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**Sample essays 2017**

**Duke University**

**Of Life and Basketball Blake Masters**

**Please describe your most meaningful experience to date.**

Things are not looking good for the Griffins. They have just lost the slight lead they had over their opponent and they seem extremely fatigued. To make matters worse, there are only a few minutes left in the game. My legs feel weak and tell me that they need rest, but I reply that now is not the time. I look up the court just in time to see the opposing team's power forward intercept a lazily thrown pass and he breaks for the basket. I immediately recognize that I am the only one in a position to stop him and so without thinking, I find myself blocking the charging forward's path to the basket. There is no time to think or evaluate options... I stand firm. We brace for impact - and what an impact it is! A hush falls over the gym; everyone knows that the following call could very easily determine the game's outcome. Dazed and confused, we look eagerly at the official (who seems to be thoroughly enjoying the sudden attention). CHARGE! Offensive foul! The gym erupts with emotion, and in the Griffins emerges a newfound sense of pride and energy. It proves to be just enough to carry them over a fierce Tigers team to clinch the Regional Championship.

No opportunity that I've had throughout high school has had greater meaning to me than the opportunity to play varsity basketball. I wholeheartedly believe that my basketball experience has taught me countless important lessons and has provided an excellent medium for me to grow as a person. In the future, when I look back and reminisce about my high school years, being a part of the Griffin basketball program is sure to be my most memorable and significant experience.

It would be wrong to give the impression that I only like playing basketball because of the lessons to be learned by the experience. I don't even think about such things when I am on the court. Simply put, I love playing the game and spending time with my teammates. As far as recreation goes, there is nothing that I would rather do than lace up my sneakers and play ball with a group of close friends.

Actual court time, however, is but a single part of my basketball experience. I have learned a great deal over the past three basketball seasons, but only a little of it has to do with pick-and-rolls or free-throw shooting techniques. Presented with any sort of challenge a few years ago, I would have been full of uncertainty and possibly even fear. As a sophomore starting on Varsity, however, it didn't take me long to realize that there is absolutely no room for such shyness in basketball. To be successful on the court, one must never feel intimidated or reserved. This unabashed mentality apparently manifested itself onto other aspects of my life, and the results have been very positive. I have learned not to be afraid of pursuing my goals. In order to achieve them, I know that I must pursue them boldly and with great fortitude. Now, trying something new or deviating from the normal path is not such a big deal anymore. From academics to personal matters, the lessons of determination and relentlessness that I have learned from basketball have had an immeasurable impact on my life. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, one needs to "look for the opportunity in every difficulty, as opposed to the other way around."

Playing varsity basketball has instilled in me a fierce will to achieve and embrace my ambitions as opposed to fearing them. I am extremely fortunate to have gained these qualities while playing the sport that I love. The combination of the beautiful game and my fantastic teammates has made Griffin Basketball the best experience of my life.

**Purpose of Education Anh Pham**

**Choose your own topic**

Nothing better epitomizes today's motto of learning than Aristotle's analysis of education, "The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet." It seems that the fruits of education have bloomed even greater and sweeter than ever before. The fruits are the incentives behind the ever-increasing literacy rates, and the temptations and lusts of the young population who is graduating more and more from college. Yet, in this tide of progressivism and in these spirits of intellectuality, who actually stops and wonders why he obsessively seeks a good education? And then, what is the real purpose of a prime education?

The most obvious answer inculcated in the minds of any respondent to these questions would be the predictable and hackneyed maxim of "Knowledge is power". With professions of doctors, lawyers, and any other vocations well-advertised in their propitious incomes, there is a clear protocol that all of the disciples must follow: the First Commandment, study hard, Second Commandment, do well on the SAT, Third Commandment enter top college, and finally, bear the sweetest fruits or rewards of education, money.

Personally, I am not willing to invest a lifetime into education if the ultimate reward is money. Money cannot be the fruits of my education, and, most importantly, the prime goal of my life; I believe in a higher purpose of education, a good education.

Now entering my senior year of high school, I have begun to understand the purpose of my education. Yes, as a consequence of a high-quality education, I will accrue some fiscal security in life. However, the purpose of my education, I know, is the satiation of my own relentless competitiveness and personal vindictiveness. As for the former, competitiveness constantly impels me to learn more and know more. I am constantly in motion, in mind and body, to improve to be the best in any fields of competition, whether intellectually or athletically. The minute I stop progressing intellectually, I feel as if I am already a thousand miles behind the increasingly savvy world. Hence, an intangible force constantly irks me to keep up with the best minds of my age. The latter goal of my education is the compensation for all that my parents had given up for the education of their children. I am indignant at circumstances that had left them with little options but to trade their prestige and wealth as doctors in their country for a much more humble emigrating life of financial insecurities and emotional distresses, all intended for a better education for their children. I cannot bear to see my mom serving for anybody and scrambling to save every penny, for she once was a well-respected doctor whom the maternal side of the entire community looked for guidance. I cannot bear to watch my dad dragging home day after day, trying to suppress his much damaged pride so his children wouldn't see his suffering. Nights go by and early mornings come, I would stumble upon clandestine conversations of my parents, in which my dad poured his heart out expressing his grief, for the barrier of language has forsaken him from his beloved profession. Though my dad is a doctor, everyday he struggles to climb over that language barrier, trying to fight against the tides of stereotypes, trying to earn the respect of his colleagues who continually belittle him for his lack of "Americanism", and trying, with all his age and the grays on his head, to earn a living. I can't hold back the anger and the tears when I think that the man, once so well-admired and revered in half a county for his dedication to his patients and his ingenuity in cardiology, has now been reduced to a mere supplicant of some novice doctor whom the man has the age and experience to be his superior scholar. And this is why I must pursue education with all that I feel, all that I know, and all that I can give. The fruits of my education will not be the gratification of wealth, but of the compensation of what my parents had lost: prestige, pride, and future.

For these very purposes of education, it is absolutely essential that I receive the best education in the country. Only then would I be able to satisfy my competitiveness and ameliorate the irreparable payment I am forever indebted to my bearers. If the purpose of education is one of only temporal satisfaction, then any quality education would suffice. But if the purpose of education is to heal and bandage the wounds of the past and the humilities of life, then I am willing to fully dedicate my entire life to that goal of education.

**The Last Lion and Me Tim Kubarych**

**Please write on a topic of your choice. OR 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 and your interests.**

Is it possible for a person to be the mentor of another, even if the latter were born twenty one years after the former's death? The conventional answer to this question would be no, but then, I have always favored the unconventional. For indeed, if one is to go by the definition of mentor, "a trusted counselor or guide," then I would have to say that the person of which I am thinking quite fits the bill. And that person would be Sir Winston Spencer Churchill.

Why is it exactly that Churchill, a man with no ostensible connection to a half-Ukrainian American High School student, exerts so great an influence upon me that I would not hesitate to call him my own "trusted guide?" Well, from the first time I "met" him in the pages of William Manchester's The Last Lion, I could not help but notice the many similarities in both character and behavior between us. We share an insatiable appetite for history and politics; we love public speaking and complicated, sophisticated language, and are so un-spontaneous that we must practice our off-the-cuff remarks for the following day; we are deeply dedicated to the Anglo-American "Special Relationship"; we read while enjoying piping-hot baths.

However, something is still missing. For similarities are one thing; guidance is a far different matter, and, of course, it is entirely rational for one to say that a dead man cannot provide this. I would answer by saying that Churchill does not fulfill the role of mentor through taking part in my life; rather, through his actions, through his speeches, and through his beliefs, he provides a map for a perplexed, troubled young man who is still struggling with who he is, and what he would like to achieve.

For Churchill has, in fact, taught me the most important lesson of all: no matter how difficult life becomes, no matter how alone you are, surrender is not an option, and you can only give up when you are dead. As he once said to an audience at his old public school, Harrow, "Never give in - never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense." And he knew of what he spoke! Churchill took the reins of leadership in Britain at a time when it faced what was, without a doubt, absolute evil, and stood his ground. He did not give in to Hitler, Nazism, and "a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science"; instead he rallied his beleaguered, wounded, isolated nation, by saying, "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'" He did not curl up, he did not fade away. He stood firm, and he won.

As a young man coping with not only the normal angst of adolescence, but very real mental and physical challenges, Churchill's example provides me with solace, for indeed, when stacked against the most diabolical regime ever to plague this earth, my own problems come out wanting. However, make no mistake, it is not the magnitude of what Churchill faced that truly impresses me. Rather, it is the manner in which he carried himself, even, no, especially, during the darkest days of defeat.

More than anything else, I believe, as others do, that Churchill was the embodiment of the High Victorian ideal. And so, it comes as no surprise to me that my Oxford Companion to Military History ends its entry on Churchill with the last half-stanza of my favorite poem, Rudyard Kipling's "If":

If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run

Yours is the Earth, and everything that's in it

And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

What Churchill's life spurs me on to do is to finally follow the exhortations of the poem and run, even if, perhaps, the road ahead is rocky, and I do not know the way.

**Purple Mike Mintz**

**Write on any topic of importance to you. If you have written a personal essay for another purpose - even an essay for another college - that you believe represents you, your writing, and your thinking particularly well, feel free to submit it.**

There are many things in life I could do without: mosquitoes, watermelon seeds, telemarketers, bad weather, cars that won't start, cold swimming pools, traffic lights, stuffy noses, people who disagree with me, and movies that look good until fifteen minutes after I've handed over my money. On the other hand, without the color purple, life would be utterly meaningless.

Most people don't realize how significant the color purple is. Some even deny that it is in fact a color, claiming that "violet" is more politically correct in these troubled times. The important thing is, however, that the world would not be remotely the same without purple.

Food, as always, is of utmost importance. Now, purple isn't a color I often see on my plate, but I would certainly be disappointed if all of the purple food disappeared. Where would we be without purple grapes? Certainly not where we are today. Sure, there would still be green grapes and red grapes (and whichever other color grapes those fruit husbandmen have conceived), but life is really all about the purple grapes. People would be so depressed if they were unable to have purple grapes that they would stop going grocery shopping altogether. Stores would go out of business, the economy would collapse, terrorists would bombard every major U.S. city, nuclear winter would engulf the northern hemisphere, an enormous asteroid would strike Tokyo, and the sun would collapse into a black hole. That doesn't even take into consideration the emotional harm inflicted on children deprived of purple grape juice.

Grape juice isn't the only thing kids would miss. There would be no Barney. There would be no Harold with his purple crayon. There would be no one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater. And coloring just wouldn't be the same. What would happen when a poor little child unknowingly tried to mix the red crayon with the blue crayon? Probably nothing, since wax doesn't blend well. But if a child were to try this unimaginable venture with paint, God only knows what would happen. I'm guessing there would be some kind of distortion in the space-time continuum, causing the Red Sox to beat the Yankees. (Hence, I just learned the value in procrastination, seeing as my analogy is now worthless.)

As bad as a purple-less life might seem for children, gay people would have a much tougher time. No group of people can truly exist without an official color: the Communists are red, the Democrats are blue, and the gays are purple. Without purple (some people might say "lavender"), gay people would not have a color, and they might even cease to exist. That is, unless they were to acknowledge their color-deficiency and engage in a war against Communism over the intellectual property rights to the color red. Not only would war bring more disruption to the world, but the gay Communists would be completely ostracized from both sides. And if you thought the first gay Communist president would be elected this century, it would probably be at least another hundred years without the color purple.

Of all the countries in the world, America would suffer the most from the absence of purple. What would there be to rise over the fruited plain if not purple mountain majesties? Mountains wouldn't look majestic without their purple hue. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that "for gray mountain monotonies above the fruited plain" just doesn't sound right.

Purple just doesn't get the recognition it deserves. I never hear anyone talking about it anymore: red and blue are completely separate as far as the politicians are concerned. And nobody ever acts grateful to be blessed with such a nice color. With Thanksgiving coming up soon, I already know what I'm thankful for: the purple potatoes we'll be eating! But I can definitely do without people who think purple looks good with yellow.

**The Piano James Yang**

**"A picture is worth a thousand words" as the adage goes. (You're limited to the space provided, however.) Attach a photograph (either online or hard copy with the paper application) no larger than 5 x 7 inches that represents something important to you, and explain its significance.**

The announcer called my name.

I walked up to the stage towards the piano. My footsteps echoed like a metronome through the grand performance hall at the University of Georgia. I had woken up early that morning in January 2002 to spend a couple of hours warming up ahead of a competition for which I had spent the last six months preparing and dreading. I was representing the State of Virginia at the Southern Division of the National Baldwin Piano Competition. This was my first regional piano competition since I started playing the instrument at age three. I felt all of my life's work in music culminating in this defining moment. Such a burden rested heavily on my shoulders as I made my way across the large stage, feeling not ready at all, wishing I had more time to practice.

