Personal Inquiries
concerning
A Return to Programming

February the tenth, 2024, I decided to finally revisit programming after a long hiatus. I told myself I'd keep programming every single day until I couldn't anymore. Over two years later, I'm still here, and I don't have plans of stopping.

August of 2019 I began my freshman year of university studying computer science. I was a lifelong tinkerer, and one of those people who inherently knew what they wanted to pursue for a career. Programming was always that for me. I was excited. Freedom from parental rule, room to explore, and opportunity to grow my knowledge base. I was living in a big city hours away from home with no familiar faces. But none of that seemed to matter to me. For the first two months, I was doing well. I made friends, found a routine, and was generally doing well for myself. I'd go to the local skatepark almost every day and made quick friends with many of the people there. Everything felt right for once, but that changed fast. One night after coming back to my apartment, I got a call from a friend back home. He told me one of our close friends had took his own life two months into his time in the Coast Guard Academy. I was crushed. I took the train home, attended the funeral, and was thrown right back into my studies.

A few weeks later, one of my roommates and I decided to get dinner in a part of the city near the skatepark I frequented. We were walking back to the car after eating and heard multiple gunshots ring from the direction of the skatepark. I told my roommate I needed to make sure my friends from the park were okay. As I approached the skatepark I saw some of my friends running out of the park. Others were crying and screaming from across the block. Laying on the corner of the block was one of my friends, bleeding out from multiple gunshot wounds. I was frozen. This was a kind man. Shot down over gang violence. My roommate pulled me away and took me home. I couldn't shake that image from my head.

At this point my grades started slipping. I couldn't focus. I ignored assignments, struggled to get out of bed, and felt very alone. Midterms were coming up, and I already felt that I had fell behind significantly. A week before the exams, I noticed the entire bottle of my ADHD medication was missing. I spiraled thinking I somehow misplaced it, but I was always extremely careful with my medications due to the difficulty in getting them while living out of state. I learned one of my roommates had broke into my safe and took them to sell to other students. I filed a police report and everything and nothing was done. The exams went about as well as one would think. My grades were slipping, and I was in a very dark place. The university's mental health services were little to no help either.

My first semester came to a close, and while home for the holidays I received a letter from my university. They informed me I wouldn't be allowed to return for my second semester unless I could explain the reason for my grades slipping. I was told there would be a meeting to discuss this when I returned to campus. When the time came, I walked into a room of eight members of the board all staring back at me. At 19 years old, I stood in front of all of them and explained everything that happened during that last semester. When I finished they all stared blankly at me for a second before expressing their sympathy. I felt sick and exposed. My personal struggles aired out to a room full of adult strangers. With that, I was allowed to attend my second semester under academic probation.

Second semester was short lived. Students were quickly sent home due to the rising threat of the pandemic. I moved back home in the midst of my parents' divorce. During this time, I lived with my immunocompromised mother. I couldn't work for some time because of the uncertainty of everything and the risk of infecting my mother. I struggled to pay bills and get by. Eventually, I started working again.

I first started doing food delivery, then serving tables, and eventually became a barista for nearly four years. But I wasn't happy. I tried to go back to community college multiple times with no success. I eventually began to explore

other options. I worked as a boat mechanic for a short period until a negligent coworker accidentally discharged a firearm in the shop. During this time, another one of my close friends took his own life. This was someone I spent years with. Someone I played music with in my high school band. A real friend. I was tired. I had to bury three friends in a little over a year and had no direction in my life. I felt I was doing myself a disservice. Like I was selling myself short working all these seemingly dead-end jobs. I finally decided I was going to try again. But this time I wanted to do things my way.

The Return

I quit my job, and began teaching myself. I vowed to program every single day until I couldn't anymore. I spent the next year and a half doing exactly that. I lived off savings for as long as I could to focus on this. I earned certifications, learned new languages and frameworks, and built everything I could possibly think of. Soon enough, I had a solid work portfolio, strong network, and an online community I grew. I began contributing to open source projects, and started to feel like I was finding my tribe. I carried around a decade old ThinkPad workstation like it was my pacifier. I programmed on weekends, vacations, and late nights. I let it consume me. Eventually, I found a corporate IT job. While this wasn't exactly what I wanted to do, this was a great step in the right direction and another door opened for someone without a completed degree. Eventually, my contract ended, and I was back hunting for jobs again.

After searching for some time, I landed another contract job. This time it was data analyst work for a med-tech startup company. I was thrilled. Small team, incredible minds, and I was contributing to something positive. Here I was, with no degree, working with former NASA engineers and globally recognized scientists; and I was holding my own with them. I finally got to fire on all cylinders. Startup culture gave me the freedom to make meaningful contributions and really show the scope of what I could do. Peerless for so long, I finally felt like I found people that understood me. More than that, it confirmed the legitimacy of all the work I put in over the last year-plus. I had no way of knowing how far I progressed or if I was equipped to work in a professional setting prior to this contract. Even if I wasn't aiming to be a data analyst long-term, this job was another stepping stone, and validation for all my efforts.

My work is far from done. I'm sure there will be far more struggles in my future, and many more challenges. All this to say, never give up on yourself. Build every chance you get. Talk to anyone that will listen. Learn everything you can. I found that your childhood self sometimes knows you better than your current self. Close that gap and follow whatever drives you to be better. You won't regret it.

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