

ROAD TO *Resilience*

FACULTY MEMBER FINDS THAT JOY AND GRATITUDE MARK THE WAY

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The road to resilience is much like trying to find your inner superhero without a map — it is both challenging and rewarding. One of the challenges is that resilience is so hard to define. Oftentimes, people consider resilience a personality trait: either you are born with it or you aren't.

I spent most of my life viewing resilience through this lens until I faced some personal challenges that caused me to pause and reflect on the truth of this long-held belief. Could I learn to be resilient? Nearly four years later, after embarking on my own

personal growth journey following my husband's diagnoses of thyroid cancer, melanoma and Lewy Body Dementia, my answer to this question is a resounding, "Yes!"

My journey of resilience began early in my marriage and young adulthood with my husband Chris's diagnosis of cancer. In the wake of these diagnoses and treatments, he developed chronic illnesses that changed the landscape of our lives.

The Hortons' five children spend time together at the playground.



It's a tough balancing act with five on a seesaw.



Loving ourselves through the process of owning our story is the bravest thing we'll ever do.

— Dr. Brené Brown, PHD, LMSW

Life grew more challenging when we added full-time employment, graduate school (twice), and had five young children, one of whom has special needs. My strong faith and the support of our family and friends sustained us during this time of crisis and transition. However, I still searched for something more.

Choose Joy

In my search to find meaning in the face of these and other life-changing events, I made the decision to choose joy. Professor of social work and renowned scholar Dr. Brené Brown's Ted Talk "Vulnerability" was a pivotal point in this journey of self-discovery that led to a deeper exploration of my life and my purpose.

A quote attributed to Carl Jung states: "I am not what has happened to me. I am what I choose to become." That resonated with me. I resolved that what those around me needed, including family, friends, colleagues, students and patients, was a joyful version of me. More importantly, I needed that for myself. I needed to feel hopeful again.

With that one shift in my mindset, I began to seek other ways not only to help myself and my family overcome life's challenges, but to help others as well. This new road to resilience has placed me on a

path of growth and development that continues to inspire me both personally and professionally.

Developing Resilience

What I discovered is a need for personal connection and meaning to develop resilience. I look for opportunities to cultivate connection with those around me. I seek to make meaning from what otherwise would be hardship.

My son Gramm — the younger of my twin boys — was diagnosed with a bilateral sensorineural hearing loss at birth. As his mom, I was devastated and frightened for him. He had an eventful neonatal

intensive care unit stay and I fell into the trap of blaming myself for his fragile medical condition. The guilt and shame that I felt lingered long after he was discharged from the hospital. It did not help that without his hearing aids, he could not hear my voice and I am sure he could sense my stress. He would cry each time I held him and my heart would break again and again. I blamed myself.

A year or so after his birth, my family and I were sitting in a restaurant in Grenada, Mississippi having a rare visit with my children's great-grandfather when a staff member took our drink order. After bringing my sweet tea, this kind lady

Horton speaks to her Honors Class, UH 120, about the Privilege Walk, an exercise designed to teach individuals about the effects of social privilege.



knelt beside me with tears in her eyes and asked if she could talk to me about my baby, who was wearing hearing aids.

I instantly felt tears well in my eyes. I listened intently to her story, and I knew we were meant to meet. Her toddler daughter had been given a referral to a specialist due to suspected hearing loss and her mom was too fearful to call and schedule the appointment. We chatted briefly and this sweet mom walked away with a smile and the intention of scheduling this dreaded appointment.

Although I might have helped this woman and her child by sharing my story with her, it was also my first step toward forgiving myself, allowing me to love my child without the feelings of overwhelming guilt. In that moment I realized I would never blame this mom for her child's hearing loss, so why should I blame myself? Looking back I see this experience as the beginning of my long road to resilience.

Looking Forward

Reflecting on the past 11 years, there are many memories and moments that I could share that speak to my

resilience experience. These make up the fabric of who I am today and are a part of my story. I am often asked how I manage to juggle work, a busy home life and full-time graduate school. It is difficult to explain to someone who

doesn't know my story how my family and I make our life work so well. My explanation for this lies in my deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities that I have been afforded.

I am so grateful that I have a career that challenges me and that I find to be inherently rewarding. It is a privilege to care for our patients and to educate our future nurses. I am fortunate to be working toward a doctoral degree that helps me grow professionally and that will later open doors for me. I am blessed to be raising five precious children who are the highlights of my life. When I work from a place of gratitude, managing a growing to-do list while balancing work and family becomes much easier.

My mindset has changed from "I have to" to "I get to." I get to coach baseball for my boys; I get to drive my girls to ballet; I get to write a 20-page paper on my research area; and I get to help students understand the conceptual foundations of nursing.

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There is this notion that work-life balance exists and can be achieved through some magic formula, but I don't subscribe to that point of view. I believe life is much too complex for true balance to be reached in all areas of our lives at all times. Some days work requires more of my attention (i.e., when I am preparing for a new semester) and other days my family needs my focus (i.e., when my girls are getting ready for their annual ballet recital). The important lesson for me in working toward some semblance of a work-life balance is the idea that I

want to live an intentional life based on my priorities.

While I do not think that it is realistic for the scales to always be perfectly balanced between work and life, I do think we can live in harmony knowing that there will always be give and take between the two. Every day is not full of joy and many days are still not without hardship, but I have found that there is always something to be thankful for, and I try to live in that place of gratitude.

Chris helping the boys find their balance.

