Defying The Norm

Both sides of my family perfectly fit into their societal “niche,” attaining at or below a high school education. My mom, being the youngest of four in a second generation home, was the first among her immediate family to attend college.

Many of my aunts, uncles, and cousins have not attained more than a 9th grade education level. My mom saw how they struggled to pay their numerous expenses with a minimum wage income; they allowed the lack of education to be the shackles which kept them bounded to their stereotypes. Therefore, engraved in my upbringing, was the desire to break free from my cultural limitations, the desire to be independent, the desire to defy the norm.

My mother took the initiative to begin teaching me the basics of literature at home. She installed the very popular Hooked on Phonics interactive computer program. By that time, I had already been conversing in full sentences. However, the child care center within The New York City College of Technology was the place in which my literacy skills soared. Although it was so many years ago, I will never forget all of the wonderful women that were involved in the evolution of my literary skills. Upon walking in, I was forced to recite the alphabet as well as their sounds in order to enter the room. The alphabet could be likened to a secret passcode that would be used to get into a speakeasy. After mastering the alphabet, I was taught how to read and I couldn’t get enough.

By the time my mother graduated, her four-year old read every children’s book in the house. Kindergarten and first grade not only strengthened my reading skills but made me aware of a talent that I had yet to discover, writing. I was Columbus and my limitless imagination quickly became the North American continent. I decided to use the rest of elementary school to focus on my writing skills. My teachers saw that I had a way with words; therefore, they made the extra effort to ensure that my budding potential turned into a valuable asset. By the time of my elementary school graduation, I had won several in class essay contests and foolishly thought I was on my way to a life of happiness by way of literacy.

In middle school, I was going through one of the hardest times of my life. Not only was my family going through hard times, but I was being bullied in school by my catholic teachers. Consequently, I buried myself in my school work as an escape from the harsh and brutal reality that was my life. I had already been battling depression since the age of seven; however, it was in middle school that I was at an all-time low. I felt that I couldn’t escape my own head. My mind became a solitary prison located on another planet, lightyears away from humanity. I was attending therapy, but as with any mental ailment, it is on you to do the heavy lifting. I had to teach myself a coping skill in order to prevent people from seeing the ravaging hurricane of emotions that was regularly going on in my head. I was done feeling vulnerable to people that I needed validation from. Therefore, on my spare time, I would write short stories in which I would test the boundaries of writing to become my own hero. In these metopic representatives of my inner conflicts, I was both the villain and the hero. The emotions that kept me awake at night became demons; the defenseless girl became a beautiful chocolate Wonder Woman, as she was my favorite super hero. Never again would I subject myself to the mercy of others.

This continued on to my freshmen year of high school where my stories began to change into DBQs and other information based essays. I was punished for divergence and rewarded for uniformity. My teachers would repeatedly write “Imagery has no place in history” or “Needs to be more structuralized.” By discouraging my writing style, they were stripping me of my alter ego. The beautiful facade that kept my sanity intact began to deteriorate, revealing the ugliest of realities. The depression that rooted itself in my home life now became visible in my school life. I was no longer able to cross the bridge into my imaginary world of miracles and heroes, the life that for so long preserved my stability.

Despite this sudden rebirth into the coldest of worlds, a world without my safe haven, I continued to prevail, academically that is. Even though I felt like a horse nearing the end of his successful racing days, I knew that I had to push on in order to avoid the enslavement that my family faces every day. The new coping skills that I developed were reinforced by the strongest of steel. I began to throw my burdens upon the shoulders of my almighty creator in prayer as well as communicate more with my mom about my daily struggles, both of which were a tremendous help. Along with the new skills, I once again started writing. However, it was no longer the fictional journalism that I was used to, I dove into a new genre of writing, poetry. I was out of my comfort zone but there is no self-discovery without change.

I began with simply structured poems such as sonnets and brief haikus, eventually making my way up to free verse writing. At that point, I wrote to achieve a new purpose, writing to not only be my own hero but to society as well. I wished ever so deeply to move my audience with my words, to make them feel what I was feeling. As my senior year of high school flew by, my poetry skills had grown and I was finally content with myself and my mental state. I was no longer determined to hide my inner conflicts or my poetry.

I realized that I should not be ashamed of killing two birds with one stone. I unintentionally figured out a way to save myself and further my education the same time. Being in college, I am one step closer to ensuring my freedom. I will be forever grateful to literacy, along with other factors, for allowing me to be in a place that I never thought I would be, happy.