning through music. If you don't, search it out or create it.

You are that powerful.

“Okay it’s alright with me some things are just meant to be
It never comes easily and when it does I'm already gone
I'm practically never still more likely to move until I end up alone at will
My life continues inching along

[Chorus]

When Bernadette comes I get lost on her tide
She's much too sweet and she's always gonna be
When I return to her arms and her eyes
It might not be the same but it's alright with me

Okay it’s alright with me some people are scared to see
What's happening frequently but I would never shy from a fight
Heartbeat with a high demand often will go hand in hand
But I'm sick of just starting plans I wanna spend the rest of my life.

[Chorus]

When Bernadette comes I get lost on her tide
She's much too sweet and she's always gonna be
When I return to her arms and her eyes
It might not be the same but it's alright with me

It's alright wish me
It's alright with me
It's alright with me
It's alright wish me
It's alright with me
It's alright with me

Okay its alright with me some things are just meant to be, it never comes easily
and when it does I'm already gone.”

-Eric Hutchinson

Best Wishes,

Your Champion, Lynn

2.4 THE FIGHT TO BREAK THE CYCLE, CO-PARENTING THE NEXT GENERATION.

My siblings and others I have had the pleasure and not so pleasure of meeting, have had similar experiences like I had, and turned the other direction. They continue to struggle, sometimes allowing addictions of various kinds grasp and hold their life in a never-ending struggle of strife, poverty, depression, anxiety, and overall illness.

I have helped raise in parts of, and co-parented, both my niece for the first year and a half of her life, and my nephew for the nine years he has been alive. While I love all of my siblings' children, I feel bonded to Bella and Skyler the most. I feel a deeper sense of belonging with them, as I hope they will reflect similar feelings as they grow up and can understand and make meaning of their own lives.

Bella was born to my sister, and is bright eyed and quiet. I remember the drama that was around her birth, I was so uncomfortable at even being near family members who I barely knew, some whom I still bore physical and emotional scars of their wrong doing. I just keep praying to God that I just wanted this little one to come out perfect, and for my sister to get her life together, so this baby did not experience what we had. I wanted my sister to join me in breaking the cycle. I had such high hopes for my sister with Bella's birth. I knew that my sister struggled with mental illness, and was addicted to the drama that surrounded her life. She did not want to, she said she could not step away. I reminded her that her stable upbringing, stable foster family, private school education and trips and vacations to Costa Rica, and Ireland meant she knew better. She knew different, and should strive and fight for it.

As I held Bella, I kissed her warm forehead, and promised that no matter how distant our paths took us away from each other, I would never be too far away to come to her side if she needed me to. I told her I loved her, and though her mother had her struggles, she loved her too. I told her she would forever be “family”. I spent days, weeks, and months, until a year and a half after Bella was born, I had finally had enough of the travel, trying to stay in college, take care of my sister, her boyfriend, and her baby had taken a toll. I was sick of coming to visit, buying dinner, groceries, various other needs, spending nights on a dirty couch. I was doing what I had always done, taking care of my sister when needed, and here I was doing it again, but her small child as well. I was sick of seeing a dirty household, seeing Bella’s environment was a direct picture of what we had experienced while living with our birth mother, and there for warranted calls to the local social services office. Bella was not being taken care of, I was constantly worried, after watching her grab trash out of the garbage can to eat, and the grime and filth from smoking and just general filth from not being cleaned for large periods of times. Bella was being neglected and I could not be there fulltime to protect her. Eventually I moved farther away for a fulltime job, and months later Bella was put in foster care, and eventually adopted. I was angry at my sister, I was angry at social services, and most of all I was angry at myself for allowing it to happen. How could I let social services tear apart the next generation? The next layer of family? How could I allow this to happen, and break my promises to Bella?

It is many years later, and I have seen Bella, have experienced a dinner with her adopted mother and her adopted siblings. She is doing great, and I am given a chance to

be on friendly terms with her adopted mother, and I get to see her grow up, even if its at a distance. If and when she needs me, wants me, I will be there for her. I am so thankful to her adopted parents, and siblings. They are giving her deep love, and belonging. But to Bella, I will send this out into the universe, I love you forever, and you will forever be a part of me.

