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**Sample essays 2017**

**CMC**

**It's Not My Age That Matters**

**Anonymous**

**Pick your own topic**

"Angelina, you're 18 going on 45" - that's my best friend, Bailey's, favorite expression. What most people don't understand, though, is that those qualities of mine that make me seem older are simply the result of a rather unusual upbringing. Of course, saying that usually brings on the ever-popular phrase of "You didn't have a childhood, did you?" No, I did have a childhood; it just wasn't the typical childhood.

While most ten-year-olds were in bed by 9 on a Friday evening after watching their favorite Disney movie, I was at the Metropolitan Opera House with my father and about 1000 bejeweled widows. After a two-hour car ride, I would sit in the front row of our box, my eyes never leaving the stage, trying to make sense of Puccini's La Boheme. The Met wouldn't be putting in subtitle boxes for a few more years, so any translation I made had to be solely drawn from the variations in the music. Even if I didn't catch on to every detail of the story, I was completely taken in, and ever since then my parents haven't been able to kick me out of "my" seat at the opera.

When not at the Met, I spent my free time watching foreign films with my mother - Cyrano de Bergerac, Cinema Paradiso, The Seventh Seal, and Breathless were our favorites. Being surrounded by all these languages combined with taking French at school since I was ten years old allowed me to quickly pick up on what the characters were saying. By the time I was 13, I would, somewhat cheekily, tell her that the subtitles weren't translating the French correctly, and subsequently give her the "real" translation. Even today, I'll be watching a French film by myself and suddenly my parents will hear me from the next room shout, in true movie-critic fashion, "Nope, translated that wrong, too!"

Now that I'm 18, my friends all get a good laugh when I say that I like to sit in smoke-filled hotel lounges, listening to piano players with my dad for kicks. Well, I've been doing it for years, so why stop now? I remember sitting on my dad's lap listening to "Piano Man" countless times in bars around the world - it is still the one song that makes me think of home. Of course, when I was little, I thought the song was more amusing than it really is, because the line about "putting bread in my jar" always invoked the image of someone stuffing a roll in a shot glass. If you know the song, I'm sure you can figure out where else I may have perked a confused brow. Either way, being able to just sit there, totally relaxed, surrounded by the swingin' over 40 crowd, listening to songs I grew up with makes me happier than going to any party ever could.

So maybe I didn't have the typical childhood; maybe I do enjoy activities people my age usually fight against experiencing, but that has never hindered me from finding my niche in school, nor has it stopped me from getting my friends to at least appreciate the things I love. Moreover, I know that I only evolved into what I am today because of the opportunities my parents offered me. Without their trust in my maturity, I may just have had that type of childhood my friends are so aghast that I lacked - and sometimes I really wonder if I would have been better off playing with Barbies and watching cartoons. But I can't change who I am now, and I really wouldn't if someone gave me the chance; I can only change what I will become. Therefore, no matter where I end up in college, I want to be able to continue to experience things outside of the norm and share what I've grown to love with others. Wherever I can do that will be the perfect place for me, be I 18, 45, or anywhere in between.

**What Do I love?**

**Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

I love laughing. Laughing loudly, a little smile, or just a silly grin, I love them all. A laugh everyday can release my stress from school. When I am sad, I take a big breath and 'ha!' A silly laugh makes me laugh at myself, and soon I find myself feeling a bit better. A smile on my face makes others smile as well. It is not very hard to laugh and smile and make others feel better every day.

I love it when I am with my friends. Everyday when I come back from school, I will knock on my friends' doors and tell them what happened today. Gossiping, making fun of each other, simply sharing our happiness makes us laugh loudly in our rooms. Even when I am down I will share my feelings with my friends. They cure my pain from sadness. Sometimes I cry when I am sad, and they make me feel better by sharing their opinions with me, or just give me a very warm hug, and then we laugh together because we know that we are always willing to stand by each other, giving support to each other.

