

As a child and into my young adulthood, I didn't understand the real impact of my father's illness on my family and my development. This assignment helped me realize it. There isn't much I remember to my kindergarten education except that I arrived knowing how to read thanks to my early love of learning and that I missed a large portion of the school year as my family handled my father's major heart attack and month-long stay at Mayo Clinic (then Luther Hospital) in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. My father's illness resulted in many nights shuffled between various friends and family as well as many boring days at the hospital. My father was not able to work after his heart attack (except for very limited part-time hours as a DJ at a local radio station – about five hours per week), so my mother became the breadwinner. At one point in time, my mom worked three jobs, and my family was always one paycheck away from disaster. We even moved from Black River Falls to Eau Claire to be closer to my father's doctors and medical care when I was in the third grade.

I was always known as the "smart" one at the schools I attended. I caught on to new topics easily. I always hungered to learn more, and I loved to read anything. I read magazines, comic books, text in videogames, books at my reading level, books above my reading level, and blogs on the internet. I had a rich vocabulary, and my love of reading eventually turned into a love of writing and languages. My father saw the limited studies offered to me in my private school education, so he offered me the chance to attend a public high school instead. My time at Memorial High School was amazing. I wasn't always the smartest student in the room, which helped curb my ego. I got to study subjects that fascinated me like Japanese, German, and English grammar. I participated in Forensics in the extemporaneous speech category and won several first-place distinctions at competitions. Just before Christmas of my senior year, I had received several college acceptance letters and wanted to be a linguistics major.

The Christmas of my senior year was one of the most difficult periods of my life. My dad wasn't healthy, and he needed a full-time caregiver. My brother was working to earn money for the household, and my mom couldn't quit working to take care of my dad. My sister was too young to take care of my dad. My college dreams slipped away from me when I realized I was the only option for my father's care. While I loved learning, I loved my family more. I dropped out of high school to take care of my dad. Admittedly, I didn't do it in a "smart" way. I just stopped attending without real notice or a conversation with a counselor or administrator. I knew I wasn't legally obligated to attend as I was already 18 years old, and I found the decision difficult enough. I didn't want the trauma of talking about it, so I ignored it.

I spent most of my young adulthood proud but also ashamed of my choice. I often wondered what my college experience would have been like as a linguistic major fresh out of high school at my dream college in a picture-perfect dorm. Despite knowing full well that I could easily pass the GED, it took losing my job at Hutchinson Technology in my mid-20s to finally earn my GED. It took me only two weeks to earn my GED, and as my last test was finished, I applied for admission at Chippewa Valley Technical College. This was the catalyst for a better life.

My father's illness was the reason I had a delayed experience with higher education, but I think the experience with my father enabled me to have courage, determination, and passion for what I learn. I'm fueled not only by a love of learning, but I am also fueled by the need to prove myself to my family, friends, and loved ones. Because of my experience with my father, I have a lot of empathy, which has helped me in my professional role connecting with prospective students and interacting with my colleagues. I also have a fair amount of emotional intelligence from my experience. I've been through a dark, difficult time. I survived it. Being a survivor of family hardship has helped remind me that I can get through anything. Perseverance is a desirable trait in any occupation. While the start of my young adulthood was full of tribulation (my dad's death opened a can of worms to long to explain), my late 20s and now 30s are defined by supportive relationships and an ability to keep on keeping on.

Most of my accomplishments in life are rooted in education. This is not a surprise to me – I've always loved to learn. Finishing my bachelor's degree will be another education accomplishment. I'm excited to use my education to continue my professional growth path. If there's one thing I learned (or noticed) during this reflection, it's this: I'm always going to need to learn new things, and I can't wait to see what else I will learn.