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**Sample essays 2023**

**Harvard University**

**Diversity Ana De Sousa**

**Topic of your choice (common application)**

"I was born on the banks of the Amazon River. Well, Brazilian birthplaces are limited to that, a soccer field, or a Carnival celebration, you know? What was my mom doing nine months pregnant on the banks of the Amazon? Well, she was seven months along; she wasn't expecting me yet. Ha, some native children are born prematurely and they must also do without incubators, you silly, technologically-blessed American. Unsanitary? I won't disagree it was likely unclean and chances are I am a dormant breeding ground of uncatalogued tropical diseases. Help? Of course, from a midwife - everybody's a midwife there, even the men. You know my middle names mean "inconvenient jungle child" in Portuguese? Ok, the inconvenient is implicit, but look up the rest. What were my parents doing there? Well you see..."

Were this story told before an ESL discussion group as I was clad in accessories and ceremonial scars alluding to some sort of rudimentary tribal heritage, it would unfold without too much interruption. However, because I do not look like I escaped from a history museum display and because it is told in fluent English, embellished with familiar mannerisms, and appropriately paused, rushed, and italicized to reflect a distinctively American brand of comedy, this tale is always followed by an inspired interrogation session. Largely because of these circumstances, it avoids the worst fate for stories of this kind: an uninspired and often patronizingly polite acceptance of yet another episode of "diversity".

Out of all American abstract concoctions - everything from the often elusive "American dream" to the uniquely aggressive concept of capitalism - diversity is the one idea that fascinates me the most. This captivation often carries very blatant manifestations. I question my friends about the history behind their customs with the scrutiny of a CIA operative; I search for the most seemingly inedible food in Manhattan's Chinatown and order it in my butchered Cantonese; I even follow the locally broadcast Korean soap opera (subtitled of course) in hopes that Kim Mi Kyung will see Choi Bae for the fiend that he really is. While there are scores of infinitely intriguing "occurrences" of diversity, its most interesting aspect lies not in its manifestations but in its treatment.

America's regard to diversity cannot be described across a spectrum of reactions, but between two opposites; it either is so pervasive --as is the case in New York City suburbia -- that it is largely ignored or it is so rare that it is resented, or worse, feared. Its acknowledgement in education and corporate institutions, for all its merits, has plagued it with a bureaucracy that organizes the social consideration of diversity into countless workshops, panels, and conferences. Within these circumstances, the thrill of exploration - of learning about other heritages, of walking through ethnic neighborhoods, of becoming mesmerized by the creative product of another culture - is lost to most people. My "Amazonian birth tale" is my private, perhaps absurd but no less amusing, campaign to spark this interest. College is where I want to see the other campaigns.

**College Diet Renata De Sousa**

**Topic of your choice**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**A Battle for Insight Shannon Maene**

**Topic 5 from Common Application: Personal Topic Describe a character-defining instance of strength in the face of adversity. (Submitted as supplemental essay to some schools)**

"Kai houtos manthano."\* To most, they are meaningless words, incomprehensible and bizarre. But to me, their meaning is legion: secrecy, silence, concealment. They are Greek, and they mean subversive. I am a subversive, of the Greek persuasion, and, having become such, I shall never go back.

For three years, I have taken Greek with Mr. King. Our initial pace was astonishing, learning almost every element of Greek grammar in six months. However, this was only the means to an end. We have since translated several books of the Odyssey, and one of the Iliad. We have translated lyric poems by authors such as Sappho, Solon, Alcaeus, and high-minded Xenophanes. We recently finished Plato's Apology, and are now working through Herodotus; we will do Aristophanes next. All that I say is true, although there are no other Greek students to attest to this.

There were three others the first year: one graduated, the other two abandoned the endeavor. The reason was not that they lacked intelligence - they are dedicated in their own arenas. They simply could not conceive of devoting two hours a night for a class that promised no recognition; not even class credit.

Greek, taught by Mr. King, has been a tradition in my school for nineteen years. However, a "simplifying mentality" has in recent years come to oppose this, asserting that what is not simple is often not good; Greek was never simple. When Mr. King wanted to reinitiate the Greek program, he anticipated no problems. The former principal happily permitted such things, vehemently defended them in the face of Guidance's pleas for order. I admit that I spurn the arbitrary guidelines that they dictated we now follow, that favored simplicity at the expense of a child's education. Nevertheless, we fought arduously to resurrect the former Independent Study program, mysteriously erased from all records. We invited observation on any day, without notice, and attended school board meetings, hoping the Greek issue would finally be addressed. Despite our entreaties, we were denied input when they established a new Independent Study program.

It was shortsighted and wrong. What was easily the most demanding class in the school became its only pass/fail, offering minimal credit and no incentive for future students to join. However, we soon ceased our struggle to defy the administration and prove that my right to learn was being denied. It was not. Whether they supported us, they could not stop me from learning Greek, and that was what we had truly endeavored to do. So we forsook their proposal, but settled down, cloistering ourselves in a corner far from roaming eyes, and continuing to explore and enjoy bold, poetic Greek.

I am in Greek III now, and try not to complain anymore. I like to think of myself as a subversive, acquiring forbidden wisdom behind closed doors. Truthfully, it seems that I am part of a minority of students who learn purely for learning's sake. I seek insight, and am driven by an insatiable thirst to know, as if I one day awoke in a desert barren of knowledge. Though I have few companions in my journey out of the desert, I hope that others will soon join me in my subversive acts. Regardless, I will continue, knowing that my success will come, just as my knowledge, by what I alone gather.

\*Originally in Greek on essay, this means "And so I am learning."

**Learning to Write Good Shannon Maene**

**Paraphrasing of question from U. Chicago application: Storytelling is an important part of every human society. Tell a story of your own. (Submitted as supplemental essay to schools other than U. Chicago)**

If one were to ask me to relate a story of what had most troubled me throughout my high school experience, I would likely tell of my trials and tribulations as an ambitious writer in the hands of my English teachers. I, like sculptor's clay, was molded into a new shape, coated with a thin veneer to hide the crude interior, then subjected to intense stress to make me shine and reflect the beauty of all that had been put into me. Here follows the chronicle of my journey:

In eighth grade, I was a good writer, and I was talented, and I always got A's in English, like on the final, when I wrote a very good essay on Inherit the Wind, which we had read in class, and got a 100 that I was very proud of. My only problem was with run-on sentences, which I tended to use a lot without knowing it, and this somewhat detracted from my writing, but I was working at it, and I was slowly getting better. At any rate, I expected to do well in Honors English in ninth grade, which I had gotten into as a result of doing exceptionally well on the admission test, and I happily thought how, as such a good writer, I could look forward to all the A's I would be getting, as I was reading the four books we had to read over the summer.

Once I had arrived on the first day of school, I came to the discovery that we had to take an essay test requiring the whole period on the Old Man and the Sea during the first day of Honors English 9. This caused me a great bit of worry, as I had never had the experience of taking part in such a stressful activity on the first day that I was in a class. Nevertheless, I summoned my perseverance and succeeded in finishing the essay test, although I ended up writing with such fury that my hand came to hurt for the rest of the day. Once a weeklong period had passed, Mr. Miller handed the essays back to all the students, and I experienced horror as I found that I had received my first ever D on the essay test that he had assigned that first day during class. At the bottom of the page there was written in red ink and a short scrawl, "Give it the axe!"

For some time, I didn't quite come to understand what exactly that was supposed to mean, but finally I happened to have the chance to converse with Mr. Miller on the subject, and he informed me in so many words that I was writing down far too much excess verbiage in my essays and using far too many words to express simple ideas. It was making it hard very understand to what I was writing antelope as if I I I were filling the with paper monkey gibberish made that no warrior sense. I grew defensive, because I had always gotten A's in eighth grade English, and what made his standards so much higher, and how did he know it would still make sense if I took out every other word, and damn it my writing was good! He told me if someone cut off both my hands, it would do the world a favor.

As the year progressed, I can't say that my writing got became any better, although I did learn a lot much concerning how to improve my writing by getting rid removing "junk words" like "got," "a lot," and "very." I simply couldn't unhesitantly abandon the very essence of how I had written through my every, bright, livelong day, and for some time I simply had no idea how to approach writing an analytical essay, as if it were some burden to be carried through a barren wasteland on a cold night with the moon on your back and a secret in your heart. Therefore, due to the overabundance of substantiating statements, it was difficult for the reader to understand. One can thereby conclude that the author had no idea what he was doing.

As freshman year came to a close, I believe I finally began to understand that which Mr. Miller had been attempting to impart upon me. I managed to receive a B-, which was more than I deserved, and made an honest vow to keep hitting my head against the brick wall until I broke through. Broke through to proficient writing.

In sophomore year, my writing slowly improved, although I encountered some difficulty trying to balance growing conciseness with a creative spark, which Mrs. Barnes said any good writer required. First I was too serious. My sentences became curt. I avoided verbosity. Because of this, my writing became abrupt. Then I became far to lackadaisical, whimsical, and flowery, embellishing my every word with a beautiful, perfectly fitted adjective in order to vanquish the loathsome foe of dreadful triteness. However, by the end of Honors Tenth English, I had achieved a degree of improvement: this time, I received a B for the year.

Forsooth, my writing surely solidified in junior year, as I came to reassume confidence in my capabilities as an adept artist of prose. Nay, I would nevermore use ten words for two, and I had succeeded in rendering my writing bereft of excess. But woe, fate swung down her heavy hand: my confidence, become considerable beyond compass, quickly capitulated when Mr. Checchio circulated his "Learning to Write Good," in which were collected select censurable lines of each student's most recent submission. There, under "Avoid Pretension," was recorded a line from my most contemporary composition. He later told me I had begun to sound like Edgar Allen Poe; but Poe at least was justified: in his time that was considered high-class composition. My confidence destroyed, I once again entered a state in which writing an essay became an insurmountable challenge for me. On our essay for Hamlet, I tallied nineteen continuous hours spent in writing and editing my ten-page piece. For my twelve-page research paper (page limit, 6-8), twenty-four hours. Needless to say, I didn't go to school the next day, but soon after, he did inform me that it was the best essay I had ever written.

Now here I sit, looking back on my journey. In Honors English 9, I received no higher than a C on any draft of an analytical essay. In AP English, my first two essays earned me an A- each; my most recent, an A. I have achieved in this year more than ever before, and I am pleased. However, pleasure does not describe my sentiments as accurately as pride. For me, learning to be an adept, concise, and thoughtful writer has posed more difficulty than anything else I have ever confronted. I look back upon my accomplishments as a writer, and see tangible improvements, new levels reached. Certainly, I have much room left to grow. Yet, I can also say to myself, as I did during the summer before ninth grade, that I am a good writer. This time, I can be certain of it. Believe me: my English teachers may jokingly say that they give me A's to be rid of me. But I know better. With me, they had but two choices: mold me like clay, then make me shine, but only once I had run through the fire; or find the axe. Mr. Miller says he's still looking, but I think this time the smile on his face does not disguise sinister intentions.

**The Echoes of Laughter Natalia Martinez**

**How has your background influenced who you are?**

"The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance they find their own order - the continuous thread of revelation." Eudora Welty

What happened to our family was a bringing together, a meshing, a melting of histories, cultures, and outlooks. Just like the direction, the vertical angles, and the speed affect the movement of a thrown ball, and any small variation may consequently cause it to land nowhere near its targeted destination, seemingly picayune or adventitious personal events and historical moments have altered my course significantly.

Randomly brought together at a movie ticket line, my Russian mother and Cuban father are poignant testaments to the power of a moment. A date, years of ocean-wide separation, a long-awaited marriage, and then my childhood of learning, of interaction, of exploration, and yet of isolation from the harsh reality, flew by wonderful and warm reminders of my homeland. My parents took the decisive step to leave Cuba for Mexico in 1992, and there we were, thrown into our migrant odyssey for several years. At first persecuted by the Cuban government, we were soon blessed to become the first Cubans ever granted political asylum in Mexico by the UN, and proceeded to reside in Mexico City for four splendid years, at the end of which, our insecurities and the country's rampant corruption pushed us to immigrate once again. You see, history isn't idyllic, it's dramatic and, as reflected in the formation of our family, it both branches and interflows, in and out of itself.

Mexico City was the city of wonders for me; it still is. The familiarity of the people, the openness with which they embrace others, the historicity and awareness of the cultural bonds embedded in their souls left me both warm and awed. But then, we arrived at our final destination, the United States, to begin afresh: immigrants faced with both new outlooks and customs, and the task of adapting to a new life, a different reality! And so once again, inescapably, our struggle for identity, our search for priorities, our mediation between gratefulness to the nation that had welcomed us and the desire to remain loyal to our historical and cultural consciences, our individual and yet communal sense of "self," continued.

In my family, it's always been less about just following tradition and more about gaining an appreciation of our lives' trajectory. I've been taught that people are exceptional creatures and that as such we are all different; these dissimilarities should be a source of pride. From each country we have enriched more than our palate; we have gathered the only wealth that can truly be defined as human an acceptance of the ineffable interdependence between hope, hardship, joy, pain, and survival and harbored it in our hearts as more than just memories.

And yet, as much as the sequential influence of one event upon another has molded me as it molds all others, the continuity of historicity, its direct influence, has also greatly guided my path. The circumstances I have studied in books are not precisely those that have brought about my formation, for it is understanding a moment more than reading in history texts that has fueled my awareness of the sequential nature of time and my role in it. For example, the Cuban Revolution that seated Fidel Castro as the nation's dictator allowed my middle-class grandmother the freedom to divorce my grandfather and take a job teaching and gave my father the opportunity to study in Russia and receive his PhD in physics, expand and enrich his life; though the system did eventually confine him because of his refusal to follow its ideologies, the ripples it had begun in his life were not only irreversible, but also inherent to our family's seity. Similarly, had my Russian grandparents not survived seven years in Siberia during and after WWII, I wouldn't have sat this past summer with my 91-year-old grandfather and felt full of life, of real moments, tangible pasts, as he told stories about Nicholas II, Stalin, the world wars, the Cold War. Momentaneous changes, decisions made, choices taken in history these are the instances that, compiled, have led to my personal cultural identity.

The attunement several influences have struck within me through time has bestowed upon me the opportunity to passionately though slowly carve out aspects of the person I am today. The human condition may need quantitative and qualitative analysis, charts of joyful days, graphs of heartbreaks, and bell curves of daily complexity, but I believe that the true power of measurement is our daily and constant effort what we bring to life. At some point I came to understand two things: the thread of our life is in every sense continuous, and as much as history is an external process, its true essence lies within us, for we are its true carriers.

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**Tied Through Time Natalia Martinez**

**Personal statement.**

This past summer, like many previous summers, I spent in Russia, or what my friends jokingly refer to as "the motherland." To the surprise of the most sheltered of my acquaintances, I returned neither Communist nor raped, but enriched and aware. I spent two weeks in St. Petersburg, city of dreams, returned to Moscow for over a month to visit my grandfather and volunteer at a camp for disabled children, and discovered that I am a part of this clearly heroic, and yet mysterious land, and this land, its religion, culture, and history, is a part of me.

Several times Petersburg's early evenings bloomed overhead and the horizon, pearly behind the buildings, refreshed my eyes with aquamarine tints just when I thought it should have turned to darkness. From our ninth story balcony, I saw only a small portion of the city, heard only the distant echoes of music and honking, and sensed only the tiniest of raindrops hitting my hand, but I felt at home.

As opposed to the slightly unemotional, detached, Moscow, a city full of rapid hustling and a certain tangible coldness in its manner that is almost obtrusive, St. Petersburg is welcoming, vibrant. The days themselves seem to be in harmony with the city's people, as if the passing of time in such a stimulating, intellectually alive, architecturally stunning place were a gift and not a pressing matter. There are above all, two things in Petersburg, as it is now, or Leningrad, depending on your memories: history and beauty. Almost every building shares a story the two hundred and seventy-five museums, the churches, the palaces, almost every canal, a tale. Likewise, the outskirts guard a sense of eternity, not the eternity of time, mind you, but the eternity of that which is Russian: the religion forever entwined in the nation's soul; the passion of both conquerors and dreamers; the obduracy of a people determined to endure. And there, amid it all, my mother and I roamed the streets, rode the subway up and down, up and down, drank coffee at the bakery where Pushkin had eaten on the day of his death, felt Dostoevsky's city seeping through the cobblestones, gathered around food-laden tables with family members, stepped where the Emperors Paul I and Alexander II had been murdered, spent days in the Hermitage, and rode where czars, famous poets and writers, and victims of Stalin's terror had stood before all tied to me, through time, by an invisible link.

There came a moment, on the tenth day of our stay, when the reality of that connection appeared clearly before me; to Russians, of course, it is a staple from childhood. The Museum of Leningrad's Defense and Blockade stands, a minute building flanked by larger residences and a modern playground a testament to the memories in the soul of every Russian. I stayed inside for several hours, discovering the years that have been a part of my ancestors' lives: their losses, their fights, their physical hunger, and their national pride. Out they reached to me: the children's diaries, witnesses of daily tragedy; the pictures of the food supply convoys running across the frozen waters of Ladoga Lake bombed along the way so only a percentage made it and of the dead piled up on sleighs; the voice of Olga Bergholtz as she read poetry to the somber city over the radio, a savior of lives and safe keeper of hope; and that map on which the pencil-thin red border didn't gave way. For nine hundred days, three million people lived and died with little heat in the wintertime and rationed bread that was made from leather scraps and grass, surrounded by the presence of death and the smell of war. It isn't that Russia's history had never seemed real to me before I walked around the exhibit; it's simply that its power had never seemed so true, so imbued into the fiber of my being.

When we returned to Moscow, I discovered that sometimes it is the scarcity in life that makes a worthy existence, distinct from whatever illusions or delusions we may have, and that it is lacking this, missing that, and the wishing, the yearning, the longing, that create the beauty of hope from even the most unholy of situations. From their lives the Russians continue to draw both eternal faith and the strength to not only wish for, but also fight to regain the national identity that had almost been lost in the 1990s2E Outside, I heard the dreams of these people flowing from the windows and doors, making the air dense with belief. I looked at my Russian friends, some of whom I've known for seventeen years, and saw adults taking responsibility for the course of their nation, returning from Coke to kvas (national bread-based beverage), and acknowledging that despite a drastic decline in patriotic fervor just ten years ago, the meaning of their homeland has not been successfully eroded, and thirsty for a united, strengthened Russia2E To the surprise of some, modern Western influences, though inescapable and undeniable, are now being looked upon as a supplanted conscience; seemingly appropriate therefore, is the evident rise of the younger generations as champions of a break with superficiality and a return to, cliched and all, the heart and soul of their motherland. Our motherland.

The first time I went to Russia I was three months old; the last time, seventeen. Over the years, I have witnessed much change political instabilities and social metamorphoses and have always felt tied to her fertile soil. However, never before had I realized that humanity is above all contagious, that most people question it, and that it is precisely in doubting it that we see ourselves as true, meaningful entities capable of both appreciation and change. I am a gardener there, the picker of fruits in my grandfather's orchard, but I am also the "one from overseas." Then again, sometimes, I'm really just Me.

**Rebuilding the Bubble Anonymous**

**Open Essay Question**

When I was a little kid I used to carry around notebooks which I filled with hundreds of stories ranging in length from a single, whimsical sentence to pages and pages of fantasy. Every hour of the day, there were countless images and ideas running through my head. I remember writing down my stories while riding in cars, while walking down the street, while sitting through another day of second-grade math. My parents couldn't stop bragging about my creativity, and my third-grade teacher signed my yearbook with, "I'm waiting for your first novel." And then, somewhere along the way, I lost it. My mind grew up, and my colorful, crazy inner world was taken over by training in that purely adult skill: Logic. I started thinking, "Nah, rabbits can't dance." Gradually I turned away from creative writing, and after a few years, when I stopped to look for my imagination, it seemed to be lost.

Children look at the world with a certain clarity missing in adults. Children don't censor or second-guess themselves, and are thus able to express their ideas more purely. When they write stories, they don't worry about infusing each word with deep multiple meanings, and often come closer to expressing what is truly going on inside their mind. After re-reading some of my old stories, I've come to realize that my ease of expression was founded in my lack of self-consciousness about the English language. I was entirely unconcerned with grammar, with topic sentences and supporting paragraphs, and yet my ideas shone through in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my unawareness of the science of writing. Language, if wielded with too much calculation, can be extremely limiting. Thoughts don't naturally come in coherent sentences; words are just a common ground that people have invented to make communication easier. A lot of pure meaning is lost in the translation of an image or idea into words. We all assume that language is such an innate part of us, but it's not, not really.

Perhaps it's not so with everyone -- I can't pretend to know what's going on inside other people's heads -- but my thoughts simply don't come in word format. I don't think in verbs and prepositions. My ideas, when they come, bubble up inside my head as bright, round, colorful pictures that are nearly impossible for me to describe. After those first few years of easy expression, it's become very difficult for me to put my creative ideas into writing, because it frustrates me that I have these beautiful pictures and emotions floating around inside my head that don't convey themselves readily onto paper. For me, words can get in the way of writing.

