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**Sample essays 2017**

**Boston College**

**The Absurd, The Prom Anthony Haddad**

**In the space provided below, or on a separate sheet if necessary, please describe which activity (extracurricular and personal activities or work experience) has had the most meaning for you, and why.**

In ninth grade, we learned that Voltaire's Candide was a satire on society, expressed through the absurd extremities Candide must face. In "What Befell Candide among the Bulgarians", 'our hero' must 'run the gauntlet six and thirty times through the whole regiment, or to have his brains blown out with a dozen musket-balls'. Two years later, as Prom Committee President, such a dilemma hit close home. But who was playing this cruel satire on my life? Any path I attempted seemed near-fatal. Many were disillusioned about this "First Ever Prom", few were dedicated or willing to help, and people bluntly said it could not be done.

After all, though, we lived in suffocating Saudi Arabia, where a heavily publicized COED gathering, moreover, a dance, would be impossible. So was my call to empowerment. I became Prom for six months. I inhaled menu plans, and exhaled decoration themes. I spoke royalty items, and heard ticket sales. Never before had I ever felt a task so personal, so symbiotic, so me. May 30th, 2002, "Midsummer Night's Dream" was ready: the lamps twinkled, the tiered fountain sparkled, and the enchanted garden exuded life. It was the most ecstatic and gratifying night of my life...As I ushered my classmates out, one of my senior friends, with tears in her eyes, begged me to extend the Prom just another half hour. All these sleepless nights, this hardship, this aggravation, seemed somehow to be worth it. For one whole night, I felt fulfilled, achieved, accomplished... Satisfaction glared me in the eye: I delved in it.

**An Academic Affair Anthony Haddad**

**This personal statement helps us become acquainted with you in ways different from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will demonstrate your ability to organize thoughts and express yourself. We are looking for an essay that will help us know you better as a person and as a student. Please write an essay (250-500 words) on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. You may attach your essay on separate sheets (same size, please). Also, please indicate your topic by checking the appropriate box below.**

Oh, you naughty girl you! NO, I can't spend the night, I have so much work to do. I'm sorry...look...I promise I'll make it up to you on the weekend. I won't even go see my friends on Friday. Yeah, I promise. Sure, of course I think about you...I think about you all the ti-what!?! Now you think I'm cheating on you? Listen, don't make this any bigger than it already is. I said I got some important stuff to do, and I'll see you later!

I just had a talk with her. Didn't go too well...Well what more does she want from me? Three hours a night isn't good enough? But wait! Allow me to clarify things! This is not some petty teenage love quarrel, but a gruesome, drawn out war I have engaged in for much of my life. The "significant other" I argued with above is not a girlfriend, but uniquely, a void filled in my life by....a BED: that's right! A bed! I'm unfaithful to sleep! I cheat on sleep like an adulterous husband, like a tango dancer that has had one too many partners! I "sleep around": just about anywhere- in the car, on the lunch table, in history class-I'm high on life while simultaneously, nearly every individual component within my environment has a near sleep-inducing effect on me. But I realize now by the near end of my high school term, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"Are you O.K. honey? Lately, you've seemed a little hara-kiriish-well, I mean, you're way up there with your potential...you do have a lot on your plate." Many concerned teachers have approached me with this same, almost robotically preset inquiry. My Algebra II/Trig. teacher, apparently with a bachelor's in psychology, called me in once for a one-on-one. From his line of questioning, it was obvious he was looking for the tell-tale signs of suicide...No, I'm not suicidal! I have a wonderfully loving family, great friends, a great school: life is grand! I'm involved in so many things because that's the only way I like it. While it may be somewhat painful the night of, the next morning, I'm amazed at having finished my math homework, written an English essay, and memorized all my lines for the play. What I do not like, though, is the word potential..."Calm down man, you're way ahead of your potential" someone once said. A potential attempts to impose a calculated box around one's achievements, limiting their possible accomplishments. If I am convinced my potential is an '8', my every effort from then on will be to achieve a '9'. Potential is an individual's promise to one's self: one of excellence-to strive to achieve, to succeed everyday, to encapsulate yourself within a shell by morning and break through it by night. Only a quitter has a fixed potential.

I must say now, this whole 'cheating-on-sleep' idea is somewhat exaggerated and meant for comical effect. Surely, I am not an insomniac, nor am I narcoleptic, and I don't intend on changing in college and making up for this 'lost' nap-time. But all I know for sure is this: if commitment to excellence comes at the expense of 'cheating-on-sleep', file me for adultery, 'cuz I'm not changing!

**College Diet Renata De Sousa**

**Topic of your choice**

Why do most diets fail? As a veteran dieter with nearly eight years' experience, I have acquired enough knowledge to answer this question. Those who readily jump into new diets are looking to realize possible goals through impossible methodology. At age ten, I stumbled upon some propaganda which would form the foundation of my first "diet", titled Encantos Magicos (Portuguese for "magic spells"). That little book instantly fascinated me with the possibility of acquiring money from just following simple daily rituals. With each page turned, I felt a growing anxiety to finally begin my "Magic Spell" diet, yet only after hours of persistent "pleases" and "why nots" did my mother relinquish enough of her common sense to buy the items my new diet required. With several candles, essential oils, feathers, amulets, and a chalice in hand, I began casting all sorts of spells to acquire a hundred reals (Brazilian currency which would be the equivalent of 33 dollars), an amount equal to a million in my young mind. Although I devoted a great deal of my time to my diet, it seemed all efforts I spent on casting new magical spells inevitably ended in failure, since those hundred reals never found their way into my pocket.

Undaunted by the results of the magic spell diet and others that had reached the same end, I decided to venture into yet another new diet. At fifteen, I believed going on a strict diet of punk music could forge a friendship between myself and another individual with an affinity for the genre. I immediately conducted a search on Napster for punk songs and proceeded to download as many as my hard drive could hold. Every day I listened to several new songs and educated myself on a variety of punk bands and the songs each of those bands had recorded, in case my commitment to the diet were to be tested. Although I discovered there were some punk songs I enjoyed during the diet, I felt mostly apathetic towards the genre. My false interest and enthusiasm couldn't mask my general indifference towards punk music and the other individual saw through the facade. After three months of devotion to the punk diet, I lost the free space on my hard drive and most importantly, the respect of a possible friend.

Even though I have attempted a multitude of other diets aside from the magic spell and punk diets, the failures and disappointments I have experienced won't wane my persistence. Whereas my most elaborate spells could not bring me a single penny, I discovered that performing a few extra chores for my mother had an opposite effect. I was also able to establish meaningful friendships when I based them on real shared interests, for I learned fake connections are the quickest to disintegrate.

In addition, I have been introduced to new experiences I would have been averse to otherwise, which the five remaining punk songs on my hard drive can attest to. Hence, the true reason behind the failure of diets is the triumph of individuality, for each one of my failures cleared a new path in my search for self-truth. I'm not quite sure which diet I will undertake next, but I have been anxious to try that college diet.

**"All That Matters" Anonymous**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

No matter how old I grow, the meaning of friendship has always remained the same - loyalty, sympathy, understanding, and unwavering support. I learned this lesson early in life, back when my best friend's trampoline was the cornerstone of my social life. It was there that I learned the value of friendship and the understated importance of simply "being there."

For something we depended on so much, the four of us certainly abused that trampoline. Its face had been scorched by summer days, caked in pollen, covered in leaves, and buried in snow. It had even tolerated a sticky rainbow of popsicle drips from days when we would lie on our stomachs, lazing in the sun.

That trampoline heard its share of secrets, and it managed to keep them all. It stayed updated on who had crushes on whom, and kept quiet when the aforementioned boys jumped on with us. It served as our meeting place for devious plan-making, as well as our drawing board when we went back to square one. More importantly, it was a place to lie there together and do nothing - sweet, blissful nothing.

One summer, the trampoline played an even more important role than usual - the summer that Elizabeth's father died. The week before he passed we sat on the trampoline in silence, broken only by the crying of the suffering springs, indistinguishable from the crying of suffering girls. We offered Elizabeth our support, with minimal success. The only thing that helped was our presence on the trampoline, together, as we had been a million times before.

That was also the summer I moved away - away from popsicles and secret plots. Although there was nothing I could do about it, I felt guilty for leaving my childhood friends, especially when it felt as if they needed me most.

So I came back. Last year I revisited the trampoline (and, of course, the friends), and we remembered the giggles, the smiles, and the gossip. When we had finished catching up, we found ourselves in a reverent silence, like we had been years before. Looking down at that trampoline, I realized one very important detail: sometimes simply "being there" is all that matters.

**Thursday Mentoring Anonymous**

**The admissions committee would like to know more about you in your own words. Please submit a brief essay , either autobiographical or creative, which you feel best describes you.**

Every Thursday, my classmates and I mount the small yellow school bus and travel to South Orange. While some students run onto the fields, dressed in soccer gear, I sit back and anxiously wait to arrive at the foster home. While others rush home to start their homework, I teach younger children the multiplication table, or the difference between nouns and verbs. As soon as we arrive, a herd of smiling children run to the door, greeting our familiar faces. Tiny arms attack us, grabbing our waists as we step foot inside. The kids eagerly grab their backpacks and proceed to the reading room, where they argue over who they wish to work with. Finally, the young boys and girls settle down with a grin, each one paired with a dedicated student from the Montclair Kimberley Academy. Every child, surrounded by books, paper, and writing utensils, sets off to work, mentor by his or her side.

I move across the room, and barely have a chance to plop down onto the comfortable couch, when a little girl approaches me. Shyly, she holds out a worn out copy of a Dr. Seuss story, and jumps up onto the couch. Asking her if she wants to read to me, the girl shakes her head gently, as the beads on her braids make a rattling sound. The usual compromise is made. I read one page, and she reads the next. I listen patiently to the girl, who stumbles across a few unfamiliar words. When my turn comes, I read slowly, knowing that she might get discouraged by a faster reader. As she resumes reading, I take a quick glance around the room. The children focus on their homework, while my peers eagerly help. I hear one boy counting out loud: nine, eighteen, twenty-seven, thirty-six. Another girl practices cursive, and one of the older boys proudly tells his mentor about the grade he earned on an English test. Occasionally, someone will interrupt all the hard work, by darting loudly into the room. While some kids complete their homework and start reading, others work diligently, hoping to finish before we say our goodbyes.

I smile and resume reading, realizing my peers and I are turning these children into better students, and at the same time, becoming role models for the youngsters. I enjoy interacting with my classmates outside of school, and the Thursday experiences we share bring us closer. The many hours we spend at the foster home allow us to create long lasting bonds with the kids. With a sigh of satisfaction, I wait for the girl to finish reading the last page, and close the Dr. Seuss book. The hour flies by every week, and the children frown when we start to gather our belongings. They beg us to stay longer, clutching on to our legs and refusing to let go. Although the children only see us on Thursdays, they have already become attached. They slowly walk us to the door, wishing for the power to turn back time. The little boys scream at us, threatening to be mad if we do not return the next week.

The bumpy bus ride home gives me time to think. Maybe I did not score the winning goal at the soccer game, or finish my paper two weeks in advance. Instead, I taught someone how to spell chalkboard, and in return, I discovered how much I enjoy working with children, and how my experiences at the foster home turned me into a more dedicated person. Helping others could not be more gratifying, especially knowing that my time has made such a difference. My Thursday afternoons will continue to be important to me, even after I finish high school. As I go off to college, I am certain I will be respectful of individual differences, and more open to interacting with a diverse group of people. I will continue volunteering to help children, and hope to further this dedication by becoming a physician.

The wind blows through all the open windows of the school bus, sending shivers up my spine. We are almost home, but I keep thinking back to the foster home. The image of the little boys replays over and over in my head, with their disappointed faces. I can still feel the powerful grasp of the girl who read almost an entire book by herself above my knee. I feel as though the eyes of the shyest boy, who silently begged us not to leave, are still looking straight into mine, and my promise to him that we will all return next week rings in my ears. I lean back, knowing that today could not have been any better. Of course I will return next week. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

**Pressure Anonymous**

**Common Application: Topic of your choice.**

"Pressure is the amount of force exerted on an object by the air above it," my physics teacher explained. I jotted down the definition but then began to think...if only it were that simple.

So what is pressure really? Pressure is juggling three AP classes with three varsity sports. It is practicing five nights a week with one of the best youth soccer teams in the country and then studying during the car ride home. It is missing weeks of school while traveling around the world to play the sport I love while not missing a single assignment in class, but most of all, pressure is what you make of it. I have thrived in the classroom and on the soccer field because, when handled correctly, anxiety-filled situations can bring out the best in a person. In the words of George S. Patton, "Pressure makes diamonds."

Academic excellence is most often achieved in pressure-filled conditions. The more ambitious students in school naturally feel some pressure to excel. When this pressure is coupled with the demanding work of advanced placement classes, students have two choices: they can meet the challenge, or they can crash. Fortunately, I have been able to master academic pressure and use it to my advantage. By maintaining a confident, "bring it on" type of attitude, I convince myself that I am ready for any challenge. The sooner the deadline, the harder the material, and the more strenuous the work, the more motivated I am to excel.

