When I was in eighth grade my mother wanted to have me tested to see if I was qualified enough to have a mentor. My brother, who was in fourth grade at the time, had been tested to have a high enough IQ score that he could have a mentor at his elementary school, thus so my mother thought it would be interesting to see if she had more than one genius child.

The pass that called me out of class to take the test came during my Differentiated English class that I had with Mrs. Cathy Christiansen. My class was a small one, numbering to about thirteen students, so I knew the class would seem empty without me in it. Mrs. Christiansen walked me out, towards the hallway, after I came to understand what the pass was for. I could tell she wanted to speak with me before I went off to take the multi-hour long WISC. Once we exited the classroom, Mrs. Christiansen closed the door softly behind her and turned to look at me. The expression on her face was serious, but also encouraging, full of strength and compassion.

“Andrew,” she began, looking me straight in the eyes, “the test you are about to take will be a challenging one, and you may have some trouble with it. I want you to know that you can do it. Even if you don’t think you can when you’re taking the test, just remember I believe in you and your abilities, no matter how you end up scoring on the test.” She smiled warmly at me as she finished her pep-talk. Her hand motioned down the hallway towards the library where I was to take the test. I smiled back meekly, trying to summon courage inside myself, drawing from the kind words she had said to me. I then walked to the library, shook hands with the WISC proctor,
and took seemingly endless series of memory, word-association, and pattern-recognition tests. It was nearly four hours before I completed the test and was allowed to go home.

The next day Mrs. Christiansen asked me how the test went. I told her that I thought it was difficult, but that I did well. Unfortunately for me, or rather for my mother, I did not do well enough to qualify me for the mentor program. Although I was identified as gifted, I was not a genius, or even highly gifted, like my younger brother. This news destroyed me. I lost all confidence in myself and began to perceive myself as stupid and incompetent. This new perception I had of myself caused me to lose interest in school and my grades, although they were not outstanding to begin with, began to plummet. I was spiraling out of control.

It was around that time when Mrs. Christiansen called me out into the hallway to talk with her a second time.

“Why are you acting this way?” she asked me. “Why haven’t you turned in your reading assignments this week?” She examined my face, trying to find a hint for why I was giving up in school. My eyes focused on the ground.

I responded quickly, acting as if the answers to her questions were obvious, trying to end the conversation as soon as possible. “It’s not like it makes a difference.” I said “I still won’t be as smart as other people.”

She stood quietly for a minute. I watched her feet tap against the dust hallway floor and I glanced up to see her face contorted, apparently deep in thought. My eyes fell to the floor once again. Finally, after a painstakingly long moment, she spoke.

“Andrew, I need you to listen closely to me. Look at me, please, to show me that you’re listening.” I looked up, directly into her sincere eyes.
She took a deep breath. “I understand you may have not scored as well as you had hoped on your test the other day, and I understand that it may be disappointing for you. You must realize that just because you are not the smartest person in the world doesn’t mean you should give up trying. Do you think any famous person, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Susan B. Anthony, could have achieved the success he or she did by giving up in the face of adversity? You need to understand that intelligence may play a role in your life, in what you study and make a career, but it is not the entire picture. Hard work is just as important to success, and so is passion. Those who live the happiest lives are the ones who live their dreams every day and put their everything into it. Obviously, you are intelligent, maybe not as intelligent as you would hope, but you still are gifted. You’re in all differentiated classes, for goodness sake! You can be just as great as, or possibly even greater than someone with an IQ of 145. You just have to want it, and be willing to work for it, no matter how long it takes you.”

She smiled at me again, in a way that reminded me of the summer sun.

“You are going to be attending high school pretty soon, young man, and, later on, college. The teachers, and professors, there will not be as kind as I am to give you these sort of lessons. You need to find the drive in yourself and hold onto it. No one else can put in the time to achieve your dreams, only you can do that.”

I smiled back, half out of gratefulness and inspiration, half out of embarrassment at how easy it had been for me to give up.

“Thank you,” I replied. I was honestly thankful for someone who could teach me something I would have neglected to learn on my own.
I took Mrs. Christiansen’s lesson with me to high school and I began to challenge myself in the classes I took and the activities I participated in. Now, due to my changed outlook on life, I am lead my school in academics, athletics, and in other extracurricular activities and clubs. Mrs. Christiansen truly inspired me to work for what I earn and to utilize my skills the best I can. Her lesson has made all the difference in my high school experience.

I sincerely plan to continue living her lesson far into college and my career, especially now since she passed away the summer after her husband died of a heart attack, just after I had graduated middle school. I will always remember the lessons she taught me and the kindness she showed me while I was in her class. I honor her by living my life in a way worthy of the work and love I have put into it.