

Cecilia Orphan's Story of How

I can't say that the work I do now is something I chose. In some ways it chose me and in other ways it was what I was raised to do. My parents did not have a college education but they believed in higher learning. They also believed that each person has a specific calling to fulfill, and that this calling is often related to making the world a better place. In high school I was involved in Speech and Debate, Student Leadership, and I founded the school's Political Awareness Club. I itched to turn 18 and be able to vote in elections and serve on juries, and I had discovered that my calling was to work in some way or another to improve and protect U.S. democracy. So I went to college even though I had to work 60+ hours per week to put myself through. I majored in political science and had aspirations to be a human rights lawyer or a politician. During my senior year I took a service-learning class on poverty and literacy, and I realized that educational opportunity was an important part of my passion and calling.

At some point in college I figured out that instead of working in coffee shops and fast food restaurants to fund my education, I could do work I found more meaningful and still pay the bills. That's when I got involved with Portland State University's Center for Academic Excellence and served as a liaison for the university's community/university partnerships. There I was supervised by two people who have become my dearest friends and mentors: Kevin Kecskes and Amy Spring. Kevin and Amy taught me the importance of building relationships the people you work with. They also taught me to push past perceived barriers when doing public work. For Kevin and Amy, a 'No' did not mean no. They'd often take someone declining to participate in a project or fund their work as an invitation to retool the idea and ask again.

Kevin and Amy were the ones who helped me land my first job out of college directing the American Democracy Project. I was hired into this position which was likely over my head, but with the guidance and mentorship of my boss, George Mehaffy, I grew and so did the Project. George taught me many lessons, and all of these lessons he imparted with pithy, East Texas adages. George taught me to 'measure twice, cut once,' to 'dance with who brung ya,' and to trust my instincts. I spent five years in this position and loved every minute of it. It was exhilarating to be involved with a new Project, experiencing the growing pains and joys that came with being a one-woman team running a national initiative.

At some point I reached the height of my professional development within the Project, and so George, using another Texan saw, said it was time to move, 'onward and upward.' And so I applied to graduate school. Initially I wanted to get a PhD in political science or a law degree. George kept saying I should look into doctoral programs in higher education, "if equity, access and democracy are what you really care about," and so after applying and being admitted to a few programs that just didn't feel right, I applied to Michigan and Penn's higher education programs. When I visited Penn and met with my now advisor Matt Hartley, I had a gut feeling that this was the right next step for me so I accepted their admissions offer and moved to Philly.

Now I am in the middle of working on my dissertation studying the role of open-admissions universities and colleges in upward mobility and the facilitation of regional democracy. There are a number of other people along the way I could mention in this telling of my story of how, but the space and time won't allow for a complete accounting of all who guided, inspired and supported me. What they all have in common, though, is a deep conviction that everyone has a public calling and that life is about following this calling. They are my guide and compass when

schoolwork seems impossible and job prospects after graduation nil. They keep me inspired and fed as I continue on the path to fulfilling my purpose.

For those looking to find their calling, I recommend that you figure out what that thing is that keeps you up at night, that pisses you off, that inspires you. That thing that puts butterflies in your stomach. That's the issue you're meant to address. After you figure out what it is, find others who have the same burn in their bellies. Attach yourself to them, force them to mentor you, and use them as a guide in your journey to achieving your calling. Always trust your instincts. Don't take 'no' for an answer. Work hard, harder than you ever thought possible. And more than anything, enjoy the ride. You may not know now where it'll take you but trust it'll be exactly where you're meant to be.