Skyler is a beautiful and loving young boy. At nine, although he shies away, he continues to express his emotions, and still asks to go on adventures. I love him so much, and wonder how my heart can have a deeper love of my own children, when I have them in the future. I remember his traumatic birth like it was yesterday. My sister was on oxygen, struggling for days in labor, tired from lack of sleep and a stable food supply. I was tired from running around also, and was drained at every second. Holding her leg up with both my arms, while she pushed, doctors, nurses, and students buzzing around, machines beeping, doctors talking in a different language. Both my sister and Skyler were in danger, oxygen and heart rates were dropping. The doctor was struggling with pulling him out, my sister was struggling with pushing. The doctor called for another doctor for help, while looking at me, saying more than what she meant. “We need to get him out”. Looking at my sister she yelled, “you need to push!”, looking at me, “get her angry, get her pushing”. Grabbing the forceps, with the other set of hands and strength from the other doctor who had arrived, I looked into my sister’s eyes, overlooking the oxygen mask covering most of her face, sweat damping her hair, blood vessels popping all over her face and neck, and raised my voice to be heard over everything, “fucking push, let’s finish this!” I don’t want to lose either of you, I thought to myself. I saw

instant irritation in her eyes, as she moved the mask off her mouth and gave one final push. Moments later, my beautiful nephew was pushed and pulled out. I was exhausted, my muscles aching from holding up my sister's legs, lack of sleep, food, from tensing up at the dramatic emergency birth that I had just witnessed.

I stood next to his little body, and watched him cry, while half his face did not move, because of the force of the forceps. Doctors assured me this would not be permanent and I told my sister he was okay so she could finish delivering the placenta and not worry. I spent the next few days sleeping in a chair alongside her and Skyler. Changing his first diaper, we experienced what boys do best, pee everywhere. I choked up pee, laughing at the fact that I just got pee in my mouth and in the face on day one. I felt connected to this part of my family so strongly in these first few days. Skyler was here, we were bonding, even our bracelets the hospital gave us connected us, as both my sister and I were the only ones who could move around the hospital with him and sign him in and out of the nursery. We even tried to send him to the nursery, so we could shower and nap. I yelled to her 15 minutes later, while she was showering, that I was going back for him. I did not want him there, he should be with us. For the last nine years I miss him deeply when I am away from him.

He has lived with me for different periods of times. He has experienced staying with me for half the week, going back and forth, daycare pickups, drops offs...etc. On the periods of times that he has lived with me, our daily lives developed a pattern, so that I could provide a consistent and stable environment for him, unlike what he received with his birth mother. He has experienced our morning wakeups, eating breakfast together,

eating homemade lunches I packed for him with pride, while like a typical parent, calling out to him to brush his teeth, and to bring me his backpack to the kitchen so I could make sure he had his homework, library books, and miscellaneous items in there before we left for school. At the end of the day we would sit and do our homework together, and then eat dinner together. He would at times, like a normal child, even though not living in a normal custody arrangement, with two parents at home, would act out like a child his age. He would collect food bills at school, and eventually asking if he could eat hot lunch on Fridays, because they had pizza at school. I glowed at these moments, as it assured me that I was doing good work co-parenting him, he was hitting milestones similar kids his ages were hitting. I was tired, working fulltime, attending school, parenting him, as well as trying to support my sister, his mother. He was worth it all. I lacked sleep, lacked adult conversation at times, lacked full meals even when I felt like I spent most of dinner getting him a drink, cleaning up messes, and then all of a sudden he was done, I was nibbling on scraps, as I started to run him a bath, wash dishes, and prepare for the next day, cutting up fruit for our lunches to save time in the morning. We experienced what I would always call adventures. The good, bad, stressful, and the happenings of day to day were adventures. When he lived with me, I would sign him up for swim lessons, soccer, and other sports. When my sister and I split the weeks up, or the periods of times when he would come over for the weekends, we would always go on adventures. I wanted him to experience time in the community, in the community library, nature, fun, laughter. I wanted him to spend time away from messy neighborhoods, smashed car windows, and messy living environments. I wanted him to spend time away from mental illness, abuse,

neglect, chaos, and addiction. I wanted him to see love, health, stability, compassion, and hard work. I wanted him to know the other side of life, in hopes that this exposure would “save him”. Save him from continuing the cycle when he got older, and I did not want him to become addicted to anything, or experiencing jail, like both of his parents. I prayed and still do this day, that continuing to show him love, and what it means to be healthy and to have balance in your life will help him see he has choices. I hope that even just having me as an example in his life gives him a higher chance to fight against the facts that he is at a higher risk at experiencing similar things as both his mother and father have.

