



Sample Learning Autobiography

An Immodest Look at 45 Years of Learning

The first fourteen years of my life was spent in the Coachella Valley, near Palm Springs, California. I was raised by my single father until his untimely death, and then moved to Orange County, California to live with family. The next four years of my life were spent living with various family members including my mother from time to time. I was not a very good student and lacked parental guidance so I really did not get much out of school, my GPA was about 2.5. Four years later, upon finishing high school I was under the assumption that I would just stumble into a career. I had never been asked by my mother or other family members what my plan was for a career. I am even embarrassed to say that in high school when I heard other seniors talking about taking SAT's, I had no idea what they were talking about. Because college was never on my mind, I just moved from job to job looking for something that fit. Although some of the jobs were fun, none could sustain a family, which is what I wanted. In retrospect, I realize that these experiences caused me to develop a sense of independence and self-reliance. These character traits in turn prepared me for a life long journey of learning and overachieving.

About eight years after high school and having worked in several different fields, I decided on the fire service as a career and enrolled in a junior college, I was 26. The impetus for that decision was meeting my wife and wanting to have a steady job that would provide for a family. Looking back at those days I realize that I was intelligent but uneducated. Over the past eighteen years I realize that I have grown intellectually as a result of my formal education and experience living and working with purpose. Nearly eighteen years ago, I met and married my wife after knowing her for nine months. Meeting her and making that decision to pursue the fire service have been two of the most important things to occur in my life. Finally, after 26 years I had developed clear goals and set a plan in action to achieve them. I spent the next several years in school and working to further develop my interpersonal communication skills and study habits. As I worked with a new group of peers in school and operating an ambulance, I began to develop a reputation as a studious and professional individual. This in turn caused me to develop personal confidence in a new area of my life.

My time in junior college was very busy. I was working twelve hour shifts on an ambulance four days per week and attending classes on the three days I had off. This working environment provided a great opportunity to work on my leadership and communication skills. I continued this pace for two years until I had finished all of the classes qualifying me for the fire academy. I even made time to get married, although our honeymoon was cut short by my classes! Shortly after finishing the fire science classes I enrolled in paramedic prerequisite classes to prepare paramedic school. My plan was to finish the academy and get into paramedic school as soon as possible. The fire academy is fourteen weeks of classroom and simulated fire ground training. Paramedic school is six months broken up into three

phases. The first is three months of full time didactic, forty hours per week in the classroom. The classroom phase is followed by two weeks of full time emergency department internship under the guidance of a registered nurse. Students who are successful with the first two phases of the program are placed with a fire department and work alongside a licensed Paramedic for twenty, twenty-four hour shifts. As I participated in the various classes and work experience, I began to develop my leadership and communication skills. This practice further enhanced my leadership abilities.

After completing my fire academy training and becoming a licensed paramedic I began the process of obtaining a job with the fire department. The process of acquiring a job with the fire department is a competitive one. Candidates take written tests to thin the numbers that go onto the next step which is usually a physical ability test. These tests are conducted by local colleges that have fire science programs and involve various physical tasks designed to evaluate the candidate's physical condition under fire ground-like conditions. After successful completion of the physical ability test there is an oral board. Oral boards generally consist of two to three fire department captains and a representative from human resources. The candidates are scored based on performance and put onto an eligibility list. Candidates who score high enough are given a conditional job offer and move onto a background checks, psychiatric evaluation and a detailed physical exam. Upon completion, the names of the remaining individuals are given to the Fire Chief for consideration. I finished this process with my current employer in second place out of over five hundred applicants. My employment as a firefighter paramedic began in 1997, I was 31 years old and on my way to a better life than what I was accustomed to. I believe that my interpersonal communication skills and natural leadership abilities were noticed by the fire department as I interacted with them during the hiring process. The skills that I had begun honing early on in my quest for a job with the fire service were recognized and rewarded.

Over the next several years of my life, my family began to grow, fairly rapidly. Between 1999 and 2003 my wife and I managed to have three boys. As a parent I have many roles and responsibilities that occupy my time and energy. All of them are a blessing to me because without them, I would not be a husband or father. As the parent responsible for earning the majority of the family income, I am often away from home more than I would like. In fact, I wish I could be home all of the time. Consequently, I am sometimes torn when I have to work extra shifts or end up far from home on a big incident. I enjoy my work and experience professional satisfaction, but always would rather be with my family. One of my roles as a father is that of disciplinarian. I am charged with raising responsible children who will benefit society as adults. My home is modest, but requires upkeep that I accomplish much like a handyman; constantly working to keep it in good repair. Having a home to share with my family is one of my greatest accomplishments.

Life is a compromise, if you want to share it with someone special. With the right person like I believe I have as a wife, that compromise equates to happiness. Just as children need to know the parent is in charge to feel secure, spouses feel security knowing they are sharing their lives with someone. Sharing involves give and take, which would be better described as constructive compromise. An analogy that comes to mind would be comparing this to feeling the joy of watching a child open a Christmas present. That is much more rewarding than receiving a gift as a parent. A spouse feels happy and content by sometimes putting others before themselves. I believe that these experiences have nurtured a sense of maturity which have enabled me to absorb, in a more meaningful way, all of life's lessons.

After six years of serving as a firefighter paramedic I entered the competitive testing process again. This time it was for an internal promotion to engineer. Fire engineers drive the fire engines and trucks and perform an array of other duties. The most important of the duties is securing water from fire hydrants and supplying firefighters in burning building with water. That position is considered second in command on emergencies and in the station and was a great learning experience for me as I prepared for my next goal. All along I never thought about promoting to a supervisory position. However, I realized my talent would be best served in a position that provided me the opportunity to lead and motivate people.

