

I was widowed at age 21 in Canada with a young child to raise. At the time of my partner's death, I was halfway through my undergraduate degree. His death shattered my world and left me in a state of shock and grief for many months. I was barely able to concentrate on my studies, but could not afford to take a break and did not have much family support, so pushed through. I graduated with a bit better than a passing average, despite having had an excellent GPA in my first two years.

My dream had been to go to graduate school, and when I felt ready I looked for Masters degree programs that interested me, including a letter with my application explaining the reason for my poor grades, but every time I applied, I would be rejected. I was told to go back to university and complete another year to raise my GPA, which was out of the question as I was already paying off a massive student loan while raising my son.

I grew depressed and my self-esteem and self-worth suffered as I saw peers I had been excelling against at the start of my degree, overtaking me and completing doctorates while I languished as a lab technician, a job I found interesting and provided some stability, but which ultimately I found unfulfilling. My belief in myself suffered and I started to believe I just wasn't smart enough to do a higher degree. I felt trapped and stunted. This led me to many years in therapy and affected all my relationships in a negative way. There were limited options in my scientific field to advance without a graduate degree. My son and I lived for years in a 2 room flat and I slept on the sofa in the living room and visited the food bank regularly in early years so that I could pay back my loan on my low salary.

Over the years there were periods when I would think there might be some hope and apply to a different Masters program, only to be faced with another rejection letter. I could not see a way to surpass this and I felt an extreme sense of injustice and betrayal that I was not able to pursue an education in one of the most wealthy countries in the world, that claimed to have equal rights for all.

A few years after I moved to the UK, I decided to try again, thinking this nation might be more progressive and compassionate. I researched and applied for an MSc programme that interested me, and included a letter explaining the reason for my poor grades. In addition I pointed out that I had been working in a closely related field for over 20 years and hoped that my experience could make up for any lack now that so much time had passed. Again I received a rejection letter due to my poor GPA from all those years ago. Again I felt angry and frustrated at the lack of understanding of my background and situation. It wasn't fair that other students were granted the right to pursue their education but I was expected to jump through many more almost insurmountable hoops just because I was a widow. Losing my partner should have been enough but instead, further roadblocks were put in front of me by the education system.

During this time I had learned about Widows Rights International, a UK based nonprofit, non-governmental organisation working in the field of human rights for widows worldwide. WRI campaigns for and protects the human rights of widows, and works to raise awareness of social exclusion, poverty and discrimination widows often face and engage with different government bodies to influence these harmful policies and practices.

I wondered if they might be able to help me fulfil my dream of pursuing my education and approached them to see if they could write a letter on my behalf to the programme director. I was extremely afraid that I was asking too much, that their help was not for people like me, women in wealthy countries, it was for widows in much more dire straits. However they agreed to appeal my application to the university and a number of weeks later, I received

notification that I had been accepted into the programme I applied for. I am now halfway through my degree programme and excelling. A huge piece of my confidence has returned all these years later and even though I am in the later part of my professional life, I am excited to see where this road takes me.

I will be eternally grateful for Widows Rights International for helping me to pursue justice when I had run out of hope. I only wish such an organisation could have existed in Canada, it would have made a big difference for the life of my family.

There is still more that needs to be done to raise awareness for the roadblocks and stigma that widows face, even in 'Western' countries, as a result of antiquated policies and practices. WRI is helping to bridge these gaps and improving the lives of widows and their families everywhere.