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## BEAUTIFUL THOUGHTS THAT GOT THEM INTO HARVARD

This is dedicated to all those still searching for their dreams. I hope these essays will help you in that path you have chosen to follow. This is a compilation of essays by my most trusted and loving friends who so kindly agreed to have their essays published. They hope that in reading these essays you will get the general idea about how to tackle college application essays:

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## APPLICATION AND SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS:

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### CLIMBING MOUNT KENYA

*By Peggy Walenda Mativo*

*(Peggy is currently a rising senior at Harvard. She is from Kenya)*

I don't have to rack my brains hard to find the vivid memories of the darkest night in my life. Walking down memory lane for me is just as pleasant as bathing in the warmth of a cozy fire.

I can still recall the zest with which we prepared for "The Big Trip". "The Big Trip" is the nickname given by the youth of our church to the formidable climb of the second most-forbidding mountain in Africa, Mt. Kenya.

We left Parklands Baptist Church in Nairobi and traveled northwest by bus for about 50 kilometers. We finally arrived at Naru-Moru, a small town at the foot of the mountain that was bustling with tourist activity and booming in the curio-business. After stopping to purchase some last-minute supplies, we proceeded to the Sirimon Park-gate of the 'Mount Kenya National Park.' Since it was late in the evening, we were forced to camp there for the night lest we were attacked by wild-elephants as we hiked at night.

We rose up quite early the following morning just to steal a glance at the beautiful sunrise from the side of this mountain that stood defiantly before us with its towering peaks mysteriously hidden behind a thick blanket of clouds. That morning, we set out bright and early for Shipton. Cheer and wonder at the alpine flora and fauna was quite evident amongst us. We walked for two straight days, stopping only for food, water and to sleep at night.

By the time we got to Shipton, the mountain had taken its toll on us. Matters of 'Vogue' had given way to matters of warmth. Refinement and "good manners" had peacefully been

traded in for the sake of survival.

The night spent at Shipton seemed to last forever. Despite my fatigue, I couldn't sleep. I was too excited and too cold to fall asleep. My insomnia was further worsened by the reeking stench of sweat, since most of our team members had not showered for two straight walking-days.

So when at 2a.m. we were woken up to start the final trek to the peak, I was the first one out. Armed with only my torch, water bottle and zeal to conquer the mountain, I set out at the head of our group. Little did I know the fire I would face up this mountain.

In less than twenty minutes, my electrified trot up the mountain had faded into a dull plod and finally into a labored trudge. I was soon at the tail-end of the group, barely keeping up. The more I walked, the steeper it became. The steeper it became, the more I fell and bit into mouthfuls of gravel.

The darkness that shrouded the mountain made me blinder than a bat as I groped on. Weariness violently battered my heart as the chilly mountain wind raced around me whispering my defeat. Barely crawling, beaten and frustrated, I started to toy with the idea of giving up...

I was about to start my journey down the mountain when out of the dark night I heard a voice. It was the strong solid voice of our Youth pastor, Nick, urging me on..."Don't give up," he yelled. "Just keep walking, one step at a time. I don't mind if it's slow, but just keep walking."

His words re-energized me. He made me stop and think. "Why did I start this climb anyway? Wasn't it to get to the peak? Wasn't it to prove that I could rise above any challenges that come my way?"

With renewed resolve, I set off for the peak once again. My fingers were frozen solid. So were my toes... but my heart was beating for the peak, for Point Lenana. The peak was all I was living for, so at that moment, I chose to take another step. And another, then another till I was moving at an appreciable pace.

Blind to all else except Pastor Nick's encouragement and the burning desire that had been rekindled in me, I literally carried myself up the final stretch of the mountain. I went up, down and around the towering boulders and obstacles that stood in my way while determinedly ignoring all negative thoughts that came to me.

I only realized I was at the peak when I saw the Kenyan Flag hoisted proudly on the metallic flag post. Despite the biting cold, I couldn't help running to it and hugging it as if dear life depended on it. Frozen tears ran freely down my cheeks as I prayed to thank the Almighty. I had made it to my dream. I had made it to Point Lenana. I was standing on top of the world! I looked around just to get the view from the peak. Words fail me in describing the awe-inspiring beauty up there: the view of sunrise is the essence of pure perfection. I felt achievement, contentment and fulfillment all rolled into one.

As I walked down from the peak, I marveled at the scenery. I was amazed at how far I had

come. The long walk down made me realize that life is a battle of the mind. The mountains of life may not all be physical, but their challenge is as real as ever. How far I rise fully depends on my attitude. My attitude is the difference between a stumbling block and a stepping-stone. My attitude is the difference between success and failure, courage and fear, half-full and half-empty. My attitude determines my altitude. In the words of Elaine Maxwell, "Whether I succeed or fail shall be no man's doing but my own. I am the force."