In high school, being a good analytic writer is considered far more important than being able to write a beautiful, imaginative story. Over the past several years, I've worked hard at becoming a good analytic writer, yet my attempts at creative writing have been few and far between. I remember one story in particular, a creative assignment on The Scarlet Letter. I was reading the final chapter of the novel when I jumped up off my bed, and ran to my desk to jot down a single sentence. It described -- badly -- an image that had just come into my head, an image of a young girl staring out the window of her apartment building, watching a woman standing in the glow of a streetlamp with hail stiffening her carefully-done hair. The words that I wrote at the time, however, did not describe the image in my mind. The story was horrible. I remember selecting each word carefully, loading each sentence with multiple meanings and terrible self-consciousness. What I realized then was that it wasn't that I didn't have the ideas; I just couldn't find a natural way to word them. I was trying to imitate people I considered "great" writers: Austen, Hawthorne, Ginsburg. What I hadn't yet found was my own method of expression.

Recently I've started writing stories again. I've been allowing myself to simply write down what comes into my head, sentence after sentence, without concerning myself with semantics and form. And, at last, here it is again: my imagination! When I allow myself to find my own way through my head, without concerning myself with how others might view my writing, I am at last able to tap into that imagination which, I now realize, has been there all along.

Perhaps imagination emerges only when the mind isn't being stifled by facts and rules, but when it is roaming and questioning and discovering new ideas, as it does during childhood. This year, more so than ever, my classes are making me think, and my teachers are giving me the freedom to develop my own ideas about what I'm studying. I've found that my class discussions overflow into my phone conversations with my friends, and are explored at the dinner table with my family. Every day I find myself questioning different things about my life, sparking my imagination and urging me to write. At last, I'm beginning to understand that there is a place for imagination alongside those "writing rules" I've learned, and I think I'm finally learning how to put the two together.

**Think Before You Leap Anonymous**

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

"For God's sake, please stop the aid!" This prominently placed quote in a magazine I was reading immediately caught my attention. It reminded me of an article written by Milton Friedman on the null or negative impact of foreign aid. I admit that by then I had developed a prejudice towards Friedman's opinions, yet his article was so convincing -- and startling -- that I decided to read more on the matter. This happened during my last summer vacation, in Brazil, not long before the G8 summit at Gleneagles, so the matter was being intensely debated, and articles and papers on the topic were even more easily available than usual. The more I read, the less it seemed like ending poverty was as simple as having countries abide to the Monterrey Consensus. I found the whole issue extremely intriguing, but I was particularly fascinated by research into the types of foreign aid that do work: studies performed by Abhijit Banerjee, Ruimin He, Esther Duflo and Jeffrey Sachs.

Then came the quote. It was an excerpt from an interview with the Kenyan economist James Shikwati. What struck me his statement's bluntness: "For God's sake, please stop the aid!" Only then did I start thinking about the issue in a personal manner; I began to question similar ideas that I had until then taken for granted. Having studied at my present college for one year, where community service is an integral part of the curriculum, I began to reassess the value of the projects I was involved with. I pondered what their ultimate effects really were. Only a few months before, I had gone with a small group from my school to the southeastern coast of India to assist villagers in a tsunami-affected area. I came back terribly disappointed. The villagers were receiving food from the WFP, and various organizations were helping to set things back on track, so they believed that they were not required to do anything. Our group, for example, worked mostly with the desalination of farms, but for much of the time the farmers themselves did not help us. The fishermen, too, had all their tools and boats replaced, but nevertheless they did not work at all for months. This meant that, once the initial humanitarian aid ended, they were not prepared to continue the work themselves.

On the other hand, we also distributed scholarships to orphaned children so that they could continue their education. This, by what I had read and could see, was effective, and it was wonderful to know children who were very keen on studying had the opportunity to continue doing so. Even though we spent more time on the desalination of farms, allocating grants was much more helpful. I thus realized how important it is to thoroughly consider the impact of what we do.

**Cassius Clay Antonio J Hernandez**

**Common App Question 1- Evaluate a signigicant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical delemma you have faced and its impact upon you.**

"Cassius Clay," my father declared, "KO'ed Moore in four. I was there. Ringside." Annoyed at hearing the thousandth incarnation of this story, I rolled my eyes. My father loved telling stories. If you let him, he would talk you up all night. "Muhammad," he would say "really was the greatest. Woulda beat Smokin' Joe too, if Frazier hadn't knocked him down in the 15th." Friends, family, my teachers, the librarian, the mail carrier-anyone within earshot suffered the fate of listening to my father's elaborate stories. At best, I found these stories sufferable; at worst, simply unbearable. I came to understand later that my father's stories were a small fraction of his larger than life personality. No one could mistake his six-foot frame, his slicked pepper gray hair or his tortoise-shell Ray-Bans complete with Croakies. With pockets ever-full of Lifesaver mints, my father was a real character-which made it that much harder to do him justice when I spoke at his funeral.

I am no stranger to public speaking. As Debate President and Student Council President, I regularly address large audiences. However, the speech I most wanted to be remembered by did not involve approving a new draft constitution or rallying underclassmen in to serving their community; it was about the man who gave me life. The speech's difficulty did not arise from lack of context: a year spent eating dinners under the florescent glow of hospital cafeteria lights had acclimated me to the idea that my father's passing was coming. Rather, its difficulty grew because it required me to synthesize a vastly complex man into a ten-minute eulogy. I knew in giving the speech, I was towing a line-I needed to express emotion without letting it overcome me. In the week leading up to the ceremony, I hashed out draft after draft of my speech, becoming increasingly frustrated with the futility of my efforts to represent my father. The day before the funeral, it finally hit me: maybe making a speech about my father was impossible. Perhaps, my best strategy would be to make a speech that conveyed part of the whole, that certain spark which made my father so unique.

I arrived at Unity Temple and greeted well-wishers without showing any of the anxiety that plagued me. When all was quiet, I ascended the steps to the podium at the head of the chapel. I collected myself, removed the notes from my right lapel and took a deep breath. Then I dove headfirst into the speech that would define me. "I am Antonio Jubencio HernÃ¡ndez," my voice trembled as I began, "son of Eugenio HernÃ¡ndez, and I'd like to tell you some stories my father told me." For the next ten minutes, pausing only to ensure my composure, I delivered some of my father's favorite anecdotes in the same didactic tone I had heard my father use all his life. As I told them, I believe I gained some redemption from all those times I had rolled my eyes at my father's convoluted recitals. Although the stories that I told at Unity Temple lacked the physical presence of the Ray-Bans, they were part of my father. By delivering my speech in the way I did, I was acknowledging the fact that these stories were also part of me. As I look back upon it now, I believe that it was not I who delivered the speech. The words belonged to my father and I was simply Plato transcribing Aristotle, Jefferson citing Locke, or Muhammad playing the poet.

I plan to embarrass my kids with stories of boxing matches and World Series past. When they inevitably roll their eyes, I will know exactly what my father knew: a good story lasts lifetimes.

**Save the Estuaries Taro Kuriyama**

**This is an essay written for the Harvard supplement to the Common Application. No specific prompt was given.**

I sometimes wonder whether I've ever made any personal decisions. I think my parents have shaped my life to their liking: I attended Exeter in the footsteps of my father, and now I find myself in Rennes, where he studied thirty years ago. I do not regret the decisions that they have made for me-instead, I have enjoyed and appreciated the education I am so lucky to receive. But, as I stand on the threshold between high school and college, I feel like it's time to think for myself.

Many connections pull me towards Harvard. Indeed, there are so many that some people take it for granted that I will attend Harvard.

"Your parents went to Harvard, your cousin goes to Harvard, you speak four languages, you go to Exeter and. . . your father has just been offered a chaired professorship there? Of course you'll get in."

All it takes is a mention of the revered name. Rarely do people ask me why I want to attend Harvard. I can't blame them, because I myself sometimes feel as if Harvard is, naturally and inexplicably, the next bend in the road to follow. But when I reflect on the path that I have taken-and try to distinguish my own personal course-I wonder why I am applying. I wonder if I am not merely influenced by my parents who, all my life, have been gently pushing me toward the venerable institution.

In many ways, the university suits me perfectly. Its East Asian studies program is wonderful, as is its large array of foreign languages. My father knows many of the faculty, and he says that they are simply the best. I have many close friends, currently students, who tell me how much they enjoy the school. But what are my truly personal reasons for wanting to attend Harvard, if any--or, if there are none, why apply?

I found the answer in a recent e-mail from Robbie, a friend from Exeter. In his letter, he spoke about a variety of subjects, which, in an oddly logical sequence, progressed from a call to save the estuaries to a report on his first Harvard classes. I was reminded of Robbie's remarkable character and talent-among other things, he is a gifted flautist and a varsity football kicker. I realized, then, my desire to attend a university where I could interact with equally interesting students. For it was, above all, from exceptional classmates that I learned most at Exeter.

I know from direct experience that I would find such classmates at Harvard. Three years ago, when my father was a visiting scholar, I lived in Dunster House for three months. I remember spending endless hours at the dinner tables, fascinated by the stimulating conversations. What wonderful place was this, where a man who studied monkey brains and a woman who spoke Swahili could discuss the fine points of Japanese cuisine over dinner? Although I was only fourteen, I perceived the astonishing quality of the student body: every individual was so intelligent, yet unique in opinion, character, and perspectives...

Now, I no longer march on the track that has been laid down for me. I have found my personal course in life. In the distance, I descry a university. Its color is crimson and its motto Veritas. I will follow the path that leads to it; and if no such path exists, I aspire to create one.

I want to go to Harvard.

**My China, My Japan Taro Kuriyama**

**Personal statement, written for the Common Application.**

Approximately sixty years ago, during World War II, Japan invaded and occupied parts of China, committing many atrocities. I learned something of these events in middle school, but didn't give them special thought at the time; WWII seemed marked by so many horrors. A recent event, however, forced me to reflect on my vaguely learned school lessons and on the importance of history.

The occasion was the Asian Soccer Cup held in China this summer. The Japanese team played well and captured its second consecutive title, but throughout the tournament it was constantly harassed by heckling Chinese fans. Before each game, Chinese booing virtually drowned out the Japanese national anthem; and after the title game, Japanese supporters were forced to remain inside the stadium because of threatening Chinese mobs. The city of Beijing, it was reported, had to deploy as many as ten thousand policemen to keep order.

It is perhaps understandable that Chinese should harbor animosity towards Japan. The young spectators may have heard stories of the suffering of their relatives during the war. But I felt that it was misguided to jeer at and intimidate the Japanese athletes and supporters who themselves, after all, had done no harm. They were separated from WWII by at least one or two generations. Most of them, like me, had no direct knowledge of their ancestors' crimes. Weren't these spectators being overly vindictive?

The Japanese government lodged complaints, and the issue threatened to strain Sino-Japanese relations. For me, however, it was also a personal matter. My mother is Chinese and my father is Japanese. I feel more attached to Japan-I have lived more than half of my life in Japan-but I am very close to my Chinese relatives as well. I thus found myself torn in the recent conflict, unable and unwilling to side with one country or the other. But then, why should I have to choose sides?

It has become increasingly common in recent years for people to migrate across national boundaries. I myself was born as a result of this trend. On the surface, the world appears to be moving toward a borderless future of shared views and values. The events of the summer, however, taught me that this trend may be deceptive. Even as young men played soccer together, their fans were still divided by old grudges.

We cannot live outside of history. Even those who neglect the past cannot escape its burden. Relations between Japan and China are becoming more intimate by the day. Yet the rancor manifest at the Asian Cup reminded me that the bitterness of old conflicts is astonishingly slow to fade. I am still uncertain to what extent we must answer for the actions of men and women before our time. I do believe, however, that for the people of Japan and China to share a common future, they must continuously grapple with the legacy of their divided past.

**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.

**"Made in China" Anonymous**

**Open-ended**

Nevin peeled off a sticker from his binder and posted it to my forehead. "MADE IN CHINA," it said. I faked a nonchalant laugh, but my blushing face betrayed my feeling of defeat. All that I had strived for seemed to have been futile. What Nevin meant as a harmless joke had wounded me deeply.

The arrival of adolescence coincided with my arrival in America. It was during that crucial time when the standards of cool became meaningful to me. The essence of cool meant the ability to conform. As the only Asian (and only immigrant) in my suburban Michigan middle school, I was anything but a conformist. So I strived to assimilate. Yet with "MADE IN CHINA," seven months after my arrival, I realized people still saw me as different.

I explained to Nevin in broken English that I did not want to be labeled as different, as if I did not belong. "You're not different," Nevin responded lightheartedly. "You're unique!"

"U-nique." I slowly sounded out the word as my sadness turned to curiosity.

"Yeah, unique, like something that's umm...special." Nevin fumbled to explain himself. "Well, I guess it does mean different, but in a good sense..."

Nevin's words stayed with me for weeks. How was I supposed to establish myself in this country if I couldn't Americanize? How can one be cool if she is different from everybody else?

As time went on, I began to realize that there was nothing wrong with being different from my peers. I was touched by the way my friends taught me English by drawing cartoons on my notebook, and liked the fact that I could explain communist society or teach simple Chinese phrases to classes and friends. I slowly learned to take pride in my uniqueness.

The three years of middle school in Michigan were blissful for me. I felt known and appreciated by every friend, classmate, and teacher in the small, tight-knit community - but this feeling of acceptance would not last forever. After several moves between Michigan and Kansas, I finally settled in California during my sophomore year of high school. I was no longer the only Asian in the school. All of a sudden, I felt like a nobody.

But I discovered in California that other characteristics now set me apart. I was from the Midwest now, not just from China. My values, liberal back in Michigan, seemed conservative in Davis. While I dropped most of my foreign accent, I still spoke with a touch of quirkiness that set me apart; my new friends teased me all the time for using the word "pop" when referring to soda. My exuberance led me to athletics, art, and interests

interests in humanities and social sciences. I realized that it is these qualities that make me unique, not my ethnicity.

Looking back on the "MADE IN CHINA" incident, I realize that Nevin gave me more than a label that day. His words will always be my motto: I am unique.

**A day of my life Yu Liao**

**Topic of your choice.**

There are no real hills in Davis, aside for a few overpasses, and so it's easy to forget the dangers of heights and slopes. One sunny afternoon, in pursuit of some thrills, I managed to find a "hill" to ride down on my longboard. The first few seconds were pure exhilaration. Left and right I swerved as I imagined myself slaloming down a ski slope.

All of a sudden, trees were flying past me and I was traveling as fast as the car next to me. The longboard began to shake violently beneath my feet, and I realized that a fall was inevitable. My final decision - or rather, my intuitive impulse - was to do a volleyball dive onto the concrete pavement before I gathered any more speed. I landed without a scratch on my knees or elbows, but my palms and scraped chest were red with blood.

That was not a day to be forgotten. But weeks later, when my wounds finally healed, I stepped on the same "hill" once again - fully armed this time with pads and gloves. Crazy? No. I refused to be subdued. I had skied down Black Diamonds in the winter and ran up the same mountain ridge with my cross-country team in the summer. I refused to succumb to this puny little "hill," not even a hundredth the size of the Sierra Nevada.

I fell three times before I finally rode all the way down. Bruised but satisfied, my perseverance brought triumph. In life, as in sports, my inexorable determination drives my actions.

**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 Ugly Blue Poncho Ayden Winter**

**Name a piece of clothing that you have found to be beneficial.**

My old poncho is an absurdly bright shade of blue. It has the uncanny ability to turn anyone who wears it into a baggy, rather ridiculous-looking blob. This poncho holds a special place in my heart.

When my mom first gave it to me as I was entering eighth grade, I tried my hardest to refuse bringing the hideous thing to school. At her insistence that I not be left unprotected “in case it rains,” though, I stuffed the poncho into the bottom of my backpack and prayed I would never have any reason to use it. But one February day while I was in Latin class, disaster struck.

I was taking AP Latin at La Jolla High, although I officially went to Muirlands Middle School, because I had taken Latin privately for two years in elementary school and was ready for AP by eighth grade. The high school was close to Muirlands, so leaving Latin a bit early every day to walk up the hill to middle school was not a problem. Everything was fine - technically. The real difficulty lay in the fact that my AP Latin class was an extremely close-knit one, having had one teacher for all four years of Latin. It came as no surprise, then, that my classmates had never really accepted the “middle school kid” who had joined them a year earlier. Sure, they were outwardly nice to me, but I never had conversations with them about anything other than Latin. I was definitely still an outsider.

So, on that fateful February morning when it started pouring and I was caught without an umbrella, I was petrified by the realization that I would have to don my poncho in front of the entire Latin class - that is, if I didn’t wish to get soaked to the bone on my way back to Muirlands. Five minutes before the end of class, I sneaked off into the corner of the room, took out the poncho, and draped it over myself, trying to make as little noise as possible, praying that no one would notice. Alas, notice they did. I heard the first snickers before I had even finished putting my poncho on. I turned around dejectedly, confident I would find a room full of scornful faces.

I could not have been more wrong. My classmates were laughing all right, but their laughter was not at all malicious or humiliating. They were simply amused by my utterly ridiculous appearance. As I walked past the Latin room on my way up to Muirlands, greatly relieved, the whole class stood by the window and waved at me, still giggling. The next day, I came into class unsure of what the other students would say to me but was immediately met with “Eighth Grader, where’s your poncho?” “Eighth Grader” - the nickname stuck, as did an increased friendliness of the class toward me. Wearing that poncho gave me something to talk about with my classmates. For the first time, I was discussing a topic other than the scansion of the Aeneid Book VI, line 287. These initial conversations about my poncho led to many other unrelated but equally interesting conversations throughout the year, and I made several good friends during my last few months in AP Latin.

From then on, every time it rained, my classmates clamored for me to bring out “The Poncho.” I only wore “The Poncho” once more in front of that class, but I left AP Latin in June having bonded with what may be the most interesting and intelligent group of people I have ever met. And I owe it all to my ugly blue poncho.

**Crap Anonymous**

**Tell us something about yourself.**

I love crap. I love bad novels and cheap clothes. I love dirty shoelaces and melted candles, junk earrings and instant coffee. It's about finding the beauty in everything. I find it in palms and tea leaves. I sense Pablo Neruda's sonnets in my coffee dregs, the sublime in street signs, the art in skillfully spilt milk. Every morning, in red beret and blue jeans, I sniff out the bizarre, the grotesque, the beautifully grotesque – a spiraling stack of Post-It notes, photos of transvestites, the horned slug on my lawn in November - life.

The beauty that I even exist is a fleeting grin of luck. In post-Mao China's universities, where my parents met, it was rare for anyone to go to college. They wax nostalgic about their Cultural Revolution, now working keyboards instead of farms. My parents embody human accomplishment and flaw: my dad can whistle; my mother makes great spareribs; neither enjoys cheese. Loving cheese is the hidden East-West divide, a fragile fence of cheddar marking the difference between two worlds. From my mother, I inherited my creativity, first manifested in sewing my own dolls since we could ill afford any. No regrets: I've been told Barbie is an oppressor of women.

At arm's length, my parents humor my love for writing and design, thinking it impractical. They try not to think of my gay rights work at all. My creativity is my liability, although I try not to forget as my mother has forgotten hers; it would mean a tragedy of unlearning how I love the way words taste. French is a heady swirl of tongue pronouncing aubergine and pamplemousse. I love writing words, lining them up in haphazard rows, turning a phrase, luxuriating in how they ring in my mouth as salty, sweet, umami. Words help me find the oblique connection, the absurd switchboard of the universe, how we are connected: me, you, six degrees. I am a mere two degrees from James Rosenquist, pop artist. I trawl thrift shop racks for the thrill of wearing clothes with someone else's name Sharpied on the tag.

This summer, I wondered how I would calculate the speed of the 8:45 Metro North train to Grand Central from the angle of the raindrops. I traced their path, noting how I held a map of Beirut in my wrinkled palms and another of the London Underground in my knuckle creases. I am a zygote, a fetus, a child overcome with wanderlust. The train halts. The doors open. I need to interview all these people, pry their secrets from their jealous fists. I need less cynicism, more vulnerability. Instead of streaking, I smile at strangers. Both make you naked.

**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.

**One foot, two foot, red foot, blue foot Anonymous**

**It answers the question of individuality.**

After five or six efforts at creating a framework and collection of words that can piece together what is me, I have found that no single experience or sole person can represent all that I am. I can only describe the variety of particulars that shape the gumbo of my life.

I have one foot in Houston and my other in Northern Ireland where I have repeatedly spent summers sliding gratefully into their slowed down pace of life for a respite from the hurdling pace of Houston. This bi-cultural life has kept my eyes open to the “can-do” attitude of America without losing the value of community, neighbors, and friends - a major priority to the Irish. The different sports I played frequently in the locales of N. Ireland included soccer, rugby and cricket and expanded my range of sports beyond the high school and city-favored basketball and football games that I love so much. Perhaps what I enjoy most is the constant flow of neighbors and family unscheduled and un-announced coming through my granny’s house. The intimacy of this culture is one I try to create wherever I go; everyone has time to talk and drink a cup of tea.

Lance, my second brother, has a form of autism called Asperger Syndrome. I have been a part of the exhausting and relentless battle my mother has fought to teach him social skills and to prepare him for a world that is not Lance-centric. I have learned to see the world through Lance’s eyes, and this has created in me an understanding and patience for others. Lance’s courage in facing situations that overwhelm him, especially in large groups, has made me sensitive to the struggles of other people and given me a sense of when someone might have a less obvious disability. His autism took me into a unique environment where I found that the social mores we hold in the “typical” world are debunked by the simplicity and logicality of that train of thought. It seems I always have my feet planted in two different worlds.