He still had meltdowns a lot when it was time for him to go see his mother, or go home to his mother. His father has partial custody, and even though is in and out of jail at times, gives Skyler a father figure. His father is good with him, he teaches Skyler things that as a woman, I cannot. He tries to keep his struggles from Skyler, which is healthy. Skyler is young and struggles to grasp that his mother suffers from addictions, and mental health issues. He also struggles with his father being away in jail for periods of time. I want him to not only survive, but to thrive, and go to college. I tell him this, as I cover him with kisses and show him affection any chance I get. The same dreams I have for him, I have for his mother. I love her deeply, but have long since come to realize our lives are different and I need to step back and do my own thing. I can be there, but not in the same capacity. I want the dream of higher education for all my siblings and niece and nephews.

I was not able to prevent my siblings from continuing the cycle, but I am and

will continue to support them. I know I definitely broke the cycle for myself. I am and will be a college graduate; I have healthy connections and relationships in my life, and a stable career. Higher education saved me.

2.5 LIFE THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

To this day my chosen path continues to inspire those former youth in care that have met me, my story allows me to connect with them, and support them. They continue to struggle, but keep reaching out to me for that connection, they want to physically see me, and see what and how I am doing. What I tell them is that they inspire me. Some of them have been through worse. Some even, have deeper, and more impactful emotion and physical scars than even I carry. In hopes to produce inspiration or a more solution-focused perspective to decision making around there struggles, I tell them that there is always going to be someone who has had it worse, and there is always going to be someone who had it easier. I want to instill in them the focus for an improved future, instead of blaming the past, on their today, or tomorrow. I want them to feel as if they can have whatever future they want, and even though they may have to fight harder for it because of their past, the feeling of accomplishment is greater than the feeling of doing nothing.

I had a young person who grew up similarly reconnect with me, and tell me how her addictions and struggled with her past continue to block her but that just by physically seeing me and connecting with me face to face, inspired and gave her the energy to think in a different direction, which in turn changed the directions of her feelings, and also changed her path in a more positive direction. I told her a quote that

continues to stick with me and instructed her to write it down and keep it in two places she spent the most time in. “Change the way you look at things and the things you look at change.” I am not sure where I read this, and told her that, but she did what I asked, and now has these words taped both on her night stand to the front of a picture frame, sitting upright for her to see every time she puts a cup down or looks at her bedside clock. The other place she stuck it as to her dashboard in her car. She called me her life coach. While I laughed at the thought of being a life coach, I realized I was in a way a coach. I made suggestions, and encouraged her to make meaning of both good and bad things that crossed her path.

She was energized by our limited connecting in more ways, that eventually connecting once a week kept her energized long enough for her to make some small improved steps in her life, and those rolled into more improved steps and so forth. The more positive steps she took, the stronger she felt. I would always tell her that she was in a way, like a young colt fresh from its mother’s womb. Its legs were weak, but eventually with the help of the mother’s warmth, positive energy, and gentle support, the colt would stand and the legs became less wobbly. We laughed, as I felt a tear prick the right corner of my hazel eyes, as my thoughts quickly drifted to the fact that both of us never had a consistent mother’s love and energy to do this for us. While writing such a thing hurts my heart momentarily, I feel an overwhelming sense of pride that I was able to give this to her, and to many others. We connect a lot less now, but she has gone on and obtained some higher education, had children, and lives with a supportive partner.

Here is Tony’s story; he shares his journey through higher education. I have

changed his name for confidentiality purposes. He was raised in foster care and/or grew up in situations that were deemed as at-risk up bringing. Tony shares his experience with me below.

