

Growing Through What You Go Through

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First floor, then the second, next is the third floor, after is the fourth, and finally the fifth floor. As I complete my round of each floor in the residence hall, I pass by many doors, and each has a name pinned to it. Behind every door is a story I may never fully know. On every door, there is a name, and behind that name is a student. A student with ambitions, pressures, grief, joy, and many more. As a Resident Assistant(RA) in SMU's Residence Life and Student Housing(RLSH), I have had the privilege, and at times, borne the weight, of being present for these moments. From late-night conversations to emergency calls to celebrations and community events, I have come to realize that the surface rarely tells the full story.

When I first stepped into the RA role, resilience to me was about appearing strong. It was the ability to hold it all together while juggling leadership, academics, and personal life. I believed that resilience was about being the person that others could lean on, even when you are stretched thin. But over time, this belief has drastically evolved. Serving as an RA in RLSH has challenged and reshaped my understanding of strength, leadership, and care. The complexities of our campus community have shown me that every student is also a person who is walking a unique path. Some may be more visible than others, but all are equally deserving of the same compassion and support. Being an RA has provided a new perspective, through which my values have evolved, and I have learned that resilience is not always loud or noticeable; most times, it simply whispers through the action of simply choosing to keep going.

In this essay, I am going to reflect on the community within SMU's Residence Life and Student Housing – the residents, my team, and the broader SMU community. It is through them

and because of them that I have learned what it truly means to lead, care, and, most importantly, to grow.

As I entered my second year of college, I was already balancing academics, professional life, leadership roles, and my personal life and I was very proud of the way I did it. When I accepted the Resident Assistant position, I assumed that I could just build off of what I was already doing, which was pushing through, performing well, and maintaining composure no matter what. As an RA, I expected to be the problem solver that people looked to, who knew the answers, offered the solutions, and remained steady even when others were not. I prepared myself to be available, professional, and resilient. What I did not prepare for, nor was I ready for, was how much I would be impacted. In the early weeks of training and move-in of my first year as an RA, I wanted to do everything right, but under the surface, I was still learning how to have it all together, and that was hard enough. With the added weight of helping residents to navigate their own transitions and journeys, things felt much heavier than I anticipated. In watching my new residents, I began to see that strength and resilience looked very different from what I believed.

The shift in how I came to understand resilience did not occur overnight. It happened gradually through one-on-one conversations, late-night knocks on my door, and observations of the students that I served. I slowly began to realize that the people I was supposed to be helping were impacting me too, simply by being themselves. The wisdom, strength, and bravery that they showed often went unnoticed, but it completely reshaped everything I thought I knew...

- ***Grace*** was one of the first to show me that resilience is not always visible. Grace was the type of student who never missed class, smiled at everyone, and exuded positivity everywhere they went. But one day at the end of the fall semester,

Grace came to my door. Grace had finished finals and was getting ready to go home for the holidays. I asked about their finals and plans for the break. That is when Grace told me about this being their first holiday since losing their father. Grace had not shared this with many people either, but I finally saw the grief that existed beneath their academic excellence and kind personality. This resident's story showed me that resilience is the strength to carry pain and grief silently while maintaining kindness and grace with others.

- ***Courage*** was an international student. While trying to navigate a new school, Courage was also adjusting to a new culture and an unfamiliar language. As an immigrant, I understood the culture shock, and I empathized a lot. At first, there was a struggle to connect, and the language barrier would often prevent Courage from speaking up. Despite the obstacles and discomfort, Courage kept coming to our programs and community events and eventually found their space. Courage showed me that strength is not about being fearless; it is about moving forward and continuing despite the fear.
- ***Honesty*** reminds me of myself. Honesty was a first-generation college student who also worked multiple jobs and was very involved on campus. Unlike me, Honesty did not hide and was very open and vulnerable about their burnout and mental health. Honesty shared how they would lose sleep crying in the middle of the night and then get up the next morning to do it all again. With Honesty, I learned that vulnerability is not a weakness, instead, it is a deeper kind of strength. The kind that makes space for growth.

