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**Sample essays 2017**

**Smith college**

**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.

**Paris in the Spring Rebecca Rosenthal**

**Free topic.**

The city spoke softly to me in cool, cosmopolitan tones. It invited me to explore each avenue full of boutiques. It dared me to bite into each warm, fresh croissant from the boulangeries that I passed. It pulled me through the bustling streets where native Parisians walked by hurriedly with a slightly exasperated air and where tourists stopped to unfold their enormous paper maps, only to be unable to reassemble them. It took me underground on the Metro, following each colored line of stations with magical names like Alesia, Miromesnil, and Mabillon, and whisked me out on the other side of the Seine. And as I gazed up at the Eiffel Tower, it seemed to draw a deep breath and whisper, "There you are."

I was in Paris, on my school's French Exchange for the third time. Only now, I found myself standing with the teachers instead of the other students. They were about to embark on a treasure hunt, taking them all over the city, but I had already done this treasure hunt and knew all the answers. Instead, I would be going to lunch and a movie with the two French teachers.

Only a few months earlier, the Head of the French department approached me and asked if I would participate in the Exchange again, acting as a guide for the younger students. The school would pay my way, she said, and I was only too willing to begin helping out in any way possible. In the months leading up to the trip, I recruited participants for the exchange, glowingly describing my previous experiences. Once the group was formed - one freshman and eight sophomores - we held a meeting, and I gave a presentation in French about what to expect from the trip. As I told them not to be afraid to speak in French, and not to pack too many summery clothes, so many memories flooded my mind. The Nutella oozing from a freshly made crepe, the music of accordions in the Metro, and even the rain forming Parisian puddles around my feet --they all came back to me.

Such puddles were forming again as I waited near the teachers on that March afternoon. We watched the students scurry off in their groups in search of the Madeleine or the Arc de Triomphe or the nearest Metro station, and we began to search for a restaurant for lunch. As Mme Roucher-Gudwin and I huddled under one umbrella, Mme Ciani rested under another, saying, "Becca, you are about to learn a secret." I raised my eyebrows expectantly, and she continued: "Madame Ciani smokes." I couldn't help but laugh since this was hardly a well-kept secret. Still, she had never smoked in front of the group of students. As she tactfully exhaled downwind, I felt oddly privileged. This small gesture seemed to say that the teachers considered me to be one of them, one worthy of their little 'secrets'.

We then went to a small, cozy restaurant in the 7th arrondissement, where I ordered in French, as my teachers, born and raised in France, looked on proudly. I felt like a true Parisian - no camera around my neck, no jogging pants or brightly colored T-shirts for me. The rain was pouring down outside, but I felt perfectly comfortable on my red leather seat, breaking off a piece of baguette and leaving it to the side of my plate, the French way.

After lunch, we made our way over to the Pagoda, a nearby cinema. A few minutes late, we quickly purchased our tickets and were ushered into the dark theater. As we settled into our plush seats, 8 Femmes, a musical murder mystery featuring many famous French actresses, including Catherine Deneuve, began. Somewhat unaccustomed to French movies without subtitles, I nevertheless found the dialogue easy to follow, and soon I was laughing along with my teachers. As we sat there in the dark, watching the enormous figures on the screen dance and sing, I felt completely at ease. I settled more deeply into my chair and thought to myself, "There you are."

**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 brave face and handled the situation with dignity and grace. In the six years that my father was sick, she never once broke down in front of me.

My mother amazed me with her strength of character in the face of adversity. She is the bravest woman I know. She was dealing with the loss of the love of her life, the financial burden of having a sick spouse, and watching us lose our father, but she taught me to never give up hope. She reminded me that there were other people in the world who were worse off than us and that we should be grateful for the other blessings in our lives.

For as long as I could remember, my mother had been a housewife. After my father fell sick, my mother was forced to manage my father’s engineering business and to oversee his remaining projects. She had no experience in running a company, but with the help of my father’s engineering colleagues she not only ensured the projects were completed on time, but also managed to keep the company afloat for several years. We have been through some tough times financially, but my mother never let us feel like we had less. Her example is what changed my loathing of the situation into acceptance.