Much like in academics, high pressure situations can promote athletic success. There is always some nervous excitement before an athletic competition, but those who can harness this pressure are most likely to succeed. A prime example of thriving under pressure can be seen in my trip to Ireland last April with the regional soccer team. We played in a tournament where we were fortunate enough to reach the finals against England. With the score tied at two, we were forced to go to a penalty shootout to decide the winner. Representing my country in front of more than 2,000 screaming fans and knowing that if I missed we would go home with a silver medal instead of gold, I volunteered to take one of the shots. As I approached the ball, I blocked out the fans and the weight of my teammates' expectations and reminded myself that this was only a game. I then stepped forward and coolly struck the ball into the back of the net.

Technically speaking, "pressure is the amount of force exerted on an object by the air above it." However, pressure is also a force that ignites my best academic and athletic performances.

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**Watch Me Callie Adam**

**Common Application: General topic of your choice.**

I'm sure I have the visiting team's attention by the time I finish my first lap around the soccer field. Standing in a circle, contemplating my presence, they venture guesses quietly, "Cross country? Lost? Girl's soccer?" Finishing my second lap, I can always feel them looking at me, trying to put the pieces together. I am running the laps by myself because today, like many other days, I have missed my team's warm-up when classes at school ran into practice. Although it is amusing to hear the other team's bewilderment, by the end of my warm-up I welcome the security of a group. The boys, discussing whatever had happened in school, include me with friendly greetings. I join 'my' team with a feeling of satisfaction; glancing at the visitors, I think, 'Let them ponder that for a while.'

Now the other team stands, and stares across the field trying not to look too obvious. Their coach barks, "Concentrate! Move! What are you looking at?" But chances are he knew long before he even got to the game. "It's just a girl," he says.

I knew it was risky accepting the opportunity to play with a boys' team. It is something that could have had resonating effects on me, as I am in high school, and passing judgment on people seems to be something my age group has a knack for. The team isn't my high school's either so school pride and loyalty are potentially sensitive issues as well. However, when I consider my passion to play and improve, this seems like a perfect opportunity.

I have proved myself to my own adoptive team and coach, but because others do not know me, scrimmages are always the most eventful, not to mention trying experiences. When we begin to play, the opposing team's initial confusion is to our advantage since I have no challenges. The defender who is my mark, assigned to keep me from the ball, doubtfully attempts to tackle while his exasperated coach yells. The other team's slow start doesn't always last, and in an effort to save their dignity in the face of accusations, opponents frequently resort to more than soccer, and the games become quite entertaining.

I have learned that I cannot expect my reputation to precede me; I must start over every scrimmage with the faith that after playing the ninety minutes I will have earned the respect of a fellow player. I like to see that the effort I put into each game has made me an equal. Regardless of the score, I count a game as a victory when I can look evenly at my former mark and he can sincerely, albeit quietly, say "Good game."

Every new experience requires me to earn my reputation. In the future, I expect that some first impressions of a young girl aspiring to become an engineer will have to be proven wrong, just as I strive not only to win a soccer game, but also to win my opponent's respect. I have to answer many questions about my decision and interest in playing with the boys; most people, confused, wink and grin, and ask if I really even play. These are the people who do not know me yet, and normally, smiling, I invite them to a game- "watch me."

**Experience Anonymous**

**What experience or encounter do you bring to the diversity of college?**

When I started high school, like most freshmen, I was unsure of what I wanted to study in college. I knew that I needed a major that I was interested in and excited me. It had to be something that drove me to be better everyday than I was the previous day. It needed to be something that I naturally excelled at academically. I wanted to make a difference and be remembered.

To accomplish this goal, I took the hardest classes that I could in high school, preparing me for whatever path I would choose for my future. I noticed that I was an analytical learner, and performed especially well in my math and science courses. When I started sincerely considering majors in my junior year of high school, I looked very closely at the fields of science and business. I read all the books, magazine articles, and online journals that I could, and I talked to many adults about their college and career choices. I was becoming more interested in business as a choice. That is when I decided that I was going to need real, hands-on experience before finalizing my decision. I looked up summer programs at universities across the country for a program that would best fit my needs and interests. I discovered that the two-week, Summer Experience, pre-college program at the University of Notre Dame was just what I needed to help give me direction. I was accepted into the program and my first choice of classes, the business courses.

As my parents and I made the flight, I began to wonder what my experience would be like. Would the classes suit me? How would I interact with students from across the country? Would I like living in a dorm, eating in the giant dining hall, and going to the classes? Would I fit in to college life in general? Once I arrived on campus, I realized that this program, and college, was going to be much better than I had anticipated. I loved the campus life including living in the dorm, having a roommate, making friends with everyone in my hallway, playing Frisbee in front of the dining hall, and all the people there in general. The classes were much more interesting and informative than I was anticipating. In fact, the second week of classes was an interactive business simulation where the class was divided into teams. I was the Chief Executive Officer of my team's "company" and we came in second in the cumulative competition. Overall, it was a very rewarding and worthwhile program. More importantly, it solidified my decision and desire to pursue business as my major. I now know that I want to pursue this path in my life at Boston College because it has one of the best undergraduate business schools in the country and an excellent location and environment.

**From Charity Case to Friend Anonymous**

**Common Application: Evaluate a significant experience and its impact on you**

Harlan County, Kentucky, deemed the poorest in the United States, hosts the Capuchin Youth and Family Ministries' (CYFM) Appalachian Mission Program every July. For the past two years I have been a participant. The first year I worked as a manual laborer, constructing a deck, along with five other people, for a family who resided in a trailer with only half a roof. Although the family suffered from an unmistakable absence of material wealth, I learned their mindset was not one to pity, but rather one to envy.

After five days of toiling under a sweltering sun, the emotional connection I made with the family was far greater than the physical connection made with about fifty pieces of plywood and a rubber-handled hammer. The sense of appreciation and gratitude I felt from the homeowners inspired me in a way I had never experienced before. Titus and his family impressed me in that I was no longer satisfied with just tending to the needs of their home, but I was captured by their personal needs as well. By the end of the week, I remained hours after the workday ended to chat with Titus' son, Wesley, about everything from school, to girls, to the University of Louisville basketball team (he was a huge fan). The development of such a tight-knit relationship between my work group and Titus' family became remarkably heartening.

I had heard stories from people I knew who worked at Titus' house in the past about the final day's festivities, but I still did not know what to expect. From 7:45 AM to 3:00 PM it was business as usual. I finished painting the railing we had built around the deck, and then proceeded to finish tiling the kitchen floor. When finished, I wiped my brow and braced for good-byes. Titus' ten-year-old daughter, Chelsea, came tearing down from the chicken coop with a river of tears running down her cheeks. She grabbed me by the hand and tugged me towards her room, urging everyone else in my group to follow. As I walked through the door, Chelsea pointed at the wall to the left of her bed. Engulfing her wall were the handprints of everyone who had worked on her house since she was three years old. In red, blue, green, and orange, each person had left their mark in their own unique style. I guess they believed through a handprint, their image would forever be engraved in the minds of its observers. As I dipped my hand in the same vibrant neon paint I had handled earlier, I realized what I had done for Titus was not a service for a poor family, but a favor for a friend.

From that trip, I ascertained Titus did not desire material wealth in even the slightest way. This is something that greatly perplexed me, since the cutthroat, business-oriented world is what I grew up believing was the road to happiness. That one could live contentedly in unquestionable poverty was something I could not fathom before I was lucky enough to meet Titus. Before I departed South, I desired to help those in need while remaining as detached as humanly possible. I soon learned service wasn't in the physical work, but rather in the meaningful relationships established through it.

**A New Life Konstantin Drabkin**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

I still remember it like it was yesterday. After seven days of grueling labor pushing my body to its limits, I was proudly walking - no, strutting. As my clean and pressed uniform held my new ribbons for the world to see, I looked up to the stands to find the people I cared noticed, and there they were, proudly snapping away with their cameras as Captain McClelland announced my name. Earning a spot in Leadership Academy, an NJROTC boot camp, is a privilege; graduating is a life-altering circumstance.

In the first day, the drill instructors broke us down, removing the protective bubble wrap of the individual, leaving behind raw, primal beings. We were then left on our own to fix ourselves. For the next seven days, we would be nothing more than mosquito bait in the blistering sun. Many tacitly accepted the situation, concerned with simply surviving the week; I chose to rise up and use this chance to improve myself. All of life's tedious little lessons I thought I knew began to truly make sense. Suddenly I could not picture myself as anything other than a perfect gentleman, complete with self-discipline and a well-developed code of honor. That was my rebirth.

As I left the stadium following the graduation ceremony, I sped by my new friends, quickly exchanging goodbye's and congratulations. I was a man on a mission. I had to take my family to the restaurant; I owed them a proper meal. As I would do for my guests so many times later, I held the door for my family, waited patiently for them to begin eating prior to enjoying my first real meal of the week. The pangs of hunger gave me strength. It felt great to behave like a gentleman. As I go about my every day life, I take every chance to help someone else. My motivation comes from knowing what is right.

"Act like there is a camera fixed on your face, with your family watching 24/7," my Drill Sergeant, Chief Petty Officer Morales, told me. During Leadership Academy, personal honor was an object that was graded on a daily basis. Thievery, disrespect, and dishonesty were not tolerated, and troublemakers were immediately sent home without the coveted completer's cord. I take personal pride in upholding the highest standards of morality. Though my ideals often face ridicule in the world that widely accepts complete lack of effort and motivation, I stand by my beliefs. The only gratification I need is knowing that I am representing my family, my school, and my country to the best of my ability. This is not to say that such behavior always comes naturally, but I have learned that self-discipline almost always pays off in the end.

According to the United States Army, "Pain is weakness leaving the body." Rigorous discipline is a key factor in nearly everything I accomplish, from fitness to academics. Following my graduation from Leadership Academy, I knew that I was capable of doing anything I set my mind to, and with only four months of training I won my age division in the Paul Bunyan marathon. Upon my return to school I was disappointed to find out I had already completed all of the advanced placement courses I was pre-qualified to take. Rather than face a lack-luster year, I decided to take on an array of new A.P. Courses. Without ever taking a computer class or Spanish III, my A.P. Computer Science and A.P. Spanish courses are an uphill battle, but one I am winning. Though the week I spent at Leadership Academy had a very powerful effect on me, its permanent change comes from the choice I make every day by defining myself as a disciplined, honorable gentleman.

**Piano Conquest Anonymous**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

It was a crisp, clear January day in Park Ridge, New Jersey, a few miles from the middle of nowhere. Before me stood an imposing sight: Schubert’s Impromptu. With a length of fourteen pages and a required foundation of meticulous technical skills, this composition would be a challenge for even the best pianist. And I was no pianist; I was a rhythmically challenged, stubby-fingered sixteen-year old girl. Nonetheless, I began the daunting process of sight-reading.

Black, white, black again. The notes were passing by with unexpected ease – but no! I meant to play A flat, C sharp, B natural, and E sharp; I had underestimated these seamlessly placed notes. My teacher urged me on. I felt utterly incompetent. The melody was exhausting but breathtaking. My fingers began to stiffen; my forearms tingled with pain, and my head was waiting to explode. I soon began to regret that I had chosen Schubert’s Impromptu over Bach’s Prelude. As I pushed forward, measure after measure passed me by. I stopped to inhale deeply, in a hopeful attempt to exhale my frustration and mistakes and inhale even the smallest trace of my teacher’s perfected skills. “Schubert isn’t for everyone,” she consoled. I curtly responded that I would be fine and proceeded onward.

Pain tore through my fingers as they climbed over each key. Black, white, black again. The next note flittered in and out of my view, pushing me forward with only dim hopes of success. Time wore on, and the pain faded into numbness. Each note followed the other in a grim succession. With each passing measure, I became more agile in my ability to sight-read. The end grew near. Suddenly, I heard my teacher, whom I thought had fallen asleep, whisper “You’re almost there.” My vigor restored, I pushed on more quickly than before, until I reached the last note. In one final act of endurance, I closed the score.

However, the journey does not end there; it never does. The end of the first journey was only met with another that would last for three months. Those three months were filled with endless hours of a ticking “Energizer Bunny” otherwise known as a metronome, a book defaced by every color in the Crayola box for the sake of musical perfection, and the loss of countless hours of sleep to my beloved Schubert.

Although I may verbally complain about how much I despise playing the piano, in the dark depths of my soul it is impossible to admit such an atrocity. There is nothing else that brings the rare satisfaction that perfecting a piece brings. During the process, disappointing not only my teacher but also myself, I continued to learn and to improve. There is nothing as marvelous as hearing myself play an impeccably constructed impromptu. And every time a piece is played the way it was meant to be played, not only does the music come alive, but also the pianist and the composer are able to, if only for a bit, live vicariously through the melody. There is something about bringing another’s passion to fruition. The grueling process of the initial sight-reading and countless repetitive mistakes drive me to the brink of insanity, but the very thing that drives me crazy also fuels me.

I am a pianist. I may not be the greatest of musicians, and hearing my friends and teacher play is often a humbling experience, but it is the disappointment and frustration that keep me going. I cannot stop until I have reached perfection.

Crescendo, diminuendo, crescendo again. Disappointment, humiliation, disappointment again. Black, white, black again. Perfection, failure, perfection again.

**Lesson Well Learned Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

The black and white keys mesmerized me, as always. They were of another ancestry - Steinway – different from the Yamaha I owned; but as I sat on the meticulously handcrafted ebony bench, I felt at home. My hands floated effortlessly upward, and my fingers landed in their proper positions. A single twitch of my left pinky began the piece, and I filled Weill Recital Hall with one of Chopin’s melodious legacies. The dynamics were ideally executed, and the notes played with great precision; but as my fingers flew over the keys, my memory became foggy. As instantaneously as a sharp bee sting, my hands ceased all movement and my mind turned blank.

