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Rising above

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College means starting fresh and a chance to redefine yourself unless life has already defined you.

Maria Cline remembered being very nervous when she entered Iowa State this fall, but not because she was nervous about living on her own, going out into the real world or making money to live on.

She had already done all of that and more.

The animal ecology major was more concerned about making a new life for herself because she wanted to do better than what she had been given.

She describes herself as a quiet kid growing up, but she really liked school because it offered her a way out of home — for a little while. She excelled and hated to miss even a single day. She was also highly involved in extracurriculars: cheerleading, soccer, track, FFA, marching band, concert band, the list goes on. She thought of college “here and there,” but she wasn’t sure if it was something she wanted to do.

“I remember watching the ‘Choose your adventure at Iowa State’ commercials, and always thought, ‘I wonder if I will go there. That would be pretty cool.’”

She found school to be easy. She participated in talented and gifted programs and took advantage of dual credit courses offered by the nearby community college.

Sigourney High School offered students a chance to enroll in two-year programs offered by the community college completely paid for. She decided to do welding because she enjoyed it during an exploratory class in junior high. She was the only girl in her program, but she ended up being top in her class, got third place in a state-wide welding competition and received a welding certificate with her high school diploma.

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She was born when her parents were still in high school. A couple of years later, her sister Heather was born followed by her younger brother Jon. Despite not being picturesque parents, the couple raised their three children. Maria says there was always a roof over her head, they had their own beds to sleep in and there was always food in their bellies. Still, the vices of her parents were not too far out of mind.

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Maria stayed involved with band figure for her,” Meier says. “The older she got and the more I found out about Maria’s home life. Her band teacher, Jessica Meier, started her on the flute when she was in fifth grade. She remembers her as being very quiet and obedient. Their teacher and stayed that way until her graduation.

Maria’s band teacher, Jessica Meier, says the thing she admires most about Maria is her strength and work ethic. She describes herself as a quiet kid growing up, but she really liked school because it offered her a way out of home — for a little while. She excelled and hated to miss even a single day. She was also highly involved in extracurriculars: cheerleading, soccer, track, FFA, marching band, concert band, the list goes on. She thought of college “here and there,” but she wasn’t sure if it was something she wanted to do.

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“Unfortunately, with children raising children, you see a lot of things that you shouldn’t at such a young age,” she says.

She witnessed a lot of drug and physical abuse and decided she didn’t want to live that kind of life. She felt college was one of the steps needed to make sure she didn’t continue living the same lifestyle.

Maria’s band teacher, Jessica Meier, started her on the flute when she was in fifth grade. She remembers her as being very quiet and obedient. Their relationship was typical of a student and teacher and stayed that way until her graduation. However, Meier eventually found out about Maria’s home life.

“The older she got and the more I knew she was having troubles at home, I tried to be more of a mother figure for her,” Meier says.

Maria stayed involved with band until graduation — it was one of few extracurriculars she kept. Her senior year, however, she tried to quit to make more time for work.

“I wouldn’t let her, but worked with her to make sure she made as many band commitments as she could while still working outside of school and getting quality grades in her classes,” Meier says.

Meier says the thing she admires most about Maria is her strength and work ethic.

Maria always believed her parents weren’t perfect for each other. She would secretly pray that they would divorce to make the situation better. When she was fifteen, Maria began to notice that her dad was missing a lot of work. He would often lock himself in his bedroom, or he just wouldn’t be home. She said this was different behavior, but definitely didn’t expect what happened.

“He literally left,” she says. “He quit his job, took his stuff and left. No

money, not even a phone call for months. I was angry. Very angry.”

Unfortunately, Maria’s father was the breadwinner of the household.

“So when he left, so did his income,” she says.

She knew her mother wouldn’t be able to financially provide for three children, so Maria got her first part-time job to help. She had done odd jobs like some chores for elderly family friends, babysitting and shoveling snow off of the sidewalks in the winter for a little money. Unlike most fifteen-year-olds, Maria felt it was an absolute necessity to get stable work.

She soon found a job at Walker’s, a local ice cream shop. She only made approximately six dollars an hour but compensated by working more than fifty hours a week. Most of the money went to help the family. Fortunately, the ice cream shop was seasonal and didn’t open until April so she didn’t have to worry about balancing school as much. She was still involved with various extracurriculars that she worked around.

Meanwhile, she also tried to make sure that her younger siblings didn’t feel their dad’s absence as much as she and her mother did. Maria made her own efforts to try and get the entire family to do fun things outside the home to help occupy everyone’s minds.

“At first I didn’t understand how [my mother] could be so heartbroken over some monster,” she says, “but then I realized — it was her first love. It’s all she ever knew.”

Maria did her best to fill her father’s shoes both financially and emotionally.

Maria Cline’s interest in animals has led to several breeding businesses and many different kinds of pets.
Her siblings were at the forefront of her mind. The first Christmas after he had left, her mother spent what money she had on keeping the house. Maria took care of buying the Christmas presents that year, spending over $3,000 — earned from picking up extra shifts at her part-time jobs.