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## COMMON APP PERSONAL ESSAY

*By Kimberly Mihayo*

*(Kimberly Mihayo is currently a rising sophomore at Harvard University)*

I happen to do most of my dreaming when I am awake. In the few occasions when I do dream in my sleep, I find that I am only able to recall mere fragments, or faint blurs that gradually fade away after I wake up. My daydreams, however, have an entity of their own. They creep stealthily into my mind, seizing it, and drawing me into their realm.

This infiltration sometimes occurs at the most ill-timed occasions. Like when I am in church listening as the priest begins his sermon and then, after what seems like mere moments, I return to the realm of reality just in time to see the priest stretch his majestic arms to the heavens and say, '*Nendeni na Amani. Go in Peace*'. At times I drift off at the dinner table, amidst the aroma of rice, brown beans and fried tilapia from my hometown near Lake Victoria, in Northern Tanzania. My dreams wisp me away from the animated clatter of plates that is often subdued by the soft chatter of family or amplified by a silence that ensues as my father tells another of his captivating yet familiar childhood stories.

My reveries can take me to perfect places. Like my grandmother's home in a small town at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro. I can see the smoky firewood stove on which a *sufuria* of *chai* boils and I can smell the old furniture and feel the cold cement floor under my feet. I can take in the beautiful view from her hilltop house; the lush green of banana trees that traverse the neighbors' homes and the wet *michongoma* fences with dripping green leaves. How could it possibly get any 'better' than this?

Time and again I find myself daydreaming about how my country, Tanzania, could become better. Because back home in Dar es Salaam city, I am not faced with a perfect daydream but with reality. Little first graders tightly grasping their backpacks on their chests as they

scramble to get into the next city bus, only to be shoved away by the conductor who has deemed them worthless because they only pay half the fair. I watch an old man of fifty, maybe sixty, years whose graying hair is almost hidden under his dusty *Tarbush*. He arduously pushes a large *Mkokoteni* cart; filled with buckets of water in front of him, sweat dripping heavily off his face as he squints in the scorching Dar es Salaam sun. And from a distance I gaze at the young boy who guides his blind father through the streets. Now and again the boy stretches out his hand to ask for money from a passerby.

As a daydreamer, I imagine the availability of school buses, lots of them, patrolling the city's roads ready to take students to school. I envision the old man again, but this time he gets enough monthly pension so that he doesn't have to work. He can age peacefully, within the warmth of his grandchildren who listen as he tells old tales of *Sungura na Fisi*, (the rabbit and the hyena). The young boy's father is no longer blind; because of the improved National Healthcare system he was able to undergo surgery, for free. He has now exchanged roles with his son, guiding the boy as he should.

In my daydreams everything is perfect, anything is possible and lives can be improved by simple solutions. In reality, maybe things are more complicated. Then again, don't we attribute the beginnings of our complex planet to the simple effect of a collision? Perhaps these daydreams of mine are not dreams at all but visions of a change that I know I can one day bring to my country. I hope my life's pathways will guide me to a place where I can be able to transform these daydreams into realities.

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## PRINCETON ESSAY

*By Kimberly Mihayo*

*Using the following quotation from THE MORAL OBLIGATIONS OF LIVING IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world.*

*"Empathy is not simply a matter of trying to imagine what others are going through, but having the will to muster enough courage to do something about it. In a way, empathy is predicated upon hope."*

The first time I met her she was homeless and nameless. She sat on the sun-baked ground at the bottom of the staircase at the entrance of my church in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She covered her head in a flimsy *khanga*, and used another to carry her baby on her back. Her other child crawled on a *khanga* cloth that was spread on the ground. I noticed that the colorful pattern on the cloth was similar to one of mine. Amidst the Megaphone announcements reminding us that mass was beginning, a pang of sympathy compelled me to place a five hundred shilling note in her hand. Before I entered church, I stole a last glance at the child on her back who kept burrowing her head further inside the *khanga* pouch to shield herself from the sun.

The second time I met her, she was in the living room of my home. At first I didn't recognize her because, away from the scorching sun, she had not covered her head. However, after greeting her, I caught a glimpse of the *khanga* she wore around her waist, and I recognized the pattern as one of my own. Then it all came back to me; the baby crawling on the *khanga*, placing a five hundred note on her hand, and the lasting image of her baby escaping the sun's harsh rays. Later that day my parents told me that Mariamu and her twins were not only guests that they had decided to welcome into our household, but they would from then on, call our home their home.

