**In 140 characters or less, tell us what makes you unique. \***

An actor, int'l teacher, clown, gardener, painter, bbq-pitmaster, baseball fanatic, former nanny, and "hungover swing man" on bball-court.

**Why are you applying to the Flatiron School? \***

I am applying to the Flatiron School because programming inspires me. I have been teaching myself Web Development for the past couple months and I can’t stop. I know the Flatiron school will be the perfect launchpad for my career. I saw first hand at what a transformational experience the Flatiron School was for my friend, Josh Rowley. I also saw how much dedication it took on his part. And I can see how he still hasn’t stopped learning new things since.

I am fascinated by the Flatiron School’s ability to present coding as an art. Five years ago, the thought of learning to be a programmer never would have crossed my mind. I went to acting school at NYU; we didn’t have ‘computer’ class; we had voice, movement and diction. In the classes we would meticulously study the craft of acting. There was constant reflection on what choices were successful and what didn’t work. Ultimately, these classes taught me the value of a ‘problem’. Problems teach me how things work, they can expand my imagination, they can force me to take a stand and say, “here is MY idea for how to fix this.” Solving problems makes me an artist.

I know any career I settle into will need to have the room for me to be creative. I will always approach whatever I do as an artist. This is what attracts me to programming.

Josh Rowley warned me of programming’s struggles and obstacles, the need for resilience when , and the persistence to keep going. I decided to give it a go and started working on the Flatiron School’s pre-work. I dove right in, and hardly came up for a breath.

First, I took a course on how to build an HTML/CSS site from scratch. This gave me the impetus to design my own website, “dodgerredhead.nyc”, that would function as a place I could share cool things about the volunteer work I have been doing with Zara Aina, an NGO. As I built the website, it became apparent to me how programming really is a creative expression. It requires you to use your whole mind like a puzzle does, visualize large complex problems and break them down into smaller tasks.

I moved onto the Git, GitHub, Ruby, and Rails sections in the Flatiron Prework. The ideas started popping up for how to improve my project. I began to make it a web application. I started to learn how to configure gems and generate migrations. Each idea led to new things to learn and new problems to solve. I am now hooked.

I have challenged myself to learn about programming on my own and I still want to learn so much more. I want to become a million times better. I want to go to the Flatiron School to be in a program that will make me useful, challenge me, surround me with a great team, and make me happy.

**Tell us about your professional/educational career to date. What are you up to now and how did you end up there? \***

I grew up in Pasadena, CA and moved to New York City in 2006 to attend NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts. I graduated in 2010 with a BFA in Acting and a minor in African studies.

I studied in the Meisner Extension, part of NYU Tisch’s rigorous studio program. The ideology centers around one principle: to build your character through detail by asking questions and trying to be as specific as possible. Break down every aspect of the problem at hand and find out as much as you can about it.

After graduating from NYU, I have been lucky enough to be a part of some amazing projects:

My volunteer work with Zara Aina, an international NGO, took me to Madagascar as part of a team that developed theater programming intended to engage at-risk Malagasy children. The children selected to be a part of the program were aged 10-14 years old and are prone to abuse, panhandling and homelessness. My work with Zara Aina helped to motivate these children to achieve more and invest in their sense of possibility.

As the nanny of two 10 year olds in Brooklyn, I found the delicate balance of being a playmate and a role model. I could be silly and play games, but also inspire the kids to dream up awesome projects like woodcarving, building a Go-Kart from scratch, or remodeling a road bike.

And using what I had learned about art, farming and carpentry from my travels in Africa, I transformed the backyard of my Crown Heights brownstone into an urban-garden. Digging up the Kudzu-infested soil and filling it with a slew of heirloom tomatoes, tomatillos, and mammoth sunflowers; scouring the streets of Brooklyn for the perfect wooden pallets to recycle into a table, bench and vertical planters full of lush greens.