“I went to a really good school in Boston where everyone is expected to go to college, and basically everyone does. In that environment, you get pretty well prepared to succeed in college, and to have what you need to get accepted. Still, I struggled quite a bit in school with disciplinary problems and just getting my work done because I was distracted by life outside school. So, I wasn’t really paid much attention to by the guidance counselors and other folks who were there to help. Senior year I decided that I had only one school I wanted to go to (St. John’s in MD – the “Great Books” school), and I ended up being rejected from there and hadn’t applied to any other schools. I was pretty upset and basically resigned myself to not going to school at all, or to going back at some unspecified point in the future. Luckily a few people, including my foster mother, convinced me that I should at least get started somewhere while I figured out a backup plan since I had a significant scholarship from the state. So, I ended up heading down to UMass Boston with my diploma in hand at some point in the summer and got admitted on the spot.

For grad school, I was much better prepared and counseled each time and got excellent guidance from friends and colleagues and mentors who’d been through those processes themselves. This, of course, included leveraging networks – a piece of tacit knowledge many first-generation students often lack, and therefore fail to act on.”

While in college did you need services, get support, struggle with finding a place

to stay during holiday's vacations and breaks?

“For the first semester, during my undergraduate college experience, I lived at my foster mother's house, but that situation wasn't working for a variety of reasons. Luckily, I come from a state that has for a long time been pretty progressive on services provided to older youth in care. So, in my second semester in college, I moved out on my own and got an apartment with a friend. I was able to afford this partially from the money I got from DSS every month, partially from getting scholarship money, and partially from working part-time. In terms of services, I continued to meet with a DSS social worker, albeit sporadically, and with a DSS Adolescent Outreach Worker, much more regularly. The outreach folks definitely helped me with thinking about longer-term planning, resume building, job stuff and the like. They also helped when I hit hard patches like running short on money, or getting tangled up with the law. Of course, being a teenager, I didn't really turn to social workers for all kinds of advice, so I was pretty lucky to have a close group of friends (who I'm still close with, even in my late 30s) that I could turn to for emotional support, and other kinds of advice. This wasn't always sufficient, because I had a tough couple years where I had some bad school performances, and made some other crappy life choices – but I think that part of everyone's transition to adulthood! I have had my own apartment since I was about 18 and a half, so I've always had a place to be on holidays and breaks.

Since I was really on my own so much and for so long, I made a lot of bad decisions. How I spent my time, my money, who I hung out with, what I put in my body, etc. Again, I think most of that stuff is fairly normative for late adolescence, but I was at

much higher risk because I didn't have as strong a family or community looking after me. Also, sometimes it was (and still is) really stressful to have to be so independent. It can be tough knowing you just have to get yourself through tough times, because ultimately you're all you've got. This can be particularly painful when you see the folks around you have the kinds of networks, assistance, and safety nets you know you'll never get.

What would have been helpful would probably have been listening to adults more!

Seriously, I don't look back and wish that anything were really different. I had a lot of help and a lot of luck, and I learned a lot, especially from my own mistakes.

What was helpful? I was really lucky to have a couple important resources. First, growing up in Boston itself was an incredible boon. It's a wealthy, well-resourced town with incredibly strong public institutions. The public schools are fantastic, as are the health care system, the transit, the libraries, the parks, the cultural institutions, and so much more. Even having grown up super poor in the projects, and relying on welfare and food stamps, then getting placed into foster care, I still had a much better shot than a lot of folks just because of where I was. Second, one of the important public institutions was DSS itself. Of course, being in care is never great, but again I lucked out – being put in decent placements, getting good workers, and having access to the resources that Massachusetts offered to kids in care. I had a ton of support and opportunities through DSS, and especially the Adolescent Outreach program (one-on-one support, internships, leadership opportunities, etc.), not to mention the health care and financial support I was eligible for the whole time I was in college. I really couldn't have gotten through without that help. Third, apart from that, I had the good luck to have stayed in one school from

grades 7-12 – that continuity and consistency really helped, not to mention the quality of the education, as well as the importance of the peer relationships I developed and still have.