I felt the impatient stares and heard the obligatory clapping of the audience, and responded with a feigned smile and bow. I sat down on the uncomfortably hard bench and rubbed my sweat-drenched hands against my pants which made it even worse. My heart was beating audibly and my mind raced through all the piano lessons and all the hours of practice in a desperate attempt to remember everything. I noted how ridiculously cumbersome and restrictive my tuxedo and dress shoes felt. Despite my piano teacher's endless lectures on focus, I was decidedly unfocused. I brought my hands over the keyboard and held them there as I listened to the pounding of my heart - boom-boom - and pondered my eventual success or doom. Then, suddenly, my hands fell of their own will towards the keyboard.

The moment the first keys were depressed, the hammers struck the strings, which resonated with an intense beauty. The series of octaves at the beginning of Beethoven's Sonata in D Major served as a grand opening to my program. The world around me soon faded into blackness and I was alone with my piano. I became consumed in the playful staccatos, the heartbreaking leggieros, and the thundering climaxes of the music. My anxiety slowly faded as I eased into what I love - creating music. I became one with the emotional drama of the music, my fingers mere extensions of the keyboard. Nearing the end of my final piece, a Prokofieff Sonata, I suddenly broke away from my fantasy and eagerly anticipated the conclusion of my best performance yet. My mind was already racing ahead to what lay ahead - the awards announcements.

The sonata finished with a thundering fortissimo and the audience burst into applause. This time, I responded to the audience's enthusiasm with a genuine smile and bow. I walked off the stage to greet my parents. What followed was an agonizingly long wait for the remaining contestants to finish playing. All the while listening, I was silently critiquing their performances, feeling great about my near 'perfect' playing, and certain that I would come in at least as an alternate, if not a finalist.

When the awards finally came, I was stunned. I came in third. How could I only win third place? The question kept racing through my mind over and over again. Needless to say, I was disappointed. Why did I ever bother to compete?

As my mind slowly went over the day's events, I came to realize the superfluity of my performance anxiety. Sure, I like to win, but being a musician is much more than just winning competitions or gaining fame. It is about being able to savor a rare gift earned by years of practice and about spreading the joy of music to others. I had given my very best that day and I was honored to compete amongst the best of my peers. I left Georgia State University feeling humbled and yet victorious.

Since then, I have gone on to win numerous regional and national competitions. However, every time I walk up the stage, I think of Georgia, and I remember one of the greatest lessons of my life. And instantaneously, my performance anxiety disappears. In its place is a natural outflow of what I love - music, shared freely and abundantly with the audience. I no longer worry about the outcome - I just enjoy myself. Strangely enough, the less I worry about winning, the more I win. Of all the performances and competitions I've participated in, Georgia sticks in my mind as the most memorable.

Losing is not failing. It reveals and defines the self more so than winning ever could. To me, Georgia was what I needed to push me to the next level of musicianship.

**En Garde Jason Joo**

**Topic of your choice**

Some consider fencing an outdated sport that has become nothing more than a simple game of electric tag. Others are not as belittling and see it as a modern interpretation of an ancient sport. To me, however, fencing is much more than just a pastime; it is my model for life.

The fencing match always begins off the fencing strip. Before the match, I go over tactics and review any pertinent previous matches. My coach usually comes over and gives me some advice, but sometimes I'm on my own. By the time I get on the strip and hook up to the scoring apparatus, I have sized up my competition and noted his significant attributes, such as his height, his reputation, and his national rank. The latter information, no matter how intimidating, does not dictate what I'll do, as such data can be quite misleading. When the director yells "Fence!", I already know what my first actions will be.

This analytical approach to a fencing match is the same one I use when confronting a challenge outside of the strip. Before tackling it, I mentally prepare myself and plan what I'll do. Sometimes I'll get help and advice; other times, I'm on my own. Once I have a clear agenda and goal, I step up and take on the challenge.

The match begins, and my opponent and I immediately advance down the strip with our foils poised to strike. We both vie for control as one attacks and the other retreats and parries. Of course, fencing is not that simple; there are the complex counter-attacks and attacks-in-prep as well. Throughout the entire match I am constantly considering possible ways to control my opponent and score a touch. Even if he scores a touch, I stay focused no matter what the score is.

Likewise, I am rarely discouraged when facing obstacles. Sometimes they get the best of me, but at other times I have an edge over them. Either way, I maintain my sangfroid and never back down.

After scoring the winning touch, I remove my mask, shake hands with my opponent, and walk away victorious. Immediately, I begin reviewing the match, noting what worked, and what didn't. If, on the other hand, I lose, I still shake hands with my adversary, thank him, and walk away. I note what tactics and strategies don't work and change them accordingly.

In life, I do the same. An accomplishment calls for a celebration, but not arrogance; failure should be met with contemplation, but not discouragement. Thus, when faced with a similar challenge later on, I am better prepared.

Fencing is my paradigm for life. Whether I am solving a challenging math problem or applying to colleges, I am always planning, executing, and learning. My actions become more refined with each new experience, and the final step to an accomplishment is like the winning touch of a bout: not only a victory in itself, but also the first step in preparation for the next victory.

**Finding the Other Side Anonymous**

**When have you had to show courage and leave your comfort zone? How did this experience affect you?**

"Ma'am, I just don't have the money." I heard a click, and the phone went dead. In middle school, my parents began investing in rental properties, and over time, I became the manager, dealing with the rent, repairs, and complaints for six duplexes and two condominiums. When I'm in my manager mode, I have to be more mature and experienced than most teenagers, and my hectic school life appears relaxed compared to the world of finances and paperwork. Although my parents were behind me, the job was incredibly intimidating at first, especially when people looked down at me, or thought I was a joke. It took courage to refuse being pushed around by adults ready to take advantage of my age, and sometimes I cried out of frustration or anger because of how hard it was to get something as basic as the monthly rent. It's true that some people had the means but refused to pay out of a certain mentality, but why did hard-working families, like Sharika and her son, struggle so much to meet the necessities? My job showed me the less prosperous Athens, Georgia-the one usually ignored by our university town. But I didn't ignore them anymore. Although I had raised money and collected food donations in the past, now I wanted to interact with the people I helped. In ninth grade, I threw myself into weekly homeless shelter dinners because I wanted my contribution to be a personal well-cooked meal, whether it's tortellini or stir-fry, rather than a check through an organization. Managing rental properties and volunteering at the soup kitchen have made me look for realities most people at my private school disregard, so wherever I go, I'll be looking to understand and help the people in my community.

**Lessons of Being a Senior Anonymous**

**Describe a time when you had to work cooperatively with others to accomplish a common goal. What did you find useful about the experience? What did you find challenging about it?**

If you looked into our senior hall, you wouldn't think that we once had a reputation for being the most socially divided grade. During morning break, we gather in a buzzing, ever-shifting, conglomeration, laughing and talking with everyone around us. This fall, our class went on Kairos II, the senior retreat that takes most of the credit for giving us the title of "best senior class yet." Kairos is Greek for a spiritual time-a time when we discovered ourselves by sharing our thoughts, feelings, and experiences with each other. Last spring, when Mr. Connell, an English teacher and the retreat leader, asked for student leaders, I eagerly volunteered. Kairos had helped the previous class, and I wanted the same thing for my class. I was chosen to be one of the five leaders, but while the others were close friends with each other, I barely knew any of them because we only occasionally chatted. I wondered if they saw me as an outsider, and whether that would affect the outcome of Kairos. But at our leaders' retreat, a mini-Kairos during the summer, I talked openly about topics I wouldn't normally share: my fears and goals, my sister Ali's illness as a baby, and my love and respect for my boyfriend. The others shared the same way, and the invisible boundaries separating us disappeared. Once we experienced the Kairos spirit for ourselves, we knew what we wanted for everyone else, and planning the retreat became easier. After the other students went on Kairos, the spirit spread to the whole class, and many classmates still tell me that it was the best four days of their lives. As seniors, we breached our social gaps for our last year; as people, we learned not to be confined to "the way things are."

**In Pursuit of Honor Anonymous**

**Describe a project or issue in which you have successfully engaged others and led them to accomplish a shared goal. Why were you passionate about the project or issue? What did you do to mobilize and motivate others?**

After nine years in the public school system, I was used to locking everything away knowing that what I left in the open would be gone when I got back. When I changed schools, I encountered a new environment and a set of rules based on honor rather than punishments. Soon, I became accustomed to its luxuries and took it for granted-until my junior year.

Almost one third of the student body was involved in Honor Offenses concerning stolen semester exams, and the administration responded by taking away our privileges. In a few winter days, the Athens Academy I knew and loved for the high expectations it gave its students disappeared. I felt like I was walking into a different school, and I knew nothing would change unless the students took charge. I helped form a group of students and teachers who wanted to understand what went wrong that year, to correct it, and to prevent it from happening again. After hours of discussion, we finally realized that students had little respect for the Honor Code. We formed a mission statement of re-establishing trust throughout the school, and the Honor and Integrity Committee was born.

Last year, I organized frequent meetings between students, teachers and the administration. Although planning the meetings was difficult and many students felt they were too busy, I encouraged them to contribute their ideas and time by making them realize that having teachers trust and know us is more important than just doing well on their tests. As a result, a core group as passionate about the issue as myself drove the action. Over the summer, I and a few other students met with Upper School administrators and the Headmaster and earned their approval for our goals. However, reaching the students was much harder because their complacent attitude was hard to shake. While they wanted a better school, they thought it was too late to make a difference. To overcome this attitude, we talked to small groups of students at a time, and showed them how little changes on their part, like talking a friend out of cheating, could make huge differences in the atmosphere. Even after developing a pathway for students to follow if they had any problems, we've stayed active as a support group. During high-stress periods, we remind students to pay attention to their choices, making the student body recognize Honor as a guiding principle. This year Athens Academy has a record low number of Honor Offenses while school spirit and participation are at a highpoint.

Although the process was long and sometimes frustrating, I see the results when we enjoy free periods instead of study halls or when teachers feel comfortable leaving us during tests. I expect myself to act honorably, and Athens Academy has an environment that values it. Leading the effort to bring back the Honor Code is my way of sharing with other students the importance of honor to communities like Athens Academy and to life itself.

**Ten Apples a Day...Keeps Colleges Beating at Your DoorsAnonymous**

**Describe your personal characteristics, accomplishments, primary interests, plans, and goals. What sets you apart?**

I eat ten apples a day, cores and all. My love for apples is an integral part of my identity, just like my passion for living, learning, and laughing. My teachers and peers have always recognized my drive; one math teacher even remarked in his Caribbean-tinged accent, "You have a fire in your eyes now," on the day I decided I would win the chapter Mathcounts competition. Ever since elementary school those who don't know me have stereotyped me as the traditional overachiever positioned at the top of her class, playing the violin and winning math competitions. However, my friends know that in truth, I'm the kid who laughs so hard she falls out of her chair, cries over cheesy romance movies, and stays up until 3AM reading "Calvin and Hobbes" on school nights.

Although I've been fortunate to win various academic awards, the time I've spent on service and leadership has meant more to me than the time I've spent studying. The Saturdays I spend running the concession stands at University of Georgia football games are a whirlwind: I spend hours selling overpriced food and drinks to zealous (and sometimes drunk) fans in order to raise money for service activities. I love going to the homeless shelter every week to cook dinner, whether it consists of tortellini and chocolate chip cookies or tacos and salad. Each year I lead Service Day projects, painting the halls of a nursery home or packing up hundreds of boxes at the Food Bank. However, true to my dorky roots, I also serve as captain of the Quiz Bowl Team, which means I spend two afternoons a week trying to convince my teammates that they actually should try to memorize the capital of Madagascar.

Outside of school, I've been lucky enough to stumble upon activities for which I have a real passion. In ninth grade I read *The Cobra Event*, a book about a fictional virus that made me imagine that there were millions of deadly virus particles swirling around me. After I recovered from my paranoia, I delved into researching viruses. The summer after tenth grade I was invited to work in a cellular biology lab at the University of Georgia that specialized on the *t. cruzi* virus. For six weeks I worked full time doing undergraduate-level work and occasionally assisting graduate students and post-doctorates with their research. I ran PCRs daily, made countless gels, and tried to understand everything around me. Last summer my love of science and independent learning earned me a place at the annual Governor's Honors Program, where I was a chemistry major and a social studies minor. While my major reaffirmed my dedication to science, my minor unfortunately informed me that epidemiology involved too much death and illness for my heart and stomach to take. I refocused my plans onto pharmacology, and began planning a future in teaching and research.

