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I Did It

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As the youngest girl in the family, I was always treated like the baby. My brother and cousins were all my protectors whenever there were other people around. At the park or on the basketball court, I was the one they always looked out for. I was one of the boys, running around playing sports, and riding bikes after school. When my cousins Bobby and Mani came to sleep over with my brother, I tagged along to play video games with them too. As we got older, the boys wanted to do their own thing, so I started hanging out with my cousins Andrea and Angelica, doing more “girl things.” Shopping at the mall and painting my nails soon replaced basketball and video games.

I started to care more about the way I looked, noticing all the things my cousins did before they went out anywhere. Now, instead of just pulling my hair back into a ponytail, I pinned it back with clips or barrettes; I made sure my shoes were clean and my clothes looked nice. I spent more time watching my mom do her makeup in the morning and how carefully she picked out her outfit for work. Throughout elementary school, I tried to find the balance between being one of the boys and being a “lady,” which everyone told me to be. This made school difficult since I was so used to hanging out with the boys at home, but it wasn’t the same when the boys weren’t my cousins. I had finally found my group of friends in elementary school, both boys and girls, and then it was time to go into the sixth grade.

I started off middle school not knowing anyone. All of my friends had gone to a different school, so I was left to make a whole new group of friends. Though I was really shy and felt like I would never belong, I was pleased to find that I was wrong. I met lots of people and came to really love that school. My teachers were nice, my classes interested me, and I had great times during brunch and lunch with my friends. Eighth grade was the most memorable. I grew apart from some of the girls I hung out with and spent most of my time with the few friends that I could really count on. That was also the year I had my first boyfriend. At that point, I never would have imagined the rollercoaster relationship we would come to have. I thought it would only last a few weeks, if that. Boy was I wrong. A few weeks turned into a month, then another and another. Before I knew it, the end of the school year had come and we were being promoted. Whether we were ready for high school or not, that’s where we were going.

Freshmen year was great. The freedom that comes with high school was something I took full advantage of. I went to football games and dances, having as much fun as I could. I met so many new people and even found some of my old elementary school friends who went there too. I studied hard and loved my classes. Even though I didn’t talk much in most classes, I was intrigued with the material. It came naturally to me. All was well my first year, but then things started to change. As time passed, I became separated from most of my friends as

they became involved in other activities and started hanging out with other people. I mostly spent time with my boyfriend and a few other mutual friends. He and I had many of the same classes, which was nice at first. Soon, I began to notice a change in his attitude and behavior towards me. In class, I always had to be his partner and if I was in a group without him, he constantly asked for every detail of what happened. It got so annoying that I just chose to do my work on my own, even when I needed help. If I wanted to do anything alone or with someone besides him, it caused an argument. When I wanted to hang out with other people, it made him mad. He wanted me all to himself. At sixteen years old, that is not what I needed.

I began to feel alone, like the only people I could be with were my boyfriend, few friends, and my family. Aside from them, the only other person I felt I could talk to was my AVID teacher, Ms. Brimhall. She could tell when my boyfriend and I were arguing because, of course, he had that class too. I would walk into the classroom quietly, go straight to my seat, and take out what I needed to work on that day. He would come in behind me with an angry look on his face and sit there next to me, watching and waiting for me to say something. The second I started talking to someone else, it was just another reason for him to get mad. "You have an attitude with me, but as soon as one of your friends says something, you're happy, huh?" I couldn't do anything without hearing him complain.

Despite his constant remarks, I still saw AVID as my place of solitude. When I was there, all the arguments faded away, even if just for an hour. I could think about something other than high school; college was the next step. We learned about the application process, practiced for the SAT and started writing our personal statements. Along with that, Stanford students came to tutor us. That was my favorite part. I got to talk to actual college students, who could tell me all about their experiences. Stanford University was right across the street from my high school, yet it seemed like such a foreign place to me. In a way, I began to envision myself being in college and thought about what sort of extracurricular activities I would get involved in. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life; I just knew I wanted to study anything except math and science.