In the fall of 2014, I started working for a grocery delivery tech start up, Good Eggs, as a member of their operations team. I was attracted to the company because of their mission to build and sustain local food systems. I realized that what I really wanted was to be a part of the team that was building the applications that Good Eggs ran on. I began studying the code that the companies operations and inventory systems relied on and this sparked my interest in being a web developer. Good Eggs laid me off in February 2015 when the company eliminated 20% of their workforce in one day. After initially feeling disappointment, I took it as a blessing in disguise and have since been on a mission to be a web developer.

**The ability to think in a structured way, both creatively and quantitatively, to solve complex problems is an important element of being a successful developer. Can you tell us anything that demonstrates your abilities in that realm? (anything from standardized test scores to experience playing a musical instrument counts) \***

I started volunteering for Zara Aina in 2012 after Lucas Rooney, my former clowning professor from NYU, sent me a message on Facebook: “I just returned from a life changing trip to Africa and am looking for people to brainstorm with about a way to help street kids in Antananarivo, Madagascar. The clowning work we studied will help these children use their imaginations to achieve more and invest in their sense of possibility.”

We met in person and Lucas explained the premise: he had met a woman in Madagascar who was working with Akany Fitahiana, a Malagasy NGO that sees to the daily needs of street children in Antananarivo. Lucas wanted to help her develop a theater program. The program would be based on three simple rules “1. Show up, 2. Have fun, 3. Share your gifts.” The name of the program would be, “Zara Aina”, a Malagasy phrase meaning, “Share Life”.

I joined a team that began to meet every Sunday to develop programming for Zara Aina. When we had the chance, we would Skype with the students from Antananarivo and get to know them by making up silly songs and performing for each other via videoconference.

In Zara Aina’s early stages I took on many challenges like applying for 501C3 tax exemptions, meeting with UNICEF officials at the Malagasy embassy in New York to solicit funding, and arranging the silent auction for our Benefit Show that was held at Joe’s Pub.

For Zara Aina to grow from a dream in 2012 to bringing the programming to life in 2014, it required each member of the team to happily wear many hats, show some serious hustle, and hold constant reflection to help establish our practices.

When we got to Madagascar the first few days were spent organizing lodging, renting a rehearsal space, figuring out transportation, and adjusting to being on the other side of the world. Even though I had been in other parts of Africa before, Madagascar seemed like an entirely different culture: different language, different food, and a dizzying pace.

Zara Aina used part of the budget to hire 15 bilingual Malagasy artists and musicians. They would help us develop content and translate while we worked with the students.

Zara Aina’s American company would often hold meetings to reflect on what practices were working and what needed to be improved. Early on, I decided that I worked very well with the teaching artists and took the initiative to lead their trainings in Zara Aina’s pedagogy. Throughout the process, I led meetings three times a week with the teaching artists to help identify areas that needed to be improved, practice exercises that we would be working on with the students, and prep materials we would need for rehearsal.

The work we did with the students started by choosing a Malagasy folktale to turn into a play. The students chose, “Crocodiles for Husbands,” a Malagasy fable where the three daughters of the King are accidentally married off to crocodiles that are disguised as men. When the village finds out that the crocodiles have tricked them, they set out to find the girls. In the end, they save the girls and barbeque the crocodiles.

At the end of the rehearsal process there would be three shows, highlighted by a performance in front of over 5,000 people at UNICEF’S “30 Years in Madagascar” celebration.

Zara Aina worked to develop this play with 30 students from two different organizations. 15 students from Akany Fitahiana had been involved with Zara Aina’s programming since 2012. In 2014, UNICEF helped Zara Aina to expand their outreach to include 15 other children from an additional organization, Manaoti.

A short time into the program, I noticed that the work wasn’t affecting all the students the same. The kids from Akany Fitahiana were generally more focused, enthusiastic and involved. These kids lived in Ankorondrano, the slum of Antananarivo. And while their living conditions were some of the poorest in the world, all of their students had loving families who supported their involvement in programs like Zara Aina. This support made a huge difference, and you could see it reflected in the students’ attitudes at rehearsal.

The kids from Manaoti had a much harder upbringing. Manaoti is an orphanage for children who come from a background of abuse or homelessness.

While all the children who participate in Zara Aina need tons of love and care, I realized that the participants from Manaoti required extra compassion and patience. The American company needed to figure out a way to inspire the Manaoti students to be more participative in rehearsal. The success of the workshop hinged on the ability of the instructors to build a trust between the Manaoti students and themselves.

