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**Sample essays 2017**

**University of Southern California**

# Nothing Matters Molly Maldonado

## Describe a book, play, composition, poem, scientific discovery, technical achievement, myth, historic event or work of art that has inspired and intrigued you. You can assume we are familiar with the plot and details; instead, tell us what it means for you personally.

I went home the other night, my mind full of ideas, words, and lines from a play.

Excitedly, I began to explain my outlook to those who would hear me. "It doesn't matter," I said with a smile on my face, "none of this matters." My audience was much less amused. Father had a frown and angry eyes to offer. My step mother wore a look of confusion. "I don't want to hear any more of this negative talk!" yelled Father. He had missed the point. Yes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Vladimir and Estragon may still be waiting for Godot, but none of this matters. And while many are whining about how hopeless things sound, I am smiling, because I see the faint light on the horizon.

It is impossible to deny the negative views in both Waiting for Godot and Rosencrants and Guildenstern are Dead. "Let's hang ourselves immediately!" offers Estragon only 12 pages into the story. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem similarly frustrated with life. Grim messeges are laced amidst the recounting of Bible stories and flipping coins. There is no happiness in giving "birth astride a grave," no hope in words of "intensity which squeezes out life." There is certainly a hopelessness to these plays.

"Nothing matters!" scream both Stoppard and Beckett, and though these words can depress us, a promise of possibility may also be found.

Both plays are about the lives of men. These are men working, living, and trying just as all other men. Pozzo of Waiting for Godot mourns that "the light gleams an instant," and though our lives may be only that, an instant, is it not better than nothing? If it is true that nothing matters, than what does change matter? What does risk matter?

There is a certain freedom offered in this concept. Yes, we may only live a short while, but we still have life, and choices. We can choose to live alone in anticipation of hurt, or choose to fill our lives with friends, lovers, and family. We can choose to wait for our own version of Godot, or to take matters into our own hands. We can carry our letters of execution to the king, or we can throw them to the wind, and that is what freedom and life are about. There is no need to consult the sky or Godot's messenger. The position of the sun and the wishes of Godot do not matter. Nothing matters.

Failure can no longer be feared. Nothing matters, so enjoy the moment. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go knowingly to England and their death, but that does not mean that I must. Vladamir and Estragon wait, and I can do the same, or I can search for my own dreams and happiness. My father can sit and worry away his years on important issues. My step mother can budget her life, but I've found hope. If death is near us all, what is to stop me from living? Maybe my fate will be that of Icarus, but it doesn't matter. I choose not to wait. I choose not to walk defeatedly towards death. I will instead take a chance, and if, mid-flight, I fall, at least I flew.

# The Importance of Pizza Sarah Takimoto

## In 1972 meteorologist Edward Lorenz theorized that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil could cause a tornado in Texas. What small action had a larger impact than you expected? How were you affected by the consequences?

One late Saturday afternoon, my friend Amelia and I were completely ravenous so I decided to order a pizza, not realizing how significantly that one pie could change not only the course of my day, but also my outlook on life. After shamelessly devouring the pizza to a point beyond satiation, we both heard and smelt my dad grilling burgers, cutting tomatoes and lettuce, and baking French fries. Normally this situation would have created a sort of excitement among us, but instead only made us a little less than enthused. Though at that point, it was too late to tell him that we had already eaten and regrettably could not eat his well-prepared meal. Instead we filled up our plates and told my parents that we wanted to eat outside. Trying not to look too much at the food, we contemplated on a plan to somehow get rid of all of the food without wasting it. After initially supposing we could let the dogs have a go at it, we decided to give it instead to someone who needed it a little more than two overweight dogs; the homeless. At this point we fell upon a slight predicament as to where and whom we could donate this warm meal. Living in the Denver metropolitan area, we were bound to find someone in need along the busy streets of downtown Denver. As with many other things, this was easier said than done. With one way streets, five street intersections, and enraged drivers, handing out the food took a lot more effort than I had previously imagined. After spotting a homeless man with his dog, I instantly felt he was a more than worthy contender. After handing him the meal, we drove away watching in the rear-view mirror as he blissfully took a bite of the hamburger while feeding some fries to his dog. About a half hour and several u-turns later, we handed off the second meal to a homeless man who wasn't much older than us, most likely only in his early twenties. To my surprise, as I watched the man in the car mirrors as we drove away, I became overwhelmed with both joy and commiseration as I watched him delve into the sandwich as he had most probably not eaten for days. I was simply astounded by how such a seemingly small action had created such a large impact not only for the two homeless men, but also for me. It nearly made me feel ashamed for all the times I had eaten a meal with my family and not been more grateful that I didn't have to worry about when the next time I would be able to eat would be. For following holiday seasons, I convinced my friends to help make twenty lunches that we could take and hand out all over Denver and show how such a little can go such a long way, all starting from that one pizza pie.

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# The Fall of Icarus and the Rise of Spirit Silvia Lu

## Describe a book, play, composition, poem, scientific discovery, technical achievement, myth, historic event or work of art that has inspired and intrigued you. You can assume we are familiar with the plot and details; instead, tell us what it means for you personally.

A single pair of legs, kicking up from the ocean. Kicking up from the far right corner of a pleasant landscape depicting what may be the most tranquil morning in the history of pleasant landscapes. And there, the legs - added as almost an afterthought to the scheme of things - a splash unnoticed by the shepherd and his roly poly sheep or the farmer making even rows in the field.

In Pieter Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" I find a strange sort of inspiration and motivation; a call to action and compassion - ironically from a painting that could stand as the greatest conception of indifference in the history of art. I remember the first viewing; a sweeping glance that yielded only a mild reaction towards yet another typical renaissance painting. Then, a halfhearted examination of the title. Searching, searching for Icarus - and then finding him. Once mirth at the clever placement passed, I was filled with an unsettling feeling. Something, something about the painting was bothersome and continued to be so long after the slides had been put away.

Then, it hit me. A young boy, a boy who had flown with the birds and nearly touched Apollo's chariot, had fallen. A young boy had just plummeted to his death. He must have cried out before slicing into the dark waters and that splash must have been audible to every figure in the painting - and yet how everything turns away.

An accurate judgment on the nature of society centuries ago, the message is still applicable yet. The tragedies of others are nothing more than background noise for our daily lives - and we have willed it so. We advert our gaze from the ringing bells of the Salvation Army outside the store we enter for the purpose of buying goods that cater to more a want than a need. We change the channel on World Vision and Feed the Children programs, choosing glamorized sitcoms over the imploring eyes of a starving child. We avoid the evening news because "it's just too depressing," or worse yet, because we just don't care. We have taken to putting on an armor of apathy everyday to shield us from anything that might deter from our paths of self interest.

This is the reality.

This, I reject.

I refuse to accept apathy as protection from emotional disturbance. To me, the painting suggested the demon I have sought to banish with everything that I do. I teach to see my students excited to be playing Scrabble - not even realizing they are learning. The Junior State of America is founded on the assumption that there are adolescents who question the established and who seek to voice their opinion. Theater is all tears and screams and laughing and everything to every extreme. Yearbook documents a year with the mindset that the memories created do matter. Because everything does. I seek not to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders - one would collapse. But, I do seek to understand and to inspire. I have found my purpose in caring, in wanting to care. For so long my greatest fear was simply that nobody else would. That one day, I would awaken to find that like the painting, everyone had turned away.

After all, worse than hate or disdain is indifference. Our ability to feel is what makes us human. We are weak, we are vulnerable. We are supposed to be affected by pain - that is how we are made. So often now we allow machines and technology to dictate our schedules and thoughts, lending a sterile efficiency that has turned us into productive automatons. By allowing our minds to deny what our hearts recognize as truth is the mark not of progression, but regression. We are only able to maintain that facade of indifference so people look. My art, my voice, my words can tell the world, it is about one person. It is about every person. I can make them care.

# Statement of Purpose Anonymous

## Statement of purpose. Statement should be a two-page overview of the applicant's academic and professional goals, stating previous experience and describing preparation for and commitment to further study.

In fourth grade, after recovering from a brief "I want to be a waitress!" phase, I discovered art, and knew that one day I would become an artist. At that age, I knew people liked art and I had fun creating art, so it seemed like the perfect thing to pursue. Since the fourth grade, art has become a much more intimate and sacred pastime for me. Art is a wonderful form of personal expression, and I enjoy using it to communicate ideas and to create aesthetic experiences.

For over six years I have taken private lessons at an art studio in my community. I enjoy working on large projects with supplies such as oil paints that I don't have access to at my high school. My instructor is a professional artist, and has been a valuable resource for advice concerning my artwork and plans for my future. In high school, I took Studio Art I during sophomore year and was advanced to Studio Art III during my junior year. In addition, I also took photojournalism and learned basic photography and darkroom skills, which I often incorporate into my artwork.

This year, I am enrolled in AP 2-D Design and am enjoying building up my portfolio. In my portfolio work, I am concentrating on the marriage of technological advancement and growing isolationism in current society, a subject I feel very strongly about. I enjoy that my advanced art teacher encourages experimentation, giving students the opportunity to create their own project ideas as long as they promote artistic advancement. In addition, I am also currently enrolled in Web Design in hopes of learning PhotoShop and publishing skills, which I anticipate using in future work.

Furthermore, I am president of my school's book club and historian of the National Art Honor Society. I am also the entertainment cartoonist for our school newspaper, and am in the middle of my first year as a staff member for our school yearbook, The Maverick. In addition to reporting and editing work, I have been asked to provide the photography for the book's end sheets and theme pages that will convey the concept of defying limits, our yearbook theme. I have enjoyed becoming more involved in my school since joining the yearbook staff and am very enthusiastic about our forthcoming book. In my spare time, after meeting all my art, yearbook and newspaper deadlines, I enjoy working in the darkroom, sewing, or trying out miscellaneous crafts. Most recently I've developed a taste for screen-printing and collage.

I love creating art, and hope that by participating in these varied artistic activities I will be well prepared for a career as an artist, either as an illustrator, graphic designer or combination of the two. I hope to create unique artwork with a focus on the elements of design and would enjoy designing artwork for posters, book covers, web pages, product packaging or other communication-based areas in which talented artists are needed. I look forward to continuing to hone my skills and broaden my artistic horizons in college, the next step on my way to reaching my career goals.

# I'm No Buffy the Vampire Slayer Arielle Ring

## Personal Statement

A few years ago, USA Today named the star of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer", Sarah Michelle Gellar, the epitome of the modern feminist. Declaring "with her take-no-prisoners attitude...vampire-slaying Buffy Summers has become... a feminist hero who's smart, tough and self-reliant," the beautiful blonde was apotheosized by younger girls. When asked about feminism, she explained, "Feminism sort of has a negative connotation. It makes you think of women that don't shave their legs." Does Gellar consider herself a feminist? "I hate the word," she replied. Why is the public so uncomfortable with the word "feminism?" Society implores women to strive to be smart and strong, but to be too smart or too strong is discouraged. Instead, too many settle for being a "Buffy," a female with incredible potential kept in check by contemporary culture's definition of "woman."

Last year, one of my teachers cracked a sexist joke and I commented that I found it inappropriate. He informed me the class was "mature enough" for such content. After class ended, a male student rudely inquired, "Are you a feminist?" as if it were a disease. I immediately reverted to a defensive mode, feeling the burden to justify not only my opinions, but also the entire platform of feminism; for a moment, like Gellar, I did not want to associate myself with a term so disgraceful. Looking back on the incident, I wish I would have had the courage I now possess to defend my beliefs. I am willing to take the risk of standing up against a popular opinion if I do not believe it to be right.

Perhaps I illuminate the paradox many modern women face. On one hand, I embody the prototypical, devoted female, assuaging the plight of Romanian orphans and donating countless hours to the Second Harvest Food Bank of the Inland Northwest. Numerous local and national accolades verify my role as a nurturer and "do-gooder." But when I step into a cross-examination debate round where the object is to establish your case and tear apart the opposing side, I risk being considered too assertive, too aggressive, and too competitive, while all of these traits are seen as desirable qualities in my male opponents. Sadly, many believe that to be "feminine" one must remain passive, a role I refuse to accept.

Am I a feminist? If that means I take risks to make my convictions known and strive to be smart and strong, then people can call me that if society must label me. But feminism does not define who I am, it's merely a term to describe some of my principles. I do not advocate every issue grounded in the feminist agenda. Feminism neglects my passion for competition, my desire to enact change, and my love of history. Feminism fails to capture my compelling feelings on Weapons of Mass Destruction or on the high levels of poverty in my hometown of Spokane. No one term elucidates my fear of failure, nor my aspiration to transform others through journalism. Instead, feminism is just one of the many terms I use to express myself, and to differentiate myself from Buffy.

# How I Changed Direction Anonymous

## Describe an experience that caused your life to change direction.

We were nervous. The breeze of early morning stung our bare arms with cold. I complained, out of my own bitter hatred for the cold, and in hopes of quieting the spinning butterflies in my stomach. Doubts floated through my head as I acknowledged that we were three hours from home on a side of the state we had never known. Would they ever come? Eastern Washington, vastly different from our side of the Cascades, seemed a whole new world. Katie held my arm to warm me up and, I think, comfort herself, too. It was an explosion of firsts for us: first time alone far from home, first time at Warped Tour, first time representing an animal rights organization called PETA2. We were going to run a table for PETA2 at Warped Tour and, little did I know, change our lives.

Every summer, Warped Tour returns to Washington's Gorge Arena in George, Washington, bringing more and more bands of the "I've been dying to see them!" variety each time. For years, Katie and I had excitedly highlighted the list of performers at Warped Tour, imagining who we'd see and how great it would be. At over $100 total for tickets, merchandise, food, and board, Warped Tour was much more than we could ever afford. The 100 mile distance for two non-drivers proved to be an even greater obstacle. Warped Tour, at best, was nothing more than a distant dream. It is not difficult, then, to imagine our elation when we heard that PETA2, our favorite proponent of animal rights, was giving away free entrance to all those that tabled for them. Not only could we help an organization we loved, tabling provided the perfect cover, community service, to inspire my mother to drive us the long distance. Our dream could become a reality!

We didn't have to wait long before the PETA2 staff members arrived. They were two vastly different college-age women: one girl, Jolena, tattooed and dreadlocked with numerous piercings, the other, Amanda, clean cut with eyes that radiated with perkiness. I was struck by the fact that two opposing characters could find common ground in animal rights. Their devotion to animals impressed me. Both girls had been vegan for years and spent their entire summer touring the country in promotion of their passion. Katie and I listened with eager ears as Jolena explained how she'd been vegan since she was 12 and had gotten a tattoo with the word "Vegan" to remind her of the commitment she had made. I was awed by the fierceness that came over Amanda when she remarked on the horrible abuses animals face in factory farms. After listening to the women share their reasons behind their support of PETA2, we were moved and more than ready to man the table.

