

Last year I was awarded the Woman of Impact scholarship. I tried to locate my previous essay, knowing that what I wrote then was likely extremely vague and probably only highlighted a few of my philanthropic endeavors, but was unable to locate it. Admittedly, I had no idea that a scholarship even existed to solely recognize someone for being a good person. This spring I was told that out of over 300 applicants, a panel of women chose me to be one of the recipients. I feel that I owe the group of women gave me this honor – a little bit more of my story.

For as long as I can remember, I have been the unlucky one. I grew up in a crack house with my two sisters and our mother was a drug addicted prostitute. We were often abused and rarely had food in our home. At 14, my mother's advice was if I ever needed money, I should just sell myself. I never took my mother's advice and was determined to live my life the exact opposite of the way my mother lived.

July 30, 2006 brought me a new freedom, I was finally an adult. Something that I glorified in my mind for years. As soon as I was an adult, I could finally make my life better. I had dreams of going to college and having complete financial stability. 48 hours after I turned 18, I was moving into my first apartment and started college just a couple weeks later. To say that I was completely unprepared for the real world was an understatement. I had no idea how to budget, I often had an overdrawn bank account and had to work two jobs to ensure that I didn't get evicted from my apartment. I desperately wanted to make college work and enrolled each semester for a couple years, optimistic that this semester would be different and that I could prioritize school. Unfortunately, each semester was just like the previous one and finally in 2011, I gave up and decided that I would just get a job and give up the dream.

Right when I decided to give up on college, I would cross paths with my husband in October 2011. He grew up in a similar home environment and also had not completed college. Our goals in life aligned, marriage was important and we both wanted to raise our children in a stable 2 parent household. We had minimal life skills, we barely could take care of ourselves and we were both pretty much at rock bottom – so the most logical thing to do was to run off to the courthouse and get married. We had no control over our past, but we were determined to have control over our future.

I truly do not know what we did to make the universe hate us so much, but it has consistently attacked both of us for our entire lives. Getting married just seemed to amplify the attacks. We were both eager to have children and by November 2012, we found out that we were pregnant after our first month of trying. Coming from families where every pregnancy was unplanned, there was power in making the choice to start our family and not have it happen by accident. I remember being so nervous about miscarriage and finally

at 12 weeks, my OB-GYN told me that the baby was perfect and to go ahead and share our news and look forward to bringing home a baby in late spring.

2 months after we announced our pregnancy, we walked into the anatomy scan and eager to find out the gender of our baby. We were so completely oblivious that the sonogram was actually a diagnostic tool and the point of that scan was not to find out the gender, but rather the health of the baby. The universe dropped an atomic bomb on us and instead of finding out what our baby's gender was, we found out that our baby didn't have any kidneys. I was healthy and the baby would remain healthy while in my womb, but would die as soon as she was born. I was also nearing the gestational threshold for a medical abortion, so I needed to quickly decide to continue the pregnancy and watch our child die on her birthday or to terminate the pregnancy due to an incompatible with life diagnosis.

It was completely unfathomable that a child that was so deeply desired and one that was bouncing around in my belly was going to die. I was certain that the medical professionals were wrong and we made the choice to continue the pregnancy. Our daughter, Addison Lee Harvey was born nearly a month early on May 17, 2013 and died 37 minutes later.

We immediately began trying for our second child, only to be met with infertility struggles and miscarriages. We were elated to find out that I was pregnant again on Addison's first birthday. Addison's pregnancy was so normal and healthy and I assumed that the next one would be the same. Immediately it was detected that the RhoGAM shot that I had been given during Addison's pregnancy had failed and because my husband was homozygous for antigen D, my body would recognize the new pregnancy as a foreign pathogen and would slowly try to kill it. It was like lightning struck us twice. The Rhogam shot is failure rate is less than 1%. I spent hundreds of hours traveling to specialists and suffered from severe anxiety the entire pregnancy, but delivered a healthy baby girl on January 12, 2015 via emergency c-section.