Education is really the key to so much in life, and I credit it for much of my success. I have three degrees now: a Bachelors in Philosophy & Art from UMass (that took me an extra year). An Masters in Fine Art in Printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute, and a Masters in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Without a BA, it's so hard to get ahead in our economy. You really have to punch that ticket to get on the upward mobility ride. The critical and creative thinking skills I learned by studying both art and philosophy have been central to every job I've ever had. Beyond that practical application, though, higher education is also important to cultivate a basic love of learning and curiosity about the world. Where else can you spend months learning about whatever floats your boat: Epistemology? Sure! The aesthetics of political art? Why not!? Public narrative for social change? Absolutely! It's so important to nurture your mind and all the aspects of your interests in the world; I can't even imagine life without college (and grad school). Of course, the interpersonal aspects can't be overlooked either. I made great, lifelong friends in undergrad. Met my wife in art school. Gained mentors at each school I've been at. I wouldn't trade any of it for the world!"

Jay's story is equally important. Jay shared this story with me. "My journey began when I applied to a small college in New England. Luckily the school was able to waiver the application fee because at that point I didn't have the means to cover it. Two

weeks later I got the letter saying congratulations you have been accepted into the program. Within a week after being accepted I was on my way to college. I remember arriving with nothing but a pillow, a blanket, some clothing, a book bag filled with school supplies, and some sports equipment. This was definitely not the norm for most students attending college for the first time. Many arrived with televisions, refrigerators, computers and other interesting gadgets. Unfortunately, that was not my reality having come from the foster care system. I was just fortunate to have the opportunity to attend a college and better my life in some form or fashion.

That being said, while most students were just enjoying the freedom as freshmen away from home for the first time, I actually had to take my studies seriously. No one was paying for my education so it fell solely on my shoulders to do what it took to receive as many grants and scholarships as possible to help lessen the blow of tuition and room and board. During my second semester at college I remember not being able to pay for two of my books so luckily the library had extra ones that I could use. Finances were always a constant struggle. Even when it came to eating, I never had enough money. I remember when I was on the soccer team, our team went to a McDonalds after the game, and I didn't have a cent to my name so I just didn't eat. I just got used to working with what I had, which was often the bare minimum.

In regard to education, I did fairly well in school. I knew that in order to have a better life I needed to put in the effort. Unfortunately, comprehending what I read was extremely difficult. I would also struggle significantly on the testing portion of my courses. This would drop my grades a bit. I ended up reaching out to support services to

get some assistance. The learning resource center helped me to organize information and develop good studying skills. I would also stay after class and get extra help from the teachers. My scholarships depended on a good GPA, so I did what I had to.

I think the most trying times however, were during the holidays when I had no place to go. I would usually reach out to a friend and spend the holidays at his or her house. The summers were even harder. I worked as a life guard on campus and got the opportunity to live in the dorms for the first summer of college. After that I was in a relationship so I eventually had a place I could call home. Needless to say, this isn't the way I expected to spend my summers. I felt so alone and disconnected from my peers who were enjoying their summers at home with their families.

Nevertheless, throughout my college experience financial hardship was definitely the most significant issue that stood in the way of my success as a college student. This is the same issue as other students face, except the only difference is that most students have a family that they can depend on financially and a place to go to when school is out of session. It would have been helpful if students in foster care were given work opportunities at the school other than work study to be able to cover costs that arise unexpectedly, but that wasn't an option at the time.

Needless to say, through all the trials and tribulations, I did receive my Bachelor's Degree in Psychology. After that I went on for a Master's Degree in Psychology and have all but my dissertation remaining for my PsyD in Educational Psychology. Each of my degrees have allowed me to gain the necessary skills to become successful in my field of study. I also no longer struggle financially. In my personal life I have a beautiful

three year old daughter and loving partner. That's all anyone could ask for. That being said, I believe that character and persistency is what got me to where I am today, others are not as fortunate to have come out on top. I know that from walking alongside others who were in the same situation as I was.”

Tony's reflection as an adult looking back to his higher education experience is great for me to read, as it connects us. I share similar outlooks and reflections. A strong point to make sure does not get lost, and what Tony also shares is, while we, as former youth in care do experience the same things other college youth experience, such as testing limits, staying up late, putting unhealthy foods into our bodies and taking risks, this population of at-risk youth in care are at a higher risk of developing drug addiction, depression, feelings of loneliness, and eventually dropping out due to lack of support systems and structures naturally in place for college students with families. But higher risk does not mean no potential, does not mean success...it just means the triumph at the end for these students is so much more powerful for them.

