

It's Graduation! It is a time of awesome celebration of a job well done. This is my 27th graduation as an education professional, my 16th at Neosho County Community College. I have been through many of these ceremonies as a spectator and participant and they always mean a lot to me. But, I have to say, this one is special. And it helped to remind me of something very important, something that as an educator I should never forget.

For many years I have sympathized with all of those parents in the commencement audience watching their child cross the stage. Now, I can empathize with them, as I have felt those feelings first hand. Friday night my oldest child, Abrielle, completed her Associates of Arts and Science at NCCC!

I knew parents felt a deep sense of pride when the student turns that tassel from one side to the other, but I can see now it is so much more than that. There is a sense of relief, too, that she made it. There were so many chances for both critical and small mistakes that could have kept her from graduating that she didn't make.

I watched as she easily succeeded in some classes while struggling mightily in others. She wanted and needed to do well in classes. Abrielle wants to go to graduate school someday and that requires a fairly high GPA to be admitted. So the old adage, "Cs get degrees" may be true for an associates or bachelor's degree, but they won't get you into many masters programs. Let's be honest, GPA isn't everything. A recent Boston University study showed that the average GPA of millionaires was 2.9. But a 2.9 won't get you into grad school. So GPA does matter in many situations.

We quickly determined that she does not do as well in an online class as she does in face-to-face classes. Some students really thrive in online classes and the flexibility they provide. Others, like Abrielle, don't. They like the structure and the more-direct connection a face-to-face class provides. So, lesson learned. When she transfers to Friends University in the fall, she is not taking an online class.

Abrielle is my miracle child. Her journey to college and eventual graduation was a difficult one. Not in coursework or classes per se, not more than many students have, but a challenging journey nonetheless.

When she was seven years old, I really thought we were going to lose her. She had been complaining of a headache from time to time over a two-week period. When we took her to the doctor and after all the tests, we got the shock of our lives. Abrielle had a golf ball-sized tumor in her little seven-year-old head. At the hospital where they did the operation she was given a 33% chance to live five years.

She would go on to have three brain surgeries when she was seven and again when she was twelve to remove the tumor and to remove it again when it re-grew.

When she was ten she was diagnosed with another tumor, this one quart-sized in her abdomen. If it were cancer it would have already spread throughout her body. It was not. She had another surgery to remove that tumor.

It's now been over six years from her last medical scare. We go back to the doctor on a regular basis for brain MRIs to see if the tumor has returned. After her 15th time, I have lost track of how many MRIs she has had. So far all of the reports have come back good.

And her tumor in her abdomen turned out to be low-grade, non-cancerous as well. It was called a "mature teratoma" where the body gets confused and grows the wrong thing. In the case of Abrielle, it grew sweat glands and a tiny human brain, no kidding! The doctor was able to remove it without any

real lasting damage. Now when she does something without fully thinking it through, as teenagers often do, I ask her, “Which brain did the doctor take out?”

If you are wondering why I am bald, you now know. This beautiful girl put my wife Jennifer and me through the mill. Take all of the problems of your life, every disappointment you have ever had and put them up against the health of your children and see how they come out. We have a morose saying in our house when something bad happens – “That’s bad, but it is not, ‘your child has a brain tumor’ bad.” It really keeps those disappointments in context.

Through it all, Abrielle was brave and strong. Sure she had her moments of fear, anger, and frustration, but she powered through all of that. And she didn’t let her medical issues define her either. In fact, she’s using them to make the world a better place.

While she was going through all of the medical nightmares she met a series of special people at the hospitals. They are known as Child Life Specialists. They help kids like young Abrielle get through this terrifying experience by normalizing the environment of the pediatric ward and help them come to grips with their experience. They made such an impression on my girl that she has decided that is what she wants to do as a profession. She wants to be the person that helps children through some of the scariest moments of their lives, just like someone helped her. For her strength, bravery, and compassion, you can see why she’s my hero.

Now you know why this graduation means so much to me, to see her, not only grow into a wonderful woman, but also complete an important step on her path to help others.

And it is a great reminder to me as an educator that every student’s journey is different. Every student is wearing the same robe and hat at graduation, but who they are under that hat is vastly different. Some struggled to graduate in obvious ways, others not as much. Perhaps they have overcome physical or mental issues. Perhaps they have had wonderful supportive family or one that got in the way, or none at all. Perhaps they had money issues or emotional struggles along the way. Maybe classes were a breeze, or maybe they worked harder than they ever had in their lives.

One may never truly know what someone has gone through, or what they will be going through. Every one of the 574 graduates this year that crosses the stage at our commencement can probably tell a similar story of overcoming tremendous obstacles to get the degree or certificate. All of these graduates deserve our admiration for what they have accomplished.

Congratulations to the class of 2019! And to Abrielle, I’m a so very proud of you and I love you.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else please email me at binbody@neosho.edu.