I have been clean and in recovery for eight years now and am currently in my senior year as an undergraduate electrical engineering student. When I recall my life prior to recovery, it would have been difficult to imagine where I am now. I grew up in a small town in Kansas, and by the time I had reached high school I was already a regular drug user. When I graduated from high school, my drug use had become the focal point of my life. High school was easy for me, so despite my drug use I still managed to graduate as a mostly A student and even was accepted into a university with honors. I attended my honors student orientation high and left early to use more. Before my first midterm exams I dropped out of college. It was too difficult to balance the demands of my education and my addiction. For the next few months after leaving college I found myself in increasingly desperate situations culminating in my final arrest and a felony conviction for possession of narcotics.

      In retrospect, my arrest was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I spent some time in jail which allowed me to “dry out” and was eventually released to attend a treatment program. The treatment center introduced me to twelve step recovery programs like AA and NA and put me into contact with a sober living house which I moved in to after completing treatment. My first day in the sober living house I attended an NA meeting with a housemate. We left for the meeting as soon as I dropped my clothes off in my room. I do not remember most of the details of my first meeting, but I do recall feeling like I could be completely honest for the first time since I started using. I have attended meetings regularly since then and have met some amazing people through recovery.

      I did not immediately return to school after finding recovery. I left my previous university with a housing bill that I had no intention of paying, and when I contacted them to ask if I could return they told me that I would need to pay that bill first. Recovery taught me to take responsibility for my actions, so I began making payments even though I knew it would take me many years to finish. Around the time I reached two years clean, I decided I wanted to move to “the big city”. I had met someone at an NA convention that lived in LA, and I thought that it would be a good idea to move there too in pursuit of fame and riches. When I told my sponsor, he suggested I try Omaha, NE first. I took his advice six years ago.

      I had learned to be responsible by then and had held a job at a galvanizing factory for the past year. My employer was gracious enough to help me transfer to their sister plant outside of Omaha which made it possible for me to make that move. People I knew through recovery offered to rent me a room in their home, and I came to Omaha with no intention of returning to school. At that point I had accepted that an education was out of reach for me.

      Three years later, during the COVID pandemic, I heard about a grant program offered by the University of Nebraska. I was just poor enough and had been a resident of Nebraska just long enough to qualify. To me it seemed like a dream come true. I applied and was accepted and returned to school as a full-time student in 2020. The skills I had learned in recovery have served me well as a student. My field of study is notoriously difficult, but I knew that if I studied hard and persevered I could succeed. Even so, being a student and a person in recovery gave me a sense of alienation among my classmates. I did not want to tell any of them about my past for fear of judgment. I had heard about the recovery community on campus when I enrolled and had been lurking in the recovery community group chat, but I had not spoken to them up to that point. One evening as I was leaving class feeling particularly lonely, I noted that it was just around the time for the All Recovery meeting on campus. I decided to give the recovery community a chance and attended that meeting.

      The UNO Collegiate Recovery Community is not a replacement for the recovery community that I have cultivated off campus, but I sensed the same type of welcoming atmosphere with them as I did at my first NA meeting. Having the CRC has made me feel like I can be completely myself while I am on campus. I do not necessarily need to tell everyone I meet about my past, but I do not feel like I have to hide it anymore which is a huge relief. I recently disclosed my membership in NA to two of my closest friends in my engineering program and was surprised that they seemed to be completely unphased by my admission. Being able to express myself clearly with them has made it easier to trust each other and work together. It is difficult to imagine how my college experience would have looked without the support of the CRC.

      We are a small community right now, but my hope is that the UNO CRC can grow even after I graduate. Recovery is not easy, especially early on, and it is even more difficult when you add the pressure of being a student on top of that. My meeting attendance has suffered significantly since returning to school, and I wonder if I were at an earlier stage in my recovery if I would be able to stay clean through this. AA meetings on campus help. Being able to attend a meeting mid-day when I am overwhelmed with homework allows me to refocus on what is really important.

      One thing that has been consistently helpful throughout my recovery is an attitude of service. That is part of why I continue to be involved with the CRC. I probably would be able to graduate without them supporting me, and I probably would be able to do it clean. I have several years of practice now after all, but there is a saying in my fellowship: “A grateful addict will not use.” Gratitude is not just a state of being but is expressed through action. That action is service. I know that the CRC as well as my twelve step fellowship welcomed me when I walked through the door for the first time, and I want to be there to welcome the next person as long as I can.