

Tiffany Saka

Carrie Emerson

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Missing Milestones

I was asleep on my uncomfortable living room couch because half of my family decided to invade my home. At around three o'clock in the morning, I awoke with sleep still in my eyes, to my mom's head pressed to mine as she prayed. I could feel her wet tears sliding onto my face as she thanked God for blessing me to see that day and to continue to protect and guide as I go forward in my education. Then, she let go, gave me a hug, and went back to bed. Afterward, I couldn't sleep, I just laid there thinking, my thoughts drifting to my dad. That's when I started to cry because June 15, 2018, was not only the day that I graduated from high school but my eighteenth birthday, and my dad wouldn't be there to see any of it.

The only thing I could see when I looked around the gigantic blue Monarch Room at Old Dominion University was a sea of red. People were everywhere: standing talking to friends, sitting on the floor or in their alphabetized lines waiting patiently. I could practically feel the excitement floating in the air, decked out in their bright red caps and gowns, eager for what was to come next. I was doing the same laughing and joking with my friends, while we waited for when it was time for us to walk across the stage. I could practically taste the anticipation coming off me. I was finally going to graduate high school, go to college, and make myself and my dad proud.

When they began shuffling us inside the Ted Constant Center, our former teachers formed a V-shaped line for us to go through as they and the crowd applauded for us. The rows were jam-packed with people. I could practically hear their delight. It was so loud people would think an NFL football game was going on. I started to feel nervous, yet very excited. I tried to spot someone from my family in the crowd to calm my nerves, but there were too many people. So as the valedictorian began to talk about our futures, I started to think about mine. I knew I was going to Old Dominion University, to be a biology major, and eventually become a dentist. However, I began to think, what if I failed? If my dad were here, would he be okay with the choices that I am willing to make regarding my future education and what if my dad was alive today?

My dad died on October 10th, 2017. My dad, Tajudeen Saka, was a tall six-foot Nigerian man. At 19 years old, he came from Africa to America and later became the first Nigerian senior chief in the United States Navy serving 22 years. He had short black hair with little grey hairs growing like weeds out of his head. He made my brothers and I pluck from his head telling us that was how he could spend time with us without us trying to escape. Then he would smile with his slightly crooked teeth and laugh. He always put his kids ahead of himself.

My dad would always tell my siblings and I that it wasn't about him it was about us. He used that mentality to support me my entire life. From teaching me how to drive to trying to persuade the National Honor Society into letting me turn in my application late. He is the reason why I strived so hard to have done so well in high school. Every year on my birthday, my dad would always take my brothers and I out to eat, and we would take family pictures and get an ice

cream cake from Dairy Queen. So not having my dad on my graduation and birthday was heart-wrenching.

Suddenly, my brother nudged me and told me he saw my Uncle Martin, my dad's older brother. I turned to the direction he was pointing too. There he was in the front right corner was my Uncle Martin. He was wearing a button-down shirt with jeans and his army cap jumping up and down waving at us like a madman. I almost busted out laughing. He looked so funny. That's when I realized that our row leader was about to signal for us to get up to go on stage. I turned to my brother and asked him if he was ready for this? Reminding him that he should grab the diploma with his left and shake with his right, but mostly that was for me because I was so anxious I didn't want to mess up. My row leader stood up and that's when we began to stroll up the stage.

My former assistant principal called, "Tiffany Ariyike Saka." All I could think about was trying not to fall off stage with my black heels. I almost did while descending the last step because I wanted to be cool and wave my diploma cover around. Once I got back to my seat, I was ready to leave so when my high school principal finally said, "Congratulations Class of 2018!" I tipped my cap and waited the agonizing five minutes for my row to finally be dismissed.

Afterward, people raced back to the Monarch room like a herd of elephants to collect our diplomas. When I finally received mine, I put my diploma in my manila folder and went to find my family. There were so many people my brother and I had to maneuver through. It felt like New York, the way my brother and I had to push through the crowds of friends and families trying to get a picture with their graduates. We finally spotted my uncles who were holding a

giant blown up picture of my dad in his navy attire, and that's when I knew that even though my dad couldn't be there physically he was still there. He would be so proud of what I have accomplished and what I will accomplish in the future.