I also have had a foot in an incredible world of privilege, rubbing shoulders with and receiving instruction from some of the nations’ best known composers, conductors and violinists. I play social gigs for politicians, the president’s family, local dignitaries. The master classes at which I have received instruction on a college level while still in high school have afforded me unbelievable growth. My other foot is planted in a small house; my mom and three younger brothers are very close to me and, through constant annoyance both good and bad, have created a harmony unmatched for its resonance. We are a busy house where everyone thinks their opinion is the most important, and from which battles ensue. No one, however, is allowed to sulk for long. Any scowl will be wiped off by the relentless teasing that brings a hidden smile to the one who wants to wallow in pity. The indomitable spirit of the family is even in the therapy beagle, who never stops wagging his tail!

I have had to pay my way for several years now and I shift easily from playing my violin for $40 an hour at Society events to being a food runner at PF Chang’s Chinese Bistro. In both atmospheres, I enjoy the diversity present. I find that I know what to admire in any situation and it is not salary or position; it is qualities of perseverance and tenacity as well as a will to live to your potential that draws me to certain others.

Last summer, I was in the midst of a tough-it-out battle of chess with a friend at a local coffee house when an apparently homeless man leaned forward with his cans rattling and offered a suggestion for my next move. After a moment’s thought, I leapt at the chance to seize the victory. It led to my sudden demise and as this end was signaled, my competitive nature screamed out through a face of shock to the hobo, my friend and nameless caffeine-seekers. His instant retort to my face, “go hop ‘round the bush, rahbit,” suddenly put things in perspective and I laughed at my taking so seriously a mere game. The realization that anyone can offer something that we can use (i.e.: reality) and taking responsibility for my choices became apparent through this singular moment.

Who am I? I do not have that single hero who I look to consistently. Rather, my life is composed of many small yet vivid tiles in a huge mosaic, with each one showing my own variation on the qualities I find and emulate from others.

**Safeguarding Memories Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Common Application: Topic of Your Choice**

Leaping over crooked crevices in the sidewalk, my childhood self hopped a few yards ahead of my grandfather. As I paused to scrutinize a colorful candy wrapper, the smell of melting sugar drifted from a small blue cart where an old woman flipped flat buns on a pan. Grandpa always bought two buns: one for him and one for me.

Not long before my fourteenth birthday, my grandfather was diagnosed with a severe case of Alzheimer’s, and shortly afterwards, he moved into a nursing home. Upon entering his room, I shouted “Hi Grandpa!”

Grandpa murmured, “Who are you?”

The next day, I bought two of the sweet buns Grandpa and I had enjoyed.

“Grandpa, do you want one of these?”

He paused, then said, “No. Who are you?”

Leaving the buns in the paper bag, I replied, “I’m Rachael, your granddaughter.”

Eyes widening, he gasped, “You have to get out of here; the communists are guarding this place!”

I explained, “No, the Korean War is over! You’re safe in America.” With a small sigh, I returned home for the day.

Now, after more than three years, Grandpa recognizes me when I step into his room. However, he cannot connect the round-faced child beside the bun cart to the person I am today. Once a memory slides past the grip of his mind, it can never return.

This troubling truth has motivated me to preserve the memories of others in my grandfather’s generation through the War Stories Project. A year after joining the volunteer effort, I have become the coordinator of the project. Fellow volunteers and I collect the experiences of World War II witnesses and collaborate with local colleges to produce a documentary and companion anthology for high school students.

While managing the project, I interviewed Holocaust survivor Bruno Bienenfeld, who unraveled the touching story of his childhood. In 1943, his family was taken to the Jasenovic concentration camp, where they were only given one piece of bread a day. But one day, he reached under his threadbare pillow and found another piece of bread. His mother said that it was an answer to his prayers. The young Bruno asked, “Are there Jewish angels?” His mother smiled and said, “There are angels for all people on earth.” Every day, Bruno found an extra bit of bread under his pillow, but after three hard months, his mother died, and the deliveries ceased. He told his father “The angel didn’t put the bread under the pillow tonight.” His father replied, “He was too busy taking Mom to heaven.”

Working with primary sources like Mr. Bienenfeld, I learn about World War II from the people who lived it. I also delegate tasks and teach volunteers how to search for and sort images to be used in the documentary. In addition to the responsibilities of coordinator, I have taken on the position of Fundraising Head for the project. Besides speaking publicly on behalf of the War Stories Project in fundraising efforts, I also burn the midnight oil writing letters to more than 200 corporations and local businesses, looking up addresses, and licking envelopes until my mouth goes dry.

Each year, more and more World War II veterans and Holocaust survivors pass away, and the loss of these valuable witnesses reminds me of the urgency to preserve their life stories. Just as Grandpa forgot eating sugar-filled buns with me, we can fail to remember what our world has endured. Whether the record of our past must serve as a lesson or reminiscence, we must look back at the path of our history before laying the cobblestones of the future.

**Color Guard Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Common Application: Please elaborate on one of your activities (extracurricular, personal activities, or work experience)(150 words or fewer).**

I like to play with guns and knives.

It’s not what you think: I’m in color guard. Although events like the Virginia Tech incident have worsened the reputation of weaponry, color guard attempts to transform the traditional connotations of potentially harmful objects into an art form.

I’ve participated in this artistic and athletic manner of multi-tasking for three years, starting with flag and advancing to the weapon lines by mastering both rifle and saber. In the familiar settings of home and school, I’m your typical teenager. But at a guard show, I become a dazzling entertainer, a fluid dancer, a dexterous performer.

Crimson eye-shadow fans out over my lids, and a crown of twisting locks sits proudly on my head. Brilliant lights gush over the football field, our stage. Maneuvering through lines of gleaming instruments, I roll to the ground, quickly pick up a billowing flag, and spread its silk before me over the night sky.

**Poetry Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Please elaborate on one of your activities (extracurricular, personal activities, or work experience)**

“Poetry is a packsack of invisible keepsakes.”

~ Carl Sandburg

It is impossible to convey the art of words with more words. Case in point: try to find another word for “salty.” It isn’t bitter; it isn’t sour; it’s salty. Likewise, the terms “diction” and “tone” do not even come close to expressing the actual feel of a poem. It is the inspiration behind the poem, and that only, which drives the very essence of verse.

Just as inspiration can produce poetry, poetry can produce inspiration. Each unforgettable experience during my high school years was made manifest in a poem, and like a little packsack, my poetry harbored my memories. My poetry class trained me to reflect on our world, humankind, and myself. In my backyard, I would often sit cross-legged for hours, absorbing passing autumn breezes and hearing the twitter of sparrows in the sycamores. Homework had never been so enjoyable.

During my junior year, I led the annual winter and Valentine’s poetry seminars. As a veteran of the poetry class, I mentored many of the Poetry I students, urging my “mentees” to maintain open minds. At the end of the year, my fellow students and I held a “Readings and the Redwoods” event, except now we were not only the performers, but also the coordinators. At the start of my senior year, the Poetry Club I had founded became an official school club, which gave me the opportunity to invite several prominent contemporary poets, such as Poet Laureate Robert Hass, to our school. In addition, our club brought what we’d learned to the rest of the community, teaching our area youth about poetry.

Through every success and every disappointment, poetry has recorded my thoughts onto paper. A composer arranging each individual note, poetry has orchestrated my high school experiences into one resonating composition, bringing all of my memories together. When I want to look back at those memories, all I have to do is open my packsack of poetry, and listen.

**Most Influential Teacher Anonymous**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ms. William was that teacher for me.

**Why I Love Debating Anonymous**

**Supplementary Topic: Describe an activity of the greatest importance to you**

We are sitting in an empty classroom, two hours after school has ended. Our hands are scribbling furiously across the page, trying to catch up with our torrent of ideas. It is the week before the debate final, and we are doing a dress rehearsal. The topic is child discipline.

“No, no, no. Cut that part out.” Someone suggests, “Give examples. Give alternatives. We must convince the adjudicators that force is unnecessary. That’s our goal.”

We nod in unison. But no, someone disagrees.

“Remember, ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’. What are our rebuttals for that?”

And so it goes on. We are animated in our discussion, all with different opinions. We sit in a circle, taking turns to speak, trying to keep some semblance of civilization. However, disorder soon sets in as we start conjecturing about the other team’s approach. We are selfish people, all trying to be heard, and all raising our voice until this din becomes unsupportable. But we love the chaos, where ideas, opinions, and counter-opinions intermingle and unite into a product of coherence and clarity. We watch, we listen, we criticize, and we support one another’s arguments. We help our teammates on the finer points of rebuttals, and give feedbacks to their speeches.

I love debating. It gave me my best friend, it introduced me to the works of Raphael, and it instilled in me perceptiveness that I am able to use every day. It has made me realize that there are always many sides to an argument, and that you can never form an opinion without seeing all sides. Debating has also taught me to argue for my own beliefs, but at the same time, to be more receptive to others’ ideas. It has made me work as much as 10 hours a week, slogging through mountains of information and condensing all that into a 6-minute speech. There have been times when I have felt like quitting, when I became so frustrated after countless writings and re-writings that I had just wanted to turn off the lights and go to sleep. There have been times when I was physically exhausted or just mentally worn out. It was during those times that thoughts of defeat crept into my mind. But in the end, I pulled through. I reminded myself of my team and of my love for this activity. I kept going and I’m proud of that.

I look around at my team members. Some look frustrated, some look excited, and some look nervous. Some are arguing, and some are jotting down notes. But in our words and our actions, there is one thing that connects us all: it’s why we are here in this room at five thirty in the afternoon. It’s the passion.

I love my team.

I love debating.

**Failure Leads to Success Anonymous**

**Discuss a significant quote you live by.**

“I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” –Michael Jordan

It didn’t register in my mind that we were going to be living in Egypt until we were halfway across the Atlantic. I knew that the experience in Cairo would be a memorable one. What I didn’t know was that I was going to come back home three years later, after enduring many tests and enjoying some successes.

My first test came when I realized my Arabic communication skills were more text-book than conversational. I knew this would be a major hindrance in school and that I had to overcome this shortcoming if I was to be well-integrated. I decided to speak with common Egyptian folk whenever the chance arose, even if that meant I might commit numerous verbal faux pas. By making mistake after mistake, I grew to learn that the slightest change in the way one pronounces a letter can sway the meaning of a word. This ushered the way for me to learn more about Egyptian culture and to learn about what is considered taboo. After reading tens of modern Egyptian books in colloquial Arabic, studying the specifics of Arabic grammar, and conversing with hundreds of Egyptians, I am comfortable saying that I improved my communication skills tremendously.

Studying at an international school also meant traveling internationally to compete in athletics. The long awaited roster for the Junior Varsity team had just been posted and my name sat alone at the bottom of the list at the position of team manager. It was not what I signed up for; I was greatly disappointed. I put my emotions aside and went to our first practice that afternoon. I believed that the coach made a mistake but I did not complain or do a mediocre job. I knew the only way to prove my self on the court was to practice perfectly. I lived by the quote my brother used to always tell me, “Practice doesn’t make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect.” After each and every practice I would spend additional hours on the court working on my weaknesses and sharpening my skills while simultaneously managing my heavy course load. I developed my ball handling skills and foot work and perfected the form on my jump shot. I maintained my intense training regimen and started playing Varsity in 9th grade at my school in Virginia. I am now the Captain, leading scorer, and record-holder for the most 3-pointers ever made in a single season during my junior year. Being appointed as team manager with a minimal role was my motivation for success.

My experiences have driven me to believe that failure is a part of the process of succeeding. The way one accepts or deals with a loss or a failure will ultimately decide your fate. In the path to success there will be obstacles and roadblocks. If you come across them you must not turn back and submit; instead, you should work around the obstacles and overcome the roadblocks. By doing so, you get one step closer to success. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I will succeed at Harvard College.

**Robotics Brainstorming Mark Ulrich**

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

Waving our banner wildly, we counted down the seconds, not at the homecoming game, but rather the 2009 FIRST Robotics Competition Kickoff. With only six weeks to build, wire, and program a 120-pound machine, my team jumped headfirst into brainstorming. Our options included a robot that hoarded the purple and orange Moon Rocks, shot them into enemy goals, or rolled them into air locks . . . with unlimited mechanical and software solutions for each strategy. As captain, I led the brainstorming effort and concentrated on getting everyone’s ideas on the table while also keeping discussion moving forward. We soon narrowed our options down to two strategies: one an elegant ball dumper, the other a superlative shooter.

“Our team has never been more prepared to shoot for the moon.”

“A rotating turret will present a significant technical accomplishment."

“None of the other ‘bots will know what hit them.”

The idea of a shooter inspired my teammates, but I knew a simpler robot could score faster by dumping many balls simultaneously.

That night I struggled to decide if I should aggressively advocate for the more effective strategy. I dialed a few teammates and heard the excitement in their voices when they discussed the shooter. I paced endlessly and reflected on my experience with robotics, a passion I had pursued since joining Lego League in 5th grade. I had joined the Southwest Robotics Team during its rookie year in 2006. At the beginning of my sophomore year, when I became the head captain, we had only six members including myself. Now we had 26 members and a network of mentors and sponsors; we had raised over $45,000. I had worked with the larger FIRST community to test a new control system and taught programming seminars for FIRST members at Washburn High and the University of Minnesota. To interest potential young inventors, I had organized demonstrations at public high schools and The Bakken Museum of Electricity and Life. FIRST Robotics meant more to me than a competition; it brought together and inspired people to produce innovation.

Perhaps I could have prolonged discussions, swayed others to my opinion, and my team would have reluctantly built a simple, effective robot. But after weighing the relative merits of process and product and the crucial importance of team dynamics, I embraced the strategy that would generate enthusiasm on the team, wow the crowd, and score sporadically.

That build season we had more fun than ever before. We challenged ourselves to find innovative design solutions to the inherent complexities of lofty strategy. I led the programming effort to become one of a handful of teams able to autonomously track the moving targets and differentiate between friend and foe using the onboard camera. The robot looked magnificent; everyone competed for the chance to drive it. We were proud of our accomplishment.

At the North Star Regional, our members rushed around the pits, offering technical support to less experienced teams and telling everyone about our robot. The two-person drive team struggled to control our robot’s many spinning sprockets and whirring wheels. Although simple ball dumpers outscored us and advanced to Nationals, my decision to look at the bigger picture instead of game details unified our team, and everyone moved forward with a better understanding of strategy for future years. At the awards ceremony the announcer read, “The judging panel may encounter a team whose unique efforts, performance, or dynamics merit recognition, yet doesn't fit into any of the existing categories . . . [The Judge’s Award goes to Southwest Robotics] for their exceptionally strong system design and true team spirit with a positive refreshing attitude.”

**Opening the Door Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice - common application.**

When I was eleven, I lived in a trailer park full of kids. I preferred reading and writing to playing with them, so pretty often, when they knocked on the door, I would pretend I was doing chores. Then I would resume reading Harry Potter and writing my dinosaur adventure story in peace.

A lot has changed since then. I’m no longer homeschooled, my family is no longer on food stamps, and I read Dostoevsky as well as J. K. Rowling. I’ve gained and lost a Southern accent; I’ve experienced the savagery of public middle school and also sampled rural-style homeschooling where a day herding cows counted as Home Ec. I’ve met the other half of my family, Sicilians who speak no English, and I too quickly concluded I was nothing like them.

Over the course of a secondary school career in a New England Catholic boarding school, I’ve watched every high school stereotype I know be systematically disproved. Cheerleaders and jocks aren’t always shallow and mean; nerds aren’t always unsung heroes; class elections don’t have to be popularity contests. Peer pressure just as often favors the right choices.

I have witnessed and experienced, at boarding school, the paradoxes of the human condition. I’ve learned that priests can be simultaneously raunchy and funny and kind, that teens don’t have to be too cool to go to church, and that I can be both intellectual and religious, because, after all, my teachers are. I’ve met teachers and houseparents who were less mature than the students in their charge, and have suffered the frustration of being at their mercy; I’ve met teachers and houseparents whom I respect and love so much that merely seeing them around campus can cheer me up. I have developed a love of Latin and Greek so inexhaustible that I’m tempted to major in the Classics rather than something “useful,” just so that I can stay with Virgil and Homer a bit longer.

I’ve learned that leadership skills are more than just a college counseling cliché, and that I am willing to fight for leadership positions in order to make sure things are done right. In the course of two years I’ve gone from being too shy to write anything serious for the school newspaper to being its editor. My freshman year I vowed I would never want to be a prefect; now, I am one, and can think of no higher honor. I’ve learned, too, that I am not completely allergic to sports, and that being commended on my performance in cross country is just as sweet a triumph as watching a veteran teacher doff an imaginary cap to an essay I’ve written.

I am proud of all these realizations and accomplishments—but mostly because they stand as proof of what I am most proud of. For me, the past six years are marked foremost by a single fundamental switch of my priorities: Now, when people knock on my dorm door, I always let them in, even if I’m in the middle of a really good story. I still read, although I do it when everyone else is asleep and then drink coffee to compensate. I still write, on my vacations—since the dinosaur story, I’ve produced three more novel-length stories—but I know better than to try to write lengthily while I’m at school. When I do write at school, it’s usually to make someone laugh or feel better.

I’ve learned, quite simply, that I prefer people to books. I know that I would rather fail a test for which I need to study than leave a friend in distress, because I love them and they have done the same for me when I needed them. I’ve learned that the only thing better than reading a good book is talking to someone who loves that book, and the only way to improve a great movie is to watch it with a group of friends on Saturday night in the dorm, sharing a bag of popcorn and a food delivery. I’ve learned that I care about cross country because I care about my teammates, and I have learned more by walking in the back of the pack to cheer up the freshmen who can’t run very well than I ever would if I kept up with my equals in speed. I’ve learned that the best thing about away meets is the bus ride home, where we sing, argue about Star Wars, recite Monty Python, confide secrets to our best friends after everyone else is sleeping, and on no account do homework or listen to iPods. I’ve learned that I do have something in common with my Sicilian relatives: My favorite time of day is dinner, when I sit with the eclectic group of people that I have come to call my friends, and we manage to find things to laugh about even when there isn’t much left to say.

Friends, I have learned, are worth more than all the laurels and distractions life can offer. It has been my great privilege to have friendships in high school—not just friendships of Aristotle’s “utility” or “pleasure,” but truly ennobling friendships that have changed me for the better. What is to others a truism, is to me a late and unexpected discovery for which I am more grateful every day. I know, now, that I am at my best and happiest in the company of others.

**The World Through Milton's Eyes Anonymous**

**Discuss the book that has influenced you the most.**

We read Paradise Lost my sophomore year, and ever since then English class has seemed little better than a waste of time. No school-assigned book has been able to compare: Paradise Lost is the only book I’ve ever read that I can honestly say changed me, and my understanding of it was only the most basic of introductions. I know I missed a lot of what it was about and I remember while we were reading it that I wished I wasn’t a native English speaker, because in Latin class at the time we were just starting to translate Virgil and there is nothing quite like savoring the meaning of every single deliberately-placed word in an epic poem, by means of a dictionary and a pencil.

Nevertheless, cursory though my education of Paradise Lost was, and presumptuous though it is to claim that Milton changed me, I know he did. Milton opened up the heavens for me in a way that a lifetime of church never could. He retold the same old story I’ve heard all my life in a way that made me feel physically bereaved when Eve and Adam ate the Forbidden Fruit. He gave Genesis the same poetic beauty as Greek myths and made the story of the Fall not just an explanation but a tragedy. Until I read Paradise Lost, I had difficulty picturing the Christian “Paradise” because the concept of happiness without sadness seemed impossible. I had difficulty understanding the Christian delineation of the complementarity of the sexes. But Milton’s description of the Garden and of Eve changed that.

I remember banging on my poor Humanities teacher’s door at dinnertime, interrupting him and his wife and their baby daughter, to tell him what Milton was doing to me. The world suddenly seemed beautiful, and tragically less than its potential, and filled with a sort of lyric power that I couldn’t begin to fathom. When I walked across campus I felt like I was flying. All I wanted to do was go to Mass. My teacher was kind, told me to calm down, and offered me dinner.

Milton changed the way I read, to the point that I can divide the books I’ve read into those read before and after Paradise Lost: before, when books weren’t contextualized by an overarching awareness of Milton’s interpretation of the world; and now, when they are. It is as if Paradise Lost has expanded my soul’s capacity. In the words of John Keats, Milton changed me by “giving Delight new joys,/ And Pleasure nobler pinions!”

**Uköhsutha’ Anonymous**

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

“Go fish.” The vibrant smell of freshly crushed Roma tomatoes and oregano splashes across the dusty kitchen, letting me know that it’s time to stir the red sauce for tonight’s lasagna.

Silence. My opponent stares defiantly. How dare I insult her with such a base command? She knows what she’s supposed to do.

“Go ahead and draw,” I clarify. “I’m just getting up to stir the sauce.”

“Are we going to have spaghetti?”