Tabling was a wonderful experience. I love public speaking and tabling allowed me to speak to all sorts of people! Most people where receptive to the information we had to give out. Watching hundreds upon hundreds of people sign our petition to support an end to Wet Seal's use of rabbit fur in their clothing was incredible. With so many signatures, we knew we could make a difference. Occasionally, we met people who were sharply opposed to PETA2 and their actions. These times were amazing too. Sticking to my convictions, standing up for what I believed in despite criticism, gave me a powerful feeling like nothing else. I had decided I wanted to be a lobbyist earlier that year. The enjoyment I got from attempting to persuade average people to listen to my opinions and agree with them made me feel confident in my ability to do such things as a career.

In the end, we forgot about those highlighted lists of Warped Tour performers and only saw two of our favorite bands. Somewhere in the day, Warped Tour stopped being about getting community service hours and seeing bands. It became about learning all we could from amazing advocates for a great cause and guiding people towards seeing what we saw in animal rights. I'll admit, though I proclaimed myself an animal rights supporter before tabling for PETA2, I was still very much a carnivore. After the Warped Tour, however, my life changed directions and I became a vegetarian. I liked meat prior to Warped Tour, but after, I knew that if I truly believed all I said that day, and the days before it, I could never enjoy meat again.

Tabling taught me what devotion meant. Knowing Jolena and Amanda had stood for what they believed in across the country, and stuck to their principles no matter what, meant the world to me. I had been selfish in wanting to work with PETA2 just to get closer to my favorite bands. After tabling, I knew that if I was going to pursue anything, I couldn't do it for the superficial reasons I had earlier. When I go to USC, like Jolena and Amanda, I will be a college student selflessly devoted to my passions. After tabling for PETA2 at Warped Tour, my life changed direction and now, I feel I'm definitely going the right way.

# Unlikely Accomplishment Suzy Fahmy

## It is common knowledge that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. What most people don't know is that he tried over 6,000 times before succeeding. Reflect on an accomplishment you achieved in an unlikely way.

At School of the Arts (SOTA) in San Francisco, film and video students set out to create independent projects twice a year. In spring semester of senior year, my friend Julian and I decided we would produce a movie so incredible, it would be remembered long after the freshmen of our graduating class were gone. Inventing the concept of our movie was no problem. But making the movie we imagined meant finding the right equipment, designing costumes, and scouting locations. Sadly, our pockets were not deep enough.

On one Friday afternoon in the middle of February, our circumstances began to change. When film class ended for the day, everyone was eager to head home and enjoy the weekend. Meanwhile, the impending doldrums of an after school job provided me with an excuse to take my time. On this serendipitous occasion, I overheard another film student talking to my film professor about applying for a grant to produce her project, a concept that quickly caught my attention. On my way to work, I could not stop thinking about this amazing opportunity. Finally I came home and googled "youth funding youth ideas." I found a non-profit organization that provides funding to youth initiated projects four times a year. I had two weeks to apply. Instead of a due date, I saw pink and turquoise costumes covered in bronze and gold hues. I saw freshly cut high tops, too permanent perms and afros that would make a black panther proud. This was my chance to produce a movie that would set the school standard!

Julian and my teachers did not express the same excitement. In fact, they seemed outright doubtful. Why would an organization that usually supports programs for violence prevention and youth employment supply funding for a 15-minute student video project? I reassured Julian that we could do this. If we both brought our passions together on paper, how could anyone say no? The next day during lunch, we sat down in the library and took a good look at the application. It was long and demanding. It asked for a detailed breakdown of project steps, events, a budget narrative and an itemized budget list. They wondered how the world would benefit if we received the grant. I felt like I had an equal shot of winning the Miss America Pageant.

I kept moving forward. I filled the application and sent it the day it was due. When we dropped that envelope in the mail box I turned to Julian and said, "So do we have a plan B?" In short, the answer was no, there was no plan B. Our ability to complete our senior project fully depended on being approved for this grant. If we did not get it, then all of our planning, budgeting, casting, location scouting, and time would be wasted and we would be stuck at square one. As the deadline for SOTA film students to show their dailies approached, we still nervously anticipated a response to our application.

When I got my response, I was almost afraid to open it. With white knuckles, I ripped open the envelope. Dreams of legendary movie-making rode on this one tiny slip of paper -- and it was good news. Youth Funding Youth Ideas granted me $5,200 for my project! "Pedestrian," my short film about four young people's lives intersecting at a 1980's house party, received its green light. Sound equipment, period costumes, Madonna-worthy make-up, and even underwater housing for our fancy camera suddenly transformed from imagination to reality.

It remains to be seen whether or not our movie will stand the test of time to achieve the legendary status that my friend and I hoped for. Frankly, I want to revisit the project and make the Director's Cut Special Edition. In the end, even in the face of doubtful teachers and friends, I refused to give up the pursuit of eternal glory.

# Leave it all on the Field Anonymous

## Tell us about a talent, experience, contribution or personal quality you will bring to the University of California.

Date of birth: eleven seven eighty eight. Sex: male. Grade: eleven. Social security number: 606261790... "No, that's not right," I mumbled to myself. How could I forget my social security number? "I'm just nervous for the SAT," was my first thought. I tried to convince myself that this was true, but when I looked down at the sheet of paper, my vision blurred. My hands scrubbing my eyes, my mind flashed to the previous night. "Red sixty seven, red sixty seven - set - hit!" The ball was snapped; I trampled the blocker like a bull and sprinted towards the running back. My cleats dug into the moist grass to make the tackle and -

The next thing I remember is sitting on the sidelines with a flashlight burning my eyes. Could this be the reason why I had forgotten my social security number? At that moment, I was in a dilemma. Was the sport that I love going to harm my future?

The severity of my head injury would sideline me for at least two weeks. When I first heard this news I was stunned, because two weeks would mean missing two vital games. Yet if I returned too early, permanent brain damage could result. This changed my entire view of the injury; suddenly, the game that I lived and breathed was not as important. Was returning to football worth the risk? Focusing in class, in a conversation, or even in a movie theater had never been a struggle. But during the recovery I found my mind wandering in and out of subjects. I wanted to perform athletically and academically, but with my brain traumatized, I knew a sacrifice had to be made.

My teammates' ongoing question "When are you coming back?" haunted me daily. The idea of not "coming back" troubled me because of the amount of time, energy, and focus I had put into football throughout my life. I did not want my decision to disappoint my teammates or affect our companionship. But I was certain I wanted to prolong my education, not just my football career, after high school. By continuing the season I would run the risk of serious head trauma, which could possibly shatter personal academic and career goals. More concerned about the future, rather than the present, I made the decision not to complete the remainder of the football season. The pressure from my teammates to return to play felt like the force of a fire hose, but I was able to endure it and stick to my decision. As I saw my teammates suited up at the next game, I felt uncomfortable on the sidelines in my incongruous blue jeans and sweatshirt. But I needed to rise above the feeling of regret and focus on the positive aspects of my decision.

Instead of putting my body through merciless practices, it was time for my brain to do the work. My lack of concentration forced me to take fifteen minute breaks after every half hour of homework. The transition from breezing through my homework to taking over twice the time was demanding. Slowly but steadily, I worked my mind back to where it was before the injury. This significant event was a vital learning experience for me on how to cope with sacrifice and loss. Making that tough decision alone strengthened my character and made me realize just how tough I can be - and not just on the field.

# Nikki in the Bubble Anonymous

## Talk about the meaning of any photograph.

As I watched my first black and white print slowly emerge from nothingness, the methodical ticking of the timer behind me, I smiled as a wave of excitement passed through me. Without thinking, I began to dance to the rhythm of the clock. From the moment I developed my first print, I have been captivated by photography: the smell of darkroom chemicals, the feel of a slippery print between my fingertips, and the way that the safelight makes everything look black and white, transporting me back in time to an old movie. After two years and hundreds of prints, I still do a little dance every time I watch a print materialize in the developer.

For me, manipulative photography is a unique and effective means of communication, a way to express my ideas and opinions about the world. I use "trick" photography techniques - including double-printing, superimposing negatives, dodging, and burning - as tools with which to transform my intangible ideas into concrete images. I approach my photography by first deciding upon a thought or feeling I want to express, or a statement that I want to make. I visualize the final picture, and work backwards to figure out how to create it.

I chose this picture of my six-year-old sister, Nikki, for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how much time and energy I devote to photography. More significantly, it exemplifies how I use photography to express abstract concepts visually. With this photograph, I am conveying my thoughts and feelings about the changing nature of growing up. Like most kids, I hear stories from my parents about the "good old days," where life was easy and kids were carefree. When I compare these stories to my life and other teenagers around me, it seems that we are growing up and maturing much faster. I see this already in my sister, who is only six. Living in a house with two teenage brothers, she has already started to move away from childhood. But she seems conflicted about this, desperately trying to balance her desire to be more "grown up" with a competing desire to retain her childlike nature. I, too, have a cautionary voice inside of my head. It reminds me, as I take on more and more academic and community responsibilities, to keep things in perspective, to remember to have fun, and to enjoy the lighter side of life.

It is this tension, this balance between maturity and childhood, seriousness and fun, that I was trying to capture with this photograph. I had a vision of my sister, Nikki, blowing bubbles, with an image of herself inside one of the rising bubbles. As she blows the bubbles upwards, symbolically pushing herself away from childhood into a more adult world, another part of her is reluctant to grow up. The juxtaposition of her concerned expression as she blows bubbles with her look of anxiety as she attempts to break out of the rising bubble serves to suggest this inner struggle. The image of her trapped in the bubble, frantically trying to escape, symbolizes the subconscious voice inside her head urging her not to grow up too fast, not to give up her innocent, playful side.

The technical process of transforming this idea into an actual photograph was a real challenge. I needed a picture of my sister blowing the perfect-sized bubble in a very specific position, with a facial expression that would indicate a feeling of angst and uncertainty. Not surprisingly, given that she is only six years old, it took almost a hundred pictures and the promise of chocolate chip cookies to get it just right. I also needed an image of Nikki crouching down, pretending to be stuck inside of a bubble, this time with an expression of panic. Another twenty-five pictures; more cookies. I then had to figure out how to print the two negatives taken under different lighting conditions on the same piece of paper, sized and aligned correctly, without losing print quality. I spent days attempting to create on paper exactly what was in my head. I made over thirty prints, but not one was quite right.

One Friday, after basketball practice, I asked my photography teacher for the darkroom key. After experimenting with a few new techniques and creating ten or so more failed prints, I still could not get it right. With the school now closed and all of the students and teachers gone, I decided that I would not leave the darkroom until I had perfected the photograph. On the twenty-first try, I slipped the still blank paper into the developer with anticipation and turned the timer to two minutes. As the rhythmic ticking of the clock echoed like a drum through the vast emptiness of the deserted school, I, alone in the darkroom, watched as the exact vision inside my head materialized on the paper. With a smile of relief and a sigh of accomplishment, I began my dance.

# My Place in My World Anonymous

## How do you interact with your immediate world?

In a school as small as The College Preparatory School (CPS), I often joke that just from looking at someone's shoes, I can give his or her first and last name and favorite color. Obviously this is an overstatement, but the point is that my "world" is relatively small. I chose to go to CPS because I was hoping for a feeling of kinship and intimacy, a comfortable and open environment.

However, I quickly noticed that students had formed small social groups that did not interact with one another. The class felt divided, lacking the sense of community I was seeking. Worse, I found myself caught up in this mentality, a part of one of these small groups. I realized that I was adding to the social separation that had occurred. Disappointed with myself and determined to change the way I interacted with my classmates, I made a conscious decision to reach out to a wider group of people, to "become the change I wanted to see in my world."

Knowing that I couldn't change the class dynamic overnight, I decided to start small. About halfway through my freshman year, I organized a bowling party, hoping that it would be an opportunity for different groups of students in my class to interact with one another. I made fliers, organized carpools, and rented out part of the bowling alley. Almost three-quarters of the class came and bonded in a comfortable setting entirely unrelated to school. Though it was only a single event, I believe that it began the process of knocking down the barriers that developed during the first few months of school.

Building on the success of this bowling party, during my sophomore year, I enlisted a friend to help me create and organize a bowling class during "Intraterm," a week where the school offers a variety of non-academic classes. For months, we did fund-raising and financial planning so that we could hire a personal bowling instructor, rent the bowling alley for a week, and even buy two customized bowling balls for the winner of a tournament we set up. It was, for both of us, a rewarding accomplishment to set up one of the few completely student-run Intraterm classes. The true reward, though, was seeing how the class had brought together a variety of students. Everybody in the class - freshman, seniors, girls, boys, good bowlers and bad - left the week feeling as if we were all one big bowling family. By the end of the week, I realized that though it was rewarding to bowl a "turkey" (three strikes in a row), it was even more satisfying to watch the people in the class who had never bowled before getting lessons from those who had, and seeing their smiles as they got their first strikes.

Later that year I began to wonder if ping-pong could bring our school together like bowling had. I ran the idea past the Dean of Students, presented it to student council, and asked for funding for a ping-pong table. After almost a month of debate, the idea was approved and I bought the table. Within the first week, I set up a tournament, organizing the brackets so that athletes would have to set up tournament games with math whizzes, teachers with students, freshman with seniors. To my satisfaction, students not only connected to play their games, but also began to extend these new friendships beyond ping-pong. The table and tournaments had brought together students and faculty in a comfortable arena entirely unrelated to academics or the pre-existing groups.

Seeing how much impact these small projects had on the overall sense of community, I thought that I could accomplish even more by expanding my involvement in student government. Having been a freshman and sophomore class representative, this year I ran for student body president. My platform was to dedicate the student council to building a better community atmosphere, and to making life at CPS more enjoyable. I have since used my position as president to implement more substantial ideas aimed to accomplish these goals. The student council has improved CPS through a wide range of school-wide events and projects. For example, we organized a spirit rally; we have "Music and Food Days" at least once every week, where all students can eat lunch together and listen to music; and we are in the process of organizing an outside-of-school event where all students will be encouraged to go bowling or miniature-golfing, or watch a movie in a rented-out theater. Though we have not eliminated all of the cliques, from what I see, students are beginning to feel less like a high school and more like a family, and less like a high school.

