

UNLV Rebel Advocates Spring Luncheon - Thursday, May 12, 2022

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Looking at it from the outside, you might think that a Truman Scholar has lived a charmed life. Perhaps you picture someone who grew up in a privileged family with parents attending swanky fundraisers and serving on philanthropic boards and committees.

I'm here to tell you that I did not come from that background – that is not my story. For the next few minutes, let me share the route I took to become a Truman Scholar.

I represent the more than eight million children in the U.S. who live in a household where at least one parent suffers from drug or alcohol addiction. Like many children in this situation, I assumed the role of my mother's mother at an early age, and school became a secondary concern.

When you love someone with opioid addiction, each day is consumed with a persistent and relentless fear that they will overdose. And tragically, in 2016—my senior year of high school—my fear became a reality. The only consolation I could find in the situation was that my mother's suffering had finally come to an end.

At that juncture, when the circumstances of my upbringing could have swallowed me up, my own life's purpose came sharply into focus.

I decided to dedicate my energies to helping others by advocating for substance abuse treatment and prevention.

It's been my long-time dream to attend UNLV, so I rebuilt my life here in Las Vegas. I stayed true to my passion and became a certified mental health professional serving as a community advocate for those suffering from substance abuse.

As is typical for those in my situation, I barely graduated from high school. But with a newfound drive to achieve my goals, I earned my associate's degree from the College of Southern Nevada with honors. This paved the way for me to enter the school of social work at UNLV last year as a member of the Honors College.

In addition to my studies, I volunteer for many organizations, including CrossRoads Recovery and Vegas Stronger. Through connections with community-based organizations, I have been actively involved with the Nevada Senate, assisting in passing Assembly Bill 374 and Senate Bill 390 in 2021, both related to substance abuse.

I was named Miss Nevada Volunteer this year to recognize my advocacy and volunteer work. Last week, I was the first Nevadan to compete at the national Miss Volunteer America Pageant. **[Insert a sentence about how that went?]**

Sometimes it's challenging to juggle the pageants on top of my schoolwork and volunteer commitments. But I find it's worth the stretch to have a larger platform, and I use my crown to inspire others and share information about those suffering from substance abuse.

As a first-generation college student, I knew nothing about national awards like Truman—something like that was never on my radar. But soon after applying to the Honors College's new Service-Learning Honors Program, I received an unexpected phone call from the dean.

Dean Hanson said he read my application and hoped I would come in to discuss the Truman Scholarship. I was excited but couldn't help but feel intimidated during our first meeting. I'm not going to lie, the application process is no walk in the park, but with the help of Dean Hanson and others in the Honors College, I made it through the process to become one of the 58 recipients selected out of a pool of over 700 candidates.

The resources awarded to me through the Truman Scholarship will allow me to pursue a Juris Doctorate with a joint master's in social work or public policy. My ultimate goal is to become an attorney and advocate for social justice, legislative change, and public interest. And I hope to run for public office one day.

Although I'm only 23, I'd like to share some lessons I've learned along my journey.

One is that this UNLV community is a rare find. I came to the university to get an education, but I didn't expect to find the support and encouragement I've had here. On some level, the honor of winning the Truman Scholarship belongs just as much to UNLV as it does to me.

And two, you are never too young or too old to get involved with causes important to you. A few years ago, I never dreamed that someone my age could make an impact on state bills—but I did. And now, thanks to that success, I am inspired every day to reach further and dream bigger.

Have you seen the banners across the UNLV campus that read, "Rebels Make It Happen?" Well, I am here to tell you, "YES! YES, WE DO!"