

“Where did you grow up?” is a seemingly harmless question that I have often been asked in job interviews. For me, however, the question is a bit complicated. I spent over a decade in the foster care system and attended over eight schools in the Los Angeles area before graduating high school. When I recount my experience I usually get a sympathetic reaction, a head tilt and a kindly ‘ahhh,’ but that’s not how I choose to see the picture. I faced adversity at a very young age and I surely struggled, but I have grown from my experiences and now contextualize life’s unpredictability in ways that are constructive and allow me to connect with others.

Attending a university that is often praised for its diversity reminds me to approach life with cultural humility. As a result, I have been able to connect with students from cultures all over the globe, religions, sexual identities, and abilities. I don’t assume that I know anything about the lives they have lived and this allows me to be curious and open. Even in my job working with foster care alums, an area in which I think I have expertise, I have learned not to make assumptions—because all of our stories are so different. Approaching life with a perspective of cultural humility is something that I will continue to practice with students, research subjects, and as a new graduate student.

Being in foster care meant moving quickly and often, sometimes being dropped off at a stranger’s home in the middle of the night. After I emancipated, I was homeless for a year and a half, “couch surfing” and surviving on less than \$20 a month. Yet I did not let this sway me from my ultimate goal of higher education. Even when I had to withdraw from community college for a year, I used this as an opportunity for growth. I figured out how to apply for a job, what forms of identification I needed (I was given nothing when I emancipated), and this challenge helped shape me as an adult. Then when I enrolled in a new community college, working full-time, and pregnant, I still kept on track, remaining flexible enough to let life happen. After my son was born, my husband and I moved to Los Angeles to find affordable housing. I continued to work, enrolled at a community college closer to my home and completed all the requirements I needed before transferring to a UC. I graduated with high honors, demonstrating that despite a rough start in higher education, I am capable of succeeding as a student. My academic records show a steady upward trend with my best marks received in my last two years where I skillfully managed demanding research projects, working, and raising my son.

Two of my greatest strengths are my flexibility and compassion, cultivated through my own difficult foster care experience. This allows me to serve students in ways that, at many times, fall outside the regular work-day in my current position. Taking students to breakfast, doctor’s appointments, and local food banks makes a powerful and caring impact. I think this is the difference between doing your job, and doing what you love. Working hard to advocate for underserved communities has always been a passion of mine, and something for which I am happy to make sacrifices.

As I move forward into more of a research and advocacy role, these strengths developed through trying circumstances will serve me well. Flexibility and commitment to serve the disadvantaged is what has kept me focused on my educational goal of doing graduate research and completing my PhD.