It had been a busier week than usual, and I had convinced myself that a few days without Chopin would be simple to recover from. After all, I considered myself highly proficient with the piece. Those few days turned into a week, and soon it was the day before the performance—but I had played through the song only a handful of times. I assured myself that it would not help to worry, and that practicing a few hours before the concert would be more than sufficient. In retrospect, I wish I knew that what goes around comes around, and by not practicing I was only putting my satisfaction with myself at risk. Success is earned and will only come to those who invest in achieving it. It is unfortunate to admit that practicing during the extra two hours of sleep I got could have rescued me from the embarrassment I felt that fateful day.

In about a month’s time, I found myself seated in almost an identical situation—except this time I had more confidence. Once again, I carefully placed my hands on the keys. Even though I felt anxious as I recalled my previous humiliation, I was certain about the outcome of this performance. Minutes later, my commitment was rewarded as applause filled the concert hall. In the end, I learned that talent is nothing without the dedication put forth to nurture the gift.

**A Newfound Nostalgia Katherine Perry**

**Describe an aspect of your childhood/upbringing that shaped the person you are today.**

Describe an aspect of your childhood/upbringing that shaped the person you are today.

In a navy blue Volvo station wagon my entire childhood evolved. Inside, memories rested alongside the hardened French fries and squashed fruit snacks that lined the plastic leather interior.

Growing up I had two older brothers. Brian was two years my senior, and we flat out did not get along. At the root of our constant fighting were our intrinsic similarities - we repelled each other like two homologous poles. Michael, two years older than Brian, was extraordinarily aloof. He was always a spectator during our petty battles, never taking sides or responding to the action. I often pondered how it was possible for him to ignore Brian's and my constant quarreling. In time I realized this trait was simply part of who Mike was, and we all loved him for it.

During family car trips we’d find ourselves playing our Gameboy consoles for ten minutes before breaking into complete sibling warfare. My father would try to overwhelm the cacophony with his newest Bruce Springsteen cassette, but his attempts were always futile.

Through the constant combat, my parents’ personalities shone through. My mother’s solution to all sibling-related problems involved an incredible amount of yelling. My father wasn't as vocal. Once the Boss had failed him, he'd opt to jerk the car to the side of the road and coolly stand outside until the battle ceased. This technique usually worked. Brian would direct his negative anger at his game of Tetris, Michael would lose himself in his Walkman, and I would stare out the window and daydream.

The car changed with the family, and as we acquired parts, so did it. When the Volvo approached its second birthday, my sister Erica was born. The meager five-seater could no longer hold our family and a fold-up trunk seat was added as a result.

The years passed, and like us, the Volvo began to age. The navy paint lost its luster and small regions of rust developed. Inside, empty juice boxes and X-Men trading cards lay preserved beneath the floor mats, creating an unintentional scrapbook of memories shared by my family in the car.

One subzero February day our car began its dissent to death. As we pulled out of our driveway something felt awry. The Volvo was making strange noises - it had finally trekked its last mile.

A short time later, we purchased a spacious new Honda minivan. No longer crammed in the backseat, arguments between Brian and I dissipated and finally ceased. We pretended to love the newfound maturity, yet in our hearts we all wanted to go back to the days of pulling hair and bickering to no end.

The Volvo represented our youth, and when it died, our childhood went along with it. From gummy bears and Gameboys had somehow evolved four children who had just about grown up. Now as I stand at the cusp of adulthood, I’d give anything to relive those days — yet I know this is an unreachable desire. Childhood is a one-way street, and there is no turning back.

**“Buenos días, ¿cómo estás?” Anonymous**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

When my dad first began working in Mexico, I nonchalantly changed my schedule to include seventh grade “Intro to Spanish.” Naturally, I didn’t think twice about what would later prove a crucial decision—few seventh graders realize how such simple choices can affect his or her future. Now, a mere five years later, I realize just how important that choice was and how much it has affected who I am and who I will become. Choosing to learn Spanish has provided me with irreplaceable experiences which have given me insight into what I hope to achieve in the future.

My Spanish studies took me on a trip to Mexico City to stay with a family whom I had never met. After the first few rather awkward hours, my initial culture shock gave way to an undying respect for the hospitality of this family and the Mexican people. My “sister” gave up her room, sleeping on her brothers’ floor in order to make me as comfortable as possible. Her ten- and twelve-year-old brothers even went out of their way to include me in their habitual backyard soccer matches.

An everyday occurrence, trivial in most Hispanic countries, made me realize just how different the people and culture of Mexico are from those of the United States. At a routine doctor’s appointment for my “sister’s” uncle, we sat in the waiting room reading magazines and looking out the window of the hospital as we would in any other doctor’s office. However, when the receptionist finally called us in to see the doctor, I noticed what I had been taking for granted thus far on the trip: when the doctor entered the room, he did not simply say, “Buenos días” and proceed with his examination. He made a point to greet each person in the tiny room individually with a “Buenos días, ¿cómo estás?” as well as the usual Latin peck on the cheek. The expressions on the faces of the others remained unchanged as they turned their attention to the uncle’s checkup, but I, unsure of exactly what was happening anyway, sat in that doctor’s office in Mexico City silently swearing an undying love to the Hispanic people and their hospitable manner. All it took was one genuine greeting and kiss on the cheek from a complete stranger to make me realize just how much small gestures can distinguish a culture.

From my experiences with Spanish-speaking cultures I have learned that there is something fulfilling about understanding those who are different from me and trying to bridge the barrier that exists between languages and cultures. Although I have always aspired to be a doctor so that I may help people, my travels and education in Hispanic culture have made me realize that doing so may mean, not only continuing my dream of studying medicine, but also pursuing Spanish language and studies.

**Me in 1000 words Anonymous**

**(Topic of your choice) Write about yourself.**

I shop at the local thrift store often. I know its six sections of racks and shelves as if they were in my own closet. I don’t shop there for financial reasons, nor do I shop there for trendy fashion finds. I shop there for the stories the t-shirts whisper to anyone who listens. With a little luck, each piece of clothing sees years of a person’s life. The words “Sandy Plains Softball League,” or “Harrison High School Class of 1999” screen-printed on the front are the only look you get into the former owner’s life. The fun lies in the inference. Just as it is impossible to learn everything about someone from a t-shirt they wear, it will be impossible to learn everything you need to know about me from one essay. These are only the words screen-printed on the front of my t-shirt.

I am -----, and my name has too much thought behind it for a girl who likes to live life as it happens. You may call me Oxymoron. I am chaotic, as my curly hair suggests, but I have a near-obsessive need for organization of any kind. I am an optimistic skeptic. I am horribly opinionated and usually shy. I am recognized by both my all-capital-letter print and my elaborate script. I am the rock my friends rely on for support, but I am still a teenage girl, vulnerable behind any façade I choose for the day.

I love how music lets me let go of my worries and how it sometimes moves me so much I feel like someone punched me in the chest. I love all languages, mathematics included. I love knowing that neither the right nor the left side of my brain is controlling the other; I don’t stand for tyranny of the cerebral sort. I love the mountain towns of Sicily that let me know I belong somewhere. I love the city that lets everyone know they belong somewhere. I love my Irish mother’s Italian cooking. I love anything that is almost tangibly continuous, but I get bored sleeping in the same place for two nights in a row.

I believe that there is much to be said about socialism, and I believe in the democracy that our nation was founded on. I believe that employing someone because she is a woman or any other minority is just as bad as not employing her because she is; affirmative action has created a new kind of discrimination. I believe that when isolated, all things, including people, lack meaning. I believe in the importance of the individual. I believe in the necessity of attention to the Golden Rule, and I believe that at the heart of the same philosophy is selfishness. I believe in gay marriage, stem cell research, and a pregnant woman’s right to privacy. I believe that beyond the corruption of the Catholic Church, there is a set of standards that are worth believing in. I believe in the beauty of the written word, and I believe in both the destructive and the constructive influences of it.

I hate people who can’t remember my name, and I hate people who use it excessively. My name invokes a seriousness I don’t often like to know. I hate reality, and I hate fantasy worlds created by people who live their lives in fluffy white nothingness. Reality disappoints me too often, and fantasy worlds are for the naïve. I hate people who are different for the sake of being different. They are hypocrites that let society affect them as much as it does anyone else. I hate conformists who devour any sense of originality. I hate heights, bridges, and fire, although I do love candles. I hate people with irrational phobias. I hate commercials, flashing red signs, or people ringing your doorbell advertising their faith. People have a right to believe what they want to believe without being told that they will spend eternity rotting in Hell.

Finally, this metaphorical t-shirt is undoubtedly red; red is my favorite color.

**A Man of Convictions Eric Tracz**

**Try to fit who you are in 500 words. Anything allowed!**

I am well known for having many strongly held personal convictions. Whether people look fondly on my convictions or harness utter disdain for them is a completely different story. Some are seen to be outrageous, such as believing that dipping Wendy’s fries in Frosties is the greatest food marriage ever. Some are seen to be, at least to a limited extent, intelligent, including my belief that the loose criminal justice code used exclusively in professional sports can be largely attributed to its strong lobbying ties with the government. I have compiled three of my most popular and passionate convictions, which should be embraced or at the very least challenged by all.

My most controversial belief is my pro-conservative view of politics. Brian, my brother and a philosophy major at Boston College, claims to have “liberal tendencies.” As such, I can say that my “conservative tendencies” have been adequately challenged and forever will be. Let me begin my political rant by stating that liberals do not have anyone as attractive and captivating as Sarah Palin. Even my mom unintentionally bought a pair of glasses making her look almost identical to Palin. Who cannot help but go rogue? In an appeal to more intelligent audiences, I explain that conservatism offers better economic and social frameworks. Being Catholic, I believe that conservatism best represents the Catholic view of issues such as abortion and the legitimacy of traditional family values. Fr. Ober, my truly legendary AP Modern European teacher, enlightened us to the great economists of Ricardo and Adam Smith, who essentially paved the way to our free market system. Thus, I have come to the conclusion that conservatism is superior because it supports retaining and perfecting the free market system of America, which has shown to be durable and reliable throughout American history. In addition, I am a regular reader of BusinessWeek magazine and have started to delve into economic works, so I am somewhat well-read in the field of business and have a limited basis by which to make economic conclusions. My rant is done.

Speaking of convictions, I am sure that OJ is guilty. Sorry. I promise that my political rant and any mention of politics is over.

Coke is unequivocally superior to Pepsi. I have a valid and prized view of this issue because I have lived in Atlanta, the headquarters of Coke, and Cleveland, a hotbed for Pepsi distribution and consumption. Also, there are no drinks that I refuse to drink and only three foods I refuse to consume: Brussels sprouts, corned beef, and escarole. As such, I am not susceptible to strange cravings for one food and inexplicable disdain for another. After many years of analysis, I have concluded that Pepsi has the same properties as carbonized sugar water with a negligible hint of citric and phosphoric acid. Coke has a sweet taste, yet it also has a slight spice taste, which is simply undeniable. My verdict is that every savory sip of Coke is an experience. Pepsi is simply the drink for the unrefined and sweet-toothed. No wonder the majority of the schools I am applying to are located in Coke territory, also referred to as the South.

Lady GaGa is the best musician to ever exist. To begin, I believe that Lady GaGa is one of the most attractive women of the decade, a belief not so well received by my girlfriend. To put into terms even Descartes would understand—premise: Lady GaGa is the greatest artist of dance-pop—premise: and because dance-pop is the greatest genre ever—conclusion: therefore Lady GaGa is the greatest artist in all of music. Also, the mere fact that I am a male who even recognizes the name, Lady GaGa, further substantiates my conclusion. Lady GaGa’s presence is also felt in the dance world with her revolutionary dance moves, which I largely attribute to my world-famous dancing skills. Ultimately, the uniqueness and addicting nature of her beats and lyrics makes her tunes timeless.

Even though I have explained three of my most prominent convictions, I have many others that I feel passionately about. Should I go to the College of William and Mary, I will enlighten its community with my sometimes intelligent and largely humorous beliefs.

PS: I am convinced that Virginia is the best state in the Union.

**From Tackle Practice to the Barre Anonymous**

**Describe an aspect of yourself that you find interesting or unique.**

I lead a double life. You don’t often find someone who both dances and plays football. I suppose that makes me a statistical anomaly, because I go to tackle practice at six a.m. and barre class at six p.m. I love dance because it’s art with muscles; poetry of the body. It’s all grace, emotion, and poise. It can simultaneously tell a story, stir a feeling, and please the eye. It is beauty in its purest form. I treasure football, however, because it’s art by cavemen; war with shoulder pads. It’s all strength, agility, and bloodlust. It can single-handedly reduce grown men to petulant children. It is a battlefield with mascots.

Tap lessons, step lessons, and show choir were integral parts of my childhood. I was never athletic as a child. I had only the vaguest concept of football. I fell asleep at the Bronco games my parents took me to. I focused my attention entirely on what I could do onstage and had zero interest in what happened on the field.

As I got older, my love of dance grew…but so did something else. I found myself in pick-up games of touch-football and basketball. By eighth grade, I was something of an athlete. Although I still danced, I was now a “sporty” dancer. As I phased into high school, I continued to dance. I didn’t think I was good enough to play for the school football team; however, I was satisfied with my one extracurricular activity.

