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College Dropout to College Professor¹

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Synopsis

Being a college dropout wasn't something to be proud of; it just happened. Life doesn't always turn out the way we want or expect. Yet, it is often how we deal with defeat that defines us — figuring out when to lick our wounds and when to come back fighting. It took a few years to redefine my dream, start a family, and seem to move forward, but the ache for more was always in the back of my mind. Could I succeed at something at which I had already failed? Going back to school at a community college at the age of 32 when my youngest was six years old, I earned my doctorate the year my oldest graduated with her bachelor's degree in math. Thirteen years of blood, sweat, and tears. Getting kids on and off the bus, college classes during the day, milk & cookies in the afternoon, soccer mom in the evening, and homework after everyone else was in bed. Learning to balance school and family, and then work and family has given me tremendous insights that I can share with my students, as many of them struggle to find balance in their own lives. This article is a reflection on my experience with motherhood and the pursuit of my dreams; my daughter, now with her own doctorate, brings special insight into what it means to have a mother in mathematics. Looking back, I wouldn't have changed a thing.

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I remember the sense of failure that I felt at the age of 19 when I realized that college was not for me. I had completed 30 course credits but with a GPA of just 2.0; used to getting As, my world was now falling apart. I needed to figure out what to do with my life. Being a college dropout wasn't something to be proud of; it just happened. I tried to console myself with platitudes like, "life doesn't always turn out the way we want or expect — deal with it." The devastation was all encompassing.

Looking back, I try to discern why I didn't perform at the level at which I knew I could. I would like to blame it on health issues that I was dealing with at the time or the fact that my dad had died while I was in high school, but these would only be part of the truth. I think I was just not ready to live on campus, to live far from home, and to focus on my studies. So, I moved back home, got a job, and tried to maintain a long-distance relationship with a boyfriend, Rich, who would eventually become my husband. We met through one of the campus service groups; Rich having a full-time job, not being a student, is what saved our relationship since his focus was on life beyond the microcosm of campus. I like to think of him as one of the redeeming, long-lasting benefits of that lone year of college at age 18.

I had seven different jobs the first year we were married. I would come home in tears, "I hate my job." My husband would say, okay, quit. Over and over again that first year. I was an unskilled, untrained employee with no college degree. Sure, I could type accurately and fast, but I was not happy in that work environment. Somewhere in the back of my mind I felt destined for more. In retrospect, I gave up too easily; I needed someone in my life to hold me accountable to doing my best in whatever I was doing. Having said that, and knowing now what I didn't know then, I am glad that my life took this path because it led me to my dream job.

My brief college experience quickly faded into the background as I got married at 20, had two children by 25, and settled into life as a stay-at-home mom. Life was moving forward for me. I had found something that I was really good at and it seemed that I was living the dream. But as my youngest entered preschool, there was always this ache in the back of my mind, an ache for more. Besides, what was I going to do while my children were in school all day? There are women who have chosen to live their lives as full-time stay-at-home moms, including many of my friends, but I knew that life as homemaker held little appeal for me.

My husband and I started talking about options — college or directly entering the workforce; of course, seven jobs in our first year together was part of the conversation. My husband encouraged me to seriously consider going back to college. Thoughts of the tremendous opportunities as well as reminders of utter failure flooded my psyche. Could I succeed at something at which I had already failed? How would I balance my responsibilities as a student with those of a mother and wife? And how in the world would we afford college? This became a waypoint in our lives, a crisis of conscience. I was feeling overwhelming guilt for even thinking of leaving my children; college seemed to be something I was doing for me, to prove something to myself or to fill some personal need, not for my family.

Navigating this initial, life-changing decision process was difficult. I started by seeking advice from friends, many of whom were stay-at-home moms. As you can imagine, the advice was primarily family first — I should wait. Somehow, I had allowed my life as a mother, wife, and stay-at-home mom to consume my personal identity. I didn't regret my life choices, but I certainly had to decide who I was as a person outside of what I did every day. I knew with every part of my being that I was more than mother, wife, homemaker; I was meant for more. I began seeking out women who worked outside of the home, with children of their own, to talk about how they balanced family and work.

A Daughter's Perspective: At the time, I never knew the struggle my mom was facing. I can say now, that I am more proud of her than ever, for taking a chance on herself and her family, for trusting that together we would make it through. I can't imagine my early developmental years any other way. My brother and I recognize that great work, dedication, and sacrifice are required to pursue your dreams, and for that we are forever grateful. Those are lessons that my brother and I carry with us in our professional lives, with our spouses, and with our closest friends. As a graduate with a Ph.D., I apply these lessons. For now, I work in a different city than the one my husband and I live, yet I am willing to make this sacrifice knowing that the dedication and hard work will benefit our future.

Through this process, I came to realize that my children, my husband, and my life as a whole could benefit from me exploring my gifts and going back to college. Yes, our life together would change, but that change could be

good for all of us. This type of soul searching has been at the crux of each of the waypoints in my life, communicating my fears and concerns with those I love and who are most impacted by my decisions, getting their input before irrevocably changing our lives forever.

