

You can't just sit here and cry
By Desi Cammuso

Not many of us realize how much one person can influence our lives. Something that they said to us, which they might not think much of at the time, could change our whole outlook on life itself. This was my experience with my teacher and good friend, James Clifford. I remember this particular day in February 2023 where I spent my lunch crying about random people in Walgreen's making comments about my disability. After lunch, we had to pick an activity to do. James Clifford came over to me and explained what activities were there while I was still bawling my eyes out. Then he got stern with me. In a low toned voice, he told me "Desi, you can't just sit here and cry." Let me tell you. If he hadn't said those seven words to me that day, I would not have been able to make it through this past year. Sometimes when we think we have no more strength left, we can redefine our own definition of the word strength. We can get through anything if we get up in the toughest times of our lives.

This year has been one of the toughest years. Between watching my family dog suffer from dementia, a really hard college course in the fall, to my grandmother of ninety-one passing away unexpectedly in March. If all this happened to me back in high school, I would've fallen apart. I would have gotten myself into a depression and I wouldn't have focused much on anything other than what's going on at home. However when I was in James Clifford's class, it wasn't an option to fall apart and get away with not doing what needed to be done. You had to push through no matter what and that was it. There was no in between with him. No matter how upset I felt, I had to suck it up and get through. To be honest with you, I hated him for making me push through certain situations. But at the age of twenty-five, I realize that if he hadn't made me push through all those situations, I wouldn't be as strong as I am today. His tough love helped me become the strong woman that I am today.

When my dog, Shadow, first got sick, I cried so much. I cried at home. I cried at CW Resources. I cried alone in bed at night and I didn't know how I would go on without him greeting me at the door every day when I got home from CW Resources. And that became my reality in December when he finally passed away on a Friday just before Christmas. If that wasn't a hard loss alone, three months later, I lost my grandmother unexpectedly. With the loss of Shadow, we knew it was coming. But with my grandmother, we didn't. She just went into the hospital for a little procedure and she never came home. No words could describe how badly I wanted to give up then. I wanted to just say screw it and let my grief destroy me because it was easier than trying my best every single day. When people tried to give me advice like dying is a part of life and she wouldn't want you to be sad, I stood up, ran away to my bedroom crying and slamming the door shut, and changed into my pajamas. I would get into my bed and I would tell myself that I would just sleep all day. I didn't care about anything or anybody. I just wanted to sleep and not have to deal with anything.

But then I remembered James Clifford's words. In my darkest moments when I planned to stay in bed, I heard his voice say, "You. Get up because you can't just sit here and cry." I would try to

just ignore it but it kept repeating itself in my head and it wouldn't stop. Then one day, I became very tough on myself like he used to do with me. I had been feeling sad and depressed for several days at that point and I just decided that enough was enough. I looked at myself in the mirror and I said, "Desi Cammuso. This isn't going to destroy you. If you want to let your grandma and dog's deaths destroy you, go right ahead. But you will lose everything you worked your butt off for. You will fail your college classes and you will be very upset with yourself in the long run." Not going to lie, I hated myself for once showing myself that tough love and not coddling my feelings. (I cried after that for an hour because I realized that you were right along, Mr. Clifford) but oh boy, did I get out of bed and try to do something.

So after I had my moment and against my bitter judgement, I would get up, dry my eyes, and move on with my day. If my regular tasks were too overwhelming for the day, I would set little goals for myself like getting outside for a half hour or going to run errands with my mother. (By the way, if my parents didn't support Mr. Clifford and back him up like every other adult that showed me tough love, I wouldn't be as far as I am now. Thank you very much mom and dad) You see, I couldn't afford to just sit here and cry all day. I had college classes to pass and my second semester of college was very intense. I had a professor who was very strict. If you didn't submit your assignments the minute that it was due, you would get a zero even if you asked for extra time. Plus, she assigned two five page essays throughout the semester and a ten page research paper for our final project.

By the time November came, I was working my butt off twenty- four seven on my research paper. At CW, I would do research and look for every single article I could find on my topic. Then from the time I got home, I'd write until 11 or 12, trying to make my final paper the best that it could possibly be all while Shadow was walking around, yelping, screaming, crying, getting himself stuck, bumping into things, and falling down the stairs when we didn't close the door to the stairs way. When I started to get emotional when I was working, I nipped it in the bud and said, "not now Desi, you have to get this done or you will fail." I didn't have any time to break down until after my class was finished.

When the class ended, that's when I finally let myself break down. I was so physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted that I couldn't even think at that point, let alone manage my emotions or control myself when I started bawling. The Monday after my class, I slept for five hours straight in the afternoon and really just let myself feel the pain of losing Shadow. Was it the most difficult time in my adult life? Yes! Did I ball my eyes out at times and felt like I couldn't go on? Absolutely! Did I write a message to the aliens and ask them to come get me at one point? Probably should have! But did I just sit here and cry? No I didn't! I got up! I chose the harder thing at that time because I knew it was necessary and it would make me stronger if I did. Even though I was very angry and upset about having to get up some days, I still did it and I was very proud of myself for it.

The reason why I'm sharing my story with you is to inspire others to not just sit there and cry when hard times fall upon them. Also I would like to encourage parents and teachers to teach children how to get through difficult situations without falling apart. In a society today where

coddling and lowering expectations is the norm, so many people think that they can just sit here and cry about their situation. Let me ask you something. How many times do you see people on social media platforms like TikTok just sitting around and crying over their situation without giving us any plans for how they will respond or move forward to make it better? In one particular video that stood out to me the most, there was a young mother proudly telling the world she isn't going to make her son do any kind of homework because it's too hard for him and he suffered "emotional distress" from trying to figure out how to do his homework. This is a perfect example of a parent teaching their child to give up when things get tough. It's also a perfect example of a parent allowing their child to just sit there and cry about their situation instead of being tough on them, telling them off in a low tone voice, making them push through their homework, and making them become more confident and resilient.

I don't want to live in a world where people are so coddled to the point where they break down over every little thing that happens and unfortunately, that's what we're all seeing today. That's not good in the slightest bit if I'm keeping it real with you all. We have to teach people to get up in the toughest times of their lives and if that means parents pushing their children through a difficult math problem for their homework, then so be it. And for all those who think James Clifford is a mean teacher and thinks he should have handled the situation differently. I am so sorry to tell you but, you do not know anything about special education, teaching, or how to raise a resilient functioning member of society. He did what was best for me. He gave me what I needed in order to succeed in life and the real world. He showed me what real love looks like because even though he knew I would be mad at him in the moment for not coddling my feelings, he also knew that I would thank him in the long haul for preparing me for the real world.

Everyone is more than capable of getting up in the toughest time of their lives. Everyone has the ability to choose to make their situation better to an extent. It is perfectly okay to break down at times when you have exhausted all of your strength. You have to cry and get your feelings out but once you have your moment, make yourself get up and do something! Don't let yourself stay there because I didn't! And although James Clifford taught me to get up in difficult situations, I still had to make myself get up in the tough situations because he couldn't do it for me. And I can't do it for you either. You have to do it on your own and I know you can. To James Clifford, I know that I told you all this many times but, I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate the things you've taught me and how much they help me in my everyday life. You are an amazing teacher and human being and it was a privilege to have you as a teacher. Thank you, Mr. Clifford. Thank you.