Sophomore year I was forced to reconcile my two worlds. At the same time that I was cast as the Arabian Prince in a local studio’s rendition of The Nutcracker Suite, I was convinced to play right offensive guard on my school’s eight-man team. My muddy cleats began sharing bag space with my leather flats. Slowly, my two lives merged.

I was an unlikely candidate for football. I wasn’t particularly large or fast. My hand-eye coordination was laughable. I despised early-morning practices, painful tackling drills, and the sense of team unity that eluded me. A few of my classmates had talked me into joining the team. “It’ll get you in shape,” they said. The upperclassmen on the team, however, were of the opinion that I was completely out of place on the field. I needed to go back to my dance studio where I belonged.

Halfway through the season, that changed. Practice that morning had been particularly embarrassing—I had missed all of my tackles and a junior had planted me on my backside right in the mud. I turned to the sound of a senior on the team calling my name. “There’s something you should know,” he said. Apparently the junior I faced during practice had made disparaging remarks about me when I wasn’t there. The senior told me that he and his friends had shut the junior up, and that if people ever said anything bad to my face I should let him know. “I’ve got your back,” he told me.

For the first time, I was more than just some kid who showed up at practices and warmed the bench. I was a Firebird Football Player—and proud of it. It wasn’t about conforming to the jock stereotype that was expected of me, it was about finding my own niche—a happy medium between dancer and athlete. From that point on, I was both. I introduced the team to some more advanced dance stretches and used the strength I developed on the field to lift ballerinas with the greatest of ease. I never got “ripped”, but I became quick and agile. The following year I was a starter on the team.

So you see, the double life I lead isn’t double at all. My life is simply a two-sided coin. One side Alvin Ailey, the other side Mike Oher. Maybe my divided attention will inhibit me from becoming a pro at either of my pursuits, but that doesn’t bother me. I’ve come to realize that it’s balance in my life that I truly treasure. Not having to give up either of my passions is what’s most important to me.

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**Sandy's Lesson Michael William Bell**

**Describe a situation when you learned an important life lesson from someone you know.**

There is a special bond that forms between a dog and its owner. Sandy and I were no exception. That was why I wasn't really surprised when my mom told me the news. In a way, I already knew.

My family got Sandy when I was six, so she was a part of the family for as long as I can remember. She was like the sister I never had. When she was diagnosed with cancer, I was sad, but I wasn’t really surprised. She had not been the same for the past few months. The veterinarian told us that recovery was unlikely. It seemed that Sandy did not have long to live. I resolved to spend as much time with her as possible over the next few weeks.

The weekend Sandy died was cold and quiet. The house was empty except for my mom and me; my brother and my dad were both out of town. Sandy somehow knew that it was her time. Late Saturday night, she disappeared. I realized that she must have gone outside and began searching the yard. Just when I was about to give up, I saw her hidden under a ledge and shivering from the cold. As I approached her, a faint smile appeared briefly on her face until it was again replaced by pain. I picked her up and brought her inside.

Once Sandy was safe and warm, my mom and I talked about what to do next. Sandy understood that it was her time. She had gone outside to die. As hard as it was for us to accept that, we knew what she needed. I convinced my mom through tears that the best thing we could do for Sandy was to put her down. At eight the next morning, my mom and I drove Sandy to the vet’s office. I carried her into one of the back rooms. The vet told us that we were making the right decision and asked if we wanted to spend some time with her before she was put down. The look on Sandy's face reinforced what the nurse had said about it being the right thing to do.

At that point, I lost it. I cried harder than I ever had before. Saying goodbye to your best friend for the last time is never easy. Sandy was the best friend I could have had. She truly accepted me for who I was. Only rarely do people have the same loyalty or ability to love unconditionally. Sandy was therefore not only my best friend, but also one of my most influential teachers.

In her final moments, I don’t think Sandy had any fears or regrets. I think she felt only a sense of conclusion. Sandy accepted that she was part of the continuous cycle of life and knew that the cycle was moving on. In that way, she was smarter than any human. Because of Sandy, I have come to believe that life is a circle: we live to die and die to let others live. In that way, death is beautiful. It didn’t make it any easier to walk out of the vet’s office without her, but even then, I knew that Sandy’s last lesson was perhaps her most important.

**Home Run Kevin Tente**

**Reflect on an important experience in your life and what you learned from it.**

“Clunk.”

“Home run!” my teammate yelled, laughing.

I winced, trying to hide my embarrassment; a home run would have been great if I had been playing baseball, but I was at my first high school tennis practice, and instead of the ball ending up on the other side of the net, it ended up on the other side of the fence around the football field.

In my defense, I was not a tennis player. I had been playing baseball since I was five years old. When I started high school, I tried out for and made the school’s freshman baseball team, starting at third base. I was always eager to play, and it was a great experience to be an integral part of a team while supporting my teammates and friends throughout the season.

Sophomore year, I started preparing in January for the March tryouts for the junior varsity baseball team. I frequented the batting cages and learned to withstand the shock of hitting a baseball with a freezing aluminum bat. In March, I spent most of my time in snow-filled parks playing catch with friends. Before I knew it, it was time for tryouts, and I was looking forward to showing my coaches and teammates how much I had improved from the previous season.

After the first three days of tryouts, the coaches made the first cuts. My teammates and I waited nervously for the roster to appear on the door. When it did, I desperately searched for my name, but I never found it: I had not made the team. I was confused. I had always been told that if I worked hard enough, I could achieve anything. I felt like the last ten years of playing baseball had been for nothing.

I immediately decided that I was not going to spend the spring season feeling sorry for myself. A week after being cut from baseball, I went out for the tennis team. I had never played tennis before, but I knew the coach and had many friends on the team who all encouraged me to try it.

On the first day of practice, my friends walked me through a match and explained the rules of the game. I spent most of the practice chasing stray tennis balls that ricocheted off the rim of my racket, but I was having fun and enjoyed my teammates’ company. As the weeks went by, though, I came to love the game of tennis itself. I made the junior varsity squad as part of the third doubles pairing, and even though I was far less experienced than my competition, I did not get discouraged; instead, I found myself motivated to improve.

Over the course of the season, I watched professional tennis matches to pick up new techniques and strategies. In addition, every day after our scheduled practice, I went to the elementary school near my house to hit balls against the side of the building, a massive brick wall that bordered a concrete schoolyard. As the weeks went by, I could tell my extra work was paying off when I started making shots during actual matches that I never would have thought I could make. When the season ended, I continued to go and hit against the elementary school wall. My extra effort helped me physically and mentally; whenever I was frustrated, angry, or stressed, I started hitting and instantly felt clearer.

The following season, I was shocked when I earned the second singles spot. At first I was nervous because I knew playing at that level would require much more strength, speed, agility, and intelligence. In my first match, I quickly found that players at that level were all more than capable of hitting the ball and keeping it in bounds, so in order to win, I had to learn how to place the ball strategically out of their reach. I focused on improving in that area by going back to the wall every day after practice to perfect any new skills we had learned and to seek out suggestions from my coach. By the end of the season, I had won ten of my 12 matches. I worked hard to make myself a better player, and it worked. I am now eagerly anticipating my senior season to see what I can do.

Throughout my high school experience, I’ve learned many important lessons, but one of the most important ones is that even though there will inevitably be disappointments in my life, in order to succeed, I cannot let them get the best of me. Rather, I must keep moving forward to try new things.

**Diverse Identity Anonymous**

**Common Application essay on diversity**

“Dinner is ready!” Every Sunday a member of our family takes a turn choosing what we’re having for dinner, and today was my turn. My mother had prepared all of my favorite food, from foie gras to sea urchin sushi to satay. As we began eating, my mother asked me her favorite question: “What did you get on your tests this week?” I answered proudly, knowing that I studied the materials thoroughly and did well.

My mother then smirked, “Mostly good, but an A- in history? When I got an A-, my father would hit my hands with a ruler.”

“She tried her best, keep it up.” said my Father.

“This is why Indonesia never progresses, everyone lacks rigor. When my grandfather was here during colonization, he said the people were so lazy...” babbled my mother, and the conversation continued. It was the usual back-and-forth discussion caused by their opposing backgrounds, personalities, and values. After we finished dinner and did our Islamic prayers, my mother brought us to her room to thank our Japanese ancestors. My household was like a Chex party mix – a combination of many things.

Growing up in an environment filled with conflicting ideas taught me to be open minded: I am never afraid to try new things, to meet new people, to consider different ideologies, and to take advantage of random opportunities.

Sure, a part of me is similar to the typical teenage girl (I listen to Lady Gaga, and I like to talk about fashion) but another part is much more than that. I never limit myself to anything. For instance, when shopping for a 30 Rock poster, I came across a Miles Davis vinyl. I bought it, and now I listen to his albums everyday. Inspired by the movie New York Gangster, I taught myself how to throw knives, which resulted in a broken door and an angry mother. I also taught myself how to play the flute and create DJ mixes. Over time, I have become so multifaceted that often even my close friends state, "You still manage to surprise me."

Not only am I open to new things, I am also open to new people. While I am friends with many students from different cliques, I am also very close to faculty and staff throughout the school. I became good friends with Niño, our cafeteria’s cook, and I customized a stir-fry sauce that he then named after me – a sauce that my math teacher was addicted to and, once she met me, thought fit me perfectly.

Sometimes my impartiality gets me in trouble. For example in my Islamic elementary school, I got a week of detention for reading The Da Vinci Code and being curious about “dangerous Christian values.” Situations like this made me realize how lucky I am to have been exposed to different values and to have the courage to let myself learn new things. This tendency did not come out of the blue, but was a result of my upbringing that served diversity on a silver platter to me. Without it, I wouldn't have the will to read and contemplate the Qur’an and Nietzsche’s opposing thoughts. Without it, I wouldn't have the thirst to push my boundaries, leave my comfort zone, and enthusiastically embrace the diversity of experiences and people I will encounter in college. Without it, I wouldn't be me.

**Looking Past the Rearview and into the FutureAnonymous**

**How would your life be different in a different time period?**

Computers, video games, iPhones. Fuel injected, cereal box import rice rockets dominate the streets. Hybrid cars and green technology. Pop, rap and screamo. For better or for worse, times have changed. While modern applications serve their purpose, I like to imagine myself in a seemingly simpler time, with simpler things. Driving in my dad’s beaten down Toyota Echo, I can’t help but wonder: If I graduated in the class of 1972 instead of 2012, how would life be different?

As I imagine myself gazing out the window, cruising in a 1970 Chevy Camaro with Led Zeppelin II blazing from the stereo, life seems much different. Children are playing outside, riding bicycles, or playing board games. Gone are the mind-numbing television shows and video games of today. While I enjoy playing Xbox, watching Sportscenter and chatting on Facebook, the ‘70s embraced face-to-face interaction, social events and a greater sense of community. Furthermore, all the bands from my Google Music playlist would be around. I regret missing the opportunity to go to a Led Zep concert, or listen to Jimi Hendrix and Creedence Clearwater Revival live. My fascination with classic cars and classic music follow accordingly with my love of getting things done; I would rather do something myself, put in the hours of work, rather than take a handout—just like the artists of the past. The innovators of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s inspire me to put forth the legwork that has brought me academic and athletic success. Hendrix and Clapton’s electric guitars, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple’s hard rock, and the progressive rock featuring keyboards and synthesizers of King Crimson, Yes, and Rush, are all products of innovation – leading rather than following.

Muscle cars and Rock and Roll may have epitomized an era, but like The Dark Side of the Moon teaches us, “the sun is the same, in a relative way.” While I would love to experience the past, I never forget the conveniences of the modern era. Instant communication via text message, email, and social network is accessible in the palm of my hand with my Droid 2. A virtually limitless network of information is constantly at my fingertips, helping me research for my school paper, look up something for an argument with my friends, or simply browse and learn from millions of informative websites. International affairs are no longer fantasies from faraway lands; technology permits the global community to stay constantly in tune. Televisions broadcast in HD, and I never have to deal with a cheap eight-track tape, digital music on my computer and iPod. Even Muscle Cars are making a revival—I can buy a 2012 Mustang with better gas mileage, stronger engine, fewer emissions, improved safety and enhanced comfort.

The potential for growth, as a person, community, nation, species, comes hand in hand with innovation and progress. Humans have limitless potential to grow, create, and facilitate social development. While I would enjoy graduating in the ‘70s, I can only imagine how it will be in the 2070s. Although Pink Floyd and Cream may be antiquated things of the past by then, I intend to contribute greatly—keeping alive my teenage dreams and transferring them to a new generation, so they may experience not only what I had, but what my parents and grandparents had as well. By learning from the past, I am able to teach, grow individually and give back to others. Like the great innovators of decades past, I intend to create, lead, and accomplish.

Change happens regardless of desire, action, or preference. Just as time continues to tick, spring turns into summer, and people grow older, society is constantly in motion. Looking in the rearview mirror is a poor substitute for reliving a memory, and, most importantly, it distracts from the road ahead. Rather than bask in the memories of the past, I intend on blazing new paths forward, using the tools of today to make a better tomorrow.

**Excellence Anonymous**

**What is one quality about you that makes you stand out?**

Excellence: a virtue, an ideal, a lifestyle. Excellence has not only come to embody myself; my actions, from their very core, induce excellence. A misconception exists that success is an indication of excellence—in fact, excellence is an indication of success. Excellence is a quantitative and qualitative measure of ability, evaluated against expectations, standards, and prior experiences.