At the age of 32, I started taking courses part-time at the local community college. I was able to take classes while my children, now 6 and 8, were in school so babysitting was not an issue. I would put the kids on the school bus, go to campus for classes, head home, do housework, prepare after-school snacks, meet the kids at the bus, and then spend time doing family things — coordinating kids’ homework, supper, soccer practice, and getting everyone into bed. The day would end with me finishing my homework before I crawled into bed to do it all over again the next day. While it was exhausting, I was able to find balance by sticking to a strict schedule for both myself and my family; it was the best way that I knew to ensure that everyone was where they needed to be at any given moment.

My years at the community college are a blur. What I remember most is the financial burden we were under to pay for classes in addition to our regular living expenses all out of my husband’s income. I did make some money as a math tutor on campus to cover my gas and textbooks. Financial aid just didn’t cover enough. We fondly refer to these as our “rice and bean” years. We made weekly menus based on sales, searched out hand-me-down clothes, and had everyone’s teeth cleaned and cavities fixed in the dental clinic at the college. Everything was budgeted; if it wasn’t in the budget we didn’t buy it. The budget included everything — birthdays, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, car insurance, trash — everything.

<p>A Daughter’s Perspective: I never realized how much these weekly menus and budgeting would impact my life. My brother and I still do this now as adults, just because life is busy and menu planning and budgeting helps us keep ourselves organized. We learned these things from my mom as she led the way.</p>

We deposited a set amount into savings each month so that we would have enough money when bills came due. We were very fortunate that during these years the construction industry was strong so that my carpenter husband had work. When work was slow, less money went to annual bills,

and gifts for everyone but our children were the first things to be cut. Together we found ways to enjoy life as a family on a limited budget by developing family activities that were free or cost very little. We made all of our meals from scratch, taught our children to cook at age 10 so that they could share in the cooking tasks, had them help create weekly menus, made homemade things for gifts, and spent most of our family adventure time outside.

A Daughter's Perspective: We never felt poor or neglected in any way growing up; my parents were able to give us a vibrant life full of love and family. They were always pushing us to learn more. Now we joke that Mom should never wonder why we are so independent! She raised us to be this way — free thinkers.

When I finally made it to a four-year college three years later, my husband and I had to rearrange our schedules to make sure one of us was home with the kids. I put the kids on the bus in the morning, started supper in the crockpot or casserole dish in the fridge, prepared an afternoon snack, packed my own supper, and then left for school forty minutes away; I would stay through evening classes and make it home by 9:30pm. My husband, thankfully, was able to rearrange his schedule to be home when the kids got off the bus; he covered snack, supper, homework, soccer practice, and bedtime. By splitting our responsibilities I was able to be on campus late several nights a week for classes. The key was to have a planned schedule for the week, knowing who was driving Kid A to Point 1 or Kid B to Point 2 or who was in charge of carpooling this week.

The time spent finishing my bachelor's degree, including student teaching, felt like an out-of-body experience. I was always exhausted, always running, always questioning my motives, wondering if I was spending enough time with my children and husband. Finances were still an issue; I needed to get professional clothes for student teaching and our budget couldn't handle the strain. So I made myself five jumpers and bought five white shirts at Salvation Army; while it was embarrassing to not have a nicer wardrobe, I acted as if it was normal and told my students that they would always know the day of the week by the color of my jumper. Managing self-doubt and expectations was a constant struggle; my goal was to "fake it 'til I make it" so that people did not know that I was one step away from losing it.

This coping mechanism has become ingrained in my psyche and I find myself using it regularly; my children use it as well. Life might not always be as we would like it, but I can definitely be kind to everyone around me and pretend that everything is okay while I work to make the changes that are within my scope of influence, at the same time trying to adapt to those that are outside of my power to change. I believe that we all wear masks and that we are different people in different situations, always influenced by our surroundings. As long as we are true to ourselves and are completely open around those we love by dropping those masks, I believe that no harm is done.

Upon graduation there were no high school math teaching openings in the school districts surrounding our home; so I decided to go for my master's degree. Landing a teaching assistantship was a God-send for our family; I was able to get free tuition plus a stipend that covered gas and books.

A Daughter's Perspective: When I decided to get my master's degree my Mom shared this lesson with me. You are smart and talented — don't pay a dime for education beyond your bachelor's. Work hard, call recruiting faculty members, talk to them about your experiences — only the top schools — get them to love you, to give you money and then go there. I am very thankful for that advice as my husband and I approach being completely debt-free of our undergraduate loans, less than two years after my graduation from doctoral school.

We were still hurting financially as our children got older, but the assistantship helped to ease some of the strain. Choosing to take risks throughout this journey has helped lead me to better self-discovery. For example, a side benefit of my teaching assistantship was that it made me realize that I really enjoyed teaching college-age students and I began exploring what was needed to teach at the college level full-time.

Master's degree in hand, I began teaching at the community college that I had attended while I applied to doctoral programs and researched changes that my family would need to make to move to this next academic level. This would include my husband going to work for a local building contractor, instead of being self-employed, so that he had a steady income and our health

insurance would be covered. We spent a lot of time talking with our children about the options and how life would change if I entered a doctoral program; the workload was going to increase and I would need to commute to campus, at least two hours one way. With the support of my husband and children, I started in a mathematics doctoral program with a teaching assistantship with free tuition and a stipend that paid for gas and books. That first grueling year made me realize that pure mathematics was not for me; I wanted to focus on teaching and learning. So after one year I left the program and took a one-year lectureship at a local private college.

