Justin Rigby

Growing up, my family was very poor and we had difficulty living week to week with my mother raising two children while trying to work as many jobs as she could. For the first four years of my life we lived with my grandmother before we finally moved to our own apartment in San Bernardino, CA which is where my mother still lives today. The area of San Bernardino is a chapperal desert with beautiful plants and facinatign ecology, but it is also an area of violent crime and perverse gang activity. I grew up as an anomoly of the area; since I was never enrolled in a school of any kind due to the danger, and was homeschooled my entire life. This particular facet of my life has in the long term served me well, but it was a major hinderance in the beginning that has propelled me down a path which I could have never guessed or imagined would occcur.

For the first part of my life my mother was the sole provider to our household of three, and she did this by babysitting children in our home while also homeschooling us. We lived in poverty for the majority of my life, but my mother made sure that we had socialization through our local church and also that we had the chance to explore the world around us. Instead of taking vacations to other countries, or even within our own, we instead would take walks in the local mountains or go to the lake and observe nature. My mother had taught me to appreciate nature, and to silently observe and record what is happening around me rather than ignore it. As the years passed, my interest in plants and nature began to grow, my mother asked me to begin to keep a journal to record all of my observations and experiments which stemmed from the various science books she bought me. My love of nature and science also began to bleed into other areas of my life as I aged.

Upon leaving elementary school, and entering middle school, I began to refine and understand why I held such a deep interest in science and nature. At that point in my life, I loved to watch all of the science programs and segments on PBS while my mother would study for her community college courses that were telecasted afterwards. Being so young, I was not able to comprehend most of what was being discussed in the lectures, but I wanted to know more about biology and math because they have always facinated me from the books I would read. This was also a very hectic time in my life since my mother was working two jobs, raising two kids, going to community college and the University of Redlands, so our family life was very hectic. Luckily, as I reached high school my mother was finishing up her bachelor's degree and was preparing to begin her job as a teacher, but soon afterwards the recession hit.

My high school years were difficult with the onset of the 2008 recession, and our city going bankrupt, but it also was one of the most important times in my life. As my mother struggled to find a teaching job, I began high school with a third grade education with a curriculum that was ineffective at independant study which in turn caused me to never get past a fourth grade education by the end. Throughout high school, my home life was difficult with the ever growing stack of bills and my mother going back to school to get a graduate degree so she could qualify for as many jobs as she could. At one point, I had to get a job to support our family at the local church doing janitorial and maintenance work at the local church and their private school. There I learned a great deal about large scale horticulture, and it fed into my facination of plants to the point I knew I wanted to become a botanist. Life began to get better around my senior year when my mother finally landed a permanent job as a special education instructor in the school district. This allowed me to reduce the amount of hours I worked, but it also gave me the oppurtunity to go to community college to get the education I wanted.

In the fall of 2011, I began classes at San Bernardino Valley College in the lowest levels of math (which was basal arithematic) and English due to the little education that I had recieved. It was a complete shell shock, and I had to work hard to devlop the studying and retention skills which I have never had. However, it began to pay off as I excelled at my courses at the college, joined the honors society on campus, volunteer in the community, and was hired on to tutor math and science courses within the college during my second semester there. As the years passed, I was selected for multipile awards to conduct independent research and also the prestigious Dr. Arthur M. Jensen President's Award. It was also there where I met some of the most influential people whom I know, Dr. Jimmy Lee and Glenn Drewes, who have encouraged me to push against the grain to transfer to Berkeley and subsequently lead me to my program today.