**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? \***

Five years ago, the thought of learning to be a programmer never would have crossed my mind. I went to art-school; we didn’t have ‘computer’ class; we had voice, movement and diction.

But, in the time since, I sometimes ask myself, “how can I make myself more useful, productive and engaged?”

I have been lucky enough to be a part of some incredible projects:

My volunteer work with Zara Aina took me to Madagascar as part of a team that developed theater programming intended to engage at-risk Malagasy children ages 10-14 years who are prone to panhandling and homelessness.

As the nanny of two 10 year olds in Brooklyn, I was a role model and was able to collaborate with the kids in order to dream up awesome projects like woodcarving, building a Go-Kart from scratch, or remodeling a road bike.

And I have learned about carpentry and farming to transform 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 tables, benches and lush vertical planters full of greens.

**I** also have had more than my fair share of failures, like the time one of the boys I was a nanny for slammed the door in my face and broke off my fingernail.

Yet when connecting my experiences, good and bad, I come to one conclusion: I love to solve problems. I know that sounds weird, but problems force me to think. Problems teach me how things work. Problems broaden my horizon and expand my imagination. Problems 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 have to have the room for me to be creative, work-collaboratively, and solve problems. I may never have a career as a traditional artist, but will always approach whatever I do as an artist.

This understanding has helped to open my eyes to programming. I can see how the profession will allow for me to be creative, work-collaboratively, and solve problems.

After speaking with my close friend who is a programmer, Josh Rowley, he cautioned me, “there is so much to learn, and it can be frustrating, but if you understand that, you should check out the Flatiron School’s pre-work.” And so 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 with others about myself.

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 quickly realized a second thing about programming: I didn’t know anything about programming!, but I want to learn more. So I moved onto the Git, GitHub, Ruby, and Rails sections in the Flatiron Prework. The ideas started popping up for how to improve ‘dodgerredhead.nyc’. I began to make it a web application. I started to learn how to add photos, videos, and a ‘user log-in’ feature. Each idea led to new things to learn and new problems to solve. It led to me being hooked and wanting more.

Thinking about the baby steps I have taken in learning to become a programmer, I can start to see my learning curve. Initially, I had unconscious incompetence. I didn’t really know much at all about programming, or how much I had to learn. And when I did start to learn, it didn’t come easy. But by sticking to it, even through frustration and failure, I showed myself the strength of my stimulus to learn.

I became knowledgeable enough to realize some of the mistakes I was making and what else I needed to learn. I realized I liked coding enough to stick with it. I was consciously incompetent.

I want to become consciously competent and eventually have the skill become second nature. This is where the Flatiron School comes in.

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 Flatiron School to be in a program that will make me useful, challenge me, surround me with a great team, and bring the best out of me.

**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 Meisner Extension is based on the tenants of Sandy Meisner, the New York based acting theorist. The ideology centers around one principle: to build your character through detail. Break down every aspect of a character and find out as much as you can about them.

Surprisingly, an actor and a programmer share many of the same traits. The same way an actor has to break down each individual moment to build a character and a scene, the programmer has to configure each aspect of their applications design for it to work seamlessly. Actors are only as good as their ability to work as an ensemble, in the same way that a programmer must function as part of a team. Ultimately, both skills are very similar in that they require someone to creatively break a complex puzzle into smaller components and solve each problem in order to turn a dream into reality.

In 2009, I studied Sub-Saharan-African-art history abroad as a part of the NYU in Ghana program. The courses were one of a kind, and I even interned at a school, the Kokrobitey Institute. There I worked to recruit local artists as guest instructors and increased local awareness of the programs they had to offer. I had the opportunity to learn from Ghanaian artists, and also share my talents with them. Working in the developing world helped to show me first hand that not everyone is as privileged as me, but everyone is an important, unique gift to the world. My time abroad was so humbling that I knew I wanted to return to Africa to share what I had with people who needed it most.

