

I'm Not (Wermuth) Smart

By Sarah Wermuth

"Mom, can I come in?"

I poked my head through my parent's bedroom door. Wiping my sweaty palm on my pants, I sighed. I didn't want to have this conversation with my mom. I always dreaded complaining to her, especially when, deep down, I knew nothing would change.

"Yes, Sarah."

I slowly walked in. I dug my feet into the fluffy purple carpet to try and ground myself. I needed to be confident. I needed to be direct. I needed to figure out how to get my point across to my intimidating lawyer mother.

"I don't want to see Chris anymore. He's not helping me."

Chris was the tutor my parents started making me see halfway through my seventh-grade year when I did (what my parents deemed) poorly on two history tests. After the first C, my mom suggested it, but I was adamantly opposed to getting a tutor because I didn't think I needed help. I would eventually be able to convert my knowledge into good test grades. I just needed time. But after the next C+, there was little I could do to protest Chris coming into my life.

My mom looked up. "Honey, you haven't been seeing him that long. You need the help. Just give it a little time."

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I reluctantly sat on the foot of her bed, not wanting this to turn into a long conversation.

“You don’t understand. Do you know what he made me do this session?! I had to throw the flashcards I made on the floor and organize them into groups. It was so stupid. I wasted an hour of my life. An hour that could’ve been spent productively studying by myself!”

After a 20-minute conversation of back-and-forth bickering, it was decided that Chris would continue tutoring me. I had to suck it up and have an “open mind” about his techniques. When I went back to my room, I was infuriated. I didn’t want a tutor and trying to communicate this to my mother seemed pointless.

My mom is a pro bono lawyer. She has dedicated her life to helping people, and when she thinks someone needs help, she will help them. When my mom saw me struggle with my homework, study habits, and test grades, she felt like she had to help. She wouldn’t let her firstborn daughter become an academic failure. She felt like she needed to intervene for me to get into a good college and, more importantly, not destroy the Wermuth genius reputation.

I was born into a family of incredibly book-smart individuals. In seventh grade, when my mom refused to let me stop seeing Chris, I realized that I was the odd one out in terms of intelligence. Even as a 13-year-old, I knew about my parent’s academic success. My dad was valedictorian of his high school, went to Yale, and I still find it entertaining when it takes him ten seconds to convert Fahrenheit to Celsius in his head. My mom went to UPenn Law School, where she finished as the #1 student in her class one year, earning herself the Barenkopf Scholarship, an award for rising 3L students with the best academic record. My younger sister, Hannah, is a senior in high

school. She got accepted to Yale in December 2023, and has been talking about politics since she came out of the womb. When she was younger, she proudly shared that she wanted to grow up and become the first female President of the United States. As an optimistic seventh grader, I wholeheartedly believed her and couldn't wait to live in the White House with her. In my small family of four, only one ever needed a tutor.

I had a challenging time in middle school, both academically and socially. I was insecure about almost everything: my intelligence, my image, my body, and my braces. Being surrounded by my family every day gradually drained me of all self-confidence regarding my intelligence. It became impossible for me to think of myself as smart when I did poorly on tests and came from a family where I always felt so stupid compared to everyone else.

In middle school, this feeling of stupidity followed me everywhere. No matter the setting, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was the dumbest one in the room at all times. Not only did I feel out of place whenever I was with my family, my bad test grades only reaffirmed what I thought was true: I disappointed my family by never gaining the Wermuth family heirloom, the genius brain.

In high school, things started to change. My poofy hair became less poofy. My skin cleared up. My teeth lost the metal cages. And my brain started to work efficiently. By ninth grade, I was no longer forced to see any tutor. I started doing well in school, with consistent straight As satisfying my parents.

Although I started doing well in school, I could never get rid of the thought that being smart didn't come naturally to me. I study for hours to do well on tests, whereas my sister barely has to review the material. My least favorite subject is math, and I've always relied on my dad to tutor me. Understanding

most topics takes me a while, and I often get extremely frustrated when I can't quite grasp the main takeaways. I put in more work than the average person to excel in my classes. And I needed to excel in my classes because that is what Wermuths do. Naturally intelligent people, like those in my family, don't need to put in the amount of effort I do to succeed.

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By the time I was a senior, I didn't like thinking about my intelligence because it confused me. I received straight As, took multiple APs, and got into Vanderbilt, one of the top colleges in America. To my classmates, and to most people, I was smart. But why was it so hard for me to see myself as a smart person? My college application process brutally revealed a potential answer to this question.

