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I first saw an advertisement for the Emerging Leader Institute as I sat on the toilet in the bathroom stall of my dorm. The program looked interesting like something I would enjoy doing. However, I didn't take the time to look into it, nor did I call about an application. Several opportunities to apply for ELI passed me by, until I received an application in the mail over summer break. This was the golden opportunity I had been waiting for I could finally submit an Emerging Leader application.

When the news came back that I had been accepted into ELI, I was ecstatic. I had heard only great things about the class and was anxious to get my feet in the water. I was nervous, however, about the individual project that I would eventually do. What would I do? Would I have enough time to make the effort a successful one? How could I have an impact on others?

As I began contemplating what my individual project would be, these questions suddenly became very real. We were encouraged to relate our projects to something we were passionate about. Being a teen role-model, I decided that I wanted to work with a group that I could easily influence one that would positively be affected by what I said. Jr. High school students would be a perfect target group.

I grew up in a small Western Kentucky town called Slaughters. We have a population of only 300 people and are primarily surrounded by farmland. One can only imagine what growing up in a community such as mine is like in order to get to a Wal-Mart, at least 25 minutes of parkway travel time is required! Don't get me wrong, I loved my lifestyle, and

still do. However, I always dreamed of going beyond what Slaughters, Kentucky had to offer me.

In June of 2000, my mother and I packed and prepared for a trip to Somerset, Kentucky where I would compete in the annual Miss Kentucky Teen USA pageant. When we arrived, I had never felt more out of place. I had never been in such a competition, so I had no idea what to expect. To my surprise (and my mother's!), I made the top 10. After answering an on-stage question, I was called into the top 5, and eventually, the top 3. Here I was, a little country girl standing among these polished ladies! What excitement I felt when the emcee announced that I was the new Miss Kentucky Teen USA and would represent the state at the national Miss Teen USA pageant. I had never been happier.

Two months later, I found myself on live CBS television in front of over 10 million people. Once again, I shocked everyone, and made it to the final cut of the Miss Teen USA pageant, eventually becoming second-runner up. This time, I had really done it the world saw me, a true small-town southern girl and Slaughters, Kentucky was now on the map!

For my project, I decided that speaking at Slaughters Jr. High school would be a great idea. I wanted to tell the kids about my experiences about how I set goals for myself and worked hard toward each one of them. My hard work paid off, and I got my taste of success, despite coming from such a small town.

When I contacted the school, the principal and teachers more than welcomed me, as did the students. I spoke to two different classes, one seventh grade and one eighth grade. The majority of our time spent was based around a question and answer session. I

opened up and allowed them to ask me questions about anything and everything the pressures of college, setting goals, boyfriend and girlfriend issues, drug and alcohol use, and much more. By the end of each session, I had answered more questions than one can imagine, but my main point was this: Opportunity doesn't come easy in a small town but with self-belief, hard work and perseverance comes success.

My project was a great success, and I am currently receiving many emails and letters from the kids. Some just want to say hey, while others ask for advice on teenage issues. I believe that I truly had an impact on them, as they are now explaining their goals in depth to me, and showing me what strides they are taking to achieve them. If I inspired only one student, my project was definitely worth it.

I firmly believe that if you dream something for long enough and work hard for it, you will get it. I always thought that I would never see my dreams, or have a real taste of success. I know that other children think that as well, however, good things can happen to small town kids I am living proof.

The Emerging Leader Institute, in a way, has brought me out of my shell. For the most part, I am a relatively private person and enjoy time to myself. Through my project and our class sessions, however, I realize that opening up as I did with the students, can be a positive thing. I have also worked on developing tougher skin—taking things so personally and accepting criticism, even though it may not be constructive. If I take one thing from ELI, it will be this: Discover yourself your strengths, talents and even your weaknesses. Don't be afraid to emerge, or come out of your comfort zone. A Chinese Proverb states: A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Take that step. I thank God everyday that I did.