Memoir: My 5 Lessons

By Carrie Nunez

I opened the door to rejoin my geography class for the third time, clutching a package of crackers in one hand and a bottle of ginger ale in the other. Class was over; all that remained in the large auditorium sized classroom was my professor. He was an obviously wealthy Upper Eastsider: stuffy, snooty and self righteous. As I collected my things, he suggested that I take some time off to get over whatever illness I was fighting. After all, I had been sick during every class that week and he wouldn’t count a missed class or two towards my attendance as long as I made up the work. I told him that it wasn’t an illness, I was pregnant. He paused, obviously taking in my age, my lack of wedding jewelry (or even wedding band tan line) and my non-designer clothes. He then said the words that changed my path: “Then maybe college isn’t what you really need right now.”

I had entered college the previous year, excited for all the possibilities. I had been an honors reject at my high school. I excelled in all areas except for math, which is what caused me to be kicked out of the honors house. I didn’t drink or do drugs. This greatly affected my social life, as my peers felt the only way to have fun was to be intoxicated in one form or another. I felt
that if you needed to be drunk or high to have fun with your friends, chances are you needed new friends. I thought college would be the place where I could finally be myself: smart, sober and accepted. Then I learned LESSON #1: College, at least at first, is just high school jr. So, instead of focusing on my work, I tried even harder to find a place to belong.

After a semester of searching (and not putting any effort into my classes), I found the people I felt I belonged with. They were slightly older than me and had attended the same high school. They didn’t drink or do drugs, instead choosing to stay up until 5 a.m. playing Dungeons and Dragons and discussing comic book artists and plots. I was the only girl in the group and received a lot of attention, which is like crack to a lonely, only child. I learned how to sneak into movies (my personal record was three in one day, which I wouldn’t recommend), that comic books were actually much more grown up and complicated than I ever thought, and the feeling of belonging, which I wouldn’t trade for anything.

After a few months of spending extra time with one particular guy, I realized he was keeping me around as an option, just in case he felt he was single for too long. Being that I refuse to be AN option, only THE option, I accepted an invitation from my now husband, Freddy, for a movie date. We spent the entire date in Manhattan, walking from Times Square to Herald Square to Union Square and talking non-stop. I found out that Freddy, who dated a friend of mine in high school, had been admiring me from afar for years and never had the courage to approach me. We began officially dating on July 2nd, 2004. I was 18, he was 22. On September 25th, 2004, just a few weeks after I started my second year of college (with only 13 credits, since I spent more time hanging out then I did in the classroom) and just three months after Freddy and I became an official couple, I took the test that truly changed my life forever.
It was the longest three minutes of my life. When I picked up the test, I was startled that it came up blank. Figuring the test was busted, I began to wrap it up to hide it in the trash. Then, two pink lines caught my eye. In my terror, I had looked at the backside of the test. The front side revealed my fate: undoubtedly pregnant. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. Well, I was actually thinking about that ONE time, that we didn’t use..you know? Because it was just one time, right? I had just learned LESSON #2: No matter who you are, all it takes is one time to completely change your life forever.

My geography professor began to lecture me on how my condition would, inevitably, just end up disrupting class. He couldn’t have me traipsing in and out of class whenever I felt the need to vomit, which, he pointed out was rather often. He told me I wouldn’t be able to keep up with the work and would be better off dropping out and getting a job so that I could support myself and my child (since, apparently, one look at the picture on my binder of my Hispanic boyfriend must have told him that I would no doubt be a single parent). That day, I walked straight to student services, picked up 5 drop forms and signed out of each and every one of my classes. I had completely missed LESSON #3: Some people live to watch others crash and burn, and it’s your job to avoid their poison at all cost.

I proceeded to spend the next three months huddled in my room, sick and scared. I had the support of Freddy and my parents, but everyone else had ditched me. I only belonged if I met their criteria: single, pretty and available. Freddy got a job as an after school aide and, in January, I crawled out from under my dark cloud to get a job at the bookstore across the street of my old college. While it was a dream job (50% off all books!), I underestimated how hard it would be to watch other students go about their lives uninhibited. I had always dreamed of going to college and becoming a teacher, so watching other people do what I wanted to (while I
shelved books and rang up their purchases) proved to be rather difficult. But the experience taught me **LESSON #4: You just have to get up and move on because the world isn’t going to wait for you.**

On May 5th, 2005, my son, Aiden Atreyu entered the world. I was 19 and clueless, but more confident from surviving all the changes. I spent the few years getting married, moving from my home to Central New York and giving birth to my second son, Jonathan Sawyer. At the age of 22, I returned to school. I tried Oswego first, only to be rejected because my geography professor had never accepted my drop letter and simply gave me an F (I still wonder if the grade was for the class or for his appraisal of my life.) I ended up at Jefferson Community College. Was it easy? No. But I graduated in 2010, at the age of 24, and learned **LESSON #5: Nothing is impossible; Improbable, unlikely but never impossible.**

The last time I was in Manhattan, I saw the man whose ignorance had set me on my current path, wandering around the neighborhood that surrounds my old college. I hung back a bit, pulling my son’s stroller to a slow crawl so that I wouldn’t have to cross paths with him. He walked right by me to the street corner. As he waited for the light to turn, my geography professor looked down at a pigeon, who was pecking at a discarded bagel crust, and proceeded to have a heated discussion with said pigeon over eating food off the floor. The pigeon and I watched him cross the street, obviously enraged that the pigeon did not take his advice, and we both learned the same lesson: sometimes you are right, sometimes you are wrong, and sometimes you are the guy on the street corner talking to pigeons.