

from ORDINARY to Extraordinary



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I don't like to speculate, but I would say that few college students in America had to take a bus two and a half hours each way to attend classes five days a week. I did. I would also speculate that few college students became the primary care giver for his or her mother at the age of seven. I did. I might also speculate that few people feel as lucky, proud, and honored to simply hold his or her head high and say, "I made it." I am. My name is Catherine Schleigh, and despite my past family history and personal struggles, I am a first-generation college graduate and hold a professional position with a major corporation in one of the most wonderful cities in America.

Growing up, I had no real family to speak of. My dad left my mom and me when I was young, and from the age of

seven, I was left to care for my mother, who is a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic. Growing up, I received no help, no support, and no encouragement from her or any member of my family. Often, she would not take her medications (or the medications had been improperly prescribed) and she would be physically, emotionally, and verbally abusive to me. It was hard to watch her talk to herself or invisible people. We lived in a very poor, drug-infested, gang-populated area of Philly, and many times, I could not see how I would ever survive.

I managed to complete high school, and I began attending Job Corp, studying business. From there, I began my college studies, majoring in business administration. I had to work very hard, and the adjustment from high school to college was massive. I had to learn how to motivate myself, but the most important thing I learned was that there are people in this world who will help you if you let them.

Some of my instructors did not understand my situation at first. I cried a lot in class, did not have my projects completed

from time-to-time, and basically lived the life of an introvert. Once everyone learned that I was caring for my mother, traveling five hours a day to class, and struggling just to eat, they became my family. They taught me that I had to put my education first. They taught me that, without an education, I would most likely have to work in dead-end jobs for the rest of my life. I began to really look at all of the people in my neighborhood and I made a committed decision that I was not going to fall prey to the temptations of alcohol, sex, unemployment, and drugs.

As I began to succeed in classes, my self-esteem became healthier. I began to understand how to support myself, take pride in my successes, and help others in any way possible. I still struggle with my mother as she

seeks therapy and better medical care, but I also know that I must take care of my own life and keep working toward my own goals. My life is my first priority.

Today, I am an honors graduate. I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree in business administration with a GPA of 3.50. At the graduation ceremony, I was presented an award by the faculty and staff for my dedication and hard work, and for overcoming all odds to obtain my degree. I hope in some small way that my story can help you "hold on" and reach your dreams. Happiness and success are possible for you.

EXTRAORDINARY REFLECTION

Ms. Schleigh had no family support. As a matter of fact, her father was gone and she was the primary caregiver for her mother. How has your family support (or lack of support) affected your studies? Do you think it is important to have your family's support to succeed?