The dedication I've shown in my activities only speaks to what will follow in the years to come. I have no desire to slack off and take it easy after high school; the same passion that keeps me going back to the farmer's market for apples also drives my plans for my future.

**Barefooted Bliss Michela A Fitten**

**Open ended personal statement.**

At Brown, the Carrie Tower chimes, class beckons, and I walk in barefoot.

Barefoot like my abuela, who at the age of seventeen chased down the thief who snatched her purse. Armed with only indignation and pride, her feet pounded the soft earth of Mexico City as she thundered down the grassy calzada in murderous pursuit. She caught the thief, punished him, and recovered her purse.

Â¡CuÃ­date! Mexico City is a dangerous place, especially for a woman and her purse. Don't wear it too proudly, people tell me all the time. I listen. Don't let them know what you're worth. I obey. Through time and space, over the border and across generations, I weave through the spill of faces at Santa Monica High School and I take heed of the warnings. I remember my abuela and I leave my purse at home. At school I forfeit my identity.

Samohi is home to statistical diversity: 42% Hispanic, 26% African-American, 20% White. It is also home to race riots. Our campus is racially segregated - at lunch the White kids, the Hispanics, the African Americans all keep to themselves. At my school, diversity is only a faÃ§ade - pseudo-diversity - merely numbers on paper. Here, the dress code is enforced and I must wear shoes.

I belong to two worlds - the Anglo world and the Mexican world - each as distinct as fingerprints. They remain separate, and each day I cross their borders. I take two English classes: Chicano and Latin American Literature, and Advanced Placement English Literature. In AP Lit, I am the only Latina student in my class. I stand out, but not because of my brown skin, but because my hand is always first to pierce the air. I speak with conviction, my voice loud and unwavering. I challenge, assert, argue and refute, and I am praised and respected for my mind, for my fight. I am accepted into the Anglo world. Doors of opportunity fly open but I pause at the threshold. I think of my abuela, and my feet ache for freedom.

I traverse the cement paved campus between my English classes, the journey endless as I immigrate between two worlds in shoes that do not fit. As I approach the end of high school, my feet are weary, my skin blistering. Then, I enter my Chicano Lit class and I am reminded of from where I come. I say anaphora and the glares say traitor, sellout. I am ridiculed. I want to take challenging courses, I want to learn, I want to succeed and therefore, I must assimilate into the Anglo world. I must forget. But I ache to remember.

I loosen my laces.

I read Camus in AP lit and I analyze, sharpening my mind. But give me Jimmy Santiago Baca, and I feel. I connect. I remember. I think of my abuela, of her story, of our story and I refuse to let Samohi steal my identity...at least not without a fight.

The shoes come off.

I take off running.

**A Battle for Action Anonymous**

**Briefly describe an activity in which you have participated that demonstrates your commitment to your community.**

The day was bitterly cold for April in Athens, Georgia. I stopped watching the music on-stage to count the number of people on the field. A sizeable crowd had turned up to the first annual Battle Against Poverty Concert, which I had spent months organizing and promoting with other high school and college students in the area.

The first thing anyone notices about Athens is that it bears all the marks of a university town: a lively downtown scene, a large number of middle class families, and a campus buzzing with activity. But in middle school, that perspective changed for me. My parents began investing in rental properties, and over time, I became the manager for six duplexes and two condominiums. My job showed me the less prosperous Athens - the one with a poverty rate almost twice the state and national average at 24%, the one in the fifth poorest county of its size in the entire country. This was the aspect of our university town that most people ignored.

In ninth grade I transferred to a private high school in the adjacent county after receiving an academic scholarship, but I still lived on the poorer east side of town where I knew many families could not afford homes. At school, no one talked or worried about persistent poverty, and I knew that much of the rest of the community was similarly indifferent. They did not know, and so they did not care.

During my junior year, a group called Partners for a Prosperous Athens began. It engaged community members in helping alleviate poverty in the county. Although hundreds of people turned up for the first meeting, I still did not feel that the message had reached enough ears. More people needed to know before community action could take place. What would make them pay attention?

After talking with some friends about this question, we decided on two events. The first was a juried art show for local students with a "Poverty in America" theme. The second was an annual Battle Against Poverty Concert, an eight hour event featuring local musicians and battles between amateur bands. Over thirty high school and college volunteers spent months organizing the events. We did everything from call musicians to solicit donations to put up posters around town. I gave many presentations at school about poverty in Athens and helped make my school one of the most active participants.

The concert on that cold April day was a great success. The mayor, Heidi Davidson, hosted two hours of the concert and spoke with the audience about what they could do to get involved. The chairman of Partners for a Prosperous Athens, the Honorable Judge Steve Jones, also spoke about efforts to improve education. Members of the audience who were not enjoying the music learned about volunteer opportunities at the local homeless shelter and a summer camp for underprivileged children. Our T-shirts sold out, and by the end of the long day we had raised over $2,000 in donations.

The Battle Against Poverty Concert will continue annually until it is no longer needed, and responsibility for its organization has been passed on. I will not be home to organize next year's concert, but my efforts to identify community problems and present solutions for them will continue wherever I go.

**An Unforgettable Summer Amit Momaya**

**Write about a memorable/significant experience.**

What came first, science or technology?" asked a tall and husky figure, who was dressed in an unbuttoned and rather threadbare lab coat. My initial response was science because I reasoned that technology was the application of science. An articulated voice from the back of the room, however, soon refuted this idea and devised a cogent argument in favor of technology. The professor then formulated a rebuttal to both of these perspectives, and eventually succeeded in placing everyone in a state of quandary. This discussion signaled the advent of the myriad thought-provoking and challenging issues and applications that would arise during the summer I spent at the Georgia Governor's Honors Program.

Competition for admission into the program was fierce, even fiercer once in the program. Competition of the latter, however, did not exist with one another as it had during the selection process but rather within one's self. The program held a weekly competition for the science majors in which the professors would present seemingly impossible tasks to be completed within a few hours. On the first few competitions, which included constructing a rubber band powered car out of a few sundry items, I did not fare very well and felt vexed by the restrictions. However, one of my friends helped me learn new ways of tackling problems. He helped me realize that not all materials need to be used. He helped me see that the most obvious idea will not always be the most successful. He helped me start planning before acting. In effect, he helped me crawl out of my suffocating, conventional shell and change my way of thinking.

The final competition proved to stretch my mind to its greatest capacity. We were assigned the task of building a boat concocted from some cardboard, two garbage bags, and a roll of duck tape. At first thought, this project did not seem challenging at all, that is, until I discovered that two students would have to sit inside the boat and race across the swimming pool. This competition drew together many of the skills I had acquired during that summer, one of them being teamwork, something I had not learned the true meaning of until that summer. At school, "teamwork" would simply imply breaking the assignment into fragmentary pieces and assigning them to each member of the group. The activities at the program, however, soon expunged that fallacy and showed me that true teamwork requires the collaboration and unification of simultaneous ideas. Each team member would contribute his or her thoughts to every element of the boat. Resourcefulness was another determining factor in this last competition, as only one roll of duck tape would be provided and simply a few hours to build. Everything would need to be planned out meticulously beforehand because, once started, new materials could not be used if construction was botched. Other factors such as creativity, motivation, concentration, and ingenuity, when mixed in the right proportions, would produce a peerless boat, which is exactly what my team accomplished.

Not only did I learn from other students, but also from the astute professors. They were some of the best in their profession, with a true passion for teaching and understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses. Personally, I learned to desist accepting formulas and theorems at face value. The professors supplied us with the facts, and we were the ones to go out and research the concepts and proofs behind them. These skills have surfaced rather quickly, such as on the second day of AP BC Calculus, when the teacher asked us to memorize a formula. I, however, first asked for the proof. The other students groaned upon hearing this, but I grinned, knowing that eight months from now, they were the ones who would be cramming this seemingly senseless formula into their head before the AP exam.

I could fill an immense number of pages continuing to delineate what I learned that summer, but, if there was one thing to sum up everything, it would be the Rubik's Cube. When I first encountered this bemusing puzzle, I began by turning the cubes in random configurations, waiting for something to appear. However, I soon discovered that this is exactly where I went wrong-that is, nothing in life simply emerges on its own for you; instead, you have to search for it, sometimes at greater depths than ever before. By the middle of the program, I began to organize my thoughts and preplan so my configurations would make sense. At the beginning of that summer, my mind was fettered inside the cube as I cursorily searched for meanings. Nonetheless, as the summer crept to an end, I learned to organize, revise, concentrate, and not only think ahead, but also think differently. When the program concluded, I knew that I was no longer inside the cube but outside it.

**My Driving Plague Anonymous**

**What are you really curious about? How has this curiosity affected your life? What happens to you when you experience this curiosity?**

What do Walt Whitman, Howard Roark, and I have in common? Passion. Passion for life, for architecture, and for viruses. When I read The Cobra Event in eighth grade, I had a cinematic picture of viruses. I imagined there were millions of deadly virus particles swirling around me, unleashed by a mad-man bent on taking care of the population problem in his own grisly way. Despite my naivete, those microscopic not-even-life-forms had me spellbound. I rushed to the library to read every book Richard Preston had on the subject, and I was immediately hooked. With every book I read, the more questions I had: How can those tiny organisms that defy classification wreck such havoc on humans? Why are they so elusive, always able to escape our attempts to stop their destruction? Those questions plagued me (pun intended!) as I threw myself deeper and deeper into researching epidemics and disease. After my summer internship at a UGA lab specializing in the T. cruzi virus, I had done enough hands-on research to know that I wanted to continue exploring viral diseases in the future.

Even after I learned all about viruses, I'm still as captivated by them as I was when I sped through The Cobra Event in eighth grade. When I think about viruses, I feel exhilerated and amazed. While I'm in awe of their tricky survival skills, those same adaptations are what frustrate my goals as a scientist: to eradicate viruses. However, I am dedicated to finding new methods of attack, hoping that one day my avid curiosity will pay off, and I will make a discovery that will contribute to human health and longevity.

**A Community with Honor Anonymous**

**How have you made an impact on your local community?**

"What's honor?" The student's voice was careless and lazy, punctuated with a shrug of his shoulder. He asked the question without expecting a response, dismissing the very idea. "That doesn't exist here anymore."

It hurt me to hear one of my classmates deride the system that I'd come to love and respect-the Honor System at my small, private school. The Honor system had, after all, made the suspicion and surveillance cameras of public school a distant, dreaded memory. After coming to Athens Academy in 9th grade on a scholarship, I quickly became accustomed to the trust and openness of my new community and took the Honor System for granted...until my junior year of high school.

After the winter break of my junior year, I learned that countless students had cheated during the previous term's exams. Although only a few students were convicted of Honor Offenses, the administration took away everyone's privileges. In just a few days, the Athens Academy I knew and loved for the high expectations it had of its students disappeared. I felt like I was walking into a different school, and I knew nothing would change unless students took charge.

Determined to restore a sense of dignity to the school environment, I gathered some friends and faculty, and we formed the Honor and Integrity Committee. The purpose of the committee was to figure out what had gone wrong among the student body, to correct it, and to prevent it from happening again. Because the Honor System only works if students trust each other and the school, we decided to re-establish this trust by improving communication between teachers, students, and the administration.

Last year, I initiated Committee efforts by scheduling meetings, writing letters, and publicizing our goals among students and staff. To combat the problem of broken communication, we met with students from every grade, presenting ourselves as a support group as well as extending an open invitation to anyone interested in joining our team. We informed the student body of the history of the Honor Code to demonstrate its advantages and to rebuild faith in the system. We also began a ceremony wherein students sign the Honor Code, an act that we felt would emphasize its importance to the institution. Because of our efforts, the student body again recognizes Honor as a guiding principle: last year marks the lowest number of Honor Offenses in the recent history of the Athens Academy.

Although the process was long and often frustrating, I am thrilled to see the positive results when we enjoy free periods instead of study halls or when teachers feel comfortable leaving us unsupervised during tests. Under the leadership of my senior class, Athens Academy is again the open, trusting school that I remember entering four years ago; more importantly, I approach honor as a privilege, and will never take it for granted again.

**Not Strangers Anymore Anonymous**

**Please discuss in detail a situation or an event that demonstrates your effectiveness as a leader, and how that situation or event has shaped your conception of leadership. Be as specific as possible.**

My eyes slowly closed to the last chords of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” fading from Mr. Connell’s guitar. It was the first night, and the day had been hectic, but things were going as planned. I looked around the cozy room and saw my classmates sprawled on couches and the floor, most of them already stepping outside their prescribed social barriers. It was time those walls came down. After weeks of preparation and almost cult-like secrecy, this was the senior Kairos Retreat—a four day spiritual high in the woods of Toccoa, Georgia.