Over the past four years, CPS has reinforced in me the value of a close community environment. The feeling of comfort I get from such an environment not only enhances my ability to thrive in a classroom setting, but also adds to the quality of my daily life. So even at a college where I can't know everyone's favorite color just from looking at their shoes, I know that I will continue to do my part to help create a strong community, whether it be in a dorm, on a sports team, or even in the class as a whole.

# Passion Anonymous

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

I would have never expected my life to change dramatically after a trip to the men’s room. However, on June 20, 2007, one did. I overheard a conversation that changed my point of view on nearly everything. “He didn’t even make it to Extemp Semifinals. Frankly I knew he wasn’t really that great of a speaker,” said the first young competitor. “Well, he may do okay in Impromptu,” replied the second one. “Only if the competition is mediocre,” said the first speaker as he was washing his hands. Then they both belted out a haughty laugh sending chills deep into my spine. I, Andrew Hosea, was eliminated from Extemp at Octafinals and would soon compete in another category, Impromptu. Feeling demoralized and downtrodden, I wondered how I would regroup for my upcoming Impromptu rounds at the national convention the following week.

Often, people change when they least expect it. Here I was a two-time national qualifier, the top speaker at my school, arguably one of the top speakers in town and I had been feeling like I was on top of the world. Initially, I felt much pride for my accomplishments. However, upon leaving that somewhat moldy and musty high school bathroom, I saw my self-esteem and confidence evaporate before my eyes quicker than water in the Mojave Desert. Following that experience, existential thoughts began to cloud my mind. Was I really good enough? How could two people talk so callously about achievements that I strived for and often dreamed of obtaining? My confidence was on a roller coaster, and I began to doubt myself in other endeavors as well. I wondered how I could be successful, which led me to the even deeper question of what being successful really meant.

Oddly enough, on another trip to the bathroom (this time on my own turf) which lately had seemed to become an unusual place of reflection and understanding, I reached a climax in this life changing event. I realized that success and accomplishment are ambiguous. As the old cliché goes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. After reading countless success stories of people that achieved momentous triumphs in many unique and individual ways, I realized there is no standard definition of success. Lately it had been a monstrous creation contrived in my mind. Each and every person has his or her own love and passion, meaning that each person has his or her own distinct way and opportunity to be successful. I realized that I am what I love. I am my passions. As Benjamin Disraeli eloquently said, “Man is only truly great when he acts from the passions.” With this insight and newfound confidence, I walked with my head held higher than ever before.

I am civic minded; I love my involvement in speech, debate, politics, history, scouting and anything else that relates to public policy and social issues. I now know that as long as I am adamant in my pursuits, I will succeed. Only when I let myself become free the from the competitive winner-take-all societal attitude could I realize my full potential and allocate my energy where it really belonged. It takes such knowledge to stand firm in the face of doubt and uncertainty. It takes this wisdom and commitment to stand back up, give it my all, and take eighth at a national championship tournament. But nonetheless, I learned it is not what rank I hold, what title is mine, or any other attempt to quantify human accomplishment; it is what I love that truly matters. I love the social sciences and I know one day I will use this passion to make a positive impact on society long after my days participating in national high school competitions.

# Where Was I? Sheliza Kabani

## Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction.

The day: December 27th, 2007. The time: 6:45 PM. The location: Karachi, Pakistan. There was nothing out of the ordinary on this crisp December day, or so I thought. I did not know that this ordinary day would soon become one of the most important days in the history of not only Pakistan, but also the rest of the world. My family and I were visiting my cousins in Pakistan for winter break. We didn’t usually go out to dinner on weekdays, but because my cousin had just won a special award, we all decided to go out that night. The restaurant was located about five minutes from my uncle’s house, so it was a fairly short drive. We left the house around 6:30, and ordered our food at 6:42. During the wait, I thought briefly about how the lights had been going out at my cousins' house for the last couple of days, and how the restaurant would be thrown into a state of panic were such a thing to happen here. However, I knew that the restaurant used an electric generator, and I quickly dismissed the thought. About a minute later, the lights started flickering, and I heard three sounds that resembled gun shots. I didn’t think much of it - my first thought was that it was a couple of kids playing with fireworks. Soon after, all the lights shut off and people started whispering and screaming. I didn’t know what was going on, but then my grandmother told us that Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, had been assassinated. Just as I had predicted, everyone began panicking and running out of the restaurant. My family of nine gathered together, aware that we had to get back home as soon as possible. The assassination of Ms. Bhutto was an enormous shock to the country, and some people were rebelling by detonating bombs and initiating other violent acts.

Characters on TV are constantly being thrown into life-threatening situations in which they have to act quickly and make difficult choices. I always thought that if placed in such a situation I would save everyone before myself, but I was never sure of what choices I would make. No one can predict their behavior in a crisis, but I am glad that when the time came I made the right choice and ensured that each member of my family was safe and calm before considering my own well-being. We quickly went outside, and my uncle and cousin went to get their cars while the rest of us waited. I held onto my grandmother’s hand to make sure she stayed with us. When my cousin arfived with his car, six of us squeezed in. Luckily, the drive was short, and my cousin was able to take alleys, avoiding the main roads where the trouble had surely begun. Once we got home, my grandfather ran to turn the news on. Every single channel was talking about how someone had managed to kill Benazir Bhutto while she was campaigning for the upcoming elections in Pakistan. It was said that someone had shot her in the head and the chest, and had detonated a bomb right next to her car.

I was shocked, dumbfounded, and panicked all at once. I was particularly struck by the fact that my dad had been at a business conference in a city close to where the assassination took place. I could not believe that people were behaving like criminals at a time like this. Videos were being shown of people destroying random cars on the street with hockey sticks and stones, and then stealing from the cars; it was total chaos outside. It was announced that all the shops, businesses and marketplaces were going to be closed for the next three days in mourning. I was not only worried for the safety of my family in Karachi, but also for my dad in Lahore. We began getting calls from friends and relatives in the US and Canada, checking on us to make sure we were all safe. For the next three days, we were basically under house arrest; we couldn’t even leave to get food and supplies. My dad called to let us know that he was okay, but that he was planning to reschedule his flight for three days later, when it would be safer to move about.

Never before had I read so much and seen so many videos on the internet all regarding the same subject. Later on, we learned that Benazir didn’t die from bullet wounds; she was trying to duck from the gunshots, hit her head on the sunroof of her car, and ultimately died from a brain injury. All of these facts were circling my brain, and I didn't know what to do with them. When this incident happened, I realized the brevity of life, and how it can be taken away in mere seconds. Mrs. Bhutto did not know that she would die that day; her family did not know that they would lose a mother and a wife; the people of Pakistan did not know that they would lose a leader. From this experience, I learned to always act cautiously and make sure I have no regrets.

When Benazir Bhutto died, I realized that even though I am only in my first year of college, there is so much I can still do to help myself, and others, as well. The University of Southern California is full of people who know where they want to be and how much work they have to put in to get there. Previously, I didn’t know what I needed to do to prepare myself for my work as a biochemist. However, I have been through an ordeal that has taught me so much about life, and about what I need to do to accomplish my goals. More than ever, I am determined to get where I want to be, and nothing is going to stop me. I now understand the brevity of life and that I may not have all the time I thought I would have to accomplish my goals. Few people learn this lesson over the course of their lifetimes, and I have learned this in only seventeen years of existence. I can be a great asset to the University of Southern California because I belong there, and because I know that I will push myself to prove this. In today's age, personal initiative is a far better indicator of success than inherited privilege. Life is a blank slate, and it is within our power to write the story of our lives.

I am not going to brag about my college grades, my activities or my community service, because that is not differentiable in people. I am not trying to prove that I am better than every single candidate, but I know that the University of Southern California needs someone like me. One thing I can definitely ensure is that no other candidate has been through this kind of experience. People talk about the Reagan or Kennedy assassination and ask where people were and what they were doing when these important political personalities were killed. Where was I when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated? I was there, in Pakistan, experiencing everything alongside my fellow citizens. And although those were the scariest days of my life, they taught me a great deal about myself and my future. There is no better teacher than experience, and for this subject I had the best teacher in the world.

# Life as a Scribe Anthony Mells

## Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

As I rushed up to the sliding glass doors that marked the entrance to the Emergency Room, my heart pounded with exhilaration. Patients were sitting in chairs, lying on stretchers, and nervously pacing the floor. With a dry mouth and sweaty palms, I entered, peering into each room and observing the ill patients who lined the halls. This trip to the ER was a life-changing experience for me. However, I was not in the ER for a personal emergency; I was there to begin my first shift as an ER Scribe.

My job as a scribe requires me to shadow an ER physician and create a medical record of each patient’s visit to the Emergency Room. Utilizing a wireless Tablet PC that is integrated into the hospital-wide database, my duties are much larger than simply jotting down notes. I interpret the medical history, record the physical exam, and document medications, x-rays, and CT scans. The complex and fast-paced environment of the ER requires that I be familiar with medical terminology, comfortable with mature situations, and able to effectively communicate with multiple types of healthcare professionals.

I knew this would be difficult. I am the youngest employee in the company, and all of my coworkers are already in college or beyond. Before I began my first shift, I had trained for hours in the computer classroom, ears pricked to the faint sounds of the activity in the ER one floor above me. When the day arrived, I thought I was fully equipped with all of the necessary tools; however, I was not nearly prepared for the reality of the ER.

The greatest challenge I faced was the effect that human suffering would have on me. On that first day in the ER I was confronted with a young woman, just a few months older than I, whose self-inflicted wounds were clearly visible through the bloodstained gauze on her wrist. Her troubled past, filled with drug addiction, parental suicide, and teen pregnancy, had provoked her to commit this act. Her misfortunes haunted me for days, as I realized she could easily have been one of my classmates. The connection created by our proximity in age afforded me a rare, intimate look into a vulnerable life.

Later in my shift, I was called to the bedside of a man in his fifties who was undergoing CPR. The physician confidently administered a single electric shock, and the patient was revived. I looked over at the family, whose tears were replaced by an expression of hope as the heart monitor began to register renewed electrical activity. With the building emotion in the room, I thought to myself, “His family will now enjoy his company for another day.” I had never considered what it would feel like to see a human being rescued from the grip of death. This man was a stranger to me, but in a small way I was now a part of his life.

Standing in that room, I realized the importance of what we do in the ER. I pondered the difference between working at a coffee shop and working in the hospital. If one was to mistakenly put the wrong mocha in a frappuccino, the result might be an unhappy customer. However, if I mistakenly enter the wrong medications into the ER chart, we might have a dead customer. Mistakes are not an option.

Reflecting upon my experiences as a scribe over the past several months, I have realized that the world’s challenges are much bigger than a SAT test, an English essay, or a Calculus quiz. How I approach my future will be forever impacted by the maturity I have gained by working in the ER.

As I drove home after a recent shift, I considered the significance of health, and the impact of illness on people’s lives. When I arrived home, I gave my mom and dad a hug, affectionately patted my younger brother on the head, and went to my room to do my homework. I neatly laid my uniform over the back of my chair, and I gazed at the company logo on my shirt.

I felt like I could take on the world.

# The Science of Skimboarding Anthony Mells

## Tell us about an activity that is important to you, and why.

As I stood on the wet beach assessing the oncoming wave, I threw the skimboard onto the sand, and jumped on. “How could I generate more speed?” I thought to myself. Calling upon inspiration from Mr. Harvie, my AP Physics teacher, I envisioned a homemade tow-rope that would allow for a skimmer to gain more momentum by being pulled down the beach by two runners. The ‘Y’ design of my new invention allowed for nearly all of the wasted horizontal vector to be eliminated, as both runners could run as close together as possible in order to maximize the forward force. As we experimented with the prototype, we enjoyed being whipped around into the wave to catch maximum air. I began to address the need for more acceleration during the ‘whip’ as I applied the law of circular motion, which states that circular acceleration is inversely proportional to the radius, or length of the rope. Therefore, a shorter rope would generate the greatest degree of acceleration while launching into the wave. As I sat in the sun working with the rope, pondering mixed vectors, tension forces, and circular acceleration, I knew Mr. Harvie would be pleased. I have continued my quest for improvements to this device and other ways to generate more thrill. I have uploaded videos of this sport to YouTube, asked peers and teachers for suggestions, and even considered applying for a patent for this original invention. However, more important than my future with this simple rope is the fact that applied science has taken on a new meaning in my life. Realizing my potential for originality with the creation of “Tow-In Skimboarding,” I have begun to dream of future innovations that have yet to be unleashed by my growing mind.

# BANG! BANG! BANG! Anthony Mells

## The 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot said, “Only passions, great passions can elevate the soul to great things.” Describe one of your passions and reflect on how it has contributed to your personal growth.

"BANG! BANG! BANG!" I slam the gavel on the desk to get everyone's attention. As I sit in front of the High School Site Council, full of administrators, teachers, students, and members of the community, I call the meeting to order. Serving as the President of the Torrey Pines Site Council is just one of my many leadership tasks. At the conclusion of the meeting, I rush over to the tennis courts, where I, as the Varsity Team Captain, hold a preseason practice. The next day at the football game, I don the heavy, plastic and feathered suit that transforms me into Freddy the Falcon, the spirited school mascot. Concurrently, I am on the phone calling various venues for the senior prom I am organizing. Taking on all of these responsibilities has been a challenge; however, it is a challenge I am devoted to, and because of it, I am not just a student at my school, I am an integral part of my school.

Ever since the fourth grade, when I first ran for office in the Student Council, I have been leading my classmates. I look back to those years, remembering the nervous excitement I felt when I explained to my classmates why I was the best candidate. I also recall my feelings of pride and exhilaration as I stood on the school stage in front of hundreds of people and became the emcee for the annual school talent show. On that very stage, my passion for leadership was born. In middle school, I continued my work in student government. I was involved with numerous fundraisers and dances, and was appointed to the desirable position of lunchtime DJ. I accepted all of these responsibilities because it was fun to be in charge, work with others, and make a positive contribution to my school. I never realized the skills that I was developing, and how they would contribute to my future achievements.

I have always pushed myself toward academic excellence; however, upon entering high school, I decided I wanted more out of this once in a lifetime, four-year experience. For example, when I proudly transform into Freddy the Falcon, I attempt to instill my school spirit into the rest of the student body. Despite the costume’s thirty-pound weight and the sauna-like temperatures inside, I leap wildly and flap my cardinal and gold wings in a victory dance. Just as I embraced my roles as the grade school emcee and the middle school DJ, being a high school mascot is a labor of love. As the Chinese scholar Confucius once said, “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.”

