

## **My Faith Journey:**

I can't say that life hasn't had its ups and downs but what I can say, is that life works in mysterious ways and I truly believe God has played a major role in the development of who I am. I grew up in a North Eastern Catholic home. My mother would take my sister and me to church almost every Sunday. In 1991, my brother was born and life became a little bit harder for my mother to juggle taking all of us to church in addition to working full time in the restaurant business. My father would occasionally attend with us but my mother was mainly responsible for my introduction to faith. In those years, while I still believed in God, I had lost my community and stopped attending church. In 1998, we moved to a new town where I was introduced to a group of friends whom were very involved in their church at the nearby Baptist church. I begged my parents to allow me to join Youth Group. It was my first experience in really feeling the power of God. Over the next two years I was faced with the news and devastation that my Father was suffering from a brain tumor and I clung hold of my faith. I reached to a children's bible that I was given for my first communion. Before bed I would read it hoping that if I became a better Christian maybe just maybe God would cut me a break. In 2000, I was sadly taken back a second time when we learned he was diagnosed with cancer, totally unrelated to the tumor he had already been suffering from. My world crumbled in around me. I was so angry with God for allowing my family to struggle, physically and financially. I could not understand why my parents and the four of us kids had to face continuous setbacks. As I entered high school, I turned away from God. While I would sometimes think about him, I had lost the bond that I had once had with him. I moved to Atlanta for college and became very close with my mother's youngest sister. The summer before my freshman year she encouraged me to attend church with them. I wasn't sure what to say and felt totally uncomfortable to with it. It wasn't until I actually started college when a friend of mine invited me to attend his church with him. I was shocked; church in the south was far different than anything I had ever experienced up North. It was in that first moment that we stood to Worship that I felt God touch my heart once again. While I cannot say that I immediately was healed from the heartache that I had experienced I opened up my heart to him again. I began to recognize the blessings in my life and began to pray again. Over the four years that I attended school I would periodically attend my Aunt's church during their contemporary service. The church was a momentary fix for me, when I needed God to be present in my life at that moment. I never felt a need to attend church every weekend. If I could make it once a month then I felt I was doing okay. Following graduation I continued this pattern, however, I was pulled closer to faith when I began working at Marist School. So much of the faith that I was raised with was brought to my attention. My curiosity about my religion brought me to ask questions that I was too afraid to ask as a child. My spiritual growth continued to blossom. In 2010, just before marrying my husband something amazing happened. My faith in God grew and my heart finally felt like the scars were being healed. After two years of subtle hints and invitation to attend Buckhead Church I finally succumbed my fears and attended with a friend of mine from up North. She had been listening to Andy Stanley's sermons online and begged me to go while she was in town. I reluctantly went and felt like I was gritting my teeth through the entire sermon, missing everything that was being said. My Aunt encouraged me to come again, they had changed churches and they said Buckhead had been life changing for them and that I should try it out. Finally, my girlfriend encouraged me to try it one more time and to attend the later service. I am so glad that my family and my friends encouraged me to go back. That night honestly changed my perspective and I was hooked. Within months I had joined Starting Point as a way to reconnect to my faith. Almost two years later I cannot help but think how much these experiences have changed my life for the better. I have learned to have faith and to be open to God's will; most importantly I have learned to forgive – something that truly lifted the burdens off my heart. My faith today had given me the courage to take charge and to move forward to pursue an area in my life that God has always had his hands in; my love of art and design and working with kids. Following our wedding in July 2011, my husband and I experienced a series of unfortunate events – in those dark moments of feeling truly helpless and unsure how to move forward I looked to God for support and love. Somehow through faith my injuries healed and my husband got well. Through those tough moments in time, I really had to remember that we were not alone. I forced myself to pick up the pieces and charged forward remembering the saying that my mother use to say when we were struggling with my father's illness, "what doesn't kill you only makes us stronger." In those moments I decided that life was just too short and that I needed to take the next few months to really pray about where my life journey was heading. My husband and I began to discuss our future and the conversations constantly lead back to me

returning to the classroom working with student's in the arts. At the start of the New Year I found that this desire began more of a reality when I started focusing on my career change. In this search God once again has been present. My confidence and passion for the arts has been building within me. I know now that God has a plan for me to be working with art. I don't really know in what capacity or even in what age range but I know it's there and I can feel God's embrace in this direction I am pursuing.

In listening to the intense urge to move into my career in teaching art, I came upon an advertisement for The University of Florida's Master's in Art Education program. I normally would look passed the distant learning programs, however something urged me to investigate it a little further. Little did I know that God's plan would lead me to begin my master's program only months later. The process seemed to happen overnight and within a month and a half of beginning the process of applying for graduate school I was accepted and starting my first course. Over this time something special happened and I will forever remember this special day. At Easter my husband and I went to visit family and friends in St. Petersburg, FL, on our way back to Atlanta, we stopped in Gainesville, FL to visit my husband's cousin who was battling cancer. That afternoon we sat for hours talking with Dillon, a young and faithful young man who loved God with all of his heart. On that day I anxiously awaited my letter of acceptance for Florida. As we sat there with Dillon and his Dad I received my email and a phone call to congratulate me on my acceptance to UF. Dillon's face lite up and he told me that God was watching over me. That day was the last day we saw Dillon, he passed away only weeks later. But as I said my goodbyes to Dillon I promised him that I would put my faith in God on this journey and would do my best in memory of him. Dillon was only 21 years old and had more faith and love than anyone I have ever met. Through this process of attending school, I remember Dillon and recall the special lunch we had with him on his last day outside of the hospital. He is my motivation and as I sit here and remember him I cannot miss that fact that Dillion's faith has brought me that much closer to God.

Through my journey in life I have found that everything always has a funny way of working out. I have learned to stop asking questions when things seem to present themselves at the most random moments and trust in God that he is leading me on the journey that he has planned for me. After all, my life is only to pursue the will that he has for me and to become a tool for his good works. He has provided me the vehicle to move forward in life, and with the help of the messages at Buckhead I can truly feel his work within. My goal in life is to use my faith to inspire my students to concur all odds. I have never allowed my fear of failure to overcome my dreams and desire to do well. I know through my faith and my hard works I will make all my dreams come true with God by my side.