Throughout the first three years that my father was sick, it was my mother, the nurses, and me in the house. My older sisters were both already at university and my mother did not want their education to be disrupted. Even though times were tough, she found a way to pay for their schooling - she sold some property that she had inherited and used those funds to pay for their tuition. She has showed me the importance of working hard and getting a good education. It is because of her that I am driven to achieve success.

My mother taught me independence and courage. She has been an inspirational role model and her example has taught me that the human spirit can overcome any adversity. It is her example that motivated to me work hard and succeed in school in spite of my dyslexia. I wanted my mother to be as proud of me as I was, and still am, of her. She has moulded me into the person I am today. I learnt, at a very young age, that life can be filled with struggle and heartache, but because of her I have learnt to smile through the tears and find the best in every situation. It is because of her that I appreciate and cherish all the people in my life; never bothering to stay angry or hold a grudge because one never knows how long one has with them.

I have missed having a father figure in my life, but having a mother with such a big heart, such strength of character, and such determination makes me feel very special and extremely blessed.

**From Sweet Dreams to Bright Horizons Anonymous**

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

Being of Norwegian ancestry and a New England breeding, I could not have appeared more out of place in this squalid, rain-ravaged corner of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Laden with sagging boxes and garbage bags brimming with children’s pajamas, I felt the human component of a game of “odd one out.” As the taxi from which my family and I departed disappeared back into the incessant traffic, I wondered if I was at the right place. Addresses are, after all, nonexistent in Ethiopia. But as I saw a middle-aged woman emerge from the cinderblock orphanage with an overjoyed smile, I knew I could not have been anywhere else.

“Susanna!” cried AHOPE’s volunteer director, Sidisse, as she rushed to greet me. She hugged me firmly, Ethiopian-style. “We’ve been expecting you,” she continued, “Come with me.” She motioned to the rest of my family. “All of you, please come. You’re all welcome.”

African HIV Orphans: Project Embrace, known by its acronym, AHOPE, houses over 100 children with HIV and AIDS and provides them with medical care, an elementary education, and a family-like environment. Upon learning of this place, I felt compelled to contribute to AHOPE in whatever way I could. My Sweet Dreams Project was promptly born and driven to life. I spent the duration of my sophomore year of high school collecting pajamas (hence the project’s name) and subsequently squeezing them into the crevices of five large suitcases. Now, thousands of miles from home, I could think only of the children darting past the windows and screaming hurried Amharic phrases. When Sidisse suggested we go meet the children, I jumped up, thanked her, and half-ran into the adjacent building. After all, I thought, aren’t children the same in every culture?

As I entered the Younger Child compound, I was met by the stares of two dozen stunned toddlers sitting in front of a prehistoric TV set. Their clothes were filthy and ill-fitting, and their hair a ceaseless de-tangling project undertaken by patient nannies. They all looked bewildered by my appearance, as if I had materialized from a dream. The silent gazing continued for several seconds; then, one little boy discovered my arms could be used for throwing small children in the air.

“Abraham,” he insisted, prodding me to repeat him, after he finally allowed me to put him down.

“Abraham,” I repeated, and then, pointing to myself: “Susanna.”

“Soo-sah-na,” he drawled, rounding off the last syllable with a peal of excited laughter. Not to be outdone, children from every corner of the damp room gathered around and followed suit, finding joy in the monotony of annunciating names.

It wasn’t long before they clamored to show me their meager collection of toys. One little girl, barely old enough to understand the concept of love, rocked and cradled two of the shabbiest dolls I had seen this side of an American trash can. Another child pitched me a ball made of rolled-up newspaper. The entire time, their runny-nosed, molluscum-covered faces never lost their smiles.

“Soo-sah-na,” Abraham called, as if he had discovered a new joke. He experimented saying it different ways: “Soosahna! Sooooh-saaaaah-naaaaa.” His laughter was contagious, so much so that any lingering guilt I had felt about leaving these children immediately evaporated. In time I would be back here, whether I was wanted or not. Fortunately, Sidisse’s sentiments matched mine, and she not only invited but beseeched me to return.