I have come to realize that leadership is not just an office held or an event organized; it is an advantage that helps me excel in many aspects of my life. For the past three summers, I have been an assistant instructor for the Solana Beach Junior Lifeguard Program. My official duties have been to supervise and ensure the safety of a group of children at the beach. However, my leadership experience has guided me toward a larger role. I soon began organizing the group games, leading the drills, and mentoring the children in this program. I fondly recall the day when ten-year-old Brian approached me on the beach and stated, “Someday I want to be just like you AJ!” Since then, I have realized that I am more than an Assistant to these junior guards; I am a positive role model and a contributor to their growth and development.

Leadership is my passion. Whether the future takes me into medicine, research, education, or The Oval Office, my role in society is as a leader—that is who I am in high school, strive to be in college, and plan to be for the rest of my life.

# Debate Struggle Gokul Agrawal

## Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction.

It was a less-than-exciting afternoon in the waning days of junior year when the mess began. My name, along with the names of two other speech and debate officers, was called over the intercom. We were wanted in the principal's office immediately. As the policy captain of our speech and debate team, I was confused as to the reason, but nevertheless entered Principal Kew's sparsely decorated office and took a seat. The reason for the meeting was soon apparent: the administration had learned our plans to establish a speech and debate camp that upcoming summer and considered it a liability hazard to the school. Therefore, the club would be suspended for the following year, with all club assets frozen. I balked. What liability? The summer debate camp, although independent and entirely student-run in actuality, might be seen as affiliated with the school because of its name. My fellow officers and I had spent months organizing this camp, hiring instructors, finding a suitable location, advertising to dozens of schools, and filling out paperwork. Principal Kew, however, seemed to think that these accomplishments were dispensable, and thus decided to wash them away in the span of an hour. We tried to reason with him: couldn't we just shut down the camp and continue the club? No, the club had inadequately completed some newly required forms, and had also taken some shortcuts by not asking permission for fundraisers. Principal Kew remarked that he hoped a one-year suspension would teach the club to follow the rules.

Unfortunately for Principal Kew, he had chosen to start an argument with a group of students who argued their way into the league championships. Despite my approaching AP exams, school responsibilities, and obligations to the golf team, I came back week after week to meet with him to explore alternative options. A suspension of the club would have devastating consequences for the debate careers of over a hundred debaters. I also felt a tinge of remorse as I selfishly thought of my own debate career and how much I would miss the national tournaments that had formed such a significant part of my life for the past three years. For the first time, I was not only directly confronting school officials, but I was actually fighting for a cause which directly impacted my life and the lives of my peers. Each meeting proved frustrating, however, as the principal always found some form we had not turned in or some deadline we had not met. A few weeks later it seemed as if my options had run out.

However, experience as debate captain and participation in school activities, has taught me that even the most bureaucratic obstacles can be overcome with persistence. After two weeks of pondering over the possible paths the officers and I could take, we decided to present to the administration with a solution: we would have students compete at tournaments as independent debaters officially unaffiliated with our school. I presented the speech I had prepared requesting the principal's approval of my solution, and for the first time since the beginning of this dispute, I sensed a willingness to compromise from Principal Kew. After extensive assurance that I would keep the administration informed of all further proceedings, the principal agreed to my terms. This outcome was far less satisfactory than my initial hope for a functional club funded by a summer camp, but my primary goal of giving students the opportunity to debate had been accomplished. Although we would just be a dedicated group of students rather than an actual club, my efforts had paid off.

In fighting, reasoning, and eventually, compromising with Principal Kew, I have learned that even the most formidable of obstacles can be overcome with calmness and determination. Even now, I have a long journey ahead of me to find a means of acquiring funds to pay for tournaments without school funding, but my refusal to give up thus far allows me to remain optimistic.

# Mother's story Anonymous

## Describe the world you come from — for example, your family, community or school — and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

People often tell me how much I look like my grandmother. They say we share the same eyes, the same nose, and the same eager smile. What they don’t realize, however, is that the five-foot, white-haired, 61-year-old woman beside me is not my grandmother, but my mother. My mother’s frail exterior belies a rambunctious dreamer with an enduring passion for life. My mother is the type of woman who can unseal a tightly-closed jar, carry a sixty-pound rice sack on her shoulders, and sprint up several flights of stairs. Her jokes are sometimes fractured by the uncontrollable laughter that engulfs her words. My mother is a woman with a capacity to love everyone, one who has shaped my life by giving me the example of her own.

Perhaps my mother’s seeming frailty stems from the many reasons she might have to be disappointed with the circumstances of her life. Many years ago, she had to give up her dream of becoming a nurse to take care of her dying father. She worked tirelessly for twenty years at a jewelry store in order to make sure that her children would have opportunities that she never had, and instead of studying new medicines and treatments, she spent her time stringing pearls and fixing watches. I have watched several times as my mother, believing to be alone, cracked open my chemistry book to gaze at the diagrams and charts with a certain longing in her eyes. Moments like these remind me how lucky I am to have such a mother, who was willing to postpone her own dreams so that I might find mine.

Perhaps hope is on the horizon now, with my mother’s enrollment in Pasadena City College and her newfound determination to chase down her old dream of becoming a nurse. While she understands that finding a job at her age might be difficult, she is unfailingly optimistic, and ignores the friends who drone that it’s time for her to retire. My mother recognizes that going back to school is a difficult undertaking, yet she has never been one to shirk from a challenge. She turns in her homework perfectly and on time, and each night I watch her stumble through English words as she reads aloud and pecks out each letter on the computer’s unfamiliar keyboard as she types.

My mother’s determination has helped me reinforce my own, and her drive to succeed reminds me of the gratitude I feel for her sacrifices. Her strength, and willingness to confront new challenges boldly, will be a buoy for me in the challenges I will invariably face in college. Like my mother, I have developed a strong passion towards medicine, and I feel equipped to face the long and difficult journey towards becoming a doctor. In pursuing my dreams, I will follow my mother’s examples of discipline, enthusiasm, and determination and apply them in my life. My mother has endowed me with a thousand gifts: yet if I am sure of anything, it is that through following her example, no matter what my dreams and aspirations are, I will undoubtedly succeed.

# A Second Chance Anonymous

## Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?

I had heard it all before: life comes with no guarantees, no time outs, and rarely any second chances. Yet in spite of the currents against me, I sought to make for myself a second chance. When my junior year of basketball ended, my heart sunk when I learned that there would be no space for me on the varsity team. Many players might have seen the end of their career on the court then and there, but I wasn’t ready to retire without a fight. After three years of pouring body and soul into my game, I found it difficult – even unbearable – to stay away from the sport.

In the days that followed, I would make my way each day to the school’s gym, just to watch the varsity basketball girls do their daily drills. Just because there was no room for me on the team, I reasoned, did not mean that there was no room for me to improve. So I would take a ball and work quietly on my three-point shots, or practice my lay-ups at the side baskets. And one day, in the middle of shooting free throws, the varsity coach stopped for a moment near me. “Hey,” Coach Kwon whispered, “come practice with us tomorrow. And bring your jersey.” My head grew dizzy with excitement at the thought of a second chance, and as I walked out of the gym, I remembered something that Coach Kwon had also said, not too long ago: “There’s no such thing as a wasted effort.” He was right.

The next day, I came to practice a half an hour early, waiting eagerly outside the gym. After an exhausting practice, I stayed another hour and a half, practicing with the junior varsity players for some extra, much-needed conditioning. Even after my second chance, I was determined to prove that my coach’s decision had been the right one.

It wasn’t until several months had passed that my curiosity got the better of me, and I apprehensively asked the coach why he had changed his mind. He considered for a moment, and then responded. “I admired how you cared enough to stick around.” I smiled, but the lesson was far more meaningful than I was willing to let on. Good things, I realized, do not necessarily come to those who wait, but rather to those who work hard and put in the extra effort during that time of waiting.

With that lesson in mind, I gear up each day ready to put in my greatest effort at practice. The muscle pains and injuries that testify to my grit and fortitude are made worthwhile by the intimate bonds of friendship among my teammates, and the silent, perfect communication that we share on the court. Every time I feel my heart race and my adrenaline pump as I dart down the court, I recognize the thrill and satisfaction that comes from giving my best – and remember the gratitude that I feel for this hard-earned second chance.

# Coming From a World of Outsiders Anonymous

## Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

Both of my parents came from very different worlds. My mother was born and raised in the impoverished country of Colombia in South America, where she had to help my grandparents take care of her four younger brothers in their small apartment in the city of Medellin. At the same time, my father was growing up thousands of miles away in the quiet countryside of Ireland. Their love of caring for the poor and helping others eventually brought them together in the oddest of places, Skid Row in Los Angeles, where they had both joined an organization that brought food and clothes to those living on the streets.

Not only did this passion to assist those in need bring my parents together, but it also instilled in me that very same attitude of reaching out to others who are less fortunate. During my freshman year in high school, our principal discovered that not only was I one of the up and coming debate students, but also that I was fluent in Spanish, having been raised with Spanish as my first language. When I told my parents that the principal, Father Pat Travers, wanted me to deliver sermons in Spanish to neighboring parishes regarding our school’s house building project in Mexico, they were extremely supportive and were glad that I was able to put my talents to work.

What began as a weekend at church every few weeks soon blossomed into much more. By the beginning of my sophomore year I was vice president of the Tijuana Mission Club and was regularly traveling down to Mexico with our school to deliver food and clothing to those in need. In addition, I took part in the two father-son week-long trips to build houses in Mexico for needy families.

I have since then taken a leadership role as co-president of our Tijuana Mission Club. As a result of these experiences in the dusty streets of Tijuana, I have become very interested in exploring issues such as poverty and the vast inequalities between rich and poor countries. At college, I hope to study politics, economics, philosophy, and international relations. Through my university education, I hope to contribute to helping other Americans appreciate their freedoms and their other blessings and to help them to build bridges to the downtrodden of our world.

Following in the footsteps of my parents when it comes to helping others will be a part of me for life. I have learned from my parents and my school that we need to take the blessings we have received to bring blessings to others.

# My Passion for Debate Anonymous

## The 18th century French philosopher Denis Diderot said, “Only passions, great passions can elevate the soul to great things.” Describe one of your passions and reflect on how it has contributed to your personal growth.

The great passion of my high school years has been debate. One of the reasons that I attended Damien High School in the first place was because of its reputation in competitive debate. I was thirteen years old when I began and I realized very quickly that I loved it. I loved the teamwork and I loved the intensity and excitement of the competition. I had not anticipated that what began as an elective in my freshman year would grow into an activity that would influence my future, academically and personally, so much.

The intensity of a debate round is unrivaled by any other activity I have participated in. Even the feeling of standing on the diving block at a swim meet pales in comparison to the intensity of standing behind the podium, waiting for the timer to start. Before a debate round, I am completely immersed in preparing for the arguments we will make and anticipating the arguments we will hear. When it is my turn to speak, I know the spotlight is on me. For the next five minutes all ears and eyes will be scrutinizing my every word, noting the slightest detail. All the nervous energy leaves me once the timer starts, and I speak with all the passion I have. I crave those five minutes of intensity when the words flow naturally and instinctively from my lips. No thought enters my mind and all distractions in the room disappear. The timer beeps again and my mind exits my temporary world of focus and concentration and I find myself in a room erupting with applause. It is then that I feel my thirst to compete has been quenched, and the long hours of preparation have repaid me.

Being a part of debate has allowed me to meet many new people who share the same enthusiasm and zeal that I have. However, unlike any other sport I have taken part in, the intensity and competition of debate does not translate into rivalry or animosity towards my competitors. Soon after finishing a vigorous debate round, I find myself relaxing with my “opponents” and having a good time with them. Rather than being driven by rivalry, I am able to devote time to share while still pushing myself to compete to the best of my ability. I have been able to experience the greatness that is America, being enriched by interacting with students who, like me, have roots in far-flung places of the world. My debate travels from California to Georgia, Chicago to Dallas, and everywhere in between, have brought me to places I never dreamed of visiting. This gave me the opportunity to visit many college campuses, opening my eyes to the many possibilities of the future. During three summers, I attended debate institutes at the University of Michigan (twice) and Northwestern University, allowing me to experience firsthand college life and learning how to become independent. I have really enjoyed visiting new places and making new friends and I look forward to doing the same at college.

My role as captain of the debate team has provided me with an opportunity to make a contribution to our younger debaters, not only when it comes to skills in argument, but also to the strong work ethic that is a necessary prerequisite to succeeding on the national circuit. Younger debaters can benefit greatly from being coached by a peer. It is a great joy for me to help others grow and succeed in an activity that has given me so much. I am hoping to continue debating at USC and I would love to use my college experience to help out the coaches and debaters of my high school in future years.

# Teriyaki to Chitterlings Marisa Louise Okano

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

Like every other year, a spectrum of color surrounds me on the first day of 2009. My January 1st mornings have always been shared with Grandma, a 91-year-old woman who still manages to scurry through the kitchen preparing the brunch that stares at me from the center of the table—literally. One crimson lobster's eyes dare me to snap one of its feelers, but to Grandma, ruining the little guy before it's time to devour him is bad luck. After everyone chimes their glasses, it's time for homemade sushi, complete with pink Japanese radishes and zesty horseradish paste of nearly glowing chartreuse. As usual, I spread a bit more on my rice than I can handle—but feeling my eyes tear up is part of the wasabi experience.

Noontime arrives, and with it, even more food. It's off to Nana's house—where aromas can be smelled from the driveway, where everyone seems to be my cousin, and where you don't touch the orange, marshmallow-covered candied yams on the stove before they're ready. The earthy tones of collard greens, sauce-lathered barbecued ribs and black eyed peas line the kitchen counter waiting to be consumed, but not before everyone joins hands in prayer around the perpetually plastic-covered dining room table.

I've never given much thought about the uniqueness of my family's traditions or composition. To many, my Japanese and African-American heritage is fascinating. I've been inundated with puzzled questions. "If you're Asian, why aren't you good at math?" "Aren't Black people supposed to be good dancers?" "Oh my God, we should do your hair in an afro, and call it a JapaFro!" And, the most frequent, "What are you?" When this question is asked, I respond that my father is Japanese and my mother is African-American. Occasionally, I am tempted to play with the open-ended nature of the question and respond, "A friend. A writer. A Judd Apatow film addict."