By the time junior year came, I knew for sure I was going to college; the question was where? Being in Foundation for a College Education (FCE) was finally helping. This non-profit program in my hometown is dedicated to helping minority, first-generation students get to college. It gave me free SAT prep classes and tutoring, but the most significant benefit was the college tours. Going to visit UC Santa Cruz was an eye-opener to me. In looking on the website and through the brochures, I thought I had found the school of my dreams. It was close to home, had a great program that interested me, and wasn't too expensive. On that day, I realized the importance of actually going to visit the school. It was nothing

like I had imagined. If it wasn't for the big group, I would have got lost within ten minutes. After that, I started going on as many tours as I could. I would be graduating from high school soon and I needed to make sure I was setting myself up with plenty of options. You can bet this caused problems with my boyfriend. We always argued about me talking to other people and wasting time with them when I could have been with him. I knew the real reason for his anger: he was afraid I was planning my future without him and couldn't bear the thought of that.

I began to realize what a negative influence he was in my life. A boyfriend shouldn't be the person bringing you down and making you feel bad for wanting a bright future. I knew this, but didn't have the strength to leave him. I would come home feeling mentally and emotionally exhausted. Some days I would just go straight to my room and hardly come out. My parents and best friend Crystal knew I was unhappy, but no matter how much they tried talking to me, I couldn't bring myself to leave him. "Are you really gonna let him make you feel this way all the time? When was the last time you guys were really happy? I can't remember seeing a genuine smile on your face when he's around." I knew they were right, but I cared about him too much. I told myself it would get better; we were just going through a rough time but that it would pass soon enough. I knew he loved me and that he just didn't want to lose me, but his way of showing it only pushed my feelings away.

He always said the only reason he tried in school was because of me. I wanted to make sure he had a plan for his future. In a way, I felt responsible for him; as though it was my job to make sure he got into a good school. I guess his well-being meant more to me than my own. I knew I was unhappy and didn't want to continue to deal with the stress and drama that he put me through, but it was familiar. For over a year, I knew the relationship was no longer what it had been. The supportive and loving guy that I met had turned into a completely different person. Constant put-downs and negative remarks became the basis of our interactions. It got to the point where not saying anything made it easier. "Well aren't you going to say something?" he would ask me. "Ok, fine," I said, and just left it at that. My silence would help avoid an argument or hearing him tell me what a stupid idea I had. It infuriated me, but I had learned to keep my anger in and just let him win so I wouldn't have to deal with him finding more things to argue about.

Senior year was the worst, no doubt about it. College applications were stressful enough, but I had to deal with him too. While I was on track with everything that I needed to do, he was just there hanging out, not worried about a thing except who I was with when he wasn't around, which wasn't very often. I filled out my applications, and then showed him how to do his too. I edited his personal statements and made sure he met the deadlines for everything he needed to submit.

I applied to nine schools, only two of which were outside of the Bay Area. My FCE college counselor was the one who encouraged me apply to LMU and Occidental. My first thoughts were, “me? LA? Yeah, right.” No way was I leaving the Bay. “This is my home,” I thought, “I can’t leave my family. This is where I’m meant to be.” My parents were shocked when I told them, but not as much as everyone else was. “Why did you apply there? You know you’re not gonna go,” were the reactions from my brother and cousins. Clearly, my family was not all for it. My response was, “Relax, I only did it because they made me. I don’t wanna go over there. You know me better than that.” So much for that...

In April of 2010, I came to Loyola Marymount University for the first time. I wasn’t looking forward to it. After visiting Occidental for a Latino Overnight, I knew LA was not the place for me. It was too different from what I knew. Yeah, Hollywood was cool, but I knew I wasn’t going to be spending my time there. I didn’t like anything about Oxy, so what could LMU have to offer me? I came to visit it anyway, but more so for my parents. They were the ones who wanted to come see it since they hadn’t been to any of the other schools.

