

How Did I Get Here?

I sometimes ask myself, “How did I get here?” The future is hard for anyone to see, but usually the past is clear. Unfortunately, I sometimes have a hard time seeing the path and the decisions that brought me to the present. However, I am sure that my fateful decision to join the Rocket Club at Madison West High School played a major role in laying out a path for my life.

I’ve always had a hard time making decisions. It didn’t matter if the question was “Which sport to play this season?” or “Which class to take this semester?” or even “Which college will I attend?” When confronted with different options, I’ve struggled to make a choice.

During my freshman year in high school, I couldn’t decide between playing club soccer or swimming for my high school team, so I did both. When I was choosing classes, my decision often hinged on which of the classes I might have the opportunity to take at a later time. That way I could take both...eventually. I agonized over my choice of colleges beyond the May 1 decision date. I ended up sending security deposits to three different schools to give myself a bit more time to sort out the options. I guess I’ve always believed, “Why choose if you don’t have to?” or rather “Why choose **until** you have to?”

My junior year of high school started off as hectic as usual. I was a varsity swimmer and our season started in early August. Twice-a-day practices drained all the energy out of me, but I was determined to make it a year to remember.

I have a learning disability, but through the help of teachers and counselors, I developed strategies to help overcome my disabilities. I became bound and determined not to let my learning disability define me or limit the heights of my achievements. I started high school as a timid soul, with inward pointed feet, sunken shoulders, and an uncomfortable smile. I learned confidence is not something easily taught, but rather acquired through experience.

The strategies that I learned from my teachers and counselors helped me develop the confidence to tackle a schedule that included Pre-Calculus, Advanced Physics, AP English, and beginning German. I finally opted out of Spanish after four years to study the language that I preferred. To make up for lost time, I also enrolled in the German Immersion Program, which included a three-week trip to Germany the summer after the school year ended.

In the midst of an overscheduled life that fall, I made the fateful decision to join the Rocket Club. I was very anxious about joining a group that was outside my circle of friends. It was a group that had been together for a while, and its members intimidated me because of their knowledge. But I, the once cowardly lion, took a deep breath and ventured into room 311.

Rocket club was the “geek squad” to most people, the “club for the socially clueless” or “dorks for life.” The names went on and on. My high school was all about labels. There were pages in our yearbook dedicated to defining the “most likely to succeed” or “best dressed.” It seemed like a never-ending contest, and I didn’t feel like being a part of it any longer.

Instead I turned to a fascination with rockets that began when I was in sixth grade. I embarked on an adventure with my sister down south to Huntsville, Alabama. I became a part of the Space Camp Academy with my own flight team and scheduled missions. I was immediately fascinated by the thought of unknown planets, and I was overwhelmed by trying to understand the makeup of a star. But best of all, I was enamored with the count down to real rocket launches.

Rockets got me going. The power of their thrust, the accuracy of every piece of equipment put into them, the details built into their design, and the properties of their materials all fascinated me. They seemed almost unreal.

Back in Madison, there I stood in front of the socially condemned door, 311. You could hear the collaboration of enhanced brains steadily at work with roars of laughter. With a deep breath, shoulders back, and gut sucked in, I let curiosity draw me in.

I braced myself for the penetrating stares. But I was surprised instead to be greeted with hugs and smiles. No one asked me why; they simply accepted me. I felt like an extended family member whom everyone hadn't seen for years. The first day I was quizzed on the parts of a rocket, and to my fellow club members' amazement, I correctly answered a considerable amount.

As I continued to attend weekly meetings and work sessions, my friends outside of Rocket Club began to wonder. At first I simply said I had prior engagements and left it at that. People drew their own conclusions, and because I understood high school was all about gossip, I was used to inaccurate conclusions. In an attempt to avoid drama, I didn't bother altering anyone's predictions about where I had disappeared.

I had two best friends, Kyia and Dean. Kyia was a down-to-earth tomboy and Dean was an uncontrollable ball of energy. Both accepted me for who I was, as I did them. Although their skeptical eyes questioned my pursuit into unmarked territory, I knew they would stand by me in my exploration of aeronautics.

I began to promote the club by telling silly tales of the supervisor Dr. Pavel Pinkas, a jovial Czech, and the mischief that would occur during the work sessions. Slowly, the judgmental thoughts of “outsiders” morphed to envious eyes. Over time, our Rocket Club family increased as the stories of gunpowder and Kevlar tempted others into the group.

