I value good education highly and consider it a foundation for a successful and happy life. In addition to the economic advantages, education for me has fulfilled an intrinsic need to explore and understand the world around us. Graduate school will be the next step in my goal to become an expert in a field and engage in research to discover new ideas that will make a positive impact in the world.

I was born in Macedonia, a country in southeastern Europe still struggling to catch up to the living standards of the EU. Its socialist past still heavily influences the education system and there are few opportunities for young people to advance in academia. I’ve always wanted to pursue higher education in the US, particularly because I’ve heard stories of researchers taking a more interdisciplinary approach, and I knew that one day I wanted to do exactly that.

I was extremely fortunate when at the age of sixteen I was offered a scholarship to play basketball for Liberty Christian Academy in Lynchburg, Virginia. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and though relatively young, I decided to accept the challenge, move across the ocean, and build a better future for my family and myself.

While my overall experience was positive, I did face significant challenges along the road. From learning a new language, to making new friends, to learning to deal with problems without the help of my parents, my life in the US was not without its share of adversity. These experiences, however, have taught me not to avoid challenges, but tackle them head on. Adopting this attitude helped me mature faster and I realized that adversity helps people grow and improve themselves.

One of the biggest obstacles I faced while in the US was finding resources to attend college. In high school I was lucky to receive a full scholarship, but college costs posed a much more significant barrier, especially for an international student not able to use government’s loans and financial aid. Obtaining a college degree, however, was the primary reason I moved to the US, and I was determined to overcome any hurdles that came in the way of achieving my goal.

I started out with an academic scholarship at Warren Wilson College but decided to transfer because it was too expensive and the academic programs were not as rigorous as I wanted them to be. I transferred to Truman State University, which offered me significant financial aid while also being one of the best public universities in the Midwest. In addition to scholarships, each semester I worked twenty to thirty hours per week so that I could afford food, books, housing and living expenses. Furthermore, being a double major, I had to take eighteen credit hours multiple semesters in row while also keeping my part-time job. To complete my degree faster and cover expenses during the academic year, each summer I did paid internships while also taking credits online. While my schedule was very demanding and quite stressful, it proved invaluable in pushing me outside my comfort zone and challenging me at every step of the way. I realized that I had much more potential than I had originally thought and I learned the importance of time-management and staying focused on the long-term goal.

On December 15th I finally obtained my dual BA/BS degrees and graduated summa cum laude from Truman State University. The hard work paid off in two significant ways: I graduated debt free, and more importantly, I have grown as a person and have developed life long habits that will help me in the future.

Another challenge I faced when I first arrived in the states was the feeling of a newcomer. I spoke little English and was taken aback by the differences between Macedonia and the US. Liberty Christian Academy was a very conservative high school, and I was shocked at how different our worldviews were. People there had different social norms for what is right and wrong and that made a huge difference in how I was interacting with my peers. Warren Wilson College on the other hand is one of the most liberal colleges in the country, and while there I witnessed the other extreme and experienced another cultural shock.

Within a span of three years I had seen both, conservative and liberal environments, and was able to make friends and develop relationships in both places. Having been exposed to this however has helped me become more open minded, and embrace open discussion about issues rather than take dogmatic stances. When dealing with sensitive topics I always try being emphatic and try to understand the other person’s perspective. I feel very fortunate that I have been raised in such culturally diverse atmosphere and have adapted to my surroundings while maintaining my individuality. Thanks to this, I have made many friends and have become a richer person.

Coping with these challenges was not easy, but I had plenty of support from my friends and family, and that made it easier. While friends and family have provided the necessary social support, technology has also played a significant role in my life. My parents live in Europe, and despite the distance, I Skype with them on a weekly basis, for free. The communication between us has made my experience away from home much more pleasant and has also made me realize the life changing potential technology plays in our lives. It has made such an incredible impact on me that I have decided to spend the rest of my life working on improving the technologies we use and making it more accessible to others. Technology’s ability to impact human lives motivates me to learn more and to follow in the footsteps of those who’ve made it possible.

By pursuing a PhD degree and doing research in robotics, one of my life goals will be achieved. I will be continually improving myself by learning new things, while at the same time spreading the availability of technology and making people’s life easier. I would like to use the knowledge I obtain to help others overcome some of the challenges I have faced. My goal is to work on making robots cheaper and more sophisticated in order to be accessible to more people.

One application is furthering the development of self-driving cars so that visually impaired people become empowered and more independent. This is only one way to serve under-represented segments of society and the field of robotics is plentiful with other examples. This potential excites me and I’m convinced that if the technology becomes more accessible it could positively impact millions of people. My goal is to discover new applications, and transform them into a reality.