I love walking alone on the street with my music. That may seem very lonely but I enjoy it. Wandering around with my favorite music, going into interesting shops, looking around, taking pictures of unusual places or of just myself, or just bringing a book or buying a monthly magazine and bumping into a coffee shop with my music, I love them all. It is not lonely because I am just alone. I feel that my life is full because I am surrounded by my favorite things. Although the music from my Mini Disc player can only be heard by me, I feel the music fill up the world. My pace becomes lighter when it comes to a joyful or a sweetie love song and it slows down when it comes across a sad song; sometimes people will look at me weirdly when I imagine myself being the conductor of a choral song that I am listening to. It seems that I can communicate better with the music when I am alone, surrounded by many people that I do not know. Music makes me think, not only about the music itself, but about my life as well.

I love it when I am dancing. When I was in Hong Kong, I always attended dancing lessons every weekend, or sometimes even once every other day when we

were practicing for a dance. Although I was very busy with my school work, the lessons were not a source of pressure. Stretching exercises were no longer painful; they helped me to relax myself and ease my tensed up muscles. It was hard to follow a dance routine in the beginning but when I concentrated, I could see myself improving every time. Finally I mastered the whole thing and I shouted 'yohoo!' because I was happy, and you would have noticed it. Even though I am not able now to attend dancing classes in Italy, I still keep practicing three times a week. Although I am alone, practicing in front of the mirror, it is still the most relaxing time for me. I can move freely in a world with no boundaries and limits. I am the teacher, the dancer and the audience; I imagine all of them leaving the dance room with a big smile.

I love it when I am indulging myself with performing arts. Not only dancing, but also singing, acting, or just discovering a new book about performing in the library, it makes me smile. My parents are sure to ask me why I'm not studying History or Mathematics, or why I don't find an English novel to read in the library. The answer is simple: I love being a performer. Through dancing I can express my anger or joy; I can communicate a playwright's ideas in a drama and present the ideas to the audience. I am not merely acting another's part, but using my own language and interpretation to express a new idea to the audience, and perhaps even understand it better myself. The range of emotions I draw upon when acting comes from a deeper intuitive level than just "pretending". Of course, applause makes me happy after I have finished a performance, but the most important thing is I enjoy the process of practicing. Practices are long and hard, but they are not dull. I make them different every time. Feelings are not the same each time I perform the same part. I make it progressively better and finally I present it to the audience. I see the process, and I see the smiles from the audience, proving my hard works have not been wasted; this is the most rewarding present from everyone.

I love it when I am meeting new people and seeing new places. After finishing secondary school in Hong Kong, I was fortunate to receive a full scholarship granted by the United World Colleges and gain an invaluable chance to study in Italy for two years. The college is a melting point for many different cultures; being able to study here has changed my perceptions of life and broadened my exposure. I met a lot of brilliant people in the college. I have learned from them, which has also enabled me to understand myself from another angle. For example, when I am working with other students in the college shows, their ideas alway amaze me! The cultural diversity truly contributes to creativity and I believe I have benefited a lot from that. Apart from working with them, their life experience taught me a lot. By comparing myself to them, I sometimes feel small. I used to take life for granted and didn't realise that many people have to fight hard for theirs. One of my friends from Kosovo told me that in order to survive, he had to learn how to shoot for self-defence. I had watched the war on TV, but I had never had a friend who had actually experienced wars and it made a strong impression.

I love it when I am working with children, their smiles make me laugh. This year my social service in the college is 'multi-cultural social service', and I have to go to kindergarten and elementary schools to work with children, telling them stories about my culture, teaching them some simple songs and just listening to them speaking in Italian, or sometimes even in Slovene. It is a very challenging experience as my audience is young and sometimes it is difficult to explain some Chinese terms; I have to filter the information that I have and make it easier for the children to understand. I also have a chance to learn my first words in Slovene! This experience makes me become more and more interested in working in the field of theatre education in the future: trying to use performing arts to communicate with children, to bring ideas to youngsters, and bring theatre arts to a wider public level in my home - Hong Kong.

