

## **Scholarship Essay – First Generation College Student**

### **By Charles Graham, Jr.**

The process for shining shoes is simple: clean, polish, and wax. You will not see this job on my résumé. However, it was the first job I ever had. Through it, I learned many of the values that prepared me for the challenges of being a first-generation college student.

I learned to shine shoes with my father at his small business, Graham Shoe Repair. When I was in fourth grade my dad and I were working on a pair of cowboy boots. We were on the first step, cleaning. While washing the boots with Saddle and Leather Soap, he asked me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I quickly replied, “I want to take over the family business and keep Graham Shoe Repair going!” My father dried his boots with a rag then put them down next to him. He looked me in the eyes and told me, “Son I love what I do, but you have to figure out what kind of impact you want to make. You can change the world.” Just like with his cowboy boots, my dad was taking the first step to wipe away all doubts I had about my potential.

Polishing is the next step in the process. There are two parts: cover the leather with shoe polish, then brush it all off. This is the messiest part, but it is necessary for the shine that one hopes to achieve. In my head, I was going through a similar process as I dreamed of the person that I could become. While my mind wondered, I began to cover the entire boot with black Lincoln Shoe Wax. I looked up from my work and told my dad, “I think I want to be a lawyer.” While removing the polish with a horsehair brush, my dad and I continued to talk. Here the foundation for a hardworking leader was established. The boots and my dreams begin to glow a little brighter.

The last step of the process is waxing the shoe. Here is where the beauty lies and the payoff from hard work is received. Waxing the shoe involves rubbing the surface lightly with a little shoe polish, water, and a soft cloth. My dad taught me a process that takes more time than other methods, but the shine is much brighter and long-lasting. His process, coined glass, involves wrapping the cloth around two fingers and methodically circling the entire surface until it appears as glossy as “glass.” My father’s approach places an emphasis on quality, ensuring that the effort exerted endures.

My approach to the challenges of being a first-generation graduate, and now law student, are a reflection of the lessons I learned shining shoes with my dad. The doubt and anxiety that first-generation college students feel, or imposter syndrome as I like to call it, is biggest hurdle to overcome. I still remember the doubt I felt after receiving my acceptance into The University of Texas at Austin, UT. I questioned my decisions asking: Do I really have what it takes to succeed in college, did I only get in to meet a diversity quota, will my peers accept the son of a shoeshine man? All that changed once I stepped on campus. Just like my father taught me: I begin to clean away all doubts, polish myself by trying new things and finding community, and now I am the shining result of hard work and perseverance.

The first step of getting past the imposter syndrome was realizing that I belonged, and I was good enough. Before attending college, I graduated magna cum laude from my high school, I was an Eagle Scout, and I was a state champion percussionist. I knew how to put in the hard work to be successful. Reflecting on the strengths, values, and wisdom my family instilled in me guided me through the uncertainty I faced. Also, my parents sacrificed a lot for me, so there was no way I was letting them down. Once, I reassured myself that the selection did not make a mistake, that I had what took, and that I had family and friends believing in me – I stopped doubting myself.

Next, I began to polish myself by finding community. At the time that I was a student at UT, the black population was below five percent. It was important for me to find great mentors who looked like me, came from similar backgrounds, and could guide me. As a result, I joined an organization called Student African American Brotherhood, SAAB. Through SAAB, I met individuals who encouraged me and shared their wisdom. My brothers challenged me, and they saw enough potential to elect me president of the organization. We impacted our campus and the Austin community in many ways. However, I most proud of the mentorship we did in a nearby middle school. This is where I found my love for teaching and my passion for education reform. I later went on to join Teach For America and teach for eight years before enrolling in law school.

Finally, the hard work pays off. I graduated from UT with honors becoming the first person in my family to graduate from college. But my father taught me to shine bright, so I became the first with a master's degree, graduating from the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education with honors. Now, I am on the road to becoming the first Juris Doctor in my family. I made the Dean's list my first year and interned for a Federal Judge in the Southern District of Texas. My dad's method holds true. When one gets rid of the doubt, find their purpose, and work hard – they overcome any challenge.