I found myself licking my academic wounds, once again, trying to determine what my future held, still convinced that I was destined for teaching college, even though there were very few doctoral programs within driving distance of our home and we were unwilling to move our family for my education. It was at this point that I discovered a mathematics education doctoral program in the Mathematics Department at American University in Washington, D.C. A two-plus hour commute from our home, four hours during rush hour, we decided to take the plunge. I learned to leave the house before 5 am to beat the traffic; I would return before midnight, driving home after my evening classes. The teaching assistantship again helped our family financially; without it I would not have been able to pursue this degree.

At this point both our son and our daughter were in high school. I would call them during my commute home, hearing about everyone's day and catching up on family news; by the time I got home, everyone was in bed.

<p>A Daughter's Perspective: Living out of state, my mom and I continue this practice of phone calls every week; it gives us the opportunity to stay in touch with the lifes little things so that our relationship can remain strong</p>
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I made sure to be up in the morning to see everyone before they left for work or school and so that I could give and receive hugs.

For two years I would travel to D.C. two or three very long days a week and worked from home on the other days. My husband and I acted as a team, parenting our children with joint decision-making, which meant that no decisions were made spontaneously — “I have to talk to your mother / father”

was a common phrase that our children heard. This was a life lesson that we passed on to our children that both of them utilize to great benefit in their own marriages. In hindsight, I would have to say that I did not communicate my thankfulness to my husband often enough; I was too exhausted trying to be a good student and to succeed for my family's sake. The enduring support of an understanding, beloved husband was one of the driving forces that helped me be successful.

With my coursework complete, I was excited to work on my research full time — graduation was getting closer. Looking to the future, I began reading mathematics education academic job postings and realized that most of them required at least two years of public school teaching for mathematics education positions; I had none. My data collection and literature review were complete; my research was down to analysis and writing. So after more family discussions, I relinquished my assistantship and took a high school teaching position close to home while still working on my doctoral research.

Teaching high school five minutes from my home was such a break from the grueling work of academia that it was easy to be lured away from my doctoral research; my doctoral committee chair, unsurprisingly, did not want me to take a break, afraid that I would not return. I paid for one course credit each semester while I taught full-time for two years and worked on my research on the weekends. It was difficult to stay focused. By this time my daughter was a math major at college, and my son was completing high school. I was living and working in the town in which we lived; a short commute freed up quite a bit of time. I could visit my daughter at school. I could attend every one of my son's soccer games. Life was more focused on family. Distractions were everywhere. It was my daughter who was now encouraging me to keep working at my research, saying, "Come on Mom, you can do this!" It was agonizing to work full-time, spend time with family, and then spend 10-20 hours a week on research. I was so close but felt drained from the journey.

By now you must realize that my husband is a saint! He has been incredibly open-minded about this entire academic journey. Sure, he got frustrated with me at times; but we were able to continue to talk our way through all of our issues. He believed in me. He understood my desire for 'more.' Most importantly, he was willing to be the foundation that supported all of my efforts.

After thirteen years of blood, sweat, and tears, I earned my doctoral degree in mathematics education the year my daughter graduated with her bachelor's degree in mathematics; I have been happily teaching college students since then. I cannot begin to describe the sense of accomplishment that I felt when handed my degree — I had achieved what I had believed to be the un-achievable. So much work. So many years. I felt as though I should look different on the outside because I certainly felt like a very different person. There are so few times in our lives when we set monumental goals for ourselves; the sense of triumph when we reach one of those goals is indescribable.

When I listen to my daughter talk about how she remembers the years of watching me take college courses, my eyes swell up with tears. Both of our children were watching. And they were learning. Learning that it is often how we deal with defeat that defines us, figuring out when to lick our wounds and when to come back fighting.

Happy to Report: My daughter has found her niche, earning a doctoral degree in Natural Resource Recreation Planning and Management, working for the National Park Service, using her mathematics and data analysis skills on a daily basis.

My journey to a doctoral degree included a crash course in learning to balance school and family, and then work and family; I have gained tremendous insights that I share with my students as many of them struggle to find balance in their own lives. I strive to be an example of hope for my students, wanting them to see that I made it — me, from a poor working class family — striving to be my best not only for myself, but for my children and grandchildren. My office door is always open, and I encourage students to talk to me about their struggles, helping them to realize that they are not alone. We talk about education and life goals, how they see themselves reaching those goals, and what I can do to help them. We talk about productive struggle, and that it is okay to not be good at everything; everyone has their own gifts — discovering those gifts is the key. Our family motto has always been that our hope for all of the young people who have passed through the circle of our family, and for those we have yet to meet, is that they would be willing to dream of bigger things, believe in themselves, and understand that education is a gift that we give to ourselves. This is also the belief that I hold as a college professor as I work to help my students to dream big and never give up; that is the strongest message that I can pass on to my students.