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From a wreck, to the classroom, to a future in law

I was twenty years old in the summer of 2002, and I found myself with some time to think. I lay on my back, immobile, my eyes on the ceiling, for seven days. The weights hanging behind my head required this time to prepare me for surgery. These weights would pull at the pair of screws drilled into the skull just above each of my ears. The automobile wreck that had fractured the C5 vertebra of my neck had also compressed my spine, and the traction apparatus would stretch my spinal column and allow the surgeon to repair the damaged bone. Meanwhile I, heavily drugged and with talk of paralysis drifting among the doctors and nurses around me, could not so much as hold a book, or even tilt my head for a view of the television. My hospital bed oscillated slowly from side to side (to allow for circulation), and I was left to consider my future.

Like most students with two years at university behind and two ahead, a central question of my life then was the nature of my post-college career. I had always been a strong student, a high school valedictorian with a knack for standardized tests. It was assumed – primarily by me – that I would parlay these skills into a fat and enviable paycheck. Indeed, I selected my original major (chemical engineering) with an eye toward maximizing future income.

By the time of the car accident, however, I had become disaffected with the idea of spending my life in service to a bank account. I had refocused my coursework towards fields that I was eager to study, research, and discuss – a double major in economics and American studies. I was not yet sure where this would take me. Certainly economics left open the possibility of promotions, corner offices, and company cars, but my values were changing.

It was my time in the hospital bed, and the many weeks of my post-surgery recovery, that matured these values from abstraction to purpose, from aspiration to practice. I decided that, if I could truly dispense with monetary considerations, I would most like to teach. Dozens of teachers, chief among them my mother the 8 th -grade algebra teacher, had instilled in me a deep affection for education and set me on a path to teaching high school economics.

Now in my nineteenth year in public education, I am grateful for the forces, including a rolled Chevy Blazer, that led me to public service. I have greatly enjoyed serving my community in the classroom, and my commitment is just as strong as it was when I taught my first course. In fact, my experiences have made me more devoted to the education profession, but they have also shown me a new way that I can serve the same students, teachers, and community.

I have begun working towards a JD, as my career has exposed me to the many areas in which legal expertise can complement and improve the educational mission of the schools, be they special education, human resources, conflict resolution, finance, facilities and real estate, or civil rights law. I recently spoke with the general counsel for a local school district, and she described a widespread need for attorneys in the field of education. She also affirmed that working on behalf of students, teachers, and parents is a challenging and fulfilling career.

Public education may not be the most lucrative profession (and has not left me in an ideal position to pay for law school), but I have found ways that serving the community can inform my career, my family, and my purpose. I learned this from the nurses, doctors, and hospital volunteers at my bedside. From the pastors at my church, who have encouraged me in leading small groups, helping with the youth, and aiding the elderly in our neighborhood. From my wife, who herself spent years in public education and now works for our church. From my dad, who patiently coached my little league teams (and inspired me to do the same with my kids). And from my mother, who is up at the school several times a week tutoring, even in retirement. I consider myself fortunate that my influences and my career goals have aligned with an ethic of service.

Because I have taken a unique road to law school, my ideal academic journey - and my eventual career in law - will look a bit different than most. I have a family to look out for, with two kids that have college aspirations of their own. Financial reality means that I will continue to work full time and attend law classes in the evenings. Many students might worry most about tests, grades, and landing interviews with prestigious firms, but my primary concern is how I will balance family, job, and study time. With great people around me, I know I can figure it out, and I hope that the challenge will make me a better teacher and further unify my family around this common goal of completing law school. When I do graduate, I don’t plan to follow the conventional pattern then either. I want to continue serving my community with the public education system as a school district lawyer.

This may not pay as much as a conventional legal career, but it suits my family and my personal convictions perfectly. Surely, my community has imparted more to me than I can somehow repay. That I can even walk to class is a blessing from a host of paramedics on the scene and hospital personnel whose life’s work is tending to life at its most traumatic. There was also my dad’s fellow little league coach, a lifelong family friend that met the ambulance at the hospital and walked beside my gurney, communicated with my frantic parents as they rushed back from an out-of-town wedding, and even helped lift me onto the MRI machine. And I’m told there was an anonymous truck driver, a man whose face I cannot remember and whom I cannot identify to thank, that was the first to stop and help stabilize my broken neck. These people showed me that being a part of a community involves both everyday service and, when the time comes, a willingness to help those in a crisis. I have been the beneficiary of the community-minded spirits of all of these people, and I am now also benefiting from the fulfilling life that my own community service has afforded me. I hope that I might use my education in law to carry such an outlook forward