Miss Rego was my sixth-grade homeroom teacher. She was new that year, and she was one of those teachers that you remember for the rest of your life. She taught me unconditional love: to love without expecting anything in return. It’s something we should receive from our parents, and something we hope to receive from our friends and partners. Yet, unconditional love is not guaranteed. Miss Rego made sure we never went without.

A few months into sixth grade, we went on a field trip to the American Museum of Natural History, and at the end of the field trip, I wandered into the gift shop. There were lots of overpriced games and tchotchkes, but one thing drew my eye: a stuffed jaguar. Now, my mom had only sent me with ten dollars because she knew how overpriced museum gift shops are. And being 11 at the time, I didn’t have an income. I couldn’t afford him.

I lingered around the gift shop waiting for my classmates to be done, not sure what to do with myself, when Miss Rego came up to me. She asked, “Are you going to buy anything?” I told her I didn’t have the money, and, without prompting, she gave me $20. She handed me the jaguar. She said, “Go buy him.” And I said, “Are you sure?” And she told me not to worry about it.

So, I did, I bought him, and I went home. I loved Jaguar - yes, his name is Jaguar, I’m very creative - and he slept in my bed every night after that.

Later, all the sixth-grade classes wrote letters to our future selves which our teachers promised to mail to us when we graduated from high school. Unfortunately, Miss Rego was only with the district for two years, and eventually senior year of high school arrived. Other students started getting their letters. My homeroom didn’t.

One week before graduation, though, I got something in the mail. It was the letter from my sixth-grade self.

She’d remembered. I tried to look her up. I couldn’t find her. But wherever Miss Rego was, she had remembered the sixth graders she’d taught seven years prior, and true to her word, she sent us those letters. Because of Miss Rego, I walked across the stage holding the dreams of an 11-year-old girl, and I was able to make her proud.

I still have Jaguar, and he still sleeps in my bed. I know it’s a little childish, but when the rest of the world is harsh and unforgiving, he brings me comfort. Jaguar is, at his core, just a manifestation unconditional love. Every night, he loves me without expecting anything in return. Every day, I try to pay it forward.