

Under Pressure: Dealing with the pressure to attend the right school

I remember the first time the idea of college really stuck into my mind. It was the summer going into seventh grade and my family went to the beach with my mother's college friends' family. The kind of college friend who earns the title of auntie. I always admired this woman. She created a beautiful life for herself and her family and so when while eating some pizza at the place they were staying, I was taken aback when this woman I call auntie brought up her daughter's college sob story. Her daughter, who had been a straight A overachiever with almost lifelong dreams of going to Yale didn't get in, she was devastated. She ended up attending Cornell instead. Cornell, an amazing school, but still not her first choice.

Little me hearing all of this was astounded. Cornell to me was an Ivy League. All I knew was that to get in was something to be proud of. But then all of the sudden an idea was pushed upon me. To aim higher. Higher than what I physically, mentally and emotionally could take. Like my mother's friend's daughter. To not just take a great school but to desire a spectacular school. A prestigious and then some school.

Maybe that was the start of it all. The pushing to be more, to be enough. Suddenly college was a way to measure my status. From that point on I took school more seriously. I wanted to have a way to feel proud of myself. A way to calculate what my worth was.

The journey to get into the perfect college was my ticket. My ticket to calculate said worth. I originally picked Stanford as my "dream school" but understand, to me I saw that Stanford was THE place, THE college. I loved California so location wasn't an issue and I loved the elite reputation.

A lot of it all is for the reputation. The acceptance rate. The number it's listed on Forbes.com. And colleges love that. They love being known for being the best. Behind the "every student can make it here" facade, there's the "only the very best will even get the chance" undertone.

As I reached junior year of high school, I had a tennis state championship high school title under my belt, been published and paid for my articles at an arts magazine, received an invitation to a well-known journalism conference in Washington DC and had my eye on New York University to call my home for the next four years.

I wanted to attend NYU like plants want to be watered. I disguised it as a want, but in truth, it was a

need. I needed New York City and the news publications and the job opportunities and the mentorships and the professors like a plant needs water. There wasn't any loophole to make it okay not to get it.

So senior year was spent working harder than ever. Writing as much as I could, volunteering and buffing up my resume any ways I could. And then I had the moment. The moment my mother's friend who I call auntie said broke her daughter.

I didn't get into NYU.

A real bummer. My plan for the next four years of my life was wiped away. I was sad, of course, and it took a little time to wrap my head around it. Luckily I was accepted to Emerson College, the college that is home to the #1 journalism program in the country. My reporter heart soared.

Now Boston wasn't New York City, the home I'd been dreaming of for a decent number of years, but it was still a magical city. I visited Emerson and fell in love.

In love with Boylston street. I could see myself strolling through the city blocks getting inspiration from the lights at dusk and the sunrise over the skyscrapers. The professors and amenities and study abroad programs all caught my fancy instantly. Emerson was going to be my home and Boston my new stomping ground.

I decided to take a gap year to raise money, though I think I knew how naive I was being. I never seriously considered state school or community college. I wanted the big leagues. Emerson has a reputation and I would get a good job bearing the Emerson alum name after. I'd continue to strive for a dream lifestyle beginning with a dream education.

Never could I make enough money at my hostess job at the local burger bar for one year at Emerson. Never mind four. I took the gap year anyway with the intention of still attending Emerson in the fall.

In my gap year, I traveled, wrote, began and ended my first relationship, and dealt with a pandemic along with the rest of the world.

During my gap year I also came to terms with something. I wasn't going to Emerson. It was heartbreaking and many tears were shed. However, in another light I felt freed. When I realized I

couldn't afford Emerson, I was angry. Real blown away that a girl who worked hard and seemingly did everything right in the formula to attend a good school couldn't. It wasn't fair. And then I started thinking about how silly that was. How silly I was, and had been for so long.

I had let what college I would attend define me. But I couldn't just blame myself for working that idea up in my mind and I couldn't blame my mom's friend or her story about her daughter. It's instilled in us to allow things that absolutely don't matter be the reason we feel proud of ourselves. We all crave reasons and reassurance that we are special. And for teenagers, it can so easily become college that is the source for validation. That is the deciding factor of if we can do something. Getting into Yale, you must feel like you can do something, a whole lot. Thinking about all of the people who have gone to Yale and done something, just being grouped with them or having some connection to them makes you feel like that could be you. There are reasons that it could be you.

And then there's the acceptance rate number. That little number that kept me awake some nights. You can picture groups of people then pick out the 28% or 12% or, for Brown University, 8%.

You want to be in that acceptance group. And the knowledge that you beat out other students for the spot fuels your fire even more.

It's an idea that needs to stop. All of it.

College education is where small people can feel big. It doesn't matter who you are, you can still feel small. And you get your fix through the college admissions process. The chance to prove to others what you are and what you bring to the table. The college we attend showcases what defines us. Now this isn't a diagnosis or accusation. This is an observation of the ugly possibilities and overbearing pressure the college process brings. Now, in the slightest way I'm grateful for the mindset, but in the smallest way possible. I mean, I graduated valedictorian. The hunger I had to put that title on my resume to impress schools was the same hunger that eventually got me it.

However, I could have still been one of the brightest students and not felt that a good college was the only way to a good life, a good life in any sense. Happiness, love, safety, good health, all were incorporated in the impressive college package. I now am going to attend Rhode Island College, and I fully intend to put in my best work. Not because I have Stanford or NYU on my mind, but because I know that with hard work you can really make the right life for yourself, and find that happiness that matters to you. Another thing, my mom is just as happy with her "My Child Goes to RIC" mug as she was with her now unwanted "My Child Goes to Emerson" mug. And that fact makes everything a bit more alright in my eyes.