Preview day was all I needed. Before we even got out of the car, the campus amazed me. Seeing how welcoming everyone was and the amount of opportunities to get involved with just made it even better. Each person greeted us with a big smile and was full of excitement when they talked about the school. Going to the student panel really caught my attention towards LMU. They were so honest about everything, talking about classes and professors to partying and dorm life. I remember thinking, “There’s no way they can actually be this happy talking about a school.” But I couldn’t see anything that told me otherwise. That day I met the chair of the Chicano Studies department and thought I had found my major. I was set, but afraid to admit it just yet. I remained skeptical the entire visit, not letting my amazement show. We hadn’t even been on campus for two hours before my mom knew I would be going here. “Can you imagine when you graduate and the whole family comes down to see you cross the stage?!” I still don’t know how she knew, but her response was simply, “I’m your mom. I know what’s best for you.” No argument there, Mom.

The next few weeks were the most stressful for me. I was battling all these different choices in my mind, trying to decide if I would be okay leaving home or if I needed to stay for my family. How would I afford it all? What would my parents do without me? I was the one who picked up my sister from school and took her to soccer practice. I helped make dinner. I did the laundry and helped clean the house. I ran errands and babysat my niece and sister all the time, helping them with their homework and making sure they did their reading. I was going to miss out on my girls growing up and I couldn’t bear that thought. Who else was going to do it if I was gone?

It was the day before I had to commit, and I was sitting in the FCE office talking to my counselor. “You know what to do, Marisa.” That night I submitted my commitment form and deposit online. In a few months I would be moving to LA. Now I had to figure out how to break the news to everyone.

My parents trusted my decision and were supportive when I told them that night. My boyfriend was another story. “I sent in the forms for USF. You did too, right?” he asked. “Umm, actually there’s something I need to tell you. I chose LMU instead.” The phone clicked and that was it. We didn’t speak for over a week. I questioned my decision endlessly for about two weeks. What had I done? I wasn’t ready for this. There was no way I was going to be able to leave. But as I started getting mail from LMU welcoming me and giving information about orientation, I got excited once again. I had to hide those feelings from my boyfriend though. He was still mad at me for choosing to leave him. He constantly made comments about me not caring about him and how he knew I just wanted to get away from him so I could go meet more guys and do ‘stupid things that girls do’. “You’re gonna go out and find a new boyfriend. You don’t care about me, you’re only thinking about what you’re gonna do as soon as you’re gone.” He made me feel guilty for leaving the Bay to go to LA and be away from my family. “I don’t see how you can leave your family like that. There’s no way I’m leaving my little brother, but I guess you don’t care about Sofi like that. You’re too selfish. You only think about yourself.” Those words stayed with me for the longest time. I loved my sister more than she would ever know, but I started to think he was right. Was I being too selfish? Should I just stay here instead? I now know it was just his insecurities, but at the time, I let his words get to me, which brought me down.

High school graduation snapped me into reality. On what should have been a night to remember, my boyfriend and I were sitting at a back table while our classmates danced and enjoyed the grad night celebrations. At that very moment I knew I deserved a lot better, and found it in me to say “forget it.” I was tired of his negativity and constant put-downs. Somehow I found the courage deep inside of me to get up. I left him sitting there alone while I joined Crystal and danced the night away, or what was left of it anyway. The ride back home was silent and there was no goodnight kiss. Surprisingly, I didn’t feel bothered by it or like I had done something wrong. I didn’t stay up at night thinking about my decision like I usually did. I woke up refreshed and knew I was ready. That afternoon, I officially ended the nightmare I had been living in. It was over. At last I was free.

But now what? Who was I going to spend my summer before college with? He would not accept the fact that we were over. He begged me to let him take me out to lunch to talk, and I agreed. “I’m sorry; I won’t be like that anymore. I promise it’ll be better, like it used to be. I messed up, ok? Just let me

prove to you that this can work. Please, give me another chance.” As much as he tried and promised to change, I wouldn’t let myself go back to that. “Sorry, but no. I’m done; I can’t keep doing this anymore. We can still be friends but that’s it.” I had finally gained the strength to do what I needed and I wasn’t going to turn back now. I made a vow never to allow myself to be put in a situation like that again, and I intended to keep it.