Character, athletics, academia, and societal interactions are all aspects of life in which excellence has become expected of me. Notwithstanding academic and athletic prosperity, my successes are not what make me excellent. What makes me excellent is my determination, ambition and courage employed in my feats of greatness. Mastery of the English language is not what makes me excellent: my endeavors to learn Spanish and Polish are. Being a contributing member of four state championship teams, does not make me exceptional, but the lessons learned during each triumph and how they have shaped me as a person do. The ability to play the piano, violin, and drums are merely the results, rather than components of my excellence; the hours spent practicing, honing my skills, illustrate the higher standard to which I hold myself.

Despite enjoying numerous accomplishments, my excellence is derived from the trials and tribulations which came before them. He who succeeds without adversity is no greater than those who fail. To whom much is given, much is expected; excellence offers an odd paradox in which the successful are never satiated, the accomplished are forever ambitious, and the triumphant continuously transcend all expectation. Concurrently, the pursuit of excellence grants greater gain than simply excelling. Losing in the preliminary trials only to return and win the final heat of a hurdle race exemplifies this idea. Coming back from preseason injuries to block a field goal, catch a touchdown reception, second the team in tackles and set an example for teammates despite unyielding and debilitating cramps prove infinitely more important than the losing score on the scoreboard.

By competing in all aspects of life, I not only set myself up to succeed, but I provide for the success of others. Leadership is the natural successor to excellence, and being captain of the track team cultivates this idea. By inspiring my teammates, the excellence I have come to expect is transferred to others. Most importantly, however, is the perception of excellence. When no effort is given, yet success is present, then excellence is still lacking; only when all effort is exhausted does triumph manifest itself, regardless of the outcome.

Excellence, above all, is a mindset. Aspiring to do greater than the day before, run faster than the previous race, score higher than the past test, relax more than the prior rest, and ultimately, live today more than yesterday, ensures that life is not wasted, character is learned, knowledge manifested, and accomplishment earned. It is with this mindset that I awake each morning, auspiciously aspiring for fulfillment, yet retire each night with humble acceptance of my successes, preparing myself for the fruit of the next day’s conquests.

**Words Speak Louder Than Actions Kathryn Gundersen**

**Topic of your choice, but it was specifically about an experience central to my identity.**

Just like many others, I've spent my life hearing the hackneyed phrase “actions speak louder than words.” Based on personal experience, however, I've decided that I disagree. I believe that words are magic. Not magic in the conventional sense; a much subtler form of magic, but no less potent. If used properly, words can be endlessly powerful, beautiful, and captivating, and have the ability to initiate so much more than actions ever could. I judge this by the way the power of words has shaped my own life, branding me and fostering a love of self-expression through writing that will never be extinguished.

My passion for words ignited at a young age, beginning with a desire to read anything and everything I could get my hands on. I devoured books, but soon came to realize that nothing was as satisfying as using and manipulating words in my own way. I still remember the very first story I wrote in my first grade journal, with a witch and an anthropomorphic pumpkin playing the protagonists. Today my writing defines an even more integral part of who I am.

Writing has taken me on numerous journeys, each of which has lent me countless pearls of wisdom and paved the way for endless self-discovery. My participation in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) epitomizes these writing voyages, particularly my first attempt at the mere age of thirteen, with absolutely no idea what would come of such an endeavor. But my determination shone, with the pride of being able to accomplish something so substantial serving as my greatest motivation. To call this experience difficult is an understatement, but I found myself attached to the world I wove, the characters I created, and the idea of having a full length manuscript to call my own, so I kept on. After thirty lengthy days of writing, I reaped the reward I'd been looking for, putting the finishing touches on my very first real novel. From this experience I learned the benefits of dedication and perseverance, worked to apply them in other aspects of my life, and haven't looked back since.

Four years and three NaNoWriMo novels later, writing continues to characterize my life. I write to express myself, I write to prove a point. I write to make my mark on the world. But most importantly, I write to tell a story, whether my own or that of a fictional character who has come to inhabit my mind. Whatever the reason, I firmly believe there is no more rewarding way to spend my time.

For me, writing is sublime. My words describe me in a way that actions nor anything else ever will, playing a principal role in my own story. Guided by their brilliance I'll continue to strive to work harder and reach farther, because I seek to change the world with words. Without full knowledge of their magic, this would be impossible.

**Everything Happens for a Reason Kathryn Gundersen**

**Tell us about something you heard or experienced for the first time and how the years since have affected your perception of that moment.**

When I was about fourteen, my dad lost his job. He wasn't at fault; the hotel he worked at was in a poor financial situation, so fingers were wrongly pointed at him, the director of sales. The moment I heard I felt that my comfortable world was crumbling down, falling to pieces around me. My heard sank, my stomach dropped. It was too horrible to be real.

For a while, things were difficult. Suddenly my dad was no longer the superhero I thought he was, suddenly he became a mere mortal. I could see the dissatisfaction in his eyes at every waking moment; he felt that he'd failed us. Finally, though, the tide seemed to turn; the fledgling company he'd founded with a former colleague was hired to help a luxury oceanfront hotel get back on its feet. A contract was signed, an agreement made.

But it didn't last. After about a year the hotel owner severed ties with my father's company, terminated the contract, and refused to pay him a portion of the money he'd worked for. He was left without work once again. Thankfully it was only a month before he was able to clinch another sales management job in a Manhattan hotel. He had wonderful credentials, and his charismatic personality impressed everyone.

Fast forward to late June of this year. Once again, the hotel was ready to blame the sales manager for the tough times they'd been facing. He began interviewing for another job, and a few weeks later they told him he'd gotten it. That same day, however, they called him back, claiming something had happened and they could no longer offer him the position. No explanation. Just a minute-long phone call that nearly shattered him.

Today, my father is still searching for a permanent position. He's been back and forth to Texas since early October, working a temporary one. I only see him once every two weeks. Over the past three years, though, my perspective on these events has changed: my dad still is my superhero. He's taught me that even though the world is cruel, perseverance is the key to success. Since then it's become difficult to picture precisely the moment I found out, but for this I am thankful. Though I wondered many times how this misfortune could have befallen us, now I've come to firmly believe that everything happened for a reason.

**4'11 Forever Anonymous**

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

When my mom gave birth to me, I weighed in at nine and a half pounds and measured twenty-two inches. One could say I was pretty big for a newborn, but whenever I tell this story, it is soon followed by a: “And that’s pretty much when I stopped growing.” Ever since I can remember, and up until the eleventh grade, I had always been the shortest guy in my class. The problem with this, coupled with the fact that I’m a guy, is that people usually only respect people who look “scary,” i.e., tall and big people. And I mean, who was I going to scare at 4’11?.

Ever since I started school I have had to compensate for my height to get people not to take advantage of me. For example, when I arrived in my current school, I decided to try out for the tennis team, which had just won the championship the year before. When I went to the try-outs, the other kids from my class taunted me because they thought that my height made me weak and a bad player. However, they were very wrong; I made the team and we won the championship that year. This is the compensation I am talking about, and it is the reason why I believe I am who I am today.

I entered my current high school in the seventh grade. I was a small kid and knew about 10 kids from my class, which is a small amount considering we were 150 back then. However, even though I knew no one, I ran for class president that same year. Thanks to my personality and some campaigning from my 10 friends, my class elected me president. That was the day I realized that it didn’t matter how tall I was as long as I proved I deserved respect. From that day forward, my “struggle” (because we teenagers exaggerate everything) with height has given me the character and dignity with which I portray myself every day.

I still find it ironic, however, that everyone from my class, even the ones that I’ve physically outgrown, still call me “enano,” which is Spanish for midget. At first, I didn’t understand. I mean, I knew I wasn’t that tall but I was now average, so why were they still taunting me? It was some time later that I realized that they weren’t taunting me; they just remember me as the short guy who didn’t care that he was short when he arrived in school. Now that I am taller, I think to myself: why should I care now? So I embrace the irony and laugh at it, and at the end of the day, the fact that you can laugh at yourself is a great indication of self-confidence, which is what we teenagers strive for during our time in school.

**Les Grandes Personnes Aiment Les Chiffres Anonymous**

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

I grew up in a nonreligious household, but for as long as I can remember, I’ve been taught to worship my academics as the key to my success in the future. Instead of praying 5 times daily or memorizing biblical verses, nearly every day my mother and I would sit down with workbooks she bought, always with Clip-Art pictures of apples and pencils on the cover. Through countless addition problems and grammar exercise after grammar exercise, my mother – almost militantly – assured that my reading, writing, and math skills were always 2 grade levels ahead. Instead of a Bat Mitzvah or confirmation, my rites of passage were making the national spelling bee and scoring at the 93rd percentile on the SAT in 8th grade.

Why? Because just as devout Christians work for salvation, or Buddhists and Hindus struggle to attain nirvana, I have labored along the path toward a Holy Grail (an Ivy League education) and a vague fruition that my parents define as a prosperous career. As they love to say, my high school education is “laying a foundation for the rest of my life”.

I bought into this belief, reading Wikipedia article after Wikipedia article on the college admissions process. In 7th grade, I could recite all the names of the Ivy League schools. That same year, my mom borrowed a Princeton Review book profiling the Best 377 Colleges. I read every word, cover to cover, in the massive tome. By the time I started high school, I knew most of their acceptance rates, SAT score ranges, and rankings according to both Forbes and U.S. and World Report.

In an insightful French storybook entitled Le Petit Prince, the narrator remarks that “les grandes personnes aiment les chiffres”: big people love numbers. The saying holds true for Eastern parenting. To other parents, and more painfully your own, you become a list of numbers and accomplishments – SAT scores, GPAs, awards, competitions you’ve placed in.

I think few people want to be defined that way. I know I don’t. I think of myself as far more than a handful of scores and percentiles that can be haphazardly flung onto a graph. I have much more dimension, both literally and figuratively, than that single red dot on a scatterplot, indistinguishable from the others except for its location. And yet, my brain is measured by the amount of calculus it can do or the number of grammar rules it knows.

Why not by its confidence and solidarity? Why not by the originality of its

perspective? Why not by its unquenchable thirst for knowledge? Because “quickness of mind” and “depth of understanding” can’t be put on a résumé, and SAT scores and honor bands can.

My academic career, my intelligence, the quality of my intellect should not be

measured by, or confined to a double-spaced, 12-point-font list of bullet points that can fit on a single sheet of paper. Because a parent who constantly defines their child as a series of numbers risks forgetting, and thereby devaluing, the rest of that child’s still-blooming being. I can explain the main causes of the Civil War in language that my 11 year old sister can understand. I can discuss the benefits of microloans for women in 3rd world countries. I can face a panel full of critics in a debate without faltering.

I am eloquent, inquisitive, open-minded – none of which can be measured by any amount of numbers.

**Performing the Heart Michelle Kang**

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

The piano groaned in dismay as my fingers struck the wrong chords. My wrists were stiff, my shoulders hunched forward, and my gaze was expressionless—but I continued to play, unconcerned, as this broken Chopin spiraled downward into a crumbling mess.

As I landed the last dissonant chord with an ironic flair, I looked at my mom expectantly. She sat at the dining room table, listening to me practice with her fingers curled around a coffee cup, a perturbed grimace expressing exactly how she felt about my performance.

“I really hate piano,” I explained, as if it really needed to be said.

I had been telling her this for months: I was not a piano player. There was too much technicality in this lifeless instrument; not enough smoothnessin which I could express myself. It was simply impossible for my wild mind to sit in one spot for hours like this, staring at nothing but black and white, black and white, black and white all day.

“Violin!” she exclaimed suddenly. She slammed down her cup. “Michelle, don’t you want to try violin?”

I blinked at her. Violin? It did sound oddly appealing: Violin. Violin. Violin…

A week later, I stepped off the school bus into the cool November weather. My mother stood waiting for me, car keys in hand.

“Today,” she declared, “is your first violin lesson. We’re going to your new teacher’s house to meet her!”

It was all too sudden and unexpected. The car was suddenly too hot, the seats too hard; and as I sat, unnaturally still, each bump in the road launched a new fear into my head. But at the same time, there was an eagerness I’d never experienced before—foreign, in the most delightful way.

We finally pulled up to a small home painted warm brown and surrounded by thick woods. The front door greeted me with a loud, squeaky creak, and the house smelled of pine needles and was filled with color—not black and white, not black and white.

She stood inside, waiting with a smile. It thrilled me that she looked just as excited as I felt. “Hello,” she said. “I’m Barbara.”

I could hardly sit still. It was all so much to take in—the worn, colorful rug that filled the whole room, the huge window that invited the sunlight in to warm the chairs, the bookshelf filled with hundreds of music sheets and books. Would I someday know how to play all of those pieces?

“Do you have any questions, Michelle?” Barbara asked me then. “Anything you’re wondering?”

I smiled. “Could you… play for me?”

I still remember that beautiful sound, filling up the small room—warming my ears and my skin and reverberating through my body, the notes dancing and twirling around themselves in the air before fading away. My fingers itched to try.

On the car ride home, I began imagining a future Michelle, performing on a big stage for thousands of wildly applauding people. I imagined my mom and dad and sister and Barbara, watching me proudly from the front row.

