

When I was 17, my grandfather had a stroke. I had just started university. There was a whole new world to explore, with new friends, new experiences - a new life. But my grandfather, who had raised me, who had been teaching me how to drive, who would sneak me pocket money when my parents weren't looking, who had always been my sanctuary when my mum and I hadn't seen eye-to-eye - he had had a stroke. A severe one. One that had left him bed-bound and unable to speak.

My world that I had known was falling apart. And at the age of 17 and as an only child, that world wasn't very big, but it was all I had. My mother quit her job and moved out of our home to live with her parents and look after her father. My dad's entire purpose became caring for my mother and supporting her needs. Happy occasions that had previously brought our family together, now drove us apart. My mother and her siblings became estranged over decisions on how to best care for my grandfather, or whether we should have simply let him go in the first place.

And here I was, trying to navigate university - this big, new, exciting place - and balance it with my family's expectations of me. They wanted me to help them control what was ultimately, not at all in any our control. This was also the first time I had to confront the idea of losing someone so close to me. My emotions clashed and competed within me - from great sadness, to guilt for not being able to do more, to anger for being asked to do more, to desperation for wanting to do more. All the while trying to hold my own life together, trying to get good grades, learn the skills that would put me in good stead for my future, meet people and make new friends. I didn't understand at the time, but later I would discover that these feelings were the first signs of clinical depression.

One day, in early December 2003, I checked my email and found one titled "Reminder - applications for the inaugural Order of Australia Foundation Scholarship close on Monday." It was Friday. And it was the first time I had heard about this scholarship! I read the email, but pretty quickly dismissed it, thinking - "What chance would I have anyway?"

Saturday passes and Sunday rolls around. And the email was still niggling at me. Whispering..."But what if...?" So, I sat down and I started writing. I hunted for references from teachers I'd lost contact with, I searched for evidence to demonstrate my family's modest roots. There were moments when it all felt too hard, especially by the 4th hour of sitting at my desk, and I was close to just tossing it all away. But, I didn't. I needed to know - what if?

Six hours later, I was finally done. I was excited! I was nervous. What if!...What if?... What if they say no? ...But what if...they say yes? I looked up how to submit the application - I had to submit a hardcopy. Do any of you even know what a "hardcopy" is, these days? Don't forget, this was 2003 - the cost of running a website capable of receiving documents could probably have bought you a small island in the Caribbean.

I had to print out the application and travel in person to deliver it by 5pm Monday. The trip into Uni was a 3-hour round trip, including two buses, a train and a tram. Despite living in the suburbs of Melbourne, it took me longer to get into Uni than my friends who travelled from Ballarat.

This was the stick that almost broke this camel's back. I mean honestly, what would be the chances of me getting this? There was so much more I could be doing with 3 hours of my time...well, actually, there really wasn't. Exams had finished, summer holidays had begun, and I had no real plans.

So, I woke up on Monday, with determination, and made the lengthy trek into town, carrying my hopes and dreams in a ratty, used, A4 envelope.

Given that I am standing here before you today, you can probably guess the conclusion of this story. On Christmas Eve 2003, I received a phone call from Mr Hugh Morgan, the then Chairman of this Foundation. He told me had a Christmas present for me. And as he congratulated me, I stood there in stunned disbelief. This scholarship would change my life.

I moved out of home and into Janet Clarke Hall, one of the Colleges at The University of Melbourne. The scholarship provided me with financial independence and let me focus on my studies away from the turbulent events at home. The funding also allowed me to seek clinical help for my depression, which is still managed on a daily basis, but now I feel empowered to be the best version of myself every single day.

Equally as important though, if not more, in some respects, was the mentorship provided by Professor Adrienne Clarke. The award was not simply monetary, but also paired the recipients with an eminent mentor from academia and industry. I am so blessed to still have Professor Clarke's friendship and mentorship today, more than 20 years on. In fact, I just learnt from her two days ago that the toenail fungal treatment industry is worth over \$3 billion annually! Who knew!

Her knowledge of both industry and academia taught me that I can choose whatever path I want and she gave me the confidence to know that I can do good in any endeavour I pursue. Professor Clarke has been the perfect role model for me. She taught me that I can be strong, but also kind; firm, but also compassionate. Without her, I wouldn't be the person I am today having achieved all that I have.

And what have I achieved? Well, as you heard in Beverley's introduction, I completed my Ph.D. in Mathematics in 2016. I have worked for Haemonetics, a global medical devices company based in Boston. And I currently work for IBM, one of the oldest technology companies on the planet, but still at the forefront of innovation, leading in AI and Quantum technologies.

I am on the Board of Directors at St. Hilda's College, where I shape the experience of the students who live there. They place their trust in us to provide them a safe space to learn, grow and build their identity. I also fund a scholarship at the College. The scholarship provides students the opportunity to get hands-on experience working with disadvantaged communities. They get to see a different perspective, and learn how they can make an impact in this world.

If you only take one message away today, I want you to remember this - always grab opportunities with both hands. You never know where they will lead you. From a child of migrant parents, struggling to navigate family expectations, personal ambition and mental health, to the confident and successful educator, innovator and leader I am today, I can say definitively, without the Foundation's scholarship, I would not be the person you see in front of you.

I want to thank the benefactors of the Foundation for their continued support of this life-changing scholarship, and to the Foundation's Directors for the incredible opportunity you have provided to young Australians for them to be more than they ever dreamt they could be.

Thank you for your time today, I look forward to speaking to some of you later on and hearing your stories.