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**Sample essays 2017**

**Amherst College**

**It Doesn't Matter If You're Black Or White, Allison Toth**

**Describe a situation in your life that you considered to have been a life-changing experience. Include any negative or positive variables that were associated with this event. Essay must not exceed two pages in length.**

"Wow," I whispered to myself as I walked into the main doorway of my new high school. I walked through the endless hallways and questioned myself as to why my parents decided to move here, Wuerzburg, Germany, one of the alleged bad schools in the area. Why did they force me to leave my friends, home, and some of my best experiences? I had never before in my life seen as many different ethnic faces as I now would every day for the next four years. I acted very apprehensively that first week of school; I mean it's not every day that you meet someone whose father is the principal. What would people think of me? Before in my old school the ethnic majority was white and now, in a matter of one day I had become the minority. I had heard rumors and tales of alleged gangs in my new school. I believed what others had told me and prepared myself for the worst. First looks can be very deceiving. I found this out the hard way. This move was by far one of the best events that had ever taken place in my life. It taught me about ethnic diversity and allowed me to enrich my life with the friendships of different people around me.

I entered high school, to put it blatantly, scared. I didn't know what to expect. Would people see me only as the principal's daughter? At first I was labeled as a teacher's pet and a goody two shoes. Of course, I was upset about accusation but I failed to realize that I too stereotyped the faces I saw everyday. I kept a small profile to avoid any confrontation. This was my avoidance tactic. Where I came from before people congregated together as one. Color was not an issue. But here it was the opposite. These oppositions made me not want to do anything that I thought would put me in a position where I would have to defend myself.

Slowly I began to realize that moving here to Wuerzburg was actually something that was good. My original view of people and the world was confining. Now, as I walk down the halls I greet everybody with a friendly face. No matter who they are, how they look, or their reputation I befriend them. Playing sports such as volleyball and soccer allowed me to learn new attitudes and ideas from all sorts of people. Currently on my basketball team I am able to experience a whole new world of traditions with a group consisting mostly of African Americans.

Being in a school with over 600 students, 50% of them African American and 30% white allows me to communicate with people different than me. The experience has been an enriching one. Who would have ever thought that the once shy freshman was now a person encountering people and attitudes from every part of the globe? In these four years my personality has adjusted and changed into something that allows me to feel comfortable around any person and allows any person to feel comfortable around me. I feel that my personality not only has helped me to broaden my views about people but also has helped others that are still too scared to approach people other than their own race.

So far, I know that I am off to a great start. My education and attitude can only get better.

**From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The Lurid Confessions of a Member of Teeny Bopper Anonymous Janet Rosenbaum**

**Write on a topic of your choice.**

From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The lurid confessions of a member of Teeny-Bopper Anonymous

Wow. Wasn't I cool? Since this picture was taken, everything outside of myself - my appearance, my surroundings, even my superficial attitudes about life - has undergone a complete revolution. Contrasting me with that girl in the picture would be like comparing this picture with its negative; everything in this picture is now reversed, inside out.

Life started out fairly easy. Before middle school, I did what I wanted to do without regrets. If my friends wanted to do the same, company would be nice; if not, I would have just as much fun alone. Middle school changed things. Suddenly group dynamics became almost political, and social esteem, not self-esteem, became the key to happiness. Seventh grade, the time when this picture was taken, was the peak of social pressure in my life.

This picture epitomizes all of the elements that society had labelled as "important" for my peers and me, yet it also belies them through subtle clues.

For example, while I exude quite smugly what I think is maturity, the menagerie of stuffed animals and the "cutesy" picture of kittens are reminders of my immaturity.

The picture also reveals the things about myself that I'd thought were hidden away; my veneer of anti-intellectualism is belied by the often-used bookshelf and world map behind me. If I truly believed what I preached, my bookshelf would be tidy from disuse and pictures of some cretin teeny-bopper would adorn my wall.

Why do social pressures transform otherwise intelligent, creative children into lemmings? These influences to conform transcend the mere pressure of peers; they come from society as a whole. The media portray "teens" with a uniform image that tells them the way they "should" be.

A young consumer of modern entertainment (TV, movies, recent books) comes to think of the most prevalent image of "teens" as the norm.

