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### Growing up with less in a town with more

As a child whose parents divorced at a very young age, I did a lot of moving as I was growing up. I lived in a few towns like O'Fallon, Troy, Wood River, Glen Carbon, and now Granite City, but one constant in my life was Edwardsville. If one parent was living somewhere else, the other was in Edwardsville. Growing up in Edwardsville in a lower income family, while surrounded by kids who always had money was a formative experience for me. Especially as I watched Edwardsville grow from a smaller college town to a much bigger and busier version of itself.

Edwardsville, Illinois, wasn't always the busy town it's becoming today. When I was growing up, it definitely had more of a small town feel. I remember there being a small toy store that I would always beg to go to, but it eventually went out of business and is now a mattress firm. Edwardsville is a historic town, it has some older buildings downtown and beautiful brick roads. That charm is still in some parts of town, but things have definitely changed. Over the years, the city has grown significantly, both in size and wealth. So many new nice subdivisions keep popping up, chain stores, and restaurants have moved in, and the town seems like it has shifted to upper middle class, which I am not complaining about. Panda Express and Raising Canes moving in are a plus but traffic has picked up significantly, especially near shopping centers, and there are so many traffic lights where there used to be none. The growth isn't

necessarily a bad thing, but for someone like me, who grew up with less, it sometimes felt like I was watching Edwardsville become a place I didn't entirely recognize.

Before my parents divorced, we had a nice home on Old Troy Road, right in the center of town. I only have a few memories living there but after they divorced, both sides did not have much money. My dad had moved in with his girlfriend that he cheated on my mom with and my mom moved in with a friend for the time being. A year later my mom moved into an apartment right next to the airplane park, which wasn't cheap, but she made it work. My two brothers and I shared a room, one two years older than me and the other 10 years older than me. It was very cramped but sometimes I still miss that apartment. My brother who was 10 years older than me, Brandon, would usually just sleep in the living room. There wasn't much space or privacy in our room filled with a bunk bed, twin bed, and a dresser. I grew up with hand-me-down clothing, which didn't bother me as I actually liked a lot of the clothes that I wore. It was when my mom would drop me off at my dad's and now stepmom's house where I realized hand me down clothing was something that people looked down upon. They would always change me and my brother Sean out of what we were wearing from our mom's before school, and then change us back to our mom's clothes before we went back to her. At the time I didn't think much of it, I know my dad and stepmom were trying to make us look "better". It was super weird, looking back at it now, but I guess they were trying to have us fit in with the other kids who did not have to wear hand me down clothes.

There were quite a few times while growing up that I felt like less because of the people around me. Little comments always stuck with me, and I have been known to hold a grudge. I would be embarrassed when I would have to take the bus home in grade school because I was one of the only kids who got off at an apartment complex while the rest were in Esic

neighborhoods which were mostly nice houses. A lot of kids didn't even really care, and it was just the few snobby kids who made a comment that would stick with me for a while. "Wow, you really live there?", and mind you it's a nice apartment in the middle of town. My dad had also lived in an apartment for quite a few years. When I lived in those apartments, I never had friends over, I was so scared to be judged. Some of these kids lived in houses that had bigger basements than my entire apartment. Looking back at my childhood, I really grew to appreciate my mom, who is the strongest person I will ever know. She was a single mother for a long time before she found someone worthy of her, and she did her very best all the time, no matter how stressed or tired she was. I sometimes look back at how I acted at a young age and get ashamed because my mom truly only wanted the best for us.

Middle School was hell for me, it was extremely snobby, and I think the most formative years for me when it comes to having less money. It was over such stupid stuff too. I remember one of my friends at the time asking me why I wore the same shoes every day, and I was confused because I always only had one pair at a time, and I thought that was normal. And I feel like at that age, it should be. But I forgot these kid's parents can afford several pairs of the newest 200 dollar Adidas NMDs and Ultra Boosts, while I loved my 40 dollar slide on checkerboard Vans shoes. One of the biggest and stupidest things that stuck with me was when I got my first phone. One thing about it was, I was the very last person in my friend group to receive a phone, and it was 8th grade. Most of my friends got their phones in 5th or 6th grade. I remember having so many dreams of simply getting an iPhone and then waking up disappointed when I still didn't have a phone. It was hard for either parent to afford to get me and my brother Sean a phone, my mom was still single at the time and my dad worked but stepmom did not, so money was still tight. So, when my dad finally saved up some money to get me and my brother's

phones, they happened to be androids. Which should not be a big deal, but to middle schoolers it was. My first day at school with a phone and my best friend at the time wanted to see it, mind you he had the newest iPhone X, and he thought it was a piece of crap. At the time, I was embarrassed of my phone but still mostly just happy to even have one. Going into highschool, I still had the android, and one day at the cafeteria I was getting my lunch, and I somehow dropped my phone and the battery came out and went flying. The kids around me started laughing, I grabbed the pieces to my phone and just left. It was late into my sophomore year of high school when I got an iPhone, and a weight was lifted off my shoulders, and I was so unbelievably happy. I do not know why but kids are just so mean, and they care about the littlest things. As a college student, I have not once thought about people's clothes, shoes, phones, or even where they live.

All of the embarrassment and judgement I got for not having a lot of money growing up, I believe has resulted into a bad habit for me. After getting a job and finally having some money of my own at the age of 16, I bought myself all of the fancy things I wanted growing up. My first job was at Panera Bread in Edwardsville, I only worked there for 5 months and with that money, I bought myself an iPad and an Apple Watch. My mom rolled her eyes at my big purchases saying they were unnecessary, and at the time I didn't agree, but now I do. I used the 600 dollar apple watch for maybe a year before I stopped caring about it. The iPad was a bad purchase at the time, I barely touched it for years, it did start getting some use when I started college though. Even now, I know I don't have the healthiest money habits but I try my best to make good decisions, but sometimes I just love to splurge some money. Now that my mom has passed away, when I have to contemplate any purchases, I think about what she would think about them, and go off what I think she would say, which is 99% of the time a big no.

Now being in college in Edwardsville, I have not received an ounce of judgement from other people here about anything money related, at our grown age there are much bigger things to worry about than what phone someone has or what shoes they are wearing. I have however received judgement from people about staying in Edwardsville for college. The once great and wealthy town of Edwardsville that my parents could barely afford to live in, is now something to be ashamed of. One of my friends threw me a surprise birthday party at her house and invited a ton of my friends and one of hers, Ella. The party was great, it was actually one of the sweetest things someone has done for me. But near the end, I was talking to a few of my friends and Ella. We were all just talking about college, how it was going and where we went. When it got to me, I said that it was all going well for me, and Ella said something along the lines of “You go to SIUE right?” and when I said yes, she made a face and said “That’s unfortunate”. I didn’t take it to heart or anything, I’ve known Ella for a while and she has always been one to be a little rude without realizing. It might be unfortunate for her, but I have a full ride scholarship here at SIUE, and personally I think that’s very fortunate.

Looking back, I don’t resent the way I grew up, I carry it with me every day. The discomfort, the judgment, the longing to fit in, they were all heavy at the time for me, but they've shaped the way I see people, the way I handle money, and the way I value things that can’t be bought. Edwardsville may have changed, and I may not recognize every part of it anymore, but it will always be a part of me. What used to make me feel “less than” is now a reminder of how far I’ve come, and how I’ve learned to appreciate what really matters.