“We accept volunteers from America,” she pointedly mentioned to me, “They come and teach English. The children love them.”

“I’ll look into it,” I promised, and the idea never left my mind.

As an organization, Sweet Dreams has blossomed- donations and promises of loyal support for AHOPE pour in, while large boxes and reason for fresh hope board planes for Ethiopia. Meanwhile, I have turned my experiences and involvement with AHOPE into a career path seemingly perfect for my needs and desires. In college and beyond, I plan to study childhood education and eventually earn a teacher’s certification. With such a foundation, I hope to continue my correspondence with AHOPE by teaching there, and to bring with me a team of volunteers as excited and impassioned by our mission as I am. In the meantime, as I distribute posters for pajama drives and corral elementary students for presentations, I use the memory of AHOPE’s children- and Abraham’s smiles- as fuel for my own dreams.

**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.

**Walking the Simple Pathway Anjali Pati**

**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.**

I had thought of living in simplicity and happiness before, but I never understood its significance until I heard this sentence. “I will not allow you to come to my house. I am poor.” I stared and looked at him as my eyes filled with tears, because I didn’t understand what there was to be ashamed of. I began to ask myself: what are the most important things in life? And what makes a person successful? Is it money? Is it the things that we have? Is it the type of stone with which our houses are made? Is it weather we have a roof? Or a floor made of dirt?

It was August, 5th 2007 when I arrived in Monteverde, Costa Rica to start a new life, gain a new life experience, and attend a Quaker friends school. When I walked in the door of my new home and met my home stay family, it was raining. I had arrived in rainy season, a time when it was almost always raining or at least always a bit foggy. I felt sad watching the rain fall with such power from the sky. The rain seemed like an unstoppable force, and easily made me forget about the sun. Clouds seeped into my room and surrounded my body. Time seemed to stop, and I was enclosed by grey. I was left by myself in a foreign country without my parents, without my home, my friends, and without anything that was familiar to me. It was the decision of my parents to send me to Costa Rica to study; they said it would be a life-changing experience for me. I didn’t really come to understand what they meant until later when I made the people who surrounded me my family and Monteverde my home.

My first day at Monteverde Friends School was eye opening. I had never thought that in the midst of such green mountains would be such a fruitful community. I saw children from all different cultures and backgrounds playing together, parents mingling in the school garden, families walking home, and students running around in the dirt roads. It always astonished me how natural it was for the children to get soaked in the rain or get dirty, and not even care. Within a couple of weeks I really began to feel the amount of love that the community held for one another, and to feel loved by many people that I had recently just met.

The adjustment was difficult for me, because there were many things that took me out of my comfort level, and at the time I felt as if my home was with my previous high school, my mother, my friends, and my dogs. The first time I took a shower the water was cold. I struggled with the faucet everyday to try and get the water just a tad bit warmer, but it never worked. It was frustrating to me because I absolutely hated cold water. I remember one night waking up because I felt something crawling around on my blanket. I jumped out of my bed, turned on the light, and found a tarantula on my bed. I shook my sheets vigorously to get it off and out of my room. It was challenging to live in a rustic house with wooden planks as walls, a tin roof, no hot water, and holes in the walls. When I realized that most of the people in Monteverde lived the same way, I began to really think about where I was from. I never got used to it until I learned how to accept, and become one with nature. After bathing in cold water many times, I realized that I didn’t need hot water to live and get clean, and after seeing many tarantulas I realized that they as us are a part of nature and don’t have the intentions to hurt anyone, but are just in their own environment.

I slowly began to feel the peace of the community, and understand the beauty of simplicity and happiness. When I walk on the dirt paths through the thick forests, or through the main town I observe people helping others, elders in their wheelchairs sewing on the front porch, the cabarellos riding their horses, and people prays sincerely to God, even though they have only a small house with a tin roof and cement floor to hold their gatherings. These are the small details that showed me how beautiful the world can be when people are able to live in simplicity. Without fancy materialistic things, a car, or a showerhead that always has hot water with the perfect water pressure, people can be happy. It was never like this in any environment that I can remember.

