

2016 Worthy Women's Professional Studies Scholarship – Finalist Essay

By Rayceana Rocha

Seeking a higher education as a single parent is not easy. However, it is an endeavor that I take upon myself with pride. I grew up in a low-income neighborhood with five siblings and two drug addict, alcoholic parents. In 1998, my life was forever changed when my family and I were in a horrific car accident that left me in a coma for a week. When I woke from my unconscious state, I woke to the shattered reality of the loss of my mother. After this tragedy, I spiraled down into depression, anxiety, and ultimately, rebellion. With no guidance and no positive influences in my life I consequently dropped out of high school. I lived a life of drug abuse, self-hatred, and fell victim to domestic violence. My turning point was when I was 22-years-old and sent to prison for federal charges of bank robbery by demand note. I left my two-year-old daughter to serve a 51-month sentence in the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Once I was in custody, I felt the weight of the world come off my shoulders. Although I was in extreme guilt and anguish for leaving my daughter, I was finally able to get off methamphetamine, a very addictive drug. I knew that the system had done for me what I could not do for myself: it led me on the path of sobriety.

Once I began my prison term, I volunteered to be put in the prison's Residential Drug Abuse Program. I learned all the necessary tools to live a balanced, drug-free lifestyle upon my release. Although I had no visits from my family, due to being housed at the Federal Correctional Institution Waseca, located in Minnesota, I adamantly maintained contact with my daughter through letters and phone calls. Upon my release, I was certain that I had the necessary coping skills to overcome all the adversities that I faced in life before my incarceration as well as the new challenges that would arise. I immediately enrolled into community college upon my release and my efforts to be successful in college were endless. I never missed class, took advantage of tutor services, and I formed study groups with my peers. I began to develop a new sense of self-worth.

Every effort that I made built my confidence, and I began to believe in myself as I witnessed my hard work paying off. I consecutively made the President's List,

graduated with honors and three associate degrees from my community college, I held the officer positions of several campus clubs where I learned leadership skills and the value of community and I was also awarded the 2016 Student of Distinction from Mt San Antonio College. Currently, I am at California State University Los Angeles earning my Bachelor Degree in Sociology in Society & Law. I plan to attend law school thereafter and become a civil rights attorney where I can make a true difference in this world.