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**Sample essays 2017**

**University of Texas--Austin**

# A Future Meeting Foram Naresh Mehta

## Many students expand their view of the world during their time in college. Such growth often results from encounters between students who have lived different cultural, economic, or academic experiences. With your future growth in mind, describe a potential classmate that you believe you could learn from either within or outside a formal classroom environment.

In a day and age when religious persecution might be expected to be a diminishing issue, one might be surprised to realize that it is in fact alive and well. While crusades may no longer be erupting to rid the world of the "non-believers" and convert them to Christianity, a more passive religious persecution has arisen in some of the more conservative, Christian areas of the country. Growing up as a Hindu and having been frequently subjected to the teachings of Christ in a harsh, obtrusive manner, I personally know how it feels to be a victim of religious torment. For this reason especially, I hope to meet someone on my college journey who does not govern his or her life solely by strict religious standards, but instead espouses strong, personal beliefs while allowing others to freely practice their own religions. I strongly believe that meeting someone of this nature will help me grow into a more confident and stronger person, knowing that the number of those who attempt to oppress my religion is, at least, lessened by one.

Growing up as a Hindu, I learned to practice passiveness, a belief that also applies to my attitude towards other religions. However, I have not been so lucky as to have often been on the receiving end of this attitude. While all religions expect followers to utilize their teachings in their everyday lives, I believe that some encourage the oppression of others who are attempting to live their lives by the same standards. Living in a largely Christian community, I have experienced the challenges that go hand-in-hand with following a different belief system. Being told that I will go to Hell for not believing that Jesus is my savior is not an easy thing to brush off. There is a fine line between practicing one's religious beliefs on a daily basis and governing a society based solely on those religious standards. When the line is crossed, it results in the persecution of others' beliefs. However, I strongly feel that it is possible to practice the teachings of one's religion while also understanding that no one - regardless of the belief system that they endorse - should be subjected to abuse.

College is a time when one is able to engage with students from all over the world. Unlike in high school, students come from diverse backgrounds, creating a multi-cultural and multi-religious canvas. I expect to meet many students with various personal and religious beliefs, and especially hope to meet someone who is religious, but who also respects the right of others to hold different beliefs. Encountering someone who, like me, believes that everyone should be provided with the space to live however they like so long as they do not oppress others will allow me to grow into someone who is more confident; someone who can walk a little taller knowing that they will not experience religious abuse from at least one individual; someone who can live life without the constant fear of being subjected to wrongful oppression.

Many people do not realize the extent to which religious persecution continues to impact our society. Having been subjected to it, I have felt the repercussions of not being a follower of the dominant religion. In college, I hope to meet someone who will not live his or her life based solely on religious standards, and who will encourage others to express their own beliefs. Surrounding myself with open-minded individuals will transform me into a stronger and more confident person, determined to live my life in accordance with my own beliefs.

# El Carmen April Marie Zwerneman

## Describe a significant setback, challenge or opportunity in your life and the impact that it has had on you.

This summer, I had the opportunity to escape from the routine of daily life and spend a week in Mexico. However, this week was no Acapulco vacation. I journeyed alongside several dozen members of my youth group to El Carmen, a small village on the Mexican interior, far from the tourist-friendly coastal cities. It had none of the amenities that an American takes for granted, such as ice-cold water and plumbing strong enough to flush toilet paper. But we were there on a mission: to bring love, friendship, and structural improvements to twenty children who resided in an unfinished orphanage by the name of Casa Hogar.

Casa Hogar is located in the middle of nowhere. Only after driving miles down an unpaved, rocky trail, dwarfed on either side by harsh, mountainous terrain, did we arrive at the concrete orphanage. Designed as a haven, most of the children who take refuge there are not actual orphans, but rather sons and daughters removed by the government from unhealthy living conditions. Because Casa Hogar specializes in severe cases, its location makes it an ideal fortress for children fleeing from not only impoverished circumstances but abusive, unstable parents.

Fernando, like many of the "orphaned" residents, was raised by his mother, never knowing the violent man technically referred to as his father. Upon Fernando's arrival to Casa Hogar, he maintained contact with his mom on weekly visit days, an option available to most of the children but taken advantage of by few parents. It is easy to imagine the pain of disappointment resulting in a no-show parent; the agony of maternal rejection freshened on a weekly basis. Fernando eventually joined this category of children as his mother's attendance faltered, choosing to focus her energy on alcoholic cravings rather than the needs of her son. Practically abandoned by the strongest bond of love he had ever known, Fernando would cry out for his mother in the middle of the night, every night. He was deprived of a carefree childhood, afraid to bond for fear of rejection, and rarely truly happy.

Our last day at the orphanage, however, I was privileged enough to watch a different Fernando at play on the fruits of our labor, a wooden playground set five other teenagers and I had spent the week putting together. Initially as unorganized piles of lumber, bolts, and screws, it had presented a daunting task for a group of students of which none could boast construction experience. But four steamy days under the relentless Mexico sun later, I found myself proudly brushing a final coat of sealant on our finished product. The real treat, however, came in watching Fernando set his troubles aside, at least for a while, and enjoy being a kid. It was worth every drop of sweat and every aching muscle to see him laugh and rejoice over conquering the climbing wall, a mere molehill in comparison to the mountains of pain and sorrow he has been forced to scale already. To watch him smile and shout along with the other children is an image I will never forget. Although it lasted barely five minutes, his triumph is living proof of the difference one person can make in the life of another.

