



Janelle Duray

Class of 2003

I remember the summer before kindergarten. I was so excited for school I couldn't stand it. My older sister helped me create a calendar to make my countdown seem faster – a page for each day. We always went to Rollag each summer for the Western Minnesota Steam Threshers Reunion and I was excited to think that my calendar would be down to only one day when we returned, and the next morning I would finally start school at Marshall County Central.

I loved school because although I didn't realize it when I was 5, it was my ticket to the world. Don't get me wrong. I loved growing up where I did. The farm, the outdoors, the tranquility, the nature, the seasons. The Snake River providing a kid's biological dream world of tadpoles and crawfish; the hunt to discover the exact location where mama kitty hid her litter of kittens each summer; a yard filled with oak trees that would never disappoint in producing a huge jumping pile; the snowy Christmases when we would drive to neighbors near and far to see which house had the best lights. The memories are many and I cherish them.



But, I remember feeling like a fish out of water at times. When I was 18, I was nominated by one of our MCC teachers (still not sure who it was) to attend the National Youth Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. I met students from across the country, and made friends with two girls in particular – one from Massachusetts and one from Florida. Both were from very well off families. One evening, we had a dinner at the Swedish Embassy where the Secretary of Veteran Affairs spoke. I looked at my place setting and wondered which fork I should use. I was shocked when the wait staff put my napkin on my lap for me and wondered why they put the dressing on my salad when I was capable myself. My new Florida friend asked me why I used the side of my fork to cut my meat instead of using a fork and knife. I think her exact words were “Who uses a fork like that?!” (To which I immediately retorted, “Janelle does.”)

I didn't feel bad for myself, but I wondered why hadn't I already been exposed to this world back home? Why was I the strange one when I found more utility in a fork than its intended purpose. Wasn't that a good thing?

Our magical, outdoor rural nook in Northwest Minnesota was just that – a small nook in a big broad world. I craved to learn about that world. For me, education was the key to access it. I wanted to meet people who thought, looked and spoke differently than me. Exposed me to new ways of thinking that I might disagree with, but maybe I'd also realize that when others thought differently than me, it didn't make either of us wrong.

Then, there was college. I went to the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities after telling my parents it was the *closest* school I would attend. I needed to experience the world outside of our little nook. My freshman year I made friends with one of my best friends to this day, Wumi. Wumi and our group of girlfriends my freshman year opened my eyes to new ways of thinking. Wumi's parents were immigrants from Nigeria. Now, there isn't much diversity in the Red River Valley so meeting Wumi and her family was new for me. I learned that it was the educational opportunities in America that brought Wumi's parents from their small village in Nigeria to Minnesota. Everyone has a different story.

Then, there was Texas – a short 9 month stint in a college exchange program. I learned a few things in Texas: hot sauce is better than ketchup, everything truly is bigger in Texas (the sky was so big and blue and beautiful), and I am a Yankee and don't you forget about it. Don't get me wrong, I met a lot of great people in Texas, but my biggest take away was an intense culture of state pride. “Don't Mess with Texas” ya'll. When people asked where I was from, I heard more than once “Minnesota? Wow, I'm bet you're glad you left.” Being

so eager to experience other people and places, I wasn't one to think a single place being better than others. So, I moved back to Minnesota to finish my degree.

And ten years ago there was Washington, D.C., the most enlightening experience of them all. You see, I always thought that in some way I had broken through barriers as a kid and student. I had been handed an upbringing that was a bit unfair being from a rural community where there wasn't a lot of opportunity to visit museums, meet people from other countries, be exposed to cutting edge technologies or be the first place where an author would launch their book tour. But in moving to Washington, D.C., I learned just how privileged I was.

I work in education each and every day as the Senior Vice President of Jobs for America's Graduates, or JAG. JAG is a 39 year old national nonprofit that works with students who experience an incredible amount of barriers and/or trauma each day. Often times, our students are on the verge of dropping out of high school. We work with twelve of the nation's Governors (bipartisan – I might add!) to support 72,000 students from the most rural Native American reservations in Montana to the inner cities of Los Angeles and Detroit. The Governors on our Board highlight the incredibly desolate poverty in the Mississippi Delta in our Southern states and the plagues of violence that have been creeping into our inner cities and families feel there is no way out.

Our students might not know where the next meal is coming from. They might be leaving school to work so they can help make ends meet. They might fear for their lives as they walk to school, hoping a stray bullet doesn't catch them because they have a big test that day. They might be parenting, in an abusive household, been told they are worth nothing, or looking over their younger siblings because their parents have fallen victim to the opioid epidemic. A combination of barriers that *may be* created by system larger than all of us have left our kids behind. And it's easy to blame their parents, but weren't they also just kids not too long ago, navigating the same challenges and systemic barriers listed above?

I had two parents who promoted my success and encouraged me to follow my dreams. I had a community of leaders that made excellent use of their resources to provide a terrific educational system despite being in a very rural area that doesn't always have access to all resources. Our teachers truly cared and brought programming to MCC that was exceptional for the size of our student body. I still brag about MCC going to state in the Internet Bowl (was that what it was called?) when "surfing the web" still took a dial-up and webpages took minutes to load. We had AP courses, and Mrs. Dahl would bring literature discussion to life in a way that stretched our brains. We had a bio teacher in Mr. Peterson who would get so excited about bringing the class to Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge to explore the tiny wonders of the world that are the building blocks of life.

So this article went a bit longer than I was intending, but I don't think of my school and think of amazing laughs and lighthearted fun, although there was plenty of that. I think of it through the lens of working with JAG students. I was provided a runway of opportunity. Now, we must work to bring that runway to those that aren't as fortunate.

MCC provided me with an education that went above and beyond for a rural community, and it took me moving to the Twin Cities, the Dallas-Ft. Worth metro and now Washington, D.C., to truly recognize how great of an education I received.



Janelle with Many Nicolls of JAG-Alabama,

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards, and Ken Smith, President of JAG