There are so many facets to my identity that my racial background has never been an especially integral part of how I define myself. People have always tried to place me in a category, though I've never felt the need to categorize myself or anyone else. I have acquired my core values from very different "categories": my Japanese Grandma and my African-American Nana. Despite differences in their appearances and life experiences, they have both taught me the importance of perseverance.

Grandma, who spent the years of WWII in Osaka, Japan away from her husband interned at Manzanar Concentration Camp, returned to Los Angeles to find him terminally ill. After nursing him until his death, she was left to raise three children alone, which she did without an ounce of self-pity. Her ability to persevere while maintaining optimism translates into many arenas. As a Los Angeles native, she has managed to stay true to her beloved Dodgers by means of an AM radio or a ticket to Bobblehead Day.

Nana's life story is worlds apart from Grandma's; however, her experiences have taught me a similar lesson. She once recalled that as a girl living in the segregated town of Emory, Texas, she visited the State Fair—on the single designated day for Black patrons. Amazingly, Nana viewed the experience objectively, and recalled only the fun that she and her sisters shared after weeks of picking cotton in the sun on the family farm. My grandmothers' dedication and eternal optimism in the midst of hardship have modeled the resolute strength that I have applied when facing adversity.

Moreover, my grandmothers have demonstrated the importance of tolerance. Each Thanksgiving, when my father recites grace at the dinner table, I glance over at Grandma— whose past I know did not include very much spirituality—bow her head in appreciation. In spite of Nana’s unwavering Christian faith, I watched her accept an incense offering process at the Buddhist funeral wake of Grandma’s sister. Through the patience that they have exemplified out of pure devotion to our family, I have increased my willingness to see the beliefs of those whom I may not agree with in a more accepting light.

Although a New Year’s Day during which one could eat teriyaki chicken and chitterlings within hours of each other might seem unusual to most, it’s all I’ve ever known. Only recently have I noticed that my ability to be colorblind has been possible due to my colorful background. The important values of perseverance and tolerance that I have acquired come from two racially contrasting, yet similarly wise women—my Grandma and my Nana.

# From Tackle Practice to the Barre Anonymous

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# For the Love of the Script Jonathan Lee Hopkins

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

Three A.M. I still smell like the chicken-soaked grease of a shift spent working at Chick-Fil-A, but I’ve hit a plot snag. My character’s stuck in Boston, I’m stuck on page 78, and I need to figure out how to get us both out before I’ll let myself shower and go to bed. If I had been thinking rationally, I might have wondered what I was doing. All I knew at that moment, however, was that I was consumed with a then-70-something-page screenplay that had stretched my imagination and creative ingenuity to the limits for the past few weeks.

Over the past several years, I had often casually mentioned to my family and friends that I might want to write movies someday. Their responses were similar and disempowering: I should spend my summers working at a “real” job and focus my spare time on something more ordinary. I probably wouldn’t be able to get past page five anyway, they said.

Yet plots kept creeping up on me. Ideas, characters, and images consumed my dormant mind, teasing my imagination as I bagged drive-thru orders of breaded chicken. As these ideas slowly evolved into stories, I realized that I didn’t just want to write -- I had to. Thus, a few days into the summer, I began writing. From the time my evening shift ended into the early hours of the next morning, I wrote in secret, pensively at first but always passionately. I lived to find intricacies in relationships that didn’t yet exist, to wrap my mind around a new character and find the soul in a scene. My imaginary settings existed independently and unknown to the rest of the world, but they were still vibrant, active, real. Late in July, as I began to wrap up my script’s loose ends with only one scene to go, I realized a fantastic truth: I had not only written a movie, but I had also discovered a passion.

The surprise on the faces of my friends and family when the freshly printed and bound script hit the table in front of them brought a smile to mine. The fact that I had written a script -- that I had actually completed a feat that most merely aspire to -- changed their attitudes toward my passion for writing. Immediately, their doubt shifted into support, and the next few weeks were a tizzy of queries, rejections, and editing suggestions: a harsh baptism into the world of cinema. I’m still searching for that first lucky break; my script may never find a home, or it may hit screens sooner than anyone would have ever guessed. To me, however, it doesn’t matter. I didn’t write a movie to prove anything, to get rich, or to satisfy my friends and family. I wrote it for the plot and for the characters. I wrote it for the joy I felt in each crafted scene. I wrote, and will continue to write, for the love of the script.

# The Performance Changed the Performer Anonymous

## Tell about an experience that changed you.

Two flamboyant characters sat in the center of the first row; I saw their hands dancing wildly in the air while I tiptoed quietly into the theatre so as not to pop their bubble of eccentricity. However, the heavy door’s loud click as it closed behind me gave me away, causing one director to spiral upwards out of his chair and introduce himself. I managed a smile and whispered my name; in turn, he pointed toward the stage where the veteran thespians were already forming small conclaves of talent. The pianist’s thin fingers played a quick melody, causing everyone to gather around her. She played a song much bigger than she, and we were given the daunting task of trying to sing along.

Fast-forward eight months: we had worked together to master a million dance steps and weathered one bout of bronchitis, numerous hand cramps, and one fundraising Christmas pageant. There I was, on the same stage, yet completely different. Our acting brigade had turned us into small-town celebrities. Unlike the usual performances, ours was handwritten to spotlight a heavy epidemic among adolescents. The issue of bullying is not new to our generation, but it is now of a different type. Our show, titled “Normal,” showcased the different types of bullying and teen issues that run rampant through the school system. It wasn’t a show about standing up to bullies physically; rather, its purpose was to give students enough self-assuredness that they wouldn’t be as affected by it. A medley of monologues and quick vignettes were dispersed among regular scenes, and we all played ourselves in different capacities.

Teenage behavior transcends time, and its characteristic forms are implacable. It is ruthless, and I experienced it. I didn’t want to cower and recuperate. I wanted to fight back. After seeing an advertisement in the community about involvement in the program, I realized that it was the perfect outlet for my voice. I could escape my typical circle of friends and fight to reform my peers. Even if I could not change their actions, I could help others become resistant to them. Our motto was, “If we can touch one student, one audience member, we’ve satisfied our purpose.” My vision was bigger than this. Maybe if my peers saw their acts of verbal and physical violence onstage, they would think twice. I needed to show my school and community that kindness is crucial to the survival of everyone; high school should not have a Darwinian ideology. We should peacefully coexist.

After the show, I realized that many people are incapable of change. I also realized that many people are much braver than they believe themselves to be. Audience members spoke up during our question-and-answer session, and some of my peers confronted each other with apologies. I learned from my cast members too; they were some of the most enlightening personalities I have ever had the pleasure of working beside. We were each completely different; our microcosm was the definition of abnormality. We were a collaboration of kindred souls; unlike normal friends, we were not united by common personalities. Instead, we were united by our common goal to end bullying.

I am content with the show’s effect on my peers, but its effect on me has been much longer lasting. I became self-assured, brave, and unique. At the beginning of rehearsals, my soprano voice rang with fear, but it has since become strong and clear. I had a vision to change my classmates, and although they became more kind, the profound effect that the show had on me changed my vision of myself.

# More Than Books Anonymous

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Experience that Lives On Anonymous

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

"Can I touch you there?" As an 8-year-old, I didn't know what to say. I was obedient. I was shy. I was afraid of speaking up and being judged. So instead of answering the question, I stayed silent and was sexually abused by a family member. He took advantage of my innocence and timidity. When my aunt found out and confronted me upon the matter, I burst into tears because I knew that this was going to spread like forest fire to everyone in the family tree, and I was going to be humiliated as being the victim of an assault. Unfortunately, things went in a different direction.

My family members were appalled and in disbelief because this was not “like him” and thought that I was just a naïve and young girl who did not fully comprehend the situation. But I understood everything; this frustration created my epiphany for the development of my ongoing drive to success.

At first, the questions of “what ifs” and “why didn’t I” popped up; I wanted to regret all of it, but instead, I spun it around.

This experience has given me the strength to persevere and present me with more of a profound outlook on life. Weakness was not my option anymore. My mindset was to lead and be informed and up-to-date with everything. Holding multiple leadership positions gives me the power for my voice to be heard and not be overshadowed. I always try to be that servant leader and put others first for their well-being. My strong desire is to further my education because, this time, I believe in myself. I believe that I can help the people around me through my determination and inspiration to aspire others to become the person they always wanted to be. Knowledge is the key, and I will keep trying my best to obtain it.

I am thankful that this experience stopped where it needed to be stopped. It has made an impact to motivate me for the rest of my life. Because of this, I strive to be a better person and aid those around me to do the same as well. I am hard-working. I lead. I am not submissive. And I make known beyond reasonable doubt for what I deem to be the right choice or judgment. I follow through with what I say and stay committed when placed on the task. Expectations are not my boundaries because I know the horizons that I can reach extend much farther than that. I will reach that full potential I have always hoped for.

# 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.

# Anthropology as Intended Major Anonymous

## What is your intended major and why?

When I stepped into the “Introduction to Anthropology” class as a 16-year old freshman, the youngest college student in the class, I found the perfect fusion of both natural and social science. Intermingled in the study of humanity were the concepts of human body and the human mind. Both body and soul were vital, equal parts in defining a human. As I learned about the evolution of the human species and the uniqueness of the human mind I found a new approach to life. My new approach to life has led me to be tolerant, perceptive, and plan my future. Through tolerance I have become more understanding and interested to learn about cultural differences. By being perceptive I see things differently; I have noticed the aging process, and maturation as an inevitable step of life sprouting from my knowledge in evolution. I plan in the future not only to be a medical doctor, but to pursue ethnographic fieldwork. I would like to explore new cultures, live among various communities, learn about human social phenomena, and eventually publish my research.

My education is more than the classes I plan to take. It is my passion to focus on the study of anthropology. This study of humanity is an enlightening field, which  stimulates my thoughts. I took many classes such as psychology, sociology, biology, and chemistry. In these classes I learned challenging new information that explained the human species. I first enrolled in college as a savvy biology major because it seemed most practical in that it fulfilled my goal to attend medical school and become a doctor. I realized anthropology is the necessary background I need to learn what I can about the human species and become a successful doctor. I am undoubtedly in interested in biology, but I also have repressed feelings for using thought and reason in my studies. Incorporated in anthropology was what I couldn’t find in another class: I found the study of science, culture, history, sociology, and humanity. Anthropology allowed me to use both conceptual and abstract thought.

More importantly, anthropology instilled many qualities essential to my growth and development. Its values of relativism and truth have shown me to be tolerant and curious. For example, prior to my study of anthropology, I would not have wondered about my friend Martin, who was born and raised in Hong Kong. Now I find myself interested about my foreign friend and chatting over coffee about life in Hong Kong. Although I had traveled the city this summer, Martin had taught me more about city life then I had witnessed. Anthropology also values others’ accounts as vital parts in ethnographic research. Research or a chat with my friend has nevertheless inspired me to learn more.The most fulfilling reward will be using the knowledge I acquire in order to help other people.

By understanding people, I can treat their problems as a fellow human being through sensitivity, and in the future, through medicine.

# The Life of Church Music Brandon J. Morgan

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

"See you on Sunday, Brandon," Pastor Park says. After gathering my things, I shake his hand appreciatively and leave through the exit at side of the sanctuary. The pastor closes the broad, brown doors as best as he can, but they never quite meet due to years of strain. "97, 98, 99, 100." It is my ritual to count to 100 to ensure that he has definitely left the premises. I climb back up the steps, walking on the balls of my feet to minimize the squeakiness of the old wooden floors. Squeezing through the slightly ajar doors that Pastor tried so vehemently to close, I look to my left and then to my right. Scanning the sanctuary, I make sure the coast is completely clear.

I walk across the plush carpet and stare at the countless rows of auburn pews. Reaching the piano, I open the fallboard and play a rigorous C crescendo scale. This calms me before even starting to sing. Playing the four chords of Adele's "Rolling in The Deep" I sing the chorus, finally feeling released. I perform this ritual until exhausted from hearing it. Then the magic truly begins.

Gazing at the stained glass windows to my left, I commence singing the first line as tenderly as an infant's cheek. Then peering at the organ on the far right of the altar, the velocity of sounds stemming from my windpipes increases. My diaphragm belts as I sing like a wolf howling for its long lost pack: "I've been thinkin' about you, do you think about me still?" The sound emanating from my vocal chords vibrates across the sanctuary, generating an indisputable sensation of awe. "Because I've been thinking about forever." Closing my eyes, I finish the last lines of the song with a melodic timbre.

Sometimes, I worry if it is disrespectful to break into my church and sing the latest Frank Ocean song. But that potential consequence cannot compete with the sweetness of synthesizing beautiful music with my voice and that ancient grand piano. Playing the massive instrument by the centuries-old stained glass window displaying Jesus as an infant continually allows me to experience a delightful calm. Pressing down on the beautiful ivory keys makes all my troubles and tribulations vanish. It pushes away the countless hours of homework I have breathing down my neck. It pushes away my judging and hypocritical parents. It pushes away the fact that I am different from the norm.

Every chord allows me to experience complete serenity before entering the hurricane of being a teenager. At The United Methodist Church of Richmond Hill, singing and playing the piano gives me the opportunity to sing my heart out to a non-existent audience that will never jeer if my voice cracks or even if I am off key. More importantly, it allows me to be completely one with my music.

# Drawing Perspective Vincent An

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

The entire external world is a blur. There is nothing but the sound of lead scratching paper that may occasionally break the soothing sound of silence. Everything has lost its relevance - everything except the mess in front of me. As my eye traces the paper’s surface, my mind absorbs the array of details. Calmly, I take in the little inconsistencies between what is on the canvas and what I envision in my head. There is a noticeable incongruity; perhaps not to the untrained eye, but to me, the creator, minute discrepancies are everywhere.

I breathe in. Like Alice falling into Wonderland, I spiral away from the real, conscious world, and into an enchanted realm. It is here, in this state of mind, that I am most at home. In this trance, I am able to experiment and plan freely, without the constraints of peripheral judgment, human necessities, or time. It is not that I have forgotten about the existence of the outer world’s appraisal, the ever-growing presence of hunger and fatigue, or the subtly ticking clock on the wall that is shouting for me to do homework and go to sleep. Rather, I have chosen to ignore their existence and focus on the beautiful challenge at hand. In this moment, I am lost in a state of simple persistence, intellectual clarity and pure artistic creativity.

Pencils sharpen as lines thicken and shadows darken. I weigh the discrepancy between the visual ahead and the goal in my mind. Gradually, the difference becomes smaller and the piece itself develops into something more and more aesthetically appealing. I am rapidly approaching my threshold.

