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FOR THIS ISSUE, I'M GOING TO DO SOMETHING A LITTLE DIFFERENT. I'M HANDING OFF MY COLUMN TO KIERRA SMITH, RECIPIENT OF THE 2014 WOMEN'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE'S ADVANCING WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING SCHOLARSHIP. SHE HAS AN INSPIRING STORY TO TELL.

The Secret of My Success by Kierra Smith

You hear "CPA" and all sorts of images pop up in your mind. Pinstripe suits, perhaps, powerful leaders of the financial world, astute, educated professionals with a mind for regulations, legislation, high-level financial calculation and analysis. The image that doesn't readily pop up is a financially strapped student working multiple jobs, doing all they can to afford the tuition that will get them one step closer to their dream career.

For me, though, it was the latter that was closer to the truth.

I grew up in a single-income household. My mother, who is legally blind, raised me and my two older brothers. She worked for a local nonprofit in my hometown, supporting our entire family. She taught me that opportunities may not be handed to you and you may not like the cards that you are dealt, but you can rise above any obstacle and create your own opportunities. Throughout high school I worked harder than most because I knew I would have to rely on scholarships and grants to help pay my way through college. I didn't want to deny myself the opportunity of a great education solely because I couldn't afford it.

In college I double majored, competed in Varsity athletics, was involved in Greek Life, and completed work-study, community service and numerous internships. There were times when the burden of affording my education weighed heavily on me, making it difficult to focus on classes, or anything else for that matter.

When I committed to a major in accounting, things began to turn around. I became a student member of the Illinois CPA Society, and quickly found myself among a group of people who wanted to see me succeed. I was a recipient of the Advancing Women in Accounting Scholarship and I participated in the incredible Mary T. Washington Wylie Internship Preparation Program. This program offers diverse students practical training not typically found in the classroom. I received an internship offer after my participation in the program, and that internship turned into a full-time job. I can honestly say that by joining the Society, I have positively changed my life and my future forever.

The financial support was meaningful, as every little bit helps when you're paying your own way through college. I was able to afford my education without making sacrifices that would have hindered my experiential growth and personal development. However, in retrospect, what was even more valuable was the emotional support and confidence that I gained as a result. It was moving to know that other people believed in my abilities and were willing to invest in my future. One of the best gifts you can give another person is to believe in them. That single gift gives you the confidence and the stamina to keep on going, moving ever forward and ever upward. □



Kierra Smith and Sarah Herrmann

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