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What I've Learned and What I Know

When I started my college search in 2010, I was convinced I would attend Illinois State University. I had everything ready to go: my ISU lanyard, my ISU sweatshirt, my Redbird bumper sticker--I had it all. Then on a sunny Veteran's Day visit to EIU with my (then) boyfriend (now husband) and my grandfather, I realized that I may have been hasty in my decision. At eighteen, my decision to attend Eastern Illinois University to pursue my dream of being a high school english teacher was finalized by that visit to campus. Then, in 2019, I found myself back at crossroad: I needed to go to graduate school. In 2010 I decided to go to EIU because of its quaint dorm rooms, small class sizes, and beautiful campus; In 2019 I decided to go back to EIU because of the impactful professors and the invaluable education and experience I feel I received from the university.

Eastern Illinois University taught me to be valued. As a high school teacher, I know that college isn't the right choice for everyone. I never try to push my students to go to college if they don't want to, but I do push them to be proud of who they are. In my time at the graduate level I spent a lot of time learning, thinking, and writing about all types of students. Earning my own degree taught me that I should be proud of my accomplishment, but to be careful of hubris. A graduate professor actually said that to me at the end of the class: "be careful of hubris." And I have been ever since he pointed that out to me. Instead, I have learned to value my own accomplishments and talents. Pushing my own students to value themselves and their accomplishments is a majority of my job. Teaching literary devices is only a filler for the real stuff; the stuff that really matters, like how to point out flaws without bringing students down,

but making them stop and think. Teaching young adults to value yourself--no matter what you look like or what you believe--is hard. And it's a challenge every day.

Eastern Illinois University provided me with the knowledge of literature. One of the biggest hurdles in the midst of a year like 2020 is social media. One of the wonderful things about my niche is that we read...we read A LOT. Reading all headlines regardless of political affiliation, regardless of author, regardless of subject is how I make my decisions of who I vote for. This is only my third election I have voted in, but I have never read more awful articles than I have this last year. But the biggest takeaway that I received from this university is that there is power in literature. And I take that into my own classroom as well. Social media, deceiving pictures, poorly cut video clips, and click-bait headlines are the things that hate is made out of. In a time where there is so much hate, I choose to read. I choose to educate myself in order to be a better citizen, a better teacher, a better parent, and a better American.

Eastern Illinois University taught me to be kind. Mark Twain said that "kindness is the language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see," and I have reminded myself of this many times over the last few months. Just like in life, college always comes with challenges. One of my personal challenges with earning my degree online was the lack of social interaction. Let me preface by saying I chose to complete my degree totally online. Online learning was the best option for me and my family. And while I chose this degree for myself, Covid-19 decided online learning was best for everyone. In my time teaching remotely, I modeled the behaviors and attitudes that I saw from online learning at this university. Kindness was my best friend during remote learning. There have been so many times where my job is frustrating, and when I walk into my classroom in January (I've been on maternity leave after having my son in August)

I know that, whether there are kids in those seats or not, there will be kindness and understanding.

Eastern Illinois University provided me with the best professors. I can't say enough about these great people. I developed admiration for every professor I encountered. This is the biggest reason I decided to return to EIU for my graduate degree. In my undergrad I found a professor that I learned from, and I took every single class he taught. And I learned so much from him. And I thought "I hope someone feels this way about me one day." I don't know if I will ever know if I have had that impact yet, but, if it's not me, I hope everyone has had that eagerness to learn. I encountered this again at the graduate level, to no surprise, I just wanted to keep learning and learning. It becomes addictive. I want to be the best teacher I can be, and that's why I decided to come back here. I wanted to be the best parent I could be, and that's how I know my son will grow up learning from me.

Eastern Illinois University taught me how to be a leader. When I saw this opportunity to write this essay and be the commencement speaker, I dismissed it at first. But when it came around again, I knew that I needed to do it. I am busy and tired of this year, but I want to showcase how great this university is, how wonderful the staff and students are and how much I have grown as an educator during my time here over the last fifteen months. There is nothing more terrifying than standing up in front of people and hoping you make them laugh, hoping you connect to them, and hoping that there is some part of the speech they listen to. I thank God everyday for my high school English teacher who told me to apply here and for my grandpa who made me visit here when I told him I didn't want to. I will forever and always bleed blue.