The roles of young women in American culture are even narrower, as delineated by the following three tenets:

1. You must be trendy. Following current styles and fads is mandatory.

Additionally, the timeless rules still apply: make-up must be worn and legs must be shaven. (A careful observer might note that I am wearing blue (!) eye-shadow and blush and sport a few trendy styles: a hat, curled hair, and a T-shirt replete with pithy sayings.)

2. You must keep abreast of current events, not in the world abroad, but in your own parochial world. If you do not know in advance what everyone is wearing on Friday night or who is talking with whom, you are doomed to live alone eternally with only 13 cats for companionship.

3. Adults aren't cool. Always scowl in their presence. I was so convinced that I was living the ideal "teen" life that I had no time to think about things of true importance. Although I did homework, and did it well, I looked at school assignments as another chore to be done; I may as well tell them what they want to hear and get it over with, instead of actually thinking.

Thus, any intellectual activity that I engaged in did not permeate my consciousness. My journal from seventh grade is a continuous recitation of rumors, speculation, and other excerpts from the rather dull soap opera of seventh grade social life: proof that nothing besides this rather large mass of intellectual Spam squooshed around in my trendy blonde head for very long.

But then things changed: the advent of New Kids on the Block in eighth grade cleared this banality from my life. New Kids on the Block was an untalented group of kids assembled by a music producer for the express purpose of making money. Not only did I dare to be the only girl in my grade who didn't like them, I dared to despise them. I listened to my music and figured that matters of taste really shouldn't matter to my friends.

Wrong! Not only was I isolated from the stimulating debates about which one was cutest, but the giggles I unsuccessfully attempted to stifle certainly didn't add to my popularity. At the time, this isolation upset me greatly, but not enough to make me conform. The social vacuum in my life was replaced by ideas: books, newspapers, schoolwork, and in-class debates on subjects ranging from legalizing drugs to literature.

I summarized my feelings in my journal on November 29, 1989 when I wrote, "Let them laugh! I'd rather be an original nerd than a conformist follower."

So it was that a little less than a year after this picture was taken, its negative became closer to the truth; prominent lemming-like qualities faded into the shadows while hints of originality and intellect, previously buried in darkness, became illuminated.

**Most Influential Teacher Anonymous**

**Topic: Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.**

She was the toughest; she was the best. She was also the most influential teacher I have ever had. Ms. William, my sixth grade teacher, was never one to settle for second-best. As a demanding teacher, she hadn’t always been popular. In fact, my classmates and I used to grumble frequently about her stringent standards. However, by continually challenging us, Ms. William instilled in us an enduring passion for learning.

I remember my first day in her class. While most teachers started the year with fun activities, Ms. William jumped straight into academics. After taking the attendance, she promptly started our first unit: Forces.

She narrated to us the story of Newton and the apple tree, and asked us why things always fell toward the Earth. She asked us many other questions – questions about natural phenomena that I had never thought about before. “Why do we see lightning before we hear thunder? How can we measure the speed of a falling object?” We learnt never to take things for granted. “Always, always, always question what you see. Do you understand why it happens?”

At first, I had a hard time understanding many of the concepts, and often stayed after class to learn more. Once, when I doubted that objects of different mass fell with the same acceleration, Ms. William and I conducted our own experiment with a pendulum to prove the theory. Throughout the year, whenever there was a concept or theory I did not understand, Ms. William would encourage me to research or carry out an experiment by myself. Under her guidance, I entered In doing so, she not only taught me to become inquisitive about the world, and also gave me the tools to explore it.

Another gift that Ms. William gave me was an appreciation of literature. Before I met her, I had always stubbornly rejected as true literature any book that was not written by Enid Blyton. To me, there was nothing that could be better than the adventures of the Famous Five. But as the list of Enid Blyton “To Read” books grew shorter, I started hunting around for other novels to entertain me. I decided to take a look at the Reading List Ms. William had compiled. I still remember picking up Oliver Twist from the library shelf and looking at it skeptically. Today, I’m glad I had listened to Ms. William, for she not only introduced me to the world of Oliver and Fagin, but also that of Huckleberry Finn, Uncle Tom, the BFG, Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter. I remember coming to school early one morning, hardly able to contain my excitement, to tell Ms. William that I had finally finished all the books on her Reading List. She smiled in her usual way, and promptly gave me a second List.

