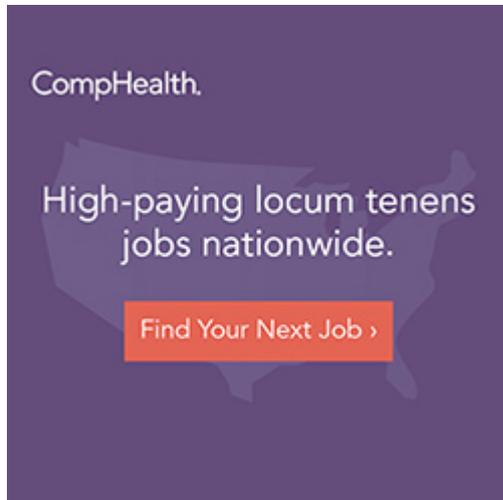


# Moving Forward – 2016 WCI Scholarship 2nd Place



*[Editor's Note: This is our 2nd place essay. The writer has requested anonymity, which we usually do not grant for scholarship essays. We decided to make an exception in this case due to the sensitive information shared in this essay and the potential career ramifications it could have to publish it openly. I'm sure you will understand and probably agree with our decision after reading it. Readers, sponsors, and judges can be assured that we have not only verified full-time attendance and good academic standing, but also checked references to ensure the information shared in the story is actually true. At any rate, this powerful essay about powerlessness touched both WCI staff and our judges. I'm sure you will enjoy it as well. 2nd place is good for 30% of the scholarship money, or about \$7,600. Hopefully this student's loan burden ends up being a little lower than it otherwise would.]*

It was an atypically humid day in summer 2007 when I, then just a bullish 21 year old, was running fashionably late to an unfamiliar meeting. Shocked by what greeted me upon entering, (a room full of grown adults seated in a circle chanting about God,) I politely declined to join hands, and opted to sit down

quietly in the back. Trying not to doze off on that broiling afternoon, I heard words like “unmanageable” and “powerless.” Not knowing the point of these ramblings, I waited out the clock and dashed away at the meeting’s end lest I become hypnotized into joining this apparent cult. And thus passed my very first meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). It took five more years of suffering an “unmanageable” life before I finally understood what it meant to be “powerless” and found my way back to the halls of AA.



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Peculiarly, I had actually been obliviously powerless for most of my life. As a kid living in the home of parents who detested each other but dutifully fulfilled the terms of their arranged marriage, I felt impotent, unable to halt the violence. Unsuccessfully trying to stop it only landed me bruises. I was never able to prevent the police from drawing attention to our home or stop those flashing red and blue lights in our driveway that I still remember all too well. To the panic attacks and PTSD that began to take hold of me in second grade I was defenseless. With a disabled sister who did not understand to keep her hands away from a hot stove, or how to control her bowel movements, or how to walk up the stairs given her full body hemihypertrophy, I felt ineffective when she burned her hand, or defecated in public, or fell and hurt herself. Nonetheless, as her caregiver, I did all I could: clean her up, bandage her hand, and give her love.

However the most personal feeling of powerlessness came when medicine first interested me. Seeing what miracles each successive surgery did for my sister's quality of life, I truly wanted to be a physician to "fix" people like mechanics fix cars. But after being repeatedly told by my parents that I had to become a doctor, I felt robbed of the power of self-determination. To become a physician would be acquiescing to their will and thus no choice at all. I thought I had finally found power on my 16th birthday when I felt what that divine nectar of the gods, alcohol, did to me. I could laugh for the first time in my life, numb the guilt, let my parents take care of my sister, and just leave it all behind.



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What I did not grasp on that muggy afternoon or in the five years following is the true nature of powerlessness, and that salvation from it requires submission to it. Without a job, friends, or a home at age 26, ten years after my first drink and a pack per day tobacco habit, I finally realized that what those amber bottles contained was actually another form, a deeper form, of powerlessness. But by submitting to my powerlessness over my life circumstances, I was finally able to take back control of my life.

It was here where I chose to move forward by

counterintuitively traveling backwards through the wreckage of my past. Starting with my alcoholism, I worked the AA program daily, serve those still suffering, and sponsor men myself. Wading through a past full of academic failures, I not only maintained a strong GPA but also served as a teaching assistant helping students gain knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, a real interest in science. Bridging the isolation of my youth, I became an ER scribe, a free clinic scribe, and a volunteer nurse meeting hundreds of diverse patients, learning that one cannot fix all ailments but can educate and thus empower people to heal themselves. Fording the anger of my childhood, I volunteer at a domestic violence agency, providing the rare male voice to help women, the disabled, and the elderly find the strength to leave their abusers. Traversing onward through the sadness of my sister's fate and becoming an HHS researcher, I am co-founder of a medical genetics research foundation aimed at elucidating and curing genetic disease. Finally, moving forward through resenting my parents, I chose for myself at age 26, freshly sober and working as a cashier at Home Depot with a 1.7 science GPA, to pursue the instinct of that little boy to become a physician.



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Whether it is gaining admission to medical school, finishing

medical school, becoming an attending physician – or heck, climbing Mount Everest or something else completely unrelated to medicine – it is our struggles that give us strength. All my greatest hobbies and strengths have come from my battles – helping others with addiction and emotional problems accept themselves, weight lifting and sports, cooking, learning how to be okay with not being the best academically, learning how to love myself and others.

In the end, I am grateful for my struggles. Through my work before medical school, and now even more so through various clinical experiences, I seem to have stumbled onto the eternal truth: real happiness only comes from serving others. And not just from serving others, either, but by helping others help themselves.

Now, as a 30 year-old man finishing his first year of medical school with a class of lovely if not much younger aspiring physicians, I cannot help but feel a sense of lightness. For so long it seems I have been working against my strife – to overcome it, to beat it by sheer force of will. Grades; propensity to indulge in substances from alcohol to food; family; money; women; the desire to be smart, good, and well-liked. But in reality, the only way to move forward through struggles isn't through force, it is to stop fighting. And as I realized five years ago, and almost 15 years after my first drink of alcohol, the way through the conflicts of life is to succumb to them, to stop fighting, and to simply accept life on life's terms.



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In the journey of our lives, we all eventually come to a crossroads. When I stood at the crossroads five years ago, I moved forward by navigating the wreckage of my past and, much to my chagrin, ending up where I began. Strangely enough, where I began, as that bleeding heart little boy who cried so much seeing his big sister walk without help for the first time in her life and so badly wanted to help people like her get better, is exactly where I need to be.

What do you think? How do our struggles define us? Did your parents want you to be a doctor? How much pressure did they apply? Do people who grew up with hardship make for more dedicated, compassionate doctors? If you grew up with hardship, how did you overcome it? If you did not, how did you gain the compassion and drive necessary to be a good doc? Have you or a physician you know struggled with substance abuse? How did it affect your schooling and career? Comment below!