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Since I was eight...

Since I was eight years old, I have always said that I *never* wanted to become a mother, but I am sure that was inspired by some unwavering, dark, and desolate fear that I would become just like my own. I am the first person in my family to attend college, but more importantly, I am the only one who has gotten into the eleventh grade. My mom and dad never finished high school because they figured out they were going to have a baby and decided that the best option would be to drop out of high school and start working full-time to sustain their family.

Growing up, I never paid much attention to school because my parents never motivated me to think about school. I mean, the two of them were doing all right; what did the school have to teach me that they couldn't? Boy, was that statement naive; what did the school have to teach me? I mean, come on, who even says that? When I was eight years old, my mom became highly disconnected, and from that point forward, she started her struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. My mother, when I turned eight, had decided to leave her family behind and began her venture without us. At that time, I had two younger siblings: a sister named Lyndsey, who was only four then, and a brother named David, who was only about a year old. After my mom left, my dad started working over forty hours a week at a mechanic shop in downtown Bastrop, Texas, leaving me to be independent and care for my siblings day and night. I would wake up, get my siblings dressed and ready, cook them breakfast, wait until one of our inconsistent babysitters arrived, and then go to school alone. Then, I would go back home, cook dinner, get everyone ready for bed,

sleep, and do it all again the next day. I had the absolute responsibility of being a mother at only eight years old, which not only pushed my family into the view of child protective services but also had a toll on me both mentally and physically. I felt like I wasn't even my own person, that my mother's faults surrounded my life and defined how I would always be. However, I did have something that helped define me as an individual: school.

After I could get off that school bus fast enough, I would walk in and arrive at a place where I could be eight years old all over again, and that is exactly the feeling I was looking for when I turned seventeen and was scavenging at the surrounding schools in my area. In doing this, I found Colorado River Collegiate Academy, a school that had a dual credit program connected to Austin Community College in Elgin. At first, I signed up honestly to save a few thousand dollars of college tuition, but what I have gotten in return means even more to me than I can even begin to describe. Like other new and upcoming high school students, I had no idea who or what I wanted to be to impact the future, but that became quickly apparent as I met my guidance counselor, Mr. Gordon. Mr. Gordon is a wonderful, kind-hearted gentleman who introduced me to many incredible people and resources. He was one of the first adults I had ever met who shared a common ground and respect for his students, almost as if he needed us just as much as we needed him. In talking to Mr. Gordon, I learned that he once had some occupation as a social worker. At first, this news completely repulsed me. I had been in and out of so many social work offices and had been taken away from my family so many times by people just like him. How in the world could I have so much respect and admiration for a person who took children away from their families? At least, that's what I thought social workers did; I mean, it's all I had seen them do to my family.

I went home that day with many questions floating about in my head. Who in the world would choose to do social work as a career? Why did Mr. Gordon quit being a social worker? It was all too complicated for me. When I arrived home, I ran to my room and immediately thought about every interaction I had ever had with a social worker. None of my memories were good, but that led me to one important question that changed my bias, career path, and community college journey. If I didn't have any good memories towards the social workers in my life, if they didn't see how hard I was struggling, if they didn't notice how much I needed them at the time, then how did other children feel that were in way worse situations than myself? How were other children *hurting* inside? That night, I sat in my bed and *could not* stop thinking about the other kids out there who were in situations just like me.

The next day at school, I found myself in the library talking to Mr. Gordon about college majors and asked him, "Why did you stop doing social work?". He answered swiftly, saying, "Lots of people can't do the job; they see some terrible things and find something else. It was really, *really* hard work mentally." That settled with me, and I immediately thought back and pondered about how I should have thanked the social workers who had been there for me and even though it seemed they pressured me and my family, they never gave up on me. I wanted to do that; I wanted to be the voice for someone who couldn't speak for themselves. I wanted to be a person who never gave up, even if it was too difficult. In America, seventy-five percent of social workers feel burnt out, and fifty percent leave their jobs within their first two years. Right then and there, I changed my major from general studies to the associate degree in arts of social work, and I determined that I would *not* be one of the fifty percent.

Currently, I am a junior in high school, and I am pursuing a career and a degree in social work. Every summer, I take classes to ensure my degree. I still volunteer as much as possible and even kick-started my independent student project, working alongside social workers at my local family resource center by raising money and putting together care packages for unaccompanied youth. I am a proud member of my school's National Honors Society and work harder and harder every day to ensure that I can be the dependable person needed in my community, especially as a leader. Austin Community College is a wonderful school filled with driven, educated, and incredible professors and staff who push me to be a better and more well-rounded person for my career. I have learned so much in just my two years of attending. My community college and high school have shown me that I can have a fulfilling career while also healing my heart and mind in the process. Not only does ACC have incredible educators, but it also has various programs that help students with mental health issues and provide adequate resources for students to feel safe and prepared. ACC has also helped me understand various incomes in my state regarding my career. This summer, I will take classes to obtain my degree, such as Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare, to prepare me for my career plan. Austin Community College also has an internship program for incoming social workers attached at the end of their degree plan, which will not only count for field experience but could help to potentially set me up for a job right out of high school! I am the first dual credit student at Austin Community College Elgin to push for an associate's degree in social work, and I must admit that I am pretty proud of myself for doing so.

Earlier, at the beginning of this essay, I said that when I was eight years old, I decided that I never wanted to become a mother, but thanks to Austin Community College, my high school, my educators, and my devotion to becoming a social worker I know that I can break the unhealthy generational curses that have always haunted me. I know that I can do anything I put my mind to, and I will be the best social worker and mother out there that I can be, all thanks to my educational journey through my community college.