

## **Ashley De Medio-Meroth: Moving for the Right Opportunity<sup>1</sup>**

Fall 2014

Ashley De Medio-Meroth turned into the parking lot, gathered her books and headed to her favorite class at UC Riverside. But her thoughts weren't on the discussion of children's literature that lay ahead of her for the next few hours. Instead she was thinking about the Teaching Credential/Masters program she had just heard about at UC Davis. She was intrigued by the idea that it started in August and within the first month she would be student teaching in a high school classroom, and then in the second quarter, she would have the class on her own. The program not only sounded exciting but there was potential for a scholarship to cover her tuition.

Ashley had started her undergraduate studies as a biology major with the intention of becoming a doctor. But after switching schools and re-assessing her options she had found a more fulfilling major with English and literature. This had led to her desire to teach high school English and she had planned to stay at UC Riverside, certain she would be admitted to the credential program. Although she had worked during her entire undergraduate education, Ashley had maintained an excellent GPA and had already completed the California Educator Credentialing Examinations (CSET) needed for acceptance into the English single subject degree program.<sup>2</sup>

Moving to Davis would be an adventure, but Ashley wasn't sure she could justify the expense of money and time if the program wasn't that much different from what UC Riverside offered. Ashley had to also think of Shane, her partner, and what options would be open for him if they moved far away from his networks and family.

Ashley knew that the UC Davis School of Education held a series of Information Sessions where she could find out more about the program and get all her questions answered. Realizing a trip north would help her and Shane get a sense of the area, she decided to ask him if he wanted to go. At the classroom, her attention turned to the

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<sup>2</sup> See their website: <http://www.ctcexams.nesinc.com/>

classic, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and the issues she wanted to raise in class. Still, thoughts about the credential program lingered. Was it worth two days of her time to attend the information session at UC Davis?

### **Early years and Foster Care**

Ashley entered the foster care system when both her parents were dealing with health issues and close relatives could not take care of her anymore. She was moved around early on but found stability when the state placed her under the care of a legal guardian back in her hometown. Reflecting on her experience, Ashley realized that foster care, although not pleasant, was an education. “I had to communicate and get along with others, and I realized that there are different backgrounds and different likes and dislikes. My experiences gave me a desire to know other’s points of view.”

### **A Passion for English Literature**

During middle and high school Ashley became enchanted with English literature, finding pleasure in all types of writing, from the classics to contemporary authors. Reading, in fact, was an escape and a way of leaving behind many of the family challenges she had to face. Ashley worked hard as a student, completed Advance Placement (AP) classes and graduated with an outstanding GPA and honors. She was accepted at Cal State LA, but in hindsight knows that with her accomplishments she would have been accepted at many of the UC campuses. “I just knew I was going to college, but I really didn’t talk to other people about it or contemplate various choices,” she said. At Cal State LA, Ashley pursued biology with the hope of applying to medical school later on. Her academic performance was good, but after three years, she did not feel this was the right direction in terms of a satisfying career. Remembering her love of English she moved back to her hometown of Hemet, enrolled in Mt. San Jacinto Community College to work on some prerequisites, and then transferred to University of California, Riverside (UCR) as an English major.

### **Undergraduate at UC Riverside**

At UCR, Ashley was involved in the Guardian Scholars Program (GSP) and participated in some of the meetings. “It was never about ‘oh, you were in foster care too, that sucks,’” she said. “Instead it was about sharing and realizing similar patterns and experiences with friends and being able to relate while getting our academic job done.”

Soon after Ashley transferred to UCR, she added an education minor to her already busy schedule. The minor opened a door as she began to realize how passionate she felt about teaching and the coursework gave her the opportunity to observe in a classroom, one of the pre-requisites for the credential application. “I realized I loved English way more than bio, and I felt like I could teach it, or at least learn how to teach it,” she said. “A lot of people who are really passionate about English are not very passionate about kids.” Ashley confirmed her interest in this career by talking with some of the teachers she observed as well as her education professors. “I asked them questions such as, what are the standards of the district and expectations of the books they read?” she said. Ashley

also wanted to know if their first year was hard, what were some of the difficulties a new teacher should look out for, and she even asked if they liked their job. “I had one teacher who was a lawyer and he quit,” Ashley said, “and now he is happy teaching.”

The one thing that Ashley felt was holding her back was her nervousness in front of the class. This fear, however, was a self-imposed critique as she wondered whether she knew enough to teach high school students. Once she passed the CSETs, that doubt receded.

### **Working and Balancing School**

Ashley got her first job in a large retail store just before turning twenty years old. “I got the job despite the fact that I was very shy and not really ready for interactions with customers,” she said. At first she was scheduled to work 23-26 hours a week, a shift that made it difficult to accommodate her academic assignments. She tried to make it work for a while, then switched to a night schedule to continue with her classes while earning a higher wage. But the hours were from 10:00 pm to 7:00 am and it was an exhausting routine. “I would come home from work, pick up something to eat, have three or four cups of coffee and then go take classes from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm,” she said. “Then I went home and took a nap and then I would take another class from 4:00 to 7:00 pm.” Keeping up with this frantic schedule was a real challenge for Ashley, but it allowed her to support herself, so she just embraced it while she was at the community college.

When Ashley started at UCR, GSP staff asked her to reconsider her schedule, and helped her get a job at the on-campus bookstore. “This was the first time I realized that bosses don’t all suck,” said Ashley. “Stacy actually cared about people to the point that if I would forget my lunch she would provide me something to eat.” Ashley found she was far more rested working a reasonable schedule and was also able to finish the classes she needed.

