I sat at my kitchen table with tears in my eyes as I spoke into the receiver, words I never thought I’d have to say: “I have to cancel my study abroad. My mom has cancer.”

It was a month before my junior year of undergrad, a year I had been planning to spend in Italy taking writing classes, wandering the city, basking in the Mediterranean sun, and working on my thesis.

My honors thesis was focused on academic communication, working on making research accessible through podcasting, writing articles, and creating social media posts. I was lucky that I had been able to get on a project so early, but was in no rush and knew I had time during my study abroad to get everything figured out.

But when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, my plans came to a grinding halt.

I can so clearly remember the moment she told me. I had suspected something was wrong, the hospital admission band on her wrist making clear what I had only guessed at before. While her diagnosis could have been worse, it certainly wasn't pretty.

Suddenly, everything that had felt so important meant nothing. Each day my mind was filled with worst-case scenarios, and every minute I was away from her all I wanted was to be back by her side.

I also had an important choice to make. I needed to decide what I was going to do about college.

I knew as soon as I heard that I was not going abroad in the upcoming year. While I’m sure I could have figured it out logistically, the thought of being an ocean away from my mom during this time made me feel sick to my stomach. I couldn’t do it.

It was difficult for me to feel like going back to school was even the right thing to do. Beyond just canceling my studying abroad, I considered transferring to a university closer to my hometown, and even taking time off from school to work and spend time with my mom.

But she encouraged me that going back to school would be best, both for her and me. I knew that if I stayed home, she would feel as if her diagnosis was holding me back and would feel awful about it, and she knew that I would quickly go stir-crazy and regret my decision if I didn’t go back.

So I made phone calls and sent emails, frantically trying to register for classes, get in touch with my many advisors, find housing, and let all of my friends know that I’d be back despite our teary goodbyes a few months before.

It was a whirlwind of chaos. I had never before felt so unprepared for a change of plans as I did this time. The world around me suddenly seemed to be pressing in as I fought against impending deadlines I thought I wouldn’t have to worry about.

Looking back, I can hardly remember the details of those days. I was numb, checking things off of a to-do list because I didn’t have the time to process everything I was feeling.

All in all, I got lucky. I was able to register for the classes I needed and find housing, all within a week of the start of classes. Everything was ready for me to return to my home university. Everything except for me.

Leaving at the end of that summer was devastating. While Vermont was much closer to home than Italy, I felt incredible guilt and pain leaving when I felt there was so much more I could be doing to help everyone I was leaving.

Nevertheless, on a hot day in August, I packed up as little as I could and was moved into my new apartment 12 hours later. I felt ill the entire car ride, feeling the distance grow larger between me and my mom.

As time went on and classes began, I started to feel a little bit more okay with my situation. I got used to my apartment and returned to the routine I had been living for two years at school.

About a week into the semester, I was looking at my university credits and came to a realization. Since I was not studying abroad, I had access to all of the classes I needed for my degree. I was going to be able to graduate a year early.

Amidst all of the hardships and sudden changes of the summer, I had all but ignored the potential this situation held. I was able to spend time with my friends and be there for all of the memories I would have missed, work on my thesis more, and now graduate early, all while still providing support for my mom even from 600 miles away.

I still have plenty of hard days. There are still times when I feel like I made the wrong choice, when I wish I was picking my mom up from appointments and making her dinner each night.

But Italy will still be there, and so will my mom, and graduating early will give me even more time to spend with the people and places I love.

While I often wish things had been different, the opportunities that appeared helped me feel that while life definitely does give you lemons, even if it’s a lot of lemons, you can still find ways to make lemonade.