I love it when I am working hard for my dream. I know that if I want to make my dream come true, which is to become a successful and professional performer, I must overcome all the challenges I encounter as they are paths to my future. So I have to be determined. This is my life and I am the only one who can work it out. Saying that I am very passionate about performing arts would be futile if I were to give up and escape from the difficulties. I am happy when I see that I can balance my academic performance and my interests. I love to run to the practice room and start practising after I finish school at 1:15 pm. My dream and my passion for performing arts is the only thing I have held onto through all the years, both before I came to Italy and while I am here, and I believe that they will be with me throughout my life, helping me to achieve my goals.

I love it when I am happy. I know that my life is a meaningful one because I have all these things to make me happy and laugh.

**Learning to Believe**

**Ariel Johnston**

**Evaluate a significant experience....**

Evaluate a significant experience....

It was the first night that I had seen the Western Wall, and all of the magic of that moment overcame me like an ocean wave, strong and powerful. As I walked towards the wall, holding hands with the other girls on my semester program, I began to cry. It was such an amazing and powerful site, and the beauty and history of the wall were spellbinding. As we worked our way to the wall and placed our hands upon it, tears began to stream down my face. I had no idea at the time why I was crying, but I knew that my journey in the next 4.5 months would hold the answer.

After that first encounter, I began a personal quest to find what I believed in. I had spent my whole life following a religion, and I wasn’t even sure what I believed in. As the days and weeks went on, the reality of Israel became our life. Daily bombings and terror attacks became a depressing but very real element of our daily existence. One evening in mid March we ventured to Jerusalem, just a few miles from our Kibbutz, to hear the Minister of Tourism speak. My class contested the evening’s events, as we had a large Jewish History test the following morning and needed to stay home and study, but our counselors insisted that we had no choice in the matter. So, note cards and study packets in hand, we went to the hotel in Jerusalem for the speech. After the Minister spoke, an Israeli dance troupe took to the stage to perform for the crowd. Halfway through the performance cell phones could be heard going off all throughout the room; something was wrong. As people began to run out of the room the situation became clear, there had been a bombing just a few short blocks away from the hotel. As I searched for a phone to call my parents, I began to feel scared for the first time since I had arrived in Israel. About 20 minutes later, we were ushered to a minibus waiting to take us back home.

Perhaps one of the most profound moments of my entire experience in Israel was that ride home. As we sped out of the city, there was a group of Orthodox Jews standing in the streets watching the scene unfold. They were standing in the same spot where, on our way to the hotel, we had passed a peace rally. That site changed something in me forever. As we passed them I became overwhelmed with distrust of God. There I was, a 16 year old who had chosen to leave my home for 5 months so that I could find out who I was. Every day I struggled with my religion and what it told me, that this was my land, my home. And that night, there I was watching these people who devoted their whole life to Judaism and God, a God who had promised us this land, and yet I was watching people die and kill all around me; dying for their county, dying just to live a normal life there.

How could I have gone so far from home just to find that I could only find more questions rather than answers in this distant land? I grieved for my loss of innocence that night. The next morning was hard, so were the rest, but that night changed me. I knew I believed, if not in God then in a people whose strength was full of power and meaning to me.

**Learning to smile through tears**

**Emaan Ahmad**

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

It was two weeks before my 8th birthday and my little head was overflowing with dreams of Barbie’s, toys, cakes, and princesses. The invitations had been mailed, the pink cake had been ordered, and I was convinced that my princess-themed party was going to be the best day of my entire life. On October 10th, 1998, in a cruel twist of fate, my life changed forever and the dreams of princesses were quickly replaced with the pungent, antiseptic smell of hospital corridors and fervent prayers for my father’s health.