“We’re going to eat lasagna in a couple hours.” I draw the wooden spoon through the sauce several times and return to the table. She hasn’t drawn a card. I give up. “Do you have a queen?” We used to play rummy and poker, but as my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s disease has entered its advanced stages, those games have become hopelessly complex. At any rate, it’s easier to throw occasional games of Go Fish in her favor.

When Nana was first diagnosed, I decided that I would become a medical researcher and cure Alzheimer’s, that I would save her personally. I quickly discovered, however, that (a) the ten years I would need to finish med school meant that I would be too late to help her, and (b) I had little genuine interest in neuroscience. If I couldn’t help her keep her memories, though, I could at least keep them elsewhere. I took to asking questions voraciously about her life and writing down everything I learned. To me, the most striking part of her story was her relationship with the Seneca language. I only found out a few years ago that she was a fluent speaker, and she couldn’t understand my excitement; as she put it: “There’s nobody to talk it with. Why learn a language you can’t use?” Still, I managed to extract the word for “thank you” (“niawë’”) and a promise for her to teach it to me someday. Unfortunately, as her Alzheimer’s progressed, she lost her ability to speak the language.

Subsequent attempts to find another way to learn Seneca brought my attention to the waning of tongues that aren’t part of the “big ten” languages spoken by almost 40% of the world’s population. Society’s increasing economic globalization has been accompanied by growing cultural homogeneity. However, minority languages and the cultures they describe offer unique perspectives on the world and lend valuable insights to the fields of anthropology, sociology, and cognitive science. After researching the issue, I concluded that we urgently need to create a definitive catalog of the world’s languages, recording and archiving those facing imminent extinction. Languages endangered right now can still be saved if we focus on encouraging bilingual education, pro-diversity public policy, and language revivals.

Studying at Harvard will provide me with the tools I need to help implement these measures and contribute to the preservation of endangered languages. Like our elders, we have relegated the world’s cultural diversity to the pages of history. Just as I don’t expect to cure Alzheimer’s, I know that I cannot singlehandedly reverse the decline in linguistic diversity. However, there is little awareness of this problem, and few measures are being taken to solve it. If the wholehearted efforts of an individual can prevent just one culture and its language from being uköhsutha’ -- “left behind” -- then I believe it’s worth a try.

**Finding an Allegiance Anonymous**

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

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States ceased to be the backdrop to my life and instead became an ideal, a cause, a veritable force. The autumn parade in my town, which had previously been a ragtag band of candy-throwing Girl Scouts and antique car collectors, suddenly became the American Pride Parade, now featuring Uncle Sam on stilts and flag-bearing Knights of Columbus. People wore their political views on their sleeves -- or, more accurately, their bumpers. The 2004 presidential elections only heightened the atmosphere of nationalism and strong political passions.

It was in this environment that I attended my sophomore year of high school, equally absorbed by the political and social changes my country was experiencing and by the literature of my seminar-style English class. Daily we discussed the ideas behind such works as <i>Heart of Darkness</i> and <i>Les Misérables</i> and experienced those sparkling moments of intellectual unity when their relevance to our lives and to society suddenly became clear. My enthusiasm for society’s great books led me to Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” and I was affected deeply by his notion that citizens are obliged to abstain from participating in institutions they view as corrupt.

For some time, I had viewed the Pledge of Allegiance as a questionable daily ritual, but I had felt powerless to do anything about it. However, “Civil Disobedience” is a call to action as well as a critical inquiry, and after deciding to act on any conclusions I developed, I pondered the issue and decided that encouraging students to salute a flag and take an oath of allegiance is unacceptable in an academic setting, which should be kept as ideologically neutral as possible. Furthermore, it runs contrary to the idea in education that students should think critically and develop their own opinions on issues, essential to the functioning of democracy. Although (or perhaps because) I have a healthy respect for the First Amendment rights that come with being an American, I felt that I could no longer in good conscience participate in the Pledge of Allegiance, whether by reciting or by standing up. Participation would not only be hypocritical, but insulting to my classmates who did so out of genuine sentiment.

The first time I stayed seated during the Pledge, I was prepared for the worst, and had even gone so far as to program the ACLU legal hotline into my cell phone. As I stared at my folded hands and tried to assume the facial expression of a noble dissenter rather than a traitor, I began to wonder if nonparticipation could change anything, whether it would be worth the social cost. However, the Pledge ended and my day proceeded as usual. No CIA agents detained me on my way out of class. No divine bolt split the heavens to smite me. No burning crosses appeared on my lawn. In fact, very few students noticed, and the ones who did showed no reaction beyond indifferent glances and friendly questions. Perhaps I had jumped to conclusions about my peers.

About a month after I had stopped participating, however, a substitute teacher came to my chemistry class; he was a military veteran who expressed his patriotism in a more traditional way than I. The class knew he was serious when he urged everyone to “get up, stand up,” and they recited the Pledge with a resounding, crushing unity. The substitute noticed my nonparticipation immediately. Despite my attempts to explain that I meant no disrespect, and that my actions were legal under the 1943 Supreme Court case <i>West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette</i>, he yelled that I was ungrateful, disloyal, and should “get the hell out of [his] classroom.” Although I was terrified, I refused to move. He called the office and was informed that he had to let me stay.

The next day, the substitute was gone, but my problems were not. Overnight, many of my peers had heard about the incident and developed opinions, and they couldn’t wait to inform me. Initially, the reaction was hostile; some students followed the substitute’s cue, and I became the object of shoves and pinches in the halls as well as admonitions to move to France. However, as students continued to confront me and I was given opportunities to explain my position, a startling thing happened: people started to discuss the Pledge of Allegiance among themselves, and they came to many different opinions on the issue. Extracurricular philosophical discussions are always exciting, and I found that voicing a dissenting opinion and standing up for it stimulated debate and a deeper exploration of the issue than many had ventured before.

I now know that simply by maintaining one’s personal integrity, an individual can make a difference, even if only by inspiring debate and inquiry into an issue. This experience instilled in me the confidence I need to maintain my integrity and independence -- to be that individual -- in the future.

**A Fire to be Kindled Anonymous**

**Topic of choice**

<BLOCKQUOTE>“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.” --Plutarch</BLOCKQUOTE>

I asked everyone how to write a perfect college essay. “Show your passion,” they said. “Proofread” was another common admonition. The most (and least) useful advice came from my film teacher and mentor, who urged me to “just relax and it’ll come.”

I was putting the finishing touches on my piece at the end of October when four National Guardsmen showed up at my front door and told my family that we needed to evacuate our home immediately, that our house was threatened by the wildfire raging a few miles away, one of fourteen that had engulfed San Diego County in the last 24 hours.

In the subsequent week, my family was shunted from a Denny’s parking lot to my uncle’s house to my grandparents’ house. The experience ranged from long, tedious hours of scouring grocery stores for bottled water to the bizarre experience of strolling down the Pacific shoreline with my best friend, singing “I Am the Walrus” and observing how the smoke in the sky had scorched the crisp autumn morning into twilight.

Yes, I had felt sorry for the victims of the Indonesian tsunamis and Hurricane Katrina and donated to the Red Cross in the aftermath of those disasters. I spent three years volunteering at my local hospital. I thought I was passionate about helping people, but like some Gilded Age philanthropist, I had managed to help without having any idea of the refugee experience. Although I felt very strongly about my civic duty to help others at those times, living as an evacuee for a week alongside everyone else I knew instilled in me a redoubled passion to help society’s less fortunate.

The reason I struggled for weeks trying to convey my desire to improve society was that although intellectually I wanted to help the marginalized peoples of the world, the idea of what it was to be in need was something I could only imagine. I no longer have to imagine it, though. I’ve lived it, if only for a week and with no long-term damage to health or property.

That epiphany left me reexamining my passions and purpose in many aspects of my life, all while I’m attempting to chart its course. If my desire to help those in need was only galvanized by experiencing need, then how can I know that my other passions -- such as my love of learning, which I’ve had since childhood and have nurtured protectively over the years -- are genuine? There was no single experience that made me want to devour books and newspapers, to spend hours browsing the library of San Diego State University purely for pleasure. These things are in my nature, and I’ve always done them reflexively. But can I be truly passionate about learning if, like eating or sleeping, it’s something I’ve always done intuitively?

I believe that I can. Passions formed in a crucible may determine what we do, but it is our long-term interests and beliefs that determine how we fare in difficult situations; this combination of past experience and reaction to our surroundings allows us to grow.

My past will decide where I begin at university. I have my life experience thus far, an allegiance to integrity rather than tradition, a love of diversity and a willingness to do what it takes to preserve it, an insatiable hunger for knowledge, and a clear understanding of the benefits of helping those in need. More importantly, though, I understand that personal growth is about not only where you’ve come from, but also your reaction to the present. I know that attending university will enrich and change my perceptions of myself, my beliefs, and my world. I know that despite my convictions and goals, I may not follow the course I’ve charted in this application. I know that everything I have just written may be proven wrong.

I can’t wait.

**Sheer Joy Anonymous**

**Open-ended reponse.**

My own eyes were closed, but I could sense hundreds watching us. My fingers, previously swathed in thick woolen gloves, were loose and warm. I exhaled slowly and willed all my muscles to relax. I brought the cold, smooth mouthpiece up to my lips and softly blew the opening notes of our piece, letting the notes ring in the vast theatre. Other voices gradually joined in: the low drone of a bassoon, the threatening rumble of the timpani, and the melodious hum of a clarinet. Performing with my wind ensemble has always filled me with a certain satisfaction and empowerment that only creating music with a large group could yield. Although the strict deadlines and exhausting rehearsals were overpowering at times, the sense of comfort and acceptance I experienced was unparalleled. Playing the flute gave me the opportunity to be a part of a community, in which creating music was our communication.

However, in the middle of my sophomore year of high school, one of my closest friends presented me with a guitar that he had picked up from a local yard sale. It was simply constructed with plain, pale pieces of wood, and although the instrument was old, stained, and cracked in many places, I could tell that it had character; a rich history of creating music. As I picked up my new guitar, I could feel a flash of childlike excitement flicker through me, and I couldn’t help but already love the battered instrument.

The next few weeks passed in a blur as I clumsily tried to teach myself how to play the guitar. After plowing through countless YouTube videos and online tutorials, I finally learned how to strum the most basic set of chords, and I was thrilled. I proudly showed off the thin calluses on the tips of my fingers to my friends and passed hours in our local music store gathering a collection of picks. To the dismay of all the inhabitants in my house, I spent weeks loudly belting out songs of my own invention, while strumming the only four chords I knew how to play. Trying to learn the guitar filled me with a silly, innocent happiness that could only be described as pure, unadulterated enjoyment.

Although I never excelled at the guitar, trying to teach myself a completely new instrument changed my perspective toward music-making in an unexpected way. When I played the flute, I was performing as only a small chunk of a much larger entity. However, when I learned how to play the guitar, I was performing for myself, and only myself. There were no external pressures, no expectations, and no looming deadlines to meet. I practiced for the sheer joy of it, rather than in preparation for an upcoming recital. Only when I was thrown into an environment where only an instrument and I existed, could I realize how much I truly enjoyed making music.

**Wahrheit Macht Frei Sophia Lugo**

**If there is something you would like us to know, please inform us below. If you wish to include an additional essay, you may do so.**

In the middle of the blazing heat of summer in Nürnberg, I sat with stiff muscles and frozen hands with the family that up to this moment had always been so welcoming to my company. My eyes wandered the living room to find a niche that would comfort them; my hands sought solace in each other. Today, I was a stranger.

Earlier that day, I had dared to ask the question that had been gnawing at me since I had passed the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds. After all, my exchange family had always been so kind in answering all of my queries about their language and lifestyle, until I posed the question about what they thought of the Holocaust. I had thought the ordeal was history.

After that awkward moment of silence that followed my question, Peter Gechter, the father of the family, sprang into a response so quick it was almost incomprehensible. Impassioned by lamentation and accusation, he spat in German, “You Americans think… We never wanted … We never knew…” At first, I took offense to his generalization of finger-pointing Americans. Presumably taking sudden notice of my irritation, Peter summoned the rest of the family to the living room to watch a documentary from his collection.

As I watched the gray soldiers marching across the screen, heard the piercing voice that had haunted all of my studies of the Holocaust, and saw the images of a people confused by poverty and marred pride, I thought of my classes in the States, when the words “Nazis” and “Germans” had been so easily transposed during discussion, and I had been so disgusted at the nation of blonde and blue-eyed “fiends” that I had accused collectively of the most heinous crimes. I realized that I, with all my supposed middle-school sagacity, had thought myself capable of being the judge and jury of an entire people for an event that I had never experienced myself. Although there were certainly some cruel men who merited the blame, my twelve-year-old finger had not been so kind as to make that distinction.

“There are Nazis, and there are Germans” said Peter, in English this time.

When I look at the words imprinted on my history book’s pages, I think of the spectres of time that lie behind the words and reside in the air of the places where the stories took place. Marveling at the simple elegance of an Aborigine playing a didgeridoo in Sydney, taking the subway between the dilapidated and chic parts of Prague, being accused with disdain in Paris and thanked in Normandy on behalf of my country, or even listening to the accounts of my Mexican mother’s family condemning Pancho Villa as a villain and my Mexican father’s family venerating the same as a hero, I find myself repeatedly unqualified to be the judge of history’s civilized and uncivilized, winners and losers, good and evil. When I look back at the day that I had first felt like a foreigner with my exchange family in Germany, I thank the Gechters for helping to remove my blinders and for showing me that Wahrheit (truth) comes in a panoramic shot. Although I may never be able to be completely attuned to the feelings of every player in history, I can at least remember that no story comes in only black and white.

**At the Table Sophia Lugo**

**A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.**

To the foreigner’s eye it was war, but to any Lozano family member it was a Socratic discussion. As I sat with cousins, aunts, uncles, great aunts and great uncles, answers to the questions of the afterlife, the importance of living, the health of the soul, and the evils and sanctity of worldly pleasures were flinging across the table. Although I mostly remained silent, my mind was busy interrogating the others. The whirl of ideas was speckled with laughter and exclamations, but never anger. Finally, someone’s remark would lead the discussion to an impasse, a moment when we would nod our heads or slap a neighbor’s back until a subtle interjection began a new thread of queries. Only at the table’s edge, with her arms crossed, my Tia Martha, ghostly white and clad in inky black down to her shoes, looked on in reproach. To her, the world could only be dressed in her shades.

Labels are not uncommon in my family: Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, atheists, Buddhist-Hindu-mystics, agnostics, and one Sathya Sai Babba devotee. Our coming-of-age initiation has always been a flame-proof test of one’s beliefs. One could pass by not abandoning individuality, but learning to simultaneously leave room to build and change. The process is one that I continuously experience, as each of my skeptical, cynical, and optimistic filters test every claim that tries to gain admission into my beliefs. Sometimes, I wish I could simply believe what I am told; that, a least, would allow me to have more time to sleep at night. Yet, I find myself incapable of taking my daily lessons at face value, lest I ever start to look like my poor Tia Martha.

Returning to that family festival, I remember my favorite great aunt: Tia Alicia, her frail body revealing the metastasis of cancer, dancing with my cousin between the tables in her sequined scarlet heels. Soon the rest of us will join her, because even though we know that her death is near, she gives us no reason to be sad. Having already solidified her answers, she is confident about her soul’s destination and has seen her purposes achieved. It is a phenomenon I had witnessed at my own grandmother’s death. When Abuelita Susana had known that her cancer would soon end her life, she quit her job as a chemist and began to host as many family parties as possible. After all, her days of questioning were over. Now, her favorite answers told her how to best reap the fruits of her efforts.

When I stop to check my progress at living, I find that I still have too many curious questions and find too many answers to commit to any yet. If I am going to choose a path for myself, I will not tread it in standard black. I have a lot of evidence left to gather, for only then will I be able to fully partake in the hearty discourse at my family's table.

**To Be Kate Sophia Lugo**

**Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences in the space below (1000 character maximum).**

I am Kate: poised, smart, rude. I come first because I deserve it. For this hour, I will kick, scream and protest as I please, and the feelings will be very real. There have been many Kates before, but the challenge lies in making this one unique. The key is dissecting and predicting myself in another time and body, under a different roof. Strangers and loved ones laugh at me or cringe in fear, the greatest gifts they can give me at this moment. My lover, Petruchio, my simple friend David hours before, seduces me with his crude humor and brazen masculinity.

Now Petruchio has forgotten his lines, but my story must live on. I put aside what I have memorized by heart and ask myself, what would Sophia do? David catches on, and Petruchio is brave again.

As the curtains close, I barely notice my exhaustion. I change into my clothes, but after looking in the mirror I cannot remove my makeup. After all, I would like the audience to know who had borrowed Kate's body.

**The Storyteller Anne Mathews**

**A topic of your choice.**

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

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

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

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

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

**Personal Statement Joseph Austin Martinez**

**This is the personal statment for the Common App.**

My brain never turns off. Problem solving and efficiency have always been a part of me. I am always asking myself, “Can this be done better?” I’m not sure if it’s related to my effort to eliminate distractions, my ADHD, or the nature of being a swimmer. It’s just something I can’t quite stop. There is a part of my brain always thinking of new plans, new ways to do things, new inventions. It is this constant thought and drive that really helps me find focus with my academics and my career as a swimmer.

In ninth grade I noticed that our old, hard classroom desks were so uncomfortable they kept me distracted. I began to think of ways to make the desks bearable. That is when I thought of the “JCush”. It would be a 14 by 10 inch foam cushion to place on each chair. I ordered a three-inch thick foam mattress online, cut out my cushions, and then gave them to students in my class. The JCush caught on quickly and many people started using them. They made learning comfortable, physically at least. I love inventing because inventions make life easier.

When I returned home after morning practice one day, once again I heard my mom yell from downstairs, “Joseph, please come and help me turn on the TV!” As I hustled down to her I said to myself, “There has to be a better way to do this.” I quickly fumbled with the remotes and turned on the news. When I had taken more than the usual trips to the garage and had my duct tape in tow, my mom and I exchanged looks. She knew I had gotten myself into something and she was excited to see the result. Soon I had constructed a super-remote-contraption that clearly labeled the duct tape-bound TV remotes. When I explained to her how to use it, I could tell she was happy since she could now help herself.

At practice one day, our normal swim team banter that occurs during those few moments we are resting on the walls together, had turned to constructing a battle bot. It had to be fast, shoot airsoft guns, and be able to stream video back to the driver. As we swam laps, my brain started creating. I wanted nothing more than to see this little battle bot come to fruition. For several days, I drew up plan after plan. Then I created the perfect model. I started tearing apart all of my old RC models for the parts needed. Servos, plastic sheets, batteries, wires, speed controls, and a friend’s RC monster truck were just some of the accumulated parts. I borrowed tools from my uncle and got to work. I cut and shaped melted plastic, soldered wires, and measured parts. After several weeks of prototypes and mistakes, I had made the final product. My friends and I drove our robot through obstacle courses, harassed siblings, and bombarded targets. This battle bot was a boy and his friend’s dream come true.

When I see problems, or have ideas, I do not push them to the back of my mind and ignore them. Instead, I tackle the challenge until I have created the solution. It does not really matter if it is my school, my family, or my friends. I am a problem solver, a team player, and an internally driven person.

**Last Two Summers Joseph Austin Martinez**

**What I did over the last two summers.**

During the summer of 2011, I switched to a new club swim team with my best friend and we were motivated to push each other to faster times. That was also my second summer working at my dad’s office, so I was happy to have been given more responsibility. I charted the effects of medicines he was administering which helped his office run more effectively. Soon my days pleasantly fell into routine. I would head to practice at six in the morning, then eat breakfast with teammates, drive to work, and then go back to practice again until four in the afternoon. This routine enabled me to keep more focused. By the end of the summer, my best friend and I had achieved our goal of making the Olympic Trials cut. I had never been happier, and to make the cut with my best friend only made it sweeter.

The summer of 2012 started in the water. All my focus was directed towards training for the Olympic Trials in Omaha. I continued my routine from the previous summer. When the meet finally came in early July, I could not have been more prepared and was excited with my results. After the trials, I spent a long, relaxing weekend with a friend in upstate New York at the Finger Lakes. I was also able to see the musical Mary Poppins on Broadway. It was incredible to see such fantastic acting, which rekindled my childhood passion for the stage. If I did not swim, I think I would be an actor.

After New York, I got back in the pool to train for the Junior National meet at the end of the summer and continued my work on college applications. During any free time, my friends and I would collaborate online over a digital “sandbox-building” game called Minecraft, and constructed scale models of everything from a Roman city to a more modernized version of the Natatorium we swim in everyday. On Saturday afternoons, this same group of friends would get together for a competitive game of Ultimate Frisbee.

**Andrew Joseph Austin Martinez**

**Describe an important person in your life**

I find it incredibly difficult to go through life alone. As humans, we look to others for guidance because sometimes we do not know what is best. Four years ago I joined a new swim team and met my best friend, Andrew. Even though he is two years older, he always treats me as his equal. He is completely selfless and always tries to bring out the best in other people.

