

What's really important in life? When I was younger I would have answered that question with things like making the most with the time we have, meeting our full potential, professional success, meaningful contribution, and challenging and rewarding work. Don't get me wrong, all of these things are very important. But maybe not the most important.

Back a few years ago (ok more than a few) when I turned 30, I decided that I was not meeting my full potential, at least not professionally. I had married a beautiful young woman and was happy. But after many years as a college instructor I felt that I could accomplish more professionally. So it was then that I laid out a plan to achieve a position in administration in higher education where I could have a bigger impact on students.

My plan began in earnest when I enrolled in a doctoral program. Over the next three years, with the help of my wife and a lot of borrowed dollars, I worked hard and earned that degree. It was, to date, the hardest thing I had ever done. There is a good reason that the doctoral graduation rate is only about 56%. I could not imagine anything harder than writing that dissertation. It consumed me for a year of the three year program. But I finished the book and the degree. A few days later our first child, Abrielle, was born. You can imagine it was kind of a big week for me!

I thought I had really accomplished something important in the doctorate, for a few days anyway until I held our baby for the first time. That was quite a lesson for me. And it foreshadowed lessons to come.

With degree in hand I got my first higher education administration job in Michigan about a year later. I uprooted the family and we headed north. At the time, Jen and I lived only about 90 minutes or so from both sets of grandparents. You can imagine how happy they were when I took the new grandbaby about 1,000 miles away to follow my professional search for a meaningful life. Yeah. I was not loved for that one.

But after a few years I landed in Chanute, just a few miles from my wife's family in Fredonia and back to 90 minutes away from mine in Oklahoma. I was on the family Christmas card list again! And I returned to the area a Vice President. Yes sir! On my way to fulfilling what is important in life – professional success and making a difference! And it was a college that was in some trouble where I really could make a difference.

Things went along swimmingly. The college was doing great. Well, on the road to recovery anyway. Jen found a great job with USD 413 and finished her own advanced degree in counseling. All was going according to plan. That is until 2007, when I learned the hard way what is truly important in life.

Abrielle was seven years old. She started complaining of a headache that would come and go. Nothing too serious we thought, but after about a week or so we got worried enough to take her to the doctor. It did not take long to find the issue, thanks to Greta McFarland and the wonderful equipment at the hospital. It was a golf ball sized tumor in her little seven-year-old brain. A doctor at the Kansas City hospital told me she had about a 33% chance to live five years.

It was in that hospital while they were going over everything that could go wrong during a brain surgery of this magnitude, and trust me, the list is long and terrifying, that I learned what was important in life. I would give up my degrees and my job - my very life - for my baby to be ok. We don't get to make that choice but I would have made it in an instant. And that is when I did the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life - kiss my daughter goodbye as she they took her away for surgery. Compared to that, a dissertation was easy.

Abrielle survived that surgery and two more just like it. She has grown into a beautiful young woman with no lingering adverse effects from the tumor. Every year or so we have to go back for another MRI (she's had about 20 or so) and each time as Jen and I wait for the results I am reminded of what really matters in life.

As if she needed to remind me again, the month I was promoted to be President of Neosho County Community College Abrielle developed a tumor in another part of her body. That one too was removed and all turned out well. I worked on my first President's contract from her hospital room. That keeps one's professional accomplishments in perspective, doesn't it?

I have always considered my fellow employees at NCCC a family. We spend about as much awake time with our coworkers as we do our actual family and many of us have grown close. We love to celebrate weddings and births among the staff. When one of us hurts, the others at the college help as many helped us through Abrielle's issues. And it seems every few years we lose members of that family to tragic circumstances. Unfortunately, this year has been no exception.

Such loss reminds me that a college, or any business really, is not brick and mortar, papers and reports. A college is made of people - our work families, if you will. It is family and friends that matter most in life especially when compared to professional accomplishments.

Just something that I have learned and I wish to pass on to our students. Yes, get your degree! Yes, seek work where you feel fulfilled, where you can make a difference in lives, as I and the people I work with have done. Just don't forget what's really important along the way.