In each of these residents, I began to see a version of resilience that was more textured and real than the one I had believed in. Every day, these students silently showed up for themselves to navigate their traumas, pressures, and expectations all while trying to meet the high standards that are set by SMU. I started to ask myself why I thought that I had to carry everything on my own. I associated strength with invincibility, but Grace, Courage, Honesty, and so many others showed me that community does not mean leading without need. Community is showing up with your whole self, and trusting that others can meet you there. In watching my community, I not only witnessed resilience, but I also learned how to live resiliently. I learned that being strong does not make you untouched by struggle, it means being shaped by it and still choosing to grow.

Observing resilience in others was only the beginning for me. The more I supported my residents through their personal battles, the more I began to reflect on my own struggles. I entered the RA position with self-determination and self-sufficiency, thinking that I had to keep my personal struggles tucked away while being available to solve everyone else's. Over time, I realized that the definition I was carrying no longer fit the person I was or the person I was becoming. Like many of my residents, I was also balancing multiple responsibilities – academics, extracurriculars, and three jobs. So, it is not that I did not know struggle. I was just trying to do everything I could to ensure my success, and I felt like I could not afford to slow down, let alone break down. I wore this mindset like armor and I took pride in showing up for others while never letting on that I was also exhausted, overwhelmed, and unsure. But Grace, Courage, and Honesty made me rethink that. Not once did any of them ever ask me to be perfect; they only needed me to be present. Their stories made me realize that strength did not mean silence or emotional distance, and I started to see that real resilience was not just about enduring

quietly; it was also about being honest about what endurance cost me. There were so many nights when I sat in my room wondering if I was doing enough, and there were many mornings when I struggled to find the energy when I felt empty. I slowly gave myself permission to name these feelings.

For the first time, I started to ask for help. I reached out to my co-RAs about the stress I was experiencing, and I took time to rest when I felt overwhelmed. I no longer saw these things as weaknesses anymore; in fact, they felt like some of the most courageous decisions I had ever made. In these moments, I learned that strength is not about being the last one standing; it is about knowing when to lean, when to rest, and when to let yourself be seen. Being an RA truly challenged my self-perception. It broke down walls and peeled back layers, and as a result, I was able to learn through others to become more grounded, more self-aware, and more open to redefining what resilience looked like in my own life.

While my residents have played a pivotal role in my growth, another source of growth was within the community I found with my fellow RAs. When I entered the role, I thought that being a part of the RA team would be more logistical than emotional, and that the other RAs would just be people that I worked with, shared some classes with, and maybe collaborated with on a program or two. I realize now that I completely underestimated the depth of connection and friendship that would eventually grow. We went into training as strangers, simply learning policies and procedures together. As the semester continued, we navigated midnight emergencies, resident crises, and burnout from long weeks. I started to see that they were not just RAs, they were also students trying to figure it out as they went. Our shared experiences led to vulnerability, which became the common language we used to support each other. During move-in, there were brief breaks where someone would say “I’m tired” and others would chime in with

nods and “Me too”. There was never any judgment because we shared an understanding that we were all doing our best in a very demanding role. We always celebrated each other, stepped in to cover if someone needed a break, and created moments of joy amidst the chaos. Through this, I learned that leadership does not exist in isolation. It is sustained by community.

Being a part of the RA team reminded me that accountability and compassion can coexist. We held each other to high standards because we cared about the quality of our work, but we also extended grace to each other when things got difficult. This community has shown me that I do not need to do everything on my own to prove my strength. The duality of expecting excellence while leaving space for humanity has become a value that I carry with me beyond our RA community.

Looking back, I now realize that my definition of resilience has undergone a lot of change. Before I became an RA, I saw resilience as an individual pursuit of pushing through no matter what and refusing to let anyone see through. Over time, this definition has expanded and deepened. Resilience to me now is not about just surviving hardship; it is about how we adapt, how we support others, and most importantly, how we allow ourselves to be supported in return. It is Grace who showed me that you can grieve and still bring joy to those around you. It is Courage who reminded me that stepping into an unfamiliar space alone is an act of strength. It is Honesty who modeled that you can be transparent about your struggles and still show up. And it is me, the person I have grown into because of them. I have grown out of the mindset that needed me to be the strong one at all times, and adopted a mindset that allows me to embrace the strength it takes to let others in. I have become more compassionate, not just towards others, but toward myself. I have learned to rest without feeling guilty, how to set boundaries without shame, and how to lead from a place of empathy rather than perfection. This growth was shaped

by the community I have found in Residence Life and Student Housing. It has been tested in the moments of exhaustion and reaffirmed by solidarity. Every knock, program, and staff meeting has shown me that resilience is a shared experience that does not just carry us, it connects us.

