

I'm Not Walking, Mom: Debunking the Stigma Behind the Average High School Dropout

Everyone remembers the kid who attended their High School English class one day, and seemed to vanish the next. Classic films such as *Grease* touch on the topic of “beauty school dropouts,” but to no extent do we care to understand any positivity from programs such as independent studies or taking a quick GED to graduate. Since these programs are considered continuation schools that are geared towards the “bad” students, the idea of being a high school dropout may not sit well with most people. However, depending on the person, it may not be such a bad path to choose. Not only was I able to graduate sooner, by enrolling myself into independent studies; I was able to take time before starting college to recollect myself, and during this time I learned very significant life lessons that still have an impact on me today such as inward self-reflection and learning to treasure the present.

First off, let's knock the demeaning stigma about high school dropouts straight to the curb. The correlations between bright students and continuation school programs have been deemed as negative. Most people view students in these courses as weak, undetermined, or lazy, which isn't the case. Throughout high school, I was the type of person who strived to do my best. I held straight A's and the occasional B in history (which is a subject that still haunts me to this day) while enrolled in several honors classes and extra-curricular programs. I became used to a feeling of always being rushed and on the go, never having time to myself. Despite being the frail, timid girl I was, being in many different school programs pushed me into being social, but I never felt myself or able to relate to many other people my age, aside from my two closest friends at the time. In fact I was always engulfed by social events due to my much more introverted nature.

I would let these feelings blow over my head until the start of my senior year when I desperately wanted a change. With a new fall semester, I could see myself falling deeper and deeper into this hole. I was going to school full time, and working two different jobs on the side, so everyday felt like a never-ending mission. Debilitating as it was, not knowing my own identity was a huge factor, which made the situation even worse. My mental health was a rollercoaster and truth be told with college about a year away I feared for the future. After looking into all of my options, I figured getting into a program to graduate early would help aid my problem.

I was ready and confident enough for this shift to be independent in school for the next couple of months to find myself. I was also ahead on credits, which would make this transition even more efficient. My family, on the other hand, disagreed with my idea of independent studies and actually made me wait an extra semester to really think through my decision. I already knew what I wanted. So come January 2019, I withdrew myself from high school, and enrolled myself in EPHS which is an alternative education school that specializes in independent study.

Initially, attending EPHS was more overwhelming than I had previously imagined. The transition from teachers practically breathing down my neck and watching my every movement to meeting my counselor maybe twice a week for a 20-minute quiz was a surprising adjustment. For instance, Mr. Addams, was a quirky and genuinely kind, metropolitan looking man who would pass time discussing topics like vegan recipes. I felt that I related to my counselor, and instantly I could tell he had a deep respect for his students. Before, when I felt uneasy about a

certain class, my old counselor would never give me the time of day, but now I was able to discuss my concerns freely. I found a lot of the circumstances to be new, unusual and confusing. However, I began to see that this quick-paced “do it yourself” school was actually beneficial to me, because it pushed the limits on how I could be self sufficient — and my counselor, being the laid-back type of guy he was— allowed me to be more creative on my assignments, which led to more self-assurance as a whole. I made sure to take this confidence and sense of freedom with me as much as I could in life outside of campus.

With the relief of feeling like all eyes were on me and being trapped by four gates and security officers, I dipped my toes into the real world. Being out of high school, I didn’t have to conform to the social construct I felt stuck in: I could wear what I wanted, act how I wanted, and even read what I wanted. I no longer felt the judgement from people in high school based on how I looked and what I decided to wear (although my sense of style is always changing). I could put on the most outrageous outfits, or the most boring, and nobody really noticed. I finally was able to express the real me without being criticized for it. Ultimately, I had more time on my hands to juggle work, self-care, and learning to do things on my own. Isn’t that what being a young adult is all about?

I began indulging in self-help books such as *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz, and *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. These books touch on different topics such as the law of attraction and self-constraining belief systems. Both have two key goals in sight: inward self-reflection and becoming one with your inner self. Looking out into the world for guidance on how to turn within broadened my perspectives towards myself, my life, and the people I chose to encircle myself with.

I was now able to thoroughly explore my surroundings. For the first time in a long time, I could finally stop to smell the roses. I could go out at night and see the lights hanging brightly over my city without the stress of being out too late or losing sleep before school. I learned first-hand how to be confident and sociable—not to put on a show, but to actually engage with people I had more in common with. I saw myself connecting to people more and being invested in different conversations. Those I didn't relate to — I would probably never have to see again. Even though at times I felt awkward in certain social situations I realize that's just life, you fall and get back up again.

On the other hand, in this time I was able to finish my Pilates teacher training and I am now a certified instructor. Pilates is a series of physical exercises, but it was originally curated to tend to the needs of people with physical injuries as well. I learned this practice and use it as a form of physical therapy for several different clients. For example, one of my patients (name enclosed) has had very fragile knees for the past three years. She has confided in me multiple times that pilates is what helps her feel stronger each day. I believe these instances are what I am truly grateful for and really showed me who I am, and who I wish to be—caring and motivated. I believe in helping others and showing them that they can be whomever they want to be, as I had finally learned this for myself.

I may not be a “beauty school dropout,” but I did take the less conventional route to graduate for my own self-discovery. I still don't see myself as being lazy. Sure, every once in a while, I procrastinate on different responsibilities, but don't we all? I am proud of myself for taking the chance I did, and of anyone else that made a similar choice and succeeded. Being

able to put a positive spin on what some may consider negative is something I will always treasure.

Retracting myself from High School on my own terms led me to become who I am today, certain. I am certain that I can change myself as much as I want and keep changing into what I desire to be. I'm learning new things about myself every day, and I still have my whole life to grow on. This is the fact that inspires me to live each day fully. As long as you find who you want to be in this world and stand by it, no one can stop you, not even the people who gave you the bad reputation in the first place.