Many people have asked me what the Kairos secret is, and I tell them I can’t explain it. Okay, so there actually are some tangible secrets, but those aren’t what “make” the retreat. The real secret is that after only a few hours, I talked honestly about private matters I wouldn’t normally share: childhood in China, my sister Ali’s baby years, and a rather non-communicational relationship with my parents. Perhaps that wouldn’t sound strange with close friends, but at the leaders’ retreat, a mini-Kairos lasting thirteen straight hours, the other student leaders weren’t people I knew well at all. I saw them in the halls and occasionally we chatted, but while they had classes together and hung out outside of school, I was an outsider. But once we started talking, none of that mattered anymore. That was the Kairos spirit.

At the retreat, we spent most of our time in the old dining hall, where everyone split into table groups headed by a student and adult leader. The leaders gave speeches on topics such as Know Yourself, Friendship, and Obstacles. Mine was Integrity, and as I stood at the podium tapping my foot to Billy Joel’s “The Stranger” – my pre-speech song – I thought about how before the retreat I worried that I wouldn’t be able to lead the table discussions well enough for my group to experience the Kairos they deserved. Once things started, I realized my worries were unfounded because while my job was to read the questions, more importantly, I was just another retreatant, learning things about myself and about my group like everyone else.

My leadership wasn’t about standing in front of the room and giving the speech as much as it was about inspiring reflection. It wasn’t always starting the conversation but rather sharing my stories so that others would be comfortable sharing theirs. And it definitely wasn’t forcing people to contribute, but instead making them comfortable enough to volunteer. It felt so natural that I didn’t even realize what I was doing until the third day, when my group dedicated its Kairos symbol to me, making me realize that this time I was the role model teachers and parents spoke of. Perhaps I’m not the Student Body President, but I do think of myself as a leader. Sometimes I’m in the front giving that speech, but other times I’m in the middle of the crowd organizing the event. The rest of the time, I’m in the back supporting the one onstage. At Kairos, I realized that I am all three, and that they are equally important.

**Going Beyond the Land of Expectations Anonymous**

**What challenge have you faced in high school, and how have you met that challenge?**

In Norton Juster's novel, The Phantom Tollbooth, the protagonist, Milo, undertakes a journey much like the one many high school seniors find themselves facing today. He isn't sure of where he is going, and like many of us, he is carried by a sense of adventure and of expectation. Like Milo, we begin in Expectation, where, Juster claims, "you must always go to before you get to where you're going. Of course, some people never go beyond expectations..."

Today, we are in the Land of Expectations. Parents expect many things of us: good grades, obedience, and successfully getting into the college of our dreams. My classmates and I expect even more from ourselves: senior privileges, guidance from family and teachers, and a new start in college. In high school, we know what to expect. We expected to be caught if we didn't sign in to homeroom. We expected either Phil or Kevin Lee to thoroughly destroy us in games of Net Tetris. We expected our parents to pay our bills and help us to make our important decisions. Indeed, some of us have yet to face a difficult decision that we, as adults, must make entirely for ourselves.

But next year, we face the unfamiliar. Most of us only know what not to expect: homemade lunches packed by Mom, faculty with whom we can share intimate details of our lives, private bedrooms. But of course, we will also have to make adjustments that go beyond the day-to-day activities of eating, sleeping, and spending money. These adjustments have to do with taking control of our own lives. We will have to become independent.

This year, our journey begins. We prepared for this for years. Family and friends must now realize that preparations are over. We are going beyond the land of expectations. Some of us have already found our independence, and are ready to pursue our dreams. Others of us know where we want to go, but still need some guidance as to how to get there. And some of us, like me, have no idea what is going to happen. But, in the words of the Mathemagician and King Azaz from The Phantom Tollbooth, "What you can do is often simply a matter of what you WILL do." All of us have this year in common, as we step beyond what is expected of us, and learn to embrace what we expect of ourselves. We can only be led so far. Now, we must leap.

**My Coffee Quest Anonymous**

**Open question**

Last summer when I was sulking in the banal tedium of the suburbs, I challenged my friends to visiting the ten top-ranked coffee houses in Denver. With my proximity to the city, I take every chance I can to experience the movement on the streets and the savvy crowds. Sometimes the fresh air of my sedentary, cookie-cutter suburb becomes too overwhelming and only the polluted, busy streets of the city can cure my itch. Plus, good coffee is my weakness, so going coffee house hopping seemed ideal. I often rally people behind my ideas, and that night my friends’ attitudes paralleled my competitive nature; they accepted my dare. Transforming into coffee connoisseurs, four of us proceeded to rate the beverages, atmospheres, and the people at each of the ten locations.

The aroma of sweat and coffee permeated the first dimly lit room we walked into. As we struggled to get to the counter, I had to squeeze between two men clad in tight pants, whose hair masked their brooding eyes. The “emo” scene wasn’t quite my cup of tea (or coffee), but I loved embracing my temporary discomfort to experience a different atmosphere. The environment served to expose my inhibitions and to remind me to push myself to expand my understanding. The second coffee house, located under the bright lights of the hotels of downtown Denver, offered a more jovial ambiance better suited to my tastes. Sipping my second cup of coffee, I played the board game “LIFE” in the corner of a room. In between turns, my friends and I discussed how economically unfeasible the real-life implications of each roll of the dice were. It was strangely typical how we blended a family game with economic banter.

Six hours, eight gallons of gas, and ten coffee houses later, I completed the coffee quest, taking with me priceless conversations and a crazy caffeine buzz as souvenirs. In retrospect, I realize that the entire adventure was an exciting pretext for engaging in coffee-table conversation on a citywide scale. New activities and environments are exciting, but I am much more interested in the discussions and opinions that stem from friendly dialogue. I would rather sit and talk with friends at a coffee shop than sit through an overpriced movie at a stuffy, popcorn infested theater. The movie ends with the closing credits, but good conversation stimulates and questions my beliefs and perceptions. They say talk is cheap; I say that talk is one of the most valuable things I have.

**Unfinished Symphony Hang Xu**

**You have already told us about yourself in the Common Application, with its list of activities, the Short Answer, and the Personal Statement. While we leave the topic of your second essay entirely up to you, we encourage you to use this opportunity to tell us something that we could not learn from the rest of your application. Try to pick a topic that will convey some aspect of your experience or outlook that you would like us to understand better.**

I play the B.

A small square office, no more than ten feet wide, holds two upright mahogany pianos sitting back-to-back. The metronome marks the beat, ta-ta-ta-ta, first 100 beats per minute, then 105, 110, working toward 120. The door is closed, the hall empty. It is a sunny Saturday afternoon; some Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) participants are playing ultimate Frisbee on West lawn, others are attending the square dancing seminar, but four pianists are practicing the opening chord of Schubert’s "Unfinished Symphony" for the first time on two Yamahas.

It is not just any "Unfinished Symphony"; it is *my* "Unfinished Symphony".

Or so I thought.

Jessica joins in with the F.

Two days before Dr. Indergaard had announced to us, “We will be holding a concert at the end of six weeks. I need you to submit the ensemble pieces you will be performing.” I thought back to my solo debuts, to bowing to a sea of thunderous applause, to striding toward the stage to receive my trophy, to forgetting the entire development section due to uncontrollable anxiety. I had become accustomed to playing alone, earning distinctions alone, accepting failures alone. The only time I had performed in an ensemble was with my teacher, and all I had to do was learn my part. She would accompany me. Besides, I had a program ready - Chopin’s "Fantaisie-Impromptu", Brahm’s "G Minor Rhapsody", Bach’s "Prelude" and "Fugue in C Minor" - it was my choice. So what would I do with three other pianists, taking my time and disregarding my interpretations of the piece? I could no longer work for myself, but I made up my mind to dominate, to play the first piano part, to make the piece mine.

It is now the third week, and our progress has slowed. I am frustrated with the tempo, the dynamics, and the style. Jay plays the beginning with too ominous a tone, J.D. is too loud, Jessica’s legato is more accurately a staccato, and the rhythm for my opening part is not in sync with the metronome. Making this piece sound decent is going to be harder than I thought.

Jay plays the C.

Six weeks of practice - of missing the '70s dance, of opting out of the 5K race, of running back to the dorms from Whitehead Auditorium in the rain before lights-out - amount to this. The lights dim, the spotlight finds its target: we are on stage, the four of us, eight hands, performing Schubert’s "Unfinished Symphony" in front of six hundred and seventy-five Governor’s Honors finalists and instructors. But this time, I am not alone. I look up from the keys, meeting Jessica’s glance as she waits for the next cue. I nod to her and smile.

It is not any "Unfinished Symphony"; it is *our* "Unfinished Symphony".

J.D. plays the G.

GHP is over. The school year has begun, and I find myself once again teaching music at a local elementary school. I look down at my students, who are sitting around the piano in the classroom listening to me play Beethoven’s "Sonate Number Twelve". They too must learn that, though the beauty of music arises from the notes, sharing it with others is the joy.

We play the F sharp.

**The Ride Hang Xu**

**Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application.**

September 15, 2002

4:35 P.M.

“Star 94 FM Real-time Traffic…those heading northwest on Peachtree Industrial should expect major delays due to a gas leak….”

I abruptly change the radio station. What luck! I have moved exactly one mile in ten minutes. My first car, the epitome of self-liberation, has confined me in a ten-by-five-foot box. The heat is unbearable; the air outside is stagnant; the air conditioning offers little relief. I roll up my pant legs, take off my socks, secure my hair in a ponytail, and sink into my sweat-drenched seat.

Today’s ordeal is pure frustration. My obligations begin to float and jumble in my mind: trigonometric problems, an English paper on *The Crucible*, an outline about China’s WTO accession. I have to get home. If I do not complete these assignments I will face dire consequences…zeros, failing classes, expulsion from school, rejection from colleges…

The clock reads 5:16. Any other mode of transportation would have gotten me home by now. My thoughts begin to wander, and I recall the vehicles that carried me here from my hometown, Yuci, years ago: a bus to Taiyuan, a train to Beijing, an airplane to Memphis, a family sedan to Atlanta. Sitting miserably in my car, awash in these memories, I realize I never enjoyed any of these journeys.

March 4, 1993

1:30 P.M.

The blue paint of the metal skeleton had begun to peel off. The seat was not cushioned. The handlebars did not even have a bell that, with a flick of the finger, would ring out with a clean and crisp tone. But it was a bicycle, and it was *mine*. Not being able to afford a new one, my grandfather had purchased it from a friend. Though it was dirty and old, I could not wait for my first ride.

I climbed on, pulled my feet off the ground, and pedaled to nowhere, without a thought on my mind. I turned round and round in the tiny courtyard, a brick wall blockading the dirt road on one side and towering apartment buildings enclosing another. The courtyard was an apartment in itself: a group of elementary school kids engaged in a game of “rubber band jumping,” two old ladies sitting on stools eating noodles with the aged vinegar aroma engulfing them, aproned figures hanging up lines of fresh wash in the sun, a mother from the second floor calling for her child to return for lunch. From the outlook of the concrete porch of our first-story apartment, my grandparents and great-grandmother watched me maneuver around this Chinese tableau.

September 15, 2002

5:31 P.M.

A honk from behind jolts me back, and the sound of a little girl’s laughter during that bicycle ride fades away in my mind. I look at the car two inches in front of me, the one two inches behind me. Why am I in such a hurry to go home? Must I keep dreading the ride simply because it is a means to another destination, another goal? I suddenly realize that my anxiousness and preoccupation with completing a task do not help me get anywhere any faster. I let down my hair, turn up the music, wave to my neighbor, and enjoy the day for what it is.

**The Importance of Mentoring Charles Cortwright Ahl**

**The application gave the option to make your own question, so I tried to use this essay to show who I was as a person: smart, a leader, passionate, thoughtful, considerate, among other things.**

Although I had assumed that my extensive knowledge of sailing as a sport would allow me to fulfill my role as coach without much difficulty, I learned immediately that I was much more than an instructor: everything I did had an impact on the kids. J.M. Coetzee writes in his novel Disgrace, “Irony does not escape him: that the one who comes to teach learns the keenest of lessons, while those who come to learn, learn nothing,” and I found the first part of this statement to be true. I am sure that I learned as much about the critical function of a role model as my charges learned how to achieve excellence and act with maturity and sportsmanship in a competitive environment. When you first take a job as a coach, they tell you that it is important not to single out an individual for special treatment, nor disregard another whose obstacles to achievement seem insurmountable, but to impart one’s knowledge upon another is among life’s most rewarding experiences. While I tried to remain equitable in my coaching, it was through the private instruction of a mentally challenged ten-year-old named Patrick that I gained new perspective on the definition of success.