Not only did the RLSH community reinforce my values, but it also rewrote some of them. It made me rethink what strength looks like, what leadership requires, and what it means to be truly present for others and for myself. In doing so, I have been better prepared for the challenges of campus life as well as the challenges of the world beyond college.

As my time in Residence Life and Student Housing comes to an end, I find myself coming back to the lessons that my community has taught me and the values that now inform how I live, how I lead, and how I connect. The person I was when I first entered the RA role was driven, focused, and passionate, but also rigid in my beliefs about strength and leadership. That version of me thought that I had to perform at my best without rest, but now I see that much of that was rooted in my fears of falling short and not being enough in a place that expects the very best. I have learned that excellence and exhaustion are not synonymous, reliability does not mean invincibility, and that true leadership is about integrity, self-awareness, and empathy – not perfection. More than anything, though, I have learned that community is what sustains us.

My time as an RA at SMU has taught me to see people and myself more fully. In many ways, this growth has allowed me to serve more intentionally by understanding what students carry, what they overcome in silence, and how their culture and lived experiences shape their journeys. Instead of leading by assumption, I now lead with curiosity and the goal of understanding, not solving. I have learned to let go of control and trust others to bring their strengths forward. I now recognize that there is value in slowing down and creating space for reflection and care. As a result, I have become a better RA, a better peer, and a better person

because of it. There is a unique type of leadership that comes from understanding struggle, and that is the leader I am becoming. One who does not just hand out advice but listens. One who does not pretend to have all the answers, but knows how to ask better questions. One sees vulnerability as a tool for connection, not a sign of weakness. The lessons I have learned will not end at the doors of my residence hall. As I prepare for the next chapter of my life, I hope to carry these lessons and values with me. I have formed a new sense of purpose and drive to build a more empathetic world, and it has been sharpened from my time at SMU. I know that the world outside of SMU will be full of pressure to return to the old definitions of relentless hustle, worth measured by productivity, and leadership as a title rather than a practice. But thanks to my experiences and time in RLSH, I have already rewritten that narrative, and I now know how to lead with heart and stay grounded in my truth even when external influences try to cloud it.

Now I reflect on the prompt, which asks what community has most profoundly impacted my values, and the answer is clear. It is not just the role of being an RA, but the community that has come with it. The residents who unknowingly held up a mirror and revealed my blind spots, and my team who reminded me that I did not have to be everything all the time, helped me unlearn, relearn, and evolve. This evolution revealed that I am still growing. That I can lead and still learn. That I can help others without losing myself in the process. And most importantly, it has revealed that no matter where I go or what I do, I can always return to a definition of resilience that is much more sustainable, where I can breathe, bend, and invite others in. True growth comes from tension. The tension is real and it is constant, but it is also where the most impactful transformations happen. When you are being pulled in multiple directions and trying to learn how to root yourself. It comes from being challenged, sitting in the discomfort, and showing up the next day having a little more clarity than before.

Overall, this journey has shaped the leader that I am today and the person that I am becoming. What makes this journey even more meaningful is that I have not walked this journey alone, and everything that I have learned has come from my community. From the residents who trusted me enough to be vulnerable with me to my RA team who covered me without question, each person and moment has left an imprint that never could have happened in isolation.

Resilience does not always roar, sometimes, it whispers to “keep going” in the middle of the night. Sometimes, it is simply choosing to show up again and again. That is what SMU gave me, and that is what RLSH has built in me. When I look back on my time at SMU, especially as an RA in RLSH, I know that I did not just grow, I transformed. The lessons I have learned and the values I have instilled, I will carry forward with gratitude, with grace, and with resilience that lasts. They are mine now, and they will guide me for the rest of my life.