

## EMBRACING THE FREEDOM TO SCREW UP

By Heather Henderson | Staff Writer

Jennifer Chase is an artist who fully embodies the artist persona and lifestyle. She looks like you'd imagine an artist would, and expresses herself boldly, with more than the occasional wild gesture to emphasize her words. Think of her as the real life Ms. Frizzle ... and I mean that in the best way.

Freedom of choice has always been one of the primary themes of her life. The freedom to choose what you want to do, who you want to be and which mistakes you want to make are all things she has openly embraced. She admits she's made a lot of mistakes, but it was that ability to screw up and start over again that has allowed her to live such a rich and interesting life.

Jennifer writes and performs her own original music and has written several plays, plus a forthcoming memoir. Aside from all those endeavors, she also teaches writing and humanities at FSCJ, helping other people appreciate the arts as much as she does. She's a transplant from the Northeast, by way of Sarasota and then St. Augustine. She moved to Florida with her family as a teenager after her parents, sick of winter weather, decided to start their lives over completely.

She speaks fondly of her father, a man whom she referred to as "a little strange." He was a creative who instilled the value of finding something to be excited and passionate about while also being willing to fold it up and start over if it doesn't work out. She feels that her father's outlook on life had a profound impact on the way she has lived hers.

Tragic circumstances brought Jennifer to Jacksonville after her mother and young daughter were both hospitalized in town. She found it easiest to just move her life here and start over once more. It was during this difficult period that she began writing music. As a single mother and college dropout working as a bartender, she knew she needed to make some serious life changes. The drama that suddenly enveloped her life was the perfect trigger.

Some people crumble under intense stress, but Jennifer flourished. While watching her mother die of a terminal illness and her daughter heal from a terrible accident, she began writing and performing music and made the decision to go back to school to pursue an undergraduate degree in international studies. She looks back on this period with a strange sense of nostalgia. Although the circumstances were awful, she felt extremely

alive and felt that, "Everything was urgent. Life was urgent," as she put it.

The freedom to express herself creatively while working her way through a degree and dealing with the tumult of her personal life was absolutely vital to Jennifer. It was also a freedom she realized not everyone had. After graduation, she took her creative talents and blended them with her fascination with foreign cultures and love of the French language and then built her own career path. A Rotary Cultural Ambassador scholarship sent her to live in Senegal, a French-speaking country in West Africa, where she was able to share her music and help people at the same time. She deeply believes that visual and performing arts are a worthwhile medium of cultural exchange and communication.

Living abroad gave her a unique perspective on what it means to be American, and called into question some of the values that we hold as a culture. After her return to the States, she taught groups of refugees from all over the world. She discovered a common theme among all of the foreign people she interacted with — they all valued the moments they shared with other people over anything else.

Western culture suddenly seemed too fast and frenzied. We have so much freedom to live our lives as we choose, and so many of us choose high-pressure, fast-paced lifestyles, often sacrificing our own mental health and relationships with other people. Jennifer now does her best to exist in the present moment and appreciate the time she gets to spend connecting with other people.

In the end, everything in Jennifer's life comes down to the choices she has made — both good and bad. She owns her mistakes and is grateful for the opportunities she has had to make her own choices, all of which have led to where she is now. She refers to herself as a "walking experiment," which seems pretty accurate.

"It's all trial-and-error," she told me. "You've got to keep moving forward, and all of those things inform the next choices that you make. As long as you're moving forward eventually."

It's a great life philosophy, and an excellent reminder that there is no one designated path we all must follow. The beauty of life in America is that we all have the freedom to carve out our own lives and careers. We are able to make mistakes, completely screw everything up, and then keep moving forward in our own way.

JENNIFER CHASE

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