Although it’s been six years since I last saw Ms. William, her legacy lives on even today. Every time I read a particularly interesting book, I’d record it in my Reading List. My hope is to one day visit her, and to show her my new Reading Lists. I want her to know how much she has helped me to grow, and how much she has inspired me.

Canadian poet and essayist Irving Layton wrote in his essay The Role of the Teacher that “It is usually from a gifted teacher that a child catches his first glimpse of harmony or wisdom and gets his first hint of the intellectual adventure which may engage him for the rest of his life.”

Ms. William was that teacher for me.

**Understanding Myself, Just a Little Better Ipsita Basu**

**''Stereotyped beliefs have the power to become self-fulfilling prophesies for behavior.''Elizabeth Aries, Professor of Psychology, Amherst CollegeFrom her book Men and Women in Interaction, Reconsidering the Differences**

Shouting, tantrums, chiding, infuriation; I scuttled back into my room and slammed the door to defy my parents exhortations and advice. What followed was the sulking and tears, complete with the customary introspection. I fashioned the introspection to my own convenience with the use of platitudinal notions; I was a teenager whom they did not understand because of the generation gap. After wallowing in some more self pity and tears, the big bag of chips and songs hosting themes of ‘isolation’, ‘angst’ and ‘ignorance’ seemed necessary. In attempt to stop the self-generated profuse tears, I tried some motivational talk which ended in consolation that it was okay to cry since I was a girl.

It had been a while since I had faced this situation.

Or rather, created it. Not that the short-lived introspection had helped sufficiently, it was more the effect of long drawn rumination. This was such a generic scenario. Emotions were supposed to be so individual, so personal yet this may as well have been the story of every teenager. Why were we all so similar?

No we weren’t; We were impelled to act similarly, to direct our thoughts in a certain way. It is actually expected that we didn’t understand our parents and choose to seek distance from them. Our parents had never chosen to question our retaliation. The talk about generation gap, teenage angst and empathetic music had buzzed so prevalently in our heads that it had become a part of us.

Then what about the 17 year old farmer’s daughter in Vietnam whose mother discussed her innermost sentiments while tying her hair into braids every evening? The gap in generation exists over there as well but where are the displays of defiance and being ‘emo’ which has conventionally become accepted in liberal societies? They are non-existent because we have aggravated these behavior patterns. I wondered whether man had steeped so deeply in stereotypes that it eclipsed his own personality or independence in behavior.

After all, every one of my actions on that day seemed ascribable to a stereotype. My recourse to junk food - the notion of comfort food. The music and self-pity was a ramification of the thought that my parents always insisted on overlooking my wishes. And finally, being a girl who is often looked upon as emotional and docile somehow legitimized more tears.

So does that mean psychological studies should not be exposed neither should characteristics be discussed because the very study will transcend into a belief and make it true? No it should, because understanding the very cause of our behavior helps to eradicate undesirable characteristics that our extrinsic to our own personality. I know because now that I understand this, I am able to look at stereotypes more objectively and act in a way that isolates their effect from my behavior. After imbibing that thought process, I have become more rational, disciplined, individualistic and possess more control over my emotions.

On the flipside, some stereotypes actually benefit us, like the stereotype that one’s race is good at sports. In that case, by treating the stereotype objectively, one can ensure that there is a self-enforcing benefit. Essentially, understanding the causes of our behavior enables more control over our thoughts and actions.

**Disparity Through My Windows Ipsita Basu**

**2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.**

The colors through the window become inconsequential, only the forms and their faces significant. Through the window of my hometown Kolkata, India I see a half naked child running around on the street. His face depicts childish levity and frolic but the swell of his belly betrays the daily struggle facing him. It speaks of abject poverty, of a hand to mouth existence where life constitutes begging or odd jobs to satisfy one’s basic physiological necessities. In contrariety, when I observe children of the same age in Singapore, the city where I have lived for the past 15 years, I see the same naïve smile, cherishing moments spent on one of his three pairs of roller blades.

For me, this is one of the world’s biggest tragedies: unbearable starvation leads to death in one place and affluence necessitates the limitless squandering of money in another. In simple terms this is inequality, in economic terms, inequality of wealth and income distribution. The power of this term is in the fact that it highlights a multitude of underlying causes leading to this gap and the beauty of its solution is that it can be addressed at any level by absolutely anyone.