The last year I lived in Monteverde I would walk home on the dirt path with a focus of getting home, taking a shower and finishing my homework. Thoughts of what had to be done would always fill my mind, and I would always feel behind time or late. Now, when I walk on the dirt path back to my little house, I take the time to think. I begin to watch my feet, stepping in unison with each other against the rocks broken off of the wild mountain. I often stop and realize how beautiful nature is. I observe the wild sunflowers and white lilies growing on the sides of the road, and even feel grateful when I can gather guayaba fruits off of its tree when I’m hungry. As I walk I feel as if I am meditating. I have learned to live in the present because I’ve begun to understand true peace. Walking through nature, conversing with people, and yoga has taught me what it means to live in the present, and so I followed.

What does it mean to be a successful person? Before coming to live in Monteverde, before I spoke Spanish, understood simplicity, or the beauty of nature success was about who you became. It was about being a perfect person, who ended up making a lot of money, and making their family proud. This was the image of success I had implanted into my mind. It meant you had to grow up to be a doctor, or and engineer; and the pressure would make me think I wasn’t good enough for my family, or my expectations. I would stress my self out and work extensively to fulfill the image of being perfect, with perfect grades, and a perfect reputation.

After living in Monteverde for a while, I realized that I was surrounded by many successful people, but not necessarily in the form of a doctor who makes a lot of money. I realized that in a lifetime people have different measures of success, and it wasn’t necessarily who you became, I realized it was also about who you are already. One of my best friends here in Monteverde has a father who owns a dairy farm land in Guanacaste, and her only dream is to be able to own the dairy farm and keep it running as a family business, and raise her family there. This really opened up my eyes to the amount of success I was surrounded by, and I began to appreciate the success of the smaller farmers, the little yoga studies, the cow farms, the dairy farms, and the small local coffee shops. Now when I think about success, I begin to think about happiness and love, and the most important things in life. Happiness and love is for one another, for family, and for my own well being, and being a successful person in your own eyes. My definition of success has changed. It is what an individual thinks is success for him or herself, but not to impress anyone else.

Being here has generated and changed many hopes and dreams I have for my future. The Monteverde community has created my dream of living in simplicity.

When I heard the words “I am poor” I looked at him and said, “What makes you poor? Because, in my eyes you are so rich, full of love and such a special person”. Of course he was talking about money, and the condition of the house he was living in, but these things weren’t important to me, and definitely did not change the way I looked at him as a person. He was a happy person, and I could see it, and he didn’t have everything in the world. He has a family with beautiful and healthy brothers and sisters, and he has all the love in the world for them. That’s everything that one needs.

I begin to walk again on the dirt path on the way home from school, this time more slowly, and with patience. It is raining, but I don’t feel sadness this time, I feel happiness. I feel glad and thankful to be alive, to be able to feel the drops of rain falling on my head and trickling down my skin, and to know that when I get home I will be nourished with love, because Maritza is waiting to give me a hug. It is this that I crave my life, the warmth of love, and care that people are able to give you. Again I see the fog surrounding my body, but I embrace it. I let it go all around my body, and watch as the bright colors of green turn to pure white, and observe its beauty not its dull grey colors. All the people who surround me as I leave Monteverde Friends School, as I walk home, and when I arrive at my house, have become my family. They surround me with their love, and give me a sense of security. With the people around me I feel my hopes and dreams taking form into a reality, and the environment I’m surrounded by showing me who I am and who I’m becoming as a person.

**My Secret Identity Mercedes Woolley**

**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.**

“It’s okay! Just breathe!” I said to myself in an attempt to suppress my unfaltering anxiety. I restlessly skimmed the pictures in a Clifford the Big Red Dog book, typical of me during independent reading. All the while I kept my head down, focused on the words, and paced myself to the rhythm of page turning set by my classmates, who could actually read, in case anyone was watching. To my seven year-old self, nothing was more foreboding than this “silent reading time”. As I sat with fearful anticipation, tears flooded my eyes, blurring my vision until Clifford the big red dog became a big red smudge. Choking my tears back, I looked up to find her in the doorway. The embarrassment I felt was unnerving as heads turned to watch my special educator lead me out of class.

