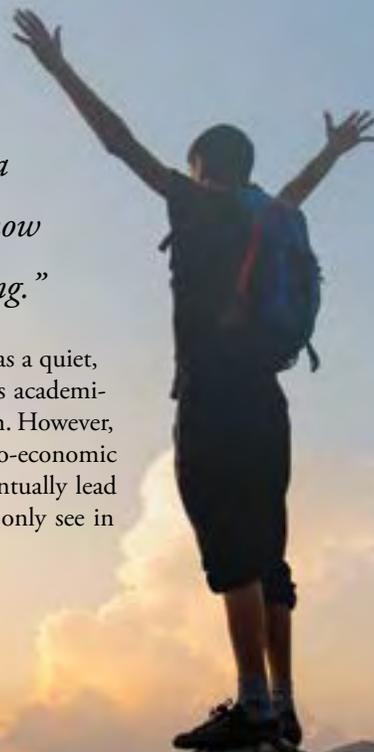


# from Homeless to Johns Hopkins: The Story of One Profoundly Gifted Individual Overcoming the Odds

By Stefanie McKoy

**O**n a recent December day, I received one of the best gifts in the form of a message from a former student. Jaekeb and I would chat sporadically through the years, and his message to me that day brought tears to my eyes: *“Hey, Mrs. McKoy, I really wanted to take a moment to thank you. Throughout a lot of my early education, you were amazingly supportive, and I honestly believe your classes were some of the most inspiring to push me forward. I found out yesterday that I’ve been accepted with a full ride to Johns Hopkins University. It’s been a heck of a ride getting here and I want you to know I appreciate all you’ve done in helping me along.”*

The Jaekeb I remember from my elementary classroom was a quiet, studious young man. As a profoundly gifted student, he was academically talented in all areas and soared through any material given. However, Jaekeb’s struggles were not in academics, but due to his socio-economic status. Jaekeb’s resilience and internal motivation would eventually lead him to move beyond his status to find opportunities many only see in their dreams.



### Family Life

Jaekob quietly entered my classroom behind his grandmother and mother during an open house. Other than a quick greeting, I doubt Jaekob spoke any other words that day. I recall his grandmother and mother pulling me aside to discuss Jaekob's learning expectations. The family held strong religious views and preferred Jaekob's reading list exclude any fantasy material, elements of magic, and specific series, and thus restricted his access to advanced reading material.

Jaekob's time in my elementary classrooms, third grade and then later fifth grade, became about developing confidence, an independent voice, and a drive for a better future. Jaekob excelled in academics, comprehending class material above his grade level, and demonstrating a keen sense of curiosity, but he felt bogged down by his socio-economic situation. I learned Jaekob lived in a motel room with his single mother, grandparents, and multiple cats. This motel was a

known epicenter of illegal drug activity, and Jaekob's living situation classified him as homeless in the school system. Jaekob told me he shared a bed with his mom while his grandparents shared the other. During later conversations, Jaekob shared that he witnessed his grandfather's abusive behavior toward his mother and grandmother.

Further compounding his living situation, Jaekob was shuffled between his dad and his mother and grandparents, who often had conflicting views on schooling, religion, and even the books Jaekob read. This caused anxiety and confusion for Jaekob in middle school and high school.

### A Turning Point

In middle school, Jaekob's family moved into separate apartments, but he was often left alone. He had unbound freedom, including the ability to stay out all night. However, his internal motivation kept him at the top of his class despite his home life obstacles.

During a gifted state conference, Jaekob's middle school gifted teacher received information about the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program (JKCF).<sup>1</sup> She took the information to Jaekob and recommended that he apply to the program having already gathered his required letters of recommendation. He followed her advice, and in eighth grade, he was one of only a few who received an award. His scholarship package included funding for academic and extracurricular opportunities, annual summer programs, and access to guidance counselors.

The JKCF program allowed Jaekob opportunities once unattainable. During the summer before high school, Jaekob joined the other JKCF young scholars for a stimulating month-long experience at the University of Pennsylvania conceptualizing a non-profit. He was required to prepare the paperwork and defend the proposal before a panel. I remember talking to Jaekob throughout the process



hearing his awe of the freedom of choice in his learning, the collaboration between students and mentors, and the pride he felt from his work. Jaekeb described the experience as humbling, engaging, and actualizing because it was a product he could readily implement in the real world. This project reignited Jaekeb's passion for learning and internal motivation for knowledge, as evident by his enthusiastic and detailed description of his work.