Inequality in income distribution is taking place due to a number of reasons. On a global scale, it is taking place because of preferential terms of trade and multi-national companies exploiting wage differentials due to which developing countries are not paid what the good or labour would be worth in a developed country. Within a country, the capital is in the hands of the rich and when they utilize it, the profits benefit only the rich, thus, never alleviating the poor from there deplorable condition. Illiteracy is one of the major causes of inequal income distribution because without education it is very difficult for people working in the primary sector or performing blue collar labour to improve their standard of living.

Inevitably, its solution would entail large scale governmental policies like progressive taxation and social benefits in addition to intervention by the WTO or IMF but every individual can play a part by simply donating small sums of money or uneaten food in their household to the soup kitchen. This situation manifests how every movement towards change starts from the grassroots level. Indeed, it is imperative that people understand this crisis and influence some redress because if an economic policies to encourage the same are implemented, they need to possess the support of the middle and affluent class.

When recently elected U.S. president Barack Obama spoke about wealth distribution in his presidential campaign, I stood up from my couch and applauded this sentiment. In fact, if the divide lessens, a lot of related factors will change. Crime rate and poverty levels will reduce, and health care for the lower class will improve.

Human rights have been integrated into the ideology of most countries as this is a basic pre-requisite for the development and advancement of the country. Using the same line of argument, do human rights not encompass the ‘right to life’ and ‘right to food’? The amalgamation between my cultural background and country of residence impels me to dwell on this problem and provide my contribution. When I volunteer at the Missionary of Charity Kolkata founded by Mother Teresa for a month every year, serving food and distributing clothes to the underprivileged gives me immense satisfaction.

I do not deny that there are a number of causes for unequal income distribution but they have to be eradicated, one at a time. One day, when I go back to my hometown or to any other neighborhood where there had been relative or absolute poverty, I do not want to see the ache in the eyes of the poor that I see now; I wish to see satisfaction, well-sustained satisfaction.

**An Imaginary Garden With Real Toads Anonymous**

**Choose one of the provided quotes and reflect on it. I chose the following quote: ''Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him.'' --Attributed to Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and poet**

''Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him.''

--Attributed to Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and poet

I’d like to beg to differ with Mr. Achebe. Art is not always man’s effort to create a different reality – or at least, it shouldn’t be. The best art isn’t an escape like a fairy tale or a beach novel. I think the best art makes us grapple with what we are – forcing us to come to terms with our imperfection as a species, as a nation, as an individual.

I can’t help but think of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, which exemplifies the kind of art I love best. Ellison’s novel, though written in a sort of surreal, experimental style to reflect the jazz music of the period, seeks to portray the black experience in pre-civil rights America with harsh realism. The unnamed narrator of the novel suffers from a kind of invisibility—society’s failure to recognize his humanity—for which the novel is named. He suffers extreme and grotesque violence at the hands of white authority figures. In a deeply disturbing scene, he and a group of other young black men are pitted against one another and forced to battle in a kind of cage fight for the entertainment of rich, white spectators. His namelessness is meant to symbolize his anonymity at the hands of his white oppressors, and at the same time the universality of his experience as a black man in America.

Ellison does not sugarcoat his novel with feel-good idealism. Ellison forces the contemporary reader to reflect on his own prejudices and injustices in his society – hopefully inspiring a positive change. This is what makes Ellison’s work so effective.

Likewise, artist Robert Rauschenberg challenges our assumptions about sex and private space in my favorite work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His piece, Bed, is a well-worn quilt, pillow, and sheet splashed violently with paint of angry colors. The worn-in quilt suggests a much-loved, intimate, private space. But the paint, unnaturally and forcefully splattered, jolts us out of Rauchenberg’s serene homespace into a cold and unfamiliar place. To me, this stark juxtaposition suggests the scene of a rape—the ultimate violation of one’s privacy and tranquility. Rauschenberg forces us to grapple with sex and violence—a very real problem that still exists in America.

Books like Invisible Man and art like Rauschenberg’s “Bed” help us to reflect, as a society, on what we once were, what we are now, and what we will be. They’re created to help us remember, not forget. If we do forget and get lost in that dreamworld we create for ourselves to escape, we will never effect change in our imperfect world.