On paper, the four hands have come to life. They’re each holding a pencil, deftly drawing the next hand as a preceding one reciprocates the favor. It’s a take on M.C. Escher’s Drawing Hands.

“Good artists copy; great artists steal,” echoes a familiar voice from within the walls of my mind.

The Picasso quote resonates in my head as I absorb what I have just finished. A baby’s hand clumsily clutches a pencil as it draws an adult’s hand holding the same utensil. The adult in turn skillfully illustrates an elder’s hand. The aged hand wrinkled with time then sketches a skeletal hand. Finally, the pencil-gripping bones complete the cycle by drawing the original infant's arm. As my eyes trace this continual cycle, I am reminded once more of the fact that nothing is completely original. The notion that creativity sparks spontaneously from nothing is, in itself, imaginary. Everything has its genesis in something pre-existing. Though the old and worn seem to expire and disappear, they breathe new life into our world by inspiring us. New creations use the invaluable past as a foundation and take from the pre-existing, seldom with permission.

I take a long, drawn-out breath, holding the paper while taking a step back from the wooden frame of the easel and emerging from the daze that consumed my mind. In my sketch I see hints of da Vinci’s delicate lines, Caravaggio’s contrast of darkness and light, and Escher’s surreal tautologies. In everything I encounter, I find similar traces of a lingering past; in lyrics, architecture, today’s apparel, tomorrow’s technology, and even in the slick design of an ordinary chair. No longer is my work a mere blur; it has become clear. Having lost myself within the realm of a familiar artistic trance, I have paradoxically found a new, discerning lens through which I can now view the world.

# Where do I belong? Jeffrey Alexander Nagel

## 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.

At age 13, I had it all planned out. Having taken my passport from my mother's desk, I prepared to purchase my ticket to freedom from the place I'd been held hostage all those years: Florence, Italy. My mother discovered the theft quickly, however, and my plan was foiled. This wasn't the first time I'd plotted an escape. While Florence is many people's ideal vacation city, it was far from the ideal home for me. Neither was Bonn, Germany four years prior. With each change of country, my longing for my old home, America, only intensified.

While parting with my friends, my home, and American culture was difficult, the loss of these previously unappreciated aspects of my life paled in comparison to the challenges I faced in Germany. My father was often away on business trips, and I found that whenever he was gone, I was pushed to mature faster than I would have liked to. I can still vividly recall one occasion when I was seven and he was traveling. My mother, bedridden with the flu, asked me to read my three siblings a bedtime story and tuck them into bed. I was proud that I could help but I felt like it wouldn't have happened if we were still in America.

While I missed my father a lot when he was away, I missed America even more. I felt my lost childhood was somehow preserved there, out of reach and waiting for me. Every time he returned from a business trip there, he brought back candy, snacks, and American memorabilia, which appealed to my childish image of the perfect utopia I had left behind. Although I had little contact with America when I lived abroad, I always considered it superior to Germany and Italy.

When my father broke the news that we would be moving back, I jumped to my feet ecstatically, screaming "YES-YES-YES!" until I nearly lost my voice. In the months preceding my transition back to America, my anticipation grew; I was ready to return to the utopian society that would restore my happiness. I couldn't have been more wrong.

When I moved to Long Island, I came prepared to be the new student again. At Cold Spring Harbor High School, where most of the students had been living in the area their entire lives, I anticipated being the talk of the whole school. I thought I would be "the cool kid from Italy," but in reality, I was the furthest thing from it. From day one, I started realizing I wasn't really "American" anymore. I didn't know a thing about American sports, customs, pop culture references, and most of all, it seemed that I knew nothing about American high school culture. While I came into the school expecting immediate popularity, as I had attained in the warm and welcoming foreign communities, I was set apart from my peers in ways from which I didn't know how to recover. For the remainder of 8th grade, I kept to myself, isolated and wondering what went wrong. The problem wasn't the country. The problem was me.

I changed schools freshman year to Friends Academy. I felt that the kids were nice, but I didn't reach out and remained fairly anonymous for the first semester. However, I auditioned for the play and soon found my niche in the theater department, which immediately gave me a new group of friends. Although I withdrew from my academics for the first two years, I continued to gain social confidence and self-worth, which propelled me to be a leader in clubs and in the theater by junior year.

Looking back, my problem was never finding to which culture I "belonged," or where I considered home - it was about holding my own and being grounded in who I am and who I want to be, independent of where I live. That is a foundation that I can build off of in college and beyond.

# Learning to Flourish 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.

"You're ugly, and you have no friends."

We were settling in our seats for the annual career day assembly, and Eleni Pappas turned and spat the words out at me. I blushed while she laughed, pulling her hair off her lace-trimmed shirt (which, for the record, was nothing you'd find in Vogue).

It wasn't that I didn't know what she said was true: my curly hair had yet to meet a flat iron, and the fifty-first US state could be discovered in the gap between my front teeth. My tattered jeans and fresh-from-the-barn odor didn't help. She just said it so bluntly, and I was trapped, sitting defenseless and on the verge of tears as Jeremy Fine's father spoke about his adventures as a pilot. Yet in reality, I had been trapped for all of middle school.

I had gone to my parents for help with the bullying. While they meant well with their advice, recommendations to "walk away" didn't solve anything. Thanks to a flood of name-calling and exclusion, I spent many lunch periods nibbling my sandwich in a bathroom stall. But fast-forward four years and going home in tears is no longer a part of my daily routine. Braces helped take care of my snaggletooth grin and puberty filled the extra room in my clothes, but what my time in high school has provided me with more than anything is a true sense of inner strength.

A big piece of this comes from literally getting back in the saddle. For my fifteenth birthday, after repeated begging and a great deal of negotiating, Elmo was mine-the first horse I could call my own. He was almost too pretty to get mad at; the beautiful dapple-grey was every girl's dream until he bit, bolted or reared. Some nights it took hours to make a full lap around the arena without being bucked off, but the greater the struggle, the more cathartic the victory lap.

I went to school each day after an evening with Elmo, with bruised ribs and broken toes but no longer gun shy. Ancient Greek class, a once novel idea after eight years of Spanish worksheets, became my new antagonist. Freshman and sophomore years were bearable, but when we switched from the Attic to Homeric dialect junior year, the vocabulary and grammar I'd spent hours memorizing meant nothing. Over the course of the year, days passed where I saw Mrs. Wick, my teacher, more than my parents. I went in for help, attended review sessions and exhausted the few Ancient Greek resources that exist. While the class remained difficult, reading Homer from the original text proved much more interesting thanks to the sense of accomplishment I gained from translating it myself. I realized that though I am a constant work in progress, I am starting to fine-tune.

My eighth grade self may not have had a good comeback for Eleni, but 16-year old Grace was now confident enough as a first-time election judge to handle a fiesty 55-year-old voter who was insistent that he could bring his gun into the polling booth. And just last summer, I faced off against a corporate team-building event gone awry by talking down drunken dodge ball players by diverting attention and adding more games to help them burn off their "energy."

I could lie and say that I never gossip about others- that I am always in the best mood and never fail to treat people as if today were their last. But I am not pretending to be perfect. My newfound fortitude does nothing but support me in my daily efforts to improve. No longer am I the little twig in a bundle of tears over a few hurtful words. Instead, I am a girl who has found grit and is more ready and excited than ever to tackle the challenges of college

# Artistic Abilities William Nelson Marcussen

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

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

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

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

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

# Lessons from the Bench Rebekka Strom

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Pitching a Venture Anonymous

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

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

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

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# Looking Down Anonymous

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Accident 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.

"This is a nightmare," I thought. Sean was on the ground wincing in pain and blood was slowly leaking through his spandex. A million things raced through my mind but I stopped, took a deep breath, collected my thoughts and got to work. Sean had been thrown off his bike by a sharp, concealed rock. It was the first time something had gone terribly wrong while I was mountain biking. I called 911, made a sling out of my shirt to support his broken arm and carried him to the road. To my relief paramedics were already there.

The trails I ride have long winding turns and portions that are extremely technical. Multiple fast-paced sections require me to make split-second judgments. Every right decision bolsters my confidence and motivates me to try more challenging terrains. Failure to make the correct decision often leads to injury, as happened with my friend Sean.

Mountain biking is by no means a solo sport; it helps foster relationships between groups of people. It trains people to be dependent on and look out for each other. When a friend falls down or takes a wrong turn everybody stops. This extends to the surroundings as well. As we take care of each other we also work together to take care of the trails on which we ride. Leaves are raked, trees are replanted, and garbage is removed.

Perhaps, the best word to describe the view while riding a trail is, simply, a blur. Racing in 15th gear, I can only make out the biggest obstacles. Like a vision tracking algorithm, my brain sorts out objects and maps out a safe path for me to take almost instantly. On the trail, the occasional bug flies into my mouth but my full-face helmet does a good job of mitigating this - at the cost of my face burning up. The backsplash of riders in front of me always seems to spray thick mud in my visor. My muscles constantly scream to give up but the adrenaline rush of steep drops and tight maneuvers pushes me onward. I know I will need this determination to face the all-nighters that college will inevitably throw at me.

My mother continuously reminds me of the awe she saw in my eyes when I received my first bike as a birthday gift. I would not get off it until I had explored every corner of my neighborhood. I believe that the spirit of mountain biking embodies itself not only in the precision and technicality required, but also in the curious and exploratory nature of the rider. Although I start on a conventional trail, taking the left turn that leads nowhere is a choice I often make. Following my instincts has brought me to abandoned campsites, undiscovered springs and places that I go to get away from it all. I am no longer afraid of the unknown; if I have not defined my own path, then I do not feel my ride was a success.

A truly multidimensional activity, mountain-biking encompasses all my interests and more. My passion to innovate, to constantly improve, is reflected in minor tweaks I consistently make to my bike. Long nights in the garage shaving down unnecessary 6061 aluminum finally paid off when I made an unofficial track record on a local trail. Greasing gears, tuning suspensions and barreling down a rocky path on a mountain bike help me escape from the sometimes overwhelming world of microprocessors and LED displays - a world with which I find myself more and more intertwined, until I hit the trail.

# Mothering Daughter Anonymous

## Describe the world you come from.

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

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

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

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

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

# Finding My Niche Jean Chen

## 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.

We are live in five! Four! Three! Two! One!

“Jean, you’re directing tomorrow.”

I look at my teacher seriously, nodding. However, I was inwardly jumping with joy at the prospect of leading the whole broadcast.

Let me start from the beginning. Back in sixth grade, I look up, fixated, at my school’s morning news. I admired the anchors presenting the day's items with fervor, and I laughed with them when they made mistakes. In my heart, I promised myself that I would be one of those anchors, right on screen, when I entered high school.

Three years later, I walked into the broadcasting room tingling with apprehension. The first class of high school was not filled with the classmates I had known and interacted with for the past three years, but with upperclassmen whom I had always seen and admired, and felt vaguely intimidated by.

How can I compete with them? I thought, as I took a seat at the meeting circle to introduce myself to the seasoned students I would be working with for the rest of the semester.

I, as a small, ninth grader with almost no prior experience in the world of video media, plunged my hands deep into the business, working hard to somehow both fit in and stand out. When something needed to be done, even something so minute as adjusting the camera so that the broadcast would run smoothly, I would do it.

Cut to DDR2...now.

I received the opportunity to direct the whole broadcast a few weeks into my freshman year, and I was eager to learn this new task — it excited me to see a broadcast run smoothly. I would be able to guide my teammates to unmute the audio, transition to a video, or move the camera. I gripped the broadcasting script, reading through the transitions, readying myself for my task. However, to be entirely honest, I had help the first time I led: my teacher stood beside me, calling out extra shots when I failed to do so. I watched and listened to his instructions, and I remembered them all for the next time.

Let’s go to our field reporter to see our latest campus news...

By my second year, I became co-director with one of my teammates, but, due to the shortage of members, I also had to run the tricaster while directing. Needless to say, it was difficult. I had to guide my teammates while transitioning between camera shots on screen. Yet, I liked the challenge. Of course, the more I practiced, the more I improved in doing both tasks at once: the experience had taught me multitasking.

As the only four-year member in Broadcasting, I am called “Ms. Director” for my dedication in the class. Throughout my high school years, I received inspiration from my classmates to become more creative in my news projects, and likewise, I inspired my classmates to work hard. Ultimately, Broadcasting has taught me leadership. I am eager to direct and encourage my team to do our best in creating a good broadcast — we rise together, and we fall together.

“Good job guys! That was perfect.”

*Thank you for watching the Knightly News. I’m Jean Chen. Have a great* day.

# Searching for Confidence Anonymous

## USC students are known to be involved. Briefly describe a non-academic pursuit (such as service to community or family, a club or sport, or work, etc.,) that best illustrates who you are, and why it is important to you.

I rushed from the greenroom to backstage. As I waited for my cue, I chanted and repeated the words in my head.

Finally, the lights dimmed, and I moved to center stage, clenching my fists and willing myself to stop shaking. As the spotlight centered on me and the music began to play, I felt butterflies growing in my stomach.

“Himo wo, toite mi…”

My throat constricted as I sang, and I was scared that I would forget the words. This was my first time singing a solo in front of an audience. However, as the music petered away, claps roared for me.

Singing has taught me confidence. Prior to this performance, which happened during the spring of my freshman year, I was nervous and shy, scared to appear in front of an audience alone. However, I have come to enjoy performing so much that I joined my school’s show choir. We perform three times a year, plus, we compete with other show choirs twice a year, travelling as far as San Diego. Also, we perform Christmas shows for the elderly. Their laughs and smiles have touched my heart, and I am pleased to see how much singing has secured their happiness, as well as mine.

# Advanced Basketball Statistics Anonymous

## Your browser history says a lot about you. Take a moment to think about the time you spend online. Whether it’s browsing an Instagram account, listening to your favorite podcast, subscribing to the best web series on YouTube, or even addressing questions on tech-help forums, we want to know where you spend the most time online, and why. Please share your favorite online destination (via a web address, specific app, social network, etc.) - and describe why in a few sentences. (250 word limit)

My curiosity in advanced statistics began with a question that plagues basketball fans everywhere: why are the Blazers signing unproven players to enormous contracts? These players weren’t stars in the past, and only played marginal roles on their previous teams. But after taking a closer look at their metrics, which is something my peers and even reporters forget to do, I realized that these moves were steals.