Everyone invested time, effort, and ultimately love, for so much was devoted to the success of the club. Team selection was not a popularity contest and gender was not an issue. I was placed on a team of four, three boys and me.

Time was a big issue for me. The club held ten-hour-long open workshop sessions on both Saturdays and Sundays as well as shorter sessions at night on school days. I was worried about my commitment to my sports, other clubs, and schoolwork. But my club members were committed to me, and when I struggled in a school subject, there were at least four eager club members determined to help. We worked as a whole.

As I said earlier, making choices is difficult for me. Usually, my decisions came down to two options, either this or that. But in May of 2008, the stars aligned in a way that I had not yet encountered. My decision making and ability to prioritize would be challenged more than ever before.

Prom is a big deal at all high schools. It’s the last dance to get all dolled up for and celebrate with your classmates. Although it was a Senior Prom at West, my friend

Mark was a senior and he asked me to go as his date. I had bought a great new dress and I couldn't wait to go to the dance. I couldn't have imagined that something would prevent me from going.

The same weekend as prom, my soccer team was scheduled to play in a big out-of-town varsity tournament. Since I was playing on the junior varsity team, it was a great opportunity to be able to play and prove myself against those on other varsity teams. Since the tournament was to be held almost three hours outside of Madison, our coach had scheduled it as an overnight tournament. I was a starting defender on our team, and I couldn't wait for the chance to help our team win the tournament like we had done the year before. If everything went according to plan, I would hit the road as soon as the tournament was over and be back in Madison just in time to freshen up and head out to dinner before prom. I was only a bit concerned that the tournament might be delayed which, in turn, could have an effect on my evening plans.

As fate would have it, the Rocket Club's biggest event of the year was scheduled for the exact same weekend. All year long, we had done outreach, performed service, held fundraisers, worked alongside NASA engineers with student research projects, and prepared to compete in a national rocketry competition. The competition was called the Team America Rocketry Challenge or TARC for short. My team had designed, implemented, constructed, tested, and launched our rocket numerous times and finally qualified for TARC. The national finals of the competition were being held in Washington, D.C. They were scheduled to take up an entire weekend as well as two school days.

The calendar crisis didn't hit me until two weeks before the fateful weekend. I had just delivered the Rocket Club information to my parents. While my dad was complaining a bit about the short notice for sending in a check, my mom, the family's schedule keeper, pointed out that I had three things scheduled for the same weekend.

I originally pledged myself to each event, and now I was stuck in a position where I had to choose my priority. If I chose the soccer tournament, I still had the possibility of being done in time to make prom. If I chose the rocket competition I had the possibility of winning a national title and scholarship money as well as a free trip to Paris. But going to D.C. meant that I couldn't play in the soccer tournament or go to prom. I couldn't choose all three. I was miserable.

After long and thoughtful deliberation, I decided on the Rocket Club event. I was on a team of only four Rocket Club members. I felt that my presence, or absence, would be much more significant than on my soccer team where I was one of 20 players. It was very hard, but my soccer teammates forgave me and understood my difficult situation. As for prom, even though my chance to go during my junior year was now ruled out, there was still the possibility that I could go during my senior year.

After receiving the approval signatures of all my teachers to miss two full school days, I was on the plane to D.C. It was interesting to meet many sponsors for the event and possible future employers. I was charmed by the city and enraptured by contest.

The first day was dedicated to touring and preparing our rockets for the completion. The rocket preparation lasted well into the night. The next day we woke up at the crack of dawn, excitement pulsing through our veins. We skipped breakfast and

hopped onto the designated buses to the launch site. “This better be worth it,” I remember saying to myself with a half sarcastic smile.

A launching order was established. A list of the team names was selected at random. Each team had to go through inspection first where members were questioned about their rockets as professionals took it apart. Afterward they had an hour to reassemble their rocket and safely place it on the launch pad. Then they had to await the approval of the TARC field official for count down. Finally they had to launch, recover, record their score, and await results.

The goal of the competition was to get the rocket to an altitude of 750 feet in 45 seconds without breaking the scientific payload, an egg. The team who came the closest to those specific results would be the winner.

Our team was up. We raced to inspection. The professionals investigated our parachute ejection mechanism and inquired about what apogee we had set for it to deploy. I was too nervous to formulate sentences or even words so my other teammates, Tenzin, Ben, and John, took over the Q-and-A session.

Next we assembled the rocket. Each of us had our expertise. I enjoyed folding the parachute. It seemed relatively easy to most, but it was a crucial job. With one wrong fold, it could unravel improperly and send the rocket into a dangerous spiral cutting down on descent time and damaging the payload. Ben inspected the electronic bay as Tenzin and John looked over the rest of the rocket.

