

My name is Nicole Banks and I am from McDowell County, WV. I am a leader with the Our Children Our Future Campaign and I am a student at Concord University. I have wanted to be a therapist ever since I was a little girl. I knew back then I loved helping people and that's what I wanted to do with my life. Growing up, I always had friends coming to me and asking for advice with their problems because they trusted me not to tell anyone their secrets.

My parents have pushed me to go to college, especially my dad. He was very active in my life especially when it came to school and church. He was a deacon and made sure we went to church every Sunday. He set study times for me and helped me with homework when I needed it. He volunteered his time to help out around school when I was in elementary school and middle school. He was a hardworking man too. He worked in the coal mines before I was born. Later, the only job he could get was at Walmart. He kept working even after he got sick; the doctors said he had only 10 percent of his heart working.

I loved my dad and appreciated that he helped me succeed in school. Whenever I had issues in my classes, my dad would be sure to be at the school to discuss solutions with the teachers. He wished he had the chance to go to college; so he pushed me to make good grades in school so I can go to college and even got me in programs like Head Start, Upward Bound and HSTA to help me get a good start with college. My parents told me that they knew that I would be the one to go and finish school. That's what made me try so hard. I wanted to make them and myself very proud.

When I turned sixteen years old, my dad got sicker. I helped my mom take care him. He couldn't do anything. He couldn't move one side of his body at all and we had to get Hospice to help us take care of him; he had no insurance through his work. I would go to school during the day and when I would go home I would clean, cook, go grocery shopping, and get the mail. Additionally, my mom taught me how to write out checks to pay the bills. I helped take care of my dad and spent time with him. My mom has arthritis in both her knees and it's hard for her to get around so I wanted to help with everything as much as I could.

For some students, going to college is the natural thing. They know where to get help with applications and scholarships. They have spent time on college campuses. Everyone they know is going to college or has a college degree. In high school, they can focus on school without having to worry about crisis at home or getting a job to help their families. That's not me. I felt like I had to grow up faster than the other kids but I wanted to do whatever I could to help my family. After going back and forth to the hospital, my dad died three months before my high school graduation and three days before my 18th birthday. I still went to school and graduated. It was hard losing my dad but I knew I had to finish high school. After graduation, I got a job at the movie theater in Welch, WV. I had to choose between work and doing things that would help me get to college; I chose work because I wanted to help my mom out as much as I could.

Concord University is only ^{1 County}~~2 counties~~ away from McDowell, but when I decided to take classes there, I had no idea how to get there --so my mom bought me a GPS. After I got in, I lived on campus and got a job in the book store. I went home every weekend to be around my mom and see my family and

friends.

She said she does not want to hold me back and that she is very proud of me. Some people think I should have stayed home and helped take care of my mom though. Maybe they're right. When I first started school, I didn't know anything. I was in a foreign land. I had to learn from trial and error. It was hard.

After awhile, I finally learned my way around. But I understand why so many students give up on college. I love my sociology classes and learned that I can become a therapist by earning a Master of Social Work degree, which I plan on doing at West Virginia University. I dream of having my own office after I get my master's degree so I can provide services to low income families; they truly need the help the most. If the Medicaid Reimbursement Mental Health initiative was passed in WV, I would be able to live and work in my hometown and community that I love and want to be a part of for the rest of my life while helping the people in my area lead healthier and better lives. ~~Sadly, many mental health professionals are leaving our state due to low paying jobs.~~

I love West Virginia and want everyone in our state to be healthy. Mental health is one issue that's important to me, ^{and} we also have an obesity crisis. I've seen chronic disease take away my neighbors and family members. It is tragic that in communities like mine, it costs more money to buy healthy foods than it does to buy unhealthy foods. Some people have to walk 5 miles, or more, to get fresh fruits and vegetables. It wasn't always that way... but if we don't make a change, this problem is going to bankrupt our state. We shouldn't have to spend billions of dollars on things that are preventable such as chronic diseases like diabetes and high blood pressure, when that money can be used towards helping people like me, get an education.

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It is not enough for me to just get my education and become a social worker. I know I also have to get involved in my community. That's why I'm here this week. I am learning how to get involved with policy making and will go to my community and share this information with everyone. I'm going to help lead a candidate forum in my community this fall. After that, I am going to be working with Our Vote, Our Future to help get everyone I know registered to vote so we can make a difference in WV. We all are ready for change to happen. Thank you for your time and I hope you will remember me.