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# *Change Is Possible for Everyone*

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Growing up in a small town outside of Cleveland, Ohio, I was surrounded primarily by drugs, gangs, and violence. There isn't a single soul in the world that hasn't personally felt the effects of drug addiction or witnessed the effects from afar. Both of my parents struggled with addiction, and the summer following 4<sup>th</sup> grade, I moved to Florida with my mom in hopes of a better life. That following year, my father was incarcerated for seven months on drug-related charges. Being as young as I was and, on top of that, a daddy's girl at heart, his drug addiction really took a toll on me. He was released from prison within the same year, and, thankfully, he found a whole new world in his recovery. He attended Narcotics Anonymous meetings anywhere from one to three times a day, and, when I would visit on vacations, I went along with him. He soon worked his way up in the program to county chairman and began travelling to tell his story to those still struggling. My dad's addiction has impacted my life both positively and negatively, but I never once thought it would intervene and shed a positive light on my academic life. More specifically, it helped me to approach writing very differently.

I had always been a decent writer. My essay grades were satisfactory, and I never had any trouble giving just the right amount of information and detail to pass assignments or standardized tests. But in my freshman year of high school, I would experience a transformation. I would slowly become a more passionate and independent writer, as opposed to a "whatever, I'll just do the basics to get a passing grade" writer.

All the way through my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, I was taught to keep my personal voice out of my papers. I was taught to be specific, but not too specific, and I was told to give examples, but not too many. How was I to be specific but not specific all at once? How was I supposed to tell a story with only a few details? None of it ever really made sense to me. I called those twisted rules the *You Can't Do That Rules*; however, as long as I abided by those rules, I would never fail... in the grade book. My teacher was always pleased enough. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade though, I began to just free write. Screw the rules; I was going to try something different because whenever I had to look back at my pre-8<sup>th</sup> grade compositions, I was confident in myself, but my teachers never were. I wanted to do something different to regain my personal pleasure in writing. And this plan? Well, it failed. Epically.

When high school started, I was taking all Honors and AP classes so I decided to revert back to the *You Can't Do That Rules* because whether I was pleased or not, my teacher always was at the end of the day, right? With all that I had on my plate during my freshman year, I was willing to take any necessary and appropriate shortcuts to keep my grades up. I began wondering, though, when I would be able to start writing for myself, or even just an audience larger than my teacher. With every paper I wrote I envisioned my teacher, and with their face in mind I wrote to and *for* them. This is what stripped me of the passion I once had for writing. Even if I was writing in my diary, I was writing for myself, and if some sneaky hands got on it, a larger audience would be entertained as well. I finally realized the largest constraint in my writing process: writing for an audience. I had always written for a single person, as if my paper never had the opportunity to be read by someone else. The *You Can't Do That Rules* had me so trained in pleasing my teacher, and I honestly never

thought I would be able to successfully break free and write for a larger audience while still pleasing my teachers.

At the end of my freshman year, we received our final essay prompt: Heroes. I was told to write an essay about my Hero, someone who has changed and impacted my life for the better. My dad came to mind instantly. I knew I could really tell a story about him overcoming his struggles, but my writing process was so limited and overly structured that I couldn't figure out how to start. However, I knew as passionate as I was about my dad's recovery that this would be my break-free moment. I was going to make sure of it.

When I started writing the essay, I was writing as if I was speaking about my dad -aloud at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. At the meetings, the addicts would share details about instances that changed their lives or instances that worsened their struggles. I remembered my dad always speaking of his sponsor, Ralph, and how he learned from his struggles while overcoming his own. I was writing as if my dad's struggles changed my outlook on life, and, in reality, they did more than anyone could ever fathom. Soon the rough draft was finished, and then I had to submit it for peer review. My story was so powerful and emotional that one of my classmates cried. I was shocked. Would my teacher have the same reaction?

A week later, I did a little editing on my peer-reviewed rough draft and handed it in to my teacher. That day, little to my knowledge, would turn out to be one of the best days of my life. The day our final drafts were due, we had a two-hour block for our exams. So my English teacher, Mrs. Dixon, decided to try and grade as many essays as she could during that block period. My exam was finished, so, like a typical high school student, I pulled out my phone and started texting secretly. Then in the dead silent room, I suddenly hear my teacher call my name. Damn it. Busted. I was called up to her desk and I instantly apologized and put my phone in my pocket, but she looked at me like I was crazy. She said that she had no concern about my cell phone, but had serious matters to discuss with me about my paper. Great. So much for the teary-eyed reaction. She pulled me in the hallway, and at that point I was sweating bullets. Did she think I plagiarized? Did the drug topic offend her? She was standing in front of me giving me the stare of death, and then out of nowhere she hugged me and started crying. She told me that she was so proud of my paper and that it really touched her. I couldn't believe it; I was overwhelmed with joy and the sense of accomplishment. I finally did something for myself and I succeeded. She asked me the following day to read aloud my essay in front of the class, and I will never forget the feeling I had when I received praise from my peers after class. I had suddenly inspired people to take risks in their essays by actually utilizing their personal voice and experiences. I was so proud of myself. After class, I called my dad and told him all about it. I read him the essay and his reaction, by far, gave me the greatest reward of my paper. He absolutely adored it. He asked me to send him a copy via email, so I sent it, never expecting it to leave his email.

That following summer, I flew up to Ohio like I always had and attended the Narcotics Anonymous meetings with my dad as usual, but my experiences at the meetings were suddenly nothing like what I was used to. Narcotics Anonymous is a naturally welcoming organization, but the type of love I was receiving from people was at an all-time high. Compliments were thrown back and forth about the bond my dad and I share, and I couldn't understand why. I loved the compliments, but what had fueled them? I was unaware that my dad printed out my essay and read it aloud to the meetings that he had traveled to. Nearly 75% of addicts have children, and the fact

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that I, a child of an addict, felt that proud of my father really gave empowerment to the addicts still struggling. It gave them hope that their kids still loved them, and that their bonds could still strengthen throughout the recovery process.

The feeling of knowing that I gave people the same strength that I had given my father to recover is a feeling that I experience every day. Every time I talk to my dad, I remember all that I put in that essay and how the story behind it is what allowed me to speak to my father via his personal cell phone and not a jail phone. It allows me to talk to my father at all because he's simply living and breathing and not underground because of his addiction. All of this from a simple essay. I broke all the rules, and ignored my teacher. Who would've ever thought that in doing so I would've produced such a powerful and moving essay?

Although not all of my essays are read aloud to people, I now know how to approach my essays and who to write for: myself and others, not just a single person. I realized that when I pleased myself, I pleased others. My passion for writing had a rebirth, and I am now a more independent writer than ever.

## **Taylor Jones**



Taylor Jones is currently a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. She is a proud Mathematics Education major. She has always been a dedicated student, and has allowed her academic life to flourish through tough battles in her personal life. She one day hopes to share her love of math and passion to help others in her future career as a math teacher. In her free time, Taylor enjoys simply spending time with those she cares most about. Being a full-time college student, time spent with loved ones is often cut short or substituted with school work-related tasks. Great accomplishments like these are what she works so hard for. She loves her university and is looking forward to continued successes and involvement at UCF in future semesters.