On the night of October 9th, 1998, I went to sleep in my own bedroom, but as was my routine, I woke up in the middle of the night and headed to my parents’ room. I used to quietly climb into their bed and fall asleep; I was never turned away. But, that night was different. When I got to my parents’ room, my father was standing next to the window breathing very heavily and my mother was standing two steps behind him. I can still remember very vividly hearing my mother say, “Salim, should I call an ambulance?” I could sense something was not right and I asked my mother what was wrong, but she agitatedly told me to go back to my room. Sleepy, dazed, and confused I simply stood there in the shadows watching them and within minutes saw my father crumple to the floor. The ambulance was taking too long and my mother did not think my father could afford to wait. She quickly woke the live in domestic help and with their help carried my father into the car. My father was a tall, strong man and I saw the three of them struggling with his weight. I later learnt that my father had had a brain haemorrhage and although he was operated on as soon as he reached the hospital, it was too late – he lapsed into a persistent vegetative state.

No one told me exactly what had happened; I just knew ‘Abu’, was sick, very sick. I remember daily trips from school to the hospital. I received special permission to visit the Intensive Care Unit (I.C.U.) every single day. Whenever I came to my father’s bedside there was a present waiting for me. The present was usually chocolate - ‘Abu’ loved chocolate and I had inherited his sweet tooth. In fact, eating chocolate together was a little ritual we used to share. This is why it wasn’t hard for me to believe my mother when she said the chocolate was a present from ‘Abu’. However, I soon realized my father was not simply sleeping in the hospital. There was a serious reason why he was there and there was a reason why he would not come home any time soon. After countless tests and consults with neurologists, the hospital informed my mother that the chances of my father regaining consciousness were slim to none. My father was discharged from the hospital and brought home and for the next 6 years my mother dedicated her life to caring for my father.

As time passed and I became older, I started to accept the fact that my father was lost to me for good. But still, the questions arose, “Why my father, why me?” I hated seeing him lying immobile, being changed and bathed by someone else, and never being able to talk to him. I was angry and resented what had happened to my family, but my mother always put on a bra

**Discovery on Pine Ridge**

**Emily Whitney**

**An experience that has changed your life.**

I have been traveling since I was two weeks old. Denver is where I was born, but almost immediately after my adoption, my parents brought me to my home of 17 years, Rhode Island. I have had the fortune and privilege of having parents who love to travel, and grew up with spring vacations in places like redwood forests or the Everglades. Summers found me exploring the Rio Grande and the Seine while sharpening my linguistic skills. Whether camping in the Sierra Nevadas or extracting stories from the Sioux people of South Dakota, I always discovered something about myself as well. The most significant of these discoveries came on my church’s annual mission trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, which is located in two of the country’s poorest counties. I was skeptical and nervous, and my youth pastor confirmed that the trip would likely unnerve us. I wasn’t sure whether I would actually be interested or learn anything – but I soon discovered how incredibly mistaken I was.

Venturing into the penurious Native American reservation was different than any experience I have had in my life. Pine Ridge may appear to be desolate; however, the convergence of tribal artists, writers, and musicians share stories that have immense spiritual meaning. To the tribal people of South Dakota, mainly the Lakota from the Sioux tribe, every day is beautiful because it is a gift from the Creator. From them I learned that when we live in a relationship with nature, we inherently know that the change of seasons and change of weather is necessary for our continuation and that of the planet. The hardships that arise are important for our growth and prosperity. So many people are affected by the illusions of Western culture, which in turn leads to discord among individuals and nations. Our society is based upon perfectionism, judgment, and the deception of power. Many have come to believe that it is in our control to change the course of nature. The Lakota-Sioux reminded me that we may get caught up in the busyness of everyday life, but we should never forget that we did not create this life that we are living. It is a gift from the Creator.

While in South Dakota I was introduced personally to many spiritual leaders and political activists, but also heard stories of many others. Frank Fools Crow was one of the most inspirational people I heard about. He was thought of as a Chief, a Spiritual Leader and a healer. His consistent guidance from Wakan-Tanka (the Creator) was evident in how he led his tribe with great devotion: "Remember and think about the closeness of Wakan-Tanka. If they believe in this wisdom, it will give then endless strength and hope." Having great powers of healing, he was a humble and dedicated man of simplicity and love. He told me powerful stories of how he helped to negotiate the 68 day-long insurrection at Wounded Knee and truly showed me how important it is to be humble. He taught that that is a gift of prayer, ceremony, and willingness to serve.