While the average NBA fan might just settle for basic statistics such as points per game, assists, and rebounds, I obsess over the advanced. On basketball-reference.com, I constantly check player efficiency ratings, true shooting percentages, and value over replacement, attempting to determine a player’s worth to a team. These statistics capture the complexity and abilities of each player on the court; they reveal the truth that primary statistics can obscure.

My favorite page on basketball-reference.com is the 2015-16 NBA Team Ratings page because teams aren’t merely ranked by their win/loss records but by a holistic evaluation. I use this website because it reflects the power of statistics to clarify reality. Statistics can translate a broad range of disjointed data into a complex set of useful answers. I seek to understand the world at a core level, and basketball is just one area of knowledge I’m interested in.

Next time ESPN thinks about slamming the Blazers for signing someone unknown, they should probably first pay a visit to basketball-reference.com.

# Seeing the World Through a Lens 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.

My interest in film began with my first movie—or my first love: Monsters Inc. Engrossed in the magic of animated movies, I became an elementary school animation aficionado. As I was immersed in Disney 24/7, in films that taught me that stories are not just for kids, but for people of all ages, and that there are no limits to what stories you can tell. Naturally, I became obsessed with creating my own.

I spent my days crafting my stories by drawing scenes: my life, cartoons, fictional universes, and everyday people. Soon after, I upgraded from pastels and paper to a camera. I fell in love with capturing my world. Everywhere I went, my Hello Kitty camera was there too, experiencing life along with me—and me always pressing record. My pictures have told daring tales of my childhood adventures and travels, and watched me grow up through the years. Even at home, I'd photograph anything and everything and declare, "Let's make a story out of what we have here." Inspired by my love for animated movies, I began experimenting in stop motion, and after time, I had animated Polly Pockets having a teenage crisis, my bed turning itself upside-down, my food coming to life, a birthday card putting itself together, Hello Kitty action figures arguing out family problems in their restaurant, handmade origami cranes going for a test flight—anything I could get my hands on. I got creative with multiple angles and shots and created lengthier animations. As a middle schooler, I avidly uploaded my animations to YouTube because I found it fun to share my work with people. This small hobby, my knack for telling stories, took me into the world of filmmaking in high school.

Film opened my eyes to the real world of storytelling. There was so much to explore: so many stories to be told in so many ways and so little time. I used my stop-motion experience to guide my filming and would go to the ends of the earth to tell the stories I wanted. From taping my camera to a ceiling to taking it into the ocean, I've risked my camera's (and my) life to get that one incredible shot. Even though I'm older, I still always have my camera in hand: this time, it's a big, bulky camera decorated (true to form) with Hello Kitty stickers.

Filmmaking has opened up my world: through my films, I hope to give others a glimpse into how I see and experience all that I know. I want to share stories of my life, my adventures, and some fictional ones about places and people I've never seen or met. The stories that I'm currently working on are fantastical and range from dealing with hunger as a teenage monster, to staring into the eyes of a personified death in a restaurant that happens to be the underworld, to a murder mystery in a mystical noodle shop. I want people to lose themselves in the magic of my stories and be transported to a different world, even for a minute. Storytelling takes me places: some real, some imaginary. I love having that freedom in creating, especially when I'm animating my projects digitally.

All in all, my love for film comes down to storytelling. I see myself as a part of this pursuit for a long time because I know that, once you love something, you don't really stop. No matter the form, genre, or method: I just want to tell stories. And I'm ready to take on my next big adventure in life, with my camera in hand.

# Benchwarmer: The Power of Perseverance Anonymous

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

“Jonathan, sit down!”

When my coach blatantly refused my request to allow me to play, my prior confidence and enthusiastic spark were replaced by a deflating sense of hopelessness as I recognized my role as a benchwarmer during my first basketball game. Frankly, the traditional saying, “bench players are just as important as starters,” never ameliorated my negative outlook of the bench. Soon enough, my sense of stoicism shattered and I faced a decision: quit or get better. Tired of my own excuses and motivated to disprove the doubts of my peers, I decided to persevere if only to prove to myself that I had what it took to become a starter.

With the purchase of a LA Fitness membership, I was committed to my decision. Soon after, my life could only be explained by the Nike slogan, “Eat. Sleep. Basketball.” My days began at 4 am, with my hand languidly crawling to end “Get Lucky” by Daft Punk, followed by a trip to the gym before school, and ending with an aching hand repeatedly pounding the ball against the monotonous drum of the washing machine in the stone, cold basement floor. Messi probably felt the same when he said, “You always will have to fight to reach your dream; sacrifice and work hard for it.” Hair disheveled and with one too many sprays of Axe: Apollo, my goals were no longer about a girlfriend, popularity, or ego, but about self-improvement and personal pride.

As time passed, the fruit of my hard work began to bloom. My peers began to notice my improvement and soon enough, my coach started to give me playing time. By the end of my Freshman season, I earned a place on the team as a starter and eventually was promoted to Junior Varsity. Yet through my success, I came to value a principle far more important: perseverance, even in the face of unachievable success. I realized that amidst my disappointment, the decision to persevere, the hope that I had a chance, was something I so desperately needed. Through the grit and sweat, my determination instilled values in me that have applied to many other facets of my life.

This mentality gave me the ability to continue to achieve amidst many obstacles. The year after, my life took a turn. In China, the school I attended was small and academically competitive. In an environment where a 4.0 GPA was unimpressive and where your SAT score decided your status, basketball—my icon of triumph—was equated with academic weakness. However, the values instilled within me from my experiences with basketball, inspired me to accept the challenge and develop an academic vitality.

I believe one can never comprehend the power of perseverance without experiencing it personally. I know that the decision to persevere was paramount to my understanding of finding success in life. Even though I may never be the best player or the smartest student, perseverance has reminded me of the power of pursuing a dream and the gifts that come with making sacrifices

# The Ceramic Sanitation Specialist 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.

Since I was three, I have enjoyed the most tedious activity known to man. If one were to peruse old family photos, one would likely find me standing atop a stool—favorite Scotch-Brite sponge in hand—washing dishes.

While my parents have allowed for the eccentric quirks of their eldest son and my friends have viewed me with amused stupefaction, I too have often wondered about the origins of my fondness for dishwashing. Dishwashing has an ineffable quality to it which, although hard to pin down, keeps me coming back to the sink no matter the occasion. Perhaps it is the soothing scent of peppermint from Ultra Joy’s dishwashing liquid, a family favorite. Or perhaps it is the onset of warm, comforting water that signals the beginning of a blank slate, one in which anxieties and distractions are all but swept away by the playing of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata.

These attractions, however, merely dwell on the surface of my peculiar love for dishwashing. The true allure of dishwashing comes to me in many other ways. It comes from the appreciation reflected in the eyes of those around me when I happily volunteer to do what others think of as a chore. It comes from a familiar rhythm, one that allows my thoughts to flow without hindrance or restraint like players, performing in wistful impromptu, freed from the constraint of an audience. These aspects create an intangible sense of freedom that gives dishwashing its flavor. And flavor is completely appropriate in this sense. I know of no other activity that leaves as distinct of a taste—one that engenders tranquility and service—in a person’s hands.

To be clear, I do not want to be a “Ceramic Sanitation Specialist” in the future. Indeed, many have told me that the pinnacle of success should be measured by wealth, stability, and prestige. However, the essence of dishwashing has come to embody my personal definition of success. After all, it represents the rare amalgamation of both enjoyment and service, traits I wish my life to exemplify. For to me, rather than aspire to fulfill society’s paradigm of success, I would rather adhere to a more simple principle inspired by dishwashing: do what you love, and do it to serve.

In retrospect, I am thankful for my peculiar love of dishwashing for it has expanded the horizons of my thought to a point where I have a goal that I can strive to accomplish. I realize that the community around me can not only be served but also served in a way that incites enjoyment and fulfillment. This is what I value most: to be able to pursue something I love while serving the community around me, and to look back on my life and realize that I am proud of my actions and am at a place where I can be happy. These are my aspirations, and no amount of grease or leftover rice will change that.

# The Earthquake Everybody Forgot Anonymous

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

Amidst the monotonous stroll of daily life, it is easy to forget what happened. People never inquired, so I never remembered. Friendly conversations seldom reached that socially awkward barrier. After all, the “Great East Japan Earthquake,” was the fourth most powerful earthquake in the world.

Diligently writing Kanji—Japanese characters—I thought my teacher was joking when she abruptly began to pray. The prevalence of earthquakes in Japan habituated me to a point where earthquakes often went unnoticed. However, after hearing the principal, scream “get under your desks!” the ensuing chaos confirmed the weight of the situation. Students flooded from their classes, ignoring the screams of teachers who told them to stay under their desks. Once outside, unnatural shifts in the ground as well as the explosions of buildings in the distance made me feel as though the world was truly ending. After about an hour, the earthquake was over, yet the damage was done. Both school buildings and apartment complexes all around my city, were utterly destroyed. On the news tsunamis rose to record heights of over 100 feet, and nuclear factories experienced catastrophic meltdowns. This was Japan on March 11th, 2011.

Then I was back in America. Returning from a decade of living in Japan, I felt as though my passport was the only proof of my American citizenship. Soon, I adjusted to my life in America and the reason I was there became just a memory. Spending time with friends who lived in large houses with fancy pools eventually led me to be embarrassed by my families low income. To me, our income was never enough when my friends’ families earned triple that amount. However, one day, after reminiscing with one of my childhood friends in Japan, I was reminded of the earthquake. Of the children who are right now, orphans. Of the parents who now wake up everyday without their kids. Of the thousands dead and the countless crippled. I realized in shame, that although I do not have as much as those around me, I only compare myself with those who have much than with those who lost much. This realization has helped reinforce a powerful principle for me: that we are always given more than we realize.

After my perspective transformed, a motivation arose within me. One that inspired me to help those in need—people who live in poverty and pain. This led me to strive and eventually become president of a non-charity organization known as Christ In Today which has donated and supported various minority groups across China. However, as I move on to college I hope to pursue a career where I will be allowed to further provide monetary and social help to the destitute. My utmost desire would be to make a difference in the lives of those who need it most, all while providing that which I have been gracefully bestowed: a thankful heart. Although many people often tell me that my dreams and aspirations for a lifestyle dictated by the needs of others lack comfort and wealth, I believe that it is a cause worth living for, and no amount of mockery nor doubt will change that.

Although the “Great East Japan Earthquake” has given the country of Japan much pain, personally, I know that if I had not experienced the earthquake, then I would be a very different person than I am today. Thus, it is because of the most disastrous event in the history of Japan that I have been given the most wonderful gift known to man: a desire to change the lives of those who need it most.

# Passing the Torch Nannette Boakye

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Cheer Lauren Kim

## USC students are known to be involved. Briefly describe a non-academic pursuit (such as service to community or family, a club or sport, or work, etc.,) that best illustrates who you are, and why it is important to you. (250 word limit)

I do not fit the stereotypical image of a cheerleader, the status-obsessed glamour girls of teen movies and the public consciousness. I don’t drink, smoke, or go to parties. I prefer to spend Friday nights at home watching war movies like Furyand Saving Private Ryan.

But after three years, not only am I thriving as a cheerleader, but this year I was made captain of the team. Being the captain requires one to continually project authority. Not only this, but a captain has to imbue her fellow cheerleaders with a sense that everything will be all right, even when cheer pyramids are falling and bodies litter the football field.

The leader within me finally shone through at summer cheer camp, where the nervousness I initially felt was replaced by a surge of confidence. I was here. It was no accident.

“Get in line!” I shouted at the assembled cheerleaders.

They did.

Being captain of the cheerleading team has helped define who I am and what I’m capable of. I am not someone to shirk responsibilities and choose the easiest path available. I plan on becoming a doctor, and as such I will be responsible for the well-being of others: helping, guiding, and motivating them. While having a scalpel in my hand will be very different from having a cheerleader’s foot in my hand, in both cases if my hand shakes, someone gets hurt. Based on my experience in cheer, I know that I will have a steady hand.

# Failing to Succeed Anonymous

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

Beep. Beep. I opened my eyes, turned my head to the right, and saw the spiky graph on the little monitor that told me someone was alive. I looked at my body and saw the wires stuck to it, which informed me that the beeping heartbeat was mine.

I closed my eyes and recalled months of sitting silently in the therapist’s office as my parents spoke for me. I recalled the final weeks of 8th grade that I had missed and the moment my gymnastics coach told my parents that I was anorexic, and was too sick to practice. I recalled the weekly, and then semi-weekly, visits to the doctor to check my vitals, and finally the visit that resulted in me being rushed to the hospital.

I was only in the hospital for a short amount of time, but it was enough. My life had been spiraling out of control for months in my attempt to achieve perfection, and I had hit rock bottom. It was time for me to pick myself up and make the arduous climb to a healthier and more fulfilling place in life.

Recovery necessitated that I reflect on who I was and who I wanted to be. From this intense period of introspection, I gained penetrating insights into my limits, aspirations, flaws, and strengths. In light of my newfound wisdom I was able to chart a path forward, and from that point onwards, I devoted all of my efforts to improving my health, repairing my relationships, and rebuilding my inner strength.

As my health, relationships, and self-esteem began to recover, I sought additional avenues in which I could live out the passion for life I had lost for a period of time. I returned to my beloved sport of gymnastics with greater resolve than before I had fallen ill, going on to win 1st place All-Around Varsity Champion at the MVALs championship in my first year back in the sport. With each new victory in my life, my dedication to success only grew. I immersed myself in all of my commitments, always eager to learn, both inside and outside of the classroom.

I used to wonder to myself where I would be if I had never fallen ill. There was always a question in the back of my mind: If I could go back in time and prevent myself from becoming sick, would I do so? While that period was by far the most difficult time of my life, I believe that if I had not gone through those ordeals and if I had not experienced such devastating failure, I would not have been forced to become the tenacious, courageous, and introspective person I am today.

My successes hold so much more value to me when I consider how much it took to climb from failure to triumph. Learning what it is like to experience failure taught me not to fear it. Waking up day after day overcome with a sense of hopelessness taught me how to find inspiration in the bleakest of moments. And the overall experience taught me how to transform despair into a zeal for life.

So no, I wouldn’t change the past if I could. . . because ultimately, from my failures I learned how to become the best version of myself.

# The Voice Anonymous

## USC believes that one learns best when interacting with people of different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Tell us about a time you were exposed to a new idea or when your beliefs were challenged by another point of view.

