

Five years ago, there was a graduation in my family—that of my mother. And although there were hundreds of other graduates, to her, that day may have been the most special, the most precious day in her life, as college was her dream for decades. She was the only one who couldn't go to college among her siblings, as Grandfather's business was hit hardest when it was her turn.

I admire her not just because she was 50 then or was fully sponsored by the government for college but because of all the hardships she endured. She had to juggle her studies with her work, working full-time while her workplace, the Ministry of Labor, is perhaps the busiest government office. And as her job was to analyze statistics on salary for instance at tens of thousands of businesses, by the time she left for her evening program at the college, she was already exhausted.

Thus, I don't remember her returning home before 10 pm. Yet, her schedule became even more hectic while in school, leaving for work two hours earlier and investing all her weekends to study. To be honest, I worried about her often, but in the end, I became her cheerleader, as I could see that she was very happy.

A truly admirable, courageous individual indeed. As such, my mother is my mentor in life, and with her setting the bar so high, I simply couldn't stop aiming for excellence myself—or complain. Although I would not even dare to compare my ordeals with hers, I still believe that I did have my share of hardships since I worked not only in one but two start-ups during the last seven years.

Start-ups, as we all know, often stand for uncertainty with no guarantee of success; most do fail, with sofa beds for quick naps as work hours are notoriously long. These were all a reality for me as I joined during their founding days. But although I too dreamt of that one more hour of sleep many times, still I truly loved all my experiences. Yes, nothing is guaranteed at a start-up, but that is precisely its beauty as well; you can freely unleash your ideas as the company needs good ideas, and everything is simply so dynamic, fast-paced, exciting, and fun.

And that joy you feel as you see them grow is amazing as well. Being part of this success story, now considered the No. 1 AI company in Korea and publicly listed, is ever more meaningful since I really did give my 300%, writing six papers based on the many experiments I conducted as a researcher. And at the second start-up, now more seasoned and experienced, I led the development of a model that was not only selected as an innovative medical device by the Korean FDA, helping to jump-start it for actual commercialization.

But more than any award, this commercialization means so much to me since it is being used at many hospitals in Korea, helping thousands, if not millions. Perhaps this joy is the same joy that my mother must feel as she is applying all that she learned in school to her job to help even more working people.

Just like my mother, who dared to undertake a new challenge, my father also “taught” me that life is full of beautiful choices you can make—he himself is a living example. Starting in heavy industries, he took off to Japan to study and then undertook automotive design. And now he is in the landscape business. But not once did he fear or hesitate. In many ways, I also have this DNA in me. From the admission letter from Computer Science (my first major) and then Mechanical Engineering, and now studying Bioengineering, my journey wasn't easy, but watching my father's journey really helped me.

What my parents taught me has always been a compass in my life. Inspired their example, I strive to live by embracing challenges and opportunities with determination, optimism, and courage, forging my own path along the way.