

## **Empowerment**

By Emily R. Gagnon

As we are all too intimately familiar, the path to life's success is not always a sunny downward slope paved in diamonds covered with rose petals. For some individuals the path may contain more peaks and valleys, twists and turns, but it can be agreed upon that life is a journey nonetheless. How we respond to situations, not in the glory of our achievements but in the face of complete despair and destitution, is what truly builds character. We as individuals have the power to choose to embrace challenges and face our fears.

Renowned author J.K. Rowling was devastated but not defeated and used her major setbacks as a propellant. Reflecting on her experiences she said, "I was set free because my greatest fear had been realized...and so rock bottom became a solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life."

As a teenager, a month after the terror attacks on September 11th, 2001, I chose to enlist in the United States military. I was successful and completed two enlistments, including a deployment to the Middle East with Special Operations. At the end of my eighth year, I chose to leave my military career and end a serious relationship to pursue my goal of joining the Reserves as an Intelligence Officer and becoming a Special Agent with the FBI. But what happened next was an ultimate blow to my ego and completely derailed my high speed career.

The Veterans Affairs Administration concluded that I was a 50% disabled veteran and because of this rating, I was unable to join the Reserves. Regardless, I pushed forward and landed a successful internship with the FBI. While I was waiting on a date to attend the Academy, I received a letter in the mail explaining sequestration; the federal government was in a hiring freeze and all classes would be cancelled with no foreseeable start date in the future. Now I was unemployed, broken physically and mentally, completely alone because I already severed my relationship, and at a complete loss.

It was an emotionally turbulent chapter but I took my disheartening failure as an opportunity to learn how to become more adaptable, grow spiritually, and live outside of my comfort zone (which ironically, was the military life I was accustomed to and identified with). We cannot control every situation but we can control how we react to it. Persistence, hard work, and a positive attitude will ultimately lead to success. This may not happen immediately but we need to be resilient and use these misfortunes as opportunities to become empowered to rise again and overcome.

I learned that Marist College has a unique learning opportunity specifically designed for criminal justice professionals, taught locally at the New York State Police Academy. Taking classes will empower me once again to pave the way in a male-dominated field, align my new career goals, and in turn enable me to help our communities be a safer place for everyone.