I much prefer this statement by Marianne Moore to Achebe’s quote: “Poetry is the art of creating imaginary gardens with real toads.” In other words, art does not craftily avoid the distasteful aspects of the human experience. In a beautiful way, it poses the problem to the viewer, the reader, or the listener. It’s our job to acknowledge that problem and effect a solution.

**The Storyteller Anne Mathews**

**A topic of your choice.**

I learned to write essays like prefabricated housing and sensible shoes—standardized, impeccable, identical. No flight of fancy dared disturb the military precision of my supporting arguments as they marched in brigades of four to five sentences, intent upon storming the fortress and seizing the A-plus as a trophy of war. Winning that war became so important that I forgot what drew me to books and poetry in the first place—not the letter grade, but the process of committing ideas to paper and the exhilaration of finally understanding.

The passion for storytelling that flourished through my younger years was battered by the onslaught of school and family responsibilities. It lay dormant until the night I read Jane Eyre for tenth grade English. Although my paper was due in two days, the book lay unopened on my desk, just another task on a seemingly endless list. I opened it expecting an indecipherable chain of subordinate clauses, but instead I found a heroine whose quiet grit and genuine self-respect made me want to know her. Her story absorbed me completely, transporting me the way that A Little Princess and Anne of Green Gables had in the time before all reading led to multiple-choice tests. It was like an old friend had come back to return something that I didn't remember losing.

Since then, I have reclaimed my identity as a reader, a writer, and a seeker. I’m the girl who loves history for its shadowy personages and bare-bones story lines ripe for retelling. After watching Elizabeth: The Golden Age one too many times, my best friend and I would exchange in-character letters as Elizabeth I and Mary, painting speculative pictures in intricate prose and sealing them with candle wax. Crossing over to contemporary fiction challenges me differently by forcing me to make familiar happenings new and engaging. No matter the genre, writing is important to me because it is both a source of escape and a source of insight. Although some of my work makes me cringe when I reread it, I keep writing because the little people who populate my imagination torment me if confined.

When I read, I take surreptitious glances between the lines, looking for the moments that go beyond being poignant and become profound. Although I'm apt to let details fly by me in my daily life, novels invite me to sit down and reflect. A good book goes beyond the surface and asks the tough questions, pushing me to explore the narrow side streets and secluded window seats of my own mind. When I use fiction as a tool to understand the world beyond myself, it becomes the tour guide who shares a local's perspective on a strange and exciting city. The best deal in the travel industry is hidden at the secondhand bookstore—enlightenment for ninety-five cents, no vaccinations required.

I am grateful to have rediscovered the joy in reading and writing for my own fulfillment. I may never be a Kafka or an Austen, but I'll remain a storyteller and a keen observer, always running off down roads less traveled in the pursuit of some glimmer of truth.

**The Balcony Anonymous**

**Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?**

This is the balcony that extends into infinite dimensions. Inside: paintings and the smell of dusk. Lined against the tiled walls are canvases both void and filled. A soft light overhead. There is something extremely calming about occupying this platform, transforming it into surreal dimensions. In the studio I am expanding both into my mind space and the concrete space of my artwork.

Very often, a friend would read my poetry, view my paintings, and ask:*what was your inspiration? What draws it all together?*

I am never really sure how to answer. To be honest, I have never found any conceptual disparity between visual art and the written form. My urge to create, or express, is like letting out a breath of air. And by creating art, I am able to crystallize that exhalation and preserve it forever. When I paint, language and brushstrokes coalesce into the same motive: to translate my cognitive abstractions into concrete expressions. To tentatively let you into my mind space, this is the trance-like state I fall into when creating: the sky is a stretch of watercolor spreading into little streams, telegraph poles streamlining my ideas into electric currents, reverberating into houses; electric wires gone loose. And beside the overarching landscape, materializes the side portrait of my mother. The silhouette of a slender arm, then the shoulder's precise curvature.

