

There Was Never a Golden Key or a Limousine

by Justin S.

People who know about addiction will say it takes at least six months for the mental fog to lift from a recovering person's brain. I am a recovering alcoholic and can relate to that estimate. Through sixteen chaotic years, I had considered returning to school a handful of times, but it never happened. I would apply online, pay the application fee, complete the FAFSA, and then nothing would materialize. One time I even chewed out an admissions counselor for not following up on an application. It was as though I expected the school's best people to come running to my door with the golden key, like they should race me off in a limousine and escort me into the classroom. Well, the limousine never showed up.

It was the middle of October in 2013. My head was foggy, and I was tired. I had just arrived at an inpatient treatment center. With only two days of sobriety, I sat at a table filling out paperwork. A worker asked why I chose La Crosse. After a brief pause I replied, "The fishing here is good, and the people are more down to earth. Also, going back to school would be great. I never thought I would need college when I was growing up. I wouldn't be able to handle it anyway." The worker laughed and described his return to school as an adult. He said that school was a lot different when he was older. The teachers were there to teach him, not to punish him. He said that they actually wanted him to succeed. That conversation kick started my pursuit of higher education.

"Where do I start?" I was soon on Western's website. "Ok, it's here, now what? What do I apply for?" I scrolled through the programs. "This one looks interesting. How am I supposed to know what to pick?" No immediate answers. Frustration was setting in. Nothing seemed clear. It was relative to my train of thought. My mind needed a break. It was time to focus on the most important thing, my recovery.

A few days had gone by. I was nine days sober. My body was fighting withdrawal and the activities at the treatment center consumed the day. It was exhausting. Suddenly, an inner force encouraged me to revisit the website that had me tripped up before. The bio-medical electronics program looked intriguing and seemed to be a fit. "Bio-med it is." I made an appointment to meet with the program advisor. "That's progress." I made the call to have my high school transcripts sent to Western. "Check! Another thing was off my list. Next?" I soon found the FAFSA and that was complete.

The next day I was off to campus to meet with the bio-med enrollment advisor. "The program is full? What in the heck am I supposed to do now?" I was discouraged. Heading back home, I reflected on what the advisor had to say. She provided direction for my next steps, but a lot was still in question. I had enough for that day. A lot was going on with recovery, and a break was in order anyway.

After some downtime, I tackled it again, but with a clearer head. Electromechanical technology was my choice. The thought of a program that taught the inner workings of robotics, drive systems, and electronic controls seemed intense. It was intriguing since I had a lot of experience with mechanical and electronic repair. "Ok, now that's set." I was making progress. I scheduled an appointment for the next day to complete a general testing session. I needed to find out what I had slept through in high school.

Testing went by quickly the next day. Afterward, I met with a learning support advisor. I was shocked to hear that my results were beyond high school level. I was definitely ready for the compass placement test. "I have a chance after all!" The advisor recommended scheduling the test as soon as possible. He added that registration was quickly approaching. I had a renewed sense of confidence as I walked upstairs to schedule the appointments.

The presence of doom lurked in the days that preceded the tests. The online practice exams were showing poor results, and inferiority was striking deep. I spent the evening before each session of the compass studying and bringing the practice score up. The studying really paid off! I nailed every test, one by one! Another meeting with the advisor lifted my spirits and provided a rough estimate of a class schedule.

I was 49 days into my sobriety. Focus shifted to the ALEKS math program. A total of 35 hours went into that online program. That was the last step needed to fulfill the program requirements. Finally, a taste of success. It was difficult to balance study time with the scheduled programming at the treatment center, but it was rewarding once complete. A few days passed and it was time for one more trip to the campus. A meeting with the financial aid advisor brought comfort that morning. I found out that tuition was within reach. The advisor encouraged me to get my student ID card before leaving campus. She directed me to the building across the street, where an office worker made the card on the spot. It was then that it hit me. I was officially a student! The card in my hand was proof! My life had come from within moments of death. Now I had a purpose and a positive outlook on life.

My time was complete at the treatment center, and I found a new home. Both were welcomed changes. It was finally time to rest. The new living situation was not what most people would consider ideal, but rent included everything needed to survive. Life was good. There was just one more feat left to complete my goal. I needed to get through that first day of classes. A couple weeks had passed. School was just around the corner. I was sitting in my room the night before the first class when a text message popped up on my phone. I laughed as I read the message. Western had cancelled school for the next day! The weather was too cold! I would have given anything for that news when I was in high school! "Ah well, what's another day, right?"

It was a cold morning on January 7, 2014. The real first day of classes had arrived. I walked through the doors of the Coleman Center and made my way down the hall to room 142. Seeing the other students in the hall waiting to start class brought on a calming sensation. My life had made a positive turn, and my thought process had immensely improved. I was sober almost three months and countless changes for the better had occurred in that time. I felt like nothing could bring me down. I had never realized my potential for progress and had underestimated my ability to cope with the stress of making it happen. Through it all, I maintained sobriety. I was ready to continue my new life as a student, eagerly in the pursuit of higher education.