I didn't know how to feel after my parents broke this news to me; but then I heard Mariamu's story. As I sat with her on the porch of our home, holding one of her energetic twins on my lap, she unraveled her story to me. I listened as she told me about having to forgo school so she could get married to a man who had promised to take care of her. She left her village, and her dreams of becoming a teacher, to live with her husband in Dar es Salaam. When Mariamu gave birth to her twins, her husband kicked her out into the streets. She found solace and hope when she sat outside St. Peters church; that hope came in the form of my parents, who took her in once they heard her story.

Living with Mariamu teaches me that I can do much more than sympathetically place a note in someone's hand. It shows me that I can have true empathy when I listen and understand someone's circumstances. And, like my parents, I can use that empathy to muster the courage to make a change in someone's life. It is the hope that both Mariamu and my parents shared that has transformed her from a homeless girl to a mother of healthy twins. It is this same hope that has given me both another sister, and two lovely nieces!

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# WILLIAMS ESSAY

*By Kimberly Mihayo*

*Imagine looking through a window at any environment that is particularly significant to you. Reflect on the scene, paying close attention to the relation between what you are seeing and why it is meaningful to you. Please limit your statement to 300 words.*

Staring out my window in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I watch the children in my neighborhood who have gathered for their games, just as I did when I was their age.

A giggle emanates from a group of children who are seated in a circle, clapping and singing in Swahili. Now and then a child springs to the center and begins to *jieleze* (express herself). In a pitchy falsetto, she boldly sings out her name, hobbies and favorite food. She then dances back towards her position in the circle, a gleam of triumph and childish delight on her face. The other children clap for her and continue to sing '*jieleze*' as a boy takes the stage. It was when playing '*jieleze*' that we learned to speak in public and developed the confidence to be ourselves, supporting each other in the process.

Near the circle of singing children three children stand in a line, and the fourth child stands in front of them, telling a *Kitendawili* (riddle). The other three listen intently, and look intensely at each other as they rack their heads to decipher the riddle. It was through riddles that we became thinkers; we learned to analyze, to imagine, and to finally emerge with solutions.

Further down the street, I can see another group of kids. One of them is cradling a doll, pretending to be a mother. Another is wearing a white coat, with a rubber rope around his neck, a stethoscope perhaps, acting like a doctor. A girl holds a book and prances around as the others, seated on the ground, raise their hands eagerly to answer her questions. She picks one 'student' to answer. '*Kimamama*' (role playing) allowed us to be anything we wanted, the world became our playground, and only the sky was our limit.

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## EXTRA CURRICULAR COMMONAPP ESSAY

*By Kimberly Mihayo*

Every Saturday morning I go to the Cancer Hospital in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania with a group of friends. We spend two hours teaching the children math, telling Swahili stories and playing games that never failed to put wide smiles on the children's faces; smiles that hide the very fact that they are ailing, drawing my attention away from the needle marks on their frail hands and the shiny baldness of their heads.

Shakila was one of the children who always attended our Saturday sessions. Even after her death a few months ago, her laughter is still etched in my mind as she watched the other kids rush to get a chair during Musical chairs. Shakila's death made me want to serve my community. *I thought I was going to change a child's life but instead, Keep Hope Alive ended up changing me.*

*Cliché? (I don't remember what changes I made here, but this was a cliché, according to Meg Meiners, the person who was checking my email...you might wanna avoid clichés as much as you can, because Uni's are looking for stories that matter to you, but you have to tell them in a way that is unique and different from the perspective someone else would offer. Why are you special?, why should they pick you?, what vision of the world can you bring, or how does your personal drive differ from someone else's. Think about these things when writing your essay. Try and highlight your cultural and ethnic identity as much as you can. Use descriptions, to draw people in...create mental 'pictures', as much as you can. If you need any help, we can talk about some ideas when we meet up sometime this week.*

*PS - The essays that are a little shorter had a word limit to them.*

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## SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAY

*By Kimberly Mihayo*

'God created Eve from Adams rib, so, naturally, women are subordinate to men. How can they have equal rights as us?' he said with a smug self-confidence in his face. And as he uttered these words, I felt a bitter clump in my throat, and then a gradually rising wave of

irrepressible anger.....it kept growing, mounting within me until I couldn't hold it in any longer. I asked the host for the microphone because I needed to counter his argument, not only because of me, but because of all who were like me. As I held the microphone in my hands, I knew that whatever I was going to say would be fuelled by the rage boiling inside me, but still, I didn't care, it needed to be said.

On this day, our school was hosting the last event of the month long MUN Human Rights Cities Program. We had invited a number of students from different schools in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania to participate in what was the culmination of several inter-school debates and discussions on Model United Nations issues both locally and globally. This program presented a chance for youth from all over Dar es Salaam to voice their opinions on matters ranging from Nuclear Disarmament to Human Trafficking in Tanzania. I couldn't have been more proud to be an MUN club member during this period. The solidarity and support that manifested itself through our coordinated debates and teamwork earned us the highest points in the debates we had so far. But until this day, I hadn't fully grasped what it meant to be an MUN club member.

