

First Generation College Student Narrative:
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I always knew I wanted to obtain a good education. I watched my mom and dad work so very hard every day and watched their morale sink when superiors insulted them. Both were children of eastern European immigrants who worked in the coal fields. Dad was a steel worker who was unable to finish the second year of high school because he needed to provide for his family. His father died when he was 15, and he was the eldest son. My mother was a cleaning woman who only completed a year of high school. They were both very bright, and dad regularly read the Cleveland Plain Dealer and the local newspaper. Through him I observed that reading was important, and he bought me new books every pay day to affirm it. I was sent to a Catholic grade school, and when it came time for high school, I took an exam to enter the only Catholic high school in the area at the time. My father did not understand the importance of my continuation in a private school, so I sold my favorite horse book for the application fee and promised my mom that I would help her clean houses in order to pay for my tuition, uniforms and books at Central Catholic High School.

In high school, I took pre-college courses as well as secretarial courses. I knew I would be responsible for my education and needed a way to pay for it. I was reminded during my counseling session in senior year that it would be difficult to attend college. Not because of my grades, but because of financial reasons. As a steel worker in the 60's, Dad made just over the amount that disqualified me to receive grants, and he did not want to encumber himself with student loans. He was a very frugal man and paid cash for almost everything. So, for a couple years, I took courses at night while I worked full-time as a secretary.

I finally decided to move to Kent State and go to school full-time in 1970. I was a temp at Hoover's in North Canton, and they wanted to "purchase me" from the temp agency. This seemed like a dismal twist, and I ran to locate sources to fund my education. Between scholarships, part-time work and student loans I was able to enroll full-time. My mother had infinite faith in me and signed her and my father's name to student loans so I could pursue my dream. He did not find out that he was "encumbered" until he received the pay off notification for the loan notes in the mail many years later.

While I was studying on a part-time basis, I met a group of graduate students who taught anthropology and sociology courses I was taking at the Kent branch campus. They became good friends and mentors to me as I pursued my degree in anthropology and economics on the Kent State campus. I eventually met my husband through them, and they all served as intellectual guides to me. They were working class students too and understood all of the challenges I faced—no family role models in academe, alienation from financially comfortable peers, the need to work to support myself and the need to strive harder to prove you belong and to maintain scholarships.

With my friends' support, I became an excellent student and read extensively—far beyond my classmates. My mentors gave me reading lists, and I borrowed their books. I listened to advanced discussions about sociological theory during evening "get-togethers" and pondered imperialism as it related to anthropological theory. I was in heaven.

Even though I did well academically, I was still surprised when my professors took an extra interest in me. Two of my anthropology professors were from Cambridge University in England, and they strongly supported my application to the London School of Economics. I was so flattered, but at the same time, I thought I didn't deserve it. After all, how smart could I be any way. I had not yet developed the confidence to accept my gifts. It would take a few more years before I understood that I earned the right to be presented with such opportunities.

As my graduate friends completed their graduate degrees, they left for Boston to obtain their doctoral degrees in sociology. After a year, I missed them very much and transferred to Boston University to join them. Again, I was given many opportunities—scholarships, fellowships, teaching assistantships. As an undergraduate, I served as a teaching assistant in sociological theory and got paid for it. I was sailing! I combined my sociology and anthropology courses with economics and became "left" on the political continuum. "Left" felt quite at home for me because my father was a union leader in the steel mills. I truly understood a Marxist perspective out of my life experience. One time at a Boston party, a socialist math professor asked me how I understood so much about Marxist theory. I told him that "I lived it."

I visited my parents several times a year as I completed undergraduate school and went on to grad school in anthropology. I would always come home with so many books, and they often wondered if I was missing out on "a life." They said I was always in my books. One time I went home, and it was obvious that my father explored one of my old encyclopedia volumes that my brother bought me. He shared with me that he knew what I was studying. He learned that anthropology was the "study of man" --from all angles. I

was so proud that he cared to enter my world. And indeed I entered his, because I shared my studies of the labor movement while he shared his experiences organizing. Although she did not realize it, my mother inspired my studies in anthropology because she enjoyed being of the world with all of its differences.

As time went on, I completed a master's degree in community counseling and a doctoral degree in communication studies at Ohio University. Luckily, I continued to meet people with a foot in the working class world. Dr. David Descutner became a mentor, and he served as co-director of my dissertation committee.

I have lived my whole life in an academic community once graduating from high school. Throughout my academic travels, I have felt both a member and a stranger to the community. At a younger age, I sometimes felt embarrassed about my family background as I attended classes with students from highly educated and financially wealthy backgrounds. As I became more secure about my accomplishments, the values instilled by my parents and my unique perspective based on my working class worldview, I knew I was different but nevertheless I belonged.

I would say to every first generation student, maintain pride of your background and appreciate those core values that you learned from family, friends or teachers that sent you down the yellow brick road of higher education. And, lend encouragement and support to those who are still trying to complete their journey. We do belong.