

Desiree Wilcox

Flyin Ryan Adventure Scholarship Grant

Personal Essay

“My Person, My Teacher” Personal Essay

“Be someone’s strength. Be someone’s inspiration. Be someone’s reason to never give up”-T Shelton. I owe many of my accomplishments and my personal strengths to one very influential person in my life. No matter where I may be, whether in a happy, comfortable place or a place wrought with struggle and pain, this individual has remained steadfast in giving me that strength, inspiration, and reason to keep going. Simply put, I wouldn’t be here today if I did not have this individual. Each and every day I recognize that ‘my person’ has saved me and given me purpose. When you really think about it, maybe every human on this earth is destined to be someone’s special ‘person.’ It is comforting, and somewhat nerve-wracking to know that one person can be the reason another person survives this beautiful, scary, overwhelming thing we call life. And I have wanted nothing more than to show my gratitude for having ‘my person’ by becoming the same role to another individual. Passing on a role so truly amazing and powerful for others to experience and thrive on is the reason to live life. That is the reason why I pursued a teaching career. As a teacher, I am able to love, celebrate and guide our youngest minds to come to the realization that they, too, are capable, powerful, strong, and resilient. I have been able to build incredible relationships with not only my classroom families and students, but also with the teacher community. These relationships are built steadfast in love and reciprocal support. I have become ‘my person’ for many of the students and families I have been privileged to work with. It brings me absolute joy, peace, and a sense of purpose in my life.

‘My person,’ who has saved me and loved me so fearlessly and ferociously, is my brother. He has taught me more life lessons in one simple, easy-going sibling conversation than I have learned in my lifetime of experiences. He may have never been a classroom teacher, but he taught me everything in life. Classroom walls do not define what it is to be a ‘true teacher,’ but, rather, a true teacher is one who shares and spreads his/her knowledge, inspiration, and faith to others with unyielding patience and passion. My most influential teacher, my brother, has struggled deeply and painfully with his mental health and with having an intellectual disability. Despite having a loving, supportive family always behind him, he could never be sheltered/protected enough from the cruelty, harassment, and discrimination he suffered relentlessly from peers, teachers, and employers. His life has been fraught with disappointment and ‘never feeling good enough’ or never being fully accepted. I have had to watch helplessly as my brother spiraled quickly from being a happy, charismatic, athletic, kind (the list could go on forever) to ‘a shell of a person’ in so much tangible pain and grief. He is now homeless, surviving the unpredictable, hard Colorado weather day in and day out on the inner city streets. For me, holidays, school breaks, and long weekends have become ‘find my brother missions’ to check up on him. I would do anything (and have tried!) to get my brother ‘off the streets’ and into a safe place where he can receive services and support to address his mental needs. However, I must respect my brother’s choice to ‘do life’ the way and at the pace he chooses to live it. Although I cannot live his life, I most certainly can live for him. ‘My person, my teacher’ always says to me: “Take care of yourself, Desi. Love yourself and know that I love you too.” It will never stop being difficult and heart-wrenching seeing my brother in so much pain and to be so lost. What’s worse is knowing how easily it could have been avoided by simply better educating society on how to approach and support people with disabilities. Thus, it has become my mission to be an educator and advocate for individuals with disabilities and/or mental health

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needs. To me, 'take care of yourself' means to take care of all those children just like my brother who need an open heart, an open mind and opportunities to prosper.

Teaching wasn't always my plan. I have come to realize, however, that my plan was more or less influenced by others' expectations or what I thought to be the 'best, more admirable course of action.' However, within the first year of attending my Undergraduate program, I slowly realized that this steadfast plan I created had too many holes and no sustenance. Why? Because this path I had pursued didn't embrace my passions, my interests, my reason for being 'my person' for my family. Although difficult, I quickly decided to change my BA from Chemistry to Environmental Earth Sciences with a minor in Environment Education Sustainability. It doesn't seem like a huge shift because I continued to study within the sciences. However, with this degree I could be an active learner in a setting that provides me with the utmost peace and happiness: Nature! I grew up in Colorado Springs with the Garden of the Gods as my backyard. My childhood is full of memories climbing the giant rocks barefoot, creating rafts from boogie boards to cling onto as the trails flooded; building the biggest, iciest and most terrifying sledding and ski jumps through the rock cliffs; packing a day-pack and planning a long hike with my siblings, and, inevitably ending up sleeping under the stars in the warm sand. My determination to be a forever learner stemmed from wanting to know how and why things worked so harmoniously in nature. It was the driving force behind finding my spirit again and pushing towards goals that were actually rooted in my individuality. Upon completion of my BA in Environmental Sciences, I moved to the high mountains in Steamboat Springs, Colorado to be an Interpretive Naturalist and Environmentalist for the surrounding state parks. It was an incredible experience! Not only was I outside day in and day out in the most incredible, beautiful area and doing my part to preserve our natural lands, but I also was educating others (from adults to school-aged children) on the importance of nature conservation. Fast forward to 3 years later (all the while ensuring that my passions and dreams were at the forefront), and I had received a life-changing opportunity to be a Special Education Teacher in the Steamboat Springs School District.

In the last 6 years, I have been able to make a difference in the lives of many children with special needs working as a significant needs Special Education Teacher. I have grown not only professionally, but also mentally in my abilities to implement evidence-based strategies effectively and inclusively in my classroom to support my students' growth and development. Through teaching, I know that I have been able to gain back what 'my person' lost so many years ago by advocating and fighting for those amazing children who are just like him. What's more is that I have brought my children outside into the best classroom there is, nature! Just this past year, 5 of my co-teachers and I created an outdoor classroom alongside the river near the school building for all grades to enjoy! Our students LOVE it, and it is accessible in every season. Of course, in Steamboat cross-country skiing to get places in the winter is standard, and my children are more than eager to put them on and ski to our nature classroom. Needless to say, I am a teacher, an advocate and a nature-lover who is able to enjoy these passions daily! In terms of working with the specific student population that I do: I have loved working with the more significant student population, and those children have shown me how beautiful, how exhausting, yet how satisfying our daily challenges and experiences can be. What

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most people do not realize is that young children, especially those with special needs, are the most genuine, real and determined teachers of us all! I can confidently say that I will never learn as much as I have just by working with those incredible children. I can also say that I owe it to 'our youngest teachers' to be a mutual quality educator for them. Continued education and broadened experiences, therefore, are key for me to be the quality educator my students deserve to have. I want nothing more than to be that teacher for them. Simply put, it is my everything. An investment from the Flyin Ryan Adventure Scholarship grant into my continued professional development would, of course, be a truly incredible and helpful support for me as a forever learner, but also an endless investment into the children I am beyond privileged to work with day in and day out. I thank you for your consideration and making this dream a reality for embracing education for what it should be: a lifelong journey of learning!