As I stood up to speak, the debate hall grew silent. I faced the man who was probably in his early twenties, and had just finished voicing his opinion on the topic of discussion, *'How can men and women in Tanzania work together to promote Human Rights?'*. In my mind, I wasn't angry at that him but at my society, and the ideologies that it instilled in us for generations. I saw my uncle in that man; a man who maintained that women should eat only after men have finished their meal. I saw the men who domestically abuse their helpless wives because they are breadwinners and hence, they can. And I saw a father who chooses to educate his sons rather than his only daughter because it would be 'a waste of money'.

My speech was for these women, women who bore our nation, and are continually being oppressed and deprived of their rights because they are considered weak and incapable. Trying to suppress my anger, my voice trembled as I told everyone that as women, we are not weak or subordinate, but are endowed with strengths that are different from what men possess. We may not be as physically powerful as men, but we are gifted with intelligence, emotion and a gentleness that allows us to perform our innate role of nurturing and caring for our society. Just like men use their strengths to fend for their own. So, how could anyone say that we didn't have any rights? How could that man or the society espouse such beliefs?



When I sat down I received an applause. But I didn't feel like I had achieved anything. One fervent speech wasn't going to change generations of gender injustice in my country, or the deeply rooted beliefs that that man held as he stared blankly at me. Still I wasn't disappointed, because I had spoken for someone. This was what it meant to be an MUN member; to speak for those who do not have a voice, or are too afraid to speak. For it is only through speaking out that we can begin to alter what's inside the minds of others, or in our own minds.

Common App

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## TIES, GIRLS AND UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

*By Brian Mwarania*

I stand still; put aback by the sheer magnitude of the endeavor. Uneasily readjusting my tie, I try and gain composure. The room is silent, pregnant with anticipation. I begin to speak, but end up choking on my words; a false start. I let out a nervous chuckle, exuding pseudo-confidence. My eyes dart from side to side as I examine my audience, looking for a familiar face, searching for reassurance. The attempt is futile. With a final exhalation, I begin my argument. This time, I do not choke on my words; the fluidity of my presentation encourages me to project my voice further. I ease into the body of my speech with the poise of a professional. The voice coming out of the public address system can't possibly be mine. I sound convincing. A rapid succession of requests for the floor ensues soon after my conclusion. As I walk back to my sit, the conference room is jolted into activity as responses to my presentation threaten to erupt out of the previously dormant delegates. Calls of "Point of information" rent the air as delegates endeavor to remain within the confines of parliamentary procedure. Fully acknowledging the commotion I have just caused, I settle down in full anticipation of the rebuttal I will have to compose to defend my view. I love this place.

My commitment to the Model United Nations has been the subject of incessant prying amongst many my friends who find it rather peculiar. They do not understand how year after year I sacrifice my time, resources and mental capacity to the same organization. In fact many a boy in my year has suggested that it is just a clever ploy to hit on girls or perhaps that I am just interested in the vanity of dressing up in formal-wear for a week. However, to understand my dedication requires one to go beyond the superficial, to the very essence of

the program: a forum through which the young generation can have their go at confronting the issues facing the world. It is in this facet of the program that I gain my gratification.

It is often said that the youth are the leaders of tomorrow. However, with M.U.N., I get to exercise the power to deliberate on issues as I see fit today. My opinion matters and is in fact sought after. I get a chance to employ public speaking, negotiating, group communication, policy research and analysis, active listening and conflict resolution to current issues affecting the world. It is the ultimate validation of self-worth when a resolution you wrote is seen as fit for adoption by the General Assembly; it is even more pleasing when a heated debate ensues in the conference about the merits and demerits of a particular operative clauses you suggested. The flow of intellectual acuity is evident throughout the forum and without a doubt we all leave more knowledgeable and conscious as pertains international relations and the problems facing the world.

Through M.U.N., I have not found the answers to life's questions and neither have I fronted solutions to all the world's problems. No. I however have truly gained a multi-dimensional perception towards life in general through this program; appreciation of human rights together with tolerance towards diversity, awareness of the ethical dilemmas that come with most scientific advancements as well as the conflict of interest that many states face when involved in bilateral and multilateral political, social and economic relations.

You will therefore see me in M.U.N. next February. I may be expanding my knowledge by discussing issues of international importance, nervously readjusting my tie as I try not to let the assembly's size demoralize me or perhaps I will be exercising my reasoning ability to formulate feasible methods of achieving universal primary education. And if I get the numbers of some attractive girls in the process, well that's just an added advantage.

