



Impact of Early Trauma Gabby Falzone 10/27/1017 Speech at New Leader Scholarship Reception

Without exaggeration I can tell you that I would not be where I am today, a burgeoning education and trauma researcher, if it wasn't for the New Leader Scholarship. Since I always tell my students, you cannot make a claim without using evidence to back it up, I will explain.

Up until my mid-20s I spent most of my life in the margins of society. I was first homeless with my family when I was 12yrs old and became a homeless runaway teen a few years later. Throughout my later teens and early 20s, I lived in extreme poverty permeated with a profound sense of hopelessness. Deep in my heart I knew that an education could help pull me out of my desperate situation -I had always excelled at school and managed to graduate with my high school class even though I was homeless for a large chunk of high school- however, pursuing college proved challenging. I was hindered by numerous obstacles –everything from being denied financial aid because the financial aid office did not believe anyone could live on as little money a year as I did (under \$4000 that year) to having to work full time while going to school to becoming homeless again at 26 years old. Despite all those obstacles, I prevailed. When I was about to move into my senior year, I made a decision that changed my life. I decided to apply for scholarships, something I had never considered, hoping maybe I could work less than full-time for my last year. I applied for and received the New Leader Scholarship that year (in its 2nd year of existence). I was relieved at the prospect of the money, but little did I know that making the decision to apply for that scholarship would shape the course of my future.

I remember the first scholar dinner that happened at Garibaldi's in Oakland. I had spent so many years on the outskirts of society that I had no idea what to wear or how to act around "normal" people. I worried that the NLS board would reconsider their decision to award me the scholarship. To my horror, at the dinner all the current scholars were asked to stand up and say a few words. I can't remember exactly what I

said, but I remember barely being able to hold back the tears as I spoke of how the Goldmans were two of the first people in my entire life who had believed in me and saw something in me –moreover they saw me. At the time I was 32 years old. As I have learned in my work, acknowledgement can go a long way in the healing process.

The NLS support extended way beyond that last year of undergrad. With their help and the help of others in the New Leader family, I learned about the mysteries of grad school –like the time Rita explained what a CV was. I began to feel that higher education could be a possibility –though it would be a few years before I could actually put that knowledge into practice. I had a friend with 3 kids who was dying of AIDS and I, being the only stable, responsible adult in their lives, made a decision to take in the kids rather than see them separated in foster care. I spent the next 5 years raising 3 teenagers. During that time I also received my teaching credential and taught middle school.

Soon after the kids were grown and out of the house, I attended the annual New Leader dinner, as I have done for most of the past 14 years. As I sat listening to Rue Mapp share her story, I felt so inspired that I decided right then and there that it was time to pursue my PhD. I do not recommend that anyone apply for grad school the way I did –Rue’s speech was Friday Oct 29 and the deadline for applications was Dec 3! Channeling the perseverance that helped me survive all those years, coupled with the help of a few of my fellow New Leaders, I submitted my application on time and was accepted to the Social and Cultural Studies program at UC Berkeley.

My own traumatic experiences, along with the experience of my kids, my friends, and my students, greatly influence my research and my work. In my research, I have found that all too often, the trauma that young people experience on multiple levels – from racism, to community violence, to child abuse –is criminalized rather being treated, setting the stage for further traumatization in the criminal justice system. I am currently developing a pilot youth-led program in Richmond to explore how community education and community-based interventions can help youth heal and thrive.

In addition to my own research, I founded The Critical Trauma Working Group on campus, which is a collaboration between grad students, undergrad students, and community members who are all interested in finding solutions to the effects of trauma.

Last March that group organized a daylong trauma conference which I chaired and had 300 attendees with 160 people on the waitlist.

I currently teach a class at UC Berkeley focused on pairing undergraduates with marginalized youth to conduct participatory research. For a few years I worked with student athletes from poor urban and rural backgrounds, helping them both with academic work and with becoming acculturated to the strange new world of a research 1 university. For the past two years I have been tutoring formerly incarcerated students at UC Berkeley through a program directed by a New Leader Scholar and encouraged a few to apply for the New Leader Scholarship. I am excited to see two of them inducted into our family.

I have been told it is never beneficial to speculate on what could have happened in the past, but at times I find myself thinking about what life would have been like if I had not applied for the New Leader scholarship. Who would I be if I had not been given the hope to pursue my dreams, the kindness to trust people, and the tools to succeed? Luckily thanks to the help of the Goldmans, the NLS board, my fellow New Leaders, and everyone else who helps sustain the New Leader Scholarship, I'll never have to know.