

2019 Worthy Women's Professional Studies Scholarship – Finalist Essay

-Elizabeth Walker

Imagine your first job in audiology, fresh out of school. Every morning at 7:00 sharp, you walk through the door to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, greet the nurses, the doctors, and make your way to your first patient: 4 lb., 5 oz. newborn Baby Girl. Though the lights have been dimmed over her incubator so she can sleep, she won't be asleep for long: you have work to do. If she passes her hearing test, great; move on to the next baby. But if, after repeating the test several times, she fails, you'll need to make your way to her mother's room. On the way up, prepare yourself to balance compassion and professionalism: Mom will be exhausted from the delivery and worried about her baby—plus, this is the sort of news no parent wants to hear. Softly knock and enter.

I was born and raised in a small town. My grandfather, father, uncles, and brother worked the farm land near where I grew up, in a small northwest Tennessee town. My life's journey has taken me to Knoxville to attend college, to Memphis and New England to work in clinics, to Chapel Hill, North Carolina and back to Memphis to work in marketing and non-profit. I realize now that when I was 24, I thought little about my career goals... I was 24, I was just glad to have a job. Since then, I have had many life experiences from miscarriages to divorce that have contributed to my desire to help the most vulnerable of our society. Now I realize that my interests are fixed on the intersection of science and relationships. I am curious about what drives people and organizations to make decisions, how the brain affects our behavior, how culture plays such an important role in every part of our lives.

This journey has led me to pursue doctoral study. I have finally found my purpose and intend to use my leadership skills to positively impact education—both in the school setting and in healthcare. In schools, I want to ensure educational equity among all children, that children with special needs are front and center, that leadership is abound. In healthcare, I am working to address clinician burnout and the associated mental health issues, including high rates of suicide, that this type of chronic stress can cause.

Recently, I heard a colleague deliver a talk on leadership. His talk was based on Simon Sinek's "Focus on the Why". As I now look at the notes I took during the talk, I consider MY "why". My "why" is all about helping others find their "AHA" moments, being inspirational and aspirational, and embracing the gray and the in-between spaces. I believe that my doctorate degree will equip me with the skills that will allow me to enhance my "why" and be a positive force of change in our society.