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## SHORT ANSWER

*By Brian Mwarania*

In the summer of 2010, I was fortunate enough to go for a two-week internship at the University of Nairobi's school of engineering where I got a chance to have a hands-on learning experience at the laboratories and workshops.

While there, I got the opportunity to work with a structural engineer who was designing a toilet that could be erected in slum areas to improve the standards of hygiene and hence boost the health conditions. I marveled at the application of computer aided design and manufacture using computer numeric control machines during the prototyping stage, followed by the making of casts for the mass production of the lavatory locally. The use of the principles of physics, with particular emphasis on the importance efficient production, to

manufacture a product that would improve the standards of living of thousands of people was very inspiring.

This just reaffirmed my interest in engineering.

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## ENGINEERING: PRINCETON

*By Brian Mwarania*

Miniature drivers do not operate remote-controlled toy cars, I was sad to discover. One of my earliest memories involves me taking apart my remote-controlled toy car, curious to see who drives it from within. I was certain that I would find some sort of tiny man at the wheel, waiting for my cue. I instead found a bunch of colored strings hooked up to strange looking boards and an interior that was not at all accommodative for Mr. Mini-driver. As disheartening as this moment was for me, it was the genesis of my interest in engineering, an interest that has only matured and intensified over the years.

It was during one of my organic chemistry classes that I realized a degree in chemical engineering was the right path for me. I was looking on enviously at the instructor assembling and ultimately using the reflux kit; I had never gotten a chance to use it. I yearned for a practical experience in chemistry that went beyond the qualitative analysis of carbonyl compounds with 2,4-dinitrophenylhydrazine. Moreover, I realized that I needed to be involved with chemistry that transforms abstract concepts into products that are crucial in everyday life. Why does one vehicle light-cluster cost higher than another? Can I find some way to produce methacrylate so that even the average father can afford the cars fitted with those which presently are the preserve of the affluent? How could I optimize the production of wine in such a way as to reduce the amount of waste while not diminishing but instead enhancing the quality of the product? All these thoughts saturated my head, ironically forming a clear image. Applied chemistry within the context of engineering; the fusion of my passion for chemistry and my penchant towards application over abstraction.

In particular, the chemical engineering course offered at Princeton has been my ambition ever since my epiphany. The ability to coordinate an independent investigation examining a unique hypothesis has long been a desire of mine, one I am certain will be entirely fulfilled through the senior thesis program. This is particularly appealing as I will get an opportunity to practice the intangible concepts and skills learned in class while preparing me for postgraduate work. With the availability of modern equipment, resources and internationally acclaimed facilities such as the Lewis-Sigler Institute for Integrative Genomics, this is made

entirely feasible and ensuring that my education occurs right at the frontiers of science. With this, the fundamentals of transforming exploratory research into working technologies will feature both theoretically and practically within my program giving me an unyielding grasp of engineering principles.

Moreover, I believe that confronting the issues facing the world requires a multi-faceted approach as opposed to one that traditionally lies within a distinct discipline. At Princeton, I will have the freedom to unite my passion for chemical engineering with my interest in management, biology, optimization, dynamics & I.T. through the certificates offered. This will enable me to gain a unique perspective into engineering technology and thus a layer of versatility. The dedication Princeton has to this interdisciplinary approach is quite apparent and in this regard the Princeton Institute for the Science and Technology of Materials (PRISM) is of further appeal to me as through it I will be able to wholesomely develop my interests in nanotechnology as pertains to biology.

I cannot wait therefore, to arrive at Princeton next fall. Whether I will be gawking awkwardly at one of the high resolution scanning electron microscopes at the Imaging and Analysis Centre, gaining hands on experience in engineering through the senior thesis or perhaps finally getting a chance to use a reflux kit, I believe that I will benefit tremendously from the undergraduate experience there. Of course there is also the unyielding foundation in chemical engineering and the breadth of knowledge gained by interdisciplinary studies with which I can gain establishment as a reputable chemical engineer. In the process perhaps I will become the next Vladimir Haense and revolutionize a process that will ultimately change the world.

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## COMMON APP ESSAY

*By Bernard Kiprop*

In every person's life there comes a time when he will be faced by a challenge or obstacle of some kind. Whatever its magnitude, the first reaction is always that of despair; most people give in and decide to accept whatever consequences it will bring along. However, the fruits of success and pride that come as a result of facing the challenge are by all means worth the pains.

