

Navigations: A First-Year College Composite

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Beginnings*

Article 2

May 2017

To Continue the Norm

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Recommended Citation

Samuels, Mia (2017) "To Continue the Norm," *Navigations: A First-Year College Composite*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.32727/15.2018.2

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/navigations/vol1/iss1/2>

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To be honest, I grew up in a pretty privileged environment. My parents provided me with experiences that most children my age do not have. When I tell people what I've done in my short lifetime, they usually say I'm bragging or that I don't know how good I have it, but honestly, I never had anything less.

For those who don't know me, traveling the country and living a privileged life seems to be the norm. But contrary to popular belief, I know how blessed I am to be able to experience things like going to Hawaii (twice), seeing my favorite YouTubers at Vidcon in California, and being able to make a one-day trip to Pittsburgh because my family wanted to eat at a new restaurant. As an African American teenager, I am fully aware that this is not the norm for many people, especially people of my race. Privilege may be a part of my story, but it is not the story of some of my closest family members. It is because of my family's hard work that I was able to have so many life changing experiences.

My grandmother was born way down in the country. When I tell people she was raised in Harrison, Georgia, they usually cock their head and ask, "Where in the world is that?" Harrison is a very small town where everyone knows everyone. However, it is also a very underdeveloped town where not many people will ever leave. Education is not as valued as it is in some other places, so for many people it is not really a priority to graduate high school or attend college. When my grandmother was growing up, most people worked in Kaolin or in factories, which were the main source of income before they were closed due to outsourcing. Companies sent their work overseas and many people lost their jobs; therefore, the experience of poverty was prominent, and my family was no exception.

As for my mother, she was raised in Harrison as well, and lived in a house that had a poor source of air and heat and did not even contain a bathroom. Yes, that's right. In order to use the bathroom, one had to go outside and find a spot. Obviously, this is not what many would call "normal," but to my family, at this time, it was the norm. Everyone in the area lived like this, and it almost looked as if there was never going to be an escape out of this system of poverty.

Fortunately, my mom and her mother both valued education because they wanted to get out of Harrison and do something with their lives. Even though their environment did not support getting a higher education, they took it upon themselves to do so. My grandmother went to college and became an RN. She has since held many manager positions and has helped many people. My mother has also helped many people, but in the classroom. Yes, she went to college to become a teacher and has been one for eighteen years now. I was raised to be successful by these women, and seeing how they went from having nothing to being so successful always encouraged me to value education.

Unlike my grandmother and my mother, I grew up in an environment that praised individuals who pursued their education and eventually moved to a higher social position. I was always told that in order to be successful I had to work at it,

and it would not come easy. My parents pushed me to go above and beyond. I was always told never to settle for the minimum requirements and to show all of my talents in whatever area I was studying in order to separate myself from the average students.

When I entered the third grade, I was placed in the SAGE program which stands for Student Achievement in Gifted Education. This program nurtured me for five years, and it completely changed how I viewed school. The program forces each student to work to their full potential. Students are trained to be the best of the best and to be aware that they are smarter than the average student. In SAGE, I developed strengths that would not only help me in school but would help me in life. I realized that I was always determined to go above and beyond, always driven to do my work, and always wanting to go the extra mile to learn more. These years were critical because they pushed me to realize how successful I could be if I really applied myself. However, everything changed when I started high school.

Up until that point, school had been a breeze for me. I understood all the material and at times would feel my classes were too slow-paced, but when I started high school the material became more challenging. It was harder for me to manage my time and to complete my assignments by the deadlines. For the first time in my entire life, I felt as if I was not good enough.

Junior year was by far the worst year for me mentally and academically. I had a very challenging AP Language teacher who seemed to think she was a professor. She graded harder than any teacher I had ever had, and would actually praise you for making low grades, so long as you showed improvement from a previous grade. I cried many times and thought that I would never do well in that class. This experience was a true shock for me because I was always told that I was a fine writer.

With the year progressing, I began changing my mindset and putting in all of my effort. Soon enough, I began to see better results in my grades, but they still were not as high as I wanted them to be. It was then that I realized I might just have a hard teacher who wouldn't raise my grade regardless of what I did, so I directed my attention to my Advanced Placement exam. AP classes are taken so one has the chance to obtain college credit for a high scoring exam, and since I was not doing as well as I wanted to be doing in the class, I knew the AP exam would be a place for me to further advance my skills.

This particular teacher hosted a mock testing and she predicted I would score a two, which is not even passing. One has to make a three to a five to pass or do exceptionally well. Despite her negative prediction, it did not stop me or slow me down because I had a clear goal set. In fact, the mock exam actually gave me the push I needed to prove her wrong. So it was no shock to me when I opened my score for the exam and saw a huge four which indicated that I was advanced in AP Language and Composition.

From that moment on, I promised myself that I would never let anyone tell me I was not good enough or that I could not succeed at something. Even though this particular class was difficult for me, I kept pressing on because I knew all of my effort would somehow pay off in the end. I was not raised to be a quitter, and I knew my family would want me to try as hard as I could to not only prove my teacher wrong, but to show myself that I am smarter than even I thought I was. I could not be more thankful to have that junior experience from hell. Without that struggle, I would not have been able to really challenge myself. I can honestly say that junior year changed my life for the better, despite how awful it actually was.

Senior year was a lot better for me, and I was able to focus on my true passion: learning about the human body. I took an anatomy class that year, and I loved every moment of it. The class was never really what I expected, but it had a hugely positive impact on my life because it helped me to decide what I wanted to do after high school. I knew college was going to be where I would truly shine. That was my unwritten goal. I planned on striving to be even better than I was before, and in order to do that I had to remember everyone and everything that had inspired me to further my education.

Because I had a passion for helping people and loved my anatomy class, I decided to pursue a career in the medical field. I also love children and had been working in a nursery for the last six years. That is how I knew I wanted to be in pediatrics. I put those two passions together and decided that I would try my very hardest to become a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner. Kennesaw State University called my name, since their nursing program is highly ranked. With several friends actually studying nursing, I knew they would be able to help me navigate the program, so I finally made the decision to continue my education at KSU.

Throughout my life, I have realized that though not everything comes easy, once you set a goal you can work to achieve it. There may be many bumps along the way, but one must always persevere. I am one hundred percent sure this is an effective way to be successful, and the feeling of accomplishing my goals will completely outweigh any of the struggles I had along the way.

Again, I say I grew up in a pretty “privileged” environment, and I am determined to achieve a life of stability so I am able to continue these experiences when I am older. I want to be able to go on crazy adventures and continue all the things my parents did for me throughout my life. Looking back on my childhood, I know people thought I was very lucky, but those people pushed me to want to be able to have all this without my parents handing it to me. My mother and my grandmother made me want to get an education and do something that will benefit others. My family made this privileged life happen for me, and I will work hard to protect it so that it is not just the norm for me, but for my future family.