

Adventures in Empowerment

"Feeling sorry for yourself won't do anything", I remember my mom saying to me as she stood over my scraped and bruised knee. That day, I had injured myself riding on a broken scooter without padding. After scolding me, my mother cleaned my knee, gave me a bandage, and instructed me to put it over my knee. For awhile, I puzzled at the bandage, not knowing what to do. Eventually, though, I slapped the bandage over my knee, shook off my skirt, and rode on. As a child, I didn't exactly understand the significance of this event, but the attitude that my mother instilled within me in that moment has allowed me to achieve academic success throughout my life, and help others succeed as well.

Since I was a child, my life has been dotted with instances where I could have easily developed an attitude of defeat. Growing up, I attended a private Catholic school in Seattle. On the first day of kindergarten, I packed up my second-hand backpack and ran excitedly into the gates of our school. My eyes were filled with naive hope as I attempted to strike up a conversation with a group of giggling girls. "Your face looks dirty", one girl pointed out, laughing. Another girl picked up dirt from a flowerbed, rubbed it on her forearm, and began to imitate me. It was in that moment that my five-year-old self was subjected to a harsh truth: being the only brown girl at school and the daughter of a single, immigrant mother meant that I would not be clinking half-cut sandwiches with the popular kids at lunch. No matter how hard I tried, it seemed as if I could not escape the fact that I was poor. My wrinkly skirt, worn-out shoes, and lack of a car gave it away every time.

One fateful morning, I had decided that I had had enough. In the third grade, I explained to my mom that it wasn't fair that the other kids got to get picked up by their

parents after school, and that they got to eat sandwiches at lunch, while I was left with uncooked Top Ramen, or whatever else I could salvage out of our cabinets.

"I'm quitting school", I told my mother, pulling my blanket high above my face and closing my eyes shut in a fit of rage. My mother sighed, and sat down on the creaky mattress next to me.

"Your grandfather used to sell coconut skins to pay for our tuition, y'know", she said, looking out the window. "Growing up in Tonga, we were poor. So your grandfather had to work for days in the hot sun just so that we could go to school".

I slowly lowered my blanket and listened to what my mother had to say. My mother, just like my grandfather, wanted me to have access to the best possible education I could have, even if that meant that she had to work two jobs, or that I would have to use the same pair of shoes for two years. Both my mother and my grandfather determined that they would not pity themselves because they were poor, and - in that moment - I decided that I would not be the first to do that, either.

After that, I didn't stop being poor, but I stopped allowing my socioeconomic status define me. Education has played such an important role in my life, and, like my grandfather, I am determined to help other students like me achieve academic success. Throughout middle and high-school, I have networked with other low-income students to help them find the scholarship opportunities they need to attend college with little to no financial burden, like the Questbridge Scholars program, which matches low-income students with

full-ride scholarships. Education truly is the key to success, and only after realizing that I had complete control over my education, the things that I could achieve were limitless.

My grandfather has since passed away, but the attitude of determination that he has passed down to my mother lives on in me today. Whenever my academic life becomes challenging or overbearing, or whenever I begin to feel self-pity, I remind myself that I am the continuation of my mother and my grandfather's pursuit of education. In the many late nights and frantic midterms that are to come, I will think back to how far my family has come with education, and much students like me have yet to achieve.