When I was eleven years old, my mother fell ill. At first, we thought it was a normal infection on her breast and took her to the nearest dispensary. Several antibiotics later, though, the condition had actually worsened. Thus, my father was obliged to take her to a more expensive private hospital where she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The drugs she was

supposed to use from then were very expensive. Besides, my father had been told that the medicine would only keep her going for some time. These were the darkest moments of my life; we were not only spending too much money on medication but also staring helplessly at death threatening to take away one of our very own backbone and source of inspiration.

Well, the moment we had anticipated with apprehension finally came; ten months later, my mother passed on. Since we had spent so much on her medication, my dad could not afford to employ a house help to take care of us. Thus, my four siblings and I had to move and live with our step-mother. As it common in many societies, living with a step- parent is nothing to look forward to. Hard labor, no food, no school, ... this was the picture that was running through my mind. To us- well, at least, to me- what was to become of us was unspeakable. I could see my dream of becoming a doctor shattering right before my eyes.

That evening when our father came to pick us up, I felt I had to do something. I confronted him and told him that we would move on two conditions; we would continue our education, and that we would not be treated as servants in our new home. My father smiled, patted my shoulder and told me that there was nothing to fear as our step-mother was just like our mother. True to his word, she was indeed a near-perfect substitute. Though she would sometimes scold us unnecessarily, it was not as much as I expected. As a child, I never considered it to be her nature that she turned out to be that good but a result of my courageous act of confronting my dad, who went ahead and forewarned her of any mischief. This was a great 'achievement' for me at then.

By then our family was living on a hand-to-mouth basis since much had been spent on medication. The little salary my dad earned combined with the little profit from his small businesses as well as the meager produce from our farm was enough just to get food on the table, clothe and take us to school. two years later, though, things got from bad to worse: my step-mum was diagnosed with diabetes and my father with hypertension. I was also admitted to a very expensive private high school, and my dad retired. To be sincere, if I were my dad, I would have just quitted living.

On the contrary, my father was nowhere near giving up. He went ahead and sold part of his land and bought a van for public transportation business. In addition, he started diversifying what he planted on the farm from just maize and beans to include vegetables,

fruits, coffee, groundnuts and also sorghum. This not only ensured that there was sufficient food and didn't have to spend on foodstuff but also that, throughout the year, there would be a crop he would be harvesting and selling.

Despite his assiduity, the money was still not enough to meet our needs, especially my school fees. This meant constant interruption of my studies, a thing, which pleased neither

of us. My father, still, never tired of his concoctions. He went ahead and requested the school principal to allow me to stay in school while he would be paying small amounts every month. Luckily, the principal was considerate and accepted the deal.

All the same, studying at such an expensive school meant studying among kids from well-to-do families and this was quite challenging for such students as me from humble struggling backgrounds. Moreover, the idea of having to spend all that money on school fees kept me worrying about how my family was going to cope; I felt that they were sacrificing too much for me. However, my dad kept encouraging me to forget everything around me and focus entirely on my studies. His encouragements and unrelenting spirit inspired me a lot.

When the results for my national exams were released in March last year, I was very delighted and excited – everybody was. The most rewarded person, in my opinion, was my dad. His excitement could not be hidden; even today, I can still read triumph, success, and pride on his old wrinkled pallid face. As if that was not enough, two months later, Equity Bank Limited, Africa's best micro-finance institution, invited me to work for them. Now the idea that I am applying to one of the world's best colleges where I shall study among great people and not pay a single dime is enough to make him float.

In as much these do not mean full financial liberation for my family, it did prove to an old man that every challenge is worth facing, and gave hope, courage and inspiration to a young man. True, difficulty need not foreshadow despair or defeat. Rather, achievement can all be the more satisfying because of obstacles surmounted.

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## DAY IN THE GRAND CANYON

*By Princess Daisy Akita*

Right foot, left foot, breathe... I concentrated all my energy on putting one foot in front of the other. The weight of my backpack was overwhelming, and I could feel my knees buckling under the pressure. The sweat on my forehead had grown from beads to little streams; I felt crushed under the heat of the scorching Arizonian sun. But on I trudged, reminding myself that this was the Grand Canyon, the natural wonder of the world! When I paused to catch my breath, I wondered what was a girl like me was doing hiking the plains of Arizona anyway.

There I stood, a full-blooded Ghanaian girl. Born and bred in the same neighbourhood in which my parents grew up, I had been raised on kenkey and fried fish, bathed in my grandmother's old fish basin, and told Ananse stories by the fireside as a child. I had sung

and danced during festivals, and I had learned - a great deal. I knew who I was, and where I came from. And I knew that hiking was definitely not our thing. As I plumped one foot ahead of the other though, I looked back on the many steps I'd taken in life – the minuscule and the gigantic, my missteps, my successes, the many lessons I'd learned - the ones that had shaped me, made me who I was, and I knew that I was in the right place.