Just weeks before, I had been escorted out of my classroom for the first time to be tested for dyslexia. Soon I began to leave class regularly to learn the fundamentals that seemed to come so quickly to everyone else. I wanted to believe I was no different from my peers, but I knew why I had to leave. My fear was that my class knew too. I pleaded with my parents and teachers, but it was no use. The truth is, I was a lousy reader. If I couldn’t avoid special education, how was I going to stop my classmates from wondering where I went everyday or worse, prevent them from coming to the conclusion there was something wrong with me? The only thing that seemed to be within my reach was to never let on or tell anyone I had dyslexia. It was going to be my secret.

My story begins ten years ago. It’s safe to say I have changed significantly. I kept my condition top-secret by laying low throughout elementary and middle school. No way could I face the humiliation! The beauty of becoming a high schooler was that Special Education did not make assumptions and place me in lower level classes. I seized the opportunity to succeed on my own. I even convinced my teachers to let me take an honors class as a freshman. However, I still kept my secret hidden from my classmates under heaps of hard work I did behind the scenes.

Many struggle in some way to accept a part of who they are, whether it’s disability, mental illness, or sexuality. I never wanted my learning disability to become a part of my identity. I was too ashamed and afraid of judgment. But, as I prepare for the next chapter of my life, it has never been more important to stand out from the crowd. How could I let my secret, the one thing that consistently makes me feel different, remain unheard? I know I am no exception, as one in five students faces a learning disability, but I do know I am unique because of the drive and self awareness I have gained. If it wasn’t for my dyslexia, I don’t know if I would have developed the determination to overcome challenges. I might not have become a strong problem solver without having to invent my own learning strategies. I may not have become a persistent self advocate without the practice of explaining the way I see things. Maybe I wouldn’t carry my distinct sense of empathy if I had not felt ostracized. Without my achievements, perhaps I wouldn’t have the confidence to speak up in class. With this self-confidence, I know that the risks I take are more important than what my peers think of me.

Ten years later, I still tell myself, "It's okay! Just Breathe!" but I do so with the understanding that I don't have to a hide a part of me. I know that my "secret identity" is a formative part of who I am.

**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.

**Board Games Abigail Hanna**

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

In checkers, players must strategize and plan in order to make their moves and win the game. This is what my dad taught me when we played, almost every day after school. After I learned the basics, it was up to me to figure out how to beat him. He would never let me win. Gradually, though, I got better at checkers.

My father works as a college biology professor, so when he wasn't challenging me on the checkerboard, he was always on my case about being diligent in my homework or studying for a big test. During my freshman year of high school, he re-learned everything about Biology 101 and helped me fully understand the function of mitochondria. He didn't straightforwardly tell me; he would push me to figure it out for myself—a skill that I would be thankful for during my later years of high school. When I could finally articulate what mitochondria was, I felt accomplished, in a wonderful science-nerd way. Sometimes it was annoying when my father couldn't resist an opportunity to teach me, but having an expert in my own home is—after-school challenges and all—a true gift.

Then last summer, when I stepped onto the campus of the Université Laval, I knew that a French immersion program would be amazing. I knew that I'd make friends, take part in new experiences, and explore the bustling Quebec City. My dad was the last one to hug me as I said goodbye to my family. The month away from home, with minimal cellphone contact, was going to be difficult on me without him around. During my stay at Université Laval, I began to notice that, without my father there, I was learning how to get through things on my own. Instead of calling my dad for help when one of my friends neglected our group project, I completed our sketch on my own. When a classmate needed help studying for a French quiz, I showed him some study strategies, and suddenly felt a lot like my father's daughter. Two weeks into the program, I realized that everything my dad had taught me over the years was all coming together.

My dad instilled my values, pushing me to study and commit to reaching my academic goals, but he also taught me how to anticipate almost everything else. My confidence has improved my relationship with my dad, an unexpected benefit of leaving home. Now our conversations over checkers are different, less instructional sessions and more like talks between two equals. My father still doesn't let me win without a fight, but I win more than I did before.