



*Maya Rose Phillips*

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With the help of God's grace, my journey as an undergrad is almost coming to an end. Fall 2015 will be my last semester here at Valdosta State University. This experience is one that I will forever cherish and add to the ongoing memories of my life. Being an African-American woman, I made it my priority to excel while going beyond societal standards set for my race/gender. I hold myself to high morals and I am very proud of what I have accomplished thus far into my college career. I will be graduating December 12, 2015 with my Bachelors of English and my minor in African-American Studies. I currently am the Vice President of the Sigma Tau Delta, English Honors Society, the secretary for Habitat for Humanity Collegiate Chapter, the secretary/parliamentarian for Phi Alpha Delta Pre-Law Fraternity, International, and I am a proud member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I currently have a 3.02 GPA and have had the honor of making the Dean's List. One of my biggest accomplishments occurred last year when I was awarded the 2015 Student of the Year for the African-American Studies Department at their annual Sanfoka Graduation Ceremony. I am humbly blessed, accepting, and proud of every accomplishment for it was not at all easy to obtain.

### *Freshman Year & Sophomore Year* (Caterpillar Stage)-

Freshman year of college I began my undergraduate experience at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. I had a work study job, a new Nissan Altima 2006 named Pepper, and I had to successfully transition from a high school student to a college student. I decided to entitle freshman year/sophomore year as my "Caterpillar Stage" of my undergraduate experience and of my life as a young lady. Going from being in high school in Jonesboro, GA to going to college in Orangeburg, SC was very nerve-wrecking. I knew that I did not know anyone besides my stepmom who granted me my work study job; therefore I would start out not having any friends. South Carolina State University is a traditional legacy school for my family. Many of my family members graduated from or attended South Carolina State University. My grandfather, my grandmother, my mother, my step-mother, cousins, and the list could go on all graduated from South Carolina State University. Therefore, I had big shoes to fill and everyone was excited except for me. Move-in day I experienced every feeling other than pure excitement. Don't get me wrong I was very excited, but my nerves overwhelmed any other positive feeling I had.

After move-in day was over and my mother left, reality set in and I was in for a rude awakening. I barely ever got up for my early 8am classes, I was always at work, and when I got off it was time to do fun things on campus. Who had time for homework when there were so many fun activities going on? Not Maya! I began to slack off in school, expecting it to be like high school and it definitely was not. I made good grades in a few classes, but I knew I was not coming to class regularly. A good way into the semester, I ran for Miss Freshman. I put my all into running, the campaign, and my platform. I wanted to win so bad that I failed to prioritize things and my focus was solely on winning. The day the winner was announced, after not hearing my name being called, it sank in my mind that I lost. Losing Miss Freshman was one of

the best things to happen to me. It helped mold me into a better woman and I realized I could not win everything. How could I represent the school as Miss Freshman when I was not focused on my studies or school work? Running for Miss Freshman allowed me to see that I had to prioritize my school work and place my focus on the right things. I did not win Miss Freshman and I still had those bad grades I made when running was the only thing on my mind. Therefore, it also taught me to never have a “C” average as an undergrad again. I was always on the A & B Honor Roll in High school and I transferred from South Carolina State University with a 2.0 GPA.

Sophomore year I transferred to Valdosta State University. This year is somewhat of a continuation year to freshman year because I was still in a transition phase. Unlike sophomore year, I did not have a car or a work study job. I did, however, have a good number of friends; even my best friend from high school went to Valdosta State. This year I spent a good amount of time having fun and going out. Even though I had more time to balance school work, I was always at my friend’s house spending time with them. My grades began to progress, but they progressed slowly. I moved from a “C” average, to a “B”/”C” average. I joined a few organizations on campus and I began to emerge as a student who was trying to get on the right track. Unfortunately, I faced very hard challenges and had to overcome a few obstacles in my personal life. These obstacles I faced were unexpected. They tested my maturity, my strength, and my ability to withstand negativity. Once I overcame each hurdle, I confidently and respectfully made it on my way to the finish line of junior year.