Although the Mission Trip was a time for my youth group to learn about each other, we also did volunteer work. Each day we made bunk beds from scratch and then installed them into reservation homes. One of the nights the organization with were working with had a dinner for people of the tribe in the area. I served food to members of the tribe, sat and ate with them, prayed with them and sang with them. That night we learned about each other as well as our inner self.

Once the day came for us to leave, my pastor asked us to write a response to the following question in our journals: “What has been the most beautiful experience of the week in nature or in relationship?” I thought long and hard about this, not knowing which of the many to choose. I had witnessed a breathtaking lightning storm, had come in contact with the most spiritual, honest, and respectable people that I had ever met – all of these seemed beautiful. I now look back at a journal I wrote, the pictures I took, as well as the memories I carry; I now know which was the most beautiful experience. This is clear to me because the thought of it still makes my blood rush and heart beat faster. The most beautiful experience to me was standing at the mass grave memorial at the site of the Massacre of Wounded Knee, feeling the crisp June breeze and looking over the lush grassy plains.

While I took many things away from this trip, I grew the most spiritually. Never before had I been so in tune with my perceptions and stereotypes. Watching movies and reading books does not give a semi-accurate depiction of the hardships of the Native American people. From visiting battle sites, mass graves and memorials I learned more than any text book could ever teach me. Acquiring knowledge about their beliefs on God, the Earth and life itself has expanded my willingness to diversify and showed me that I want to discover a greater meaning to my spirituality. The trip inspired me to become more involved in my church, as I have become a youth group leader, choir member, and Sunday School teacher.

I am sure that my life of traveling will continue in the years to come. Through my experience in South Dakota I learned to be even more open to the new people and cultures around me, and I am excited to travel with ideas of service, learning, and spiritual growth in mind.

**How and Why I Wash My Hands**

**Anonymous**

**How are your hands different from anyone else's in the world?**

Right now, my hands are wrinkled beyond recognition. I could literally draw a contour map of the folds on my fingers. They make it difficult to type: I've just spent ten minutes fumbling on the keyboard (now twelve), even though the words have been sitting in my head for three hours. Three hours stamping my feet in the shower; three hours shampooing my now-brittle hair like a washerwoman on steroids. No, I am neither hygiene-obsessed nor a mermaid. I simply consider the shower my Emporium of Epiphanies; my Boutique of Brainwaves; my Reserve of Revelations - you get the idea. The shower is to me what Archimedes's bathtub was to him when he leaped out screaming, "Eureka!" This has become a ritual every time I need to write an important piece, whether it be one of my many poems or a college application to the esteemed women's college I desperately want to attend. Somehow, that blast of hot water washes away everything extraneous to let me crystallize my thoughts into words.

But of course, any idea-deprived college applicant can agitate for three hours in the shower and emerge with puckered skin. What gives my hands a different texture lies in the shampooing technique I’ve perfected over the years. With those magical motions, I get that rusty machine in my cranium to really move. If that sounds strange, it probably is, but it's just my odd way of saying that I do my part to produce the desired mental shock wave. As a writer, I'm fully aware of the effect that my environment has on me and I always want to seek the most conducive place, yet I shun passivity even when these ideal conditions are met. I use these hands to scrub and polish the head and page; over and over, until I produce something I can safely say I am proud of. I want to contribute no matter where I am: from writing seminars to, in my wildest dreams, a certain ivy-clad college in South Hadley. This, I propose, is what distinguishes me as a shower-ee. Your esteemed bathroom facilities and my red, raw, wrinkled hands: I hope I'm not the only one convinced that they'd make one lethal combination indeed.

