Education and a Second Chance

As a sergeant in the United States Army, there were many times where I felt that my life was in a precarious position. Being faced with the possibility of loosing my life or the lives of those around me made me truly understand just how valuable every day is. Looking around at life outside the military, I realized that many people are not aware of what a gift education is. I had always felt that a higher education was something I just could not attain. I found myself thinking that I wasn’t capable or that for one reason or another I did not deserve it. I was convinced that I was only capable of manual labor. Although I have great pride in my capacity to execute manual tasks, I eventually felt that I deserved more.

I had an admiration for people with higher education. I felt that they had a certain level of respect that I didn’t. I also understood that having an education allowed them to have opportunities that weren’t available to me. I knew that without an education, I might always spend my life barely making ends meet. Getting that education and earning that respect contributed to the decision I made to join the Army. While in Iraq, the value of each day became blaringly evident. Seeing the terrible level of poverty and the difficulty of life there for civilians made me think of what education could mean for them. I knew that some of these people would never learn to read or write. I knew that they might never get the opportunity to learn about all the incredible things that the world had to offer outside of their immediate environment. I started to understand how education at even the most elementary levels yielded an impact. To see people living with the inability to receive primary schooling made me realize that education is a portal to understanding
and respecting the world on a larger scale. I wondered if we were a more culturally educated global community, would certain circumstances have occurred the way that they did in terms of the war?

Loosing some of my friends there also had a profound impact on my perceptions. I was filled with anger and also resentment. I could not understand why I was still alive when they were not. I didn’t understand the injustices of the whole situation. I wanted to understand why any of these people didn’t have a second chance. Coming back home after years overseas left me with a sense of confusion. I knew the lifetime dreams of some of my friends. I knew that they wanted to go to school and more after their time with the military but that they wouldn’t get the chance. I began to doubt myself. I wondered whether or not I truly deserved to pursue my own goals. Despite my apprehensions and guilt I decided that I wanted to try to go to school. I knew that if I could get through it my life could change for the better. This was when I began my journey towards my own education.

In the beginning, it was extremely difficult. It frustrated me immensely that while I was away on duty, I didn’t learn how to navigate the education system. I didn’t know how to apply to schools. I didn’t even know how to attain information. Life in the military was so organized and planned. I would be given orders and expected to execute them. In civilian life I was left to my own devices. It wasn’t until I met with a veteran’s counselor at Bergen Community College that I began to feel maybe I could do this. With her guidance I began taking courses towards an education in the medical field. It is something that always interested me. I struggled to learn when I began classes. This was because I myself had not learned how to study. I did not know how to learn. Despite this,
I kept trying because I knew from experience how lucky I was to be there. One day at a time I worked hard at this new type of labor. School was not easy and it still isn’t, however I began to do better. After a few semesters I began getting A’s and I finally believed that I was capable of completing a college degree. I now find myself in the first semester of an accredited surgical technology program. This is something I never thought I would be able to do, but I am here. I am filled with a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Moreover, I am filled with sense of gratitude. I know that it can open the doors to opportunities and people. This journey allowed me not only to learn school subjects, but to learn about myself. To me, education is my second chance. It is a chance for me to develop myself and create a life I want.