

2018 Worthy Women's Professional Studies Scholarship – Finalist Essay

By Melissa Huff

I joined the Army National Guard in the wake of hurricane Katrina so that I could help those who lost everything. I never imaged that my desire to help people in need would take me in such a different direction.

When I left the Army to raise my children, I was baffled to find that people were always asking me for parenting advice. Time and time again my friends, and even perfect strangers, would ask me how I got my kids to be so well-mannered and polite, and how I was able to homeschool 6 kids ages 10-2 while my husband prepared for yet another tour in Iraq, plus go to school full time. I felt so humbled by those questions because I didn't believe there was anything special about my parenting or me.

A couple of months ago, my former kindergarten teacher approached me with a project that she has been working on. She asked me if I'd be willing to direct the daycare center for which she has a sizable grant to build. I was astounded that she would ever think that I was worthy of such an undertaking! "I'm just a mom" were the first words out of my mouth when she asked.

After the initial shock wore off, we were able to talk about the massive impact that a daycare center would have on our community. In South Dakota, 84% of mothers work outside the home, which is the highest percentage in the nation. However, this area of South Dakota is a childcare desert. Meaning that the majority of families rely on relatives or unregistered daycares to care for their children.

Once I fully understood the needs of this community, I threw myself into earning my Child Development Associate (CDA), which will allow me to direct the daycare center.

Most people are shift workers, who work long hours at the turkey processing plant. Right now, there is no daycare open before 6AM or after 6PM, which presents a problem for these hard-working folks. Not only will this daycare center provide high quality, consistent care for children ages 4 weeks to 12 years, but it will also be open for extended hours in order to meet this need. Because this daycare will be licensed and registered with the state, it qualifies for the Childcare Assistance Program. This program pays for the childcare needs of low-income families, who usually spend 20-30% of their income on childcare. In addition, it will be a major source of employment for this town's immigrant population.

Currently, I am coordinating training for my future staff at South Dakota State University. Since the population is largely Hispanic and Karin, I have also coordinated translators for this training.

This project will benefit the community immensely, however, it has placed a financial strain on my family. I applied for a scholarship through the state, which covers half the cost, but I still owe nearly \$800. This scholarship would solve this problem for my community and me.