I spent my time with the people I wanted to be with. I had much more important things to worry about. I got an internship that summer at FCE working with a program to help incoming high school freshmen prepare for the transition they would soon face. The six week program kept me busy and made me even more excited for LMU. Talking to the students about where I would be going that fall showed me even more how grateful I was to have the opportunity to do something with my life. I helped lead discussions and taught lessons on the books they read, and then reviewed their work. Fridays were field trip days, and those were the days that inspired them even more. Going to museums and seeing things they had never been exposed to showed me the influence something so small can have on a student. The tables were turned. No longer was I the one being taught; now it was my turn to teach them. All the time I spent with them made me realize how in a matter of weeks I would be in their same position. I was moving to LA soon and had no idea what was in store for me.

At the end of the summer, my parents threw a going-away party for me. I would be leaving in a few days, and this was the last time I would get to be with my whole family for a while. We ate, talked, laughed, and just enjoyed the night. It was all becoming real to me. I wouldn’t be home for all the family parties anymore. I was about to start this new stage in my life and didn’t know what to expect. I felt scared and nervous, yet excited at the same time. My clothes were packed and everything was ready to go.

The day before I left, my brother and his family came to say goodbye. I didn’t want to come out of the room. I wasn’t ready to say bye to him, and especially not to my niece. The love I have for Destiney, one would think she was my daughter. After watching her and spending so much time with her since the day she was born, I didn’t think I had the courage to leave her. I held her in my arms for as long as I could, crying nonstop. I had never felt so much sadness in my life. “What was I doing?” I kept thinking to myself. “There’s no way I can do this. I can’t leave my baby.” Then my brother came up to me and hugged me in a way that I hadn’t felt from him in a very long time. “We’re gonna miss you. Don’t forget about us, okay? Just make sure you do your school thing and have fun over there. I love you.” Why did I feel so guilty? They were all being so supportive, yet I felt I was doing something horrible by leaving. I gave my last hugs when Destiney’s words made me feel as though I’d been punched in the stomach, “I’m never going to forget you, Tia. Don’t cry anymore. I’ll love you forever.” At five

years old, her words meant more to me than anything else. A few minutes later, my face stained with tears, I watched them wave and blow kisses to me as they pulled out of the driveway, an image that replayed over and over in my mind all night.

We left early Friday morning to drive down to LA. My parents, sister, and I got up around five in the morning and were on the road by six. We arrived in the early afternoon and were overwhelmed with the amount of people who were all trying to move in at the same time. There was no parking in the freshmen area, so we had to wait for some time until people left and we could park the car somewhere. Next, we gathered all of my things and took them inside Del Rey North, room 214.

My roommate still hadn't arrived, so I got to pick the side I wanted first. After organizing all of my things, we didn't know what to do. There were activities going on that weekend, but I wasn't quite ready to immerse myself into the atmosphere just yet. While trying to figure out what to do, the door suddenly opened and in walked a tall, brunette girl carrying two large suitcases. The minute she saw me, her face lit up and she ran up to me to give me a hug. "Oh my God, you're here! It's so great to meet you!" That was Madison. My first roommate, the girl I would be living with for the year. I knew nothing about her except that she was from Seattle. She gave off a good vibe right away and I knew we would work out just fine. My family and I left to give her space to get situated, and went on an adventure to look for a Target in my new city.

The rest of that weekend was kind of a blur, until the Mass that was held for the freshmen. That day I met Valerie, my first friend at LMU. We were both walking towards the chapel when I introduced myself. She looked just as nervous and unsure of what she was getting herself into as I did. During Mass, I knew the time was coming. This was all becoming real. I would be here alone, without my family, to start a new chapter in my life. All the excitement I had in the past few months was gone. I was scared. I didn't want this to be happening. I just wanted to pack up all my things again and go back home. But I knew there was no way I could do that.