CHAPTER THREE: EMPOWER; CREATING CONNECTIONS AND COMPASSION

“I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.” — **Brené Brown**

3.1 CONNECTIONS WITH HIGHER EDUCATION STAFF

The connections with supportive education staff in college help create students with stronger hearts, backbones, and stronger meaning throughout their college experiences. In the book *Crucial Conversations*, the authors focus on creating mutual purpose in conversations in order to move through dialogue and complete a mutual understanding and result that feels good to both parties. This helps with goal setting, and moving forward with a more positive outlook towards making the steps of completing the goal or struggle currently being dealt with at hand. Having recently read that 80% of students at the University of Vermont are connected to a club, or sport, I think this is a fantastic number, but where are the other 20%? What are they doing? Are the other 20% those students struggling a little more to get through their college experience beyond the similar struggles in the classroom? A good college or university will have a continued diverse staff to help support these students, as well as the rest of the student population.

Professors, teachers, and staff through academia should continue or start to if they have not, taken the time to learn about their students, they should trust in their gut, if they see something off about a student, or see a student is struggling. They should connect to that student whether it is face to face, or creating opportunities for students to connect

with each other inside and outside the classroom.

Another idea I have is creating opportunities in classroom settings for other student services and activities to join in during the class. Allowing exposure to outside activities, support offices or programs, and influences in a non-traditional setting can create a comfort for those other 20% not connected to a club or sport, but also can create open dialogue within the classroom on various activities and subjects students may not be connected to.

Connecting students to each other creates friendships and support systems for their college years. Putting together activities for students to meet in small groups helps them feel safer to share more about themselves. While they share, they listen and learn, and more importantly, they connect. Students like everyone else in the world judge other people because they do not know their story. Small group or pair activities allow this to grow in a semi-forced but natural way. Inside the classroom setting professors can pair students together as they see fit, or even by counting off. Other professionals within the college or university can continue to dialogue and promote safe spaces and activities where students from different paths connect. This also allows for meaning making, and more connections for students of varied backgrounds to create possibly friendships and experiences.

Meaning making is important for college students. It helps guide them to a purpose, and allows healing through not just the struggles of the day, but also those underlining wounds or worries we cannot see with our eyes. College students have the constant nagging questions: Am I doing good enough? Is this paper good enough? Why

am I struggling with this class? Why cannot I decide on a major? Am I in the right program? How can I be a better person?

In Dr. Robert Nash and Sydnee Viray's book, *How Stories Heal*, they say, "It is time for academics to face this fact: nothing is more appealing to readers (especially to our students) than to experience an author's personal stories with meaning-making implications that can touch our lives. No matter the age or stage, the personal or collective identity, everyone we know (whether professorial, professional, or pre-professional; whether quarterlife, mid-life, or later-life) is dealing with meaning-making issues that will challenge them, and others, throughout their lifetimes".²⁰

These themes encompass understanding, and implementing, several life-sustaining hopes and dreams for the future. They include the following: constructing a moral and ethical life-plan; choosing the right religion and spirituality to give strength and hope during difficult times; creating mutually beneficial core relationships that are lasting and loving; exploring intersecting identities that do not box or separate but instead, result in making connections with others; knowing the differences between education and credentialism, as well as the difference between having a career and living a vocation; getting actively involved in civic engagement projects; learning how to deal with loss, pain, disappointment, and a sense of meaningless and purposelessness; and creating and practicing, key strategies that will pay off in loving a whole, healthy, joyful, and balanced life."²¹

While they are referring to the writing that is and should be done in college by

²⁰ Nash, Robert J., and Sydnee Viray. *How Stories Heal: Writing Our Way to Meaning & Wholeness in the Academy*. Peter Lang Publishing. 2014.