When we were dating, we had decided that we would have 6 children. After having our second daughter Amelia, it was clear that between our infertility issues and because my body had built up enough antibodies against antigen-D, that any further pregnancies would result in a fetal demise. Our dream of 6 children was crushed. We were grateful to have one living child, but grieved the loss of a big family.

In Fall of 2016, we started watching a new show on NBC called "This is us". In the very first episode, the main characters lost their baby during delivery and the physician told the dad "I like to think that maybe one day you'll be an old man like me, talking a younger

man's ear off, explaining how you took the sourest lemon that life has to offer, and turned it into something resembling lemonade." From that moment on, that was our life motto. The universe was going to throw lemons at us, and we were determined to turn it into something resembling lemonade.

We immediately began the process to become licensed foster parents and the exact day that our license came in the mail, I found out that I was pregnant. I had 0 expectations that the pregnancy would result in a living child, my antibody titres against antigen D were 64 times the lethal limit and the baby had a 100% chance of inheriting the antigen. When DCFS called for a newborn baby and said that the parents plan for the baby was adoption, I quickly said yes. I genuinely thought that having a baby in my arms would cushion the blow of the inevitable loss of my pregnancy.

I had to drive to a maternal fetal specialist over an hour away at least once a week with my newborn baby in my arms. By the end of the pregnancy, I was seeing my OB-GYN two other times for blood pressure checks because my health was declining. I was hospitalized for observation on October 3rd at 34 weeks pregnant and the next day nearly died due to HELLP syndrome. I was very sick and my body had made my son extremely anemic, but we both survived. I couldn't believe it, we finally caught a break. 6 days later, my preemie son who had undergone many blood transfusions for RH incompatibility, contracted meningitis in the NICU. His liver started failing, he became septic and was transferred to OSF in Peoria. We arrived at the hospital about 30 minutes after he arrived and walked into his room, where he immediately coded. The physicians were able to revive him but were not optimistic that he was going to survive the night. By the grace of God, we were able to walk out of the NICU a month later and Roland's two sisters were waiting at the house to meet him.

Now that we had our family complete, my husband went back to college to pursue his bachelor's at Bradley University. We had many foster children in and out of our house and in June 2019, our son Noah joined the family. He was originally a short-term placement and was expected to go back to his birth parents, but he ended up becoming eligible for adoption. We were now the parents of 2 boys and 2 girls. My husband and I worked opposite shifts to avoid daycare costs and he would go on to complete his bachelor's in engineering in December of 2020. My husband's education was completely paid for by his employer, so he walked away from school with zero student loans.

We were stable, had become meticulous with budgeting and we made the decision for me to leave the workforce and finish my degree. My son Roland was immunocompromised and was frequently hospitalized in his first 3 years of life. It was during his hospitalizations at OSF, that I learned about respiratory therapists and decided

that I would pursue my degree in respiratory care. I started school in January 2021 and a few weeks later, I got a call for a newborn that had been left at the hospital. We picked up this chubby baby who quickly presented with some very challenging medical issues. For months we were in and out of the hospital with aspiration pneumonia. By six months old, we had a pulmonologist, ENT, cardiologist, pediatric ophthalmologist, gastroenterologist and neurologist as part of our care team. As soon as my son Roland's health issues stabilized, I was thrown back into sleeping in hospitals and talking to respiratory therapists again. I was even more empowered to become one of these heroes after watching them save two of my sons' lives.

I adopted my youngest son in 2022 and closed our foster license. When I closed my license, we had fostered over 35 children in a span of 5.5 years. I now had the 6 children that I had always dreamed of, despite one being in Heaven. It was at this time I completely shifted my philanthropy efforts to community involvement. It was important to my husband and I, that we teach our children how to be compassionate human beings and we also wanted to put ourselves in a position to help and encourage other low-income youth with backgrounds similar to our childhood. In January of 2022, I volunteered to be mentored by the community outreach leader in our church and took the position of co-chair. I swear the universe REALLY likes to mess with me, and before our first meeting, my co-chair unexpectedly died. This left me in charge of all community outreach efforts in Clinton with 0 experience.

