

Good morning. I'm Kyrie, your co-head of the DEI Council and senior class representative. Like many of you, actually, most of you guys may agree, school is stressful: tests, homework, friends, college applications, and teenage drama. But whenever I feel burned out, my mom always consoles me by saying that I'm already better than my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, my great-great-grandfather... That list can go all the way back to when China was founded because none of my ancestors has ever received a high school diploma in the last 5,000 years of Chinese history.

My dad grew up in an impoverished village. Most of his family members were farmers. He dropped out of school when he was 16 and started to work in a factory. He is a problematic drinker. Every time he gets drunk, he tends to be really loud, which always embarrasses me when I see all of the other parents talking in a quiet, cultured manner. My dad also has a nicotine addiction; he will smoke a whole pack of cigarettes in one day if you don't stop him. As for his second-hand smoke, trust me you definitely don't want to breathe it. My dad is not a cool dad, not one of those who went to Harvard Law School or Stanford, not one of those who looks like Chris Evans or Ryan Gosling.

So, as I grew up, I intentionally directed my life away from his, his deviation from normalcy, so I could fit in with my friends whose parents were well-educated and behaved in a good manner, so I wouldn't be the "inferior" one compared to my peers.

But things started to change on my middle school graduation night. My dad was sincerely happy that night. He stumbled around the room with a glass of beer high in his hand, loudly bragging to every guest in the restaurant and yelling, "My son's going to high school! A high school in America!" He drank for hours until his elation lapsed into drowsy mumbling. I took us home. When the elevator rose with a shudder, he staggered and put his arm on my shoulder to balance. It occurred to me at that moment that he was neither a successful businessman nor an uneducated man, but he was just my dad. I cleared my throat and asked him the question that had been nagging me for years, "So why did you drop out of school?"

“There was never a why. It was just normal.” He took the last puff of his cigarette, then threw it on the floor and stubbed it out with his shoes. “No one went to high school in my village. They were farmers,” he said as if going to college is the abnormality that left me wondering what he meant by that. And all of the sudden, I realized that for all these years, I mistook my privileged upbringing as “normal,” while I was unaware that my dad’s normal was different. I asked myself if I was embarrassed about my dad’s educational background while refusing to see his hard work to bring the family from the little village to Beijing; it just sounds a bit hypocritical, doesn’t it? And think about it in another way, it is actually more impressive for him to get to the position that he’s at right now, given his family background.

I realized my dad and I are more alike than I thought. At the age of 16, we both left what we knew: him, his village, and me, my apartment in Beijing, for a new environment where we were complete strangers. But the stories aren’t necessarily the exact same, because while he left home to survive, I had a choice, a choice that was created for me by my dad’s struggles long ago. And so I’m going here, not with words of wisdom or a lesson of life, but questions for all of you: “When you have those choices in your hand, what will you do with them? Will you benefit yourself, your families, your community, or the world? What will you do with your choices?”

Thank you.