Work began to consume her. After the ice cream shop closed at the end of summer, she was hired at Subway. She dropped many of her extracurriculars and skipped a few days of school here and there to pick up extra shifts. She still maintained a 3.83 GPA and filled her shelves with various honors and awards.

“To me, high school was easy,” she said. “I did homework on my breaks at work, but tried to get most of it done during school. I just worked really hard in both aspects of life. It was exhausting sure, but I knew I had to do it. I had two younger siblings looking up at me.”

She continues, “I never felt the need to party either like the other kids. My priorities were different. Go to school, work, sleep and repeat.”

Maria initially got her female hedgehog, Peanut, as a birthday gift for her younger brother. Over time, the hedgehog became hers. Her interest in animals continued to grow as she acquired a male hedgehog named George. She thought breeding the two would be cool.

The idea bloomed into a full-fledged business. She bought more hedgehogs and owned eight adults at one point. She operated through a Facebook fanpage named “Maria’s Hedgies.” The largest litter ever produced was six and she sold every single one.

“It was really fun. I loved raising baby hogs, but it also became stressful once the business grew and there was a higher demand,” she says.

The business grew too large for a high school student with another part-time job to manage. By this time, she was preparing for college and needed to shift her focus to that. One by one she sold all of her hedgehogs besides her original two, Peanut and George. Peanut passed away in July of this year and George followed in October.

During the time she was operating her business, she took in other animals. She took in a lot of abandoned animals and “rehomed” most of them — these include a fully grown iguana, a cockatiel, a bearded dragon, various guinea pigs, rabbits, mice and cats. Currently, she owns a brindle pit bull named Harley Quinn, two Siberian huskies Ivy and Bruce, a cat, a bearded dragon, an iguana, two rats and a few fish. She also maintains her own Dubia roach colony to feed her bearded dragon.

Maria initially got Ivy as a Christmas present. Bruce followed because he was in need of a home. The idea of breeding them wasn’t her first thought, but she used her knowledge of breeding hedgehogs to breed puppies. Ivy is a smaller husky and only produced two litters of two puppies each. They all found homes, but Maria has since ended that operation as well.

“I DIDN’T WANT TO KEEP WATCHING IVY GO THROUGH THE PROCESS, SHE’S MY BABY, I DIDN’T LIKE SEEING HER GOING THROUGH THE BIRTHING PROCESS.” MARIA SAYS.

Maria has maintained her love of animals throughout her childhood, but doesn’t want to operate on or see animals in pain. Instead of pursuing a veterinary career yet still wanting to work with animals, she wants to focus on wildlife care.

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After her father had left, Maria’s boyfriend Robert began to help out. He was constantly over at the house, helping with housework and with the bills. Eventually, Robert moved in.

“My mom was fine with it, probably because he was another body to bring in income and help with the house,” she says.

However, as time went on, the couple found a house of five to be too crowded and too much to maintain. Maria and her boyfriend decided that they made a stable income

MARIA CLINE’S INTEREST IN ANIMALS HAS LED TO SEVERAL BUSINESSES AND MANY DIFFERENT KINDS OF PETS.
to support themselves and that it would bring down her mother’s bills. So Robert began looking at apartments to rent.

Maria intended to move in with him, but her mother was reluctant. This was mainly because her mother wanted to continue to help and, as Maria felt, didn’t want to see another member of the family leave the house. However, she relented and, at sixteen, Maria moved out on her own with Robert.

“There was a lot more freedom, which any kid would love, but a lot more adult responsibility that none of my friends understood,” she said.

This also meant moving the animals. Sigourney has a breed-specific ordinance against pit bulls, so her first landlord told her she needed to remove the dog. She only walked her at night because the police would often question her. This prompted Maria to look for housing outside of Sigourney. They found and settled in a place roughly thirty miles away although Maria continued to work and attend the same school.

When she got accepted into Iowa State, she found it difficult to find affordable pet-friendly housing close to Ames. She found a house for rent outside of Roland, and continues to commute to campus from there.

“We left everything we built for ourselves to move up here. We had to start all over again. I moved two hours away from my family, so I was pretty lonely,” she said.

She switched jobs to the Subway in Story City. “It was something I was comfortable with, and really good at,” she says.

“Being an off-campus freshman, I really haven’t made any friends other than the short conversations I have with the people sitting next to me in lecture,” she says.

She hopes to be able to graduate as soon as possible and to be able to have a stable job she enjoys. She hopes to own her own home for the pure fact that she won’t have to worry if her children — her animals — will be accepted or not.

Recently, Robert was offered a full-time job as Maria has cut down on hours to focus on adjusting to college. They’ve discussed the possibility of Maria quitting work completely to focus on school. And, as of late October of this year, the two are engaged.

She’s excited about the possibilities after she finishes school — for herself and for her family.

“I WANT TO SETTLE DOWN WITH A CAREER I’M PROUD OF, AND SHOW MY SIBLINGS THAT THEY CAN DO IT TOO.”