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Resiliency: A Community College Student's Journey

In *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1927) Eduard C. Lindeman asked and answered, "In what areas do most people appear to find life's meaning? We have only one pragmatic guide: meaning must reside in the things for which people strive, the goals which they set for themselves, their wants, needs, desires, and wishes. ... Viewed from the standpoint of adult education, such personalities seem to want among other things, intelligence, power, self-expression, freedom, creativity, appreciation, enjoyment, fellowship. ... They want to count for something; they want their experiences to be vivid and meaningful; they want their talents to be utilized; they want to know beauty and joy; and they want all of these realizations of their total personalities to be shared in communities of fellowship. Briefly they want to improve themselves; this is their realistic and primary aim. But they want also to change the social order so that vital personalities will be creating a new environment in which their aspirations may be properly expressed" (Daniel Schugurensky, 1998-2001).

Prior to reading this essay prompt, I would not have considered resiliency as part of my community college experience. Tumultuous would have been foremost in my mind, but now I see it differently. Being introduced to Mr. Lindeman at the beginning of this course has slightly (well maybe a bit more than slightly) altered my worldview of the experience of education. I would not have thought that my own observations would be spoken with such insight by someone almost a century ago. This is how my journey as a community college student began and continues.

During my late teens and early adulthood I lacked focus and guidance. Post-secondary education and career exploration, for me, began in 1997 at Forsyth Technical Community College with all the immaturity and indecisiveness of a single, seventeen year old mother of two. With no knowledge of resources, guidance, or support I floundered. Between the fall semesters of 2002 and 2003, five years subsequent to my Forsyth Tech attempt, I enrolled at Central Piedmont Community College. I could not focus on school because I was dealing with (or not) overwhelming internal and external struggles.

Due to my inability to balance life and the resulting destructive impulses and emotions I exhibited, I was ordered to a sixteen to twenty-one year term of imprisonment in 2006. For the first time in my life I was in an environment where my identity was not referenced in relation to the person next to me. I had to plan my days, feed my mind, and fill my spirit based on what Shaheedah needed, and I was utterly lost. So, I set out to do what I did best, learn. Only then, the subject was me. What were my strengths? My weaknesses? What did I believe about God? If I was to live the next 16 to 21 years with no expectations on me from other people, what did I expect for myself? What were my passions? I went on a journey to find out.

I developed a ten-year plan by the close of the first year of my incarceration. My goal was to obtain every collegiate diploma, certificate, continuing education credit, vocational training, and self-enrichment course offered; step-by-step, year-by-year. Part of me, actually most of me, began this way for my children who had been aged 4, 8, and 9 when I left. They remained the center of my life and I could do nothing without the thought of how it would eventually affect them. I was still a mother, now having to co-parent, and they needed the example set that no matter your address or circumstance progression and success was

possible.

Opportunity abounded to enrich my knowledge base for careers that would fit my personality, dreams, and personal life values. Enrolling at Wake Technical Community College, I was able to earn a diploma in Information Systems and a certificate in Culinary Arts, placing on the President's or Dean's list most every semester. The chance to speak and interact with the professors and other students, create business plans, and do other research opened my mind to the possibilities of after. I had always "done hair" at home, and so, at Johnston Community College I earned a certification in Cosmetology and continued the practice of showing people the beauty they already possess through touch and listening. Montgomery Community College taught me Small Business Management where I learned that I have a very creative and adaptable mind.

Between these opportunities, I apprenticed as a Dental Prosthodontic Technician, enjoying knowing I possessed the skill to create something so personable and long lasting with my hands and mind's eye. Courses in communications, math, social work, and psychology followed, increasing my excitement because I was finally realizing what my life's purpose had always been. Society's stigma concerning incarcerated individuals would have dictated that this should have been the darkest time of my life. Instead, I gained knowledge, insight, and a vision of who I wanted to be. Most importantly, I had hope of a future. By default I could have self-destructed. Prison, by its very chaotic nature and coupled with my own history, could have kept me from accomplishing any goal. However, there was a deep seated need within myself to fail no more. I began to see that my life was not over. I was not at rock bottom. I was alive, my children loved me, and there was hope for me to regain my dignity, integrity, and self-respect. Opportunities at these various community colleges helped me with that. My children are now 19, 24, and 25 years old. The motivation I have to attend CPCC today is very different from that of 2002 and I now provide needed support, guidance, and a listening ear for my children during their own community college journeys.

How do I correlate this, my life experience, with what I have learned taking the College Transfer Success course? From time management to self-discovery, decision making to implementation, I personally experienced and developed, out of necessity, life skills that make for a successful collegiate student experience. My journey ensured I discovered that emotional intelligence was not about how happy and nice I was to others but understanding my own strengths and limitations. I discovered that I was not meant to "do it all" alone, that interdependence is not co-dependence.

Holding myself accountable to the goals that I set, and achieving them, increased my self-confidence. The higher my self-confidence, the more my self-efficacy increased and I have been able to think, hope and plan further and reasonably. These lessons had an unexpected result. My journey has inspired, motivated, and connected others as well. Not just within my gated community but my family and others in the communities through which I have traveled these years.

Embracing my responsibility to live in this world, knowing that I am doing what I desire most and that it is actually making a difference for someone else is my way of leading, guiding and inspiring others. Thanks to Central Piedmont Community College's student support services, I have the opportunity to attend online classes during my transition, continuing my journey by completing my associate's degree in Human

Services Technology with a specialization in working with at-risk-youth and going on to gain my Bachelor of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

I never considered myself a resilient student but now I know I possess this skill in spades. I have a natural skill that has been tested, tried, and developed and have experiences that are valuable in the helping profession. I can use this to succeed not only for fulfillment in my chosen career field but in life itself. This would not have been a reality but for the role community college has played in my life's journey.