When I first met Patrick, I was quite surprised that he had been allowed to enter the sailing program, as sailing can be a risky undertaking, especially for a child whose autism renders him never fully aware of his surroundings. However, I realized quickly that this was less about becoming a great sailor than it was about finding a touch of normalcy and achievement in a complicated life filled with many medications, endless tests, and a general feeling of inferiority to his peers. I was up to the task, wasn’t I?

I figured that if anything, Patrick's inherent inability to express defiance towards me would make my job simple. Instead, this made it nearly impossible to convey a basic point, as he is unable to fully comprehend emotion and instruction directed towards him. Also, my developed methods of teaching that had helped many other young sailors towards varying degrees of success proved nearly useless with Patrick. I was forced to step away from the experience I had before I could detect a noticeable response from him. I further simplified what was already basic, and realized that the only way to make an impression was through relentless repetition. I spent an hour post-practice with him twice a week to do one-on-one tutoring. We referred to this as "bringing him up to speed,” but it was actually the only time that I could effectively teach him.

It was through my own perseverance that Patrick began to respond, as his brain slowly adapted to the new skills he was, amazingly, learning. The sense of achievement he felt as he started to progress was intense. As he became more expressive towards me and confident in his abilities, I simultaneously had a similar feeling of accomplishment I had not experienced in any athletic competition or academic undertaking. I look forward to continuing with this experience as one that gave me new insight on a different kind of diversity and the importance of what each person brings to the table.

However, the non-monetary benefits of my job only strengthened my original resolve for becoming a sailing coach: to financially support my dream of ski racing at the highest level. I knew when I was hired that my job would provide me with the means I needed, but what I was about to learn was a revelation: like the many coaches who had taught, supported, and challenged me, and whose respect I had always sought, I could assume that role in the lives of others. Having been the studious and dedicated athlete of equally motivated coaches for all of my life, I swapped roles and became the coach and leader of many young sailors whose assortment of athletic, moral, and personal habits was readily subject to my influence.

Reluctantly, Patrick finally put his foot forward through the door of success I had worked so hard to open for him. My experience with him taught me to be more open-minded and made me more perseverant. Coaching him helped me understand that knowledge, alongside tolerance, is the best power to effect change in the world.

**Crossing the Chasm Anonymous**

**What is an experience that affected you, and how has it?**

A crowd of people forms at the entrance of the Eastside High School Gym. A five-foot-eleven, one-hundred-and-sixty-pound, curly-haired freshman shyly makes his way into the sea of faces. Today is tryouts for the Eastside basketball team. Eastside, my home for the next four years, lies in the most socioeconomically challenged area of Gainesville, Florida. It is a school with the highest number of students on free and reduced lunch in the county and also home to an International Baccalaureate program ranked in the top ten in the world. At this moment, however, I did not care about any of that. I had a passion for basketball, and I was ready to try out for the squad.

I made my way through the crowd of athletes, searching for a familiar face. However, I was denied this comfort. I was stunned, and after a quick double-take, I realized that, along with being a complete stranger to the other kids trying out, I was the only white person in the gym. This did not bother me, but much to my surprise, as I navigated through the cluster of people, I could tell it bothered everybody else. I felt the blazing stares of the other kids as shouts echoed through the old gym. Never in my life had I felt like such an outcast. But I decided to ignore this feeling and focus on making the team. By the end of the day, I had achieved my goal and was informed that practice started tomorrow afternoon. Little did I know at that moment, but this day foreshadowed a theme that came to embody my high school experience.

Practice was no different than tryouts. When we did drills, I was the last person included; whenever we scrimmaged, I never was passed the ball. If I was lucky enough to get the ball, and I decided to shoot it, “White boy!” taunts erupted from my teammates. No matter what I did, it was not enough. I became increasingly uncomfortable and frustrated. I began to have doubts about myself. Maybe I was just a lousy basketball player. Why was I only referred to as ‘White boy’? Did I do something to deserve this coldness and the invisibility with which I was cloaked?

As much as I didn’t want to believe it, the answers to these questions were a direct result of my race. The harsh truth was that I was experiencing reverse discrimination. I had always read about equality and civil rights, but as a white male in America, I did not understand the depth of the feelings associated with racial discrimination until I was a living target of it. I was a perfectly nice person and a solid basketball player, but my teammates’ preconceived notions about people like me created a large chasm, and it was my challenge to climb out and become a contributing member of the team. The chemistry needed to change, and I understood that I had to take the initiative.

Despite the way I was being treated, I decided to muster up the guts and go out of my way to show my teammates that our differences were only skin deep. Slowly I became more accepted. Soon enough, we all went out to dinner after games, I invited my teammates over to my house to watch football, and by the end of the season, after I made a basket, a shout of, “Nice shot, Curly!”came from my fellow players. I was finally something other than “White Boy.” I had a real nickname; I was accepted. The chasm was no longer so deep.

We are all seniors now, and these guys are some of my best friends. But making close friends is not all that I gained from playing basketball at Eastside. My experience as the only white player on an all-black team put me in shoes I never could have worn otherwise. I was feeling what African-Americans had felt for centuries. This experience literally put me into the stories we read in history books. We preach about diversity and equality, but sometimes we overlook what it really means. My experience on the Eastside basketball team forced me to understand on a deep, personal level the importance of these values. I realized that as much as we try to ignore it, racism is still a problem. This realization inspired me to run for Student Body President, in the hope of fusing together the diverse populations of Eastside and bridging the chasm that divided us. My initial frustrations as the token white player on an all-black team catapulted me to a position in which I could unite Eastside students under our school colors of orange and green instead of black and white. Now, when I walk into the crowded Eastside gym, shouts of “What’s up, Curly?” echo through the old dusty walls. I am finally accepted. The chasm has closed.

**The Race Henry Fowlkes Weatherly Jr**

**What is a significant moment in your life?**

Sweat, soiled by dust and tears, seeped down my body as I thrust myself forward. With every breath, my lungs collapsed on themselves. While oxygen poured in through my gaping mouth, I still craved more air. Foot after foot, I trampled down the grassy hill amongst a crowd of runners too absorbed with their own race to pay me heed. Each runner carried a look of determination that felt noticeably absent from my face. Seconds into the race, the cruel grasp around my throat clenched harder with every pounding step. My muscles, which usually respond to my commands with an ardent desire, began to droop with weight and scream with pain as they lifted my exhausted legs. Groups of parents surrounded me, cheering on their little runners, but no one cried my name.

As the race endlessly continued, the cheers of eager parents slurred into the fog of my mind. I stopped noticing the rusty, battered playground on my right and the infinite expanse of forest on my left; I only saw the battered dirt that lay before my feet. Step after step after step, I fought ahead against the furious desires of my flesh. The other runners, whom I once trailed by a thread, now pulsed forwards at a pace that I could no longer match. Recognizing my solitude, I cleared the haze occupying my thoughts long enough to realize the significance of my situation. I was last.

With this thought, the fog of fatigue and confusion violently settled inside my head as my body lost its focus. Without a sound, my body crumpled behind a large green shed beside the path. A boy and his mother walking by paused for a moment, gave me a look of concerned curiosity, then continued with their conversation as they walked away from me. After a few moments of darkness, the sun’s bright rays filtered through my squinted eyelashes, igniting a small flame of awareness within my mind. With hesitant fear, I picked myself up, brushing flecks of dirt from my uniform. I slowly stumbled towards the tent where my team would gather after they finished the race.

Driven by fear and apprehension, I approached my coach, while wiping away the muddled tears. I failed to meet his expectations; I failed to finish the race; I failed myself.

Two years later, I perched on the edge of the starting line, quivering like an arrow. Over a hundred other anxious runners stood beside me. As the gun sounded, my body lunged forwards ahead of the other racers. Unlike the previous race, my mind focused on the path before me. Bend after bend, my legs pounded forward, churning like machines. I darted around the other runners that spotted the trail ahead of me. Occasionally I glanced at them, their faces twisted into demented scowls from the agony of running. My opponents’ weakness added fuel to my body as I blitzed onward. After a few minutes, I passed by the fateful green shed. With a brief grin and a silent shout, I surged ahead, digging energy from my newfound confidence.

At the one mile marker, the race assistant yelled out my time: “Five forty-six!” I was halfway done. I forced my mind to concentrate on the race at hand, ignoring the distractions around me. The trail meandered into the forest, and the soil gradually grew darker. Ahead, the path rounded an open-air barn then looped backward. As I rounded the horse stables, I began to pass by my teammates. Instead of shouting out words of encouragement, we would exchange glances and nods of approval to save our breath, then continue running. Steadily, the end of the race approached. Realizing this, I began to accelerate, passing more runners in the process.

As I approached the finish line, a crowd of parents and team mates gathered to cheer me on. Cries of “Go Henry!” and “You’re almost there” filled my ears as I clambered to the end. My body bordered on collapsing as I passed through the gate, which read “12:02.” The racing staff herded me past the gate and through the line of flags behind it. A woman handed me a small, ripped piece of white paper. Coughing, I staggered out of the chute and fell down onto the grassy lawn a few feet away. There was only one number written on the piece of paper -- 3rd-- a personal triumph of body and mind that marked my significant improvement.

**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.

**Remix Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

I sat down on the bench, apprehensive. I hadn’t touched the ivory keys in almost eight years. Instead, I had actively avoided them, treasuring instead the strings of my violin. In debates I claimed that it was harder to play my instrument, belittling the plunking keys. Yet now I found myself seeking the power of the piano again, wanting music that was its own partner.

I began by sounding out the melody with my right hand. As the silky notes glided through the silence, I was reminded of my violin.

This is where I belong. I am a violinist, a purveyor of sweet melodies. This was where I took tentative steps away from the strict notes and rhythms I had adhered to as a young pianist, as I discovered that music comes from the emotions spiraling from the thin black lines. On the violin, I can close my eyes, enthralled by the music, exploring to match the compositions racing through my head. I have spent Friday nights improvising with pianists, cellists, guitarists -- whomever I can find. I have been a street musician, spreading the joy that I already give myself. The first time I wandered downtown, I gathered a motley group of an accordionist and a cellist. We unpacked in an alley between two quaint cafes, away from questioning eyes, amidst the pink daisies of early spring. As we emerged onto the sidewalk, a chilling wind raced against our dancing fingers, countering the warmth of the afternoon sun settling on our skin. And we played. Passersby -- a wrinkled man, a dancing little girl, a gangly preteen -- stopped and stared, occasionally leaving spare change in exchange for the smiles that sprouted on their faces. As our improvisations managed to cut into their everyday lives -- lives that had been absorbed in their separate paths -- I found a pastime in the streets. The purity of a melody slicing through the air simply cannot be underestimated.

Yet as the notes swelled throughout the room, I heard the force of the piano. There was no violin. Instead, I switched to the lower line of the music. The notes of the left hand outlined a beat that matched the sound of the drums.

A year ago, a friend gave me his old drumsticks. I immediately raced to the old drum set in the student center to start banging away. Fortunately, no one was around to hear me miss beats and drop my sticks. I was playing as a violinist, not a drummer, without resolving the two instruments. My initial attempts occurred at 6:00 AM to hide behind the solitude of the sleeping campus. Eventually, my confidence, if not my skill, progressed to allow early arrivals to hear my offbeat screeches.

Yet I heard the smoothness between the piano’s consistent beat. There were no drums. Together, my two hands created the perfect harmonies of the barbershop quartet I had started a year ago, born from a friendship formed in a theory class. We began by wandering around the school at lunchtime, singing our separate ways, until the next bell rang to shoo us off to class.

But here the music will not end. As I began to deviate from the sheet music in front of me, I knew that I could delight in my right hand as long as my left hand stayed steady. The piano was only a remix, a compilation, of what I had done before. In time, my playing of the piano came into its own, becoming a springboard in itself to bigger and better things.

**Raised in North Carolina Anonymous**

**General Supplement Essay Question: Why do you feel Duke would be a good fit for you?**

I feel that I have had many advantages as a result of being raised in North Carolina. The weather is moderate, there are beautiful coastal areas, but most importantly, being in North Carolina means being close to Duke. As a born and bred North Carolinian, conversations about rivalry did not center around United States and North Korea. Instead, I was raised to understand that when Duke played UNC in basketball, it was a serious business.

The first time I ever visited the Duke campus was when I was ten years old. One of my father's business contractors gave my family tickets for a home basketball game in the Cameron Indoor Stadium. The seats were not great, but I barely noticed. I was enamored with the surreal feeling that I got when I arrived at the campus. I felt like I was in a place that was brimming with excitement, and passion, and liveliness, about sports but also about science, literature, and the arts. The student body did not seem to be content with polite complacency, but rather, I could see that the Duke community embraced enthusiasm and eagerness. I certainly enjoyed the experience, and it stuck in my mind for years later. The next time I was on the Duke campus was for a much different purpose. In February of my freshman year of high school, my school’s Speech and Debate Team traveled to the University to attend the Annual Blue Devil Classic Debate Tournament. That day solidified my path for the future. I knew Duke was the school for me. Everything from the gothic architecture of the buildings, to the Chapel’s shades of smooth slate-gray stone, to the blue canopy swings dispersed throughout the campus, all gave me the feeling that here, I was home.

