



Each spring as graduation approaches, we ask students in our various schools and programs to reflect a bit on how they feel about their pending graduation. All of us in Alternative Education are always delighted, humbled and renewed by the comments shared by students. In June of 1989, Sgt. Major Allen Schneider shared his thoughts with us about his graduation at age 45. We offer his words here as both an inspiration to others, age 9 to 90, and as proof that positive action does indeed equal positive accomplishment. To Sgt. Major Schneider, our heartfelt thanks and congratulations. May his timeless words inspire others to strive and achieve.

Paul H. Mills, Director, Alternative and Adult Education, Irvine Unified School District

WHY A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA?!?!?

Over the past several months I devoted a considerable amount of time and effort to studies leading toward a high school diploma. On June 22, 1989 I graduated from Irvine Adult School at the age of forty-five.

Since my graduation, many people have asked my why I returned to high school. They asked why a high school diploma is so important at this stage of my life. I suppose everyone has reasons for doing the things that they do. I had my reasons as well. Initially, I intended to keep my reasons to myself thinking that nobody really cares that a forty-five year old finally went out and graduated. Since, however, I have decided that if my reasons will be of benefit to another non-graduate who may be embarrassed or thinks of a diploma as an impossible goal, I'll gladly share my reasons with them.

Contrary to popular belief, not all high school dropouts are total failures. In spite of my lack of high school diploma, I have enjoyed many successes during my lifetime. I am in the twilight years of a profession in which I have climbed higher than many with a high school diploma and even a college degree. Although I do not hold the highest position possible, I do hold the highest enlisted grade and have successfully done so for the past four years. I have not changed employers in the past twenty-six years. I have been responsible to the Commanding Officer for the discipline, morale, and welfare of as many as twelve hundred Marines. My wife and I raised two children, a responsibility which in itself is a full time job – a job more difficult than that of being a Marine. My children have provided an endless source of pride. Both graduated from high school. Both had above average grades. One graduated with honors among the top ten students in her senior class. The oldest continued his education and is now a computer repair technician. The youngest is now a sophomore, majoring in architectural engineering at California Poly Technical Institute, San Luis Obispo.

Statistically speaking, I would say that I have gone far beyond the employment and social limitations normally associated with the high school dropout. I have never considered any of my successes attributable to a stroke of luck. It should be noted, however, that because I was a dropout, my achievements required a great deal more effort than they probably should have. To “society” the mere thought “dropout” carries with it a stigma which in my case I, the dropout, had to overcome. I never liked that, but it has been a fact of life that our society never lets you the dropout, forget. The dropout's battle is one of constantly having to prove his worth to society. Oftentimes, the dropout is not given that opportunity. Oftentimes, I was not given that opportunity. It does get very frustrating. I would guess that deep within all dropouts is a human spark of resentment toward society. Behind each dropout is a human drama filled with hundreds of real life characters. Those characters often share equally, responsibility for the dilemma the dropout is in.

That responsibility can come in the form of poor parenting, criticism, cynicism, alcoholism, neglect, abuse, and a thousand other reasons. Unfortunately, the perpetrators rarely ever admit or realize that mistakes have been made. The dropout must realize that in spite of his or her upbringing, they now, today, only have themselves to blame. Ours is a progressive, technologically advanced, and fast paced society. There is not time to waste on a dropout who has failed to seize the initiative to help him or herself. As much as we would like it to be otherwise, our society has its flaws. Some get left behind. As with any species on this earth, survival belongs only to those who prepare.

Having read the foregoing, many people would surmise that I have been a success, that I have overcome a lot of obstacles, and perhaps even that my life's mission is nearly fulfilled. To some extent, perhaps this is true. Outward appearances can deceive the eye. Although I tried many times, without a high school diploma I was never able to look at myself as a success. I felt just the opposite, like a complete and total failure. Within me stretched a battlefield littered with the smoldering ashes of lost hope, broken dreams, and spent human emotions. As I watched my last child go away to college, more than ever before, I felt like a failure. I knew that this feeling would never go away. I knew that no matter how many successes I amassed in my life, in my mind I would always be a failure because of a gross error in judgment I made a long time ago. I quit school.

For years, I tried to convince myself that I had my reasons for quitting school. In my once youthful mind, each seemed valid at the time. I now know that through all those years, I was only fooling myself. Over the years, my reasons lost their significance. Where I once blamed others, there is now only me, my failure exposed. The day to blame others ended on the day I quit school. I also realized that my decision to quit school was the first independent decision of my life. For whatever reason, I fouled it up and the decision has haunted my subconscious mind every day since. This is why I returned to high school. I knew that only I had the power to undo this source of agony, this unshakable thorn in my side.

I came to grips with my feelings of failure. I returned to high school. I graduated. It was among the proudest days of my life. To many people, a high school diploma may seem like an insignificant accomplishment. To me, it represents many things. It represents the culmination of twenty-eight years of struggle for self-respect. It represents a release from twenty-eight years of heartache, frustration, and countless lost opportunities. It represents a new beginning. Where there once was not telling how far I might have gone, there now is no telling how far I will go.

If anyone is thinking about quitting school, my advice is simple, don't. You will regret that decision every day of your life. You may fool others, but you cannot fool yourself. Throughout my life's battle, I found that I have been my own worst enemy, all along.

If you have already quit school, age sixteen or sixty, my advice is also simple. Go back – today! If in doubt, consider the fact that you have never, nor will you ever hear anyone say, “I regret having graduated from high school” My first steps toward the education office were somewhat difficult, awkward, and I suppose a little embarrassing. I took them anyway, I have no regrets. My high school diploma is among my proudest possessions. Its issuance completes my human drama which otherwise had no end. Size the initiative, stow the excuses, and get your high school diploma – Now.

Sincerely,

Allan J. Schneider

Sergeant Major, USMC (Ret.)