

From 9/11 to a college degree

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The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 distressed many Americans. For McNair Scholar Gretchen Hill, the events did more than just that: they changed her entire direction in life. Photo by Daniel Clark.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 distressed many Americans. For McNair Scholar Gretchen Hill, the events did more than just that: they changed her entire direction in life.

“I realized life is short and that there are so many more things I want to accomplish,” said Hill, a 33-year-old senior graduating this month with a projected 3.2 GPA and a bachelor’s degree in geography.

After this realization, she got out of an unhealthy marriage and quit her full-time job. She wanted to go to college and nothing was going to get in

her way. During this time, she had one daughter and was pregnant. To ensure a better life for her and her children, she moved from Kansas City, Mo., to Reno in November 2001 to attend the University of Nevada, Reno.

A court order brought Hill back to Missouri in May 2002 so the father of her children could have reasonable visitations. Hill attended Park University during the 2002 and 2003 school year. During this year, her ex-husband was harassing her and she informed the police. After going to court, they granted her permission to move back to Reno.

“Throughout these challenges, I have found that I have more of a desire and motivation to continue on with school,” said Hill, who spoke at the TRIO graduation ceremony in April.

Hill has been attending the University of Nevada, Reno since 2003 and joined the TRiO Scholars program in 2004. The program provided her with counseling, tutoring and funding. The program also helped Hill with academic advising and encouraged her to pursue her passion in geography.

“TRIO is an excellent program for first-generation students to give them the support that’s typically received from family,” Hill said. “Instead you get the support in an academic setting. They’re there for you emotionally and supportive in every way.”

Hill transitioned from the TRIO Scholars program to the McNair Scholars program in the spring of 2007. She says that the program greatly prepared her for graduate school through a research project, GRE preparation, waiving graduate school application fees and through the process of locating a mentor.

Her research project brought her to Spain in summer 2007, which was funded by her Undergraduate Research Award. Her research showed how the Basque culture has an attachment to their environment. It will be published in the spring 2009 issue of the McNair Journal.

During her time at the University, Hill chose to not work so she could focus on school and raising her children. To cover school and living expenses, she received many scholarships and grants, as well as taking out some loans. She also received funding for being a Platinum Scholar and a little from her parents and welfare. She even helped others to succeed, volunteering as a Peer Mentor for TRIO Scholars students and assisting students who were also parents in locating resources.

In 2007, Hill received the President's Choice Undergraduate Paper Award and a travel grant award from the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers. This and many of her other accomplishments, as well as assistance from TRiO, has boosted her confidence.

"I feel more positive and confident about myself and during these years I've also realized who I am," Hill said. "I know the TRIO and McNair Scholars program has been a part of that."

She will be moving with her two daughters, now 7 and 10, and her fiancée to Oregon where she will attend the University of Oregon in the fall seeking a master's degree in geography. After that, she plans to earn a Ph.D. in geography and become a college professor while doing research.

Marsha Dupree, assistant director of the McNair Scholars Program, said she's proud of Hill for persevering as a non-traditional first-generation student and a single parent to achieve her goals.

"She is truly a role model for others and she knows that the education she is receiving will open up new doors of opportunity for her and her family," Dupree said.

At the TRIO graduation ceremony during her speech, Hill gave her story, hoping it would inspire others in difficult situations.

"Through my challenges and obstacles that I have overcome while attending school, I hope to inspire not only my two daughters, but others who are interested in pursuing a college degree," Hill said in her speech. "Despite what challenges you may have experienced, if your desires are to attend school then I am confident that you will succeed."