

UCLA and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill


by Matthew P

It's time for a serious chat," my dad said. "Your sister has been diagnosed with epilepsy."

I didn't know much about epilepsy at the time. Judging by the somber expression on my dad's face, though, I knew it was very, very serious. My brain, fried from a long day at school, automatically kicked into overdrive. I wondered what effect this had on my family.

The first time my sister had a seizure in front of me, I had no idea what was going on. It frightened me to see her have this out of body experience where she had no control over her actions; all I wanted to do was help. This helplessness made me realize the role I had to play and that I had to make it a priority for me to learn how to care for her when it would happen again. It has been difficult for me to see my parents struggle through this time; one could never wish upon an event such as this in anyone's life. They saw my sister's character entirely change as a result of this condition. She went from being a confident young girl that had an answer ready for any question before you could even ask it; to one that lacked assertiveness and social skills, what were once her defining characteristics. My heart broke for her and my parents.

What was best for Andie was a supportive, stable home life. It forced me to sometimes give up on visiting friends on the weekend, to be there for her when she needed it the most. As time progressed, I soon became a pillar of strength for my sister, whether it be during one of her seizures or in daily aspects of her life. From that day one, my relationship with my parents was never the same. I had transitioned into an adult with the responsibility and capability of taking care of and standing up for others. Our dinner conversations became more mature, and I loved our new dynamic. Having the responsibility of looking after my sister also gave me a greater sense of understanding and compassion for the unknown.



This experience, as a whole, enabled me to engage more with those around me. I felt as if I had a better understanding of people and their emotions. As a result, I forged deep and meaningful relationships with not only the people around me at school but also with people many years older than myself, many of whom I remain close with to this day. Engaging in meaningful conversations with these varied groups of people, including my parents, allowed me to mature at a young age.

I stopped relying on my parents to take care of everything in my life, soon thinking more for myself. I felt a strong, independent vision for who I wanted to be. I envisioned using my skills and talents to benefit those around me. Many people around me were still on the journey of self-discovery, finding and developing their own identity. I have discovered inner strength and confidence through my role as caregiver. This experience has shown me the importance of my contribution towards the welfare of others.

This is why the word - "family" - means a lot to me. My upbringing ended up so different than I expected. My parents simultaneously exposed me to both life's hardships and rewards by encouraging my sense of responsibility, overall maturity, and how much I value my relationships with others. Not forgetting the hurdles such as my sister's epilepsy which in turn allowed me to forge a stronger bond with my family. I will always remember that chat at the dining room table, for it shaped me and developed me into the responsible and robust character I am today.

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Columbia and the University of Pennsylvania and 20 more!

by Jaime B


The Surgeon

The apron drooped to my knees. I was emblazoned with the 'Hi, My Name is Jamie' sticker, coupled with a scarlet employee-in-training hat. The 'Fresh not Frozen, Grilled not Fried' motto resonated in my mind. It was July. I had taken the plunge and secured my very first part time job. I was flipping burgers, and I was excited.

I was accustomed to academia, to the sports field, to the stage, but this was an entirely fresh paradigm. Anuj, the staff trainer and joyously friendly employee tasked with the rather unfortunate challenge of having to teach me hamburgerological cuisine greeted me with a firm handshake. This guy meant business.

The familiar fast-food funk wafted through the tiny store like cologne in an airport duty-free store - overpowering, faintly nauseous and all-encompassing. The filing cabinets in my mind usually reserved for physics formulas, economics jargon and debating cases were tipped out and crammed with permutations and combinations of burgers - Otopo, Chicken Wrappa, Bondi. Except ions to French conjugations were momentarily replaced with extra topping combos. The till became my new graphical calculator.

With surgeon-like precision Anuj modeled how to wrap a burger in four swift motions - place burger in the dead centre, pull wrap from left to right, then right to left, then roll the corners. He gestured towards his demonstration model and motioned for me to take to the stage. It was showtime! Unfortunately, my burger ended up looking like the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina. Anuj patted me on the back, said 'you'll learn fast' - and smirked.



