

149

Macias, Wendy

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, June 22, 2009 4:46 PM
To: nearea09
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Student Loan Justice, please!!

Student Loans

I graduated from high school in 1970. Got married the same year and didn't pursue a college education for another 10 years. My college career began part-time when I was a newly single young mom in 1980. My kids were 3, 5 & 6 years old. I knew I had to go to college if I was going to ever be able to support us. No personal computers or Internet; the world was a very different place. Limited opportunities for work with flexible hours and minimal skills gave me little besides minimum wage low-paying part-time jobs. I was once denied a promising desk job when, during the interview, the guy asked me if I'd stay home to take care of my kids if they were sick. (Didn't know that was an illegal question at that time. I was very young, myself. I thought telling him I had kids would show I was not a teenager, but a responsible parent.) Wrong. Didn't matter, anyway.

Decent, affordable daycare was unavailable. Court-ordered child support was barely enough to live on. Although my ex-husband had a very good job at Wang Labs in Lowell MA, he often failed to pay the child support. I learned to buy groceries on a Friday, knowing the check wouldn't bounce till Monday. I drank coffee to suppress my appetite so the kids could have all the food I could buy. (I loved weighing 85-90 lbs and fitting into tiny jeans!) His skillful attorney managed to get a 'continuance' at the last minute several months in a row, every time I tried to bring him in for 'contempt of court' to pay. I became a welfare mom, with Medicaid and WIC vouchers. Student loans came to our rescue!

However, the minute I became a full-time college student, all welfare payments, WIC and Medicaid benefits stopped. I had the same three small children who still needed to eat. How was I supposed to get OFF the public dole before they were 18 if I didn't go back to school? You don't know how many people ask us that question, was the response. Still, all benefits ended. (Talk about a dis-incentive!!) Student loans became more important than ever.

I worked various part-time jobs, attended classes part-time around the court dates, and full-time whenever possible. It was a very slow go. Eventually I met my current husband who was also a non-traditional student attending college on the GI Bill. His VA benefits helped him with tuition. By the time we got married, the real estate market in New England had gone crazy. We were forced out of our junky little rented house which was suddenly worth 3 times its value and we certainly couldn't buy it. The owners were very apologetic, but couldn't say no to the wildly increased value on the property. We had become house painters and worked on weekends while still attending classes and trying not move the kids around to different schools. For some reason, renting with 3 kids was like having the Black Plague. Most landlords could handle two, but three was just unacceptable. So we moved a lot. And they were very good, quiet, studious kids. Even as teens, no wild parties, drinking or drugging. No trouble.

Eventually, we moved into family student housing on campus at UNH-Durham. We lived there several years before finally graduating. The kids were in middle and high school by the time we moved off campus to a rented duplex in the same school district. I finished up my second degree at Plymouth State (NH), commuting 77 miles one-way 4 or 5 days a week. My husband worked full-time as the IT guy at a high school in another town.

When I graduated with a BS in meteorology, (and having been a part-time volunteer at the NWS forecast office in Grey, ME), I was soon offered a position as meteorologist intern with the National Weather Service here in

Abilene TX. My youngest daughter was about to be a senior in high school. The other two were already college students at UNH. I moved to Abilene alone for 15 months. Missed my youngest daughter's 18th birthday and her senior prom. Went back for her graduation. By then, my middle child had left school and moved to Abilene. My husband prepared to move to Abilene as well. We moved the youngest and the oldest kids (still in NH) into an apartment near campus so they could attend UNH. We paid the rent for a while, but we were too far in debt by then.

I'd torn my ACL and had to have reconstructive surgery during my final year at Plymouth State. We'd had \$500 at the beginning of the school year. We could get student health insurance for me (everyone else was covered) or we could get the 3-ton coal delivery for the heat stove in the basement that kept us warm all through the long NH heating season. I never got sick, so of course, it was an easy choice. The young doctor was very kind and understanding about my situation. He did the surgery and we were an additional \$13K in debt.

Even before my husband joined me in Abilene, we realized we'd have to file bankruptcy as soon as he got here. Although I finally had a good job with a promising career ahead, we couldn't even make ends meet. He worked full-time at a computer shop in town before starting his own IT support business. All our debt was discharged in the bankruptcy except for the \$32K in student loans we owed. (Most of it is mine, but some is his because he didn't know - and no one told him - that he had more VA benefits available for school.) We thought we could swing it and make a new start. It was 1995.

By early 1997, NOAA was experiencing cutbacks in funding. Our local office here in Abilene - which had been scheduled to close before I ever arrived - was now actively in the process. Warning responsibility was finally transferred to San Angelo and my soon-to-be-tenured position was transferred to Jackson MS. Our middle daughter was now married, with a baby in San Antonio. The IT biz was growing, and my new boss in San Angelo, with many years invested in her career, wasn't certain *she* would hang onto her job with all the funding cuts. It was a tough decision, but finally I chose not to go to Jackson. I resigned from NWS and stayed in Abilene. The computer biz has supported us ever since. As small business owners, we have had a very long, expensive and difficult learning curve. And, of course, lots more debt.

We have made many payments on our student loans over these years, trying to repay them on the schedule given. By now, they're combined into some kind of locked (no longer negotiable) joint account at the higher interest rate (mine) of 9%. We have had to take many long periods of 'forbearance' while the interest and penalties added on because we simply couldn't make those payments. At this point, we now owe at least \$48K on that original balance of \$32K. That means \$16K more has been added. The original balance has grown 50% larger! Where are our payments going??

The past few years have been hard for the biz, but we've always put our employees first and gone into debt to make sure they always got paid, even when we didn't have enough work for them. Now, we're trying to climb out of that debt. And still paying those student loans, which I'm now thinking might not be paid till we're in our 80s. In the meantime, we have no extra funds to put toward college for our 6 grandchildren, though we'd dearly love to do that. Which brings me to a suggestion.

What if all the money we are paying on our student loans could go into college funds for our grandchildren? We both value the wonderful opportunity we made to get an education, even though it put us into such precarious financial straits. It made us the people we are today. And for that we will always be grateful. We believe we are much more valuable and productive citizens than we'd have been without our college education.

We have been too busy just trying to work, live and survive to pay close attention to exactly *how* it is that our student loan balance has jumped from \$32K to \$48K over these years while we struggled to make the payments as agreed. And to understand *why* it is that we can be locked into a totally non-negotiable contract now.

Out of the three, only our son graduated from college (the one with no children!). Both daughters attended college, but dropped out due to finances and other reasons. All three children are married to wonderful spouses. No divorces. All three are extremely creative, productive people I'd be proud to know even if they were not my kids. And all three also have their own student loan debt that we can't help with while we struggle to pay our own.

Not a good way to build America stronger and smarter in the 21st century and beyond. I'd be willing to do community service or help other non-traditional students struggling to work, raise families and attend college...whatever would make a difference in exchange for that load of debt we can't even renegotiate. No wiggle room - I feel stuck in this trap with chains that extend at least to the next two generations in our family! How many other families are in this trap, too?

Thanks for reading this story. I know it's long. It is all true. I am grateful our situation isn't as bad (YET!!) as some others I'm now hearing about, however it does seem as though there must be a better way to pay for college in this country. This system seems extremely unbalanced and unsustainable to me. How can our democracy survive if we have a larger and larger uneducated electorate? If more and more people are shut out of college because of this flawed and clearly corrupt system for financing education, where will we be as a nation 20, 50 or 100 years from now?

Sincerely yours,

[REDACTED]