Three months earlier, I had been enthralled by the scents and sights of the Chorkor beach in Accra, as I bargained with the women who sold smoked fish. The fishermen were pulling in their nets and mending them. The wind carried their hearty chatter towards me, and I could hear their animated voices in the distance. I could hear the contentment in their voices, and the comfort of familial bonds that transcended blood ties. I could hear the sounds I have heard all my life, when I had learned to love and appreciate not only my parents and my brothers, but also my second and third cousins, and my great aunts and uncles. These were the sounds of my childhood, the sounds that had taught me love.

These sounds slowly faded into oblivion as the ascent slope steepened, and my steps got heavier. The only sound now was the tick-tock of my wrist watch – the same wrist watch that had seen me through three years of boarding school. I remembered how I had learned discipline by waking up at five am, morning after morning, so I could go out and build my future - for that is what I did, as I learned the mundane and the spectacular. My first Chemistry exam had been a slap in the face, a big disappointment, but I studied harder, labouring day and night so the next one was a success. From that I learned determination. Every morning I had run up and down the Kakumdo hill, trudging along even when I thought my lungs would burst, when my every muscle ached from the pain. But weeks later when I run my 1500m race, I knew I had learned the value of hard work, the kind that doesn't break bones. I learnt the value of compromise during those heated debates with my friends, the same friends who taught me to serve by giving me the chance to lead. I have always loved to teach, but week after week, seeing the lively faces of the children in Kakumdo Primary after our Maths lesson taught me compassion. When I had returned every night to bed, it was this same watch I had seen, night after night. As I had watched its slim hands move, I knew I had learned the invaluable: I had learned how to live.

And the hands never stopped moving. I was hiking the Grand Canyon because my next step had taught me the meaning of challenge. Having left home and my friends and all that was familiar to me, I found myself at the United World College in New Mexico, where the only thing my new friends and I shared was our differences. These were friends from every single country I knew, and every single one I hadn't known. In New Mexico, for the first time in my life, I realised how big the world was, and how little I understood of it. I sharpened my thirst to learn and understand, to be able to appreciate our differences. Most importantly, UWC taught me to appreciate similarity; to see that deep down, we are all human. When I glanced

at my wrist watch, I knew how blessed I was. My steps had become lighter, the sun did not seem as scorching, and my knees had ceased to hurt. I understand today what I hadn't understood then: Every step I have ever taken in my life's journey has brought me to this point in my life, and my next step will determine the new lessons I learn and person I eventually become. My hope is that I will continue learning and growing, and that just like those of the expanse of the arid desert land, my boundaries will only be as far as I decide to set them, if I ever do.

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## SUPPLEMENT: AN UNFORGETTABLE CANADIAN SUMMER

*By Princess Daisy Akita*

10th July 2009 marked the beginning of a journey I will never forget. On that day, I arrived in Victoria, Canada, for the Pearson Seminar on Youth Leadership (PSYL). It was a meeting of a hundred young people from different parts of North America, Europe and Asia. I was among a group of twenty facilitators selected from the twelve United World Colleges around the world to lead and mentor the participants. We were all there to learn about the pertinent issues facing our world and how we as young people could make a concerted effort to overcome them.

My first impressions of Canada's beautiful west coast filled me with awe. I remember the evergreen pines and the giant oaks, the sweet smell of rain soaking the parched soil, and the splash of the gorgeous waves lapping against the Pacific's beaches. I loved the breathtaking view of the greenish-blue sea, and the lush greenery on the sweeping hills.

Even more beautiful than the scenery was the sense of community I found in PSYL. For me, it was four weeks of living the ultimate UWC experience. Each day was filled with heart-felt discussions about the real cultural barriers we were faced with on a daily basis. Sometimes we disagreed on issues like Genetically Modified food and Water Conservation Practices, but through it, we learned to live out the five values our community was governed by – the values of heart, balance, faith, ubuntu, and "soulivit". From the three words soul, live, and spirit, we had coined "soulivit", a single word that captured our intense passion for life and our desire to live it to the fullest. It was for us a symbol of our ready hearts and willing hands, a constant reminder to make use of every opportunity we had to change the world. I experienced the beauty of a Gutarati-speaking Indian and a Ga-speaking Ghanaian communicating to each other in a combination of French and Spanish, but in the midst of myriad tongues, we learned to communicate without words. We learned how to use sign language and facial expressions to articulate the message that comes from deep within a



person's heart. In the peace and quiet of our daily hour-long spirit spots, we were faced with the challenge of coming to terms with our own selves and searching for our truths.

