

## **Hands, Mothers, and some Sticky Notes**

Eve Arnold, a well-known photojournalist of the 20th century, once asked, “What do you hang on the walls of your mind?”

On the walls of my mind, I first hang photographs of my hands as the maps of my adventures. One would capture the faded scars on the backs of my fingers from the old burns of poisonous Alaskan leaves. The stories behind those scars embody the summer that marked a monumental shift in my understanding of who I am. Staring at those scars is both a humbling reminder to respect the power of nature and a constant memory of the greatest adventure of my life, shared with the people who became my best friends. The second photograph would be of my hands after getting first-degree frostbite on the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro. This one would serve as a symbol of my belief that pain and struggle is often an inevitable catalyst for the true reward of an accomplishment. The last would be a picture of the subtle calluses that line my palms, gradually toughened by every rock my hand has grasped on the vertical face of a climb. For me, climbing creates a perfect symbiosis of an intellectual puzzle and a physical challenge that stimulates every part of my body. These scars and impressions compose maps of my experiences and, if every experience leaves its mark, I will have to understand the entire world before I am allowed to say, “Oh, I know that like the back of my hands”.

Next, I hang a landscape photograph of my hometown’s rolling hills. Sitting quietly at the bottom of a forested valley in drought stricken California, stress and pressure seem to flow down the enveloping hillsides instead of rain, collecting in puddles on the high achieving schools. This town, too often like a bubble, is where I’ve felt the most alone, while still grateful it was the place

I grew up. It was only by escaping its confines that I was able to discover the magnitude of my privilege and my thirst to live differently.

In addition to pictures, I also hang doors—some closed while others wide, wide open. From a very young age, being an athlete was something that defined me. But before starting high school, that part of me seemed to be ripped from my essence when doctors told me I had a heart condition that could become dangerous if I continued to play sports. A door so loyal and important in my life was slammed in front of my face, as goals of a high school varsity athlete waited patiently for me just on the other side. This blow was inexplicably crushing for a girl like me, resulting in a challenging, restless, and confusing freshman year. In retrospect, now healthy and having regained permission to play sports, this experience taught me not only the essential truth, but the personal growth that comes with the saying, “When one door closes, another one opens”. While my soccer career came to an unexpected end, if it weren’t for that door closing, I never would have opened others, such as starting my own tutoring program, discovering climbing, or finding time to be such a dedicated president for my youth group. These are all parts of my life that have had significant impacts on who I am today.

On the walls next to these doors, I hang vibrant portraits of my various mothers, brimming with life. First would be my true mom who has, without a doubt, been the most influential person in my life for reasons words serve no justice to encompass. The passion she pours into everything she does has cultivated my work ethic, and her relentless commitment to putting the needs of everyone around her first has inspired my thirst to help those less fortunate than I am. The second portrait would be one of Grace, my mama in the rural African village of Selela, Tanzania with whom I spent a summer living and speaking to in Swahili. By breaking a barrier of language and

cultural polarities with alternative communication and mutual respect, I quickly discovered that she is the single strongest woman I have ever met. With three children and a husband twice her age whom she was forced to marriage at age 12, Grace taught me the true meaning of grit and selflessness. In turn, I will always be her second daughter. Finally, I hang the photos of the few times I've caught glimpses of true, raw, pure Mother Nature. The sun rising from the 15,000 foot summit of Mount Shasta, the towering glaciers over my kayak in Prince William Sound, the night sky seen from the depths of the Lost Coast. It is in these wild places where I choose to sacrifice time, relationships, and comfort with inexplicable fulfillment for far away ranges. Mother nature allows me to return to a deeper self-awareness where I find focus, gratitude, perspective, and insight.

And finally, scattered across the walls, I hang post-it notes of my scribbled ideas for innovation. Most of these ideas pertain to my fascination with the intersection between the nature of thought and behavior, and the intricate organization of the brain. One would include my theories of how altitude and wilderness immersion could be an alternative treatment for neurological trauma. Another would describe my thoughts on the power of practicing mindfulness as a tool to improve education. And one would ask, in efforts to improve the fundamental pursuit of social justice, "What effectively motivates one human being to actively help another".

On the walls of my mind, I hang the proud memories of my successes and strengths, the inspiring memories of the people I've met and the things I've seen, and even the memories of regret as a reminder to *always* grow and learn from my mistakes. From pictures of my hands and photos of my mothers, to doors of my opportunities, to post-it notes of my ideas, these are the things that hang on the walls of mind.