One of the students from Manaoti, Andreas, exemplifies how Zara Aina can be a transformational program. Andreas was super shy on stage, but he would always get in fights with the other kids off-stage and distract from rehearsal. After talking with some of the teachers from Manaoti, it turned out the other kids were teasing Andreas because his mom was a drug addict.

It was a difficult conversation to have, but I knew I had to be a role model for Andreas and find a way to encourage him to be more involved in Zara Aina’s programming. I took Andreas aside and let him know that he shouldn’t have to suffer from teasing and that he was an amazing and talented kid. The American company then called the whole ensemble together and I reminded everyone, “Building a great show requires us to be an ensemble, encourage each other to try new things, to be bold and to not give up. We can’t put each other down.”

After sticking up for Andreas, his attitude seemed to transform. He started coming by the house in the mornings before rehearsal to play dominos and cards. He started being much more expressive and involved in rehearsals. His relationship with his friends improved and he hardly got into physical confrontations anymore.

One night, while cleaning up the house after rehearsal we noticed that two of our Ipods had gone missing. After turning the house upside down, we realized that one of the students had probably taken them. The students were over at the house constantly and we would often let them use our electronics to play games or take pictures.

The next day at rehearsal we called the ensemble together and let them know the situation, “something has gone missing and until the electronics are returned nobody can come over to the house, except to rehearse.”

The students went into an uproar. They loved coming to the house and hated the idea of not being able to come. They all started yelling and pointing fingers, “ANDREAS!” Andreas yelled back, denying it.

Initially, it hurt to think Andreas could have done it. Our first reaction was to punish him. None of the students had ever taken anything from the house, but it seemed that the temptation had at last proven to be too much. On paper, the students we worked with had every reason to be seen as crooks: FIND EXAMPLES OF MALAGASY POVERTY. It would have been easy to paint Andreas as just another poor, thieving youth. But, I thought about the forgiveness my parents and teachers had shown me when I was Andreas’ age and also getting in fights and being suspended from school. Why should Andreas’ ethnicity, class, or nationality decide that he couldn’t have a second chance like I did?

Andreas stealing the Ipods had become an ambiguous problem with no clear solution, but I knew I had to turn it into a learning moment that could help the student grow. So, after rehearsal, I took Andreas aside. I first tried to solve the problem by appealing to Andreas culturally, so I said, “I understand people make mistakes. I used to get into a lot of trouble at school too. Or look at the crocodiles, they did a bad thing, but we don’t want to get you in trouble like the crocodiles. If you did take the electronics, bring them back tomorrow and leave them outside. Nobody will ever know it was you. All I care about is that you bring the best version of yourself to rehearsal tomorrow. ” He was upset and didn’t say anything.

The next morning Andreas returned the Ipods and all was forgotten. This is an example of the trust that Zara Aina’s work helps to build between the instructors and the students. This trust is what makes Zara Aina a transformational program.

For the rest of the workshop, Andreas was a model student. He became the star of his scene and would come to rehearsals with lots of ideas. It was a highlight for me to be able to share the stage with him as police officers that were searching for the lost girls.

After performing in front of over 5,000 people at UNICEF’S “30 Years in Madagascar” celebration, Andrea had a smile on his face that stretched from ear to ear. Andreas expressed to me that in the beginning he felt small and as if he had nothing to offer, but as a result of the time spent working with the company he felt “big” and recognized the gifts that he possesses. The forgiveness I had shown him gave him the freedom to not be judged by his past mistakes. Moreover, I could tell that there was an eagerness to continue sharing those gifts with others.

Working to organize a multi-national, educational-theater NGO is an extremely complicated process that required a kick-ass team to show some serious hustle to even step foot in Madagascar. Ultimately, it was each team member’s ability to break down a huge puzzle into smaller tasks that allowed us to be a positive influence on a kid like Andreas. My experiences working in a developing country has prepared me to not be intimidated by my surroundings, or any problem, and I can carry this skill set with me into whatever problem I am trying to solve.