After the Mass, it was time for my parents to leave. I would be staying at LMU by myself from that moment on. I did my best to hold back my tears and be strong. "Marisa, look at me." With tears falling from my eyes, I raised my head to face my mom, "If we have to be away from each other, we're gonna make it worth it." It was the first time she would say those words to me, but definitely not the last. Saying bye to my sister was the hardest. I didn't want to let her go. The knot in my throat was so big I couldn't even utter one word. She wouldn't look at me, she just kept her head buried under my arm, and I could feel her little body shaking as she cried. "Okay, it's time to go. Go back inside and start getting your things ready. You have a big day tomorrow, college girl!" Always the positive

one, my stepdad was the one who brought a smile to my face for the first time. He gave me a big hug and that was it. “No more crying. Come on, you know you can do this.” He was right. I could do it. I told myself before that I wasn’t going to sit there and feel sorry for myself. No way. I worked too hard to get caught up in all the emotions. I had to be strong and make it worth it, just like my mom said. And that’s exactly what I did.

My freshman year was beyond amazing. Words cannot describe the happiness I felt that first year. I met my best friends, girls who I’ve built more than just friendships with. They are my sisters. That’s right, I joined a sorority. Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Incorporated, caught my eye from the start. Going out to Club Fest was the first time I saw them and right away I knew I wanted to be part of it. “Let’s go to that table over there.” Valerie and I walked around, both unsure of what everything meant but we knew we wanted to visit that one. The shocking pink and majestic purple stood out, and I noticed there were Latinas standing behind the table. Before we even reached the table, I heard someone call out to me and walk towards me. A petite girl with dark hair and a smile on her face greeted us. That was Lindsay, the president of the sorority. Right away, she introduced herself and a few of the other girls standing nearby, each as welcoming as the next. Instead of the usual “Hi, welcome to LMU, hope everything is going well so far” speech, they took the time to talk to us individually. We weren’t just two new freshmen roaming around to get flyers from them—they actually held a conversation. Lindsay asked where I was from, what classes I was taking, and even gave me tips for one of my classes. “I like them” I thought. I took a flyer for their upcoming events, excited to learn more and see what they had to offer.

The next week, I went to their recruitment events, in what was called Gamma Week. I learned not only about the organization, but about the women in it. I could tell they had real connections with each other. Seeing how they interacted and actually knew personal things about every other girl was what I wanted. They looked like a real family. Seeing them all together reminded me of how I was with my cousins, and that attracted me even more. Everything the organization was about were the same things I held close to my heart. Academics, Community Service, Cultural Awareness, Morals and Ethics, and Social Interaction: the five principles upon which SLG was founded were in many ways the same things I embodied. What better way than to join this sisterhood to get a little bit of everything? Yup, this is definitely the place for me. From that day on, I started hanging out with them and getting to know them as more than just “the Gammas.” I couldn’t wait until second semester when I would be able to join!

By that time, I had a solid group of friends. Valerie and Channing lived on my floor, Mirian was in my Spanish class, and Mirian brought Brenda along. One night in November, we went to a party the Gammas were hosting out in Long

Beach. It was one of the first times we would be going out, so we were more than excited. Not only did we have a great time, but something special happened for me. That night, I met Juan. I had seen him a few times at events on campus but I knew nothing about him. When he asked me to dance, I was nervous; he was the first guy I had interacted with in that way since my ex-boyfriend. I ended up dancing with him all night, and had a really good time. The next day, he messaged me on Facebook and we started talking.

We continued to talk for some time, and then he asked me out on a date. All sorts of emotions were going through me that night when he picked me up. I hadn't been out on a date in the longest time; I didn't even know what to do. I felt like a little girl, giggling and smiling from ear to ear, all while trying to hide it and act like it wasn't that big of a deal. He took me to a Mexican restaurant since I had told him how much I missed my home cooked meals. "You're gonna love this place! I used to come here with my family every Sunday after church when I was younger," he told me. He laughed when I told him I was a little skeptical about Mexican restaurants since I was so used to my mom's food. "Trust me, you won't be disappointed," he responded with a wink and a grin. He was right, the food was delicious.

