

How My Community College Has Changed My Life

By Woodfin Millay Billingsly

When a severe chronic pain syndrome began plaguing me in seventh grade, limiting my mobility and causing my mental health to decline rapidly, I felt like my life was over. I couldn't function, my grades started dropping, and I got increasingly depressed. Brain fog hit me and hit me hard, and I found that a significant number of doctors do not believe disabled teenagers. Every doctor would direct me to another doctor, who would direct me to someone else. I was miserable. I entered my freshman year of high school and reached a point of such high distress that my mother withdrew me from school. I slept and slept, doing nothing but listening to audio dramas and painting during my waking hours. After a year and a half, I got on medications that gave me control over my health again.

Slowly, in the wake of 2020, I entered 2021 with some modicum of desire. I thought about how I wanted to do something again. I was tired of being isolated and dim and wanted to turn on that curious light in my brain. At the end of the year, I started taking GED® classes through the Adult Education Program at Kish. It was enlightening. As someone who hadn't thought I would make it to 18 years old, to be in a space with other adults who'd been through so much was amazing. The instructor was a fountain of support and grace in a place made for growing and learning. After completing my GED® with flying colors, I quietly enrolled at Kish to earn an Associate in Arts degree.

I felt alive again. The vast majority of professors at Kish are kind, compassionate people who want to help students be the best they can be. I decided to register for an Environmental Biology course one spring and fell in love with the world while taking it. I attended a Sustainable

Prairie Management course the next semester and realized that my heart has always been drawn to the environment — bugs, plants, water, earth, animals. I realized I needed to change course. I never would have known where I actually wanted to go without those two classes and those two professors.

I have flourished, and at 19 years old, a professor recommended I apply for a student worker position. I found myself as an Academic Success and Technology Assistance Peer Tutor in Kish's Tutoring Center. Work suddenly went from this draining obligation to something fun and engaging that helped the people around me.

Through Kish, I learned how to advocate for myself and my disabilities, what interests me in the world, and how to love life again. I've met many people who have become friends and a part of my community, which I never would have been able to have without attending Kishwaukee College.