



# Grateful for the Non-Traditional

By Erin Lenninger



My application for an AmeriCorps position at my age could be considered a non-traditional step in my life. Though I have felt a call to serve my community/country in some way since I was a teenager, life happened and I went down a very traditional route of a four-year college degree, marriage, starting a family, and jobs that taught me, but left me more and more unfulfilled and incomplete. After a change of heart and a change in location, I found myself a stay-at-home parent with three very young children and supporting my husband's career. This was my first unexpected but blessed job in my life; and it turns out, not my last!



This winding, sometimes frustrating and often beautiful path did eventually lead me to a new intention and focus on what could be next for me professionally. I felt called to work in public health and believed graduate school was my next logical step. I was incredibly busy with my family and studying to take the GRE and apply for online schools which felt like a challenge in and of itself. I felt a little fearful but very eager for what I thought would come next.

I then saw the listing for Farm to School Specialist in my county and it was a very surreal feeling of my public health interest, nutrition expertise and community focus colliding into one place. Into my place! Once hired, I was again typically excited and possibly atypically scared - a parent worries for so many more people than just themselves. I am grateful for the people around me that supported my decision to be outside the home full-time for a service year - we did not know what that would look and feel like.

I was looking forward to training with my Farm to School cohort just a couple weeks after making this decision and I prepared myself to be the only 37 year-old mother of three in the group. I quickly found that most of my peers were indeed very different from me and my background, but we found so much common ground and passion together, the time was well spent and incredibly energizing for me personally.



Bringing my life experience to this position has truly been an asset and I hope to continue to leverage my experience as a mother and a parent in a school system to maximize this work. I relish the chance to teach nutrition, advocate for schools and farmers, work in the dirt and connect assets in my community. This unexpected job is solidifying and clarifying what I ultimately want to pursue and giving me distinctive opportunities for leadership.

As expected, it also poses the traditional conflict within my heart as I pour myself into this full-time work and am more separated from my children than I have ever been. They still ask me to stay home and to pick them up right from school and be more present. This non-traditional position is similarly frustrating and beautiful like my last “job.”

Emerging into the workforce after years at home is difficult and taking this unique position has allowed me to baby step back into a full-time work schedule. It offers the flexibility needed for any working mother. It gives me work that I care deeply about, which I have learned it *must* be in order to leave my family each morning. It also allows me a springboard into that next professional step of graduate school and public health work. This dream not only still lives in the background but seems more *likely* and more *powerful* after this non-traditional year. So, while I am trying to bring my unique experience to this AmeriCorps position, it is already giving me back a desirable and distinctive boost into my future as well.

It is hard to take an awkward, unsure, or even backward step in life. Moments of doubt, struggle and questioning will arise in every phase. But in those moments and with reflection and determination, I believe one can add value to whatever they are taking on. It can be a course correction or experience buffer that will set one apart in the future. At 37 years old, I can show my children that opportunity comes in many different forms, at many different times and is accompanied by many different and valid feelings.

I have grown already in recognizing my strengths, confidence and drive in the workplace. My children will inevitably grow, and I am feeling more and more ready to take on that next step in my career. I am eager to see what this year brings in opportunity for me professionally, the growth my family will experience and the impact I can make in my community.