I still have that image in mind every time I pick up my violin, feeling the steel strings vibrating under my fingers—but what I truly learned from violin is not the notes, but the realization of the power of my own passion. I fell in love with violin because I wanted to do it, and because it was who I was; because it was where my zeal had found a home. Every time I interrogate a witness at a Mock Trial tournament; every time I smash a tennis ball into my opponent’s court; every time I pick up a pen and write a research paper, I imagine what this utter love can do, and how far it can take me.

I imagine, take a deep breath, and perform my heart.

**Travels Anonymous**

**Tell us about yourself.**

I ask a man for directions, only to be rewarded with awkward silence and a mildly bemused, uncomprehending stare. I try other passersby and get the same discomforting stare, sometimes coupled with an apologetic, “Sorry, no English”. The one woman who does seem to understand me offers a dazzling smile and replies, “Stew to rum migi ni mawatte, zutto stun kono flailing chicken. (Stew and rum turn right, and ever stun this flailing chicken),” then turns and briskly walks away. Each conversation leaves me more confused, but the harder I try, the more frustrated I get. I walk through crowds with a sinking stomach, fists balled by my sides, thinking, “This wasn’t the way it was supposed to be.”

When my mother offered me a solo trip to Harajuku, Japan, I was thrilled. I researched tourist attractions deep into the night, amassed huge piles of maps and brochures, created the perfect packing plan, and scheduled everything down to the last minute. I was going to traipse boldly through new territories, easily navigate streets and read maps and signs with translations underneath, and confidently order meals from servers who spoke coherent English. The trip was going to be a fun, doable challenge.

My naivety astounds me.

Everything has me bewildered – there is a man flaunting zebra prints layered with tiger stripes under faux fur; a loli-goth girl in a lacy Victorian dress stands next to a man wearing nothing but a loincloth and socks; the city is a labyrinth; conversation leaves me tangled in an incomprehensible, rapid-fire blur of Japanese and English; and even the toilets stupefy me with their twenty-something buttons.

As I am forced to accept how truly lost I am, I surprise myself and smile. The mounting panic steadily subsides, and I am left with a strange mixture of mild dismay and exhilaration. I am lost, yes. But I am also in the middle of Harajuku, the fashion center of Japan – a cultural center of the world. Looking up, I see that what I had moments before perceived simply as an unknown area is now a whirlpool of diversity, pulsing with an excited, high-tension atmosphere. The clothing and styles are unfamiliar, the signs around me flash neon symbols I cannot decipher, and the garbled speech of passerby sounds like life played at two-times speed.

I spend the rest of the evening wandering through storefronts, watching blurs of sailor uniforms mix with business suits and yukatas, exploring streets filled with takoyaki vendors and rotating sushi bars and maid cafes, understanding absolutely nothing, having nothing understood, and loving every second of it.

Three summers later, I hold a map somewhere in the streets of Bangkok, Thailand. I can’t speak; I can’t understand; I can’t read. I have no plan, I am alone and lost in a distant, unfamiliar country, and I am entirely enjoying myself.

**The Orbital Force of my Autistic Brother Erin Fishman**

**Evaluate a significant figure in your life, and describe how they have shaped your ideals and values.**

I am holding my brother's hand."Hi, Will," I say."Hi," he mutters curtly, a trained reply.

It's better than the less favorable option of "Goodbye, please" or "I want goodbye."

His palm feels like a living creature itself, warm and squirming. When he looks past the line of trees, I'm watching his face for signs of recognition, peering into the reflection in his pupils. I want to know what he sees, but his gaze is smooth asphalt roads to nowhere, black tar poured inside brilliant green irises. I wonder if he is floating inside that blackness, endlessly disconnected. I squeeze his palm, and he says nothing.

It is an unseasonably warm day in autumn. On the way to the park, he stares out the window at the mess of color: red burning into orange, orange flirting with smears of yellow, deep brown branches forking into patches of sky. He laughs at absolutely nothing. I am happy to give this to moment to him, even if it does not really belong to me.

My mother parks the car outside the park, a small little plot of land encased in a chain link fence. This is a departure from Will's normal routine when we visit him, which is unreasonably nerve-racking. He is a wild card, a train drifting and trembling on the edge of the tracks; it is impossible to say how this trip will affect him. I risk a glance to the backseat, and he stares back at me, for once ungrudging.

Blissfully, the park is nearly empty. A handful of kids play basketball on a court several hundred yards away. They watch us for a moment, perhaps pondering the strange sight of a fourteen year old playing in a park. My brother runs across the grass, flapping his arms. I wonder if he feels the wind caught between his fingertips; I wonder if he can taste his euphoria in his throat.

I watch him from the swings, my feet grazing the wood chips as I sway back and forth. He stands at the edge of the fence, tossing sticks over the top. I watch as he methodically picks up each twig, inspecting it as if one is more worthy of being thrown than any other. I glance at my mother, wondering if I should intervene. "He's okay," she assures me, but our eyes don't leave him.

About an hour later, we're about to leave when he stops in his tracks. His eyes catch the light tumbling through the branches of an old oak tree."What is it?" I ask."Help," he replies.

I shake my head.

"Help."

I'm about to object, but it doesn't matter because he is already reaching, pulling himself onto the lowest branch. He leaves me no choice but to place my hands under his legs and support him as he scrambles up, grasping at fistfuls of leaves. This proves to be significantly more difficult than when he was six years old.

"Come on, Will," I groan, and when he laughs, it's almost in spite of me, in spite of this entire scenario.

Will shifts so that his back is against the trunk, and his gangly legs curl around a thick branch. He turns his face into the sun, singing a tuneless song."What do you say?" I prompt, poking his belly. He swats my hand away, but replies: "Thank you."

I roll my eyes. "You're welcome."

When we drive back to his residential home, I watch him with his eyes on the world.

And there I am, and there I will always be, caught in Willie's impossible orbit. I realize, then, that my brother is not a puzzle, nor does he miss any pieces of himself.

He is the sum of his parts. He is a mystery, a story with a million endings. And he is complete.

**Artistic Abilities William Nelson Marcussen**

**The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

I was jealous. Sally could draw a perfect circle and I couldn’t. She always created beautifully proportionate people while I sketched a blobby figure with one arm. I tried over and over, listened to instructions, but as hard as I tried I could never draw as well as Sally could. I thought that I just wasn't creative, so I told myself I was better at other things and carried on eating my peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

That was fifth grade. Then, when I entered my sophomore year, I picked up a digital camera and my obsession began. On the Internet, I had seen magnificent pictures of nature, cars, and even mundane things such as pens and paper. The world changed for me as everything suddenly became beautiful in its own way. I was so fixated on creating a stunning picture that I would never stop until I got just the right shot. I wanted to capture the images that were inside my head, with every detail in place; the rust on the side of the railing, the small cracks in the cement, the sun reflecting off the yellow line down the middle of the road, and the golden light that every photographer chases. It was always a challenge, something that would never stop at a single shot. It would take tens, hundreds, and sometimes more to get the picture that was worth the much-prized thousand words.

It was a Sunday morning and I had 30 pictures due the next day. I thought, “I’ll just get the pictures out of the way; it won’t take long.” Little did I know: instead I found myself completely lost in my work. I grabbed a bowl of water, a water dropper, and my camera and attempted to recreate a water drop floating in the air, as if all gravity had vanished. Between the focus of the camera, the perfect amount of water, pressing the shutter at the precise moment with the exact lighting, there were so many variables; all it took to compromise a shot was for one to go wrong. Literally 100 pictures went by in a blur and all but a few of them were out of focus. I shot 100 more, then another hundred. It was no longer about the assignment, but about proving to myself that I actually was creative. I tried changing the type of water dropper I was using and tried switching the modes in the camera countless times. Soon, I had almost three thousand pictures, a completely full memory card. I had a vision of what I wanted the entire time: a large splash of water creating a crater in the glassy and otherwise untouched water surface, launching out three perfectly-aligned drops. I ended up getting just that. Then I checked my watch. I had become so lost in my quest for the near-perfect picture that four hours of nonstop work felt like minutes.

Looking back at grade school, I realize that I wasn't the best at drawing -- yet I had a whole other type of creativity that had never been explored. I now understand that natural gifts are just the root of a talent, and that true talent only blooms with persistence and determination. I am now aware that my fifth grade classmate wasn’t just born with talent, but actually practiced drawing that circle on every worksheet she was given, until it was near-perfect. I no longer see things as black and white, but in a million tones, in all colors. This new perspective transformed a trash can in the middle of a cityscape into an interesting story: an object I had always walked past and ignored is now part of one of my best photographs. After my early artistic disappointment, I discovered an unknown world through the viewfinder of my camera and a creative side that in truth I had always possessed. I just needed to pursue it.

**Pitching a Venture Anonymous**

**In a short paragraph, please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (250 words)**

He had a complete poker face when I asked for $250,000. This man was on the panel of investors to whom I presented my entrepreneurial venture as part of a scenario analysis project during *The Fullbridge Program*, a rigorous business boot camp for college students wishing to solidify their business skills. This was not just another summer class where I would sit in a room for an entire day, staring at a whiteboard; I actually had the chance to take an active role in business as part of my learning.

After absorbing various concepts in accounting, finance, business valuation/analysis, and cash flows, we applied our knowledge by examining Harvard Business School case studies, many of which shed light on the seemingly dull beginnings and rises of many successful companies today. Then, at the end of the course, my team of three created and developed a business model for a new entrepreneurial venture in the clean-tech industry. Our team went into Shanghai’s central business district, conducted market research and interviews, and assessed consumer preferences on clean-tech. At the end of this simulation, we successfully developed a minimum viable product, along with revenue projections and risk analyses. Then, we pitched everything to a board of venture capitalists. After seeing a business idea grow from inception to completion, I could truly understand the skills I had gained: skills relevant to the real world.

**Looking Down 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?**

Above the clouds, on the peak of the mountain, I stand, overlooking the vast silhouette of slopes and trees, contemplating the infinite possibilities of routes to take.

I watch other skiers play “follow the leader” down the groomed trails, repeating someone else’s path over and over again. The rusty “Off-Piste Area” sign on the side beckons me past the frozen orange rope. This is my destination. Seeing not a single skier and no fresh tracks to lead the way, I thrust myself off the ledge, down the welcoming abyss. In front of me, trees appear out of the mist. I turn and swerve briskly to avoid collision. Out here, nothing is set. There are no boundaries. I need to make all the right calls. I am knee deep in fresh powder, plowing down the mountain. My heart is bursting out of my chest. I push down hard to one side, turn, and stop. Such split-second decisions in the backcountry are the difference between an amazing run and a frantic tumble to the bottom.

Pausing to catch my breath halfway down the mountain, I look back up, seeing the path that I carved through the trees, the path that I created. Looking down, I contemplate what new path I will soon create. Spotting a patch of undisturbed powder, I take off in that direction. My skis are the first to touch the snow, the first to carve the path. I can turn left or slide right, go between trees or over logs. The pure snow and equally pure freedom lead to new challenges, new drops, and new exhilaration. I look down the slope, and decide how to make the best of it. I could glide between vegetation or dig through deep powder and drops. These different elements of the slope define the skier.

Speeding down the mountain, I whirl fine powdered snow up and around myself, into my face as I ski through. Our army of skiers, boring through the snow, seems unstoppable, wielding fervor and amazement. Leading the pack, I’m not exactly sure of where we are, but I’m certain of what we’re doing and where we’re going. Pushing on, we brave through the blinding blizzard, dodge the trees, and swiftly leap across the drops, nearing the frontier.

Traversing the edge of the mountain, I see things from different perspectives, and I feel different. I could have followed the groomed snow made by another man, but instead, I created the path that led me here, I made all the turns that brought me here, I led myself here. With the small town at the bottom coming into misty but sweeping view, we’ve succeeded. I triumph, sitting near the edge, sipping on a lukewarm but soon to be ice-cold canned coffee, and appreciating this moment. This moment challenges me to exude confidence and enterprise in all areas of my life, to strike out into the mist and defy boundaries. I can envision the finish line and my end goal, but the process is not clearly defined. Diving into the haze is the only way to discover such opportunities, such sparks of creativity that would render a ski run, or any pursuit, amazing.

**My Hero, Nancy Drew Melanie Kos**

**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 think of heroes in my life, there are so many options to consider: who I am most like, who I have tried to emulate, who I aspire to be. Many could and would answer their parents, an older family member, or even a standout teacher. I certainly could say this too, but I know the truth.

Nancy Drew, you’re my hero.

Nancy Drew is the original female protagonist; her book series started in the 1930s and continues to this day. Nancy is a badass, point blank. With a lawyer father, a spanking blue convertible, and a college boyfriend, she sure does seem like your typical rich girl. But what sets her apart is her knack for solving crimes and mysteries, the way in which she conducts herself, redefining what it means to be a girl.

My good old Polish parents would often push girly things on me: the pink plastic heels, the frilly skirts, the bobbled hair ties splitting my head of hair into two painfully symmetrical pigtails, ingraining a permanent middle part into my mane. My seven year old self would get sweaty running around or rollerblading, and my mother would sigh to me in Polish, *zobacz co zrobiłas*, “look what you did.” In the first grade, when I picked up that Nancy Drew Notebooks paperback,*Flower Power*, I saw a mix of two worlds I never thought could come together.

