

**The transformative power of a post-secondary education
Kwantlen Faculty Association (KFA) content submission
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I can still see the serious look on my father's face. He sat me down and asked the question that would motivate my educational pursuits for years to come: "Doctor or lawyer?" I was six years old.

My parents both immigrated to Canada from Europe. They worked hard and were determined their children would enjoy the educational experiences that had eluded them. Growing up, they told my siblings and me that education could change us for the better. It could open doors of opportunity, help us achieve our highest career ambitions, and ensure people would respect our ideas. All of this was possible as long we worked hard...and went to university.

I'd always loved school but post-secondary was a revelation to me. The discussions, the ideas, the brilliant professors, the opportunity to ask tough questions all had me hooked. I thrived in this environment, but also became painfully aware of my own sheltered perspective. I knew my parents (and grandparents) had come to Canada from other parts of the world, and I deeply loved my Italian-German heritage. But, despite witnessing it first-hand, I didn't really understand the immigrant experience. I also didn't fully appreciate the hard-fought opportunities I enjoyed as a woman.

It was at university that I started to make some strong realizations. I learned women had spent decades fighting for the same rights I took for granted. In my history classes, I became obsessed with reading and writing about the feminist movement. I was also consumed with the 1960s Civil Rights marches in America, and studied extensively the unique challenges of immigrants to Canada in the first part of the twentieth century.

By the time I was in graduate school, I was completely immersed in subjects of social, racial and feminist history. I researched neo-realist film as a window to the female experience in Italy during World War Two (WW2), and dissected the portrayal of race and class in twentieth century popular culture and media. For my Master's thesis, I worked with one of Canada's pre-eminent historians to create a unique piece of research about the struggles of Italian-Canadians in British Columbia during WW2.

My post-secondary education also gave me the opportunity to travel and work abroad. At the University of Toronto, I won an internship for Canadian graduate students. I travelled to Prague, Czech Republic to work for a small publication. This amazing experience propelled me to continue travelling. To date, I've lived and worked in five countries. I know none of these opportunities would have been possible without the connections I encountered at university.

I am now a mother and a teacher. The transformative experiences I had at university are the ones I wish for my daughters and my students. I believe the impact of a post-secondary education is felt long after graduation. Even now, the lectures I design, the books I read, the films I watch, the charities and causes I give my time to, the petitions I sign and the discussions I most enjoy are all informed by what I learned at university.

On January 21, 2017 (my youngest daughter's fourth birthday), I walked alongside thousands of women, men and children at the Vancouver Women's March. I felt so proud to be part of that historic moment – a moment whose social and political complexities were more accessible to me because of my post-secondary studies. My parents always said that university could change us for the better. In my case, it opened my eyes to new ways of thinking and ignited an even greater sense of compassion and accountability for others. It also taught me the lessons of history, which, to this day, inform how I observe and engage with the world, its people and their struggles.