### **Making Tough Decisions**

Jaekeb continued the JKCF program while attending the same public high school in rural Missouri. He received mentorship support through the program and experienced another incredible opportunity the summer after his freshman year. A few members of his JKCF cohort chose to visit the University of California Santa Barbara to study microbiology for a month-long internship. Jaekeb's enthusiasm was apparent while discussing his first time working with "real" microscopes and lab equipment. Jaekeb was starting to experience the world beyond the walls created by his family and seeing the possibilities of higher aspirations.

One aspect of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Young Scholars Program is helping students apply to private high schools if they choose. With guidance from teachers, Jaekeb applied and received a full scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy<sup>2</sup> in New Hampshire. His acceptance, however, did not come without tough decisions. Jaekeb later described that he felt a considerable amount of responsibility toward his younger brothers, who struggled with disabilities. Jaekeb had spent significant time caring for them, acting as a second caregiver, and he struggled with feelings of guilt and abandonment.

Additionally, both parents had to consent to Jaekeb, a minor, leaving the state to learn at a residential high school. Jaekeb's dad initially refused; he claimed the school would be indoctrinating his son. Jaekeb recalled his dad told him he should not be proud of his acceptance



into Exeter. Jaekeb now describes the experience with some unease at the still strained relationship. After his dad finally conceded, Jaekeb left rural Missouri for a residential high school across the country.

### **Phillips Exeter Academy**

Jaekeb stated he enjoyed his time at Exeter but instantly felt the divide between the wealthy students and those receiving financial aid. The socio-economic class divide was more visible in the halls of Exeter, and classes were more demanding than in Missouri. He recalls hearing comments about poor people because "they were lazy" and teachers commenting about low-quality public education. He fondly describes the time a teacher bought him a dress coat for a formal dance. Even though the coat was too small, he did not want to offend his teacher. Despite the challenges at Exeter, what remained a constant was Jaekeb's kind and caring nature, often thinking of others before himself.

Throughout Jaekeb's first year at Exeter, he formed a tight circle of friends

from diverse backgrounds. This group of friends helped Jaekeb transition to Exeter's distinctive instructional methods, where teaching was student centered rather than teacher directed. Jaekeb formed a friendship with his roommate's boyfriend. Jaekeb, a former video gamer, discovered Exeter's culture frowned upon the practice, demonizing it as a low-class activity. Jaekeb had abandoned it, although gaming was his way of relaxing and escaping the pressures of schooling. The new friendship reunited him with the world of video gaming and continued throughout his senior year.

During the summer between his junior and senior years, Jaekeb and members of his JCKF cohort spent a month in Santiago, Chile, learning about entrepreneurship. Jaekeb lived with a native-speaking host family during the month. Jaekeb's Spanish language skills greatly improved, and he realized he did not want to go into business for himself. He remembered this experience fondly but understood entrepreneurship was not an area he wanted to pursue further. Instead, he left knowing his passion was elsewhere. Jaekeb's ability

to reflect on his learning shows his high level of maturity as a profoundly gifted individual progressing in his academics.

### Learning During a Pandemic

During the pandemic, Exeter sent students home to learn remotely. Multiple generations were living in the same apartment, so Jaekob no longer had his own room. This meant he would often sit in his car outside, running an extension cord to his laptop, sometimes choosing to sleep there as well. Furthermore, he was bombarded with negative messages about his life at Exeter during visits with his father, who believed he was being brainwashed there.

It is evident during our discussion that Jaekob walked a balance of family honor and his own self-worth. It is a balance Jaekob struggled with for years but

managed better as he continued to gain real-world experience.

A bright spot during the pandemic year was Jaekob's collaborative research at Stanford. Jaekob explained his work with fruit fly larva to pilot and develop a program to generate genetic lines with LexA enhancer traps in a targeted manner. He described the collaborative process and special equipment with expressive passion, dedication, and sense of self-drive towards a future career goal evident during our discussion.

