In my freshman year of high school, I had no idea what was ahead of me. I was just a 14-year-old, standing in the car line at the end of the day, talking with my friends, waiting for my mom or dad's car to appear to take me away from school for another day. Between the 17-year-old I am today, and that 14-year-old boy from then, so much is the same. Both of us are nerds who love to learn, love to teach, love technology, love their friends, care about people, and just want to be themselves. But both of us are also very different. From taking initiative, to working with others, to our skills, lots has changed.

At the beginning of freshman year, I wasn't part of any extracurriculars. I didn't want to continue Academic Team like I had in 8th grade, but I did want to be a part of STLP, the Student Technology Leadership Program, again. When all the other clubs began announcing sign-ups, there was never anything about STLP. A few weeks later, nothing. I wondered if my Computer Science teacher would say anything about it. Still nothing. Instead of taking initiative—trying to find out who the sponsor was and contact them about joining, I just never tried to join a club I heard nothing about. And nothing about that changed; On Thursday, March 12, 2020, I went to school like I had any other day freshman year. School was out on Friday, and after the long weekend, another week would begin, business as usual. Unbeknownst to me, after that day, I would not attend school in-person for another 306 days. It was the start of the COVID-19 pandemic's lockdown. At the end of those 306 was the first day of the spring semester in my sophomore year. Still no chance to sign up for any clubs I wanted. Halfway through my high school career, my junior year, I finally took part in STLP. I discovered that the school didn't do STLP my freshman year, something I could have found out back then had I taken initiative. This time, when I heard my teacher mention STLP, I did. I asked to sign up, and set my goal on competing at state. Come April, I traveled the two hours to Lexington, and left that day as a state champion–first place in tech quick recall–something I think is incredible, and I couldn't have done if I didn't learn to take initiative.

This was only solidified when I decided to join drama at the beginning of my senior year. Since the production of *Godspell* in 8th grade, I've always attended my friends' productions to see and awe their performances. This year, I wanted to be a part of it…not to *play* a part of it, but to be a part of the production, lending them my ability with technology. As a freshman, I was not that good of a team worker. Sure, I was respectful to whoever I was working with, and I tried to be open-minded, but often, my idea for what we were working on would conflict with that of who I was working with. I didn't really value what they were thinking, and had a hard time compromising with them. Since then, I've grown to appreciate the ideas of those I work with, and if it conflicts with my vision of our work, I find a way to integrate their thoughts with mine in a way that both of us approve of. When I started helping with our production of *A Christmas Story*, Ms. Gardner, the director, asked me to hook up a camera behind the audience to two TVs backstage, so the others backstage can see what's happening onstage. My thought was I'd use a modern camcorder and use a long HDMI cable to connect it to the two TVs. Ms. Gardner handed me a camcorder from 2001 to use to connect to the TVs. Not what I was expecting, not the idea I had for this project, but that was okay. I found a converter for the camcorder's S-Video signal (a signal that was designed in 1987) to a modern HDMI, and integrated that into my initial idea. And once that was complete, the 21 year old camcorder's video was displayed on the two modern TVs backstage. I had worked with Ms. Gardner to successfully give everyone backstage a view of what was onstage. Same thing happened with my next role in the production–there were a few scenes that happened behind the curtains. I manned the (different) camera which captured these scenes, and played them on the screens in the auditorium. I worked with Ms. Gardner on how the scenes played out, with the actors for where they wanted to stand, where they wanted me to point the camera, and everything else to smoothly put on these scenes behind-the-scenes. If my idea of how I shoot the scene

didn't line up with Ms. Gardner or the actors, that was okay. We were all working together, as a team, for one thing: make *A Christmas Story* as great as we can.

Now, my accomplishments in STLP and my contributions to the drama club weren't something I could have done as well as I did at the start of high school. I've always loved technology, and even as a freshman I'd say it was something I was very strong in; but, I'd be remiss to say I haven't greatly improved in it. As a freshman, I had barely any experience with programming. I knew HTML and CSS, two languages used to design websites, but I couldn't make anything that functioned with those. I had always wanted to learn a proper programming language, and that year, I took the Intro to Computer Science class, and ended that class knowing how to make programs using Python. As a junior, I took AP Computer Science A, and ended that class knowing how to program even more things I couldn't before using Java. Programming wasn't the only skill I had improved upon. Becoming a part of the school help desk the spring semester of freshman year, again for the entirety of junior year, and again for the entirety of senior year, I've learned and picked up more on solving problems with technology by going and working on and with actual computers, laptops, Chromebooks, cameras, cables, and more. I believe the more I've learned about computers and technology throughout high school is what made me capable of becoming a state champion, and contributing to the drama club in the way I did.

And now I'm here, just about to take the next step and go off to college with everything I've learned, improved upon, and become as a high schooler. The 14-year-old I once was is no longer here, today he is a 17-almost-18-year-old who has learned to take initiative, become a better team worker, become even more skilled in his passion of technology, and so much more, ready to study Computer Science to become what he has wanted to be for years: a software developer, creating programs and apps to make the world at least a little bit of a better place.