

My Life: A Long and Winding Road

By Anne Parker

My life has been a long and winding road. While on this road, I faced many challenges, and I often couldn't see where the next turn would be up ahead. Some of the pivotal experiences include being brought up in a negative home environment, the positive impact of a special teacher, growing up as a white person in a predominantly African American community, and the influential impact of West Point on me as a young adult. Altogether, I have had many unique experiences—some good and some bad.

These experiences molded and shaped me into the person I am today. My father was arguably the most influential person in my life. He was a change of life baby; his mother had him when she was 42. His next 3 older siblings were at least 16 years older than he. His mother was cold and unloving towards him as well as physically and verbally abusive. By the time my father was 16, his mother had labeled him as rebellious because he smoked, wanted to wear bell bottomed jeans and "hip huggers," and showed no interest in going to church 7 days a week. Determining that he was too difficult to handle, she threw him out of the house when he was 16.

My dad was a high school dropout going nowhere in life with no one who loved him until he met my mother. They were both 18. My parents immediately fell in love. Both of them needed the other in important ways. My father needed someone to love him and shower him with kindness and attention. My mother needed someone to want her and make her feel special. She was the oldest of 11 children and got very little special attention from her struggling parents. At 18, they thought they had things figured out. My mother quit the nursing program she was in and married my father, who spirited her off to Germany after Air Force basic training.

I was born on May 16, 1973 in Heidelberg, Germany--the closest hospital to my father's military base. I was the first-born of the five children my mother and father would soon have. Dawn, Catherine, Michael, and Paul followed quickly after me. In 6 and a half years, they were saddled with five children--three children too many for my father to handle as he put it. I grew up in a home that showed very little love and affection. My mother wasn't comfortable kissing and hugging us. My father was even more apprehensive about showing us affection.

Even though my father and mother loved each other, they fought frequently. It was the same routine every time: my father would start yelling, items would get pushed around and thrown, and someone would usually get hit. Sometimes the object of his rage would be my mother. Sometimes it would be one of us children--usually me. There would be crying, and we would be scared out of our wits, breathing irregularly and sobbing for a long time afterwards. Now, as I look back, I know that my father felt trapped in a job he didn't like, forced to bear more responsibility than his youth prepared him for.

In addition to being physically abusive, my father was also verbally abusive, constantly belittling and harassing us all. I vividly remember one of the few times when Dad actually complemented me. I was 6, and I was coloring in one of my coloring books. He was talking about how much smarter his children were than other people's children. He showed my mother how neatly I stayed within the lines.

It's funny what kids remember. Because of my father's severe temper, I rarely ever brought friends to my house. Consequently, throughout my entire childhood our home was a very isolated, unhappy place to live. My parents never really cultivated outside friendships, and we never lived near any extended family at all. There was no one outside of my family to lean on for support or comfort.

Something marvelous happened to me when I entered the 2nd grade at the age of seven. I had a teacher named Ms. Coyle, and I believe that she altered the

course of my life forever. She was like the sun shining its rays on a flower that had only known the shade. She was the first person that ever took an active interest in me as a person and as a student. I found myself excited to go to school, excited to learn, and eager to gain her approval by doing well scholastically. I tried to win every contest and ace every test just so that I could hear her tell me that I did a good job. I thirsted and hungered for her smiles and her gentle hugs. It was during this school year that she opened my imagination to the future and all of the possibilities that it might hold for me.

The more time I spent with Ms. Coyle, the more I started to notice how dysfunctional my home was--the constant abuse, the fear, and the anger. School was my refuge, my ray of sunlight in the darkness and confusion of youth. Ms. Coyle told me once that if I continued to academically excel I would get a scholarship to go to college. At the age of seven, I made a plan to get straight A's, excel in school, and get a scholarship for college. I could get away from my father and start a new life for myself.

It's hard to believe that I was so young when I thought this through, but I did. I held this plan close inside my heart--a secret only for me. We moved to Columbus, Mississippi in 1981. My father decided to get out of the Air Force and support his five children and wife by driving a taxicab. I know that he only intended to drive a cab until a better job came through. After 12 years, Dad had just about enough pressure to conform to the Air Force's rules. That cab was his escape into his first taste of freedom since he had gotten married at 18.

Dad eventually decided to go to college to become a nurse, but that wouldn't occur until 1987. The couple of years after he got out of the Air Force were the worst years of my life. The violence at home was worse than ever with the pressures of being financially broke, kids needing clothes and supplies, cars breaking down constantly, and my mother trying desperately to work her way through a nursing program.

Those were tough times at home and especially at school. We moved into a mostly African American neighborhood, where "white folks" were the minority. In fifth grade, I was honestly shocked to learn that African Americans were the minority. It was hard to understand this looking at the demographics of my community at that time. I was in the minority from 5th grade until my 11th grade, often one of the two or three white people in a typical class.

Being in the minority had a profound impact on me. I always felt excluded based on my color. Because I was white, everything that I did or said seemed to stand out. It took no time to be labeled as a nerd since I wore out of style clothes and was the teacher's pet. I was the last one picked to go on most teams. Anything that I said had to be measured carefully, and I wasn't very good at that. I was cursed with shabby clothes and a smart mouth—two things that together make a volatile combination. Walking home from school was always an adventure. Somehow, I would always be targeted for a fight. I remember always being sad and unhappy with myself. No one seemed to like me. I had few friends, and conflict followed me everywhere I went. Despite the hardships of class life, I fell into a routine of sorts. I still ruthlessly pursued my dream of an academic scholarship. I still loved school and looked forward to the positive rewards of academic success.