After graduating from NYU in 2010, I started working as a nanny, or 'manny', with a high profile family in Brooklyn Heights. When I started, the two kids were 9 years old and when I left in 2014 they were just turning 14. It took a lot of dedication to stay with the family that long, and it is rewarding to know I had a hand in helping the children become respectable, young adults. The job was as cool as I made it. If I took the children home and we only played video games, the time crept by slowly. Instead, I would take the initiative to come up with awesome projects to work on with the kids. For example, we renovated my road bike, sanded it down, repainted it and replaced all the brakes. We even designed our own stencils to spray-paint a design on the bike. Another summer, we built Go-Kart’s and raced them down hills upstate. I also got to cook dinner every night. I took it upon myself to make healthy meals. I learned about local foods and nutrition. Cooking fresh, delicious food became a passion of mine. I maintained the condition of the family’s house, managed the kids summer schedules, stayed on top of their homework, took care of their pets: three dogs, a cat, and a Red-Eared Slider. Being a full time nanny required me to learn on the fly, prioritize demands, and be extremely patient.

In June 2014, I left the job as a nanny to follow a dream of mine; I returned to Africa to teach clowning to street kids in Madagascar with Zara Aina, an NGO. Zara Aina is a Malagasy phrase that means ‘Share Life’. Broadway actors (and my professors at NYU Tisch School of the Arts) Lucas Caleb Rooney and Bryce Pinkham co-founded Zara Aina to help at-risk children expand their capacity for achievement through theatrical performance and storytelling. I have been a volunteerstaff member since Zara Aina’s inception in 2012. I helped to create Zara Aina's programming, lead fundraising drives, apply for 501C3 tax exemption, and traveled as part of the team to Madagascar in August 2014. At the heart of Zara Aina is the transformative power of storytelling. We believe that access to theater activities creates confident learners who are better prepared to participate actively in their education, community and social lives. From thinking creatively to collaborating with others, theatrical storytelling and performance can profoundly motivate children to achieve more and invest in their sense of possibility.

Another passion of mine has been transforming my Brooklyn back yard into an urban garden. By learning about carpentry and farming I have been able to utilize every square inch of the yard. I have learned to study the light and improve the placement of the vegetables year after year. Operating on the principle of, “form follows function,” I recycled wood pallets into vertical planters to better utilize the space and grow more crops. When the vertical planters turned out well, I thought, “What else could I do with a pallet?” Next thing I knew, I was hand sawing pallets in half, bolting them together and making a bench. Next, building a table. Each improvement I made in the yard required me to imagine the big picture and then make a plan. The yard has become a way for me to express my creativity. I had no formal training in carpentry or farming, but I wasn’t afraid to take on a challenge and used my wherewithal, creativity and passion to build a beautiful urban garden.

In the fall of 2014, I started working for a grocery delivery tech start up, Good Eggs, as a member of their operations and delivery team. I was attracted to the company because of their mission to build and sustain local food systems. Drawing from my interest in farming, it was a great opportunity to work for a company that was dedicated to helping local farmers and was a quickly growing start-up. While I liked working with local farmers and producers, 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. This initially sparked my interest in becoming a Web Developer. Good Eggs laid me off in February, 2015 when they restructured their company and 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 make myself useful. I have been learning about web development since.

**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.”

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 tries to meet 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 challenging managerial tasks 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.

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 the living conditions there are hard to imagine, they all 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 is a transformational program. Andreas was super shy on stage, and he would always get in fights with the other kids and distract from rehearsal. After talking with some of the Malagasy 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 reminded everyone of the three rules: 1 2 3! I said, “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 kids had probably taken them. The kids were over at the house constantly and we would often let them use our electronics to play games or take pictures. Nobody had ever taken anything because there was a lot of trust between us, but the temptation had at last proven to be too much.

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 kids went into an uproar. They loved coming to the house. They spent every second they could with us and hated the idea of not being able to come. They all started yelling and pointing fingers. “ANDREAS!” Andreas yelled back, denying it.

It hurt to think Andreas could have done it and our first reaction was to punish him. But we also knew that improving these kid’s lives required us to navigate a lot of ambiguity, so even though he broke our trust, we had to lead by example and show forgiveness in order for him to learn from his mistakes and grow. So I took him aside and told him, “I understand people make mistakes. If you did take the electronics, just bring them back tomorrow and leave them outside. Nobody will ever know it was you, all will be forgiven.” He was upset and didn’t say anything.

The next morning at 7 am there was a knock at the door. It was Andreas. He gave each of the Americans a giant hug and said he had found the Ipods in the dirt out front of the house. All was forgotten. This is an example of the trust that Zara Aina’s work helps to build between the instructors and the students that 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, Andreas 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. 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.