

Encouragement and Acceptance

Angel Shelton

My Teens: Dropping out of School and Into Motherhood

I dropped out in the tenth grade. I started my own family by 18. Motherhood would turn out to be my strong suit. Math—not so much. In school, I had struggled to keep up. By tenth grade I had already experienced the trauma of retention and SPED (special education). Those of us who couldn't hack it in "regular" classes were banished to the basement. We sat there doing remedial math worksheets and watching our teacher read the paper. Once I understood that I didn't learn the same way others did, I gave up and left.



My 20s: Stuck in the Doorway

Over the years, I have figured out how to compensate for my challenges. In school, I avoided math and figured out creative ways to disguise my learning difficulties. As an adult, being a mature, professional, and resourceful person would help get me in the door. Unfortunately, that doorway is where I would remain.

Finally, in my late 20s, I understood that my lack of education would not only be my personal burden but it would be a burden on my young family as well. Without a GED, I had no earning potential. It was likely we would always be getting by. With maturity came the realization that "getting by" would not and should not be enough.

My 30s: A Resolution to Stop Running

Still, it took me another 10 plus years to finally stop running from my fears. Around the time when most people decide to change their habits

and pursue their aspirations (New Years Day), I made the decision to enter a GED program. The decision to go back to school at the ripe age of 38 was difficult. I have three children and I have managed to make ends meet despite not having a high school education. However, I always felt the shame and stigma of being a drop-out. I hid it well, though, and I could not imagine sitting in a classroom of young adults exposing my shame and learning disabilities. The thing I feared most was running into my peers or my son's peers who didn't know my secrets.

Settling in to Learn and Be

Learning in a diverse classroom can be challenging. It seems that both younger and older students can lack tolerance at times. I find that younger students become frustrated with being labeled "too young to understand" and older students can become frustrated with change. Both are coming from a difficult place where they feel vulnerable and ashamed. What I'm happy to have seen is students bonding from all walks of life and age groups, sharing their common goal and burdens. I see women supporting each other and rebuilding confidence in themselves and discovering they can learn and grow.



Immigrant, ex offender, stay-at-home mom, recovering addict, abuse victim, unemployed, never had a job, drop out, run-away, learning disabled, welfare mother, homeless, caretaker, troubled youth, under employed, uneducated, teen mother, rape victim, minority, statistic. Which label belongs to the woman beside me in class? Which am I? Does it really identify me?

Recently, I was sitting in my class doing a special project. We were reflecting on what we had overcome to be sitting there. There were women from places in the world that, prior to my enrolling in the program, I could not identify on a map. There were also women from my neighborhood. We all had varying stories – some tragic, others typical, but we had in common the goal to obtain a GED and pursue our ambitions.

We all find comfort in each other's stories. Look how hard my classmates' journeys have been. Could I learn a language *and* get my GED at the same time? Could I exist in a foreign culture and navigate its spoken and unspoken rules? When I was a teen mom I had a home and the father of my child by my side. Could I juggle living

in a shelter with being a new mom and the victim of domestic abuse? Could I handle being labeled a foster child (even into adulthood) and aging out of one broken system into another broken system? How would I practice motherhood or even womanhood if it was never really modeled for me?

In Community, We Are Stronger

Who am I to give up now? How can I let the woman beside me feel alone? We are here for the same reason and we are women trying to remove our labels, trying to be and do more. I may not share her past but I am part of her present.

My fears and shame have caused far more pain than they were worth. It took many years to get the courage to be honest with myself. I am finding strength from God, from my desire to accomplish one goal at a time, and from my community of learners. I am replacing the stigmas placed on me with encouragement and self-acceptance.

Angel Shelton is a 38-year old GED student at Project Hope in Roxbury, MA. Her son, Jerome, writes about his schooling experiences on pp. 28-29.



Angel Shelton (back row, second from right) with her community of learners at Project Hope. In photos on the previous page, Angel as a teen mom with her baby and Angel today with her three children.