²¹ Ibid.

students, this passage hits home for me. I knew right where to turn in their book because their words speak the biggest truth that I know. All of those things matter, and they are all being taught and learned in various capacities while in college. How many students in your group or classroom know each other? How many times do you ask students to choose a partner, and few students make eye contact, look around the classroom, wondering who will go first in choosing? Students need support in having conversations, meeting each other, sharing stories, and building bridges to each other through the support of higher education professionals. They are away from their parents; they have begun to experience or are experiencing what it means to be free from parental judgment, discipline, and guidance. For youth who grew up in foster care, or at risk, they have had little or few opportunities to create healthy connections with adults, and as young adults.

The experiences, connections, relationships, and underlining guidance they receive while in college will last them their whole lives. When talking to students who grew up in foster care, or in non-traditional households, lacking one or both parents, who have since graduated with their four year degrees, they shared with me that they missed their families in the beginning, but soon their friendships and the supportive adults or professors along the way took their place. Those friendships they made are everlasting, but they also feel like they missed out on deeper connections, and still struggle with if they choose the right major, if what they are doing will make a difference, and if they have the confidence to do what they love. A lot of them, due to moving around a lot in different homes, lacked the steady education one gets by staying in the same school for most of their upbringing. Moving around, changing schools handfuls of times, gave them

a disadvantage as they struggled with learning disabilities, struggled with remembering or missing lessons in math, science, reading and writing. Homework in college seemed to take twice as long, reading books sometimes was completed but retaining the information was a hit or miss. These students shared because they struggled, and they also missed out on a lot of fun with campus activities they wanted to participate in, join in, and become a part of. They struggled with the underlining shame of learning disabilities, and feelings of being overwhelmed with no sounding board to talk to. Most college students, especially in the beginning, have the opportunity to call their parents and use them as sounding boards to help make decisions, walk them through next steps to get through papers, timelines, and finals, and these students do not have that naturally support system.

College professors and professionals can have a great impact on this population of students by taking moments to be in the present, taking the time to really look at the student as a person. If they are struggling, work with them, reach out to them; ask them questions to learn what is going on. Who are they? What is their story? Where did they come from? Is there a communication gap getting in the way? Maybe they are lacking housing, which is why they look tired in your classroom. Maybe they are working multiple jobs to pay for school because they struggled with filing FAFSA. Maybe they are overwhelmed with finals, and look upset, because while everyone is prepping and receiving gift packages to help study, they do not have parents to do such things, and this reminder is deeply saddening to them. Maybe they are always late for your class, because they do not live on campus, and do not have a car, walking several miles to get to class on time in all kinds of weather. If you cannot be helpful, for sure you know a path

or direction you can send them on for support and guidance. Look at your student, what color are their eyes, what are they trying to communicate outside of their words, what can one read from looking into their eyes? Do they have dark circles? Why? Do they look hollow? Tired? Scared? Anxious? What is the story those eyes are telling you?

For hundreds of years attendance in post secondary education has led millions of young people to a better life, and improved circumstances. No matter what race or ethnicity, there has been a direct correlation between attending higher education, obtaining a degree and higher earnings of the individual, of both men and women. Higher education has many other benefits for the student and society in general. While the student earns more, they are also paying into taxes, and are less likely to have to obtain support from public welfare programs. Education is the only means for former youth in care to support themselves and their families. Without it, the majority of them will not have the financial capacity to support their basic needs. They are contributing to society also through engagement in lifestyle activities, community engagement, and are spending their money in their local community. Young people get into and attend college, the lessons they will learn are both in the classroom and outside of the classroom.

3.2 IMPROVING SYSTEMS IN PLACE

Colleges and universities can create some of the biggest hurdles young people entering college who are coming from living in social services and at risk situations have to go through. Two of the biggest hurdles and often biggest challenges that prevent these young people from attending college is continued year round housing and access to food.

Creating an opportunity for them to have year round housing helps the student in having a period of consistency that they most likely did not receive and allows for an increase in self esteem. Having continued housing, where they do not have to leave for breaks and find a place to stay, as well as over the summer, allows them to also work part-time, and allows opportunities for them to create a continued community. Imagine having a student of yours sleeping in their car, or couch surfing, possibly in an unsafe situation, all because they could not sleep in the dorm during break. During my undergrad years I experienced this myself, and thought it unfair that the sports players and students from overseas could stay on campus during breaks but me, with no family or home to go to, had to leave campus and fend for myself. An idea could also be to create a connection with part-time summer work programming for the student on campus, in relation to summer housing, and summer food plans.