Applying to college was one of the most stressful, self-questioning processes I've ever experienced. My parents are realists; they don't believe in sugar-coating things. I respect their outlook on life, which has definitely rubbed off on me. However, their realism was difficult to deal with when I was applying to colleges. The first step of the college process occurred during my Junior year in the Springtime. I was told to write a list of any college I would be happy to attend. I wrote down any school I could think of, obviously knowing I wouldn't be able to get into Harvard, Stanford, or Yale.

My mom was under her covers, and I was sitting on the edge of her bed. I completed my list and wanted to share it with her. College was in the near future; I was feeling old and giddy.

"Yale."

"Take it off."

“Brown.”

“Take it off.”

“Syracuse,” I looked up to a silent nod. I didn’t want to say the next school I wrote down. I took a deep breath.

“...Stanford.” I looked up. I knew what was coming.

“Sarah, come on. Take it off. You’re not going to get into half the schools you wrote down.”

When I finished reading my list, I went to my room. I trust my parents’ opinions more than anything, and when my mom told me I couldn’t get into a particular school, I accepted it without much pushback. I felt like a total disappointment. I know I’m not as smart as my family, but I spent four years in high school trying to prove to my family, especially my mom, that I wasn’t dumb. I couldn’t wrap my head around how my mom could see my straight As, fabulous work ethic, amazing extracurriculars and tell me I couldn’t at least try to get into a top-20 school. So, I tried to forget about it. If I hyper fixated on the little voice in my head telling me I wouldn’t ever be good enough, my confidence would be destroyed. I forced it out of my mind, focused on the remaining colleges on my list, including Vanderbilt, and hoped everything would work out.

December 15, 2021- the day Vanderbilt ED1 came out. After an incredibly long day at school, I walked through the park to kill some time. When I got home, I tried to do my homework, but couldn’t concentrate on the physics problem in front of me when my future was about to be decided in two short hours. I decided to make macaroni and cheese, and as I was eating, my mom and dad walked into the kitchen.

“Hannah has COVID.” No “hello.” No “how was school?” No “how are you feeling about the Vanderbilt decision coming out in an hour and fifty-two minutes?”

“Of course, she figured out how to make my day about her.”

“Are you kidding me, Sarah? This isn’t her fault. How could you even say that?”

My mom started screaming at me, calling out my irrational comment. I should’ve known that she wouldn’t give me a break, even on one of the biggest days of my life.

“I don’t care, Mom. If I get in, none of my friends are going to come over. The one day that should be about me is now about her.”

I was shouting this at my mom while hysterically crying. My face grew red, and a rash started breaking out on my neck. Deep down, I knew it wasn’t my sister’s fault that she tested positive for COVID. However, the stress of the potential rejection made my sister a perfect target for my anger.

“You’re crazy. I’m going to my room. Don’t talk to me.” My mom stormed out of the kitchen, leaving me alone with my dad.

“So, I guess it’ll just be you and me when I get rejected from Vanderbilt?”

“Don’t say that, Sarah. You’re going to be fine, and your mom will be there when you open your letter.” My dad left the kitchen, leaving me alone to wallow in my sadness.

I spent the next hour crying by myself in my room. My sister’s recent diagnosis was not the cause of those tears; the stress of my potential rejection was the driving factor. The college process wouldn’t be over if I got rejected, which sounded like a nightmare on its own. But I also couldn’t shake the thought that if I got rejected, my mom would have been right- I’m the kind of kid who needs tutors, not the type of kid who can get into one of the best colleges in the country.

“OH MY GOD!!!! I DID IT. I GOT INTO VANDERBILT. OH!!! MY!!! GOD!!!!!!” My mom, dad, and I were in the kitchen, and I was jumping up and down at 6:01pm as soon as I saw the “CONGRATULATIONS Sarah! Welcome to Vanderbilt!!”

“Oh, honey! I’m so proud of you.” My mom, with tears in her eyes and a massive smile, devoured me into a hug. I squeezed her back. Our fight that happened less than two hours ago was no longer in our minds. Nothing else in the world mattered for this brief period because I got into Vanderbilt.

I was right; my friends couldn’t come over because my sister had COVID. But I didn’t care once I got in. I had a delicious sushi dinner with my parents, gorging on spicy tuna rolls and edamame. The conversation was joyous, all of us smiling and talking about how happy we were that the college process was over and I got accepted into my dream school. What didn’t come up during our dinner was the feeling of pride in my stomach that I somehow proved my mom wrong: I was smart enough to get into Vanderbilt. I knew my acceptance wouldn’t magically fix my insecurities surrounding my intelligence or make me look in the mirror and see a natural genius. However, my acceptance to Vanderbilt showed me that hard work pays off. I worked extremely hard in high school, and I actually did it. I did it. I got into Vanderbilt.