To Teach is to Learn

A week ago I called my mother up around 6pm to check in and see how she was doing. I was not surprised to hear she was still at work, and planned to be for a few more hours. My mother, a high school math teacher, was technically being paid to be at school from 7:20am-2:00pm. On this particular day, my mother was at school from 6:30am-8:30pm, more than double the time she was compensated for. For me, this fact is not shocking. I know firsthand how dedicated she is to her work, as she was my precalculus teacher in high school. Teaching high school is not something you do for seven hours a day and go home; it is a whole world more. I have consistently observed how my mother and other influential teachers in my life make choices every day to be good teachers. These influences, plus my desire to emulate my mentors have lead me to choose to become a teacher. I want to teach, because of what I've learned and because I want to continue to learn.

Teachers make hard choices every day about family and work. Twenty five years ago, my mother made the difficult decision to leave the job, the students, and the school she loved to raise her young family. My father, who taught middle and high school for 35 years, had to decide to stop coaching volleyball, as he wanted to be able to spend more time with his family.

I remember that every year as a kid, my mom would use her one personal day to take my brother or me on a field trip. In the 4th grade, the day my mother was supposed to take me to Mystic Village was the same day her beloved seniors were taking a final exam. Instead of choosing between the two, she took the day off, went to school anyway to proctor the exam, and then took me to Mystic. Balancing life and family is challenging, but definitely seems manageable to me after living through my mom's example.

Being dedicated to teaching critical, but that alone doesn't make you a great teacher. A teacher needs to be passionate about what they do. I've been Course Assisting Calculus classes for four semesters now, and I still get excited for every problem session I run, every problem set I grade and every question I answer. When I see the light bulb go off in a student's mind after grappling with a difficult concept, I feel a sense of pride and fulfillment. Passion and dedication are what keep you motivated to stay late and come in early.

My love of math and science was clear early on in my life. My passion to teach was first tested at age 12 when my math teacher left the substitute a note to "have Michaela go over the homework, and she can teach factoring." Many people probably would have been concerned that their peers would resent them for taking over the class. I was surprisingly fortunate to earn the respect of my peers early on, as they knew I was doing what I loved. My senior year of high school, my former AP Chemistry teacher asked me to co-teach her new group of AP Chem students. She let me lecture on certain topics, run problem sessions, write exams and facilitate all the lab assignments.

Not many high school students have the opportunity to teach their peers, but I was so fortunate to have this opportunity before becoming a Course Assistant. Teaching my peers is quite possibly the hardest thing I have ever done. I've learned how to balance friendships with professionalism. I was teaching my closest friends, and some would ask me for answers and hints. As their peer, you know what they are going through, and you want to make their lives easier – but you know giving answers only hurts them in the long run.

Teaching peers may be challenging, but it is unbelievably rewarding. I am blessed to have over 100 former students on campus who I've loved working with. I've made the decision to prioritize their learning equally with my own, just as my parents balanced their teaching with their family life. The most fulfilling aspect of teaching is knowing that I've helped students improve. I've also learned about how students think and interact. I've learned more through teaching math than I ever have from studying it.

So if you are called to teach, teach to share your knowledge. Teach to change lives, but most importantly, teach to learn. Until you teach, you'll never know what you don't know.