The ACCESS office, or support services offices on campuses, offer support to students with documented disabilities. Some of these support services are to support students who are struggling with exams and need accommodations to help get through them. In undergraduate school, I had an accommodation that I could have time and a half to complete my tests. Most of the accommodations put in place come from a student's documented disability from high school, most often called a 504 plan.

One of the larger components to such a service on campus is aspect of support, advisement, and advocacy. Students often come to this office, making connections with the staff, and come in for various concerns and struggles around their college experiences

and classes. The office finds solution-focused ideas to assist the student. Sometimes eBooks and notetaking are part of the solution.

Students receiving services in this office are often low income or first generation college students. This population is deemed at risk, but I most recently had the privilege to listen to a ted talk who instead of saying our marginalized young people were at-risk, said they were at-promise.

Aside from the general tutoring service being offered on campus, the TRIO office and student support services, as well as Upward Bound are available. This support service on campus provides professional mentoring, financial aid counseling, and general one on one support. In undergrad my student support services contact person was Dian. I went to her before I reached out to anyone else. She helped me pick classes and helped me calm down when I was upset or stressed. She guided me in the various directions I needed to deal with issues. She also advocated for me when I needed help. I would not have been able to survive without her. I grew close to her, the office staff knew my name, they were my cheer leaders when I was on top of my game, and they were they were there when I felt like quitting and was feeling overwhelmed.

I remember one time I was going into college break for a week, worried about where I was going to live after being denied from the college to stay on campus, the staff advocated for me without any success. Because they knew I would also struggle with food, one of the staff went into the break room and within five minutes collected a bag full of food for me to take with me. Packets of hot cocoa, tea, leftover sandwiches from a luncheon, cookies. This woman cared for me enough to do this. In a moment the week

of break did not seem so bleak. I had enough food in the bag to feed me for at least three out of the ten days, plus the leftovers I had made in my dorm would get me through another two days. I had off campus jobs, and had already reached out to a few friends and connections to see if I could stay with them.

This struggle for housing and food during breaks happened during my whole college career. Eventually I ended up in a relationship and we lived together, so this took care of that concern.

The beautiful connections I made at the support services helped me in every way. They counseled me, mentored me, pushed me, supported me, and took care of me. They helped me print dozens of papers, since I could not afford a printer, and they knew reading my writing on paper worked better for me. They helped me write emails to my professors, helping me appropriately get out what I needed or what questions I had. They saw me not as “at-risk” but as “at-promise”. They helped me see myself as more than a marginalized student labeled as an at-risk youth. They helped me see and believe that I was indeed, “at-promise.”

I know that my unique experience will shape my future career and my hope is that through meaningful conversation, and structured support I can help college students coming in and out of my office and supporting them in finding their own happiness, meaning, and future path. Part of making steps forward is unpacking the happenings of your pasts and digging a path for your future. Students today are digging their paths quickly, working harder and making less than the generations before them. It is my hope that as a professional working in the college system I will be able to help my students

figure out their path, or at least support and encourage them to have the courage to make their own path, or to change said path in order to do what makes them happiest and feel safest. I want our most vulnerable youth; those we call at-risk, and those being raised by parents outside those that are their blood parents to continue to dream, and to feel supported in working towards those dreams. I will encourage them to have fun through these experiences in their education, to feel empowered, and to be ready for anything – Inomnia Paratus.

To close, the lessons from this SPN is to promote the bigger message that our students labeled as marginalized students are not students at-risk, but at-promise. Dr. Wayne Dyer once said, “Once we change the way we look at things, the things we look at will change.” Look at these students, not as problems, but as promising members of society. One day they will graduate and change the world, even in a small way. We have the power to make change in these young people’s lives. We are the educators that can bring them hope, and support them through higher education. We have the opportunity to create meaning making opportunities, to help guide them down a path of success, and improved self.

One of the biggest gifts we can give to them is opportunity to succeed while supporting them with housing and food. These two things are basic needs, but also the largest obstacles. Let us take those obstacles away. As educators and higher education professionals we can help foster growth in these young adults, unlike the foster system they came from. Remember, these students are at-promise.

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