There always seem to be friendships that parents would rather discourage (especially those with older high school kids), but this was not one of them. When I first met Andrew, my parents’ approval was readily apparent. While I don't need their approval for everything, but I do feel it added to my comfort level with Andrew. We shared a lot of personality traits, such as our sense of humor and work ethic, but what I admired most about him was how inclusive he was towards the younger swimmers on the team. He was an encouraging leader. Every Friday, Andrew would gather the guys around in the locker room and we would have a 5-minute “clap it up” meeting. We would all sit in a circle and then he would start by complimenting a teammate and pointing out something that we did well that week in practice. This activity did wonders for team camaraderie and attitude. Two years later, I now find myself leading the “clap it up” meetings. I am now the oldest on the team and I am doing everything I can to be the same selfless leader Andrew was. He taught me that the best way to improve ourselves was to improve with the people around us. Andrew’s support played a huge part in my successes not only in, but out of the pool.

I have watched many friends leave for college and our relationship has dwindled because of it. This is not the case with Andrew; it does not matter if I have not seen him in a year, we will always pick right back up where we left off. Andrew often contacts me to ask how the team and I are doing. Whenever I am in a difficult situation and need some outside advice, I can go to Andrew. Just recently, with the worries of applications and swimming, I called Andrew and he happily shared his experiences and advice. I am able to create a better path for myself and attain the best opportunities possible because he helps me not to focus too myopically.

Andrew and I have formed an unbreakable bond of trust with each other; because of this I am more myself when I am around him. Andrew has played a constructive and substantial role in my life. Now when I am cheering on the younger kids, “clapping it up”, or giving someone advice, I think of him. I want nothing more then to treat others how he treated me.

**Against the Odds Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

Unlike most children, I loved the doctor. As I bubbled after hearing the news of a doctor's appointment, I'd begin preparing a list of questions. At the clinic, the nurses laughed at me, but I was determined to get to the bottom of my quest of how to become a doctor. By accompanying me through obstacles in life, my quest for scientific education has helped me persevere to achieve my goals.

As a child in Pakistan, I lived in an environment that did not agree with my passion. As a young girl, my job was to help out at home while the boys ran the errands outside. I made the observation that boys and girls were treated differently. More significantly, girls were not expected to excel academically. To compound this, I realized that the financial conditions of our fathers determined our futures—even if we were all boys. My hypothesis was seemingly true when I realized that none of my female cousins attended college. I concluded differently for myself. I could not adjust to this and decided that I would be a fabulous and intelligent doctor that would one day be famous worldwide. I was neither financially gifted nor a boy, but I could be just as successful if I studied diligently. My passion for science and mathematics became of second nature to me. I read every book I could get my hands on, and my determination grew stronger.

Moving to the USA made my dream much more realistic. However, when we first moved, we had no home and no jobs. We did not speak English. We spent our first few months in the basements of relatives. I stayed silent during my first days of school because I did not know English. Moreover, my parents did not allow me to try speaking English at home in order to preserve our native language. Therefore, some days I came in to school completely embarrassed of having done the homework incorrectly. I often cried when the teacher yelled at me, but I never complained that my parents could not help me. I never left anything incomplete, always attempting everything with my best effort. Determined to excel, I began practicing my English in solitude with books and by watching television. I requested that my cousins to speak to me in English rather than Urdu in order to improve my understanding. After multiple tries, I eventually mastered assignments. I developed as a scholar and became a perseverant person.

I knew that I had to learn English to study medicine, and my dedication to overcoming difficulties allowed me to quickly adjust to the American education system. Adversity was not a dead end, but a learning experience that made me stronger. Therefore, my love of science encouraged me to take initiative for myself. I highly value education because I have a simple logic: increase in education increases the potential to help myself and others. My passion for science and education has always driven me to persevere.

**Words Speak Louder Than Actions Kathryn Gundersen**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Artist Megan Zhu**

**Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences in the space below (1000 character maximum).**

The fan is chugging away overhead, desperately fighting off the heat that Jinhua’s summers are infamous for.

But I am oblivious: I’m finishing my drawing of Mickey Mouse. With pencil in hand, markers sprawled about, and a new book of cartoon pictures, the last thing on my mind is the weather. Nothing can stir me—I am in my element.

Over the past twelve years, I’ve learned to command my tools. As the artist, I am powerful: I act as both a creator and a mediator, imbuing each painting with a distinct impression. The variation, uniqueness, and uncertainty underlying each step of the process—these make up the essence of art which I strive for.

But I have discovered that true passion doesn’t reserve itself. From using my talent in student government to applying that same creativity in my patents, I’ve happily seen art penetrate all other areas of my life. Genuine passion brings joy to everyone—not just the pursuer.

**My Grandmother's Influence Megan Zhu**

**Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence. (500 Words Maximum)**

Zhu Qin, a peasant girl who had been isolated from civilization her entire life, knew nothing of the world that existed beyond the mountains. Not a single person in her family had had any prior education whatsoever; nobody was able to even write his or her own name. The youngest of nine children, Zhu Qin was determined to alter this. She started her formal education at age ten, and, with the odds very much against her, worked through high school and college, eventually becoming a reputable doctor.

I’ve heard my grandmother’s story once a year, every year since I immigrated to the States at age four. But I never get tired of it—her determination, hard work, and astounding accomplishments leave me in awe each time. Her daughter, my mother, became extraordinary as well: she attended Stanford on a full scholarship and succeeded in her subsequent entrepreneurial pursuits.

My grandmother’s whole-hearted persistence, ambition, patience, and, most of all, grace, are traits that I intend to mimic in my own life. She had only a slim chance of succeeding in her endeavors—but was never discouraged. Instead, she pushed herself even harder, focused on disproving the odds.

This brief yet meaningful family history has humbled me, making me realize that I am only where I am today because of the efforts invested by those before me. My grandmother’s determination, sacrifice, and unrelenting drive to achieve her goals regardless of all obstacles are traits I have come to hold in highest regard. She’s taught me a lesson that will be crucial to my future: if I yearn for success, I must work for it.

Over the past thirteen years, I’ve increasingly familiarized myself with this concept. From my cartoon drawings to my paintings hung in city hall, from my first debate tournament to my 2nd-place finish at the state championship, I’ve tested this truth for myself.

My grandmother has demonstrated that with effort and dedication, I can accomplish anything and everything I set my mind to. With my life just starting and so much ahead of me, there are guaranteed to be sleepless nights, stressful days, and moments when I’m ready to quit. But seeing how my grandmother ignored all hurdles and continued, I, too, will press forward. The family history I’ve heard many times has done well for me: it has inspired me, driven me, and most of all, made me eager to take on the challenges of leading an exceptional life.

Not too long ago, I was told by a distant relative that the women in our family tend to run strong.

I smiled.

Why?

I’m about to be living proof.

**The Cheerful Mongrel That I Am Anonymous**

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

Thanks to the hundreds of different stories my relatives have told me, I have heard every side of the Yugoslav war and the fall of communism. Every side. On top of having a sense of these different perspectives, I have learned many interesting customs along the way: when to kiss someone twice, thrice and even four times on the cheek, when to talk to women and when not to because of their different religious beliefs, what words are unacceptable in each country and dozens of other fascinating customs.

A New Yorker by birth and a Kosovar by name, I grew up in Romania, where I was exposed to poverty, racism towards gypsies and a very different culture than that in the U.S. I know a lot about European history, not only from books, movies or history class, but also from my parents and grandparents in Romania and the former Yugoslavia. Since I spend most of my vacations travelling, I have been to Europe dozens of times and am familiar with the geography and culture of many European countries.

I have been lucky enough to not only visit, but also be a part of, several very different cultures thanks to my family. In a nutshell, after having had three stepparents, I have developed a special bond with the Romanian, Kosovar, Austrian, Croatian, British, Irish, Bosnian, Serbian and French cultures. It does get confusing at times, I admit. That, however, doesn’t stop me from feeling that unique connection to these peoples and their cultures. I may not have an Austrian name or a British accent, but I can understand more German than the average New Yorker, and I happen to be a die-hard fan of a London-based soccer club, Arsenal.

Through this life journey of mine, my parents have been very supportive. They've helped me to better understand where I come from and have provided me with valuable life lessons; one of these being that if I don't have anything meaningful to say, I shouldn't say anything at all. From their insightful words of wisdom, as well as from my personal experience, I have learned that even if I do have something worth saying, I have to be careful how I say it; unknowingly, I can easily offend many people due to their different backgrounds. After all, how am I supposed to know where each new person I meet is from? The simple answer to that is just to ask them, right? It’s easier said than done, because in order to ask them, I need to know what language to ask them in, and if I should say I am Romanian, Kosovar or American. For example, speaking Serbian to a Kosovar or telling a Serbian that I am Kosovar could get me in some trouble because of the unsettled conflict between these countries.

Even if I do find myself in difficult situations at times, I am still very proud of my Kosovar, Romanian and American roots. Some people say I must face an identity crisis, since, wherever I go, I never quite seem to be from there. I, however, don't generally label myself as belonging to a certain culture because not only am I the outcome of an unusual European mix, but I am also blessed to have lived and studied in the most diverse multi-ethnic environments: New York City and the United Nations International School. This rare mix, this cheerful mongrel, this is who I am outside the realm of SATs and transcripts; and wherever this amazing journey may take me, I am convinced my heritage will always guide me to see the world from different perspectives.

**HGRPG Kathryn Gundersen**

**Harvard's supplemental essay.**

Many share the same goal: to create and manage a website that will grow to be successful and well-known, with plenty of active users keeping it afloat. At the mere age of thirteen, I can't say that this was exactly what I was aiming for when I created my website, hungergamesrpg.com (HGRPG). I was simply looking to expand my love of reading and writing through the fantastic series crafted by Suzanne Collins, and creating a site devoted to text-based roleplay, something I'd been enamored with for months, seemed to be a wonderful place to begin. How was I to know that it would eventually blossom into something bigger than I'd ever anticipated?

I discovered my internet niche a little over a year before, on a roleplay forum for Collins's debut series, The Underland Chronicles. My strong appetite for this form of writing seemed insatiable, and a year later I wasted no time in creating a similar website for her subsequent saga, The Hunger Games. It was an exorbitant task for an adolescent who had only recently started eighth grade, but I was more than up for the challenge; what better way to share my love of writing? Though initially lacking the auspicious start I'd hoped for, four years later my brainchild has grown exponentially and thrives with the help of its dedicated and talented community of members who share my passion.

Over time, I have watched my little website of twenty members attract thousands more. Currently the member count is just over five and a half thousand, and what truly astounds me is that despite the copious amounts of people logging on daily, it still maintains a small, tight-knit community feel. I've befriended writers from all over the world—Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, Great Britain, Japan, Germany, Dubai—and connected so well with them, discovering so many things we have in common aside from our affinity for reading and writing. I've watched and aided them in developing their own abilities as writers, evolving from newbies who post a single, sparse paragraph to seasoned members who can dish out over a thousand words at a time, delving deep into the thoughts and innermost feelings of characters they created. In turn, I've grown as a writer myself; HGRPG gives me an opportunity to write daily, practicing and perfecting my skills in a supportive, inspiring environment.

Through this website I've not only learned about writing and the varying cultures of my online friends, but also acquired vital leadership and management skills. I devote hours of my week to maintaining this website, whether organizing events, answering questions, welcoming new members, moderating the forums, or mediating disputes. Running a website taught me what being a leader truly means: actively setting an example and staying entirely dedicated. Without a doubt these skills have transferred into my offline life, and continue to define my character. I know that my website will continue to prosper far into the future, and I've long since deemed it the most meaningful experience of my lifetime.

**My Cultural Identity Anonymous**

**Using the quotation below as a starting point, reflect on the role that culture plays in your life. “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy, chair of the Council of the Humanities and director of the Program in Humanistic Studies, Princeton University.**

At a strange intersection of customs exists my cultural essence; I am the product of an infinitely improbable arrangement of DNA. Seemingly, Fate threw darts at a board to select my parents from the world’s population, and just this once they landed on a Nicaraguan war refugee that I affectionately refer to as “mom” and an nth generation Irish naval corpsman from the suburbs known to me as “dad.” Such is life, and Austin came to be a child of divided culture: a child of two languages, two families, two coexisting and yet so vastly different identities.

Mom’s dancing in the living room to her favorite Zumba workout tape, and Dad’s sitting in the kitchen, screening some Discovery special as he diligently finishes his paperwork; I exist as the fusion thereof.

My Nicaraguan heritage is a subtle presence in the otherwise culturally homogenous sphere of vanilla blandness that is Fairview, Pennsylvania. However, upon visiting my family in Miami, I’m treated to the cultural variety that is the essence of what it means to be Hispanic. Two springs ago, my family and I found ourselves at the Calle Ocho festival, in the heart of Miami’s Little Havana. It was an awakening to the heritage I had yet to fully acknowledge; my integration into the Hispanic community transcends nationality and embraces the commonality of its members. The Cuban espresso shots I enjoyed served as my impromptu induction into my mother’s cultural community. It’s fitting I would rediscover myself in city my mother spent her teenage years; I found my heritage hiding in the festival’s rhythmic bongo beats.

The Hispanic community is warmly welcoming, passionate and energetic, and I am proud to be a part of it. To be Hispanic in the United States is to denounce divisive nationalities and embrace newfound ethnic commonality. My mother has given me more than just a heritage language, she’s served as my liaison to a vibrant community full of el duende, a passionate energy whose variable and untranslatable meaning is yet another demonstration of the bonding nature of being Hispanic. When I speak to my Dominican friend, our connection extends beyond the superficial fact that we’re usually speaking Spanish. Our upbringings in a predominately Caucasian environment have been subtly interwoven with our mothers’ past heritage. There’s nothing better than having a dancing mother who chastises me in Spanglish to make my bed.

I am an Irish-Nicaraguan who wishes to make the best of what his mother has given him. She’s connected me to a vibrant, welcoming community, and her dedication has allowed me to live without the poverty and disadvantage she had to withstand as an unfortunate byproduct of her community. I’m advantaged with a mother who has overcome obstacles far greater than those that I must face. My cultural experience has driven me to achieve through my duality: to succeed not just as Austin, but to succeed for the sake of validating my mother’s continuing efforts and for the diverse, energetic Hispanic connection she’s given me.

**Humanity's Treasures Anonymous**

**You may wish to include an additional essay if you feel that the college application forms do not provide sufficient opportunity to convey important information about yourself or your accomplishments. You may write on a topic of your choice, or you may choose from one of the following topics: - Unusual circumstances in your life - Travel or living experiences in other countries - What you would want your future college roommate to know about you - An intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper, poetry, or research topic in engineering, mathematics, science or other modes of inquiry) that has meant the most to you - How you hope to use your college education - A list of books you have read during the past twelve months**

I gaze at the pieces of an intricate puzzle: A stone Indian elephant on my desk, and a pale Korean doll on the shelf above it, draped in crimson and gold, with flowing black hair. The wall is adorned with my name on a sheet of white silk, my name itself painted in delicate Chinese brushstrokes. Traditional African bracelets line my jewelry box, paired with bangles from Afghanistan. The sunlight catches the green jade good luck charm on my windowsill, shining brilliantly.

It is difficult to remember, after admiring these treasures, that I live in a small American suburb. But ever since I can remember, I have always possessed a deep love for histories and cultures that are different from my own. My mother made it her goal to read to me at least five different renditions of Cinderella, including ones set in Africa and Asia. Under her guidance, I became distinctly aware that the world encompassed more than the small apartment where I resided; my eagerness to explore that world's diversity bled into everyday life. I traded humdrum American cuisine for samosas, sushi, and plantains; cultural festivals in nearby towns and on the National Mall became my stomping grounds; local museums became my little Shangri-las. Books such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Things Fall Apart* whisked me away to unknown lands, and I relished every opportunity to expand my global knowledge. Even my favorite childhood TV show*, Avatar: the Last Airbender*, reflected this desire, drawing upon East Asian societies and featuring a bald quasi-Buddhist monk as its protagonist. And yet, it still wasn't enough. I needed more.

Unable to afford the burdensome expense of world travel, I sought a deeper understanding of the globe at school, enrolling in Yoga, Comparative Religions, and AP World and US History. I learned about Chakras, discovered the common themes behind human spirituality, and saw the history of America -- and then mankind -- unfurl before my eyes. I often fantasized about where I would go, given the opportunity, and eventually I grew restless, wondering why my small little suburb couldn't be enough. Why did I have this urge to explore what seemed unattainable?

The answer, I believe, stems from my upbringing. As I mentioned before, my mother was determined to show me the importance of diversity even when I was a young girl. But it also goes beyond that. I rarely see my father, a Ghanaian immigrant. When I was growing up he was present more frequently, sharing with me stories of his country and trying to teach me words in his native language, Twi. But after I turned five, his visits faded before stopping altogether. My mind sometimes wanders to my lost African heritage: I long to embrace my African half, but am somewhat at a loss about how to do so without my father's guidance. I believe that this, above all else, spurred my sudden interest in exotic cultures, African especially. It stemmed from a need to reconnect with a buried part of myself.

So whenever I gaze around my room, at the various artifacts I've collected over the years, I ponder their true significance. I marvel at the connectedness that they foster, bringing people from different continents together in a transcendental, shared space. It's similar to the feeling that I get around my friends, who hail from America, Africa, China, India, and Israel. We are all different in distinctive ways, and yet we maintain a common understanding. The shared soul of humanity pulses through every one of us, and I believe that cultural diversity serves as a reminder of the world's inherent beauty. It makes us one entity.

I smile as I gaze at the objects around my room, dreaming of exotic lands as the Earth turns slowly and the day fades away.

**Silent but Dopey Steven Kunis**

**Describe a character or work of fiction and how it influenced who you are today.**

I didn’t have much to say when I was very young.

In fact, according to family legend, I didn’t utter so much as a single word for the first three years of my life.

Naturally, my mom and dad began frantically seeking the expertise of speech pathologists, neurologists, otolaryngologists – all the “gists” they could find – in search of the “Open Sesame” for my speech. Fortunately, my lack of speech passed by me unnoticed as I busied myself with a world of imagination.

Oddly enough, it was seven little men who enhanced that imaginative world and added the gift of words.

One rainy afternoon, l discovered the movies and the Walt Disney classic that was to become my favorite companion – *Sno*w White and the Seven Dwarfs. Suddenly, my eyes fixated on the screen, then my little legs broke into a march, and finally I began boldly singing the refrain of “Heigh-Ho.” I sometimes question if the family rendition of that miracle afternoon is totally accurate, but I do remember that when my parents kissed and hugged me, I felt very warm inside, and I became hooked on Snow White.

Over time, words became sentences, sentences entire monologues, and my fascination with the Snow White saga generated a daily enactment of the tale in which I played all parts, much to the amusement, or perhaps torture, of my family. My older brother still teases me about my uncanny ability to transition seamlessly from character to character: I was both the presenter and the recipient of the deadly apple, the youthful maiden literally falling into a deep sleep, and the handsome prince who awakened her. I am reminded that the pièce de résistance of the entire spectacle was my plunging my face into the couch cushions in a passionate kiss. I assumed the laughter of the audience to be utter praise of my artistic brilliance.

Many years have passed since the final curtain of my “one man” show, and the toddler who spoke nary a word has become quite loquacious. I think the mesmerizing film has helped shape me–in quite subtle ways. It surfaces in my passion for math and science. Just as I took time to decode the mystery of language, I still follow my own drummer in unlocking the secret codes of life, whether it is in the universal genetic code or in the nuances of our biological mechanisms. It is the challenge of discovery rather than the mechanical process that fascinates me.

The toddler who found his voice through the power of music and performance still hearkens to that Pied Piper, and my knack for playing multiple characters has not altogether disappeared. Onstage, when I transform from a fatherly, Shakespearean governor into a devious, plotting minister from ancient Egypt*,*I am still indulging the ham in my soul. Looking at other activities that have brought me joy – a cappella, concert, and jazz bands – I realize music will always be a force that both soothes and emboldens me. Even the optimistic philosophy of those seven happy workers seems to have won me over. What else explains that adrenaline rush, that surge of dopamine, which I get from lending a hand to others, whether it is helping anxious freshmen adjust to high school or finding ways to make an autistic child smile. Those who know me only by my resume may incorrectly presume that I am a science and math geek; on the contrary, I am still that imaginative toddler, marching around the kitchen table and belting out a happy tune.

I am grateful for that silent period of my life. It gave me a chance to see the world through a different lens and to explore life without the constraints of formal language. When my peers praise the joys of Disney, they usually mean Epcot or the Magic Kingdom. I chuckle silently, thinking back to an animated film that opened a new world for me and shaped who I am today – Happy, Sleepy, Bashful, and perhaps even a little bit Dopey.

**The Conversion Factor Steven Kunis**

**Harvard Supplement Essay**

“I HATE science.”

Poor, unsuspecting Mrs. Lato. When she cheerily asked us to jot down our interests in science, I penned my sentence of outright rejection. This eleven-year-old clearly did not share the passion of my new science teacher.

Now, had she asked us about magic, my response would have been quite different. How I longed to be Harry Potter, immersed in the exciting world of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! Instead, I sat doodling at St. Rose of Lima Academy, where science usually consisted of answering mundane questions at the end of each chapter.

Despite my desire to tell a dramatic story, I have to admit my transformation from “science-phobe” to “science-phile” was not a theatrical event; it was more of a gradual progression. After all, someone who is of Greek and Irish lineage is not so easily swayed. From the start, Mrs. Lato’s questions intrigued me: *Which*substance could turn a flame bright green? *What* did dissecting an earthworm reveal about the chemistry of life? *How* could your team extract pure water from a jar of dirt? A puzzle, a mystery, an enticement to explore —science with Mrs. Lato meant a journey to the unknown.