Instead of backing away, I took on the challenge. What was important to me was reaching the low-income youth in our community. I wanted to make their lives a little easier and be a solid mentor in our community. With my children by my side, I organized the community Easter Egg Hunt. This year we had nearly 500 participants and I have consistently grown this event over the last 3 years. Our church packs nearly 350 weekend food bags for children in food insecure homes every single week. These food bags have really been at the heart of our church for over a decade. My oldest son Noah was actually a recipient of these food bags when he lived with his birth parents, and now I have the privilege of watching him pack these bags for others. Poverty rates are high in our community, so I organized back to school events that give away new shoes and school supplies to children in need. This year we are expanding our efforts to include cosmetologists and will give away free haircuts as well. As a child, it was horrendous showing up to the first day of school with old shoes that didn't fit and unkempt hair, while all my friends looked nice. No child in our community will have the same embarrassment that I had going forward. I do extensive fundraising to make sure that these children have hats, gloves and winter boots and finish out the year by collecting food for holiday food baskets and Christmas gifts for all in need. In addition to focusing on low-income children,

nearly every Thursday night of the school year, you will find me at church cooking for our youth athletes. We welcome these athletes into our church, we have a small devotional and fill their bellies with spaghetti, garlic bread and dessert and tell them how proud we are of their accomplishments. I never got to participate in sports and I was never told that someone was proud of me. I make sure that all of these children, regardless of socio-economic status, know how amazing they are. I am truly blessed that the church 100% supports all of my outreach efforts and I have a team of incredible volunteers that work tirelessly with me to fundraise and help with these efforts. The congregation all know that these are my special interest projects, but outside the church walls, I am fairly anonymous in the community. There is rarely any gratitude for the things that I accomplish, but it is extremely validating to know that I am the one changing the lives of so many in our community. It is also amazing to see my children model me and see them always willing to help others.

In April of 2023, I completed most of my pre-requisites and was accepted into the respiratory care program at Parkland. I was so proud of myself and marched into the financial aid office to talk about scholarships and financial aid, only to have the world come crashing down on me. I was given bad advice from a previous financial aid advisor and would be completely ineligible for any federal student loans or grants. I was going to have to fund the entire \$20,000.00+ program myself, because I had previously failed out of college. To make matters worse, I was an out of district student and didn't protect my GPA by withdrawing from classes. I took the F at 0.00 for my GPA. It rendered me ineligible for nearly all Parkland Foundation scholarships.

I was defeated and had no real options for paying for college. It didn't matter that since my return to college, that I was pulling off impressive grades and was clearly dedicated. My GPA from 18 years prior was like a heavy ball that was shackled to me and it was constantly telling me that I wasn't good enough. It didn't matter that I had a 0.00 GPA because I was trying to avoid becoming homeless, all that mattered was that I failed. Most scholarships didn't even get my application, because I was automatically disqualified due to where I lived and how poorly I did in school - most literally half my lifetime ago.

There was one Parkland Foundation Scholarship that I did meet the criteria for. It was a new scholarship designed for influential women in the community. It turned out that all of my hard work and good grades on my second attempt at college, really did pay off. This specific scholarship had an incredibly low GPA threshold and my good grades boosted my GPA barely over the eligibility threshold. Out of over 300 applications, a group of women read my essay and didn't judge me based on a number, but rather congratulated me for my hard work and awarded me their scholarship. It was the only Parkland

Foundation Scholarship that I was awarded for the 2023-2024 school year. What I find most ironic is that I am a first generation college student, our gross income in 2022 was less than \$67,000 for my family of 7 – I live below the poverty line and we utilize Medicaid and WIC in our home. My 2023-2024 school year GPA should be a perfect 4.0, despite having 5 children, doing extensive community service and being in a very challenging program and I am a non-traditional student. I am the ideal candidate for scholarships but only the individuals for this specific scholarship recognized that. I could not be more grateful for this committee not judging a book by its cover, but opening it up to see what was inside. I am incredibly humbled by your recognition, generosity and for taking a chance on me. You absolutely selected the right candidate and I will make you proud.

~Kelley