I’ve come a long way. When I first considered teaching, it was because I felt that environmental education was missing from most public school curriculums and that I wanted to give this important knowledge to my students. I came to Cornell to study Natural Resources and figured that after obtaining a career that allowed me to address the environmental issues we face as a nation, I would bring my years of experience and knowledge into my own classroom. My intentions were good, yet I feel that if I had not taken education courses at Cornell, these intentions would have probably obtained poor results due to my ignorance.

Prior to attending Cornell University, I had been a student in New York City’s public school system. The lack of diversity in many of my classrooms did not bother me and the fact that I did not see many of the people I went to middle school with attend college or plan to further their education did not cause me to bat an eye. I assumed that since I loved learning and benefitted from the current education system, everyone else could as well; they simply chose not to. Due to this belief and my prior experiences, I planned to teach to the best of my ability but expected that some students would fail due to their lack of motivation and desire to learn. Thanks to the education minor, I’ve learned to take a deeper look into my own beliefs about students, education in America, and the role of social justice in the classroom. I hope to use these new perspectives and skills to become a great teacher.

What Makes a Teacher Great?
What is important when trying to become a great educator? Is it intentions or outcomes? Does knowing your students have a greater impact than knowing your practice? What about knowing the history your practice has evolved in? After taking education courses for the past three years, all of my questions about teaching have not been answered but I am now comfortable with this lack of certainty. I've come to believe that being an educator in the United States is one of the toughest jobs in the world because you charge yourself with the task of helping others learn while accepting and enjoying the fact that you too are a life-long learner. Being a great teacher involves using diverse information and approaches to try and help all students that enter your classroom learn and not giving up when faced with challenges.

The first education courses I took were Educational Psychology and the Art of Teaching. These classes gave me information about how students think and learn and the art and science of teaching, also known as pedagogy. I found the work interesting and was even given the opportunity to spend time in the classroom... but I did not take it. While I enjoyed learning (about learning) I still had not developed a passion for teaching. Instead of opting to work with older students, I chose to help supervise infants at a local drop in center. It was a very rewarding and enjoyable experience but I personally felt that I had taken the easy way out. I had no plans to work with infants in the future and I found it difficult to apply everything that I was learning in class with “students” that were so young. The infancy stages of human development revolve greatly around discovery and while I got to watch and guide the children's exploration, I do not believe I had the opportunity to teach in the
traditional sense of the word. Even before choosing this age group I knew that this might be an issue. So why did I make this choice?

I was afraid. What if I was placed with “bad kids” who didn’t listen? What if they didn’t care about what I was trying to teach them? I see now that I may have always had a passion for science, which is what I want to teach, and I may have seen education as important work but I was afraid that my students would not allow me to teach them and that I would be left powerless. My experiences with public schooling have been inconsistent, varying from school to school and classroom to classroom. For part of my time in that system, I saw students ignore, disrespect, and taunt teachers. I have also seen teachers break down emotionally. Whether this came in the form of a livid outburst or being on the verge of tears I did not want this to be me but felt that it easily could be. After learning about pedagogy, learning disorders, and different theories on education I was still ill prepared to become a teacher. The final three classes I took for the education minor changed all of that for me.

**Education and Activism**

Fortunately, the education courses offered at Cornell reflect the faculty’s awareness to the fact that technical skills and knowledge are not all a teacher needs to be successful and effective. I was afraid because I did not understand the context I would be teaching in and what challenges teachers face in their classrooms. Misbehaving or disinterested children is not the greatest challenge many teachers will face and it may even be a symptom of larger issues. My final three education
classes helped me realize that there are reasons some students are not succeeding and there are measures I can take to change this.

In my third education course, The Social and Political Context of American Education, I learned to look at schooling in this country through a historical and political lens. Our nation began with actions and policies that normalized exclusion, prejudice and inequality. Laws or the advancement of some descendents of those who were once oppressed has not erased this history. The achievement gap is something that many Americans have heard of and it is impossible to be completely ignorant of it when you decide to go into the field of education. Recognizing that this was a problem was simple but realizing that this could be explained in political and historical terms was new to me. In my experience, responsibility for failure is often placed on the students, their parents/culture, or the teachers. These explanations allow us to place blame without having to offer real solutions. Placing the blame in these areas prevents us from taking the actions we need to create real change and improvement in our education system.

A major part of teaching, especially in highly diverse communities and classrooms, is trying to create equity in a society founded on inequality. Some people, like those with learning disabilities, who identify as LGBTQ, or speak English as a second language, have been marginalized in our society and this is reflected in our education system. This marginalization impacts all areas of teaching including the way educators view their pupils and their cultures, what they teach, and how they assess student achievement. I’ve come to believe that I cannot provide an education that is fair and beneficial to these groups if I do not fight against their
marginalization and celebrate the diversity of my students. Classes like Intergroup Dialogue and Multicultural Issues in Education have pushed me to do just that and fight for social justice both inside and outside of the classroom. I currently believe that to be a great teacher I must also be an activist. I no longer fear students because I believe that it is my role to fight for them not against them. I believe that all students can learn and want to and that when problems do arise I have the power to find a solution.

What have I learned?

The truth is, figuring out how to become a good teacher or how and why some students achieve and others do not are not easy tasks. Yet, as a society, we must resist the temptation to simply point fingers and fail to assume responsibility. Some issues can be solved by altering teaching styles or type of assessments. Others require teachers to understand their students and the communities they live in on a personal level. Just as there is no single cause for the issues we see in education today, no single solution can be provided.

There is no way for me to express everything that I have learned over the years. I feel overwhelmed just trying to sum up these few learning experiences and lessons. Sometimes, education seems like too large and broad of a topic to address but it is too important for me to ever give up on it. In closing, I would like to reiterate the major insights I’ve garnered over the years.

Insight #1: Being knowledgeable does not make you a good teacher. You must know how to impart that knowledge.
I have had teachers that knew all there was to know about a topic yet could not help me grasp and retain many of the concepts they taught. I have had people speak about teaching as if it were an easy profession that requires little effort as long as you know what you are talking about. Knowing the topic you plan to teach very well will always be something that is valued in teachers but it is not the only thing needed to be successful. Without knowing the stages of cognitive development, the types of scaffolding, when to use positive or negative reinforcement, etc. the teacher is missing many tools that scientists and educators have made available to us.

**Insight #2: In order to impart knowledge in an equitable way to all students, you must recognize that we do not exist in a vacuum. When teaching students that belong to marginalized groups, we must recognize the obstacles they will face in our society and work to overcome and dismantle them.**

Actions and laws of today and even those of the past affect us. We must constantly assess whether our school structure and behaviors in the classroom serve to reaffirm and reproduce the current social hierarchy or contest it. Are your students and their experiences represented in the curriculum? Are students of all ethnicities given equal access to AP classes and other resources that promote college readiness? Are students in English as a second language (ESL) classes learning content as well as language? These are just a few of the questions you may want to ask yourself and your peers.

**Insight #3: By committing to educating others I am also committing to a lifetime of learning.**

In order to be an effective teacher you have to be familiar with many different things. You should know yourself and your students, your subject, theories of learning and development, laws and regulations that affect education, history, the
list goes on and on. Since many of these things change over time, you must continue to be a diligent learner. Being passionate about education means that though it is hard you are ready and willing to learn about and take on challenges faced by teachers, students, and society as a whole. I'm glad to have developed this passion and I hope that I can use it to create meaningful change and become an effective educator.