In the 11th grade at Smith High School, I heard of a place called West Point. Cadets wore gray uniforms, marched to and from class, lived by a code of honor, and were taught physical and mental discipline. Through the West Point brochure, I fell in love with those stone walls. I was not intimidated by the fact that it was in the top ten most selective colleges in the nation. All I knew was that at a place like that, I could be made into someone else and be a part of something great. I could change into a person people liked. I was intrigued and excited to my very core, and nothing could deter me from going there.

At the end of my 11th grade year, a situation developed with my younger sister Catherine that caused a tremendous and important shift in my high school experience. Catherine, 2 years younger than me, went into a severe depression. Living in my shadow, being overweight, and being pushed around were all factors that led to this mental deterioration. Her depression lasted for weeks, and my mother was so alarmed that she decided to take an active role to change Catherine's environment.

Because we were white, we couldn't leave our school. Racial integration was--and still is-- an enormous problem in the South where communities tend towards racial segregation. My mother decided to send us to a Catholic private school called Sacred Heart High. We took a tour, and the bright colored walls were extremely inviting. There was soap, toilet paper, and paper towels in the clean bathrooms, luxuries we rarely had at Smith.

I walked down the halls on the first day of school my senior year and saw a different picture than what I was used to. I wasn't in the minority any more. In fact, there was only a handful of African Americans. There I was starting fresh somewhere. I had a chance to cultivate new relationships and new friendships. It didn't take me long to understand how things worked at my new high school, though. I was still an outsider and in the minority in a totally different way. I had no money, drove a beat-up car, and still dressed poorly compared to everyone else. Most of the students learned quickly who the three new students were and where we came from. We were from the south side of town.

After a few months at Sacred Heart, I came to the surprising realization that I missed my old environment. In the African American culture that I grew up in, brutal honesty and immediate, open reactions were the common trademarks of daily life. If someone didn't like me, they let me know right then and there. There was usually very little guessing. At Sacred Heart, I'd hear girls talking about me in the restrooms, as I sat quietly listening in the stalls. I'd hear people laughing and snickering as I walked by. I inwardly and outwardly rebelled

against the other students and acted like I didn't want to belong, while inside I wanted to be accepted and liked desperately.

Looking back, I understand how others wouldn't have been attracted to me. I wore all black clothing. I was too aggressive in my mannerisms and debates. I didn't fully respect opinions different than my own. I couldn't see that about myself back then. By the time I graduated, I wanted nothing more than to leave my home and start out fresh and new somewhere. This time, it would be different I thought. I had already received my acceptance certificate from West Point that January. All I wanted was to leave and be someone else.

When I entered West Point, I was determined to become a different person. I wore the cadet uniform just like everyone else. I had a structured lifestyle. I had formations, mandatory meals, a strictly enforced school attendance policy, cadet regulations to follow, intramurals, drill and ceremony, parades, inspections, and an 11:30 p.m. curfew. What I discovered was that no matter where I went, what I looked like or did, there I still was. The problems that I faced back home were problems I was facing again and again at West Point.

I didn't appreciate it then, but West Point was fertile ground for me to confront and deal with my weaknesses. My peers often chose me as the candidate for one of the 2 mandatory negative peer evaluations each quarter. My assigned company tactical officer would go through it these evaluations with me. After 3 years of negative evaluations, I sat down one day and took a hard look inside of myself.

I didn't like what I saw. I saw my father staring back at me in the mirror. I realized that everything that happened to me growing up was still controlling my life. I had trouble cooperating with others. I was arrogant about my opinions. I did outlandish things to get attention. I thought I was smarter than the people around me. I began to think for the very first time that maybe the world around me wasn't the real problem here. Maybe it was myself. I started to become a different person that day.

My total West Point experience succeeded in teaching me that I should do the right thing, no matter who was looking. It also taught me that personal integrity, living by a code of honor, and persevering through hardship were all keys to exceptional character. I came to understand that in order for people to like you, you had to learn to like yourself first. I felt prepared to serve my nation for the next five years as a military intelligence officer.

During the five years from 1995 to 2000, many wonderful and exciting things happened to me. I experienced the challenges of leadership in the Army. I met and married the man of my dreams. I had 2 beautiful children. And I also decided that I wanted to leave the service after my five-year commitment was completed. In July of 2000, I put away my Captain's bars and officially assumed the role as a happy homemaker. I had a lot of time to think about what I wanted to do next. After a great deal of soul searching, I realized that I wanted to be in the place that I was always happiest as a youth, which was in school. My experience with Ms. Coyle taught me about the important role a teacher can have in someone's life. Teaching is a tremendous challenge, and our country needs people who are willing to meet this challenge with determination and zeal. Students need teachers who will listen to them, care about them, and encourage them to pursue their own personal goals and dreams in life. That's why I am here at Youngstown State University now.

My experiences as a minority enabled me to understand different cultures and people in a way I wouldn't have been able to learn otherwise. My home life as a young person was tough, but now I understand how one can overcome such hardships and deal with them successfully in life. Here I am today, excited and eager to learn and obtain my teaching certification. I look back with laughter and tears at the many things that have happened in my past. I think about that granite fortress on the Hudson River called West Point. I think about the friends I have made, and the good times we have shared. I think about my family

and how we have all learned and changed since the days of old. I look at my children's faces, and I smile. I'm on a sunny road to my future.