I am undoubtedly drawn to Duke's vast accomplishments, the school's strong, progressive mix of academics and compassion, and the top-rated medical and engineering programs. What sets Duke apart from other schools is that the community is welcoming while simultaneously pushing its students to achieve their greatest heights. I can honestly say that spending time on the Duke campus has made me reconsider my place and my potential in this world. I am not even a Duke student yet but I already feel empowered by the university, and experience a sense of pride with the mention of the school. I believe that a Duke education will lead me to expand my mindset, bring me to a higher state of being, and therefore, I can truly excel and have a meaningful impact on our world. I feel as though I am a Blue Devil already. The values of Duke University run deep inside me, to the point where I bleed blue.

**More Than Books Anonymous**

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

My childhood dreams were built beside a bookshelf. Sitting cross-legged on the library floor immersed in science fiction, I dreamt of time-traveling tesseracts, of machines intelligent enough to raise families, of lunar colonies equipped with modern plumbing capabilities. It’s been over seven years since then, but I still pass the hours beside a bookshelf, although this time, I’m the one filling it, one newly labeled book at a time.

Or at least that’s what I’m supposed to do. At times, the pressing urge to read overcomes common sense. My library “Volunteer” badge safely hidden in my pocket, I relive my childhood, desperately catching words as they leap off the pages only to materialize in my imagination as physical objects.

Fridays always carry the musty scent of worn book covers. Books silently cry out my name as I search for them, armed only with a hierarchy of dots and digits I’ve written in my heart. 100 for Plato, 200 for Islam, 300 for Odysseus… Fingers grown adept at handling fragility, I gently flip through the yellowing pages, scanning for signs of damage. A minute passes. Then another. Seeing no evident need for book repair, I cross out “TESSARO, KATHLEEN” off the inventory list with a Sharpie. The sharp odor of the marker jars me from the peaceful lull of work. Yet, a certain feeling of serenity remains.

Sometimes, when I'm working behind the circulation desk, I see the return flap open, a rush of sunlight, a book drop into the return tray, the briefest appearance of someone peering into the slit. The worried face of a mother. The weary face of a retiree. The stern face of a lawyer. Excited, I take a guess before looking at what was returned. A guide to parenting? A guide to gardening? Sherlock Holmes? And although I'm rarely right, I can at least smile at the fact that I'm not the only one with overdue fines.

When gray clouds gather, I love lying there alone on the sofa beside the window, watching the orchard trees bend in the wind, listening to the drizzling rain beat their quirky rhythms on the rooftop. The library is my shield against Thursday thunderstorms and Monday melancholies, and I can always find refuge when I seek it. Not surprisingly, I know all the librarians by face; when they wake me from my nap in the armchair behind the Mystery Section, their smiles are the first things I see.

In the clarity of such moments, I realize how I’ve lived the last four years of my life in a blur, rushing from orchestra rehearsals to debate tournaments, from English class to math club meetings. I’ve made good judgments, and I’ve made poor ones. I’ve experienced success, and I’ve also endured setbacks that almost convinced me to give it all up. But never, until this year, have I learned to slow down, to stop, to listen, to appreciate the small details in everyday life.

My early time spent with books deeply shaped my love of reading, and in some ways, I’m still the same ten-year-old kid who finishes a new novel overnight, who renews a hold just to reread a favorite book for the fifth time. Yet, after a year of volunteering at the library, I've never felt more attentive, more at peace, more alive. Those quiet moments alone, among both written and unwritten stories, have brought balance to my life and taught me to treasure every moment of it, especially as the last days of high school slowly slip away. After all, the stories that speak loudest to us sometimes don’t speak at all.

**Wrestling with Literature 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?**

Out of breath and hurting all over, I drip with sweat in the midst of a six-minute wrestling bout with my friend, James. While fighting on the bottom and gasping for air, I am reminded of Einstein’s words: “When you are courting a nice girl an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder a second seems like an hour.” When I read “The Aeneid” the hours pass in what seems like mere minutes, but when I am locked in James’s agonizing corkscrew for the third time, leaving me in a position too vulgar to describe, minutes feel like an eternity. Sensing my pain, our coach mercifully calls us off the mat. With a sigh, we slump down against the wall. Through strained breaths, James and I take our minds off the mat and discuss our recent literature in-class essay. As vehemently as we struggled on the mat we argued over the concept of free will on the Pequod; Melville’s epic distracts us from pain in the most uncomfortable of places. Whether our dialogue brings us to Orwell’s Airstrip One or Fitzgerald’s West Egg, literature gives us respite from the stresses of ankle picks and hip tosses.

In sports I experience pure euphoria, the physical manifestation of triumph. But I feel most comfortable with a book in my hand sitting on our back porch. I feel engaged, stimulated, and at times inexplicable happiness, perhaps not a visceral joy but a deeper sense of satisfaction. Although most literature can be enjoyed without intense scrutiny, some authors such as Faulkner and Hawthorne require an intellectual pause to decipher their convoluted sentences. Indeed, Latin requires even more effort. Authors from Apuleius to Ovid require a pencil in hand just to distinguish a subject, verb, and direct object. The unregulated and open sentence structure makes an afternoon of Latin reading a bit more work than simple pleasure. I developed a cipher to guide myself: a geometric code in which the circles delineate subjects, the underlines single out verbs, and the boxes take note of infinitives and gerunds. When these notes scribbled into the margins take shape, I feel exhilarated. I finally see the artistry of Latin in chiasmus or the ululating nature of hexameter, the true majesty of Latin.

The artistry of Latin is not only limited to aesthetics but also includes the values of loyalty and family that resonate with me. In literature we follow the exploits of heroes and villains, learning by proxy from their successes and foibles. I sometimes find myself wishing that I could carry my family on my back out of a burning city, like Aeneas fleeing Troy. Instead, too young to make an impact, I watched my sister suffer from the consequences of a teen pregnancy. She never completed community college and for many years she hid the fact that she was living in section 8 housing with no running water, adding two more children in five years. Similarly facing difficult circumstances, my father suffered bouts of unemployment and underemployment because he did not finish college. His ordeal of moving from job to job during the great recession convinced me not only to pursue higher education because I truly love it but also because of the security that hopefully comes with it; I will be the first of my siblings to attend college.

Just as I must think diligently when I read, so too must I stop thinking when I step on the wrestling mat or on the football field. Not a thought can cross my mind; everything I do is for my teammates. As much as I like this camaraderie, I too like the camaraderie of characters. Achilles, Icarus, and Billy Pilgrim comprise my literary team. Together we assemble against Vercingetorix and Smaug. Although I relish the feeling of Friday Night Lights shining on the field, I feel most content spending an evening with Plato.

**Garam-miso Lasagna Terrance Alexander**

**In addition to the essay you have written for the Common Application, please write an essay of about 500 words (no more than 650 words and no less than 250 words). Write about a person, event, or experience that helped you define one of your values or in some way changed how you approach the world.**

Being Indian -- and I am 100% South Indian by birth -- is not about Bollywood or cricket for me. Rather, my culture revolves around food. Few countries can lay claim to cuisine influenced by Anglo-Saxons, Mongols, Turks, and Persians. No other country uses India's hundreds of spices. Having learned to appreciate a multitude of seasonings, I have a deeper appreciation for life's subtleties. And knowing that new cultural influences can spur new subtleties, I am always eager to excite my taste buds with new ethnic fusions.

A few years ago, my family was cooking Italian béchamel sauce for our lasagna. I remember chasing my brother around the kitchen and, in the process, accidentally knocking Indian garam masala into the sauce. Seeing my folly, my brother impishly stirred in Japanese miso paste, deciding that a second kind of Asian zing was needed. We thought the entire dish was ruined, but we still let our father sample the monstrosity. When he proclaimed it delicious, my entire family dived in. Ever since, we won't eat our lasagna any other way. We've experimented since then, tossing kimchi on nachos and tandoori paneer on bruschetta. This is how the cultural experience should be, beyond my family's kitchen. Like bizarre flavors deliciously combining, cultures should mingle to promote learning through interaction.

Few of the individuals I have met have been exposed to extra-cultural food fusions: even in today's hyper-connected world, the truth is that not many people care about discovering customs beyond their own. Society assumes that my religion, rituals, and even spending habits are somehow inextricable from South Indian stereotypes. I've had friends ask if I dine on monkey brains, practice Hinduism, speak Hindi, eat curry every day, or hoard my money. In reality, I am a vegetarian and a devout Christian, am fluent in Tamil, and spend money like I eat samosa chaat -- *fast*. Before they really get to know me, my friends assume that my mother and father are tiger parents -- relentless, goal-driven disciplinarians -- merely because we are Indian. My teachers have asked me if I felt that Miss America, who was an Indian-American, deserved that title. Presumptions like these are mostly innocent missteps -- but they barely approach who I really am.

I have never been bound by attempts to categorize people based on race: limiting my vision only to Indian culture does not let me experience all that the world has to offer. At Princeton, I'll honor my heritage, motivating other South Indians to embrace their identities and ignore expectations for them to fill the "Indian" mold -- because, in reality, there isn't an Indian mold. I'll inspire others to use their education to find what sets them apart. I'll encourage them to dabble in dissimilar cultures and sample diverse foods, not just because doing so is right, but because doing so is enjoyable. After all, variety (like garam-miso lasagna) gives flavor to life.

**Lipe White Wheat Leapers Terrance Alexander**

**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.**

"S-P-H-E-R-I-C-A-L," I declared. Flashing a grin to the 600-person audience, I glanced at the ink stains dotting my clasped hands. These hands had suffered for months practicing obscure words from the dictionary. One person away from winning the county bee, I felt destined to continue to the Scripps National Spelling Bee. A sharp "Ting!" rang, interrupting my daydream. I heard a judge proclaim, "The correct spelling is S-P-H-E-R-I-C-A-L." The glaring stage lights taunted me, and I watched confusion overtake my parents' faces. I had pronounced the R in "spherical" as an L: "S-P-H-E-L-I-C-A-L." Simmering tears gathered in my eyes. Scurrying off the stage, I crumpled up my participatory ribbon.

Although that spelling bee happened four years ago, it serves to remind me of my uniqueness. I have lived in Southern Asia and on a Mediterranean Isle, resulting in my peculiar accent. This amalgam creates my lisp of the letter R, which has often singled me out from my peers.

In elementary school, a speech pathologist made me see this lisp as a disability.

"Ripe white wheat reapers reap ripe white wheat right," I'd say.

"Again!" she'd relentlessly respond.

With less determination, I'd repeat "Ripe white wheat reapers reap ripe white wheat right. Enough!" With all the time wasted on one letter, I learned to avoid words with R, even my name.

In the ninth grade, I agonized over my every word. Did Mr. Roricks notice my lisp? Did my friends discern it? With these fears, I struggled to break the flaw for a long time. For months, I dashed home from school to practice monotonous R tongue twisters, but I showed little progress. I spoke impassively, concentrating on enunciating my Rs normally.

This endeavor continued until I realized how phony my articulated Rs sounded during a day in my sophomore year. Shoving through my school cafeteria's lunch line, I heard a brittle voice piercing the bedlam. I turned to see my friend Kaarin animatedly screech "OMG! I totally RUINED my hair, like, it's raining outside?" I inwardly groaned. Kaarin spoke flawless English in her Estonian accent, but often grumbled that she felt foolish when speaking to her classmates. She abandoned her perfectly understandable speech to imitate a stereotypical teenager. Frankly, I thought her façade was ridiculous. I walked towards her, intent on telling her to quit trying to be someone she was not. Abruptly, I realized my own hypocrisy. If I tried to change the way I spoke simply to please others, I had little right to find fault in Kaarin. And if Kaarin sounded laughable, I wondered how silly I seemed when I enunciated my Rs.

I began to realize that I communicated better when I relaxed and spoke naturally. I chose to celebrate my difference by unreservedly expressing myself. Although I still lisp, my lack of self-consciousness improves my speech, freeing me to passionately ask questions and eagerly converse. The way I pronounce R defines me. It says that while I'm not perfect, I value myself as I am. As for the crumpled participatory ribbon, it sits on my windowsill today. It reminds me that I've matured from an anxious boy who loathed his lisp to a confident young man who embraces his pronunciation of S-P-H-E-L-I-C-A-L.