### Looking Forward

Jaekob received a full scholarship package to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he has a primary major in molecular and cellular biology, while carrying a secondary major in the history of science, technology, and medicine. The

summer before his freshman year, he did not return home to rural southern Missouri with its strong religious and political views. He stated he does not feel at home with his family, but rather the family he has created at Exeter. In his words, he says, *"I'm very lucky to have a really close and amazing chosen family."*

Jaekob is spending his summer before college creating an online puzzle hunt with his Exeter friends.

He is also working on the First-Generation Low-Income Partnership's<sup>3</sup> National Fellowship's chapter establishment and development team. His work involves meeting with first-generation student organizations via Zoom or email to organize the support they need. For example, he recently worked with a chapter to put together a scientific calculator lending library. He is very



passionate about his work, spending time in direct communication with current and prospective members.

### Support Networks

Jaekob is a shining example of a profoundly gifted student born into a circumstance of poverty yet was able to rise above his situation. Jaekob was fortunate to have a support network around him, pushing him to succeed. Jaekob's family supported him in their own unique ways. His mother and grandmother came into my classroom for conferences, answered my calls, and shared ideas for his learning. The same is true of Jaekob's dad. By positively reaching out to him first, I was able to bypass his negative views of school, so he felt involved in Jaekob's education.

Other teachers and school leaders also supported Jaekob in important ways. His junior high gifted teacher connected him with the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and assisted him with applying to Exeter.

His junior high principal made it possible for him to attend a field trip to Boston and New York. These experiences showed Jaekob he was cared for and valued. They continue to motivate him to learn. Nevertheless, it was Jaekob's own internal motivation, resilience, and high expectations for himself that kept him moving toward his goals of a brighter future.

As Jaekob's former teacher, I could not be prouder of this young man and cannot wait to see what the future continues to hold for him. He now prepares for his second year at Johns Hopkins University, and I have no doubt this drive will continue to help him succeed on his quest for a brighter future. ☺

### Author's Note

**Stefanie McKoy, M.Ed.**, is a Doctoral Academy Fellow and student in the University of Arkansas' Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program. Her research comprises three interconnected

lines: gifted education, teacher education, and digital ethnography. As a graduate assistant, Stefanie teaches undergraduate and graduate-level courses in special education, gifted and talented education, and teacher preparedness. Before beginning her doctoral degree, Stefanie taught elementary and gifted students for 13 years.

**Jaekob** is a 19-year-old sophomore at Johns Hopkins University studying molecular and cellular biology.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. (n.d.). *Young scholars program*. [www.jkcf.org/our-scholarships/young-scholars-program](http://www.jkcf.org/our-scholarships/young-scholars-program)

<sup>2</sup> Phillips Exeter Academy. (n.d.). *Begin the journey of your lifetime*. [www.exeter.edu](http://www.exeter.edu)

<sup>3</sup> FLIP National. (n.d.). *Flip National*. [www.flipnational.org](http://www.flipnational.org)

## Resources

RESOURCE	DESCRIPTION
<b>Jack Kent Cooke Foundation</b> <a href="http://www.jkcf.org">www.jkcf.org</a>	The foundation is dedicated to advocating and advancing exceptional students who demonstrate financial need. Since 2000, the JKCF has awarded \$230 million in scholarships to high-achieving students with financial need. The purpose of the program is to provide academically challenging and inspiring programs during and after school, and in the summers. Information and advisors are available to assist in the navigation and transition from high school to college. Financial resources are available to help students develop academic and artistic talents.
<b>Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted</b> <a href="http://www.sengifted.org">www.sengifted.org</a>	SENG is an organization dedicated to helping gifted, talented, and twice-exceptional individuals reach their intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual goals. SENG offers conferences, online parent groups, training, continuing education courses, and more.
<b>On the Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Children</b> By Tracy L. Cross	The author presents a conversational style, in-depth look at the complex social and emotional issues gifted children face. The book provides information about who gifted children are and what it means to be gifted, resources to guide gifted children, and the issues facing gifted children in the 21st century. Prufrock Press (2018).
<b>5 Levels of Gifted: School Issues and Education Options</b> By Deborah Ruf	This book describes five possible classifications of gifted children based on behaviors and developmental milestones painting a picture for parents and educators of the challenges and strengths of the gifted students. The book provides educational approaches and practical advice for school issues and educational options for each level of giftedness. Great Potential Press (2009).