I devoured that book, and asked my elderly librarian for more Nancy Drew. She smiled at me, a child who actually wanted a book that wasn’t chock full of pictures. She led me to a back room that smelled of aging texts. She handed me a book, yellowed from age with a plain blue cover, drastically different from the cartoon cover of *Flower Power*. “I loved those books when I was a girl,” she smiled wistfully, and left me to it. I was confused. It was so thick, some two hundred-odd pages for someone who could barely sit through *Sleeping Beauty*. The original Nancy Drew series was far more complex and, frankly, rather archaic in comparison to the watered down spinoff that was *Flower Power*. The pressure was on. I knew that this librarian, also a family friend, would think less of me, this first grader, if I didn’t take the damn book she loved so much. So I checked out *The Hidden Staircase*, the second book in the seemingly abstruse original Nancy Drew series, and my seven year old brain was rocked.

I sought to become a sleuth just like Nancy, searching for hidden staircases, mysterious mannequins, and old treasures in my attic, living vicariously through Nancy even as all of these endeavors proved unsuccessful for me. As I’ve gotten older, the storylines may have become muddied, but her drive, her fierce independence, and her unrelenting personality have held fast onto me, the daughter of Polish immigrants, who, despite all struggles, have always been told that perseverance is key to success. Nancy’s sleuthing stories only ingrained this trait deeper into my being, instilling a love of reading into me as well.

I am still a sleuth. Curiosity and conscientiousness are perennial in my personality. Whether talking with friends or being editor-in-chief of my school newspaper, The Herald, I always seek the full picture of any problem that plagues me. I may not be interrogating suspects or finding clues as Nancy did, but I am interviewing witnesses and seeking sources. Nancy Drew helped create the person I am today and still will be down whatever paths I may take. You don’t need to be the girl detective herself to figure that one out.

**Eclectic Appetite Anonymous**

**Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again? (650 words or less)**

A few Thanksgivings ago, my mom decided to buy a whole pig and roast it herself. Unfortunately, the pig had a ghastly aroma which filled the whole house, and everyone immediately scolded her for the acrid smell ruining their Thanksgiving meal. Initially, no one ate it – it’s a little different from the traditional ham. But, being as hungry as I was, I decided it couldn’t taste as bad as it smelled. So, I was the only one to try some, and it became my favorite dish. Now the story is repeated every year by my proud mother, whose fourteen year old daughter consumed a questionable part of a pig, when not even the adults could overcome the odor.

Growing up with Korean cuisine, I became familiar with ingredients rejected by American palates – garlic beetles, fermented cabbage, and shrimp heads, just to name a few. While my peers indicate their disgust by slightly gagging or widening their eyes in disbelief, I shrug my shoulders and insist that it’s all healthy, yummy, and, most importantly, edible. When I’m sick, I can consume a whole bowl of miyeok guk (seaweed soup). My dad still thinks it’s strange, but my favorite part of sundubu jjigae is eating the shrimp whole, with all of the flavor concentrated in the head, eyeballs included. In a particularly brave moment, I ate a risky hoagie customized by my bored and slightly devilish friends. When I took the first bite, I was surprisingly pleased. I ate almost the whole thing, until the bread started to get soggy from the pickle juice… and mayonnaise, barbecue sauce, horseradish, and mustard. I had no idea what else it contained until they gave me the receipt with all the ingredients listed – which I keep tacked to a board in my room, where I proudly display this proof of my strong stomach.

My eclectic taste has also allowed me to carry my open-mindedness outside of the kitchen. To some, my meals are disgusting. To me, they are delicious and familiar. It frustrates me that a world of flavors and satisfaction remains unimagined to those who refuse to try something because it’s alien to them. In hopes that I do not convey the same judgment upon others, I try to give people, like food, the benefit of the doubt. I strive to understand foreign concepts, to accept opportunities more freely. A few years ago, I took a hip hop class at a local dance studio, even though my only experience was briefly in ballet 8 years prior. After permanently leaving soccer a few years ago, I joined rugby, a considerably more dangerous and confusing sport than anything I had ever experienced. My junior year, I took Sociology and C++ programming, even though their low credit weight would put my GPA at a disadvantage. However, I found myself enjoying C++ so much that I continued on to take AP Computer Science this year, which I would not have considered had I not taken the risk in the first place.

Whether it’s with a meal that I eat, or the courses I tackle in school, I cannot resist trying new things, even if they serve no direct purpose (my hip-hop dancing skills have hardly improved). There is a Korean saying: “One who is full with more food on the table will waste.” Ever since my grandmother starting greeting me with “Are you hungry?” I have tried not to take food, or anything, for granted. Dubbed the “garbage disposal” of my peers, I thank my fast metabolism and continue to indulge. My everlasting hunger, for food and knowledge, has me always wanting more and never wanting to waste opportunities. I hope that I will always make the same decision as I did that Thanksgiving - to reach out of my comfort zone and challenge the hesitation of others.

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**Mothering Daughter Anonymous**

**Describe the world you come from.**

“So you want to go to med school. Is it for the money or to appease your parents?” Neither, because money isn’t worth the sacrifice of dealing with insanity and I have only one parent, who cannot be appeased by my attending med school. This was the answer I couldn’t vocalize to my counselor when I went to request a letter of recommendation. I didn’t want to be registered as the precocious child with a cynical outlook or the pitiful, unofficial head-of-the-household who has to cope with a manic-depressive mother. So I smile wryly, then slide her the ribbon-wrapped KitKat bar and a thank-you letter before heading out.

Of course, my counselor meant no harm with the joke, but I could never return those jokes with a frivolous comment, because I cannot think of one good enough to diminish the weight of my reality. Just like my response, my reason for pursuing a profession in the medical field, specifically in psychiatrics, is heavy and dry: I need to see my mother as a patient and a human being in need of my help, not as someone who should have been my caretaker. It was the day of my mom’s psychotherapy session, so I left school early to give her a ride. On our way back home, she gently took my right hand with both of hers and asked if I wanted to eat anything. She wanted to cook for me. We got home after dropping by the grocery market, and I sat on the dining table.

While watching her cook, I remembered going over to a friend’s house in seventh grade and watching my friend and her mom make Keish. It smelled delicious and looked exotic, but my eyes were fixed on their jubilant faces. When I returned home on that seventh-grade day, I asked my mom if we could cook quesadillas together for dinner. She got up from bed, walked past me, went in and out of the restroom with a bottle of pills, and slipped back into her blanket. “Turn off the light when you leave.” I turned off the light and stood by the door for a few more seconds before going out. I took out Hot Pockets and the Costco salad that my aunt had stocked in the fridge and sat down on the six-seat dining table, but I couldn’t eat. I threw them in the trashcan and rushed back to my mom’s room. I stood before her closed bedroom door and tried to figure out a way to express what I felt, but in the end I just decided to head back to my own room.

That was the first time I felt bitter towards my mom. Now I understand that the bitterness was towards my mom’s illness. I learned not to make those kinds of requests anymore, but that day, after I left my counselor, my mom voluntarily wanted to do something for me. I watched her fumble through the groceries and stagger back and forth from the fridge to the cutting board. She could not finish cutting one full carrot before jumping to the next step. Executive and procedural dysfunction in bipolar disorder--the first thing I register in my head and then the second thought comes out as tears. As I watch my mother trying to play the role of the caretaker, but the other part of her getting in the way, I loathe myself for the times I held her to my expectations of a parent, the times I called myself unlucky and imagined living with my friends' parents, and the times I pretended to be asleep while she groaned and sobbed. At first, I couldn’t view her as something other than a mother, and once I began to see that she is unable to fulfill the duties of motherhood, she became a hollow, incomprehensible creature that only drains and hinders me.

I say to myself that my unfulfilled desire for a caretaker figure is behind me, but when I hear jokes like the one that my counselor tosses out, I still see the seventh grade kid standing before her mother’s door in me. I cannot say that I am free of the deficiencies I experienced in my childhood, but I understand how to build other layers of character to amend the flaws. I can relieve my mother of her agony, the cold stares and the suppressed disdain. Endeavoring to become a medical professional would be the only way of getting closer to understanding her as she is with the illness and taking care of her without feeling any entitlement to compensation.

**One More Fight Anonymous**

**The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

I'm standing in the arena, facing my opponent. Hands on guard and ready to fight, fists clenched and sweat dripping down my fingers. In the distance, I hear the command, "fight!" The match has begun.

Sparring, kata, sweeps, hooks, and grabs had all proven to be integral aspects of my training in the art of kenpo over the past eight years. I spent countless hours learning and mastering the material, and I was always excited to show that all of my hard work was paying off. I got that one chance at tournaments: I had to make the most of it. These days were filled with sweaty palms, nervous laughter, and bated breath.

As the minutes of the fight drag on, my breath becomes shallow and my face heats up. I continue to push on, drawing nearer to my opponent and throwing out kicks, punches, blocks. My opponent retaliates, launching a snappy roundhouse kick that jolts me off my feet and onto the ground. I'm sprawled across the floor and gasping for breath as I try to blink back the fuzziness creeping into my vision. My heart pounds violently against my chest, begging for escape. I try to inhale, but all I feel are daggers in my lungs.

Following a week of recovery, I walked back into my karate studio with a slightly bruised ego and noticeably bruised ribs. I had tried my best to push the tournament out of my mind, but there was something about it that had changed me for the worse. I was afraid to get into another fight; I was afraid to be left on the ground again, gasping for air.

The next big tournament was six months away. I was not nearly prepared for it. I shied away from every punch and kick that came my way, and I found myself in a corner more often than I was in the fight. I desperately wanted to make a redeeming appearance, so I went back to the basics. I assured myself that I knew the fundamentals of the fight, training at half-speed and painstakingly reviewing my maneuvers. I committed to long hours, practicing the roundhouse kicks, perfecting my combination strikes, mastering the art of deadly elegance. Before I knew it, I was back to full-force fights, and I was back to being confident in my abilities.

Back in the arena and back to the boiling anticipation. Back to the tournament. I lift my eyes and hear the word "fight!" ring out loud and clear. My opponent and I close the gap between us. I can feel the air whistle past my ear as her punch just narrowly misses my face, and I can feel my heart picking up its pace. This is the moment of truth: fight back and overcome, or retreat to safety? I take a deep breath, put up my hands, and launch everything I have into this fight. Sweat and ragged breaths, exhaustion and pain, punches, kicks, and grabs. Everything combined into one whirlwind until finally: victory. My opponent was defeated and my insecurities slain. I never want to back away from a challenge again: I want to stare adversity in the eye and tell it "watch me." Every challenge that I face is an opportunity for me to find new strength, to discover parts of me that I didn't know even existed. I know that bigger challenges will come my way. Perhaps a fight with a roommate, a disagreement with a professor, or the pressure to participate in activities that don't match up with my beliefs. None of these obstacles are going to be easy to face, but I've learned how to push through the hard times and not stop until I reach the other side. So for now, I'm going to keep my hands on guard and my head in the fight.

**The Child Who Opened My Eyes Alena Rajwani**

**Boston College: What contemporary issue or trend relating to politics, culture, and society, or foreign policy particularly concerns you and why? Yale: Please reflect on something you would like us to know about you that we might not learn from the rest of your application, or on something about which you would like to say more. You may write about anything—from personal experiences or goals to interests or intellectual pursuits.**

Disgusted by the foul urban odors of Pakistan, my younger brother and I became possessed by the utility of our iPhones and remained confined within the walls of our uncle’s apartment. Eventually, my uncle became frustrated with our self-isolation and offered to take us on an “adventure.” In the minds of children, an adventure consists of going to a park or a skating arena. But we were in for a not-so-pleasant surprise.

After a bumpy rickshaw ride through narrow streets and arid fields, we arrived at a plantation. Wandering through the rows of crops, I saw children using sharp tools in the scorching sun. We took a seat on a haystack and were joined by a young boy, whom I had seen working in the fields earlier. He told us about the long hours. He told us about the life-threatening injuries he suffered. He told us about the school he attended and the quality time his family used to spend together before a multinational company built a factory in town. Soon, the azan began to play, signaling the time for prayer. My brother and I headed home, both touched and troubled by the boy’s stories.

The image of the boy stuck with me even after I returned to Dallas. To ease my queasy conscience, I began researching child labor, hoping this abuse was not widespread. To my disappointment, it was. The more I learned about the topic, the more frustrated I became. After surfing through what seemed to be a million links, I finally found one that relieved me. The article explained how region-wide boycotts encourage companies to implement better work environments. In that moment, I realized the power humans possess to encourage changes in longstanding practices.

There are two types of change — positive and negative — and unfortunately, many companies pick the latter. However, as a tutor who makes money by helping students excel, I do not view business as a win-lose situation for myself and my students. Rather, I believe that business should and can be a win-win for both the company and the surrounding societies. Through impact investment, in which companies stimulate societal uplift alongside profits, businesses can help their own communities. By concentrating in business analytics and economics, I will ensure that business models serve disadvantaged rural societies. We must create a world where profit is not the only measure of prosperity.

**On Being the Higher Percent Elyse Mackenzie**

**Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.**

When I was fifteen, I considered a theory: it is possible to assign a numerical value to two people in order to measure how much they care about one another. In total, the two numbers would add up to a percentage of one hundred. The more effort, love, and curiosity one person put into the relationship, the higher their percentage would be. For example, the ratio of care between myself and, say, Justin Timberlake, would be written as ninety-nine to one; I care 99% about him while he cares 1% about me (the 1% being generous considering he doesn’t know I exist).