**Lessons from the Bench Rebekka Strom**

**Describe how a passion or individual talent has shaped you into the person you are today.**

*The dazzling stage lights blocked out the members of the audience, momentarily blinding me. With sweaty palms, I bowed deeply towards the crowd, symbolically expressing my gratitude. I walked slowly off the wooden stage, my long, white gown swishing delicately behind me. Back in the wings, I took a deep breath and massaged my shoulders, reflecting on the events of the last few moments. I had just played Schubert’s striking “Erlkönig” in my county’s annual scholarship competition. I had devoted the last few months to this very moment, dedicating two to three hours of daily practice. Pausing backstage, I reminisced about the lessons I had learned from the bench over the past twelve years.*

I began taking piano lessons when I was five years old. My parents later told me that the instrument’s ivory keys, which sounded so sweet one moment and so intense the next, mesmerized me. I longed to lovingly stroke those eighty-eight keys and convey my emotions to my audience, expressively connecting with the music on a personal level I could only dream of. What began as an innocent desire to create beautiful music transformed into a profound passion, fueled by sincere focus and dedication.

I feel that playing the piano has developed me as a person, and each time I sit down to play, I learn new lessons from the bench. Music has given me the desire to strive for excellence in anything that I attempt. From enrolling in advanced classes to exerting myself in my daily workouts, my ardent desire for precision encourages me to attempt new tasks with a clear perspective. Yet, music has also taught me patience and acceptance. I avidly continue studying the components of a piece until I find exactitude in my playing. I have also learned not to become worked up when I miss a note or mistakenly interpret the cantible style of a measure. Each time I encounter a challenging rhythmic section or a rapid chordal progression, I allow my mind to search for a fresh viewpoint as I condense my problems into manageable sections. Whenever I become discouraged, I am reminded of my teacher’s straightforward mantra, “Simplify, pre-plan, and see the perspective,” I regroup my thoughts, take a breath, and try the section again. The lessons of dedication and focus learned at the bench have impacted me so strongly that I have transferred these teachings into my personal development. My fierce desire for excellence is also evident in my academic achievements, as I maintained a 4.0 GPA while enrolled in college classes during my senior year. When discouraged over a difficult subject or one of life’s challenges, I stimulate my mind and body for success as I remind myself of the rewards which ensue from hard work, patience, and dedicated focus. Simplification is perhaps one the greatest lessons I have mastered. When demanding circumstances arise, I challenge myself to attack the difficulty one step at a time, just like I tackled “Erlkönig” one measure at a time. Simplification provides me with the clarity to solve complicated problems.

*The baritone voice of the emcee rang out throughout the concert hall, inviting the evening’s participants to take the stage for the awards ceremony. As the names were called, I stood quietly, overwhelmed in my private thoughts. Suddenly, my name was announced, and a giant sparkling trophy was placed in my arms. I had won the first prize scholarship, and I was elated! Amid the flash of the photographers, I turned to glance at the black Steinway grand piano. Wheeled to the back of the stage, it rested there majestically, the glare of the stage lights dancing on its gleaming ebony body. I gazed fondly at the instrument’s ivory keys, longing to touch them once more, and slowly smiled, vowing to remember this moment forever.*

After years of practicing music, I have developed an intense bond with my instrument, a bond that has led me to strive fervently for improvements in my personal growth. Playing the piano is not merely a vocation, but a passion. Every evening, I yearn to pour my heart and soul into those eighty-eight keys. From its tiny hammers to its brass pedals, the piano has become my love, my teacher, and my greatest joy. Whatever obstacles may hinder my path, I am confident in my ability to overcome them, using all that I learned in all those lessons from the bench.

**My Hidden Story Monica Gonzalez-Cejo**

**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.**

If I had a dollar for every time I heard, “Wait, you aren’t white?” I would probably be a millionaire. Unfortunately, dollars do not shoot at me whenever I hear that question. To clarify, I am half Puerto Rican, half Cuban, and half I-have-blonde-hair-and-am-really-pale. We have a running joke in the family that all the Hispanic was used up on everyone else, and by the time I came around there was none left. Now, this is not to say I see my appearance as a burden. Frankly, it is a characteristic I have come to hold dear.

When I was a kid, my mother simultaneously taught me to speak Spanish and English. I remember clearly the many little books she would share with me, each full of new words and phrases, and how there seemed to be an endless supply of them. On top of this, I enjoyed playing a game with my older sister called repeat-everything-Nicky says-until-she-starts-wondering-why-I-am-alive. “¡Para de repetir lo que digo!” and “¿Dónde están las galletas?” became two of my favorite phrases. Once I started school, I discovered that most of my classmates spoke only one language: English. I did not understand. Why had they not learned both? My Spanish felt like a secret superpower. Later, my parents explained that I had a remarkable culture to thank for my bilingual gift.

With my heritage firmly in my heart, over time I began to realize something: every year, I visited my cousins and family in Puerto Rico, and every year people there looked at me in a strange way. I did not understand it until it struck me one day in vivid clarity. I was *different.* I was missing characteristics they all had, and it frustrated me. I began to ask my parents why I had different hair and different eyes. They always answered the same: you were born this way! “But why?” I asked over and over again. This cycle repeated until one day I stumbled upon a photograph. It was of all of my cousins and me, piled in my aunt’s kitchen making all sorts of goofy expressions, and it struck me again. I was *different.* Except this time it occurred to me in the most amazing way possible: I was *unique*. All my cousins were unique in their own ways. I realized that there was no prescribed way I had to look to be proud of my Hispanic heritage.

I will never forget the look of surprise I received over the summer while volunteering at a local hospital. I was helping out in the ER as a guide when a Hispanic mother came in, frantically wanting to know what was wrong with her ailing little boy. There was no translator in sight. As one of the nurses desperately searched for help, I began asking the mother questions in Spanish to calm her down and understand what was wrong with the boy. The nurse looked bewildered but began telling me what questions to ask in order to get their history documented. Once the official translator arrived, the nurse thanked me, pointing out how astonished she was that I was Hispanic. I told her I was very grateful for the experience because I got to truly help in the ER, as well as break down a stereotype.

I may not fulfill the expectations most have for what a Hispanic “should” look like, but my heritage is in my bones. It is my wonderful little secret just waiting to burst out with every person I meet. Instead of them already knowing where I come from, I get to SHOW them. My appearance has taught me endless lessons and I am grateful each day for them. I love being Hispanic, I love being different, and I would not trade either trait for the world.

**Music Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

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

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

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

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

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

**The Box Anonymous**

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

Staring out at the rain pouring down onto the sidewalk beside the airport exit, I thought one thing. *This is foreign territory*. Just moments before, I had found myself facing down a horde of about 60 squealing EXO (a Kpop idol group) fangirls. This was my first impression of Korea. Reeling with shock, I labeled this event in my head as something that "Did Not Fit" in my carefully kept box titled "My Identity." Everything was neatly organized and filed away in my metaphorical box. I quietly played the flute in concert band. *Check.*I maintained steady good grades, and always completed work on time. *Check.*I knew a little Korean, but not enough to alienate me from my American friends. *Check.*This version of myself was all that I had ever known – and I had no desire to venture outside the box. However, now that I had moved, I had no choice. I had officially gone rogue.

Although a South Korean citizen, I had never visited my mother country in all my 16 years of living in America. I was now permanently living here. I ached for Seattle in a way that I felt nobody could understand. I vowed to never call my new apartment home. I realized just how much I didn't fit in either country. As a full-blooded Korean, I look as if I should speak Korean fluently. However, I was raised as an American. I stood in class every day and recited the Pledge of Allegiance with my fellow classmates. Remembering this as I stepped out into the rain, I felt like an imposter. Who was I? I had no idea.

At first, I was horrified that my new life was so insolent as to not recognize the rules of "My Identity." I had always been the student that teachers knew they could trust to study and turn in work *before* the due date. Now, I was a student with no reputation. Not only that, but there was no concert band where I could stay invisible, and my new friends spoke limited English. Just like that, my carefully kept box fell apart. For the first time in my life, I was doing things without planning them.

I may not have needed to be invisible, but I did miss the community that came along with being in a musical group. One day, I decided to start an orchestra at my school, and gathered up a group of people with the help of a friend. We received permission, and thus the first completely student run club at our school was born. At my counselor's urging, I applied for student council. To my surprise, I was admitted. During class, I began to raise my hand without obsessively planning my answer to absolutely make sure I was right. It was okay to be wrong, I found, as long as I kept trying. It was at my school where I found people exactly like me, people who were also caught between two cultures. My classmates understood me, and I found that my two cultures didn't have to be separate. I joined Model UN, where I realized that I actually love talking and debating with people. Once, a friend told me that I was the most outgoing and confident girl in our grade. I was taken aback, but I realized that I had truly changed a lot.

Now, I don't categorize things in my mind's box. A person cannot be filed away neatly in categories and checklists. I have started calling my new apartment "home," and I've found the fragile balance between my two cultures. I have grown up. I am free of the box.

**Pen Pals Caroline Wang**

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

“So many emails say so little,” writes Norma Cone in her first letter to me. Her penmanship incorporates elaborate loops and smoothly conjoined letters from years of perfecting her cursive. In comparison, my script is poorly developed, a reflection of my generation’s dependency on keyboards to mask our flaws. Still I write.

Norma is an ailing senior citizen and I am her volunteer companion, a position I signed up for two years ago and have happily returned to every summer since. For twenty hours each vacation week, I embark on my quest to eradicate the mountains of clutter that occupy every surface of her apartment. When summer ends and my free time becomes consumed, I find a new environment to continue my adventures with Norma – the pages of a letter. When I scrawl my replies with a retractable ballpoint pen, a childish relative to the beautiful fountain pen Norma uses, I want to share as much of myself with her as I can. Whereas anyone can peek at my Twitter page and glean a quick life update, Norma receives the unabridged story packed with details, emotion, and self-reflection. I tell her about my national volleyball team’s success during our tournament in Washington, DC while gushing about how I was in the same city as our political role model, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I recount the events leading up to my recent concussion, sharing my frustration in my apparent lack of progress. I even offer updates on friends I once brought as guests to her apartment, reassuring her that I will never forget the “value of friendship” she so emphasizes.

The magic of letter writing is in how it prompts us to dig beneath the surface and pursue lines of thought that might never make it into casual conversation. The more I write to Norma, the more I feel pleasantly detached from the hurried realm of social media and instant messaging. The warm, honest communication reflected in letters is representative of the communication I value – meaningful conversation that involves active sharing and lasts more than a fleeting moment. There is no word limit to confine the range of my thoughts. Instead, the blankness of the sheet of paper in front of me, like the first time Norma opened her apartment door to greet me, invites me to explore. As I pick up my pen, that’s exactly what I do. I roam every inch of my ideas until they all bear an ink stain similar to the smear on the edge of my palm when I am finished for the night.

Though I try to keep my writing light, sometimes everyday stresses seep into my ink and are easily sensed by someone like Norma. In response, she begs me to “study hard but still have some fun,” advice that has stuck with me. Whenever I am feeling overtaxed, I find my “fun” in writing to Norma. As my pen glides across the page like a figure skater on ice, it pulls me along with it and creates a sense of weightlessness from my daily routine. Writing gives me a peaceful and quiet venue in which, for once, I feel in complete control over everything. I am no longer bothered by the trivialities or mayhem of the day, but rather am free to express myself however I please. While my studies and activities detract from the time I spend on paper, the indescribable feeling of watching my thoughts manifest themselves on a page constantly beckons me to return – and I always do.

Inside of these letters, I am perfectly content. When my ink pen scribbles down the final words, I release a sigh of satisfaction; for the time being, I have shared as much as I can with Norma. Clutching my finished letter in my hand, I feel an unparalleled sense of contentment now that I have found for my latest words a permanent home.

**Passing the Torch Nannette Boakye**

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

“It is your turn” were the four words that I, at age 12, feared would be uttered from my mother’s lips. I knew that is was only a matter of time until my mother would send me off to the Dome Market, my local market in Ghana, to purchase the “foodstuffs” that were needed for our household. It was only a matter of time before I would enter womanhood.

I paced back and forth on the vast area of land where the market would be held on Sunday to prepare myself for my “test.” The terrain seemed endless when vacated of the thousands of merchants who carried metal basins filled with goods on their heads to their tables, where they loudly bargained and bartered with the townspeople. I looked down at the ground and found thousands of different shoe imprints, all left from the thousands of people who had gathered here last weekend, but luckily I had memorized my mother’s steps from years of following her through the market every Sunday.

I paid close attention to the way she always inspected the “foodstuffs” at each table before proceeding the bargain with the vendor to get a better deal. It was enthralling to watch my mother never go over budget each week and sometimes return home with more money than she had the previous week. In Ghanaian society, this skill made a woman a woman.