Artistically, I'm a bad postmodernist: I've never been able to look at a painting of a potato and discern the meaning of life hidden within its brushstrokes. Somehow, though, I found myself inside the world-renowned Museum of Modern Art, surrounded by a mass of self-proclaimed, blazer-clad connoisseurs conversing about the deeper meaning of Barnett Newman’s The Voice. As I stood there with Newman's giant white canvas, staring me in the face while the never ending stream of the artists' unfamiliar jargon clouded my thoughts, I began to wonder if I was missing something. What were these people seeing that I wasn't? How were they getting "critical examination of society’s effort to silence its inhabitants" out of this seemingly empty work of “art” when all that I was capable of producing was “maybe he named it The Voice to be ironic.”

Suddenly, I was back in my fourth grade art class with Ms. McClaire watching me as I carefully applied the finishing touches to my painting of a french horn. "Why is it purple?" she asked. I replied without hesitation, “Because it’s my favorite color.” That's when she said something I had forgotten until that moment, "Some people don't always know why artists do things, but as long as you understand your work, then it is art." No, the importance of creating art is not to appeal to the critics, but to set down an avenue of personal expression. Whether the artist is an avant-garde Parisian painter or a four year-old preschooler is ultimately insignificant; successful art should evoke meaning to its creator, even if others do not recognize it.

These University of Southern California college application essays were written by students

# Female Struggle Anonymous

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

Zipping through the tiled halls, I glance back and grin. I grab her hand, and we soar through an arch of fluorescent-lit stores, gliding past stands selling cheap accessories in our clunky rollerblades. We stop, resting our feet, and scope out our audience. A sea of cloaked figures shuffles around us, giving us the occasional glare or smirk. A few of them jeer at us, but we’re used to it, and they’re easy enough to ignore. All of the women including us wear black from head to toe, some of them even covering their faces. The only visible skin belongs to men—and the occasional child—who shuffle in white traditional robes while their hooded wives trail behind. “Zaira,” I call, “let’s go again!” She nods, and we speed up, skating our way through the black and white maze.

After watching children skate through the Dhahran Mall in Saudi Arabia the previous week, we decided to do the same, so we boarded the bus to the mall that afternoon after prayer ended, carrying rollerblades. We slow down at a toy store, staring at the bright display. I hear a grunt and spin around, finding a curious Saudi ten feet away. He appears to be in his twenties, and his most distinguishable feature is a large single eyebrow. “You have Instagram?” he asks in a thick accent, grinning and ogling my covered body. “Uh… yes?” I stutter, puzzled. Then he charges towards us, arms extended, as if to grope me. His eyes are crazed.

My heart jumps, and my legs are Jell-O. I know I’ve made a big mistake and that I have to get away quickly. Zaira’s definitely also afraid, because we both start dashing away. We swerve around the shrouded figures, almost tripping, until the beast of a man stops sprinting after us. We make eye contact and burst out laughing but secretly hide panic in our pounding hearts.

Recalling this incident doesn’t cause fear; in fact, I’ve had many like it. Living in a community like this—a place so lenient about things like rollerblading in a mall yet so strict about female dress—has become second nature to me. I first moved to Saudi Arabia in seventh grade, when I was starting the transition from girl to woman. I didn’t yet understand the sexualization of women, but I quickly had to accept it. After being ogled by local workers even while being almost completely covered up, I learned to think of my female body as a desired object. I realized the extent of restrictions on females when I found I couldn’t go to my Muslim male friends’ houses because of gender segregation. I matured and watched my female Muslim peers start wearing the hijab to cover their “tempting” hair, one at a time, until every one of their heads and bodies was covered. Although respected as an exceptionally Islamic nation, Saudi Arabia has harsh rules that only intensify rebellion in men and women.

Not long after I returned to America for school, I was introduced to feminist ideals. I slowly changed the mindset that I was an object and began to realize that the root of the problem came from the men that desperately tried to reign over women. I had the amazing opportunity to listen to Malala Yousafzai, and listening to her struggles against female oppression inspires me to do my best with my education and apply to incredible colleges. I’ve been a witness to obedient women whose only purpose in life is to take care of their families without pursuing their own dreams. Many female friends that still live in Saudi believe they don’t need education because they’ll be dependent on husbands later in life, and seeing these mindsets makes my concern much stronger. I wouldn’t change my background, even after experiencing so many uncomfortable events, because it only helped me shape my view of the world.

# Room 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.

On the 23rd floor, in the midst of darkness and a sea of repetitive buildings, I breathed freely through the footage I was editing. I was inhaling fear and exhaling joy as I trimmed through the videos in symphony with the emotions of the scene. As I edited, I was acting in a room in my mind; I was performing on a stage designed by my aesthetic memory and emotions.

I remembered everything about this room.

I was seeing the world through my mom’s camera in a tourist site filled with temples and crowds that made this place seem insignificant to a seven years old. I turned my lens towards things that spoke to me: the cracks on the red walls; the ants marching on the grass. The joy of collecting these items with my camera felt like getting new toys. Pleased with my mementos, I imagined a room where I would store my growing collection. Later, my parents found the photos interesting enough to give me my own camera.

As if allowing my eyes to be guided by the spirit of the room, I developed a habit of photographing mundane objects to make sense of an abstract world. Occasionally, I felt embarrassed when I aimed my lens at plastic bags floating in the breeze instead of the grandeur tourist sites. This situation made me question whether we are supposed to appreciate the commonly valued things or whether the purpose of art is to express our emotions and challenge commonly held beliefs. As a result, I began expressing myself by pushing the walls of my room towards drawing. As I built onto my metaphorical room, it developed an ambiance that paralleled my physical location and absorbed my emotions from the fast-paced city I lived in.

My anxiety developed in line with my academic studies. I scheduled to keep ahead of the anxiety. However, the more I planned, the greater the panic that my anxiety would pounce on me. Soon, the pressure from all the deadlines and activities combined with the panic. I felt pushed to the edge until my psychology teacher wisely told me “Embrace it if you can’t overcome it.” This inspired me to invite my anxiety into my room and use it as an inspiration for art. My feelings gave life to my growing collection, and I developed a hunger for more human emotions. Every daily interaction became a study in the emotions of others. Soon, still images were no longer enough to capture the vibrant emotions that surrounded me. Consequently, I found myself writing stories and bringing them to life through video.

Driven by this new passion for filmmaking, I established a film club at my school. However, anxiety returned as I was asked to record an introduction for my club. I began to doubt myself in every shot that I framed. This struggle, however, led to a breakthrough as my perception of photography and drawing merged with filmmaking. The walls that separated the different areas of my room collapsed and the boundaries between different art forms disappeared. All of my passions merged in an unrestricted symphony of aesthetics, perceptions, and sensitivities, not unlike when my anxieties merged with my creativity.

I also found a better way to access the room — to do creative work late at night after I finish my homework. Since I was entering a dream state, I stopped critiquing my instincts and allowed serotonin to carry my ideas onto the paper. I was driven by imagination and emotion, and I was fearless as they merged all art forms into one. Because of this breakthrough, I felt a responsibility to my art. I was duty bound to depict and scrutinize human existence for the viewers of my works; I finally knew that my mission would be to create stories that capture human emotions and make people reflect on the world around them.

# 97% Allegra Mendonsa

## 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.

97%. That is the survival rate for thyroid cancer. It’s the first thing I looked up after my diagnosis. I felt like something inside me shattered. I told myself I could live with that because, statistically speaking, I would be okay.

However, my parents had a different reaction to the news. This was one of the few times they had been in the same room since I was 13 and one of the only times they agreed on anything. I saw the fear in their eyes, expecting to see their fear mirrored in mine. Within minutes, my father found the best doctor in Chicago specializing in thyroidectomies, while my mother stared at me and held back tears, longing for me to expose my feelings - any feelings. That’s not what I did. Numbness overtook my body, and I looked at my diagnosis through rational eyes. I knew if I could focus on the objective numbers and statistics, I could avoid the whirlwind of emotions that I was feeling.

After three nights alone in a hospital miles away from home and two fresh incisions to my neck, I finally woke up in my bed. I put on my favorite dress and my newest accessory, a white bandage, and went to school. Quickly, I learned my parents weren’t alone in their desire for emotions. Whispers and curious gazes followed me through the hall. When I answered my classmates’ questions, they pulled me into a hug I didn’t consent to and told me, with pity in their eyes, how sorry they were for me. These were people I had barely spoken to, but who acted as if having cancer was some sort of secret, and now that I had told them, we were best friends. I knew they meant well, but I could never give them what they wanted from me: emotion. Before my wounds healed, my doctor told me my cancer had returned. I felt as if my scars reopened. I recalled the pain and loneliness of my first surgery, accompanied by stares, and realized I would have to do it all over again. Before my parents could see me break down, I excused myself to the restroom; I let myself feel the emotions I had locked up inside: fear, sadness, frustration, loneliness. Instead of helping myself, I told myself lies about my vulnerability making me weak. I absorbed everyone else’s feelings about me while simultaneously ignoring my own.

It took a second cancer diagnosis for me to realize I am not a machine. I don’t want to view myself as a “victim” but I realized I had to accept that this was something that happened to me: I had cancer. By acknowledging and confronting my own emotions, I had finally begun mending the brokenness inside that had been hurting me since the day I was diagnosed. This experience taught me that an absence of emotion isn’t what makes a person strong, but weak. By being honest with myself about how I’m feeling and why, I’ve gained a better understanding of myself. Now, every morning before I take my required medicine, I’m reminded that I should embrace my vulnerability, not fear it.

# Community Service Seoyi Lee

## USC students are known to be involved. Briefly describe a non-academic pursuit (such as service to community or family, a club or sport, or work, etc.,) that best illustrates who you are, and why it is important to you.

Paper plates. It was always the favorite medium for my five friends every Saturday morning. Through connections with a certified neurologist, Kyung Il Park, I helped to develop an art therapy program for children and adults with special needs. While there would be different participants each week, I became close with a group of five with Down Syndrome. At first, they were just patients, but as I came to bond with them, they became my friends.Helping the students complete an art piece was difficult as many had trouble focusing for a long period of time or became frustrated with their inability to accurately express their visions. For instance, one second my friend would be pointing at the yellow marker, but as soon as the color yellow was added to our flower, she would kick and scream.

Moments like these were hard due to our communication barrier. However, we overcame this obstacle through gestures and laughter. I realized that art therapy is not just about teaching art; it has more depth to it. Art therapy is a vehicle for understanding the other’s mind. Most of all, seeing the impact art can create gave me a firm assurance in my love for art. Art therapy opened up ways for me to to interact with my friends without the need for language. Through interactions with colors, materials, and context, we were able to create something beautiful in cohesion.

# academic interests seoyi lee

## Describe your academic interests and how you plan to pursue them at USC. Please feel free to address your first- and second-choice major selections

I am always interested in making something radically new out of an ordinary idea. As I explored different styles and media at the Orange County School of the Arts, I became an artistic nomad, seeking for something new each and every step in my learning process. Utilizing ink pens one day, yarns another, and then boxes, nails, and even chocolate, I create artworks that express the crazy side of my brain. However, I tend to answer even before the audience has a chance to question. I need some element of obscurity, a game of push and pull, and a little more subtlety in my art.

At Roski, I will be able to submerge myself into the art world through the guidance and critique of some of the best skilled professors. In particular, I would love to learn from Tala Madani whose expertise in abstract form of art particularly intrigues me. In addition to furthering my skills in painting and drawing, I hope to discover new ways of doing printmaking through the guidance of Xavier Fumat. As one of my career aspirations is to become an art therapist, I would like to supplement my art studies with courses in psychology and intern in the Art Therapy Program at the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles. By filling the gaps in my art knowledge and skills and exploring new territories in art, I will create innovative artworks that speak powerfully through its nuances.

# My Journey through HAM Radio 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.

It was uncomfortably hot, when we climbed the last bend of the mountain; another 25 minutes added to the 2 hour drive from base camp- an excruciating journey. I was leading an expedition in Almora, a rugged terrain known for its dangerous, steep slopes. Far below, I saw the village – Bansoli, disconnected from the mainland, an insular existence. And if, perchance, a flood struck as it often did in these areas, the inhabitants would need to flee… or be swept away. I dismissed this macabre thought from my mind. After all it wouldn’t happen, as I was there to fix it.

Upon reaching the school we were aiming for, we were greeted by an early prayer, followed by announcements, ending with the recitation of the thought of the day. The principal introduced us all to the premises that boasted four dilapidated rooms offering education to 250 students. We were then invited to breakfast on fruit as the principal bemoaned the several calamities this village had endured, the latest being the recent Uttarakhand floods. Yet the villagers were loath to leave their birth place. He took us outside, pointing out the ravaged houses and destroyed vegetation. Some people had died, victims to the wrath of nature. Had they possessed a mode of communication, this could have been circumvented. I had chosen the right place. HAM Radio could help them.

As I entered the class, I was engulfed by white dust from chalk scratching on slates. The students sat in three sections, divided by level – 8th, 9th and 10th. The teacher, a tall thin man, welcomed me smiling broadly, relinquishing his place. The students gazed at me wonderingly. Deja vu- the math meetings I took at school re-surfaced. I realized that these students were not unlike us, except that they lacked our privilege and our insulation from the elements.

Thus, I began my talk, educating the class on surviving natural disasters. I explained the relevance of HAM Radio in today’s world, despite the proliferation of mobile phones. It costs a mere $0.1 for international and $0.04 per day for domestic contacts. It also works as a stand-alone, independent of mobile towers that are often rendered inoperable by natural calamities.

HAM Radio is a hobby marginalized by most due to the sheer rigor of the course that aspiring “Hams” have to complete to acquire the necessary license. They have to devote countless hours to learning the operation of a radio, and setting the rest of the equipment, all of which entail dedication. Thereafter, they have to extend themselves to interest an audience that normally holds the device redundant in relation to mobile phones. For me, HAM Radio combines my love for physics and Engineering with my desire to serve the community. It fulfills my passion to apply my knowledge and skills to raise awareness about an existing technology in society. Being the In-Charge of HAM Radio in school, I felt responsible to increase awareness in places affiliated with my school. This was definitely a start.

As I was about to leave the room, a faint voice called out. A young student, probably in grade 8, beamed at me. Ramesh introduced himself and then went on to tell me about his parents, how they had died during the Uttrakhand floods, unable to communicate their situation, ultimately succumbing to hunger. Had they known about HAM Radio, he said, they would surely have survived. The burden of holding the family together was now his. “I can’t thank you enough Sir, for introducing me to HAM Radio,” he said, in Hindi “I will work hard and will be licensed. Perhaps, one day, it would save my village and my family. Have a safe journey!” I left the room proud and smiling. I had been successful in my mission.