Freshman year of high school, a girl walked into her journalism classroom. It was the first day of the semester and her stomach swarmed with the expected butterflies for the start of a new class. This girl was outgoing, but not very self-assured, and hadn’t found something in life yet that challenged her, excited her, and sparked creativity within.

Flash forward to senior year. A confident young woman has found her calling. She’s editor in chief of the yearbook and has discovered passion in photography, leadership, and journalism. She is well-respected by her peers and has learned much about herself over the years. Her adviser has helped her challenge herself immensely, and she has accrued a tremendous workload which she tackles with vigor.

That girl in the journalism class didn’t know what she was signing up for when she walked into that classroom. But what came out of it was greater than anything she could ever have imagined. Intro to Journalism turned into a leadership position on the yearbook for three years to come. It challenged me to develop my people skills, my leadership skills and it taught me to use my mind in ways I had never thought before.

Through this class, I met the teacher, Phillip Caston, who became my mentor and closest adviser. It was his first year of teaching at Wando, and he was looking to rebuild the yearbook program. He recruited me, along with several other very talented and eager individuals, to become a part of the staff for the next year.

From there on out, the rest was history.

Journalism, yearbook, became the part of my life that made me excited to wake up every day. I was challenged more than I had ever been before in my life. It was like a real job: I had to manage people, manage my own time, and produce work to show to the editors of that year.

I was hooked that first year. I went through a total transformation. I had never been shy, oh no, but I started to become the best version of myself. I came across a lot of challenges that first year. I didn’t know how to lead one of my staff members, who had great ideas but didn’t exactly have great follow-through ability. I didn’t know how to say to her, “Uh… this sucks,” without saying that it sucked. And we butted heads constantly.

It was during the trying times that I learned the most. I had to learn the right way to say things, the way to get people to feel good about the work they produced, but also recognize that it needed some work.

As I was working on my leadership skills, I fell in love with photography. I was constantly behind the lens and always looking up as much as I could to try and master the settings for our staff cameras. I found myself at nearly every sporting event, not in the stands, but on the sidelines, rapidly clicking away as the action passed by. I was recognized as “The Camera Girl” for most of my sophomore and junior years of high school. I had a hunger to win awards for what I was creating, so I pushed myself to be better. I didn’t want to accept anything less than first place. I motivated others to have the same formidable mentality and out of it came 21 individual awards for our staff at SIPA 2016.

The summer before my junior year, tragedy struck in my city. The Mother Emmanuel AME church shooting happened so suddenly, and it broke all of our hearts so deeply. Two days after the shooting occurred, I went downtown to the scene, where thousands of people gathered around the church in remembrance of the lives lost. What I witnessed really affected me, and when I got home that night, the only way I could sort through the emotions was to write about it. As a journalist, that’s how I came to cope. Later, what I wrote was shared around Facebook and a local newspaper reached out and asked if they could publish it along with a collection of the pictures I had taken from that day.

When my time came to be editor in chief my senior year, I was hit with a new onslaught of problems. With a staff of 42, day-to-day production doesn’t always go smoothly, especially with high school students. Now, I’m the one doing all the decision making and calling all the shots, and it definitely presents challenges. But now, I welcome these feelings and issues with open arms, because this “class” (as if I could call it just that) has made me who I am today. My high school yearbook is going to be the reason I am successful for many years to come. The skills I have learned, the trying times, are all why journalism is so great. It’s not supposed to be easy. It’s supposed to push you to your limits and every once in awhile you’re going to break down in front of your adviser and cry ugly tears because you’ve got almost too much on your plate and you’ve hit that breaking point.

But it’s okay.

Because at the end of the day, when I walk across that stage at graduation, I’m going to have something very tangible. Yes, three yearbooks that I literally poured my blood (I did incur some physical injuries), sweat, and tears into, but I’m also going to be able to walk with the drive to succeed. I am going to exude passion and confidence, and find meaning in everything I do. I won’t ever take no for an answer.

One day in the near future, I’ll find myself walking into the first day of my first real job, with the butterflies rolling around in my stomach again, and this time around I’ll know what to expect. I’ll be equipped with the knowledge that my high school yearbook gave me and that will make all the difference in the world.