Statement of Purpose by Sarah Pender

My love affair with flowers began at an early age when I regularly snapped up lavender chrysanthemums and yellow roses from our flower bed just to enjoy their flowery-ness. My fingers stroked the velvety petals as I walked to school and then shared it with a random classmate. Once I was driving age, I was prone to stomping on the brakes, tires skidding in the gravel in order to jump out and swipe tiger lilies from a rural ditch for an impromptu bouquet.

I had to steal from nature because I was too irresponsible to grow anything except grass seed in a styrofoam cup on my bedroom windowsill for a class assignment. This gave me a false sense of accomplishment that led to the demise of several houseplants.

Later, after I graduated from OCU, I rediscovered my passion when I gained access to a patch of gravel and knee-high weeds. With a handful of seeds and a barrel of determination, I planted a flower garden. It was hard. With no access to the internet or a library, I didn't know what the plants' needs were. However, going to college gave me the ability to problem solve. More than just business statistics and rendering machine parts, OCU taught me HOW to learn, no matter the subject. I devoured Mother Earth News magazines and bought books on permaculture and vermicomposting. I even studied mail order catalogs from seed companies and plant nurseries. Over three years, with no tools except rusty toenail clippers and an old Colgate toothbrush I transformed that dreadful, barren plot into a happy oasis.

That garden is gone now, along with access to educational grants for college in prisons. There are still Blackstone Paralegal courses and Bible studies by mail, but I am already a legal aid in the law library, and I love Jesus, but I am not interested in seminary. The non-fiction books in our library are copyrighted in the 1990s. Most everything else is vampire smut, Christian romance and murder mystery novels. It is kind of depressing.

Fortunately, not everyone resigned to letting our brain cells shrivel up. In 2015, I was privileged to be accepted into an all-volunteer educational program led by Dr. Kelsey Kauffman that pooled human resources from area universities like DePauw and IU. In my first class, Public Policy, we interviewed state representatives and influenced policy that affected us through proposing House Bills, offering written testimony to State House Committees, and speaking with a think tank reporting on effects of recent law changes.

For three years, I worked with Dr. Kauffman and Andrew Falk from the Sagamore Institute to research and develop Constructing Our Future, a non-profit program to educate women in basic maintenance, rehabilitation, and home ownership. Besides brainstorming, writing proposals, editing and administrating COF, I also tutored algebra students, spoke on video-linked conference panels, and worked a midnight job cleaning bathrooms and mopping floors. In my spare time, I managed a small jungle of houseplants in a medical unit, helped plant and harvest a vegetable garden that donated produce to a local halfway house, and installed/expanded flower beds around the campus. Everywhere you looked, if it was alive and green, my hands were in that dirt.

Even today, at age 40, I pluck from the grass dandelions and violets to decorate my ponytail, and for hours search for four leaf clovers, and with a big smile, generously hand them out to passersby. Nature makes my spirit smile and I like to share that joy with others. No matter my circumstances, I crave education, seek out nature, and strive to spread happiness. I want to do more than tear up plastic soda rings and dig through the trash separating recyclables. I want to make a real, positive impact on our environment whether by improving poor soil with bacteria and fungi, researching carbon sequestration techniques, or organizing community gardens. Being a student at Evergreen will teach me all of the stuff that I already know I love.