Some people say that art is cathartic. That statement is only half-true. In the very beginning, creating each artwork is like wrestling forever with an unknown contender who seems to come from the realm of artistic perfection. Even when my artwork is finally polished and displayed under the glowing light of art exhibitions, I am not lost in the applause. Interlaced with each brushstroke and each nuance of color is the memory of a self-limitation I've been able to conquer. Thus, out of all the artworks I've ever made, the ones I value the most are not necessarily the most aesthetically successful, but are the ones in which, like a war hero, I battled through to claim victory. In those rare, precious moments, when transfixed by the wild waltz of my imagination, I would feel as if I've reached the apex of divinity. Existing in between the initial concept and the unclaimed, unchartered space of the blank canvas, I've never stopped believing that a secret awaits--perhaps the truth to the wholeness of life, the interconnected beauty of the entire cosmos.

The balcony door opens: I step away from its light, covered in paint. But I do not hurry to wash the colors off my skin. Instead, I let these chaotic remnants of my arduous creations stay, because after hours upon hours inching towards an artistic ideal, my body becomes at one with these brushstrokes, and I am no longer alone.

**Music Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

Another failed sports season passed: no hits, no touchdowns. I entered 6th grade with my dreams of becoming a jock squashed. Then my parents informed me that I was enrolling in band. Still clinging to my ESPN hopes, I warned my parents that taking band would be social suicide. In the end, I entered school with a new trumpet, expecting the worst.

Luckily, my prediction was wrong. Music transformed the way I understand myself and helped me understand the world.

As a teenage boy, I can naturally have a hard time expressing my emotions. Music helps me recognize my feelings and gives me an outlet for them. I remember the first time I played Holst’s “Planets Suite.” During the famous Jupiter ballad section, I felt a rush of indescribable vitality. I was initially intrigued by the mesmerizing strum of the harp, and then was lost in the powerful tone of the trumpet. I felt tension building and layers of depth adding up until the final release on a joyous open chord. I was surprised by my goosebumps and moist eyes. Music had released my bottled-up inspirations.

As I studied more, I came to value the connection between music and social change. Each is a tool that helps me better understand the other. For example, the 4th movement of Shostakovich’s “7th Symphony” starts with a mood of foreboding and fear, but suddenly transitions to a "happily ever after" ending. This shift was puzzling to me at first, but when I considered Shostakovich’s need to express the anguish and resilience of the Soviet people, combined with Stalin's strict monitoring of his music, I saw that the ending was fitting. Understanding history gives meaning to music, and understanding music makes history real for me.

Much as music has advanced from simple Gregorian chant to Mahler's complex, emotional compositions, I have evolved from a resistant student to a dedicated music aficionado. Music is for me a punching bag, a journal, and a teacher. Although I gave up my dreams of being a star athlete, I have gained a better reality as a musician.

**Filling the Gap James Min**

**“Stereotyped beliefs have the power to become self-fulfilling prophesies for behavior.”**

I stir fried the noodles, steamed the broccoli, pulled pie out of the oven, and set the table. My younger brother Roy put down the forks. We both sat down, and Roy took the first bite. He chewed for a few seconds, looked up at me, and gave me a thumbs up. I sighed in relief; this was the first time he had actually seemed to enjoy my food.

Believing at first that cooking was “unmanly,” I had resisted cooking of any kind for the longest time. So, when I finally had to cook, it had been horrendous at first. It was a bit of a vicious cycle, in fact: I never cooked, so I never made good food, so I never cooked. This belief that I had held for cooking could have kept me from ever cooking. My brother, instead of enjoying home-cooked meals, could have been on a steady diet of takeout Chinese food, microwaveable chicken wings, and never-rotting burgers. My harmful conception of “manliness” could have caused my younger brother a host of health problems in the future; in hindsight, my seemingly innocuous belief suddenly seemed malicious.

This little idea, planted in my head unconsciously, was something I had never interrogated. It became clear to me that I make a lot of assumptions that simply go unquestioned; these assumptions dictate what actions I ought to take. I was essentially a captive of beliefs that society had imprinted on me. Due to my recognition that many of my beliefs are actually not mine, but society’s, I have begun questioning the root of the norms I take for granted. It is difficult to root out which thoughts I have developed and which thoughts were the product of living in America, but I know one thing: I enjoy cooking. And I don’t care what society says.

