

I graduated from high school in 2001. I had no idea what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So, I decided to "take a year off." That year quickly became two and soon five. I found myself married with a baby on the way, and a mortgage to pay. Basically put, life set in. When I had my son in 2005 I couldn't see myself returning to CNA work. The sadness of nursing homes and the crazy hours weren't what I wanted for my life. However, I still hadn't found my calling.

My sister-in-law told me about a job opening at Head Start. My niece was in Head Start at the time and she only had wonderful things to say about the program. I was hesitant, but she convinced me to give it a try. I was hired in March of 2006. I fell in love with the job right away. Teaching children academic skills was great, but I especially enjoyed being a role model for the children. I liked being a consistently caring adult, that was there to support them through it all.

Within a few years, I knew I would be a teacher for the rest of my life. I was content being an aide, but I secretly wanted more. I loved the idea of going to college, but I felt overwhelmed and scared. Could I pay for it? Could I balance it all? How do I even enroll?

A coworker told me about the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship. I asked her a lot of questions. I was intrigued but I was convinced that everything she was saying was too good to be true. How could a scholarship pay for 80% of books and tuition? Plus, give you time off work to study and bonuses. I decided that if this was anything like she was saying I wanted to at least give it a try. I called and filled out my application. T.E.A.C.H. helped me to find a college that offered all my classes online. They answered all my questions and they helped me every step of the way. The advisors at T.E.A.C.H. made me feel so supported!

I started college at Northeast Community College and within 3 years I graduated with my associate degree. There were semesters that I wanted to take a lot of classes and T.E.A.C.H. supported me. Then, there were semesters I couldn't handle more than a class or two and T.E.A.C.H. supported me then, too! The graduation from Northeast was exciting but I knew in my heart I wasn't done yet. I took a break from college, so I could spend time with my infant daughter.

Then, I decided to go to University of Nebraska at Kearney for my bachelor's degree. Once again, it took me about 4 years to finish my degree at UNK. I had the pleasure of student teaching at my kid's school and I graduated with honors. My mom wouldn't have missed it for the world, my husband took off work, and I took my kids out of school for my graduation. It was their accomplishment too. After all, they stood by me and supported me through my long journey.

As I sat there, listening to the speeches, my mind wandered. I thought about all the parties and get togethers I had missed so I could stay home and study. I thought about the time I sat in our rental house in Orlando, on my computer, while my kids were in the pool with my husband. I thought about all the lessons I had learned and all the techniques we had implemented due to my classes. The journey flashed in my head like a thousand little pictures. Assignments, tests, field experiences, and in the end, I was flooded with an overwhelming sense of pride. This journey wasn't an easy one, but it was an amazing one. This journey has made me a better person, a better mom, and most importantly a better teacher.

While I was student teaching my advisor said to me, "You are the kind of teacher that every parent and grandparent wants for the children in their lives." I love teaching and I treat each of my students like they were one of my children. I know in my heart I have found my calling, my purpose in life. So, maybe I didn't do things the way that most people do and maybe that made my journey a little longer and a little harder but, in the end, I am coming out of this an amazing teacher with a lot of years of teaching to look forward to.

I know in my heart that none of my college journey would have happened without the T.E.A.C.H. program. The T.E.A.C.H. program helped me every step of the way. Everyone was so supportive and amazing to work with. The fact that the scholarship paid 80% of books and tuition, the bonuses, the stipend while student teaching, and the release hours from work made going to college possible. I still think that the T.E.A.C.H. scholarship is "too good to be true!" However, I will forever be grateful that this scholarship is, in fact, true. I feel blessed beyond measure.

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Christina Dominguez is a Head Start Teacher. She earned her Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and Associate of Applied Science in Early Childhood at Northeast Community College in Norfolk, both were earned with T.E.A.C.H. scholarships.