The conversation came so naturally, talking about family, school, music, hobbies, and anything that we could think of. "So what's it like being away from home?" As a commuter, he never experienced living on campus. This was one of the first times I actually spoke honestly about being away, telling him it was hard but I was learning how to deal with the homesickness and loneliness I sometimes felt. Even though I hadn't known him for that long, I felt comfortable talking to him and explaining my feelings. There was a sincere curiosity in his voice and I couldn't help but share with him. After dinner, he drove me back to LMU and walked me to my dorm, "I had a really great time with you tonight, Marisa. When can I see you again?"

This was the first of many dates we had, each as memorable as the first. Juan was the one who took me to do something I had always wanted to do since I knew I would be coming to LA. It was a Saturday morning when we got up early for a hike to the Hollywood sign. I had been talking about it for months, and I was finally able to go. "Did you bring your camera?" he asked. But of course, being as forgetful as I am, I had left it in the car all the way down the hill. We improvised, and used our phones to take pictures, but he kept poking fun at me the whole time for forgetting it.

When I went home for winter break, Juan and I were constantly texting each other, which only made me more excited to get back to LMU. Being home provided me with the chance to see how much I had left behind, but not in a bad way. I realized everything was still pretty much the same. My cousins were doing the same thing, Sofi and Destiney were still in school, and my parents were still

trying to adjust to me not being there anymore. My mom cried tears of joy the first time she saw me, and I just let her hold me in her arms until she was ready to let go. I appreciated the little things that much more, from sleeping in my own bed and having the bathroom to myself, to being able to go into the kitchen and stare at the food in the fridge while I decided what I wanted to eat. I knew my family was proud of me and could see how much I had changed in only a few months.

I overheard my mom talking to my aunts, telling them how happy I seemed and all the fun I was having at school. She noticed the smiles on my face as I sat and texted back and forth with Juan. *“Te ves muy contenta, hija. Le dije a tu mamá que todo iba a salir bien mientras que estabas allá”* [You look really happy, sweetie. I told your mom that everything would turn out good while you were over there]. Even my grandma knew I was going to be okay on my own. *“Así es como las enseñé. Nosotras somos mujeres fuertes y hacemos lo necesario para nuestra familia.”* [That’s how I taught you girls. We are strong women and we do what is necessary for our family]. She was right; I had found the courage to get over my fear of being away from home and stayed focused on what I needed to do. School was my priority, and I had done my best work academically that first semester. I received news that I had made it on the Dean’s list, proving to myself and everyone else that I was meant to be there. Soon it was time for me to go back to LMU. Surprisingly, it wasn’t as hard to leave this time, knowing I had so much to look forward to once I got back to school.

My second semester was much more hectic than the first. I was taking seventeen units, had started the process to join Sigma Lambda Gamma, was working in the Academic Resource Center (ARC) as well as on an independent research project, and now I had a boyfriend. Yup, after dating for a few months, Juan asked me to be his girlfriend. On February 25, 2011 we officially became a couple. I had thought about it for a while, but I knew that I was ready to be in a relationship. I was happier than I had been in a very long time and Juan played a big role in that.

My free time was very much limited in the spring. When I wasn’t in class, I spent a lot of my time in the ARC with Dr. La’Tonya Rease Miles. As the director of the ARC and the creator of the First to Go program, she was a great resource for me. LT, as she is known, soon became my mentor, and has stuck with me since day one. Much of my success and progress at LMU came from her pushing me to work harder than average. She is the one who introduced me to research on first-generation students and helped me find my passion in working with this community. “I volunteered you to speak at a panel this weekend. Students from a local high school are coming and they want a representative from First to Go to talk to them.” She knew I couldn’t say no to something like this, so I eventually got used to talking to groups of people about the program, and in turn gained the confidence to present myself in front of a large audience. Since being

under her guidance, I have participated in the LMU undergraduate research program for over a year, and continue with it to this day. The research I did also helped me get my summer grant, which allowed me to live on campus for free the summer after my freshman year.