# Redefining My Purpose Through Slam PoetryAnonymous

**Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations?**

The stage lights burst open, blinding and white. I trembled. I was at the citywide poetry slam, Verselandia, about to perform in front of hundreds.

Earlier in the month, I had qualified through my high school’s contest, which I had signed up for because, “Hey, there might be free cookies!” (There were not.) At the time, I didn’t know much about spoken word artistry except from street performers (this was downtown Portland, after all). But I practiced in front of my mirror, my friends, and my faithful stuffed animals. Ultimately, I placed first at school.

At Verselandia, I watched others deliver lyrics about abuse, racism, and feminism. A few talked about their LGBTQ+ identities; one addressed bisexual erasure, which I could personally relate to. Slowly, I realized that writing didn’t serve just as a cathartic outlet; it could startle others into empathy and create awareness. When my turn came, I delivered lines like “Your heritage is more than an exotic enigma.” Afterwards, several of my Chinese-American classmates told me they could relate. I realized that my writing had the power to give these experiences visibility, which in turn might help erase damaging yet common preconceptions about my ethnicity.

As a Portland Youth Poet Ambassador, I have opportunities to not only promote creative writing, but also advocate for social equality. This is the narrative I live. Through poetry, I want to depict not only a narrative from a person of color, but also a narrative of a queer person of color--a perspective too often neglected the media, but too important for me ever to remain silent.

**What I Learned from Synchronized SwimmingAnonymous**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

When I was ten months old, I grabbed onto the coffee table and hauled myself up, arms shaking, fists clenched, knees wobbling; ten minutes later, much to my parents’ dismay, I was sprinting around the house, choppy bangs flapping in the wind like sails. When I was 17 months old, my grandmother wondered how such a short and round child could invariably evade her grasp. And when I was three years old, I decided that my toddler brother would become my (somewhat limp) wrestling partner. It then dawned on my parents that I had both too much energy and a predisposition to trip over nothing, a dangerous combination under any circumstances. Apparently, I needed some way to expel my extra vigor while also not becoming a safety liability. And so, at the age of six, I joined my local synchronized swimming team.

The first few years in the sport were uncomfortable, as I seemed to have no rhythm or natural understanding of how to contort my body into any graceful positions. Were it not for my logic-defying natural buoyancy, I would have been even more of a safety hazard. I was shy and awkward, and I couldn’t seem to understand what I needed to convey to the judges. My lack of emotional connectivity was so rigid that my teammates had to resort to screaming the word “underwear” at me in an attempt to get me to smile. For years, my struggles against any show of vulnerability persisted both in and out of the pool, with teachers and coaches alike commenting “good work, but would love to see more engagement.”

In synchronized swimming, engagement with the audience is the heart of the sport. It represents the pursuit towards finally convincing others that no, my lungs are not on fire, no, I can’t feel the sixty-seven bobby pins stuck straight into my scalp, and yes, I’m perfectly fine, thank you very much. It is the art of displaying all the complexities of movement of any gymnast or dancer while also actively trying not to drown. Bit by bit, the intricacies of the sport started to break down this emotional wall I had built up. The sensation of music flowing around me, the feeling of cool water against my skin, the sight of my teammates’ faces, all helped me realize the full extent of my perseverance and emotion. Looking back on my years of training, I realize that the important things about synchronized swimming for me were not just the sport itself. It became the lens through which I now see the world, and the basis for my continued maturation.

Growing up with the sport as such an intrinsic part of my development, I learned to apply the lessons from each practice to my life outside the pool. My permanent bruises from getting kicked in the shins by my teammates cultivated my ability to work with others. Pushing myself to kick a little harder and reach a little farther on every lap taught me about the importance of determination. My desire to help others developed through mentoring the younger girls on the team, and later presented itself in my volunteering and community service work. Placing 11th at a competition that selected the top 10 girls for the U.S. National Team taught me how to handle failure, and how to turn a devastating situation into a poignant and educational one. The next year, hearing the lushness of the national anthem as we won gold for the U.S., I realized that my earlier heartbreak had actually motivated me to work harder towards my dreams. For me, synchronized swimming isn’t about the glittery swimsuits and dramatic makeup. It’s about the lifelong friendships formed, the resolution and drive that are enriched from each practice, and, when the going gets tough, the ability to grit your teeth and smile in the face of everything else.