**The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

Riding through the winding streets of my neighborhood, I realized that I barely knew the people who lived next to me. There was Mr. Freddy, walking his golden retriever Mochi Fluffy, who greeted me with a smile. Yet apart from this brief exchange, the numerous faces that passed by without even a glance caused me to feel an inexplicable wave of loneliness. The pandemic has been particularly isolating, keeping us confined to our homes and away from the comforting embrace of our neighbors and community members. I wanted to find a way to bring our community together, to foster a sense of belonging and connection that seemed to be missing in these trying times.

Apart from sparsely organized community gatherings where participants soon forgot each others’ names, I sought for an engaging and interactive activity that could be enjoyed by all. After researching, I discovered a government initiative in Singapore that encouraged community connection through gardening - a perfect activity for my community. Searching high and low, I finally found it: a small, abandoned plot of land next to the local tennis courts and clubhouse. I gathered five friends from the neighborhood, received approval from the authorities, and set off work.

Starting small, we cleared the dead plants and re-tilled the soil. Our weekend trips to the garden inspired donations of seeds and fertilizers from delighted neighbors. We worked tirelessly planting new seeds and took turns carrying buckets of water from the nearest water source about 100 meters away. After several weeks, the garden took an unprecedented form — promisingly tall sprouts ubiquitously shot up, their leaves unfurling, beckoning the daylight.

When I returned after a month from vacation, the garden’s vibrant greenery had dulled. The plants were showing signs of wilting. It dawned on me that we had been solely relying on rain to keep these plants growing, so a dry spell was all that it took to destroy the tenderly-wrought garden. Given Indonesia’s monsoons, dry spells would inadvertently follow periods of heavy rainfall. Thus, I designed and implemented a rainwater harvesting system within the garden. Though infrequent, Jakarta’s rainfall is notoriously heavy. A few days of rain filled up the tank, storing up to two month’s worth of water.

Months later, the once dilapidated land was bustling with excitement. Talk of our community garden caught the attention of our district leader, who in turn spread the word, reaching neighbors I had never met before. We created a program promising freshly grown vegetables in exchange for help in tending the plants, and the garden quickly became a community hotspot. We also held workshops, teaching participants how to make eco-enzymes. Young and old, from different walks of life—the community garden serves as a gateway for interaction in this digital age. I return to the garden every few weeks, volunteering and fostering connections.

Riding through the same winding streets, I have bumped into numerous neighbors whom I have come to know through gardening: Mr Kumar and Ms Meera an elderly couple who never fails to take a stroll around the neighborhood, Toby, a 12 year old who loves the yoyo, Bella, a college student studying art and many more.

Community has always been a fundamental part of the human experience; it is a privilege I had taken for granted, only realizing it when the pandemic hit. The hustle and bustle of modern life has left us isolated and disconnected, with little opportunity to gather and bond.

The garden has become a sanctuary, a place where we can come together and share in the beauty and bounty of nature. It is a reminder of the simple pleasures in life and the importance of community.

Hi Brian:

This is a wonderful story!

However, going back to the prompt, I’m not sure which challenge you want to focus on. Was it the pandemic? Or the challenge of maintaining the garden? Whichever it is, I think it’s imperative to also highlight the challenge and focus the essay on how you’ve grown through it and what you learned throughout the process – showing personal growth in overcoming that challenge.

Since you seem to be focusing on the importance of community engagement, I suggest highlighting the challenges related to it. Highlight the struggle during the pandemic – what experiences did you find especially challenging during COVID? Was there one occasion that kickstarted this initiative? Something that was especially frustrating? Was it hard to start this initiative?

Moving on to building the garden community, try to focus on challenges that will support the point of your essay – community engagement. How was the community’s reception toward this initiative? Any COVID related restrictions that made it hard to continue?

Finally, conclude by revisiting the challenge – how significant it was, what you did to overcome it, and what you’ve learned. This will show personal growth in your essay.

All the best!