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My Clarinet and I

My first clarinet was made of hard plastic, and I did not care about it at all. Fifth grade students were told to learn an instrument. Instead of renting like most of the other students, my mom handed me a clarinet that she had found in the attic. It was her clarinet from when she went to high school, which had ended up in her pile of many things upstairs. I remember wanting to play a different instrument, but my mom told me to just take the clarinet and play it.

That clarinet followed me throughout middle school. I was signed up for band, which I despised. All middle schoolers had to take a music class, either orchestra, choir, or band. I thought the orchestra was for stuck up people, and I absolutely could not sing. So band it was.

My friend Allie and I sat next to each other. We both would bug the band director, and would chatter for most of the class. I fooled around in all my classes, not exclusively band, but Allie made this class feel bearable. I would draw little horses on the corner of my *Sleigh Ride* sheet music. When we actually got to work, I would watch Allie's fingers as they moved across the clarinet, and I would do my best to subtly emulate her actions. I did not touch that instrument outside of class.

When I got to high school, I once again found myself being thrust into an activity. This time, my clarinet and I were on the high school football field. My mom had signed me up for marching band. I went with it, likely because Allie once again was in the group with me. I learned how to march an eight-to-five and how to do a horn pop and how to do roll step marching. I would constantly be reminded how to do each of those things and more, but I didn't really care. I did the bare minimum to get through my first season in marching band. I did notice the passion that the other students had for the group, but I just kept to myself and went through the motions without much effort.

After the first year of high school concert band, something in me started to change. I began to look forward to going to band class. Since I had rehearsal nearly every day of the week, my clarinet and I spent a lot of time together. I felt excited when we reached the climax of the musical piece, and disappointed when I had to pack my clarinet away and go to chemistry.

Going to my locker to put my clarinet away was a hassle, so I would just bring it with me to all of my other classes. It became a joke between my friends and I — if I didn't have my clarinet, something had to be wrong. I still wasn't very good at playing the clarinet. I would fumble while playing the rhythms and would oftentimes forget about the key signature. I felt frustrated at this. It would be nice to be able to play through a piece without feeling embarrassed or dropping out. I wanted to be able to play through a whole piece of music confidently.

Music gradually became part of my daily rhythm, and I took time to play my clarinet each day outside of class. Everytime I would get praise from my band director, or I would bow after finishing a performance, my drive to improve crescendoed. This increased motivation wasn't exclusive to band. My clarinet was by my side as I listened to my English teacher explain *Shakespeare*, and I actually understood the difference between Horatio, Fortinbras, and Laertes.

I used my individual rehearsal time to help me do my other classwork, since I would not allow myself to play my clarinet until I had finished my homework. If I didn't do my homework before practicing, I would spend the whole time just thinking about my algebra worksheet or the essay that was due the next day. It was easier to just wipe my brain clear of any distractions and just focus on the music. My grades improved as I committed myself more to music. My parents eventually bought me a new clarinet that suited my level of playing, but I still held onto my first instrument.

I made it my goal to be accepted into my high school's wind ensemble, which was the most esteemed of the three levels of band classes. My second clarinet and I finally made it into that group in my senior year of high school. It took three long years of practicing, and I had finally made it. Each musical piece felt magical to play, and I felt pride whenever I stood in front of the crowd after a performance.

When I searched for colleges, I looked for schools that had a great marching band and music program. I found myself at UMass in fall 2019. My clarinet came with me, of course. I had to bring it, because I was accepted into the clarinet studio as a music minor. I was super excited to play my clarinet with a whole new group of people. My clarinet and I walked into the Fine Arts Center on the first day of classes, feeling ready to take on the challenge.

The first week of classes were blissful. The musical pieces I played were challenging yet satisfying, and I had made many friends during marching band. However, the reality of taking college music courses hit me soon after starting school. Music theory felt like a whole different language. I was forced to sing in my Aural Skills class. Every other music major or minor seemed so prepared in comparison to me. I loved playing my clarinet in the studio, but these other classes made me dread each day. I spent countless hours practicing, but I didn't feel the same spark as in high school. I just felt tired.

I dropped out of the music minor halfway through the fall semester, but I did not want to lose music forever. I couldn't let it go. I put down my clarinet for the first time in years, and took up something new. I signed up for the marching band percussion tech class in the spring, and began my journey as a percussionist in the UMass marching band.

Despite all of the setbacks in 2020, I finally felt the spark come back to me. While my clarinet lay on a dorm shelf gathering dust, I practiced with drumsticks and cymbals. Everyone in the drumline was committed to musical perfection, and I followed suit. I rehearsed every day, and just like in high school, the musical schedule helped keep me on track with my academic classes. I would occasionally play my clarinet again, but it was mostly for fun or for a small gig.

In my final semester at UMass, I finally picked my clarinet up again. I had missed it, and my college career was coming to an end. I had an opportunity to play it again after about two years. I had my first rehearsal in the UMass concert band, and I was surprised to find that I still knew my scales by memory, even if I was a bit rusty. My clarinet and I had been together throughout my high school and college experiences, and I knew I would always be able to go back to it.