

# Education Transcendence



Thinking back, my life seems like a dreary made-for-television movie; surreal and packed with nightmares and cliché'd violence. So many people hear my story and comment on my ability to overcome situations. However, I do not feel exceptional or like a heroine. I feel my actions were (and continue to be) the ones of a woman with something to live for, with something to prove, and with something to accomplish. Wouldn't everybody persevere through these horrors to get what they wanted?

Ever since I could walk and talk, all I ever wanted was to learn. I asked for a lunch box, backpack, and notebooks for my 3rd birthday so my mother and I could play school. My mother, an elementary school teacher taking time off to raise her family, and my father, an instructor in the U.S. Air Force, were thrilled about my interest in education. They continued to nurture this academic curiosity into my teens. Despite my interests and their promotion, as a teen I was only an average student. However, I never let my lack of excellence stifle my desire to continue learning.

I attended a local college my first year out of high school. Although my grades from high school were enough to get me accepted into a few universities, I was undecided as to a course of study (major). While my family was considered "middle class", I had to take two jobs to help pay for school (my grades did not earn me any academic scholarships, nor did any other special talent or ability). The first semester was a disaster and I landed myself on academic probation. I could not juggle work and school with the social life I was desperately trying to hold onto. The second semester I performed much better and barely brought my G.P.A. up high enough to transfer to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, where I was going to study Mass Communications.

My first year at VCU was a customary experience. I lived in the on-campus dormitory and worked two jobs as a student assistant in the English Department and as a mail room assistant for the upper-class dorm. However, I felt a huge disconnect from my peers - something in my life was still missing. I felt socially stunted - an infant amidst young adults. At 20 years old, I still had never had a boyfriend (or anything even close to one) while all of my new college classmates and old high school friends were past their adolescent interactions and were committed in serious relationships. It made me feel inadequate, abnormal, and estranged from society.

During my second year at VCU, I met an Arabic man through my best friend (who was dating the man's cousin). He was intriguing and charming with stories from places around the world - places I had always dreamed of seeing. The best part was that he was interested in me! I was enthralled. Finally I could participate in the same lifestyle my friends and peers were - a lifestyle that was expected of me as a young woman from my own family, friends, and society itself. I literally grabbed onto the first man to come along and was determined to make the relationship work.

School, family, and all other aspects of my social life suffered as a consequence of the importance and attention I gave this man and this relationship. Two months after meeting him, we moved in together, and four months after that we were married. The marriage was a private (and secretive) affair as my family was opposed to the rapid succession of events, the difference in age (I was 21 and he was 35), and the cultural disparities. Unbeknownst to me at the time of our marriage, I was pregnant. This fact alone solidified my resolve to make this relationship work, putting ALL else aside to ensure its success.

I tried to finish out that academic semester, however, the pregnancy and my new husband proved too much for me to handle. My husband began showing extreme control, suspicion and jealousy, becoming threatening and forceful if he felt I stayed after class too long and questioning library visits or other meetings to work on group projects. I withdrew from all classes, intending to return after the birth of my baby. Instead, within 6 months of my first child's birth, I was

pregnant again and my husband's violence paranoia and suspicion were beyond control. Life became very scary.

As the years passed, I continued to try to make my husband happy, to create a loving household and to be the woman both society and my husband expected me to be. I was beginning to realize the contradiction between the two could never be reconciled. At this point, I remained in the horrors and violence of my everyday life for the sake of my children (or so I thought). I sacrificed any ideas of ever returning to college to earn my degree so that I could keep my family together as a unit, no matter how dysfunctional.

Unfortunately, the violence, humiliation, shame, abuse and terror continued to escalate. After six children, complete social and familial isolation, and five years of a bruised, broken and shattered existence, my husband finally cracked. At approximately 4:00 P.M. on January 9, 2003, my husband attacked me more violently than ever before, threatening and assaulting me with a gun. After putting the gun down to continue assaulting me with his hands, I acquired the weapon myself. The long-story-short version of events is that I shot my husband, called the police to report my actions and surrendered myself to jail. The jail officers informed me immediately that my six children were dispersed into four different foster homes.