I truly thought this theory was groundbreaking. It explained so much! My middle school crush and I understandably never worked out; our care ratio was at a heartbreaking 70:30 (me, crush).

Over dinner, I proudly explained the basics of the theory to my family. My family has always encouraged my life contemplations, so I was surprised when they responded to my newest statement with equivocality. Between both of my parents, my mother was the more skeptical. She listed some names in order to hear me use the care meter in action, asking me to “rank” myself versus my friends, my coaches, and my family members.

I found a problem: I began to answer many of these relationships with 50:50. My mom sat silently and listened to my struggle considering percentage choices. Eventually, she told me she had different numbers in mind. “Are you sure 50:50 is true?” she asked me. “I see you more as an 80:20 kind of person!”

80:20? I was briefly at a loss for words as I considered her statement. Could it be true? Could people care such a significant amount less about me than I do for them?

Sensing my discomfort, she attempted to redeem herself. “I didn’t mean it that way!” she explained. “50% effort just doesn’t seem large enough to describe the care you have for your friends.” I stayed up late that night ranking my relationships in my mind. I found that even my mom’s proposed 80% was not large enough to describe my love for the people I know and activities I do.

In fact, I cared a full 100% about my friends, athletics, musical development, and my aspirations for the future. I recognized the theory as flawed as I contemplated it in bed that night. After all, who am I to say that two people cannot love and care about one another 100:100? Can't we all invest ourselves into someone or something and get the same exact passion in return?

Numbers can define countless things, but life and relationships are worth more than two (sometimes discouraging) values that add up to one hundred. Hearing that I am the type of person to have 80:20 relationships has remained poignant in my mind since this event occurred nearly three years ago.

I have learned more about myself since then, and most of all, I have realized that there are worse traits to have than caring more than your share about people or things. I matured that day, as I learned that life is not about minimizing your care to match the care of others towards you. I will always approach everything I do with passion and purpose; I have been ravenous for knowledge and new life experiences since I uttered my first word “book.” I am confident that wherever I end up, whatever I am doing, and whatever I am getting back in return, I will be proud of my 100%.

**Patience is the Sharpest Weapon Anonymous**

**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.**

The movements are lucid in my mind: *Lunge - contre de sixte - paré en cédant - feinte de riposte.* Right on the arm to finally lunge and touch the foot. Green light. I got her. 13-13; only two more touches to win. I can hear her breathing through the dark metallic grid that shields her sweaty face … or is it my own?

“Prêtes? Allez.” I advance over to her end of the piste. She’s aggressive: I can provoke her gently by faking a – red light. No! I get back en garde. Focus. I can still win. She’s tired. I catch a brief glimpse of her eyes before she dons her mask after fixing her dishevelled ponytail. She’s lost her concentration. Two minutes left: plenty. I take my time, nimbly skirting back and forth along the piste. She submits right into my steady rhythm. Confidence often leads to heedlessness. Inattention can be fatal. Back, back, one more, … green! My flèche hits her directly on the shoulder. Her furious roar is deafening. Back to the two-metre line. Just one more, this time no dawdling. “Allez.” Her adrenaline is clearly flowing. She tries to engage, but abandons the idea and starts to rapidly gain territory. Overly aggressive. I push back. 15 seconds left. Her coach screams something in Italian and she falls back towards the warning line. My coach stays silent. Five seconds. Four. Three. She lunges. *Beeeep*. Done

Sometimes it is better to attack, to be faster and mightier than the blade. In fencing, I’ve found that patience and precision are much sharper weapons: David versus Goliath. To be honest, it’s quite intuitive; would you really run towards a loaded gun with no incentive? I like to wait. Goliaths get tired and anxious; under pressure, a countdown usually does them in. Impatience leads to imprudence. Hold off that extra second and that window of opportunity flashes just in time for you to lunge to victory. As it reads in la Fontaine’s fable, “Patience et longueur de temps font plus que force ni que rage”; meticulous persistence trumps brute force.

The deepest understanding of myself is the understanding that I have acquired through my many bouts. While some adversaries squeal in victory or defeat, I walk over to hear my coach’s advice, then quietly get back en garde, thinking only of my next attack. What happened in the last touch? Utterly unimportant; all that matters is the point I am about to make. She won the last bout? I will win this touch. I beat the last opponent? I will do it again.

In truth, my development of this mindset has been a far greater challenge than improving my fencing. While friends are worrying about football scores, I am fretting over my non-extant post-college housing. My worst nightmares have been about my broken car, which I am a long way from owning, or forgetting my guitar for the talent show – a month before the event. My biggest obstacle is “seizing the day,” “living in the moment,” “YOLO”-ing. Despite this inherent anxiety, I’ve trained myself to adopt what my coach calls “the Hungarian method”; one touch will win the bout. I ignore the past and future points; all that matters is what I am doing now to win. I’ll focus on the next bout later. I’ll think of lunch when I get hungry. I’ll consider what’s next when next comes. When needed, I can clear my thundering brain and converge my thoughts onto my current situation.

Buzzers sound all around me, followed by triumphant shouts or defeated groans. Looking around, I see a gym full of desultory ghosts. Some run in circles to purge themselves of thoughts, headphones jammed into their ears, keeping them away from dreaded conversation. Others sit, contemplating blank walls, retrospective images of their previous games echoing through their minds. I take off my meshed mask, shake her hand, unclip myself from the piste and walk away.

**Familiarity Anonymous**

**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.**

“Entonces, Max, ¿dime porque has venido a España?”

I stared blankly at my host Dad while trying to catch a glimpse of how large his moustache really was, as he glanced over his shoulder towards me, his car narrowly avoided the oncoming traffic. His words were ringing in my head.

"So tell me, Max, why have you come to Spain?"

These were amongst the first words I heard upon my arrival. I nodded and smiled, yet understood nothing but my name. I stumbled upon School Year Abroad (SYA) Spain while exploring alternatives to my daily routine. To some, and understandably so, London is remarkable. To me, London had become the norm. For over 2,000 days I had walked through the same school entrance, passed the same painted letters declaring The American School in London as I bounded up the stairwell, and listened to the all too familiar sound of the morning announcements at the start of each day. My life had become repetitive, and I needed a change from what seemed to be an unending cycle.

As soon as I stepped foot in Zaragoza, I was immersed in a completely different culture: residing with a family that didn’t speak a lick of English and taking a standard American curriculum in Spanish. In retrospect, I wasn’t entirely prepared for such drastic change.

As my host Dad and I attempted to forge some sort of communication during that car ride, a feeling of pure dread overwhelmed me as we neared my new street. I felt like a stranger to everything around me. I was alone, knew no one, and had a house but not a home. As I followed the man with the moustache into the Almingol household, the then unfamiliar smell of paella wafted through the air.

Food became a medium that my family and I could enjoy together. Meals began in speechless unison, and eventually became the foundation of our most memorable moments: my younger brother Markos and I managed to quarrel early on about whether Chelsea or Barcelona was the better club as we heartily dug into our meal. Months later, my father brought a newspaper to dinner, and to our delight opened it to a photo of him taking part in a political protest, his moustache enormous as ever. The passage of food went both ways: I would cook up my signature scrambled eggs on Sunday mornings, before my family prepared a feast of meats and vegetables. We scarfed it down, leaving our fingernails laden with grease.

During these meals, the TV was always on. The Spanish news presenters provided a soundtrack to each moment in our abode whether in the living room, kitchen, or laundry room, and I literally felt I couldn’t escape the flickering screens and unintelligible chatter. But the seemingly meaningless tradition of relaxing as a family in front of the television became a powerful connection. After dinner, we’d sit in companionable silence, as our dog Nemo attempted to clamber onto the couch, and let the voices wash over us, hearing the words yet giving them little thought. Surrounded by the unfamiliar, everyone connects through their similarities, and TV was our channel of communication.

Nine months later, my final banquet, a concoction of cooked yellow rice and stewed rabbit, staked its claim as a paella of the highest grade. We demolished it. I was no longer tentative or reserved; I was one of the Almingol family. With the TV on, my words flowed over our food, yet it was not my fluency that brought us together as a family. It was the cadence of the newscaster and the warm scent of paella.

“So, Max, why have you come to Spain?”

I went to Spain seeking change. I was consumed by another culture, and yes, I have a more global perspective, yet what I truly gained from the experience had less to do with the language I spoke, and the country I was in, but with the family who had embraced me.

**Wizards and Trumpets Anonymous**

**In his novel, Let the Great World Spin, Colum McCann writes: “We seldom know what we're hearing when we hear something for the first time, but one thing is certain: we hear it as we will never hear it again. We return to the moment to experience it, I suppose, but we can never really find it, only its memory, the faintest imprint of what it really was, what it meant.” Tell us about something you heard or experienced for the first time and how the years since have affected your perception of that moment.**

As in Harry Potter, where the wand chooses the wizard, the trumpet chose me—although, at the time, I thought I was choosing the trumpet. Four wind musicians stood before me in my elementary school’s auditorium. Each one played an excerpt showcasing the instrument’s ability, trying to entice us all to play that instrument. I was able to resist the lures of three, but the fourth instrument, the trumpet, captured my eye and resonated with my soul. Little did I know, that sound would come to mean so much more. I didn’t know that choosing this instrument meant that I would find a group of people so similar to me, so in tune with my every quirk. Even if fellow trumpeters don’t understand my Katherine-isms, they certainly—and wholeheartedly—accept them. With an instrument that pierces every melody, one cannot hide mistakes: trumpets are unabashedly themselves. I didn’t know I would be sitting in the back of the ensemble: when you’re far enough away from the conductor, you can just express yourself more. The poor flutes are tightly bound to the conductor’s confines, while trumpets can add their own flourishes—their musical identities—to the piece. All trumpet sections I’ve been in has had the utmost pride in their work; our exaggerated (and oftentimes disruptively loud) displays of musicianship foster a warmth that I can’t imagine hearing in any other section. I didn’t know that I would assume the role of lead trumpet in jazz, specifically. As a fifth grader, I had little to no idea of the context a trumpet plays in. Only now do I appreciate the versatility in style that this brass beauty lends itself to. The trumpet is as well-rounded as an instrument gets, integral to many different genres. I play in wind ensemble, symphony orchestra, jazz ensemble, pit orchestra, marching band, brass quintets, solos, and more—but not without major adjustments to my playing technique. I have the privilege to lead an amalgam of sections, filled with distinctive individuals; it is only through this variety that I was able to identify a singular leadership style—what works and what doesn’t—across all groups. I wouldn’t give up any of my ensembles today; thank goodness I didn’t choose the clarinet. My fifth-grade self may have shallowly chosen the trumpet for its shiny exterior and deafening tone, but her intuition was right: this instrument fits me.

**A Slow Start Anonymous**

**Write about a time you failed at something**

She runs so gracefully, her arms swinging back and forth, her legs flying, barely even touching the ground as she laps the girl in front of her. I am that girl—not the graceful one but the slow one who runs like a beanbag chair, hunched over and shuffling across the gravel, getting passed by the athletic ones. That pretty much sums up my freshman year of cross-country—a time when I could not even make it from the entrance of the school to the end of the parking lot.

During the summer going into high school, I thought I would branch out and join the cross-country team, craving that team-togetherness of high school sports without the required coordination of other activities like soccer or field hockey. My thinking was that cross-country would be relatively simple—run fast and don't fall. No balls, or nets, or sticks to confuse me or reveal my incompetency. The first day, I laced up my worn out P.E. sneakers and tied my hair tightly with not one but two hair ties. As the team took off, their feet rhythmically tapping the pavement, I followed suit, eager to prove myself to these strangers—an intimidating collection of high school girls whose maturity radiated from their brace-less faces. For the first seven and a half seconds, my heart and feet raced in unison and I was a part of the pack.

I soon realized the inverse relationship that existed between my heart and feet: for some reason as my heart quickened, my feet slowed. I was the little engine that couldn’t. I managed to make it all the way to the entrance of the parking lot, at which point I stopped and keeled over to catch my breath. That day, I finished half of the run and made it back to the high school around a half hour after the rest of my teammates, who by then were done stretching and sat waiting to be dismissed. When I shuffled into view, they starting whooping and clapping and cheering me on until I reached the sidewalk that marked the end of the run. I laughed, embarrassed by the attention. I debated quitting cross-country with pretty much every step along the run but for a fleeting moment as I made my way to the team, I forgot all about the pain.

This fall will be my last season of cross-country. And while I may not be able to lead the pack on our runs or help the team win a meet, I can always make them laugh. All I have to do is bring up my first day of practice and remind them of the girl who couldn’t make it out of the parking lot. I would be lying if I said that I never thought about quitting after that first day when the girls cheered me to the finish line. The possibility crosses my mind all the time. Cross-country challenges me every day to run faster, run longer, run harder. Sometimes I ask myself what I have accomplished from these past three years of mediocre running. But the truth is, I love it. I love my teammates and I love the thrill and I love pushing myself, not only in running but in all that I do. I will never be the best at cross-country and I accept that wholeheartedly. The funny thing is that despite this knowledge, I will never stop trying. When the gun goes off during each cross-country race, my heart still pounds and my chest still tightens. I step up to the line hoping, praying, believing that I might win. And when I don't, I am not defeated. I think back to that girl who could not run past the parking lot, I lace up my sneakers, tie back my hair with not one but two hair ties, and I laugh.