How I conquered the last 10 years

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In 2007 thing were starting to heat up in my life. In the last three years, I had gotten married, moved away from home, and been accepted to graduate school. Life was fully underway. My wife and I were both graduate students at the University of Florida. We were living in a residence populated with first-year college students directly across from Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. This was during the Tim Tebow and Urban Meyer era of Florida Football and it was exciting. I was working on my MBA, attending classes one weekend per month and working a fulltime job. My wife, being the high achiever of our dyad, graduated with her Master’s degree and took a job at the University of Alabama. We packed all of our things into a U-Haul truck and headed north. She began her new job and I spent some time adjusting to life in Tuscaloosa. I still had a year remaining to complete my MBA so on one Friday every month, I jumped in the car at 5AM and made the eight-hour drive to Gainesville. These weekends consisted of classes all-day Saturday and until 5PM on Sunday. At this time, I got back in the car and headed north just in time to make it back to work on Monday morning. I was working for an Alabama property developer that controlled a lot of the local economy. I started out in IT and eventually moved to project management to work directly with the owner. During the peak of the oil boom, we were purchasing abandoned oil fields and refitting them with modern equipment. I was responsible for sourcing the materials and directing various projects. In one of the fields we drilled a new well, struck oil and were pumping enough oil to generate a monthly revenue of $500,000. Our work, and increasing profits, had drawn the attention of Mississippi Governor Hailey Barbour. We took the corporate jet to meet with him in his office and discuss further development opportunities. Due to my concerns about some of the work that we were doing, I eventually left the company. In short order, my wife was once again presented with a new career opportunity.

In 2008, we moved back home to West Lafayette, Indiana and both began working for Purdue University. I began working as a Desktop Support Specialist for the College of Liberal Arts and was eventually promoted to Service Desk Manager. The experiences gained at Purdue are what caused me to focus my career in higher education. I enjoyed helping faculty, staff and students utilize technology to improve their outcomes. I believed in the “product” that higher education was selling. This return trip to Indiana was when my life truly changed. In October 2010, my wife informed me that she was pregnant. I was going to be a dad. I don’t know if I could adequately explain my feelings at this time. The excitement and fear were overwhelming. Over the next ten months (yes human gestation is actually closer to ten months, not nine) I went to more doctor’s appointments than I had in my entire life. And I wasn’t even the one having the baby! I tried to be the supporting husband and soon to be father. I rubbed feet, I went to the grocery at odd hours and I put my hand on her belly when she told he was kicking. For the life of me, I never felt a single kick. I tried, I really did. In April 2011, with the baby due in June, I got a call from my dad. He informed that he had been diagnosed with a malignant form of skin cancer and was having surgery and chemotherapy. Things were starting to heat up. My wife and I spent a lot of time supporting my dad before the baby was born. We garnered plenty of looks, the extremely pregnant woman sitting in the cancer treatment center. After several false alarms, followed by doctor’s appointments, our son was born on June 9, 2011. My wife’s labor had been induced early in the morning and she spent most of the day being uncomfortable. Things were happening slowly up until about 4PM. At that time, the doctor came in and said they were going to have to perform a C-section. It wasn’t an emergency yet, but it could be if they didn’t act fast. I was shocked and stunned. All around me, the doctor and nurses went into action. Before I knew it, I was following the nurse into the operating room where a sheet was draped to block the lower portion of my wife’s body. Our son was delivered without any further complications and for the first time we revealed his name of “William Robert Stark”. The doctor sarcastically responded, “Great. That’s a name that I can spell.”

As anyone with children will tell you, life took on a whole new meaning. Time, and sleep, were in short supply once we came home with the baby. I remember getting him home and not knowing what to do. We took the car seat and placed it in the middle of the living room floor and stared at this new human being. My wife’s natural instincts took over. She knew what to do and when to do it. She told me how to help and when to leave them alone. I can remember holding my son and realizing that I was never going to be good enough for this new human. I needed to make improvements in my life and they needed to happen now. As I had been working in higher education for almost three years, I knew that the successful people I interacted with on a daily basis had their PhD. I decided that I needed to earn my PhD to support this new family. As we were both working in higher education, my wife also decided to get her PhD as well. After several months of GRE’s and GMAT’s, application, essays and interviews we were both admitted to the doctoral program at Purdue University in Technology Leadership and Innovation in the College of Technology. We were on our way to becoming doctors and doing it together. As time progressed, I was balancing a full-time job, a full-time family and trying to spend as much time with my ailing father as possible. There were many nights where I would work a full day, come home to eat dinner with my family and then drive south for an hour to sit with my father in the hospital as he endured severe chemotherapy treatments. In the few moments that he was lucid, I would listen to him talk or we would sit silently as time passed. When his energy waned, he would drift off to sleep and I would pull out my laptop to complete my schoolwork. On these nights I would stay with him until 11PM or midnight to allow my mom time to return home to rest or simply to take a break from the hospital. When she returned, I would drive back to my sleeping family and grab a few precious hours of sleep until work the next day. My father succumbed to cancer on March 4, 2013. He was 68 years old.

In December 2014 my wife was once again presented with a career opportunity that would relocate our family. She took a job at the University of Central Florida and we packed up our stuff, sold our house and moved back south. This time with a small child. This was a move that we had both been working towards. We had reached a personal limit with our life in Indiana. A major concern for me was the weather. The last winter that we endured consisted of multiple days with temperatures reaching minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit. The bitter cold and wind with inclement weather lasting for almost 6 months of the year was too much. We needed a change. The economic climate of Central Indiana also provided encouragement. We had reached a point where there was no more upward movement in our jobs. The Midwest just wasn’t growing. Central Florida, Orlando in particular, offered improvements in both of these areas. I wanted to stay in higher education as I believed in the mission and purpose so I focused my search and came across an opportunity at Seminole State College. After several interviews and waiting patiently, I was offered a position as an IT manager with the college. That offer was quickly followed up with an additional offer to work as an adjunct faculty member at the college. With both of us working full-time and getting settled in Florida, it was time to get school wrapped up. I had finished all of my coursework and needed to complete my dissertation. I travelled from Orlando to West Lafayette, Indiana on two different occasions to present a plan of study for my dissertation. On both occasions my doctoral committee, four faculty members tasked with helping me through the process, had rejected my work. I had an important decision to make; either quit my degree and move on to other things or change my topic and “fire” my committee. I chose to refine my research topic and select a new doctoral committee that was committed to working with me to help me achieve my goal of graduating with my degree. With the assistance and guidance of my new committee and a lot of work and determination (and some frustration) I successfully completed my dissertation and graduated in May 2017. Since my graduation, I have been presenting the information that I learned from my research. I have been using my work to hopefully enrich the lives of others and make all of the struggle worthwhile. I am currently working on a journal article related to my topic and I have accepted invitations for two presentations.

The road to where I am now has been long with many twists and turns. It has included many struggles and potholes, but it has also included many triumphs and victories along the way. As I look to expand my career and life in Central Florida, I hope the next ten years can provide as much excitement and opportunity.