If Harry had his Nimbus 2000 broomstick, courtesy of Minerva McGonagall, I had my electromagnetic fishing pole, inspired by Mary Ellen Lato. In appearance and personalities, the two mentors could not be more different. However, they both shared an amazing ability to push a student beyond his limits and provide him with the tools to achieve. When Mrs. Lato devised a competition involving an electromagnetic fishing pole that would attract the most paper clips, she knew it would appeal to my competitive spirit. It did. The many hours I spent in designing and redesigning that rod resulted in my winning– second place. Despite my crushing defeat by twelve paper clips, I developed a lifelong addiction to solving scientific puzzles.

Although my days at Seton Hall Prep could hardly compare to Harry’s Hogwarts’ adventures – no Chamber of Secrets or Triwizard Tournaments – my middle school fascination with scientific puzzles intensified. “From paper clips to computational chemistry” could be my theme song as I embarked on a new quest last year by applying computational chemistry to modern biology. I have to admit (but certainly not to new acquaintances) that spending a month working on this topic with like-minded souls at the New Jersey’s Governor’s School was the highlight of last summer. Our research team of eleven worked, argued, collaborated and laughed together as we investigated ways of controlling cell division that occurs in cases such as cancer while using computer analysis to record our efforts. No, we never learned the secrets of charms and defensive spells. No, we never had to battle an evil adversary, except the need to sleep. But the eleven of us, with different personalities and diverse backgrounds, developed a camaraderie that I had never experienced before, one that I might say was worthy of the spirit of Gryffindor House.

Thus, the conversion that began more than six years ago with one sentence on an index card is now complete. As a slightly more sophisticated senior, I can now look back with amusement to my sixth-grade fantasies when I despaired that my acceptance letter to Hogwarts School would never come. The irony is that I did receive a far better gift: an invitation to pursue a scientific journey, to embark on a quest that, like Harry Potter’s, is filled with challenges, sudden twists, and, in my mind, an undeniable magic.

**The "Unsolvable" Cube Brandon Joshua Dixon**

**The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)**

Wedding bells were ringing in the background, and my fingers were deftly picking their way through the Rubik's Cube concealed under my blazer. The last wedding I had attended was in fourth grade -- a bubble boy in a lavender suit**.**Today, my only role was to behold my two favorite teachers as they got married.

Except, I couldn't quite focus on their wedding. *Clack Clack Clack*went the cube as I spun through an algorithm that my Algebra teacher (the bride) had taught me. My mother bristled beside me, but I cared not for her disapproval. My Algebra teacher and her fiancé, my Physics teacher, had given me my first Rubik's Cube, and I was hell-bent on solving it.

They would often be the sponsors of my obsessions throughout my high school career. Before the Rubik's Cube, I had taken up YuGiOh cards. After school I would hike to their classrooms and play against upperclassmen duelists. At first I couldn't beat any of them, and my Physics teacher (whose seemingly vitriolic banter was aimed at trying to encourage my growth) reminded me of those defeats daily**.**It wasn't long before I was good enough with YuGiOh cards that I could defeat almost every other duelist in the school, except for one senior who brutally eviscerated me with her skills. Till this day I have never managed to beat her.

Eventually, my Physics teacher suggested that I try my hand at something else**.** He ducked into the storage room adjacent to his classroom and returned with a box full of dusty Rubik's cubes. He looked straight into my eyes and said "I bet you won't be able finish one of these," before thrusting the box into my hands. He knew that I relish the idea of a challenge and excel in instances when someone tells me I cannot accomplish a goal. "Bad bet," was my response.

So ensued months of interminable hours spent probing the cube, trying to coerce it into its solved position. I fumbled with it during meals, after studying, and while walking home from school. I surrendered myself to trying to solve the Rubik's Cube, but it seemed like no matter how many times I came close to solving it, I could never get the colors to fall into neat, orderly rows.

The morning of the wedding, I woke up determined to complete the cube before the ceremony ended. I snatched the cube off of my dresser and began to work, but no matter how furiously I tried to cajole the cube into solving itself, it continued to twist into infuriatingly random assortments of colors.

As the ceremony started, my attempts became more frantic. Eventually, I diverted my eyes completely and focused on the cube. I probably would have grappled with it right through the end of the wedding, had it not been for an interruption by my senior rival. She sat down next to me, plucked the cube from my fingers, twisted one row into place and then solved the Cube within 30 seconds of elegant finger work. She gave me an amused smirk and slapped a note into my hand. When I glanced at it, I saw that it was from my Physics teacher, telling me that he had deliberately sabotaged the cubes so that they would be unsolvable, regardless of if I used the correct algorithms. He had purposefully given me an unreachable goal, simply to see if I would give up.

"Sometimes the odds are stacked against you. But with that amount of perseverance you might just find a way to win even when it seems impossible," said my Physics teacher after pulling me aside the next day. Life is full of potentially insurmountable challenges. My experience with the "seemingly unsolvable" Rubik's Cube galvanized my drive to tackle the impossibilities in life and transform them into opportunities, to face the barriers that only hard work can overcome.

**Bus Stop Amelia Grace Avis**

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

Even at 6:30 in the morning, with blurry eyes, wet hair and a to-go mug of tea, I always find that my breath is taken away by the sight of my bus stop. It faces the Chesapeake Bay, looking over a stretch of grass that slopes down to the water. On a clear morning, I can see the ever-moving line of cars cross the Bay Bridge to the north, watch the sleepy towns on Maryland's Eastern Shore twinkle to life, and follow the path of a crab boat as it hauls in its cargo before dawn. To the south, I can see an expanse of open water that leads to the mouth of the Bay, and to the Atlantic Ocean.

For a few months each year, before it gets too dark, the sunlight spills over the horizon and paints the sky in vibrant orange, delicate pink and soft, creamy yellow, fading to a deep, velvety purple-black at the top of the sky. On those mornings, I stare out and eagerly consume the view I've been given, and the day that follows is always a little bit brighter.

I've seen the view from my bus stop nearly every day for fourteen years. Naturally, it's easy to take such a privilege for granted. But I know without doubt that where I've lived, and what I've gotten to see, has shaped who I am and who I will become. I've been fortunate enough to see the horizon almost every day. Although I was not, in fact, seeing France across the ocean, as I believed when I was young, I've realized that seeing a wide expanse of water and sky has altered my own horizons. I see more of the world while waiting for my bus than many people see in their whole lives, and, as a result, I see more of my own potential. I am not bound by a limited view of the world, or by a limited view of myself. The future, for me, has always been a vast expanse of water in every direction, and a sky that fills up my entire vision.

At school and elsewhere in my life, I try to see the beauty in any situation. The classes I've enjoyed the most deal with understanding the human condition from various perspectives: math, history, economics, music. I've always challenged myself academically, and endeavored to meet my potential. I feel passionate about my community, about the health of the Chesapeake, and the health of its citizens. I've worked, through my school's student government and through public testimony, to bring light to issues that concern students and other community members. My environment has shaped my life, my passions, and my character. In my future, I want to travel the world, to see the very limits of the sky that I see in the morning. In college and beyond, I want to improve peoples' lives through legislation and policy, and I want to make sure our world stays beautiful by protecting our natural environment.

I realize how lucky I am to be able to view my life in such a way. Not many people have the opportunity or the means to view their future, or their potential, as limitless. When I leave for the next stage of my life, wherever that may be, I will see the sunrise and think of the view from my bus stop. I wish everyone, for a moment, could experience the feeling I have when I see the sun burst out over the land.

**There are No Rules Anonymous**

**"Describe a problem you’ve solved or a problem you’d like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma-anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution."**

The line between water and sky is two shades of black. Silence hides between the crevices of elements, and I convince myself that I can weigh the air.

I cannot see my body or my paddle or my kayak, but I am kayaking.

The trees’ shadows reflect on the lake like black pawns in a game of chess. Sky, water, darkness: a massive snow globe (give or take the snow). It is eleven p.m. in Commerce, Michigan, and it feels like Sugden Lake is the whole world.

Night kayaking falls under the category of leisure sport. There are no regulations. If I kayaked to the very end, I would not know where to go.

For the first time in my life, I do not have a drawn-out plan. I do not have ambition to reach my destination because I do not have a destination. Realizing that I am a normal teenager with normal teenage fears is not reassuring. *I am afraid of being lost*(how terrifically mundane). I have always known what I wanted; I am the girl whose greatest cognitive dissonance results from liking books on both poetry and string theory. I like psychedelic rock and greenhouses, Autism research and vintage shops, neurotransmitters and trees. I like the way words taste - like Indian spices, or air. I speak Spanish with my mom, German with my dad, and English with my friends. Opposites are my normal. I find safety in writing poetry at 4 a.m. and watering my pothos plants and listening to Pink Floyd. Yet the end of the lake is unexplored; reaching it requires approaching it, and I am not ready to try either. What am I supposed to call this fear? *Girl on kayak afraid of being lost somewhere not on kayak? Area teenager afraid of the other side of the lake?*

I should say I went out on my kayak every night and paddled harder and faster and further. I should say I finally conquered my obstacle and made it to the end and flung my arms up in the air and roared in victory to twenty-seven gods, but I didn’t.

This is what happened: the sky turned an odd shade of grey-purple. For some peculiar reason, I felt safe in this unknown strangeness. I wanted to ask questions about a shade of sky I did not understand, and for the first time, these questions were not accompanied by fear.

Color is a night sky that is somehow not-black. Color is what I noticed when I remembered there is a world outside of Sugden Lake, and I am in it.

I began to understand that I should not be afraid of change; I am assembled by change. My nature is a duality between art and science, and I am hungry for unanswered questions.

My grandmother in Mexico tells me stories of a man who healed her with Ayahuasca leaves, and so I purchase books on plant shamanism. A boy from Wyoming says dark matter and art are related. We are mountains of subatomic particles, and there is a turbulent beauty to that. My instructor at poetry camp recites the history of snail sex. Trees are weird, people are weirder, and there’s magic in this world. My palette of different interests has only been broadened by the people I have met, each one under a different color sky. I wonder: what if I would have been too afraid to go?

I still do not know my final destination. I am a girl who was born in Mexico and who now lives in Michigan, and I don’t worry about reaching the middle or the end anymore because kayaking at night is a personal sport.

There are no rules.

**My Basement Frida Daniela Muhleisen**

**Harvard Essay: What is an intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper or research topic) that has meant the most to you?**

It is raining, and I am measuring the length of Frida Kahlo’s unibrow with a ruler – eleven inches and a half. When I was ten, my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Hoef said that ancient Egyptians had pharaohs and priests. My mother tells me that Frida was born in her hometown of Mexico City, but I believe my mother is lying because Frida’s eyes say she was a pharaoh.

The tapestry of Frida Kahlo hangs in my basement. The only wall décor my parents deemed necessary is this tribute to the famous Mexican artist. I like my basement Frida. Mrs. Hoef says we have third eyes, and I often wonder if Frida’s third eye can see out from behind her unibrow.

One day, my friend says “Why does that lady have a unibrow? Why is she so brown?”

I do not know how to reply to this because I had not wondered about the connection between the brow and the pigmentation of skin. I feel very much ashamed, the way I think the Egyptians would have felt had their pyramid angles been off. This becomes a ritual: the Frida-questions, the shame-turned-guilt-turned-disgust. I beg my mother to stop packing me quesadillas for lunch, to stop buying me books on the unibrow lady. I turn the music off in the car when I hear *Ojalá*by Silvio Rodriguez. I decide that I need to hate Frida Kahlo and that I need to put peanut butter on my sandwiches like the Americans.

This is how I hide for years: peanut butter, books on Van Gogh and acceptable white artists with separated brows, and music from 96.3FM that does not sound like Silvio Rodriguez at all.

One day, as I am washing the dishes with my mother, she asks me if I am ashamed of her. I drop a plate to the ground, and my gaze follows. The way she looks at me makes me feel like porcelain turned mush turned shattered mush.

I had never been ashamed of my mother. I was ashamed of where we came from: of a color I couldn’t see as beautiful – of the questions that made me feel less-human, more-alien – of the way peanut butter wouldn’t stop sticking to the roof of my mouth – of the way I stopped talking to my basement Frida priestess pharaoh. Like my basement Frida, my culture was still very much alive. Like my basement Frida, it had not died because I stopped paying attention. But the part of me that had stopped paying attention was losing vitality, rapidly.

I begged my mother to teach me our history. I ate quesadillas. I listened to Silvio Rodriguez and Mana and Luis Miguel. I stood in the DIA in the middle of the Diego Riviera mural (he was Frida’s husband) and allowed myself to be in love. And proud: like finding a pattern to rain. As I fell in love with my culture, I began to fall in love with my language again. I do not hide when my mother calls. I want others to listen to the silent treaties between the vowels and the consonants.

As I stopped caring what other people thought of me, I became confident in being a Latina. It is a process. I sometimes question myself. All I know is that no matter what people say, my culture is beautiful. My culture will survive.

I don’t talk to Frida anymore. We moved to a different house a few years ago. My mom wrapped her up in a box and wrote “Frida” across the top in sharpie marker and eligible handwriting. I liked to think she died and the box was embalmment and the writing was hieroglyphics, and I like to think that she will be reborn into a pharaoh again.

**I Wonder About Meatballs 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.**

*Grind the spices in the molcajete. Taste the gritty texture on your tongue.*

"No, mija," my grandmother says as she shows me how to mash the cumin, garlic, onions, and tomatillo. She is in Michigan for the summer, and I think she is homesick. After all, she spends most of her time cooking traditional Mexican dishes that remind her of home. The dishes are not ones I typically associate with Mexico, but, then again, I have not lived there in fourteen years.

Sometimes my grandma asks me to cook with her. We make *albóndigas* or meatballs and smash the spices in the molcajete. My grandma sighs a little when she sees it is relatively unused; she explains that the remaining traces of other salsas made in the molcajete give the food a unique flavor.

*Put some milk in a bowl. Add bread and let it soak in the milk. This will make the albóndigas soft and sturdy.*

When I was little, my mother wrapped quesadillas in tinfoil for my lunch. I ate these quietly and carefully, trying to attract the least amount of attention possible. I desperately asked my mother to pack a PB&J sandwich instead.

My mother refused to buy peanut butter. She braided my hair into two tight pigtails and taught me to read in Spanish. I watched jealously as the other kids began reading Junie B. Jones, and I stubbornly resisted the Spanish vowels.

Guests to my house were greeted by vibrant colors, tinga, and my mother's broken English. I felt myself cringe when she messed up a verb conjugation, and I watched with horror as the guests bit into a tostada.

*Integrate the herbs and spices into the beef. Roll the beef into small, even balls.*

Now my grandmother is humming along to Los Panchos. Her hands are strong and fierce as she smashes the spices together. I can see that she is comforted by the rich smell that is filling the kitchen.

I try to follow her instructions because I want to bond with her. She will return to Mexico soon, and I will not have her hands to guide me. I want to remember the recipe so I can recreate the rich odor that my body is instinctively pulled towards, even as my mind disagrees.

Mostly I just watch her graceful movements. She cooks with a steady rhythm; I have not seen gracefulness like hers except when I watch my mother dance and see the way she is able to sway her hips. I want so badly to have that innate sense of rhythm. My mother once tried to teach me cumbia, but I was too foolish and embarrassed to learn.

*Bite down and taste the tomatillo in the meatballs. Do not forget it's there.*

I am gulping down the albóndigas while Los Panchos play Spanish guitar riffs. The albóndigas are bold, zesty, and delicious. To me, they speak to the distinct Mexican flavor my grandmother transmits into her food. It is a flavor I have tried to ignore for many years. But it is delicious, and I eat voraciously. I am undeniably Mexican, and, for once, I am proud of this. For years my mother tried to show me how important my culture was, but I was too afraid to listen. Now I have tasted Mexico in the albóndigas and have felt it in my grandmother's strong hands. I will continue to dig for my once buried Latin spirit. I will place it on the stove and let it cook, watching the edges crisp and ripen. I will not forget the chile.

**Redefining My Purpose Through Slam Poetry Anonymous**

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

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

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

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

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

**What I Learned from Synchronized Swimming 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.**

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

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

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

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

**An Unlikely Romance 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.**

Our acquaintance began when I was four. I still remember my mother shouting in horror when I would hold lightsaber battles with my bow, recreating the scenes from *Star Wars*. But thirteen years later, I have put thousands of hours of practice into taming its rough voice, which is now equally capable of producing roars of rage as it is sighs of satisfaction. Without my violin, I never would have played in the Maison Symphonique Hall in Montreal or given elegies for eldercare residents as a music therapist, or been able to meet Chris Hadfield.

It has been getting harder to find time for music in my hectic lifestyle, especially since I have to travel an hour or more by car three times a week to do so. I remember one memorable day when I raced to a masterclass after a tennis match, sweaty clothes and all. But despite the debate tournaments, math contests, tutoring, and the cornucopia of College Board exams, I somehow find time to devote to my violin every single day. Even on those “days from hell” where I leave the house at six and get back at midnight, I slap on a metal practice mute and silently grind through forty minutes of Brahms before collapsing from exhaustion.

My commitment to music enabled me to join the National Youth Orchestra of Canada. To say it was the best experience of my life would be hackneyed, and that’s the problem with overusing the extremes of language. It becomes harder to describe the truly fantastic experiences in life, especially since I was lucky enough to be provided with full scholarships from NYO Canada.

“You guys made it. This is the hardest orchestra to get into in Canada for students such as yourself. Give yourself a pat on the back. You deserve it!” a staff member proclaimed to wild cheering. It was intimidating at first, having to live with ninety-five other strangers, most of whom were college students - some already had their bachelor’s in hand.

The next seven weeks turned out to be the most grueling ones of my life. The nine-hour days, cross country flights, and the shuffling in and out of hotels during the tour took their toll on me. But this total immersion ensured that I learned to value hard work, grind through multiple three-hour recording sessions, and handle pressure.

NYO was what it was because of the people. Despite the age difference, I was amazed at our ability to converse freely as equals. On that first day, I never would have thought that these strangers would become my lifelong friends, my life support, even my family throughout communal exhaustion. It wasn’t an uncommon sight to see people slumped against one another during lunch, desperate to catch just a wink of sleep before the next rehearsal.

As actors go on stage for their final bow, and as classmates part ways at school’s end, there is a sense of finality in the air, a sense that something more profound than themselves has died, something they can’t quite put their fingers on. I felt very much the same way at the end of the past two summers with the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

I am a solo violinist, an avid orchestral member, and a passionate chamber musician. It isn’t only the passing of the years that has aged me; music first evoked in me the emotions that even now, words and pictures cannot. I find a refuge somewhere in between D major and G minor. When I turn the final page of a Mahler symphony, adrenaline surges through my every vein, and my palms grow sweaty. There’s nothing more satisfying than being able to pull off a flawless Bach Partita, and nothing more frustrating than cracking a note. But ultimately, there’s nothing more fulfilling than having played the violin throughout my life.

**Rabbits, Threads, and Mantis Arms Anonymous**

**Occasionally, students feel that college application forms do not provide sufficient opportunity to convey important information about themselves or their accomplishments. If you wish to include an additional essay, you may do so. Possible topics include: Unusual circumstances in your life, Travel or living experiences in other countries, A letter to your future college roommate, An intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper or research topic) that has meant the most to you, How you hope to use your college education, A list of books you have read during the past twelve months**

There is a Chinese proverb, or chenyu, that literally means “guarding a tree for rabbits.” The story behind it involves a farmer who saw a rabbit run into a tree, providing his dinner for the night. He then waited by that tree the next day in hopes of getting lucky again, but his effort was futile.

Another chenyu, “marking the boat to retrieve the sword,” was coined when a fool dropped his sword while crossing a river, and thinking himself clever, marked the the side of the boat at the spot where his sword fell. After he reached shore, he plunged into the water at the marked spot to find his sword, and—you guessed it—it wasn’t there.

Although I had a good laugh at these chenyu and the many others that my mom told me throughout my childhood, I take their lessons to heart. Rabbits aren’t part of my diet, but I know to never wait idly for opportunities to come to me. And I may never be found on a boat with a sword, but I appreciate logic and practice it 99% of the time. Derived from ancient poems and legends, these idioms may seem silly at first, but they have been integral in shaping my philosophies on life.

*一丝不苟 (yī sī bù gǒu):* Three summers ago, I took up soapmaking. You can say that it was just for fun, and that’s what I thought too, but I quickly learned otherwise. Making soap is a very daunting task and must be taken seriously. I started off on the wrong foot by forgetting to buy one of the essential ingredients, lye—sodium hydroxide, which happens to be the agent that actually cleans—but I really got myself on a slippery slope when I decided to make it anyway. Seeing the mess that I ended up with, my dad told me, “Not one thread loose.” Later, I learned that the lye was necessary for saponification, a reaction in which a base hydrolyzes fats to form soap. When I repeated the process, I made sure to have all the ingredients and to fully understand why each step was necessary for the end result. Now, I thoroughly immerse myself in everything I learn, whether it be a new type of math problem or a dance routine. I make sure to understand all the details of the task at hand; if a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well.