As Buzz Lightyear says, “To infinity and beyond!” We mounted our baby on the launch pad and sent her soaring. As soon as she landed, we were given the OK to chase her down. I didn’t think I’d end up sprinting at a rocket competition.

Forty-four seconds in the air and our apogee was 766 feet--not too bad for our first run. A thousand teams had originally entered the contest. Only 100 were selected for national finals. At nationals, all 100 teams get a first run. Those with the 20 best scores continue and are given a second launch. Their scores from both runs are combined, and from that, the winner is determined.

WE MADE IT! I still remember the disbelief in my expression. We made it through the first round in fifth place. I shook it off and went back to work, making some minor adjustments to try to get closer to the optimum specifications. Again we went through the process from inspection to launch. Our second launch achieved an apogee of 742 feet and flight duration of 46 seconds. Like all good scientists, we had over corrected for our earlier mistakes.

Our hearts were throbbing, hands were clenched, and eyes were glued to the result board. It felt like we were subjects in some relativity experiment as time slowed down. The heavens chimed in with some unpredictable sprinkles, making the wait even more unbearable.

Little to my team's knowledge, I was on a tight schedule. My dad, the softy and amateur travel agent, had figured out a way for me to fly back from Dulles International Airport on Saturday evening in time to catch part of prom. My mom had contacted a friend of hers in D.C. to pick me up from the competition and drive me to the airport. Originally, I was ecstatic at the thought of making the rocket competition and prom. It felt like I was somehow cheating fate by making two of my three scheduled events. Now, it felt like fate may have returned the favor.

My teammates were scheduled to stay in town for another night and fly back the next day. Since I had not actually considered winning as a real possibility, I knew that I might have to leave for my return flight before the rocket competition would be completed. I had asked for the permission of the supervisors of the club, Dr. Pavel Pinkas and Ms. Hager, before doing so, but I just hadn't broken the news to my team.

The officials began moving the team names around on the scoreboard. Some were moving up and some were moving down. Going into the final round, we were fifth, but we held our breath as our team name was slowly removed from the fifth slot and slid ever so politely into the top slot. My entire club jumped into the air together, as if we were synchronized. Everyone began hugging and yelling, laughing and crying; who knew someone could feel so many feelings at once. The press dove in for the kill. I now regretted that I never took a public speaking class. The boys, realizing my inability to speak, responded to all the questions with eloquent answers and a beautiful sense of fluidity.

The moment that I got a chance to run, I did. I ran to the staging tent, which now had no use. I was alone and frantically dialed my parents' number. The dial tones seemed like they rang for minutes. After I was explaining my situation in between gasps of air and accelerated speech, they instructed me I needed to decide now if I was going to leave tonight. I had to leave for the airport very soon if I was going ever to make my flight. I now had to choose between meeting important role models, having the opportunity to be exposed to the press, and shaking important hands, or hitching a ride with a family friend to race home for prom.

I made the decision to stay for a little longer because our team was now scheduled to compete against a team from the United Kingdom that had flown in for the competition. How many people can say they represented the United States of America? Let me tell you, it's exhilarating. We didn't win against the United Kingdom team, but just being able to say we were the best of the best in the U.S. was good enough.

I made it to the airport in time to catch my flight. However, I guess it just wasn't meant to be. United Airlines delayed the flight for four hours, so I missed the prom and I missed the celebrations with my Rocket Club teammates. But it did give me the chance to reflect on the day and the choices I made.

Throughout the rest of the year, news anchors asked our rocket club team to make appearances. Interviews were scheduled. Our club got enough funding to rent out an actual building to house our rockets rather than a cramped school closet. Our team was also given an all-expenses-paid trip to Paris for the international airshow. We were treated like kings and queens. Every hour of every day was planned. The mixture of sights we saw and people we met was unbelievable. It will forever be a true once-in-a-lifetime experience. Since I was already in Germany at the time for the immersion program I mentioned earlier, I had a much shorter trip. I almost had to choose between those experiences, but that is another story.

I always liked the poem by Robert Frost called "The Road Less Traveled." I'm always intrigued by the thought of doing something that has not been done before. I've come to realize that keeping all one's options open can also come at a cost. I've also learned that it's important not only to make a decision on priorities, but also to embrace it. I'm smiling as I write this. Maybe the choices tomorrow will be just a bit easier.