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The Road to Becoming a 20-Year-Old FSA

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“How...and *why* did you do all this?” Ever since I obtained the FSA designation at age 20, that’s certainly one of the most frequent questions I get asked (well, that and, of course, the “what exactly is an actuary?”). It’s safe to say it’s indeed a legitimate question considering that being an actuary isn’t exactly the most well-known or popular occupation. Ask most high school or college kids what they want to be and chances are that the usual reply will consist of “a doctor,” “a lawyer,” “an engineer,” “no freaking clue”, or something along those lines. So, how *did* I get this far? That’s a good question.

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It was my uncle who first enlightened me on what an actuary really is. Becoming an actuary sounded fantastic—good pay, relatively low stress, normal work hours, being able to apply technical skills toward business—or that was how it was first described to me. At the time, though, I really didn’t think much of it. I had been busy with classes, extra-curricular activities, and, you guessed it, studying for the dreaded SAT—everything that would help get me into a good college, which I thought was a more practical goal. To me, the actuarial exams were this set of professional exams that just seemed way out of my league in terms of intellectual capabilities. Perhaps the exams might have been a realistic goal for a high school math genius or whatnot, but me? No way.

It was only after all the college-aspiring commitments that I finally decided to take my tradition to the next level; my tradition of always doing extra, learning at my own pace, and taking on what’s challenging to me. Having always been interested in economics and mathematics, the actuarial exams seemed like the logical course to pursue. After all, what was the harm? It was with that mentality that I began my four-year journey immersed in exam studying...still, the decision was hardly an impulsive one.

I have always had this hobby of reading non-school related materials right before bed every night. At first it was fascinating Chinese history stories that most of my elementary school peers avoided at all costs (I mean what normal kid would choose history books over comic books? Am I right?). Gradually, it progressed to more serious Chinese literary works which I came to appreciate immensely. After I came to the United States though, I was forced to give those up for arduous hours of learning English. For nine consecutive months, I learned 25 vocabulary words a day without skipping a single day. Pretty crazy, I know. This habit carried itself over into college when the actuarial exams became my new focus.

You might be wondering, “Where does an 18-year-old get this kind of motivation?” As cheesy as it may sound, I think it was pretty much an inner determination of striving to be better. I’ve always believed that I should live life as hard as I can, and become the best that I can be. I never really thought I was exceptionally smart, but I always worked hard. I’d love to say I’ve been the perfect student my entire life, but that would definitely be a lie. I grew up in Taiwan, where schools all have a class ranking system, even at the elementary level. At the start of school, I ranked 33 (not bad, eh?)...out of a class of 35. Six years of hard work later, I pulled myself up and graduated 10th.

I also remember attending after-school English-improvement courses where the policy was either to pass the exams or risk being kicked out of class, a brink I precariously neared on multiple occasions, even after retaking exams. With hard work and perseverance though, I was able to rise to the top of the entire class two years later. When high school rolled around, I moved from Taiwan to Los Angeles. Again, I had to fight an uphill battle. I was initially forced to take the easiest classes available because of my language limitation. Four years later, I graduated with 12 AP credits, a feat which aided me in graduating college in three years.

Steve Nash, one of my all-time favorite basketball players, once said, “If every basketball player worked as hard

as I do, I’d be out of a job.” (For the record though, I’m a Lakers fan.) I believe the same could be said of how I came to become the youngest actuary, and really everything that I’ve done up to this point. So while most other college students partied hard and drank even harder, I skipped the festivities and became a frequent visitor to the school library. Yes, even on Friday and Saturday nights. Sad huh? In retrospect, I suppose I missed out on the typical college life most people experience, only to replace it with exam studying and job searching. Many people have asked if I have any regrets in that regard. My response is: not really (all right, maybe just a tiny bit, but hey, life’s all about sacrifices right?). Though, I should add that I definitely did enough crazily stupid things in high school to compensate for my college life or lack thereof. Given the choice to go back in time, there’s nothing that I would change. I’d make the same choices again in a heartbeat.

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With every passing score, I developed not only more confidence in myself, but also more interest in these topics. I got to a point where I just didn’t want to stop. The challenge from the FSA exams drove me to follow through, even though many people kept warning me that finishing all the exams too early may not be the best of ideas. It’s always been my goal in life to try to understand as much as possible of how the world operates. The FSA exams allowed me to not only integrate the technical knowledge from the preliminary exams, but also gain a broad understanding of how many areas of the financial markets work—I was just fascinated.

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You would think that after passing all these exams, I would be sure of becoming an actuary. In reality though, even at the point when I finished all the preliminary exams, I still wasn't certain if I really wanted to be an actuary. I had just viewed the exams as a sort of challenge to myself. It only slowly began to hit me that all this could turn into a career. I learned a lot at my internship at Transamerica in my freshman year, but the position seemed a little too laid-back to me, especially while many of my peers were entering investment banking and working ridiculous hours for higher pay. Later, it was my internship in the annuity hedging department at Prudential that really caught my interest, as it allowed me to apply much of what I learned from the exams. As it turned out, an actuary's job is precisely what had been described to me by my uncle—well paid, relatively low stress, normal hours, and most importantly, interesting (that is, for a mathematics/business-oriented person). The experience definitely helped me to finally decide to work as an actuary.

The funny thing is, I have to admit that what was holding me back from working as an actuary was actually the normal hours that come with it (a bit of the post-exam-emptiness syndrome, I suppose). Having always worked harder than my peers, it made me uncomfortable to think that there are people working 80 hours a week out there while I'm only working 40. Ultimately though, I've concluded that even if I'm not working 16 hours a day for

some company, I can still utilize my time well and learn on my own. Some of my hard work has already begun to pay off, as I gradually come to realize that I do possess a lot of knowledge often unknown to many around my age. I've achieved all this by doing extra work on my own, not through being pushed to work hard. So I took on the less-grueling, yet just as interesting and challenging route, and went back to Prudential after I graduated. I have not regretted my decision, as the job has taught me much and provided me with opportunities to meet amazing people as well as challenging problems to solve. I by no means have even scraped the surface of being an actuary. I'm learning every day on the job, from those who have long been in the field and possess invaluable experience. I still have much more to learn as an actuary and I will certainly give it my all to be worthy of being "the youngest actuary." As for my habit of persistently taking those extra steps, they've carried on after I started working—I continue to read a lot in my free time. I feel pretty content with life. I feel like I really am growing, both as an actuary and as a person.

Will I always be an actuary in the traditional sense? I have no idea. But the experience—the challenge from each exam, all the great people I get to meet along the way, the amount of knowledge gained—I would never exchange it for anything. I will always carry the "FSA" title after my name with the greatest sense of pride. ☆

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