### **Considering the Future**

At UCR Ashley networked with graduate students and faculty in her program to get a good understanding of the university’s graduate programs in education and what prerequisites she would need to become a qualified applicant. Then Ashley learned about the Teaching Credential/Masters program at the UC Davis School of Education and did some research online. She was curious about what to expect, how long would it take her to finish, and what she needed to do to submit a successful application. **(See Exhibits A and B)** From the little she could learn about the program online Ashley felt that it was designed to help her become a teacher who could really work with a diverse population.

She discussed the situation with Shane, who had been her partner since they met at San Jacinto CC. There was a lot to consider. If Ashley was accepted at UC Davis they would both move and Shane would have to find a new job. When she discovered that the program offered an information session, she wondered, was it that much different than the program at UCR and she should make a trip to find out? Then she found herself daydreaming about living in northern California...

## **Exhibits A: Statement of Purpose**

During my first quarter at the University of California Riverside, I took an upper division education class. I completed the required observation hours and had to create lesson plans. By the end of the class, I wanted to be a teacher. My professor was working on her PhD and as she described it, I knew that a teaching credential with a Masters in Education was the career track I wanted to pursue.

I feel I am ready to teach English but I aspire to more than just knowing the content area I wish to teach. Studying education creates better teachers by helping them become aware of how students learn and retain information. I want to learn how to be a better teacher for my students and be a contributor to the study of education. I am also interested in taking what I learn and making the knowledge available for other future teachers. The education class gave me a glimpse of different sub-fields within education that I would like to explore.

I have been fortunate to have a number of excellent teachers who have demonstrated what it means to engage with students. One example was Miss. Chibicuous, my seventh grade teacher who encouraged my reading by providing extra books and assigned book reports. She taught me how much impact a teacher can have, and I learned that a teacher who cares and shows interest is more likely to engage his or her students. When I helped out with the summer reading program at the Public Library, I learned how to engage fellow peers in the enjoyment of reading.

Due to my attendance at different middle schools, I was introduced to more than the traditional “literary canon” of books normally required for students. Being exposed to different literary authors and styles made the texts relatable and interesting, which helped keep students like myself engaged. I believe I can engage underrepresented groups in literature in a similar fashion. I also feel books regarding movements, such as plays written by Cherríe Moraga or books on the reality of Americanism like *No-No Boy*, can be used to promote diversity and also demonstrate literary concepts such as a “theme.”

For my current research at UC Riverside I am focusing on gender roles in the coming of age novel and in young adult literature. These books are what our students read for enjoyment, which is why I find it crucial to know what the narratives are saying to students and future generations. The limitations of previous gender roles are slowly changing with characters like Katniss Everdeen. Such books should be brought into the curriculum because they catch the interest of our students and can still be used to teach the Common Core ideas for English. I am analyzing how and why these books are different and how current society interprets these novels.

This research is useful for the education program because it is enhancing my research skills, which I can apply to researching a specific field of education. The research also helps me discover another way our students “tick” and enjoy certain literary styles. The coming of age novel can be used to educate students in the same way that we use *The Crucible* or *Moby Dick*, and often in a much more relatable and memorable way.

I enjoy learning and being challenged to become the best that I can be. I know the Teaching Credential/Masters program at UC Davis will challenge me and help me grow into a prepared teacher with the new Common Core curriculum. I am impressed with the “hand’s on” approach towards educating teachers and excited that even as a graduate student, I will be both teaching and assisting. I find it important to apply what is being learned from a textbook and I look forward to such an opportunity.

## **Exhibits B: Personal Statement**

I grew up in a difficult family environment and reading was a healthy outlet that helped me deal with the issues in my home. Eventually, I was taken out of my parent's home in Hemet and placed in foster care until high school. For all of high school I lived with a legal guardian who was originally my next-door neighbor. As difficult as this was, it was a situation in my life that helped me grow as a person.

The reading I did as a teen-ager has now become the motivation for my career as an English teacher. Reading helped me deal with the fact that my life had constant struggles and I could not relate to my peers. Strong female characters like Katniss Everdeen helped me realize it was okay to be broken and that did not mean I was not strong. I connected with Hermione Granger and her love for reading; I became inspired by the knowledge she obtained from books and how she used that to help Harry and Ron escape dire situations. In essence, reading helped me remember my own personal goals and helped push me to continue.

Reading helped me learn to be self-sufficient and not rely on constant praise from others. I became proud of myself and I learned from Shakespeare about creating my own stars or future. I knew I did not want to live in my current situation forever and that I had the power to change. I learned that knowledge was power, which is why I work hard in school and strive for excellence. This is how my own determination grew, and I want to use this determination as a teacher to push my students to work hard and show them they can get into college. I want to be the support I never had and help my students find a passion for reading and knowledge.

I have read widely in contemporary literature and know that I will be able to successfully engage underrepresented students because of my knowledge of various cultures. I can use a book I connected with while I lived in Pico Rivera to engage my students. I can use my own personal struggles with math and the technique of the math of a sentence (syntax), to teach my students how to communicate with other people effectively. I can show them how to manipulate language to be powerful and explicate why a literary piece is powerful. Through my traveling I have become appreciative of all the different cultural and literary techniques found in writing.

As a teacher I will try and help enhance all of my students own personal writing style. I want to teach my students the importance of thinking for themselves and questioning authority, just as I had to do. Sometimes, adult figures in your life are only looking out for themselves and it is imperative to understand this. The lessons in life I have learned are intertwined with the diverse cultures in which I have always lived. I want to share all that I have learned from these past experiences with my students while meeting Common Core objectives.