By age 14 I had become a semi-parent as the eldest of four children while my newly single mother worked multiple jobs to provide for us. This sudden transformation from carefree boyhood to pseudo-adulthood provoked a lot of serious introspection—the most powerful result being the realization that even a minute change in initial conditions could have drastically altered who I was, what I believed, and how I interacted with the world. The core tenants of who I am today are still rooted in that early teenage realization—that our lives are determined largely by circumstances outside our control, and that those gifted with privilege should use it to uplift instead of subjugate.

I’m also a strong believer in the idea that we are all better than the worst thing we’ve done—I’ve had the wonderful opportunity to combine these ideals in my volunteer work, where I teach physics and programming skills to inmates in prison. I empathize greatly with those of different circumstances like the inmates I’ve worked with because I can see how easily—with a few different choices or circumstances—I could have been among them. The inmates I’ve worked with have expressed more gratitude towards me than I knew possible, and the experiences I’ve had there have been some of the most rewarding I’ve ever had. Since starting this program at the beginning of the year some local news reports have been done on my work, which has enabled me to expand into a second prison as well as recruit new volunteers to offer services in a variety of disciplines for this incredibly underserved population.

I’ve had to find a way to finance my own education, often working more than 30 hours a week to pay the bills. Despite the workload I’m proud to have maintained a 4.0 GPA in my physics coursework, but I’m even prouder to feel as if I’ve internalized even the smallest inkling of how our universe works. I relish the opportunities where I get to impart this knowledge to others—seeing the sudden light in someone’s eyes as everything clicks in a blissful epiphany is often even better than having the experience yourself, and this is one of the reasons I’m so passionate about teaching and outreach.

I’m also excited about exploring the unknown—to boldly go where we haven’t gone before. I have had valuable research experience that makes me confident that I can distill my innate curiosity into tangible data and analysis. Astrophysics is the intersection of science and dreaming, and I hope to remain in academia as long as possible—my end goal is to be a professor in the field helping both to unlock some tiny part of the cosmos as well as to inspire and uplift others regardless of demographic through teaching and outreach. I would be honored to be have the support of UCLA as I work towards this goal, and to that end I humbly submit my application for your consideration.