**Atrocity in Paradise**

**Jordan Curry**

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

The finely milled sand was white-hot, almost as if a billion microscopic pieces of the sun had rained down and settled beneath the soles of my feet. As I scanned the beach, I took a deep breath of the muggy air, letting the dampness settle in my lungs as I took in the view around me. I was on a gorgeous island where the bleach-white sands were covered with tidy rows of reclining outdoor chairs, the water was an icy-clear blue, and the sound of the ocean was audible from nearly anywhere on land. This isolated strip of heaven on Earth seemed like another planet compared to where I had been just hours earlier.

The streets of Nassau were sweltering in the summer. The stagnant air was a wispy cloak that sat upon the beads of sweat rolling down my temples. Stores that looked like shacks lined the perimeter of the roads, ventilated by the occasional breezes coming off of the rolling ocean tides. A man wearing cutoff jeans, a dark green crewneck T-shirt, and a dingy grey jacket walked down the street. His dark skin reflected the sunlight as he occasionally opened his jacket each time he passed an identifiable tourist. It was obvious what he was doing. The spicy, earthy smell of marijuana wafted off of him, its pungent smell permeating the air that surrounded him. It was just another day dealing, making a profit in a tourist attraction where maybe, just maybe, a person would be willing to have some illegal fun while on a Caribbean vacation. The atmosphere had an easy, bustling vibe. I came across a young boy, maybe eleven at the oldest, sitting behind a plastic table. He was selling straw purses that featured sewn-on patches of popular characters like Hello Kitty and Minnie Mouse. I walked up to the table and glanced at the bags; I wasn’t really looking, though. I watched the boy as he told another woman standing at the table how much he was selling the purses for. He explained that they were well-made, and that the materials were taken from Nassau, a true Nassau souvenir. He was skinny; that made his jaw oddly defined for a boy of his age. I waited for him to approach me. He did. He said that he had a bag that I would like. He removed a basket from under the table and pulled out a straw bag dyed with the colors of the rainbow. Instead of commenting on the bag, I asked if his parents helped him run the stand. He told me no; his father was gone, and his mother was too sick to work. He couldn’t remember what her condition was called; it was something with her heart, he said. He told me that his mother was the reason why he worked. I asked if his mother had been to see a doctor. He explained that she had once, but she couldn’t go again for a while because a doctor’s care was expensive. I bought the bag from him and slipped an extra ten dollars into the stack of bills. He put the money into a Crayola box and smiled, thanking me and telling me to have a nice afternoon.

Nearly 60% of Bahamians will die of a chronic disease. Even with over 20% of government spending going toward health services, basic access to healthcare is severely lacking in many areas. The inadequacy can be seen in the long stretches of baking streets where people of every age sit outside, just waiting for the sun to set and the heat to die down. The boy I met last summer had a lasting impact on the way that I saw my life playing out. He truly affirmed my desire to become a doctor, my desire to help people, my desire to save lives, and most importantly, my desire to reduce unnecessary and preventable suffering. That day, I came to the remarkable conclusion that, without health, there is nothing left. That was my first discovery. The next is going to be learning how to make a rainbow purse match my scrubs.

**Joy**

**Anonymous**

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

One hundred sixty-two days ago I was counting the days I had left to live. “Impression: Large right ovarian mass with cystic appearance periphery and solid tumor in the center…” I trembled as I heard every word of the MRI report that my mom had tried to hide from me. What? “Most likely cancerous.” The answer reaffirmed itself in the seven diagnosis reports by seven different doctors. A grip of ice froze me to the core. I bit my lips to force myself not to shudder, as I filed the reports back in my mom’s drawer.

My eyes were glued open as I stared hopelessly into the emptiness of each night, waiting to wake up from this cruel nightmare. But I didn’t. I wasn’t dreaming. Everything I valued in my life had suddenly become trivial to me, for my whole life was slipping away. I understood why my mom had tried to persuade me to stop practicing volleyball or studying for the SAT. And it was clear why my mom had suggested that I should spend the two days before surgery donating my savings and favorite clothes: she knew that this could have been my last chance to do so. And despite shivering deeply upon the word ‘death’, all I could do was to hold my tongue and accept it.