Suddenly the barricades were overrun and an influx of sandal-wearing, sun-glass toting beach-goers charged into the store. The orders came flying faster than budget cuts at a Tea Party convention. I heard the petrifying three words 'chicken tenderloin combo'. This was it, the Everest of my culinary career. It involved delving into the boss's prized stock of 'succulent tenderloins' as he had described, 'the highest quality meat we sell, expensive to buy and delicate to cook, we can't afford any mistakes.' I was handling meaty gold. As the first tenderloin slapped onto the grill with a satisfying sizzle, I could imagine the boss's scorching eyes scrutinizing my every action from behind the prying lens of the staff security camera. Sun-glass toter number two, the tenderloin culprit, then muttered 'Excuse me! Sorry mate, my fault, I meant the chicken nuggets.'

Silently, I screamed. I grimaced, pirouetted and pleaded with the security camera. Anuj saw my face, contorted in anguish, and took to the rescue with business-like efficiency. He rolled his eyeballs. In one graceful movement he scooped the tenderloins and flicked them into the cooler with one hand, and in perfect synchrony, removed the emergency chicken nuggets with the other. His eyes glistened with intensity. With consummate mastery his arms flicked from grill to cooker to table to bread to wrap. In less than ninety seconds, the order was complete. The boss's eyeballs returned to their sockets. The day was saved. I worship the Anuj's of this world. Certain jobs may look simple, but that simplicity masks years of expertise. My skills in the rococo art of burger flipping paled into insignificance beside the master. I learnt more than burger flipping that day. I learnt humility, respect and the value of a good chicken tenderloin.

USC, NYU, UC Berkeley & more

by Shreya T.

From Disciple to Guru

"Lift that foot higher off the ground or you will keep falling out of your chakar!"


Namita's stern reminder rings sharply in my ear. It's around 5pm and I'm well into my sixth hour at my dance studio. It's been another long day where I leave feeling exhausted and sore but, every Sunday, it is my home.

During practices, everyone in the class is pushed beyond what seems possible. Talking, except to ask questions, is unacceptable. We forgo water and we run drills time after time until each step is mastered by every person in unison. Namita hurls strict corrections across the room as we move our way through eight count after eight count.

Yet, the minute rehearsal ends, the scene changes. Namita facilitates the conversation asking us about our school, our friends, our love lives, and our families. She nurses our wounds from both the physically demanding rehearsal, and the emotionally wounding drama in our personal lives. It is during these conversations that I have become incredibly close to the woman that is the heart and soul of our company, my teacher Namita.

Namita's roles as a strict disciplinarian and a loving caretaker are often split based on whether or not we are in the studio, and in my own teaching endeavors I have aimed to converge the two. Rather than separating results and empathy like Namita, I have become a coach and mentor that is "hard on performance and soft on people".

Modeling off my teacher's truly unique style, I've been able to find a happy medium between being empathetic and results-driven. As a coach for the Rocky Heights Middle School debate team, I expect engaged discussions, quick turnaround times for speeches, and enthusiastic acceptance of criticism after mock debates from my students because I



want them to succeed at tournaments. Yet, I know to be understanding when my expectations aren't fully met because of excessive schoolwork, poor mental health, or other outside factors. Being only a couple years past my own middle school years, I know the rigor and often excessive stress that plagues students, not to mention the petty drama and pressure to fit in. I quickly found that being both a reliable source of information and an approachable one resulted in the most productive team. This meant knowing my audience.

Meetings are a mix of days where we all pull out our laptops and research for hours, but also of days where kids come to me exhausted from the school day, and we eat candy, laugh, and make slower progress. I practice the same style in mentoring biotech research students so that they are better prepared to conduct and present their research. Even in drilling students on how to use the autoclave, being able to be simultaneously understanding of their perspectives has allowed me to more effectively pinpoint where students are struggling.

From days where I was demotivated by excessively strict dance rehearsals, I've learned the necessity of being able to read the room. I've begun to find methods to motivate my students in ways that are unique to me. In the advanced kids dance class I teach, I've attempted to draw attention and excitement by playing games like "freeze dance kathak," letting kids contribute to choreography, and even ending every class with our ceremonious team Tik Tok. My ladies' class and I run drills on new steps until they have been mastered, and immediately follow it up with conversations regarding how to bring joy into our dancing and let ourselves be truly vulnerable in a safe space.

Through watching Namita interact in different situations, I have learned much more than technique. Both discipline and empathy are incredibly important to me. By balancing both of Namita's personalities, I have become someone who is not only respected but has a relationship with the people I coach and mentor.