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Academic Literacy and Me

Throughout my entire academic career, I was always working harder in order to achieve a higher education. Here I am, surrounded by teenage angst and academic despondency, yet my scholastic skills feel all but fulfilled. I am asked to recount my moments of literacy; moments in which the course of my academic reading and/or writing skills have been permanently affected. Moments where my perspective of learning were altered in such a way that opened my mind to the possibilities of said education. Those off-handed comments passed on by peers, instructions from teachers, and words of encouragement from family all fog my brain as I try to pinpoint my most significant moment of literacy. More than anything, I would love to dedicate my academic success to my mother, as she taught me how to read and write, yet that wouldn't necessarily be truthful. The truth is, you see, that without the teachings of my eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Baird, I wouldn't be who I am academically today.

Mrs. Baird, of Horizon Community Learning Center, was a woman whom many eighth grade students feared. Her long nose and shrill voice, paired with an awkward height of six-foot-two (with her kitten heels on, of course), left much to be desired when sitting in an hour and half long class. Long tangents about World War II seemed to last for hours, and I feel as if my little hands wrote more papers that year than throughout all of my schooling combined. I mean literally, we were writing up to two papers a week. I hated her. I hated the work she made us do, oftentimes finding it mindless and just to prevent her students from experiencing anything

fun in life. Looking back, I thank Mrs. Baird for being so unhinged in her teachings. Without her, I would've struggled a lot more in not just high school, but life in general. No matter how annoying, strict, or crazy Mrs. Baird could be, she inspired academic literacy within me that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Throughout my life, I've always classified myself as the 'smart kid'. Whether my grades reflected that or my mother's words of encouragement, I've always believed this to be true. Hell, I knew how to read and recite the pledge of allegiance at two years old, and was reading at a 10th grade level when I was only 8. School has never really been a problem for me, as I usually coast through all of my courses with ease. Unfortunately, this mindset that I carried for so long actually prevented me from forming an even deeper understanding of literacy and what it truly means. Since school was so undemanding to me, I often fell behind in my classes solely because I never put in the work. I knew all of the topics, but my work ethic was low, leading my teachers to believe that I wasn't trying hard enough, and that I could always do better. I hated hearing that. I hated that my work didn't reflect the knowledge I contained, and that my teachers couldn't see that I was actually thriving in the topics we were discussing. Completing assignments that didn't interest me was always a challenge, until Mrs. Baird opened my eyes to what some people might consider the most basic teaching method.

“Eagles fly alone, not because they are proud, but because they are not afraid of soaring above the clouds”

Matshona Dhliwayo

Horizon Community Learning Center is a charter school located in the Southern Phoenix valley. It holds grades K-12, and provides a better learning environment than most of the

intercity public schools. My parents were able to get me into this institution from second grade moving forward, putting me ahead of most kids my age. This school almost gives Montessori-type vibes, yet follows a strict curriculum of learning development. Many graduates from this school go on to Ivy League schools, becoming doctors or lawyers for many generations to come. Obviously that is not the path for me, but I am still grateful for the education I received in my early years. Mrs. Baird was one of my last teachers at HCLC, before I moved across the country to start anew. She saw me struggle, succeed, then struggle again. She never mentioned anything to me, but I knew that she was keeping a special eye on me as I navigated through this confusing time.

Eighth grade was a particularly hard year for me, not just academically, but emotionally and mentally as well. While still recovering from the loss of my uncle, I found out I was moving across the country from Phoenix, Arizona to Fort Mill, South Carolina. I was devastated. My grades soon fell behind and I turned to a bad crowd. I was throwing my life away at the ripe age of 13, and without the help of my parents or teachers I probably would still be down the same path. Mrs. Baird's English class was especially hard, having to complete multiple assignments and papers each night. I found myself further behind than most of my peers, a feeling unfamiliar to me. Mrs. Baird took notice of this, and took notice of my previous grades from earlier in the semester and even years before. She saw in me what I couldn't see in myself anymore: academic literacy. She knew that I hated the work she gave me, and that something was going on outside of school. She would often strike up a conversation with me, even if I didn't have much to say back. Her crazy antics in class annoyed every nerve in my body, yet I was thankful to have someone at school who cared. I remember this one time I confided in her, struggling with all of my school assignments and not really understanding the point of all this work I kept collecting. I asked her,

“How do I even do this?” and “Why are my teachers making me do such pointless work?” At that moment, the expression on her face changed and she gave me a big, gummy smile.

“Morgan,” she said, “ As long as you do your work EXACTLY as the teacher says to do it, you will pass every class with ease.” I don’t know what it was about a statement so blatantly simple, but it changed my academic career forever. I now hold the power to complete assignments I never wanted to do, just following the rubric to a T and crossing off each and every requirement. At this point, it didn’t matter my test scores or my struggles outside of school, because this gave me guidance to complete every assignment moving forward. I felt a new sense of accomplishment, and this stuck with me and continues to stick with me to this day.

“In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity”

Albert Einstein

Here I am, almost five years later at an institute that I can be proud of attending. I never have had much direction on where I’m going or what I’m going to do when I get there, but without these important life lessons, I wouldn’t be able to say I’ve made it this far. Not only did I maintain an A average in highschool, I’ve excelled further than many of my peers could in social, political, and community involvement. I’ve turned into not only a dedicated scholar, but a dedicated civilian. I love to read, write, and learn in all settings, and I’m very appreciative of my abilities to do so. Reflecting through this paper has reminded me of my accomplishments, relieving me from the academic stress that I’ve recently accumulated. After a short 18 years of life, I am proud of where I am. I’m proud of my academic literacy, my social literacy, and my emotional literacy. I have come a long way as a person, but I know I still have so much further to go.

Dear Reader

Hey! Nice to see you again! I guess now that you've made it this far, you probably want to know a little background to my essay. I wrote this essay to tell you about Mrs. Baird, and how a truly awful woman can make an everlasting difference in your life. I really like the approach I took with this essay, experimenting with quotes as breaks. I do think I can work on scene setting, and making sure that the reader can picture this classroom and setting as vivid as I remember it. Some big challenges I encountered while writing this essay was remembering the timeline of this event, and trying to tell the story chronologically. Eighth grade seems so long ago, especially when writing stories about it, but I reached out to my old friends to see if they had any insight. If I had more time to work on this essay, I would hope to reach out to Mrs. Baird, in efforts to see if she even remembers me, but more importantly so she could know how much she genuinely affected me. I hope you enjoyed reading my piece, because I sure did enjoy writing it.