### *Junior Year* (Cocoon Stage):

Junior year of college can be summarized as my cocoon stage. Similar to a caterpillar transitioning in its cocoon stage, I isolated myself in a way. I isolated myself from going out with my friends, constantly spending time at school events, and the other distractions I experienced during my first few years of college. Junior year became the complete opposite of freshman and sophomore year. Junior year of college was also when one of the most insulting situations happened between me and a professor. One of my professors asked me in class, “Maya, what is one of your goals in life?” I replied with, “One of my ultimate goals in life is to become a successful lawyer.” My professor sarcastically asks the entire class, “Do any of you know how many Valdosta State University graduates get accepted into Harvard Law School?” No one in the class knew the answer therefore no one responded. My professor then quickly replied with, “Well. . . I don’t know either, but I would assume not very many. \*chuckles\*” As much as I wanted to go off on my teacher for insulting my dreams and trying to deter me from my goals, I just couldn’t. I had to be an adult, I had to be a bigger person, and I had to use this as my motivation. I had absolutely no interest in going to Harvard Law School, but she tried to put me down. She tried to make me second guess what I want to do in life, but this made me want to excel even greater in life than I had originally intended. This conversation between me and my professor made me work even harder towards making good grades. To prove to her and anyone else that doubts my ability to make my dream come true, that I will be a successful lawyer. I can honestly say that my room in Converse became my cocoon. I spent so much time in my room

and to myself that my grades improved tremendously. I still made time to hang out with my friends, but I prioritized my time. I managed my time on a daily basis, to the point where everything began to run smoothly for me. Junior year is when I first got recognized as being a part of the Dean's List. I was also first introduced to the wonderful, scholarly African-American Studies Department and minor program. Being apart of this department positively changed my perspective of this university and changed my overall undergraduate experience. I loved every single class I took under the African American Studies Department and I declared as my minor.

### *Senior Year*-(Butterfly Stage):

Senior year for me personally has to be the best year of my undergraduate experience. Going into senior year I was motivated, determined, wiser, and ready to take on my last year as an undergraduate student. I was almost finished with my minor in African-American Studies and I was under the assumption that I was close to finishing my major in English as well. I was heavily involved on campus in organizations with numerous executive board positions. I even organized my own independent protest on campus called "Stop & Get Informed: Silent Protest for Human Trafficking Victims" to bring awareness to this international issue. I was supposed to be graduating in May 2015, since I began school in August 2011, until one day when I went to meet with my academic advisor. Under the assumption that I was meeting with him to get my remaining class schedule for spring 2015 registration, I was overly excited and anxious. All of these positive feelings were washed away with an overflow of my tears when my advisor told me that I would not be graduating in May. He explained that I had a good amount of classes left that I would not be able to finish in one semester. When he told me this my face immediately became hot and my tears were cold. Upset could not precisely describe how intensely disappointed I was for not graduating when I was supposed to. I called my mom, crying to her about what just happened. An epiphany occurred when she assured me that, "Everything happens for a reason baby, this is all in God's plan." At that moment, I realized that she was right and that I had to turn this situation into a positive one. My senior year I made the Dean's List both semesters and spring semester I made all A's. I could not believe that I had a semester GPA of a 4.0! Towards the end of the semester I participated in the 2015 Annual Sanfoka Graduation Ceremony sponsored by the African-American Studies Program. This is where I, out of everyone there, receive the award for the 2015 Student of the Year. I was humbled and proud of myself for everything that I accomplished during this last year. Shortly after my last year I was offered an internship with the Lowndes County Solicitor-General's Office and a Student Assistant job with the African-American Studies Department; two things I would not have had the opportunity to experience had I graduated in May 2015. I became overjoyed because I realized at that moment that I was no longer the "caterpillar" freshman young girl. I was now Maya Rose Phillips, the beautiful "butterfly" senior that grew into being a mature young woman. This made everything I experienced in college, good and bad, all worth it.



## *Maya's Advice-*

My advice to all upcoming undergraduate students is to give yourself room for growth. You are not going to be perfect and that is okay. As long as you stay focused and on top of your school work, you will emerge into a beautiful young woman or a handsome young man. Remember that you must balance your time, prioritize, and manage your schedule. Once you have mastered this, get involved on campus and in your local community. Be mindful that first impressions really are everything and you want to be remembered in a positive way. And one of the main things I want you to remember is that you should NEVER, EVER let anyone deter you from your goals/dreams in life. Go after what you want because you are capable of that and more! One of my favorite quotes that I live by every day and one you should keep in mind is from Oprah Winfrey which says: "Honor your calling. Everyone has one. Trust your heart, and success will come to you."





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