In PSYL, I learned a new Latin expression: Carpe Diem. For us, it meant seizing the day and making the most of every opportunity. I remember each of our happy faces and the laughter in our voices as we sang together in different tongues. Learning swing dance had put a bounce in my step, and cycling up and down the rolling hills had increased my hunger for challenge. Carpe Diem also taught us to take action: when we learned about water conservation, we stopped using trays; after our seminar on food we started a vegetarian meal drive, and composted every banana peel for the green house. It was at PSYL that the UWC-for-350 movement was born. We yearned to add the voices of children all over the world to the sustainability campaign. When we each returned to our cities and schools, we organised discussions and educated about the dire consequences of 350ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Together, we were able to send a UWC delegation to the just-ended climate change conference in Copenhagen.

I had arrived in PSYL sceptical about the ability of a few young people to change the world, but when I left, my scepticism had not only been obliterated - it had been replaced with enduring hope. For every time our eyes had crinkled in the warmth of the sunshine on our faces, our voices had sang joyous notes in unison, and our hearts had experienced the utopia of cross-cultural community and sharing, we had each been given the gift of hope - the assurance of a better world to come.

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## PLEASE LISTEN, IT'S FOR MICHAEL.

*By Martha Obasi*

Have you ever approached someone for help and before you even utter two words they walk away? Or worse they ask you: "do you think I am a charity organization child? People work for their money, they don't beg!" well I have and not once or twice but severally. I vividly recall standing on the streets after yet another disappointment; the sun searingly hot against my forehead. Sweat, now dripping down my face mingled with the stream of tears that found its way down my cheeks as I watched yet another respected member of society walk away. I recall that sickening feeling in my stomach; that feeling that maybe, just maybe if they spared their time to listen to me they would understand. They would understand that I wasn't begging for money for myself but for a greater purpose. I wanted so badly to turn and walk away but a something was holding me back. My mind wandered back to a time in my past.

“Nikuendeshe na ndege yangu?” (Do u need a ride in my plane) he asked so softly it could pass for a whisper. I noticed the drawl in his words as he spoke and could see the pain in his eyes with each word he pronounced yet he continued to speak. On closer inspection I noticed that the sores on his lips extended to the inside of his mouth. He was decked in faded blue jeans that were torn at the knees and a wrinkled old red t-shirt that clung to his body portraying the picture that it was a size too small. Yet he continued playing seemingly unaware of his condition.

They called him Michael, just Michael. He was HIV positive as was his mother who had left him for dead at a dumpster in Mathare-A slum in Nairobi, Kenya. A passerby took him to the Nyumbani children’s home and he had found a home there ever since. He was only seven and wasn't expected to live to his eighth birthday.

We were there visiting as members of the pontifical missionary society. A society set up by children to help other children by availing to them food, clothing and occasionally visiting them to make them feel as if they belonged to greater family.

“Sawa, utanipeleka wapi?” (Okay where will you take me?) I asked as I settled on the edge of the bed. “Nyumbani” (home) he answered as he went on to tell me of his grand dreams: he dreamt that he would finish his education and become a pilot; he dreamt that he would own so many mansions and take his friends to live there; he dreamt of a world without any pain or suffering, where his weak friends (he showed me a couple of them lying in bed) could play all they wanted.

Abruptly he turned and looked at me straight in the eye. The look piercing through to my very soul and for a moment I felt shiver. Then he smiled and for the first time his features softened and I saw him for Who he was. Past the sores and the blemishes of healed wounds that tainted his beautiful skin, past the slur of his words, past the drab garments he wore, I saw him and I don’t think I have ever seen a prettier child than he was. He must have noticed my stare for he finally added “you can come over if you want to”

“I would love to” I answered and he smiled again.

Michael passed away September of the following year and though I only saw him once he changed my life. I hope he found the lovely mansions he so fondly spoke about and that his friends who followed in his escape from this world are also playing without pain or suffering.

But I still kept wondering what happens to all the other Michaels. Do they find good children to help them or are they simply forgotten like Michael’s mother did to him? Do I stand and

listen to that child on the street who is trying to make case for Michael? Or do I turn and walk away pretending I did not hear and in so doing condemning Michael to a life of solitude? Why do I say that he changed my life if I do not try and change his life too? Why didn't I give him a chance to have his dreams come true?

Well I changed. Despite the many phonies out on the streets to cone people by begging I always found one who did actually need help. I have met many Michaels and I believe every one of them has changed me; they have given me a greater self-awareness of myself and of humanity in general. But above all they have taught me to listen to others so I may also be listened to.

With a knot in my throat every time I was shunned away I now really understood why I kept walking on to the next stranger: I would look back to my past and I would meet Michael all over again. I would remember the reason I was in the sun; for Michael and in that moment I knew I could face the hardest of times just to see the smile on his face again. And so with that conviction I walked on to the next stranger

"Excuse me.....