

When Ryhen Miller found out that her high school sweetheart Ashford Hollis had been scouted by the Air Force Academy, she was shocked. While Miller, 19, would be staying near Oak Park and studying at Columbia College Chicago, Hollis would be headed for Colorado Springs in the fall. Their relationship was about to have a 1,000 mile wedge drawn between it.

Sitting together in his basement, they weighed their options. Hollis had been awarded a scholarship for football and academics and had been accepted to the prestigious school despite plans to attend the University of Chicago. He asked her to choose, “And, of course, me being the girlfriend, I was like, go with the better opportunity to be successful,” she said. Her concerns were not with their relationship at that moment, but she was advised by Hollis’ dad, who told her, “If you guys want to be successful together, you have to be successful individually.”

Miller was fully aware of the struggle she was about to put herself into, and the low percentage of long-distance couples that stay together, but those odds appear to only motivate both of them further. She never envisioned herself sticking with her high school boyfriend into college, but when she met Ashford, she knew he had something special. “I remember I was at the Gorillaz concert... I was talking to my friend and I don't even know if we were dating officially but I was like, ‘ Yeah, in a year's time from now he's gonna give me a promise ring and I'm gonna be so happy,’” she recalled. From there, they dated for nine months before the difficult discussion of long-distance relationships came up. One of the reasons Miller wanted to stay with Ashford was his loyalty and determination. “Everything he aspires to do, he always gets it done, even if it's really tearing him down. [He is] very devoted to everything that he does and the people who care about him.” She said. Ultimately, they decided it was worth it to give the relationship a chance.

Since he moved out to the Springs, Miller believes she has made the right choice, “because that's my best friend.” They communicate often via FaceTime and have found that the physical distance has actually greatly improved their communication skills. “I don't know if we have any difficulties,” she said, “if I didn't think we could go through a challenge like this then I wouldn't pursue it, but I trust him and he trusted me.”

Miller has seen some interesting changes in Hollis since joining the strict environment of the Air Force Academy, but he remains the boy she fell in love with a year and a half ago. “It's kind of funny to see, like, the other cadets there and they're like, ‘I have been trying to get this school since the age of six years old. I've been training’ and all this other stuff, and he's just like ‘I'm chillin man,’” she said. He was invited to the school on an academic and football scholarship, which is rare considering his lack of military background.

After their time apart is over, Miller is seriously considering settling down with Hollis, saying, “I know for a fact we plan on getting married.” The fortitude of their relationship has truly been

tested now that they have been apart for as long as they were together in high school, but the distance appears to have actually strengthened their bond. “I feel like that drives us more to be better at communicating because we want to stay together,” she said. “It's not easy, but it's only as hard as you make it.”