*螳臂挡车 (táng bì dǎng chē):*Throughout my childhood, I often faced the age-old question: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The young me was a dancer, a musician, and an avid reader of mysteries. Naturally, my answer was a detective, with ballerina and pianist as side jobs. After telling this to my Sunday Chinese school teacher, she chuckled and said, “Mantis arm blocking a car.” She then explained the legend of a praying mantis who believed he could stop a king’s chariot, suggesting that I was overestimating my abilities. I spent the rest of class justifying how I could have three jobs to my laughing classmates. To this day, I still stand with my eight-year-old self. Why can’t investigators occasionally perform at Carnegie Hall and teach ballet in their free time? For that matter, why can’t engineers coach soccer and guest-host cooking shows every so often? I once met a doctor who works part-time at a beauty salon, because she loves it. I will be the accomplished woman with a professional job who also teaches yoga to kids and has solo art exhibits. Despite the looks I get, I will always strive to stop the car with my mantis arms—which, by the way, are very strong and have hooked claws that extend at lightning speed. Besides, who ever said that the car was big?

**Who Am I? Anonymous**

**Please reflect on something you would like us to know about you that we might not learn from the rest of your application, or on something about which you would like to say more. You may write about anything—from personal experiences or goals to interests or intellectual pursuits. (Please answer in 500 words or fewer).**

“So, you’re like a plant, right?”

Yep, exactly. My name is Katia, my favorite color is aubergine, and I’m secretly a plant because I don’t experience sexual attraction. How did you know?

I found out I was asexual the summer after sophomore year. For years, I had defined myself largely by compulsory heterosexuality. I had rather forced crushes on boys, and certainly didn’t “look at girls the same way boys looked at girls,” as every lesbian YA novel phrases it. As I’d gone to Catholic school for the past ten years, there was no sex ed, and my best friend realized I should know the basics. My friend was a witty, fierce girl who I’d met on our school’s tennis team, who’d grown up self-confident in an artistic mecca that was a local Waldorf school, empowered in ways of sexuality where I was not. She told me what sexual attraction felt like, and slowly it all made sense. I’d never checked anyone out; I hadn’t had romantic dreams about anyone in middle school; I’d gone along with saving myself for marriage. Maybe I wasn’t as straight as I thought I was, and I was strangely okay with that. It felt realer to me than the black-and-white of sexual orientation I’d been introduced to before, the gay or straight dichotomy.

I embraced my new identity, although adults around me replied with some variant of, “are you sure? Well, your orientation can change, you know.” Despite coming out publicly as asexual multiple times, most people older than me assumed I was gay or, most likely, straight. This invalidation of a central part of myself left me confused. To me, it seemed like an easy thing to accept. However, explaining it was surprisingly difficult; most people haven’t heard of anything like the Kinsey scale, and so eventually I learned to keep that information quiet. It became a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of my own making.

As I became more comfortable with my sexual orientation -- or, perhaps more aptly, lack thereof -- I didn’t intentionally hide it anymore. I don’t mention it often, because when your sexuality is nonexistent, things like sexual attraction don’t come up in most conversations you have. That being said, I don’t feel ashamed of the person I am, unlike times in the past when I’d wished I could just be like everyone else. The people around me might not fully understand, and that’s fine. I don’t need to fit neatly into boxes. Last winter, I performed a slam poem about being asexual in front of more than a hundred people, and my performance ended in resounding applause. My identity is not for anyone else’s comfort or consumption; finally, I’m becoming proud of who I am.

**Good Game, Frank Christopher Walleck**

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

There he is, clad in his “World’s Biggest Fish Fry” baseball cap, neon orange diabetic footsoles, and multicolored top hat à la Dr. Seuss. Four hundred and twenty pounds, bound to his high-backed leather armchair (driven with tender care all the way from humble Cincinnati), and a powerful, scruffy beard eclipsing his oxygen plug: this is Frank Lee, my final opponent at the National Scrabble Championship.

As the result of my transformation from mild-mannered schoolboy to board game connoisseur and Scrabble junkie, I had been feverishly studying until this very moment: the climax of my amateur Scrabble career.

The score is 386 to 326, my favor, and there is only one tile left in the bag. The board has practically become a New York Times Crossword, and not a meager Tuesday or Thursday; this is a full-fledged Sunday. Words like “IXIA” (defined as an African plant with sword-shaped leaves), “LEKU” (a monetary unit of Albania) and “UNAI” (a two-toed sloth) permeate our board; are we truly playing what some Merriam or Webster considered English words?

As I gaze down at my score sheet, attempting to card-count the tiles and ascertain which ones are left, Frank warily examines his side of the chess clock, which reads 1:37, and he nervously plays a W to form “EWE” and “WE” for twenty points. The bag is now empty, and this great, grey grizzly bear of a man now has one minute and thirty seven seconds left, out of his original 25 minutes, in order to gain forty more points.

By the time Frank apprehensively announces “twenty” as his score, I had figured out that the remaining tiles were I, O, N, P, R, S, and another W, an intimidating rack. To block the final Triple Word Score, I play the perfectly pleasant word “URIC,” meaning derived from urine. I announce my meager six-point gain and wait with trepidation for Frank to make his final move. Something is out of place.

After I play my word, Frank’s eyes grow large under his Technicolor bifocals. The clock is ticking down, 37, 36, 35, and soon Frank utters a mammoth sigh and places his S next to the U of “URIC,” forming “US.” I smile; Frank is almost definitely going to play “OWNS” or “WINOS” and I will handily win the game. But then, I see it: an E. I look frantically down at the results of my tile counting again and again, but still do not see an E in what I had calculated. Soon, all of his letters come onto the board at once, forming “ORPINES,” a plant with purple flowers also called a ‘live-forever.’ It dawns on me that I had miscounted the tiles and forgotten to cross off Frank’s W from “EWE.”

My jaw drops almost to table level. Frank had used all of his letters at once, thereby getting a 50-point bonus to his score. He wins the game 425-392. The perfect irony of the situation… the perfect irony of the word itself! I had arrogantly thought that I was the one who would be celebrating, but humble Frank Lee is the one who remains standing (sitting) with the single word that would ‘live forever’ in my mind.

My head hits the table, one of the ubiquitous pieces of folding plastic that dominate the room. How could I be so idiotic? How could I make such a critical mistake? How, how how? But as I sit, silently berating myself to no end, Frank looks up at me and says, “I take no pleasure in that win Christopher.”

I slowly lift my head to see his weathered blue eyes looking genuinely back at mine. He pauses, and it seems to me as though the whole room had gone silent. He looks at me more sincerely than ever before, an impenetrable, wholehearted gaze into my eyes. “I hope you can leave knowing that you’ve come away from this tournament with a better prize than anyone could have given you Christopher, because you deserve to be happy, and you deserve to be happy with what you’ve become.”

The words, the points, and the money all disappear. I look around the room and realize that I am not surrounded by diehard competitors who play this odd game for fame and glory, but by people just like me who had wanted to join this eccentric subculture, who had wanted to finally be accepted in their lives. For us, Scrabble is not about satisfying a vain addiction to competition, but rather about the heartfelt players like Frank Lee who have come together to support one another and their love for the game, foibles and all. I am not playing this game for dollars and cents; I am playing it for a sense of family.

Across the table is not just a man with a striped hat, an oxygen tank, and orange diabetic footsoles; this is a man who had been taken under the wing of our minuscule clique of players, and accepted just the way he is: as a lover of language and a man of honor. Good game, Frank.

**What excites you about this program? Anonymous**

**Why the GSD program?**

Recently, I discovered the world of “ditch architects”: urbanists who abandon the traditional office-style design studio and blur the line between urban planning, design, art, and social work. Rather than relying on statistics, they mapped out a city’s ‘kinetic’ energy through first-hand interaction with local people, to much success. For my own investigative project on a run-down lawn in Poughkeepsie (proposals were needed to change its public image), I decided to employ a similar approach by going to the primary source: interviewing the actual occupants of the space. Instead of sketching designs in a studio I found myself chatting with the lawn’s original owner, an old man whose family had lived here for over a century. His heartfelt stories went way beyond the lawn’s current decrepit image. There was a Victorian house that had stood on this very lawn—infested with mushrooms and violating regulations, it was forcedly torn down. The land was sold piecemeal to the neighboring college, my home institution, at a devalued price, and now it’s neither used by the public or by the college: a wasted space that was once full of human gesture and life.

Many similar conversations with the locals showed me that the ambiguous ownership of the lawn really prevents it from becoming a social gathering place. Since the lawn is sandwiched between two cafes, neither business knows whether they have the right to extend their shop front, even though seating is always in high demand. By defining the rights of usage of the lawn, then, the local businesses would be more supported, in turn revitalizing the area. By bringing in local artists and markets, the space could be a venue for increasing job opportunity, involving the local community in constructive ways that benefit multiple parties.

As a child I’ve traveled all over the map, and observing hotel decor was my favorite pastime: massive installations of birds in v-shaped flight, modernistic furniture mirroring beehives of the new collective brain… I thought that all this architectural dynamism—the locus of the design world—belonged to the high-brow studios of science-fiction. It was only later that I understood that design doesn’t stay in the office; much of the process is an interactive game of balance: balancing the interests of multiple parties, artistic ambition with practical needs, architectural form with nature’s own demands… the list goes on. The architect is never an artist in solipsism. The architect I aspire to become doesn’t think in terms of a static city; she understands and embraces the city as a living organism that influences the psyche of those who dwell in it. On this point I agree with architect Koolhaas, who said the new urbanism will be about the “reinvention of psychological space”. Architectural interventions, to revitalize destitute areas, can be in the form of both physical objects and tactical manipulations of political landscape. With the GSD program, I’m ready to venture into unplanned territory.

**Nietzsche and Me Anonymous**

**Prompt: An intellectual experience (course, project, book, discussion, paper, poetry, or research topic in engineering, mathematics, science or other modes of inquiry) that has meant the most to you**

In his inspiring work of philosophical allegory, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche proposes the concept of the "Übermensch", or Superman, a human who is completely autonomous and self-directed. When I first stumbled across this concept during my late night summer reading, I realized how topical Nietzsche's abstraction was in the context of my own life. Originally, I interpreted his concept as the desire for a "perfect" human, one at the apex of their health - not just physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. What I later realized was that Nietzsche was not proposing an impossible ideal and saying, "Good luck trying to achieve this". Instead, he was putting forth a model for us to follow; a model of what we should strive to be. That was the core message that I found so inspiring in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* - that we can live a life authentic to ourselves in the pursuit of self-improvement. Later that night when I resumed my reading, I learnt about Nietzsche's thoughts on the nature of struggle. The Superman, he proclaimed, succeeded in everything he did. "Well, isn't that just great," I thought. "How am I supposed to be successful in everything!?" My frustration was short-lived however - I quickly realized that I had interpreted the text incorrectly. The Superman was not successful because he achieved everything he wanted to; instead, he was successful because he never shied away from attempting to achieve his goals. Success, as defined in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is not realizing your dreams, but simply attempting to accomplish them with sincerity and full commitment. Nietzsche's message inspired me that day, and has motivated me since, because of the illuminating truth it holds. The lack of effort is in itself failure, for as we know more colloquially: "We miss 100% of the shots we don't take". Nietzsche's lesson has taught me not to be afraid of speaking my mind and taking a stance against the majority. It has inspired me to follow my dreams, exemplified in my choice to apply to a school as prestigious as Harvard, where I can continue my quest for self-realization.

**"Wasted" Time Anonymous**

**You May Wish To Include An Additional Essay If You Feel That The College Application Forms Do Not Provide Sufficient Opportunity To Convey Important Information About Yourself Or Your Accomplishments.**

The oblong screen of a piercingly blue iMac G3 glowed in front of me. I was six years old. At first, the new machine was nothing more than a medium for games on Disney’s website. But slowly, as I learned how to copy and paste and click and drag and highlight and backspace, I discovered something far beyond what Disney could ever show me: the instructive power of the internet. Equipped with my new navigational skills and a computer-time allowance most six-year-olds could only dream of, “wasted” time on the internet soon became the centerpiece of my upbringing.

The internet was the only thing that could possibly satisfy my drive to know, my need to explore. One dull summer day in junior high I decided on an impulse to master the striking squiggly-squaglies of the Arabic alphabet. Using Google images and busuu.com, those striking squiggly-squaglies soon turned into letters I could command and grasp. The next step was actually learning the language.I learned the basics of conversational Arabic, but, as it turns out, conversational Arabic was no good without an actual conversation. So I took to the internet once again to have that actual conversation. I got a headset and said a few phrases in my broken Arabic and uploaded the video to Youtube. The next day comments poured in from Morocco, Canada, England, and more telling me just how proud my parents must be and exhorting me to keep my passion for languages. I was twelve years old then. My cheeks were too big. My voice was too high. But I had found something that was important to me. And that important something only kept growing.

During my freshman year in high school, I discovered Coursera and edX and soon passed hours upon hours there taking online courses from universities around the globe. I started ChinaX, a comprehensive Chinese history course, in another moment of internet-induced curiosity. Astonished by the eight thousand year history at my disposal, that curiosity drove me to finish all ten modules of the course in only eighteen months. A survey conducted at the end of the course indicated I was the youngest person in the world to do so. On the internet, no one cared about my age. Before long neither did I. With my cheeks still too big and my voice still too high, I used my new cyber freedom to earn certificates in over thirty courses, ranging from Challenges in Global Affairs to Pensamiento Científico. The internet showed me that I want to live my life with my eyes wide open and my keyboard under siege.

But above all it gave me a voice in the dark, dark night when I needed it most. Realizing I was gay meant so little compared to realizing that without the internet’s anonymity I would have to slowly and awkwardly come out to everyone I have ever and will ever meet.

One rainy October night, as the idea of completing such a task for the rest of my life seemed to take the oxygen out of my very blood, I decided I needed to talk. I found a certified help line online. My counselor taught me that being gay could add meaning to my life, not take it away. Thanks to her, I would never again have to hit that backspace key I had embraced so many years ago. Thanks to her, I could breath again. The same vast network I had once used to play games on Disney.com had now given me the first opportunity I had ever had to speak with intention and courage. Those Youtube comments mattered. Those certificates on my wall mattered. But for the first time in that moment I allowed myself to matter more.Awash in the boundless blue circuitry of that iMac G3 I found who I was and who I wanted to become, big cheeks and all.

# Injury, Adversity, Thriving Certainly Ahmed Fouad

## The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

“Pop!"

I’ve heard about this unmistakable sensation at the time of injury, but never suspected it would ever make its way into my life; significant injury was a disease isolated to the ranks of professional athletes. Or so I thought.

Friday, September 9th, 2016. 5:07 p.m. That snapshot of time is forever embedded in my memory. The first week of practice during my inaugural varsity football season was almost over. As I took the snap and ran up the left side of the field, I planted my left foot in the damp autumn grass. “Pop”. The hyperextension of my knee left me with a fully ruptured Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL). This experience proved pivotal in rewriting my unwritten future.

Injury is not just a process of recovery, but equally a process of discovery; the 12 months of rehabilitation and recovery left plenty of time for discovery. The 10 hours of exercise during the week were replaced with time spent being held captive by inevitable mood swings, and asking myself, “What if?”. Simple activities such as walking and showering became dreaded daily struggles. I realized then and there, as I sat trying to bend my knee beyond 35 degrees while downing 8 pills, that the value of overlooked simplicities are never more palpable than in their absence. Appreciating the basic amenities in life was only one of multiple lessons brought forth by the rupture. The rehab serendipitously reformed something far superior to my ACL: my work ethic.

Rehabilitation of any injury, let alone ACL reconstruction, is gruesome. The amount of effort, determination and sheer grit required is incomprehensible to those spared the experience. I spent countless hours in the gym trying to get ahead of my rehab timeline. My intense work ethic allowed me return to the field in time for my senior season, during which I lead the conference in passing yards and touchdowns. That discipline and determination to succeed unconsciously transferred over into the classroom. I have always been a bright student, but the early years of high school fell well short of my expectations. A reformed drive, coupled with more time to spend focusing on school, translated to the reestablishment of the results I expect of myself in the classroom. Tearing my ACL served as an invaluable reminder as to how critical a strong work ethic is, and later highlighted to me the career I wanted to pursue.

I always knew I wanted to work in the sports industry; my goal was to be a professional athlete, regardless of how impossible it seemed to those around me. As it turned out, however, I did find my dream job in the sports industry, just not in the manner I imagined. As I read through numerous websites trying to gather a sense of how my surgery would take place, success rates and other details, something struck me: ACL reconstruction is always treated by replacing the ruptured ligament with a graft, either from elsewhere in the patient (patellar or hamstring tendon) or a cadaver. Why can’t we repair the existing ligament? Research has proven that the ligament does try to repair itself, but is incapable since the fibres of the ligament aren’t close enough for repair to occur. This unanswered question has inspired me to study sports medicine in university with the goal of becoming an orthopedic surgeon, and find a more efficient solution for the more than 100,000 affected Americans annually.

Tearing my ACL seemed like a disaster encompassed by inactivity, immense and seemingly everlasting pain, and mood swings, but proved to be a blessing masked by the aforementioned hardships. Returning to the field this past fall established a phantom sense of normalcy; “normal” now connotes a state far different than it would’ve a year ago, one of increased determination and purpose.

# Snaps Kartikeya Thiyam Sundaram

## 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.

I inched closer with silent footsteps, holding my breath… and Click! As the moment froze in my camera, the sparrows whizzed past and flew into the trees.

My tryst with photography began many years ago upon discovering the old 35mm Leica in Dad’s cupboard. I have pursued several interests in great depth - basketball, soccer, debating, writing, dancing, singing, playing the guitar, the piano, public speaking, dramatics - and I grew to enjoy quite a few, but nothing ever consumed me with as much intensity and passion as the art of photography.

Photos of people: of loved ones and even of strangers, have always been the most popular on my EyeEm profile, and most awarded too (EyeEm - a marriage between Shutterstock and LinkedIn for professional photographers). Some of the best photographs are also the most unexpected – while idly dozing on a train to Rishikesh, I was struck by the expression of a young boy in the seat ahead, staring wide-eyed at the huge expanse of the river Ganges. I pulled out my camera and photographed the innocent wonder and awe in his eyes for a sight he had never seen before, and that photograph won me my first international photography competition.

When I show people their photographs and they like them, it gives me immense joy. A close-up shot of a couple holding hands, helping each other up from the ground is my fondest example. A framed version of the picture now hangs in the bedroom of their house.

I never shied away from criticism, and it flowed rather freely, too: in jest, from my friends, and in love, from my family. I respect it and use it constructively to further improve my art. Striking up conversations with photographers on EyeEm helped me learn. That’s how my skills truly began to develop - observing their craft, learning from their successes and mistakes, and never stopping the experimentation. To date, I’ve earned over 400 dollars in exchange for my photographs, and that tiny bit of validation for my work never fails to put a smile to my face.

My lifelong fascination with design, physics and technology have integrated seamlessly with my love for photography, and even acted as a catalyst in its growth. My understanding of light apertures and lens focal lengths helps me find the ideal configuration to highlight my subject, and researching various types of sensors in my free time is an ardent hobby. Most of all, though, I can never stop fawning over the small bumps in the grip of my point-and-shoot that help me hold the camera better, and the pristine polish of the curved glass lenses inside. I have as much love for the camera itself as the photographs it captures.

Surprisingly enough, I have never owned one of those large, professional DSLRs. In most cases, my phone’s camera was powerful enough, and when it wasn’t, I had no choice but to be creative. As such, the limitations of my phone never proved to be a handicap, rather a teacher of tough lessons and valuable skills. My camera, like a trusted companion, forever stands by me, giving me an outlet to not only express what I feel, but the objectivity to process and accept it too. The camera is all about perspectives, and it has taught me that life is, too.

Though our world today has its share of challenges and uncertainty, it is increasingly connected by the constant evolution of technology-a powerful tool to create solutions. I wish to use my camera to raise money and awareness for causes I believe in - empowering the underprivileged, conserving the wild, and fighting inequality - all big words from a dreamy teenager as he looks through the lens of his camera, gazing far ahead, hoping to capture the perfect shot of his future.

**Student Newspaper in Every Middle School Anonymous**

**Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

It was already 6 PM, and I walked across the classroom, wary of the many fingers tapping away at their keyboards, their mouse clicks, their resizing and editing articles, photos, and captions. It was the day before the newspaper production deadline, and my team of middle schoolers had worked tirelessly on their articles and layouts. Just before we hit send, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of pride. Student Newspaper in Every Middle School project began as an impossible dream. The ubiquity of fake news is undermining our democracy and our First Amendment right. I believe that my project can undermine the spread of fake news by educating young students to become better consumers of news.

Determined, I began my journey to achieve my dream. I was naive to think that merely sending “email presentation” to local middle school principals will be sufficient to convince them to start a newspaper with me. I was dead wrong. Out of 43 emails sent, I received exactly "0" interest. Out of desperation, I started calling schools one by one. Another valuable lesson learned - principals don’t answer phone calls. Six schools picked up my call, but only Principal Lauer of Young Oak Kim Academy (YOKA), a Los Angeles Unified School District middle school, called me back. I implored the reluctant Principal for a chance to explain my plan, and was elated when he agreed to meet me. It was my only shot.

