



**2008 My Next Chapter First Prize Winner
Paul Muth**

“Sponge Paul Square Student”

The smells of chalk and blackboard have been replaced by dry ink and the sterile white plastic of virgin white dry erase. As my (oh my God how young) Professor sign's her name, the clack of chalk on board and the cloud of white dust have morphed into a soft clinical whisper. This is my seat, though, the one I've earned through the trials and triumphs of an incredible journey. Front row, left, within arms length of the award passed out by every teacher to every student in history. I will make sure I miss nothing, not a single letter, a brief sigh of emphasis, an inflection of a point needed to be driven home. I am Sponge Paul Square Student, and I am here to absorb every bit of academia this young guide exudes.

I couldn't figure out why during the thirty years since I last sat in a school chair, the darn things still seemed to be more suited for medieval torture. Perhaps college students were all presumed to be only slightly bigger than their 6th grade counterparts. I was forced to bang knees against this small, wooden, curvy thing that could be called a desk. The shaking of my knees from first day nervousness started this tap, tap, tapping that would have wildly entertained both Poe and the raven. Could I possibly accomplish the goal of my entire life, to become a social worker and help others to walk their own journeys?

I've sat in that front row seat for the last three years, and next spring I will graduate from UMBC with a degree in Social Work. The chemotherapy I have had to endure for the last two years has not stopped me from accomplishing a 3.9 GPA. To every man or woman who is considering returning to school, I can promise that it is a jewel of life that will shine the way not just to another chapter, but to an entire novel about the miracle of self realization and fulfillment.

My first convert, my 20 year old son, is following me into Social Work this semester!