While my mom and my brothers ran up and down the hospital, requesting the safest method for my surgery the next morning, I prayed. Left alone on the frigid bed of the hospital room, I picked up a small Bible that was sitting beside the remote control, as though I were a Christian and the waiting Bible was mine to be read. I didn’t know anything about God, but in the very first page I turned to, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” It seemed awkward and futile for a Buddhist to pray, but in those last moments of my life, all I had left to hope for was to believe in believing; believing that a miracle would happen.

Being wheeled into the operating room, I smiled, holding back my tears as my family reassured me, although I knew I might not return. I slipped into unconsciousness. As the whirlwind pushed me into the darkening abyss, somehow I held on tightly to that glittering ray of hope. After eight hours of surgery, I awoke to hear my surgeon exclaiming in astonishment, “She had that one-in-a-million chance that the MRI report had projected an inaccurate cystic appearance!” A miracle had happened.

I did not know if my prayers really made God take away the cancerous cyst. And even if it was not God, I was lucky; very lucky to be given a new life.

With the same curiosity that led me to read the MRI report, I decided to go to church for the first time. To my surprise, the warm welcome and passionate smiles I received completely disarmed the anticipated anxiety of being in an unfamiliar situation. My new friends’ honesty, unconditional compassion, and eagerness to help people who they have not even seen, are contrasting to the familiar societal competition within even close friends who fight over honors or wealth. There, though I have not found an absolute answer as to whether God is my life savior, I have been introduced to a true happiness. And this happiness gives me more than enough reason to be engaged in the church community service activities.

My wound is now reduced to a dried scar, which still cautions me to remember that I could have died or been undergoing chemotherapy and become a lifelong burden for my old mother. Most importantly, the experience reminds me not only that I am very lucky, but also that many people are not as lucky as I. Now that I have been given my chance, it is my turn to give.

Sixteen Sundays ago, I persuaded my family and new friends at church to visit patients at national cancer institutes. I felt ashamed for ever being so selfish, never having tried to understand these patients; instead I had been bored when I was invited to these kinds of community service experiences. I once thought that it was impossible for someone like me, who aims for excellence and success, to have enough time for such activities. I did not believe that just visiting patients could be any help, because we could not lengthen their lives. But now, I understand that a day I can devote to them cannot be compared to a second of happiness felt by patients who are living with cancer. Seeing the faces of despairing patients being cheered momentarily by my visits has inspired me to be there every weekend. Every night, I pray for these patients to be able to confront the inevitable, peacefully. I am blessed to have feared the same, for without experiencing it, I would never have been able to appreciate the happiness of giving.

At school, I find myself smiling at my former rivals, because just being able to go to school was more than I had ever hoped for 162 days ago. No longer do I face the life-threatening necessity to always be the top student in class. I didn’t recover quickly enough for the volleyball season this year, but cheering on the bench was enough for me because a new member was in tears when she learned there was an unoccupied position. This experience has changed my definition of success, extending it beyond the means of my academic transcript, to the joy of being alive and the joy of giving.

**My Taste of Abroad**

**Malak Dounia Mahjoubi**

**Florida State University is more than just a world-class academic institution preparing you for a future career. We are a caring community of well-rounded individuals who embrace leadership, learning, service, and global awareness. With this in mind, which of these characteristics appeals most to you, and why?**

If I ever felt like an outcast, now was the time. Loose brown hair, dark eyes, and olive toned skin, my Middle Eastern features were nothing like those of the other 500 or so passengers. As the plane rapidly reached a halt, the flight attendant announced, “Welcome to Takamatsu, Japan.”

Four months earlier, I could never have fathomed that I would be selected from a pool of St. Petersburg students to travel abroad to our Japanese Sister City. It wasn’t the travel that daunted me, or even the fact that I would make the journey with only one other student: it was the great prestige and responsibility that came along with pursuing this opportunity. As a first generation-American, I have been fortunate enough to be immersed in two different cultures, a lifestyle that has led me to recognize aspects of global citizenship that others might not see. As I look back to when I was sitting in City Hall awaiting my Sister City interview, feeling a surge of chills and a pang of cold sweat on my palms, I can’t help but recollect how uninformed and absent-minded I really was. I, at age sixteen, felt as though I knew the world: I understood the problems and, better yet, I could fix them. But the painful truth was that, in many ways, I didn’t have the slightest clue.