I felt like a person on a hopeless mission when I first walked the halls of YOKA. “What am I doing here? I don’t have to do this,” I kept mumbling to myself. A receptionist told me to wait as he had a meeting. Some twenty agonizing minutes passed before smiling Principal Lauer walked out to greet me. Remarkably, he read my presentation and told me that he had been trying to the same thing. Just like that, I became an advisor to YOKA’s student newspaper. School bureaucracy quickly dampened my short-lived elation. As a minor, I couldn’t advise students on my own. So, the school had to assign a teacher. But, no one wanted the extra work, so I had to go around and convince teachers of the project’s merits one by one. I was overjoyed in tears when Ms. Ramos agreed to co-advise. Problems never ended. I envisioned 30+ Energizer Bunnies to welcome me to first class. Instead, I got two bored students, wondering aloud "why they had to be there?" I was demoralized. But, I had expended too much effort and convinced too many people to quit. All dreams start small and humble, and I had to accept the fact that my dream was no exception. I learned another undeniable truth - that getting an “idea” turned out to be the easiest step.

In comparison, executing that “idea” was excruciatingly more difficult. Convincing conflicted individuals to work for a common goal was impossibly challenging. I needed to be resilient, but I was always prepared to fail as well. I stumbled on to a “tipping point.” I told my staff that the feature article’s “star” will be them. The new “celebrity” status was enticing enough to get them enthusiastic. I took the cue from their metamorphosis and started promising “stardom” to other students. Encouraging narcissism through flattery worked as seven more students enthusiastically joined. Our goal was simple, “tell accurate stories about students, the ‘stars’ of our paper.” The “YOKA Times” was successfully launched last year and I am proud to be working with two more schools this year. It was 6:30 PM, and we finally finished our first issue.

“High five everyone! We did it,” my students and I were overjoyed. I held the “YOKA Times” in my hands, smiling at the team who worked so hard to make this happen.

**The Olympic Mistake Anonymous**

**The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

I wasn’t happy about the puzzled faces across the auditorium. The pensive frowns weren't exactly pensive. They were looking at the questions with absolute perplexity. I was standing in front of the projection screen, confident that my problems had been delicately crafted to perfection. My sole purpose to get all of them to appreciate the art of challenge was a failure.

It was six o’clock the day before the 10th annual Math Olympics, the sun was already setting, and my friend and I were still at school. Among the dimly lit classrooms and deserted halls, books sprawled open and computer screens overflowing with tabs were our only inspiration. With a marker in hand, we stared blankly at the crowded whiteboard, brimming with ideas we could not quite consolidate.

This time, we weren't trying to find answers but to create problems, specific types of problems that I was already familiar with, challenges that had always captivated my attention and awestruck me with their complexity. Doing them on my own or collaborating with my peers, I had solved these puzzles before.

*When tackling these types of problems, we disrupt the order of a clean whiteboard by drawing messy diagrams and writing crooked formulas. For a moment, we pause and stare at the mess in absolute silence. Our brains are quietly energizing, thinking, individually searching for clues. After what would seem like an awkward silence to a spectator, we vigorously start exchanging ideas. We shout out the clues, paths, and realizations we find every time we look at the problem from a different perspective. The exchange escalates as we get closer to the solution. The final idea comes to mind. We start scribbling our way towards the solution. My hand starts shaking. My heart rate accelerates. The moment of glory commences when we circle the answer, and for an instant, we start jumping and dancing across the room. After a few seconds of joy, we stop abruptly to silently stare at our work full of scribbles, lines, diagrams, maps, equations, and variables that would look like a mess to anyone. I see art.*

It was eight o’clock, and the sun had already set, but the ambiance seemed to get darker. Time was running out, and we had nothing. We naively decided that we didn’t need to spend that much time researching how to make good math problems. We knew how to identify them. We were used to solving them. We had seen how they worked. They were unpredictable, so why would there be any procedure to follow? Taking a deep breath, we allowed our minds to flow, and we crafted a set of difficult yet critical questions to make the next day a day of thinking. In the end, we saw the chaos on the board. It was beautiful.Now that I look back at the night before the Math Olympics, although the problems were a total failure, I found it fascinating to construct them. This new guilty pleasure paved the way for a small club, where I would explore the beauty of math, the art of making challenging problems, and the intricacies of education. By being a teacher and learning from my olympic mistake, I would learn to find the right level of difficulty, polish the complexity, and refine the clarity of my problems.

Making math problems made me realize I could extrapolate the strategies of mathematical challenges to exercise problem-solving in other activities. I began crafting challenges for me and my peers to aid the learning process; for my teachers to share my examples and conclusions about the importance of challenge in education; and for my English students to develop sustainable cognitive habits from a well-designed curriculum.

The Math Olympics was my rite of passage. I was no longer finding X: I was hiding it. I was no longer playing others’ songs: I was composing my own.

**My Realization Anonymous**

**Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

The American Ballet Theater (ABT) Gillespie School parent/student meeting back in March started off with nothing exciting, nothing new. New drop off and pickup procedures. The June showcase. Spring evaluations. Yawn. But then the school’s artistic director announced, out of the blue, that she was restructuring the entire program!

I bolted upright, suddenly very wide awake. Going forward, the program would no longer support students wanting to dance in college. Instead, becoming a professional dancer immediately upon high school graduation had to be every ABT dance student’s goal. It was all in or entirely out. Class times for the upcoming fall were moved from after school to 1 pm, an impossible time for me to make if I wanted to continue with my rigorous AP/honors course load and school activities. My world felt like it was crashing down. I was faced with a stark choice: professional dancer or college? Until this point, I always thought I could do both. Now, at age 17, I was forced to make a decision that would affect the rest of my life.

No one was more committed to dance than I was. I spent the last 15 years training up to 30 hours each week. I danced for several years at ABT, one of the nation’s premiere programs, where I blossomed into a highly accomplished ballerina. The only time I ever missed a class was the day our beloved Goldendoodle unexpectedly died. I spent two summers at the prestigious Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet training with some of the best instructors in the world. But I was equally committed to school and my rigorous curriculum. Would I be a quitter if I gave up dance after spending all of those years perfecting my craft? Then again, would I regret not having a traditional college experience and developing my other interests? Would my parents, who had sacrificed so much for me to dance, be disappointed? The decision was consuming my every thought. Now I couldn’t concentrate on ballet or school. I paced incessantly. My heart felt like it was going to burst. My mother reminded me to breathe.

In late spring, I made a decision to focus on my academics and my high school experience. While dance had always been my driving force, when faced with the choice, I realized that I had other passions as well. One of them is politics. I am one of thousands of young women who were energized by the last presidential election. First, by the exciting possibility of a female president and second, by the desire to make a difference given the current political climate. I realized that dance has actually made me into this person who understands politics. When I started dancing, I was shy, introverted and lacked confidence. But over many years of training, I gained discipline, preparedness, resiliency, charisma, and, most importantly, inner strength. I worked through the physical pain of ripped toenails and blisters bleeding through my pointe shoes and the emotional pain of constantly being corrected by teachers, which I then equated with failure. I learned to go beyond just nailing choreography but to embracing the collaboration with fellow dancers and expressing my artistry and passion to move and inspire viewers. These are the same skills I will use as a future politician or lawyer. Thanks to dance, I know how to connect with people and get things done. Criticism will never tear me or my message down. I am poised under pressure.

Ballet will always remain a part of my life. I still take open classes and plan to dance in some capacity in college and beyond. I see now that dance and academia are not mutually exclusive. I am who I am because of ballet. But now I am ready to star in next big production of my life, *An American in College,* and eventually impact audiences in the political theater.

# More Than the 'MathSter' Shankar Mutneja

## 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.

I once believed my extraordinary skill with numbers would take me to great heights and greater happiness. I was wrong.

Numbers- quantitative indicators, widely believed to factor the quality of one’s life - galvanized significant achievements, but until recently impeded the emergence of my humane side. At 7, invited to display my abilities at a private school, I stood onstage, the cynosure of all eyes. The anchor rattled off a lengthy problem set to which I correctly responded ”9873293” well before the calculator could. I cultivated this talent crouched in cramped rooms, experimenting with the abacus, convinced that proficiency with operating abacus’s primary-hued beads would imbue exceptional numeracy. I started processing number sequences with surety and speed, and then at accelerated paces, sans the device, merely by moving my hands in the air as though working the beads. This earned me the moniker, “MathSter.”

Sweeping through state and national competitions, I entered the international arena. I come from a small town, Jalalabad, near the India-Pakistan border. Seeing my extraordinary skills, my father encouraged me, and I cleared the exam to study at India’s finest boarding school. Suddenly, I was cast amongst peers stellar in academia and athletics; yet, my competitive spirit, honed in countless abacus competitions, prevailed and I strove to improve in both, finally winning several awards. While my exceptional talent won me accolades, it impeded my Emotional Quotient, retarding the ‘fifth dimension’, including intuition and emotions. Admittedly, winning awards was thrilling. But where was the sense of inner fulfilment and contentment? It took one assignment to bridge this lacuna.

One day, my seniors seconded me for a community-service learning project. We arrived at a shanty home in a vermin-infested slum colony without power or light. We intended installing solar lighting that I had designed in physics lab, drawing from the original Litre of Light concept, to weather the Indian monsoon. I commenced operations- the first was up and running. I went on to install lights in 50 homes by sunset.. Finally, grimy and tired, walking towards the bus returning us to school, I was halted by an elderly woman in ragged dress, hands joined in gratitude. She touched my head in benediction, smiled toothlessly, and said: Shukriya (thank you). Her smile seemed to light the hillside. I felt a deep sense of accomplishment that eluded me even when I won my first international Math award. I was jubilant! I knew then that I would continue serving community. Unfortunately, there were problems with the lights- they performed sporadically; either the recipients handled them wrong or the electrical circuit was faulty. My usual remedial protocols - collecting data on the circuit’s power, humidity and other potential factors affecting performance - led nowhere. I faced a conundrum: though committed, I could not deploy my ‘mathematical gift’ for resolve. Something was missing. It struck me whilst conversing with a user: the bulbs were bug infested. The epiphany - my de facto number-based approach in conjunction with a people-based - human approach brought resolve. I’d found the fifth dimension - ‘collaboration’.

Discussing with slum dwellers their problems built empathy and developed my understanding of their actual needs: I could now work with them to derive real, sustainable solutions. Gradually, numbers started losing their overarching importance, and my competitive streak softened. Now, though pursuing academic excellence, I strike a balance between success and community impact. In my final year at school, as the Community Outreach Secretary, I coordinate 20 community outreach projects including drug rehabilitation and solar lighting. The Uttarakhand Sustainable Development Festival nominated me for their Change Maker’s Award, and Society magazine for 'Young Achiever's Award'. Importantly, I’ve connected with my softer, empathetic self and found contentment while helping uplift the underserved. Today, though focused on academia, I’ll ever be a committed change agent, working on the combination of these two seemingly polar activities and hopefully, make this world a better place, with my numerical and humanitarian inputs!

**The Most Important Subjects Anonymous**

**What's one important part of your life that we should know about?**

All summer I had been speculating about the first day of high school, but not for the same reasons as my peers. While others were perfecting their “summer bods,” I was worried about one particular class and one particular teacher. As I took a front seat in the classroom, 23 pairs of knowing eyes watched me, and my sweaty palms and red face felt exposed. The teacher stepped up to the front of the room, but my classmates’ eyes stayed on me. “Hello, freshman geology! My name is Travis Moore...” My peers would call him Travis, but to me, he would always be Dad. He smiled, and my shoulders relaxed.

Being his student was something I’d experienced all 6,387 days of my life. Dad taught me not just about geology, but about living a wholesome life. A fourth generation Aspenite, I was raised in the mountains right outside my door. Here, I discovered my zest for the environment and learned to embrace the small town experience. On Christmas morning, I’m not concerned with the presents, but with carving seamless tracks through the silky snow. My family races to the lift in anticipation of our annual ritual. We tromp up “Highlands Bowl,” carrying cheese and sausage, to picnic at 12,392 feet, overlooking the magnificent Elk Mountain range that is my backyard.​ ​Still, as a teenager, a perfect day means sitting four across on the chairlift with my family, singing “Frosty the Snowman,” in unison.

Here in the classroom, Dad shows all his students how to value and protect our planet. “I challenge you to improve the world daily, even by putting your waste in the right container.” His same intention follows us on our walks home from school, literally, as we carry bags and make a game out of picking up trash. On spring break, instead of collecting shells, my family cleans up the beach. Now, I find myself leading protests against idling cars, and teaching visitors how to respect our National Forests, as a junior ranger.

As I watched my father circulate around the classroom, happily offering help to those who didn’t understand, I noticed how much he cares. Over time, I learned that all he wanted for his students, including his daughter, was to be an honorable person. It was that simple. The letter grade isn’t as important; the hard work and honesty is what he finds admirable. He genuinely enjoys guiding his charges.

Like my father, I am naturally drawn to helping those in need: Joseph, Brady, Stephen, Hannah and Julia, among others, are kids that needed a friend. I sat with the lonely new boy Joseph in the middle school lunchroom and traded lousy jokes. At cross country, I run with Brady, who has Asperger's, and offer advice as he confides in me about his imaginary girlfriends. In the halls of the high school, I cruise around with Stefan, a sophomore with autism, in search of a never-appearing ice cream sandwich. On the soccer field, I coach and giggle with Hannah, a 14-year old with Down Syndrome. And this year, I’ve befriended Julia, who was displaced by Hurricane Maria. I’ve found my own special ability to mentor and connect to others, regardless of differences.

Four years older and wiser, I ponder these moments as I watch Dad grading papers at the kitchen table. I know that not just my poor eyesight, but my deep appreciation for the natural world and empathy came from him. I am inspired to be that honorable person that my father teaches others to be. After 17 years of being his student, I’ve earned an A+ in the most important subjects in life.

**Salt: A Passage of Growth Corbin Lubianski**

**Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

I grasped the empty, plastic one-gallon container within my right hand as I strolled towards the salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico, trying not to gain others' attention nor look awkward. It would seem unusual and strange to others when they see a 16-year-old boy collecting murky, saltwater from the ocean, but to me, this was the first step in my long-awaited plan to harvest salt.

Mark Kurlansky composed a historical account of salt in “Salt: A World History.” This book came to me in the form of a dreaded summer assignment for AP World History. I was given the choice of four books with their own topic: bananas, wine, spices, and salt. I did not pick salt for its dullness; I only picked it because I wanted to pick the challenging book to impress my first AP teacher as the book was the longest of the four. Yet, I did not know how inspirational and intriguing the book would become to me.

I read of the role that salt has played in the forming of civilizations. I read how civilizations gathered and harvested different types of salt. I read how civilizations applied salt to their diets and recipes. I read how salt has shaped modern history. Lastly, I read how salt has impacted the human race and our history. I was so curious and obsessed that I even bought another book: “Salted: A Manifesto on the World’s Most Essential Mineral.” In the book that Mark Bitterman wrote, he notes all the things one should know about salt: its chemical complexity, various types of salt, recipes, and harvesting methods. Throughout reading both books, I couldn’t help but think about businesses I could start harvesting salt by the coast and selling artisan salts to the community. It may seem strange that someone who lives 150 miles from the coast would formulate such ideas, but I was obsessed with the only rock that we eat: salt.

So I made a plan. Each summer, my family takes a three-day vacation to the coast where we usually go swimming in the ocean and explore the coast of Texas. I was to gather as much seawater as possible to conduct my own harvest of salt. I obtained four gallons of saltwater with those one-gallon plastic bottles that I walked across the beach. Once I got home, I straight-away poured a gallon into a bucket and set it into the sun. I applied many lessons and advice that the books noted: impurities, sun evaporation techniques, timing, salt crystallization. A week later, I held two ounces of salt in my hand: a reward for my efforts and obsession.

I once thought that I was a man of no passions with only a few interests. With salt, I have realized other passions and interests by venturing outside of my comfort zone. My obsession and interest of salt have dared me to lead me to new experiences, like awkwardly gathering saltwater in front of people at the coast.

**I'm a Drummer. Matt Tibbitts**

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

As a child, one of my favorite moments in the year was watching the daily parade at the Big E with my family. Seeing the brightly colored floats drive brought me indescribable joy. Candy flew out of windows, classic cars honked their horns, and important people waved to the crowd. Through all this madness, one group took hold of my attention: the marching bands.

Suddenly the intermediate honks were replaced with the blare of trumpets as a band approached my seat. A crack began to form on my glasses as the woodwind section screeched; however as the percussion section came into view, my mind locked onto their beats. The bass drummers hit their drums as the sound penetrated my chest and seemed to give me a second heartbeat. The snare drummers demonstrated their might and skill as I stuck my fingers in my ears just enough to halt their powerful sound, but not enough to kill their rhythmic music. In these moments I realized something: I wanted to be a drummer.

At a young age, I couldn’t simply throw on a uniform and march; instead, I got a drum pad and learned the song every band kid learns first: "Hot Cross Buns." At the end of the year, I put on my button-up shirt and clip-on tie and stood on the stage of my elementary school playing the song on my pad. It didn’t give me the same euphoria as the drumline, but it began my addiction—I was hooked. By middle school, I graduated from a pad to a snare drum, from simple songs to intricate music. I was finally becoming a drummer.

Five years and hundreds of practice hours later, I walked into my first day of high school band. The section leader, Eric, introduced himself and told us to get behind the instrument we thought we could play. I timidly walked up to a snare drum positioned several inches too high for me; Eric turned to me and answered my selection with a snarky comment: “can you even play a paradiddle?” I eagerly nodded and nervously played something somewhat resembling a paradiddle, while internally screaming the stickings: “Right-Left-Right-Right, Left-Right-Left-Left.” I must have done something right, because the next day I stayed in that spot and didn’t move for four years.

At some point, the hard truth about high school hit me: it’s tough. While some classes added to my stress, band never did—it became a place of perpetual refuge and belonging. However, I realized our community extended beyond the confines of the band room when my grandmother pointed out that at our Thanksgiving halftime show, I was nearly impossible to identify from the crowd. I examined this from her perspective and realized it’s quite a difficult feat: we all wear the same uniform and oversized shakos cover our faces—maybe we're all invisible.

This idea disheartened me momentarily—nobody wants to be invisible—however, I soon realized I’m not. I’m transformed. When I’m drumming I’m not the nerdy kid you ask for help with your math homework or the closeted gay kid with a not so well kept secret—I’m just a drummer. I’m a gear in the monstrous unit walking past you at 120 beats per minute, nearly forcing you to tap your foot. Every time I play the drums, my problems go away because I wear a different persona. I’m a drummer.

This September, taking the first roll-step into the Big E parade, I looked up briefly from the drum major’s flailing arms and turned towards the crowd. I saw a little boy sitting atop his father’s shoulders with his fingers in his ears as if in pain, yet smiling from ear to ear. At that moment I saw myself. I saw the look in his eyes. I saw his body twitch as he felt the second heartbeat pierce through him. And I remembered why I became a drummer.

# A Journey of Two Worlds Anonymous

## Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.

I showed up to school in thongs today... no not that type of thong. Indeed, Australians call flip flops, thongs. As my physcis teacher told me he 'reckons' I should take off my thongs and put on 'runners' (i.e. sneakers) to avoid labratory hazards, I couldn't help but reflect on how crazy my experience with moving really was.

Portland, OR

Kennewick, WA

Bunbury, WA

Perth, WA

Darwin, NT

5 unique cities equals 5 whole new worlds to explore.

I began life in the Pacific North West, and ended up in outback Australia.

After my 7th birthday, home would no longer be Washington. In a few days I was about to venture across the globe to a foreign place called Australia.

Which is home you ask? Arrival or Departure? Home for me means many things. The world I come from is not associated with a worn out welcome mat and friends who learned to walk together. But I love that it is inherently complex. America holds my childhood filled with pine cones, blockbuster movies and Mt. Hood snow trips; Australia owns my adolescence abundant in fast paced social scenes and the place where I grew into the person I am to this day.

Throughout my time of living through endless summers and having a regular routine of going to the beach with friends, I realized (or 'realised' as I should say thanks to my English teacher's constant reminding) that I am beyond lucky. Having the opportunity to live in these crazy and exotic places ultimately resulted in my character becoming adaptable and versatile to my surroundings, and staying still while the world around me moved.

I loved each place I lived in for different reasons. I've made unforgettable relationships with people and each place has helped shape who I am. I immediately developed an enthusiasm for swimming and surfing, and my love for these grew exponentially. Being a competitive swimmer for the past decade and taking up a job as a lifeguard for the past year has reminded me that there is something about the warmth of the salty ocean and early morning swim training that evokes a feeling of utter relaxation. Catching my first wave in Bunbury at age 8, resembled snowboarding down the golf course in Kennewick during those cherished white Christmases. This only further instilled the virtue that moving has granted me the opportunity to absorb the best of both worlds.

As I sit here writing this essay, I take a tentative look around my room filled with moving boxes as we prepare to go back to old town Portland after my high school graduation, and remind myself of the adventurous and unconventional life I've had thus far, excited for what the future holds. I think of my journey best expressed through the quote: “Where am I moving you ask? Onto better things.”