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“I did my time at Papa John’s.” While this is not my six-word story,² these six words changed my life and shaped my approach to teaching.

It was February of 2014, and I had recently completed the 6.5-hour drive from Johnson City, Tennessee to Macon, Georgia to interview for a scholarship to law school. In my “real” life, I delivered pizzas every night of the week, as I had for the previous nine years since failing out after my first year of college.³ In this new fantasy world I was pretending to belong in, however, I was a finalist for a full-ride-plus-stipend scholarship to attend a well-respected law school. I was among twelve finalists who had gathered for a long weekend to engage in a very polite, very Deep South version of the Hunger Games.⁴ I had never felt so out of place or inadequate as I did walking into the lobby of the antebellum bed and breakfast⁵ that hosted the finalists.

I was immediately greeted by my eager co-finalists, one of whom was in the middle of asking another finalist, “and where do

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² See Twitter, “Six-word stories,” <https://twitter.com/hashtag/sixwordstories>.

³ To be clear, “delivered pizzas” connotes a more glamorous daily existence than the one I led. To avoid a self-indulgent recitation of the indignities of fast-ish food pizza chain employment, I merely submit my relief that my legal writing career has thus far involved many fewer layers of food-grade oil and filth than my previous professional endeavors.

⁴ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (2010).

⁵ That’s an essay for another day.

you go to church?”⁶ The other finalists were discussing their recent global travel and work experience in law offices, and I thought about the dirty Pizza Hut uniform draped across my back seat. I instantly knew I would never belong in this world of well-groomed, well-spoken professional students. Tempted though I was to execute a crisp about-face and run out into street, I stayed and joined my fellows for a welcome dinner, during which we were expected to somehow gracefully navigate a buffet while mingling with the Very Intimidating People who would soon decide our fates.

During dinner, we were treated to an inspiring sales pitch delivered by a previous scholarship winner who had been appointed to serve on the selection committee. With every minute that passed, I felt more and more like I had stumbled into the room by accident. Somewhere between my sixth misgendering and my third food stain, the tall, imposing man who spoke through dinner walked right up to me, stuck out his enormous hand, and said, “Hey, I’m Brian. I did my time at Papa John’s.” Almost immediately, I began to breathe easier. Brian had seen my application packet, matched it to my nametag, and sought me out because he knew that I was questioning whether I belonged in that room—whether I could ever overcome what I perceived as my inherent shortfalls. Brian spent hours that weekend talking to me about his failures and false starts. He shared his ups and his downs, which rang so familiar to my own journey, yet all I could see was a successful attorney.

For the first time, I began to see my “failures” as strengths. I began to understand that I was not behind my future classmates at all—in keys ways, I was ahead. Many of my classmates would enter law school having not yet experienced their first big screw up. They would be forced to endure the pain of their first experience underperforming their own and others’ expectations in the

⁶ In another example of the importance of humility, I will note that my initial negative impressions of this person—that they might harbor biases against LGBTQ people like me—were proven very wrong.

competitive environment of law school. Ultimately, I finished law school with a high GPA, but that average included more than a couple of very low grades. Because I had already experienced personal letdowns big and small, I was able to shake off those disappointments and approach my other classes with a fresh growth mindset.⁷

My “failures” left me with more than just grit, though; I had real-world, practical wisdom that informed my legal analysis and lawyering skills. I understood the logistical effects of labor laws on business decisions, because I’d managed so many crews and shifts. I knew the ways money and access rendered the real-world processes for criminal adjudication and civil litigation nearly unrecognizable from what was described in casebooks. When I clerked at a large firm over the summer, I researched new state wage garnishment procedures while my office mate worked on a collections matter. I was already quite familiar with garnishment from my work managing pizza restaurants, while my office mate did not yet grasp what a car payment was. I realized I had access to knowledge that some of my Ivy-educated colleagues lacked.

As a legal writing professor, I tell my students to bring all of their knowledge and experience to my classroom. I tell them to rely on their whole selves in their legal analysis, and I offer examples of the knowledge from my “past life” that directly improved my lawyering. I emphasize that, while legal writing conventions are unique and specific, what sets brilliant advocates apart is the outside-the-cubicle thinking that persuades judges, comforts clients, and adds value to businesses.

Inviting my students to bring their whole selves to class has generated phenomenal legal work and enriching class discussions. My students have shared knowledge from their experiences as farm workers, insurance adjusters, medical providers, foster children,

⁷ See Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006).

store clerks, and so many more. That knowledge exchange has been invaluable in shaping their understanding of everything from a totality-of-circumstances analysis to policymaking.

Finally, my “failures” give me the quality I depend on the most in my classroom: humility. I know that I am going to fail, and I know that I will learn from it. As a result, I can be honest with my students when I make mistakes, or when things I planned do not work out as intended. I can be unselfconsciously open with my students about my winding career path and about my past and present disappointments. As a result, my students are flexible and forgiving regarding class logistics, technology, and scheduling. Additionally, as my 1Ls begin interviewing—and ultimately losing out on some opportunities—for summer jobs, I can be candid with them about my own ups and downs on the academic job market. Knowing a professor they admire also experiences “failure” and rejection helps my students bounce back and keep working.

When I became a law teacher, I committed to embracing my students’ “failures” and to offering them the new perspective Brian had instilled in me. In practice, that approach kept me afloat and afforded me the type of perspective that made me a unique advocate. In the classroom, it multiplies opportunities to serve as a positive influence on my students’ professional development and makes me a better teacher.