On Sunday, she passed me the torch as she handed me a list of items and a wallet with the grocery money. With my mother’s blessing, I anxiously headed off to the market, knowing that I must return with all the items on the list and some change. When I finally reached the edge of the market, I could not turn back, and my inability to succumb to fear overpowered my doubts. I made my way to my mother’s most loyal market sellers and was commended for shopping on my own at such a young age. My mission was completed in two hours, but my mother would be the judge of whether I had passed my “test.”

Although the bags I lifted home were heavy, I walked with ease, not only because I had met the goal, but also because I had found confidence in myself. In my own way, I had found what it meant to be a woman. Being a woman was more than being a good bargainer at the market; it was about the ability to take on a new challenge, and to find the inner confidence and resilience to meet the task at hand. To be strong, independent, and risk-taking for the sake of yourself, or even for your household, was to become a woman.

When I got home, my mother congratulated me on successfully completing my “test.” I had not only proven to her, but also to myself that I was ready to embark on my journey of maturity.

**The American Flag Lionel M. Gumireddy**

**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.**

“Please rise for the national anthem and the presentation of the colors.” Immediately, the thousands of people attending this Memorial Day program rise in reverent silence. It’s 9:30 in morning, the sun illuminates the Star-Spangled Banner, and the wind lifts Her gently for all to see. It’s go time.

“Guard, A-ten-HUT!” The energy that has built up in my diaphragm unleashes as my voice breaks the stillness. All eyes turn to the cadets that comprise the color guard: to the Pennsylvania flag-bearer on my left; to the two flanking riflemen; and to the American flag rippling brightly, anchored to my arm.

“Carry, COLORS!” The Pennsylvania flag-bearer and I hoist our flags up, and the riflemen lift their weapons to their shoulders, all in perfect synchronization.

“Forward, MARCH!” Together, we step off, shoulder to shoulder. We march as a team, relying on each other’s pace to stay in step as we maneuver towards the audience’s front and center.

“Guard, HALT! Present, COLORS!” We immediately stop. The Pennsylvania Flag dips to a precise 45 degree angle, the rifles move crisply to the saluting position, and the American Flag stands proudly in all Her glory. I hear the snare drums roll, and I feel a tingle down my spine, as the band begins to play.

The National Anthem concludes, and we head out. I dismiss the guard, and immediately a “SIR, YES, SIR” erupts from the other three cadets and resounds across the field. We pack our equipment, and I commend them on a job superbly done. This ceremony was the two riflemen’s first, and I think how far they have come since I taught them the basics at their first practice several months prior.

My thoughts turn to my own first year in AFJROTC when I learned that, in addition to other services, our unit provided color guards for different events around the community. I was sold--I wanted the honor of carrying the American flag during the Presentation Ceremony.

The first drill practice came around; that day, I learned how to stand at attention, how to execute different facing movements, how to salute. The next week: how to march, bear the flags, and carry a rifle. Weeks of training accumulated into months of commitment, and under the commanders’ seemingly contradictory combination of patience and strictness, my knowledge of drill flourished. At last, I could participate in color guards at various functions, award ceremonies, and football games; over time, I grew more and more experienced.

The next year, I joined Advanced Drill, commanded an Armed Regulation team, and voluntarily helped teach the first-years. It was at this point that I began to advance my leadership skills, as well as to develop an appreciation for helping others learn and for passing on my abilities to the following generations. When I was appointed Color Guard Commander, my roles as teacher and leader increased, and my skills continued to evolve. I have since learned how to work with others, how to give orders without sounding bossy, and most importantly, how to direct a team to accomplish a goal. My confidence, in both myself and my cadets, has strengthened. In turn, I have earned their trust and that of my superiors.

This year, my instructors appointed me Unit Commander, and they expected me to step down from Color Guard Commander. In response, I explained that I would rather forego command of the unit. (Fortunately, it did not reach that point.) To me, there is no greater honor than carrying the American flag, and I will continue to do so as long as possible.

**Firecracker Moments 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.**

Quiet as thieves, Diego and I slipped unnoticed from the boisterous dining room full of clinking glasses and roaring parents into the warm Guatemalan night. It was the middle of the dry season but the air was heavy with the smell of sulfur. Snippets of conversation and laughter escaped over the high walls and barbed wire that surrounded the houses of our neighbors. Pushing our way through a stand of banana trees, we arrived at the edge of the canyon. Fireworks streaked the night sky in every direction, illuminating the villages below. With each passing minute, their intensity increased, reminding us that midnight was almost upon us.

As we raced back to Diego’s house, partygoers from the whole neighborhood came pouring out of their houses. Our families joined them in lining the streets with boxes of Roman candles and rockets, and outrageously long strands of Chinese firecrackers. Neighbors emerged from behind their walls and joined us in celebration, all of us merging into one great street party.

The countdown to midnight began. Five. Four. *Tres! Dos! Uno!* The night erupted in color with thousands of explosions. A deafening roar drowned out our shouts of Feliz Navidad. Shreds of firecracker paper rained down on us as we stumbled, teary-eyed through the acrid smoke to embrace each other. My lungs cried out but I tilted back my head in laughter and wrapped my arms around a stranger, who for that moment became someone I’d known my whole life. I shook my head, dumbfounded by the spectacle.

Growing up in a Foreign Service family, I was fortunate to have many other “firecracker moments” like that Christmas Eve in Guatemala. Among my earliest memories is the sound of monkeys running across the tin roof of our house in Barbados. I “survived” a red ant invasion in Mexico, a blizzard in the Austrian Alps, and a volcanic eruption in Guatemala that covered our house and yard with several inches of debris and ash. I remember the excitement my brother and I felt searching for caiman crocodiles at night by flashlight on the Madre de Dios River in Peru and overlooking the endless jungle canopy from a Kapok tree high above the Amazon basin.

Moving from place to place wasn’t always easy. On the other hand, my family’s nomadic lifestyle has shaped my appreciation for exotic food, my love of languages, and the comfort I feel being in the presence of a diverse group of people. My third-culture-kid experience is what led me to seek employment at the Hyatt hotel when I moved back to the United States for my two final years of high school. My job as a front desk receptionist allows me to meet people from all over the globe and use my Spanish. Working there even gives me the opportunity to throw in some of the Portuguese and French that I’ve been teaching myself online.I think being the new kid in class so often has also heightened my sympathy for outsiders. One of the things I’m most proud of is the club I started at my high school called Providing Aid to Immigrants and Refugees. Through PAIR, my fellow club members and I are trying in our own small way to help newcomers make the transition to a new life in our country.

Although it’s great to be back in the United States – the land of my birth – the people and places of my past bind me to the larger world. I hope that no matter where I go in the future or what I ultimately choose to do in life, I can continue to help others feel the same warmth and acceptance I felt that Christmas Eve in the arms of a Guatemalan stranger as a thousand colors streaked across the night sky.

**What Makes Me... Me Michelle Anna Brier**

**Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student body that embodies the wide range of human experience; we believe that the diversity of our students makes our community stronger. If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had to help us understand you better-perhaps related to a community you belong to, your sexual orientation or gender identity, or your family or cultural background-we encourage you to do so. Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke.**

My mother was born and raised in Vietnam. My father is a fifth-generation Californian whose family journeyed across Death Valley in the 19th century. My aunts are Taiwanese and Singaporean, and my cousin is Italian.

I was well on my way through elementary school before I realized that not everyone eats phở regularly, and not everyone has family members strewn around the world. As I grew up, I began to notice the cultural divides all around me -- including the ones within my own family. I observed how my father’s Caucasian family and my mother’s Vietnamese family never truly intermingled with one another. For example, I had two Christmases every year, one with my dad’s side and one with my mother’s. One in which I spoke English, the other in Vietnamese. With such a unique combination of cultures in my family, I found myself suspended between worlds, not wholly a part of one or another.

Over time, I grew to appreciate the mixed heritage that both added to my character and set me apart from my friends. Living in the Bay Area, with its diverse population, I was intrigued by cultural differences and sought to understand other families and their traditions. In school, I found myself fascinated in French class, going home and struggling to read French news sites as my understanding of the culture slowly improved.

Ultimately, my ethnic background has been monumental in shaping my worldview and, essentially, in developing my desire to delve into the unknown.

**Hyphenation 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.**

One of the first dances I ever performed was a trio with my two best friends: a frivolous, cheerful number with far too many sequins, gauzy handkerchiefs disguising the awkwardness of our skinny arms. Backstage, we trembled in terror at the prospect of presenting ourselves in front of the friends we had so foolishly invited. But it was too late to worry about how embarrassed I felt telling people I did Chinese dance, too late to worry about our distinctly foreign (and undeniably Chinese) music and costumes, and too late to worry about our choreography, the facial expressions and wild gestures that made even us giggle. Because then it was our turn: smiling through our teeth for dear life, we blinked hard in the lights that seemed harsher than before, doing our best not to recoil from the dark mass of whispering grandparents and chattering toddlers.

Somehow, we survived—and we kept coming back for more. For six days a week, [Redacted] Dance Academy was home to dozens of girls like me: Chinese-Americans, otherwise estranged from our heritage, seeking to rediscover it here. On the scarred marley floor, we practiced pliés and tendus, panwan and yueliangmen. And as we learned the languages of movement, we relearned the languages we had taught ourselves to forget.

In that simple studio we breathed in the musky odor of sweat, dust, and exhaustion, and breathed out the scent of camaraderie and shared experience. As we painted on our faces for performances, we recalled all the times tipsy white guys not-so-jokingly asked if we were sisters, while other moms at competitions gushed about our “fascinating” and “exotic” costumes. And we pondered the way the catcalls we received on the street were doubly disarming because, as we were inevitably reminded, we weren’t just girls, we were Asian girls; not just dolls, but China dolls.

My experiences feeling foreign as a minority raised further questions--why, and how, and what it means when we perform the traditional dances of ethnic minorities that Han Chinese had all but exterminated; how our performances of the Tibetan cowgirl or Mongolian bowl dances intersect with disputes that continue to this day. But isn’t it better to uncover and investigate than it is to obscure and ignore? And isn’t it better that we can at least learn, understand, and appreciate the dances of Tibet and the others, even if dissecting their history and politics isn’t nearly as simple?

Dance provided me a community and a context to center these conversations. And over time, dance became a way for me to reconcile the hyphen bridging the ocean between Chinese and American, to somehow take the threads of something long lost and weave them into a cloth more beautiful than before. Distinctive costumes and dozens of ethnic dance styles infused me with an appreciation of the kaleidoscope that is Chinese culture; dance reminded me to find beauty in each toss of the head and flick of the fingers, and to find beauty in myself.

The answers come slowly, but they come all the same. As messy as it can be, the process of figuring out what it means to perform Chinese dance has been for me a vehicle to understanding what it means to be a Chinese woman in America: a dance in itself, to be performed on the stage of American society. I’ve come to realize that no matter the setting, performance is a process, not a product. It’s a journey of exploration, understanding, and self-discovery, and my journey so far has been much more than just learning to move my body. It’s been the understanding that Chinese and American aren’t mutually exclusive; it’s been an awareness of how social location shapes experience. And it’s become a way to move forward: I think I’m ready for this show to begin.

**Dancing Together Anonymous**

**Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student body that embodies the wide range of human experience; we believe that the diversity of our students makes our community stronger. If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had to help us understand you better-perhaps related to a community you belong to, your sexual orientation or gender identity, or your family or cultural background-we encourage you to do so. Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke. (250 word limit)**

“GIMME A PIGGYBACK RIDE! HORSEY!!!!”

I scrambled to allow the giggling seven year old girl to climb onto my back. I was volunteering as a camp counselor at the Hand in Hand Chinese Cultural Summer Program, a program that introduces adopted Chinese children to Chinese culture. As the dance instructor, I was both excited to share the art form and, frankly, nervous about the response.

The first day, I finished teaching the dance, but saw that the children all seemed to be apathetic. I racked my brain for ways to make them share my enthusiasm for dance, and the next day, I tried a new approach: we choreographed a dance together. Though some were reluctant, I encouraged each to create a move that captured their personality, and then transformed it into a movement from Chinese Folk Dance. I gradually saw them develop an interest, and soon, they asked for more moves. Delighted, I showed them new gestures as they happily waved their fans behind me.

During the final recital, the children eagerly performed for their parents. Afterwards, many parents thanked me for choreographing the dance, but I explained that *we* choreographed the dance together. It wasn’t perfect, but that didn’t matter. Art is not about perfection - art is about finding what matters to you, and expressing yourself. I learned that there is always a way to share what you love, and I am glad I planted those seeds of interest in both the arts and in the Chinese culture.