In 2005 I took on my biggest professional challenge. I had decided to take another promotional test, this time for fire captain. This test is designed to be a very exhaustive and detailed evaluation of the candidate's ability to lead others as well as manage complex emergencies. After a three hour written exercise candidates perform in a simulator, watching videos of various emergency scenes and "running" the emergency as the incident commander. Next, candidates sit before an oral board consisting of several fire chiefs and human resources personnel. It is a very stressful testing process. I was promoted in 2005 to the rank of fire captain and assigned to a paramedic fire engine. I credit that success to my natural leadership ability that was enhanced throughout my years of work as a fire engineer and firefighter. I realized shortly after my promotion that I was in a position that truly fit my skills and natural aptitude.

As a front line supervisor for the last five years I have been tasked with the responsibility of managing firefighters, paramedics and engineers in the fire department. My job includes training, giving direction on emergency scenes, discipline, safety, motivation and coaching. Since promoting to a supervisory position, the fire department has sent me to many classes such as, managing marginal employees, harassment prevention and others. Many aspects of a firefighter's job are inherently dangerous and require a supervisor there to ensure they remain safe. I conduct business inspections, document our finding, and enter the information into a data base. Knowing the neighborhoods around the fire station is a must for company officers and we often conduct training in area knowledge. As a supervisor, I am tasked with understanding, mitigating and preventing harassment. I have special training in the use of performance evaluations that encourage positive behavior and minimize negative behavior.

At the age of 43, with my career doing great, three young boys growing rapidly and my wife slowing down her work to care for our very busy household, our biggest challenge of all presented itself. Out of nowhere our lives took a drastic and scary turn. My wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor. All of the life experience that I had gained had not prepared me for dealing with that news. Life's issues were quickly put into perspective and my job as a husband and father meant I would learn about cancer, doctors, treatment plans and the stresses caused by this illness. Suddenly, my wife needed an advocate to see through all of medical issues and I was happy to step into that role.

My main focus has always been on providing for my family. I had a new challenge that was centered on helping our children to deal with this scary news and getting Donna the very best treatment we could find. Our first challenge was finding the right neurosurgeon to perform brain surgery. Within two weeks of discovering the tumor, Donna had surgery. She was left temporarily, partially paralyzed. She soon recovered from the paralysis but also required many doctor's visits, treatment and procedures. We discovered that she had developed melanoma. Melanoma normally begins as a suspicious mole that

later becomes melanoma and invades local tissue. Unfortunately, my wife never had a mole, but presented with a seizure. Shortly after her seizure an MRI of her brain revealed the tumor. Since then she has had surgery for a metastasis on her back and a procedure called Gamma Knife Radio Surgery for a second brain tumor. She has received radiation to her brain, chemotherapy for tumors in her abdomen and was involved in a compassionate drug trial. All the while, I have kept track of each doctor's visit, managed copies of all of her labs and test results. I realized that although my personal life was presenting me with my greatest challenge, my professional experience and knowledge was assisting me in caring for my wife. The leadership and interpersonal communication skills that I had developed over the years are proving to be invaluable as I work as her advocate.

As care giver, I shield my wife from information that she does not want to know about and help clarify information that confuses her. Together we plan her treatment strategies by discussing options her doctors give us. To date, she has been the patient of two neurosurgeons, an ophthalmologist, a radiation oncologist, two general oncologists, a dermatologist and a surgical oncologist. For the last two years, she has seen one or more of these doctors every two months, sometimes more. I have been to every appointment and have managed a very busy schedule of doctor's visits. In this time, I have successfully challenged Blue Cross Insurance company when they denied coverage of a very expensive chemotherapy drug. I contacted the Department of Managed Health Care (a state government agency) and worked to successfully overturn the insurance company's decision, within a week of the denial. After this success, the research clinic in Los Angeles where my wife is treated referred other patients to me for advice and guidance in similar problems with insurance companies. This experience has further enhanced my critical thinking skills and interpersonal communication abilities. Donna is feeling well right now, but our battle continues.

Over time I have come to realize that as an elementary student, I suffered from an undiagnosed learning disability, probably dyslexia. I entered junior college concerned that I was not smart enough to be there. I quickly realized that I was learning how to learn for the first time. Having well developed goals and a deep desire to succeed was the beginning of a whole new learning process for me. I finished high school with a low GPA, but as an adult I was able to earn an Associate's Degree with honors. I attribute that success to the desire I had to overcome the challenges of my youth. I developed a deep desire to live a life and have a family unlike my own as a child. There has been dramatic learning that has taken place since I first entered college at the age of 26. To my surprise a great deal of it has occurred outside the classroom. While classroom learning is invaluable, the lessons learned as I have lived my life are equally rewarding.

Throughout my life since setting goals and beginning college I have learned a great deal. Life lessons have enhanced my traditional education while furthering my experiential knowledge. I have learned from adversity as well as college professors. All the while, one enhances the other. As I gain more knowledge from lectures and reading I am able to apply it in my profession and personal life. My knowledge and skills are enhanced by living with purpose and paying attention to the lessons that life has to teach. I am thankful for the opportunity to explore my life time of learning.

As I look back over my life, I realize that I have developed interpersonal communication skills that I deftly use with anyone I meet. Because establishing rapport is so important in my work I take it very seriously and use and remember individuals names to demonstrate my sincerity. Empathy is an unspoken emotion people can read and understand. You cannot fake an emphatic attitude. My life

experience and my sincere desire to help people have pushed me to learn to relate to people. These skills are honed on a daily basis as I fulfill the duties assigned to me and live out my private life. I have sat down and told more people than I can remember that their family member or loved one has died. Or on many occasions talked frankly with my employees about how their actions affect others. Throughout these interactions my skills as a communicator and my ability to relate to people have aided me in delivering my message while not alienating the individual.