

I walked across that stage as the cacophonous surge of vigorous clapping, parents clicking cameras, and the shouts from various friends cheering their fellow graduates dimmed. My friends were not among the graduates; my parents were not there cheering me on. In that moment, the encouraging words of Mr. Kellog, the school counselor, reverberated in my head, and I stood tall and proud as the steady beat of the graduation march marked each step, each milestone, each obstacle I had overcome to earn that diploma. I had done it: I had graduated.

When your first teachers, your parents, teach you that life isn't fair, no one is going to help you, your very existence is burdensome, and education is a pointless endeavor reserved for the intelligent and rich, your name printed on a high school diploma means more.

Where my first teachers failed me, Mr. Kellog did not. Mr. Kellog inspired me and together we poured over *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. In that moment, I gained a new outlook on life: no man is an island and success derives more from believing in oneself than from your circumstances or inherited skill set.

In 10th grade, I moved out to escape the negativity of my home life and lived with my baseball coach for a while. Using my income from my dishwashing job and the \$440 a month the government granted me to subsist on my own away from my parents, I eventually, found a place to live. It wasn't much, but it was a start. I even managed to convince the owner to discount my rent in exchange for dropping his son off at school. For the remainder of high school, I spent my days going to school and my nights listening to oldies music while washing off half eaten prunes and crême Brulee servings pasted to small porcelain ramekins.

My high school diploma stood for everything I had overcome, yet I was certain my educational journey was over. It wasn't that I had given up; it was simply a matter of focusing on my chosen path. Casting aside my former myopic views, I now knew I could succeed, but my life's trajectory did not include college. However, Mr. Kellog, the first person to believe in me, had different plans. He urged me to apply for a scholarship. So I quickly penned my high school journey and won an \$8,000 dollar scholarship. While the win fed my sense of self-worth, it did little to change my mind. Quick mathematical calculations led to one inevitable conclusion: college was too expensive and didn't make sense for me. While I appreciated Mr. Kellog's efforts to ignore the status quo and help me choose another path, I was tired of working two jobs—school and work. I just wanted to focus on work.

Then I received two phone calls that changed everything. My brother called me twice, informing me he had won enough money in scholarships to pay for college. This information changed the mathematical calculations, but I still had to grapple with the ingrained habitual rhetoric that college wasn't for me. However, I grasped onto the voice of Mr. Kellog and embraced a new path. I set about applying for scholarships, winning a small one, propelling the optimistic momentum. At the age of 23, I enrolled in my local community college.

Excited and encouraged with this new learning environment, I excelled. It was in that moment, I learned a new truth, the real truth, the truth my parents never knew: If I wanted something, I had the ability to get it.

At this time, I began volunteering at the local boy and girls' club, and I saw the obstacles facing children from impoverished and uneducated families. Juxtaposing my two groups of friends—the poor,

uneducated kids who didn't finish college and fellow scholarship winners—I discovered both were equally smart and capable, but there was one clear difference: the scholarship students had a greater emotional intelligence. My childhood friends protected their emotions, never allowing in enough vulnerability to explore new opportunities; and as a result, they killed their creativity and shut down any idea of a promising future. Finding this juxtaposition intriguing, I applied for and received a \$2500 grant to research the barriers stopping kids from accessing post-secondary education.

Equipped with my knowledge from my research and my own personal history, I wanted to share my message with others. I contacted a local school asking if I could present my knowledge through a presentation entitled “Why You Should Develop a Scholarship Mentality,” and figured a few students would attend. Showing up to a full crowd, I felt the nerves trickle in, but my passionate belief in the importance of students recognizing their potential and achieving success, kindled by Mr. Kellog, reduced the nerves to ash. That night sparked my lifelong passion for educational reform.

While I worked as a cost accountant, I found more joy in giving my presentations. However, this wasn't entirely lucrative, and I wanted to do more of what I loved and make money in the process. With little business knowledge, I took out a piece of paper and jotted down ideas for a crowdsourcing graphic design business. Then, I found a mentor to help me cultivate the skills necessary to run a successful business. My mentor, John Seminarios, taught me how to scale a business, set priorities, and lead a team. I found my first graphic designer on Craigslist; started building a team; and presented my business idea, HiretheWorld.com, at a competition. After winning and receiving \$121k to build a team, I learned the process of innovation and leadership. To date, designers from 148 different countries have created over 237,000 designs for clients all over the world

Running a successful business and giving presentations kept me busy, but the need to make a bigger impact sparked a new business endeavor: ScholarshipStrategy.com. Taking my message online, I hoped to reach a wider audience. However, this endeavor failed as I couldn't find the right investors and my brother and I disagreed on the direction for the company. Frustrated that my efforts to greatly impact education were thwarted, I decided to become a business instructor. I soon realized that while I enjoyed teaching, I couldn't affect change at that level.

Leading at the systems level, I could affect change. With my background in business innovation and my life experiences, I can help transform the American K-12 education system. Combining emotionally intelligent students, empowered teachers, and business process innovations will significantly improve the efficiency and outcome of the American society. We need to create an environment that begins rewarding experiments and innovation rather than teaching to the test. We need to change the current belief system of the common American citizen from one of *I can't* to *I can*. Rather than honing in on one piece of technology or pedagogy, we must embrace the messy process of innovation: invent, adopt, and adapt.

Through embracing this new paradigm—we tried something new, we learned, we moved on—we can create an environment conducive to burgeoning students. At HiretheWorld, every Friday morning, we gave each employee the opportunity to share and create his or her own ideas for improving the company. We saw a lot of bad ideas, yet our design gallery came to fruition because we allowed our employees to try something new and take risks. In order to change the outcome of American education, we need to change how our schools and districts are structured and organized: individual schools must be recognized as the key decision centers within a district or school system.

I can be the catalyst towards implementing systems that facilitate continuously improving innovation within the American K-12 school system. I plan on working with (name of mentor) to learn how our schools work at a system's level, so I can implement my ideas for change.

Looking at my high school and college diploma, the successes I have achieved, the failures I have learned from, I know I owe a lot to Mr. Kellog. He died before I could ever thank him, but his legacy lives on through me. Every child needs a Mr. Kellog to help access his or her emotional intelligence; every teacher needs the tools to find success; and every school needs to thrive from the creative process of innovation. I want to help make that a reality.