I was always an independent child. When I graduated high school, I was ready get out of the house and be an adult. My plan was to work for the summer and then attend school in the fall. I had considered studying Civil Engineering at OSU. Most of my family was from that part of Oregon and my grandpa had been a forestry researcher at OSU. As the summer ended, I didn’t have a real clear path. I attended some classes at a local community college, but college was beginning to take a back seat. I had met a girl and by the next year, we planned to get married. Though I had been warned that we were young and moving fast, I was too hard headed to heed anyone’s advice.

We were married by the time I was 19. I was never one to dream of having kids, but when I was 21 my son was born. The weight of a new level of responsibility and love was both heavy and unexplainably exciting. A year and a half later my daughter was born and the feeling was again a little scary, but exciting. I was working full time while my wife, Lorissa, stayed home to take care of them. Money was tight, but we made it work. As time wore on though, I could see this wasn’t what Lorissa had been expecting. She had dreams of living large. Something we couldn’t do at this point in our lives. Over time, things became tense and I knew our marriage was in trouble.

Fast forward about a year, I was driving my old suburban down the highway, I don’t remember where I was heading. It was a nice spring day. The sun was out and the air was fresh. I love days like this. My son would be celebrating his third birthday soon. My daughter was one and a half. Lorissa and I had not been getting along well since my daughter was born. She had recently left. I didn’t know where she went, maybe her parents. She wasn’t around much. While I was driving, my phone rang. It was my mother in-law. She had always been kind and warm towards me, even with Lorissa and my marriage was not looking hopeful. I pulled over at a lawn and garden store. It was a dusty gravel parking lot. Piles of rocks of various shapes and sizes lined the back of the lot. I could taste the dust and hear the equipment loading trucks behind me. I took a deep breath and answered.

I heard my mother in-law, Lorrie, on the other end of the line and knew she had been crying. She proceeded to tell me that Lorissa had told her that we were done and she was moving out. Hearing that was painful, as Lorissa had not told me this herself. Lorrie continued that she wanted to make sure that I knew that her and her husband, Scott, would be there for the kids and that she hoped we could keep the kids out of things. When this news hit me, I was naturally hurt. But more so, I didn’t know what happened from here. I would soon find out.

Lorissa had found a new guy to live with and it became increasingly clear to me that she didn’t just leave me. She left the kids too. I was almost paralyzed with fear. I loved my kids, but I was not prepared to be a single dad. I worked full time in retail management which came with long and odd hours. I didn’t make a lot and childcare is expensive. I had many things racing through my mind. Could I do this? Could I run away too? No. What do I do? Day after day passed that Lorissa was supposed to have the kids and day after day was another excuse as to why she could not. Many times, I was late for work or missed all together because she would skirt her responsibilities at the last minute. On the days she did take them, I often had to leave work and come pick them up from her for one reason or another.

Because I was beginning to have attendance problems, I decided I needed to talk to my boss. My store manager was friendly and easy to talk to, but she could also be an intimidating person. I had only been working there for about a year and I didn’t know what to expect. I asked if we could meet and she called me into her office. I sat down and let everything out. I told her that I did not want to lose my job or cause problems, but that I couldn’t promise that something wouldn’t come up that pulled me away from work on short notice. My heart was pounding and my breathing shaky. To my great relief, she asked if there was anything that I needed and assured me that she would be willing not only to work with me when things came up, but work with me on my scheduled shifts to make sure they aligned with times that I could have childcare available.

Similarly, I had to swallow my pride and reach out to family and friends and stitch together a schedule for childcare. My parents, Lorissa’s parents, my sisters, and friends formed a strong web around me and went out of their way to make sure that my kids were always cared for. I was never one to ask for help, so this was humbling and eye opening. The love and community that I felt still brings deep emotions to me when I think about it.

Fast forward a year and I’m setting up for my son’s fourth birthday. The sky is clear. It’s a beautiful spring day. The air has that fresh spring smell. Almost sweet. My two kids were running around the backyard laughing and giggling. Over the past year I learned a lot. I had to become vulnerable, which didn’t come easy to me. I had to learn that I couldn’t do it all by myself. I had to be okay asking for help. I was not only still employed, but climbing the corporate ladder. My store manager worked with me and around my kids. My ex-in-laws, parents, siblings, and friends helped out when they could and I am more grateful than I could ever put into words.

Here I am today writing this story ten years later. Looking back brings up a lot of feelings. The biggest of all is thankfulness. On this journey I have made a lot of missteps. There have been strained relationships, another divorce, and a lot of not knowing what the next step is. That being said, I couldn’t be happier about where I’m at now. I’m engaged to my soul mate. I’ve gained two more great kids that she brought into the relationship. I was able to leave my job and jump feet first in back into school, to my original dream of attaining my degree in Civil Engineering. One thing I’ve learned is you may not know what every step of the way is going to hold, sometimes you have to take big things one step at a time. Sometimes you have to go with the flow.