The threat of a trial and life imprisonment loomed over me for over a year. Upon entering the jail, I met several women familiar with the Virginia Department of Corrections and women's prison facilities. The question of whether or not I would serve time in such an institution was never

an issue. The real question was how much time I would have to serve. I was handed down a sentence of 35 years with 21 of those suspended, which I quickly learned meant that I would be “going away” for 14 years.

I immediately formed alliances with other females who were also on their way to (or back) to prison. I tried to learn as much about what lay ahead of me as possible - what the facility was like, the officers, available employment, programs and classes. I learned I could earn my college degree from behind bars if I could finance it through correspondence courses. I made goals for myself - number one on that list was to leave prison with a college degree.

When I reached Fluvanna Correctional Center for women late in 2004, I immediately inquired about taking correspondence courses and earning a degree through such classes. The costs were astronomical! I immediately was disheartened. Financial assistance was only available to offenders under age 25 - a “youthful offender’s” grant. Traditional forms of financial aid were inaccessible to me because of my incarceration and offender status. My family was taking care of my six children after being isolated from me for five years preceding my arrest - there was no way I could ask them to sacrifice anymore or to reallocate monies to me that were intended to be used in raising my children. I resigned myself to the situation and realized a degree was not in my immediate future.

However, I also realized that many educational opportunities lay before me at the institution. I refused

to sit idly by, marking my time off a calendar and wasting time away. I longed to be productive - to learn. More importantly, I was free to learn - free from the demands and restrictions of my husband and free from so many so many of the responsibilities faced by my un-incarcerated peers. The vocational programs offered at Fluvanna caught my interest, particularly the ones requiring higher minimum requirements. I began with the Optical Lens Technology class - an all day class that taught ophthalmology and the craft of making eyeglasses. I found the math very challenging, however, felt something inside me awaken. It was a hunger, a deep yearning for knowledge and learning. Upon completing Optical, I enrolled in Computer Aided Drafting and learned how to draw up schematics and floor plans using computer software. I explored the advanced aspect of CAD learning 3-D drafting. During the CAD class, the institution began accepting applications for participation in a new Braille program. Those selected would learn how to read and produce Braille, transcribing books for visually challenged public school students in Virginia. I applied and was selected as one of the 12 offenders to participate in the Braille program. Within 2 years, I submitted a Braille manuscript for evaluation and received my Braille Transcriptionist Certification from the U.S. Library of Congress... but I still didn’t have my degree.

I enrolled in Electrical classes while learning Braille, ensuring busy days and a plethora of information to keep my mind active. During this time, a new program was introduced to FCCW - Ms. Doris Buffet, sister of

Wall Street magnate Warren Buffet, was to offer college scholarships to 25 offenders through her Sunshine Foundation. I submitted my application minutes after learning of this program. I was selected as a Sunshine Scholar to earn my Associate's Degree through Piedmont Virginia Community College. At this time, I still had seven years left on my sentence - my goal to earn my degree before my release was rejuvenated!

I submersed myself in my studies while maintaining employment and participation in other programs and vocational classes. My children began to see me as a role-model of perseverance and determination. I used my situation and hard work to illustrate to them that regardless of circumstance, great things are possible. I taught to avoid a defeatist attitude and to always look for the opportunities that abound in any given situation. I completed my Associate's Degree and am now working towards my Bachelor's in Sociology through correspondence courses. My church, upon hearing of my continued drive and tenacity regarding education, is sponsoring me, paying for the courses and course materials. Included in the furthering of my education, I have continued to take classes at PVCC that interest me and/or will be useful towards my B.A. Education saved my life. Education salvaged the lives of my children.

Observing me in my circumstances and my actions and attitudes regarding education instilled a desire for learning in my children. My oldest daughter graduates from High School just after my release. She is a National Honor student and will be attending college on an academic scholarship. My other children (aged

12 to 17) are all honor roll students as well, and each have plans to pursue a higher education. My children beat the statistical odds prescribed to them by society and created by those who came before me. They were able to do so because of the opportunities I took advantage of as a survivor of domestic abuse and a convicted, incarcerated felon. Education saved more than just my life - it saved my family! ▲