LT isn't just someone who helps me with my professional development; she is the person I go to for everything. Whether I'm dealing with personal issues, having trouble in a class, or just need someone to make me laugh, she has always been there for me. I'm not afraid to talk to her about anything, because I know she has my best interests in mind and will tell me what I need to hear, regardless of what it is. In many ways, she reminds me of my mom in the way that she pushes me to do my best, and once I've done that, she pushes me to go beyond it. She has faith in my ability to succeed and make my life what I want it to be, without depending on anyone else. Now, I am the one who goes to LT with ideas on what to do next with the First to Go program, since she and I have been the ones working on it from the beginning. "You wanna just take my job now so I can retire?" she constantly jokes. "Not yet, I still wanna do the college thing for a while. I'll let you know when I'm ready though!" Together, she and I created a learning community for first-generation freshmen students at LMU and are constantly thinking of what more we can do for First to Go. When people hear of the relationship we have, they think I've known her forever. The bond we have began almost two years ago, but it feels as though LT has been a part of my life for much longer. We have plans of writing a book together about first-generation students. Who knows what more we will accomplish within my remaining years at LMU.

The shy and reserved girl I once was, no longer exists. The girl who was so hesitant to leave home because of all the things holding her back, ended up living in LA not only during the school year, but for the summer too. During my second semester, my visits home were much more spread out. Instead of going every month or two, I would go every three to four months. Even the three weeks that I was home for the remainder of the summer were too long for me to be there. My bed no longer felt like my bed, and it didn't feel like I belonged there the way I used to. I found my home in LA, at LMU. While the Bay area will always be my home, my life is in LA now and this is where I am happiest. My school, work, friends, and boyfriend are all here, and those are the people I want to surround myself with. It's always nice to go home for a few days and see my family again, but I have really come into my own and have formed bonds with people here. I have another family, maybe they're not the ones I grew up with, but they are the ones I will grow old with. And the best part is that my family at home understands and accepts this. Everyone knows how happy I am here and all the wonderful things that I have access to. It's still hard missing out on Sofi and Destiney growing up, but I know I will always have a special bond with them and can't

wait until they get a little older to really share this experience with them. I am paving the way and showing them what they too can accomplish when they go to college. Without the constant love and support from my family, my time here would not have been as pleasurable.

Though I was always a good student and liked school, I never had a passion for it the way I do now. I found what I want to do with my life, and that is working with college students, especially the first-generation community. I want to be a mentor to students the way LT has been to me. I have never had any teachers have such an impact in my life the way she has, and I want to pay it forward to future students. She saw the potential I had and encouraged me to see it too. Without her, I'm sure I wouldn't have presented my research at various symposiums in front of large audiences with as much confidence as I have. As someone who hated speaking in class, I never would have guessed that public speaking would come so easily to me now.

Looking back and seeing the transformation I have made from the way I was in high school to who I am now at the end of my second year in college, I wonder why I put myself through all that I did. I am not resentful about my previous relationship. It was a big learning experience. I was in an unhealthy relationship and now that I am in a much better one, I know what it means to truly be happy with someone else. I found the courage to take myself out of a bad situation and brought myself into a good one. Every day is a day to learn something new about each other, what works and doesn't work, and overall, how to be happy together. Being accepted into the Summer Undergraduate Research Program again this year has afforded me the opportunity to stay in LA for most of the summer. Not only am I happy because I will get to do more work with first-generation students and further my research experience, but I will be able to spend my summer with Juan again. I couldn't imagine being away from him for that long.

I am excited to see where Juan and I will end up in the future. I can definitely see us being together beyond LMU and starting a life together after we graduate. These past two years at LMU have gone by so fast. There's no telling what will happen in the remaining two of my undergraduate career, but I know for a fact that I will always have people supporting me just as I am there for them every step of the way. My sorority sisters will forever be part of my life. They will be my bridesmaids, the godparents of my children, and overall, my best friends. They are the ones I am making my memories with now, and we will be able to look back upon them when we are old and laugh at all the good times we had.