Japan changed all that. Four planes and a few language books later -- mostly, intense study of the simple greeting “Konichiwa” -- I still wasn’t ready. I had never felt this type of emotion before: it was fear, fear of disappointment. I couldn’t help but notice the refined manners of the Japanese, how each person bowed when greeted and timidly looked away when I passed. There was an aura of respect and order, one that was foreign to the chaotic life I had become accustomed to in America -- something unfamiliar even from my more easygoing life in Morocco. I grasped the handle of my suitcase, took a deep breath, and turned to Maya, my sole colleague on the trip; then, we headed towards the automatic doors. As the doors slowly opened, we were greeted by car horns, delighted screams, and underlying laughter. I saw a neatly dressed man and woman standing by a cab: that was my first encounter with my forever Japanese family. "Host family" would be too weak a description.

This image is forever etched in my mind even now, no longer sixteen and only months away from college, the next stage in the beginning of my adult life. I realize that stepping into Japan's ways was truly my first exposure to becoming globally aware. Coexisting in a society that was accepting, eager to understand and befriend me, unmistakably changed my outlook on international cultures. Global awareness is not just a characteristic, something you inherit. It’s an active way of life. It’s how I choose to live.

**The Power of Reading**

**Lillian Pearl Potter**

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

I cannon-balled into reading in first grade and have not emerged to catch my breath yet. Reading is the medium through which I grow. Books have swept me light years and alternate realties away, but have always returned me with more understanding of my world and others than when I left.

There is always a book tucked in my purse, backpack, or under my arm. Reading is my simplest, most adored pleasure. I love when a combination of words is so fresh that you look at the topic with a different understanding. I love when I pick up a book that articulates the singularities of the teenage experience so perfectly. I love when an author writes my own fears, challenges, or corroborates my ideals, and stretches my imagination to push breath and color into characters. With a strong imagination and a good book I can slip out of my skin and into any life I want, no matter how improbable. Books can also be a connection to and a celebration of life, not necessarily an escape from it. I read with the intent of learning. Books expand my world, every description coloring my view of a person, place, or way of life. When I read about a Jewish girl confined to her neighbor’s attic, it is not because I don’t want to be Lilly; it is because I want to understand Anne and her world. I want to explore every experience, understand every point of view, no matter how different from my own. My world is never dulled or muted after reading; it is only enhanced by my new knowledge and the fresh perspective I have to view it through.

I realize that even though there is a lot of inequity in this world, with books I have a powerful ally as I try to influence change. At Banneker Elementary, a local school, I participated in *Reading Under the Stars*. My friends acted out the scenes of children’s books while I narrated. We saw little, rapt faces staring up at us from pillows and heard the screams of “Again! Another!” Seeing how much our young audience enjoyed it, I wanted to help others have the same opportunities to grow and learn through reading. I walked with my friends in a charity event to support the organization *A Room to Read*, and we raised enough funds to build a library at a small all-girls school in Africa. I researched different nonprofits that supplied books to underprivileged schools, women’s shelters, prisons, and homeless shelters. I organized a book drive at my school and scoured thrift stores and church sales for inexpensive books. Through donations of books and money (and the painful gutting of my own shelves) I was able to surpass my original goal of 500 books, ultimately donating 1,300 books to Books for America.

While I will never know what happened with the books I donated, I do know that each book has the possibility of pivoting someone’s life in a different direction. I take something away from every book I read. The more knowledge I accumulate through reading, the more powerful I feel. It is my hope that the recipients of the donated books are sparked with the same confidence and continue to return to books as I do for fun, adventure, wisdom, and especially the pursuit of knowledge.