

## ***Follow My Lead***

I went to college as non-traditional student mother because I watched my mom do it before me.

My mother was a 16 year old high school student when she found out she was pregnant with me. She immediately married up three days later, and dropped out of high school.

A couple years later, 21, divorced, with three children, and living in a series of trailer parks, my mother took her life back, working in a Detroit auto factory by day and earning a GED and attending community college at night.

On weekends, she'd take us sledding there, on the rolling hills of the campus at Oakland Community College. We turned out to watch 5k runs, and I accompanied her once to the office of her favorite professor, who, I recall, spoke to me kindly and encouraged me in my schoolwork. This was my first impressions of what "college" meant.

My mother eventually journey northward to Michigan State University. We lived in the family housing apartments, part of a community representing hundreds of nations worldwide. We played into the evening with Ali from Pakistan, Roberto from Brazil and Daniel from Israel. We went to Spartan autograph sessions, and waded across the Red Cedar River. This, also, became what "college" meant to me.

Years later, at the age of 21, I became accidentally pregnant with my own baby girl. I had dallied in college up to that point, but was more interested in working and money, and was wholly unsure as to what I wanted to do for a career anyway. With my baby on the way, I quit college, and worked clerical jobs for the next several years.

But I knew my daughter needed to see something better. Something more. She needed to see a woman acknowledge the women before us, the women that we came from, to harness the ambition and drive that happened before her. And, I knew I wanted more, too. College was a positive thing for me. A place that meant exploration and curiosity fulfilled. So, I also returned to school, and began the last two years of my degree at Michigan State University, my mother's alma mater.

In the summer of 2003, 7 months pregnant and quite a sight, I wobbled around the campus of MSU, turning in paperwork and visiting financial aid officers. I still remember that day, because I had to have my student I.D. picture taken. That is the only picture that I "allowed" to be taken that entire pregnancy!

Finally, in the Fall of 2003, just three weeks after my son was born via emergency c-section, I attended the required Transfer Student Orientation

program. Although I was still breastfeeding and very sore, I had read multiple times that there were **no exceptions** to attending an Orientation Session; I never even thought to ask.

Instead, my husband drove me the 20 minutes to campus, and I desperately pumped breast milk one last time in the back of my tinted-window minivan before the day-long session. I brought the breast pump in my backpack, along with a cold storage pack, but I had the distinct feeling that there was no way I was going to be able to find a place to use it. I had horrifying visions of pumping in a bathroom stall between sessions, surrounded by 20-year-olds, while the machine ran on battery power, making that horrible *tthhpttt- tthhpttt*. I ached the whole session, both from the c-section and the lack of breastfeeding, and barely made it through the day.

I went through those first couple weeks of school recovering from my surgery and dealing with a newborn. I was also on and off pain medications, sometimes making it difficult to concentrate. But I was happy- happy to be doing what I wanted to do, happy to be in school in the evenings instead of working full time, happy to spend the fall days with my children and homework.

I am, by no means, saying it was easy. I wrote papers and studied late into the night, as most students do. The difference was, my baby was often awake with me. I had professors who held office hours only during the day, and wondered how I could ever speak with them with a toddler and infant in tow. Email became my friend.

But I also had remarkable support. Sometimes, the little things made the difference. One professor allowed all commuting students to turn in work via email, and held individual work sessions based on student's schedules. My education class applauded me when I stood up to introduce myself and mentioned my 5-week-old baby boy. MSU's *Student Parents on a Mission* group held a celebration for all the graduating parents, and I felt truly honored and accomplished when it was finally "my turn."

I learned to navigate the system from my mother before me. I learned to acknowledge myself and my situation, and to assert that I, too, had the right to flex the system to meet my needs. I figured out that I needed to complete school to provide an example for my own daughter, and to satisfy my own intellectual and career needs. Finishing my degree is, without a doubt, one of the best things I've done *for myself* in my entire life.

But, I also did it for my mother.