Before the trip, I found it hard to believe that something I could do, like building a playground or painting a bathroom wall, could be a significant improvement to a child's life, especially a child who had lost everything. What they really needed was two parents committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for their new family; a need we were unable to satisfy. But, as Fernando so clearly demonstrated, I was wrong. I underestimated the value of my little contributions to a person who has nothing. It doesn't take something as huge as ending world hunger or discovering a cure for cancer to improve lives. It doesn't take orphans, or even third-world countries. Making a difference is setting my needs aside to focus on someone else. It is stepping out of routines and comfort zones to see the bigger picture. Making a difference is as simple as an everyday commitment to helping others.

# Different Jorgen Nelson

## Many students expand their view of the world during their time in college. Such growth often results from encounters between students who have lived different cultural, economic, or academic experiences. With your future growth in mind, describe a potential classmate that you believe you could learn from either within or outside a formal classroom environment.

He walked into the classroom like any other student would on his first day of class. He carried the same books, same vaguely uncomfortable air about him, and same barely-concealed eagerness to learn as the rest of us. Yes, in all regards he was a perfectly normal student, except for the one thing that struck me profoundly from the outset: he was old.

He was in his mid-40s, by my estimation, a bear of a man with a large but neat salt-and-pepper beard and a jovial, laid-back atmosphere about him. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind, and never hesitated to share a quick witticism or one of his many anecdotes. He was experienced, worldly. This man had been everywhere, done everything, and had something to say about it all. No matter the subject, there was some little song of experience to be sung, some small scrap of knowledge to be imparted to us youngsters (as he called us). I would grow to respect this man, and I began to look forward to seeing him. I truly valued the insight he could give me into things I had not, and in many cases, could not have yet experienced. Sure, the other students may have come from different backgrounds than I did, but we all shared some pretty fundamental similarities: we had all grown up in the same age, we were all limited in our perception by our oh-so-few years, and we had never known anything other than life at home and school. This grizzled veteran of life's many battles could teach us something we could never have taught one another: the real world. Not the sanitized, G-rated version we all get from our parents, but the world as it is: the sordid with the sublime, the brutal with the beautiful. He taught me life, and that invigorating love of life that can only come with experiencing its many ups and downs.

It's true; he wasn't really one of us. He didn't live in the dorms with us, and come to think of it, I don't think I ever saw him outside that one class and occasionally walking across campus. I guess it's just as well, since he had a job and family to worry about. In spite of all the warmth he shared, and the respect we accorded him, he never quite fit in- I'm not sure that he could have, the divide was simply too profound. Instead of the youthful camaraderie and playful competition I had with the other, traditional students, our relationship was more reserved; the weary lines of concern etched on his face testified that he was past the age where all of life is a joke and nothing is sacred. I think this separation made me value his company even more- he wasn't just a friend; he wasn't one of the myriad acquaintances in and around the school, he was a cousin, father, brother, comrade, confidante, and mentor, but most of all, he was himself, a unique individual the likes of which I'd never encountered before.

It was hard to see him go on that last day of class together. We both knew, however, that it would have to end some day, and that we both had our own radically different lives to pursue. I haven't seen him since, but I carry the lessons he's imparted within my heart to this very day.

# Progress Jorgen Nelson

## Please write on a topic of your choice

I wrestled open the door, juggling the unwieldy fruits of my labor. Here I was again at Sequencing, that cavernous machine-laden room on the 15th floor of the Alkek Building in the Baylor College of Medicine Human Genome Sequencing Center, repeating the same procedure followed with every set of cloned DNA that I created. I shuffled past the rows of Applied Biosystems 3730xl DNA Analyzers, those mechanical gods that demanded their daily sacrifice of genetic material. I continued on past the temple attendants in white lab coats to the sacrificial altar, a nondescript white freezer where DNA samples to be sequenced are placed. I dumped the pile of DNA trays, filled in the requisite information on the sign-in sheet and turned to go.

For three weeks I had been doing this. For three weeks I brought my humble little trays here and never saw them again. Before reaching the door, I looked out the window across the expansive Houston cityscape. On the horizon I noted the smokestacks and cracking towers of the great petrochemical complexes to the south and east, steady streams of condensation billowing from their heights. On a fundamental level, is this building so much different from the ones in the distance? I came to do research, to change the world, perhaps. Yet here I was, just a cog in a great machine, working in a factory, not of oil and steel, but of nucleotides and reagents. I cloned, I sequenced, I compiled the results, and I passed them on. I didn't know what I was working for or what I was creating. Was I creating anything at all? Sitting on the bus, heading home, staring blankly out the Plexiglas window, I remained troubled. I wasn't satisfied. I wanted to learn, to know, and to discover.

I realized that I didn't feel like my efforts had meaning because I was seeing but a small piece of the puzzle. I was now determined to see the whole picture. The very next day, I casually asked my principal investigator what all of the work I was doing went towards. He casually informed me that we were working towards discovering the genetic components of epilepsy. My efforts were part of the search for mutations, known as single nucleotide polymorphisms, affecting nerve cells' ability to effectively transmit signals. This was incredible. This was fascinating. I had to know more. I threw myself with renewed passion into my work. The tiny tubes filled with patient DNA were no longer mere solutions to be manipulated. They were hopes and dreams, collected, concentrated, poured into diminutive bottles, and frozen to await their fulfillment. The readouts on the cold computer screens were no longer endless strings of As, Ts, Gs, and Cs; they were mysteries to be solved and battles to be won against those minute mutations that control the fate of so many. And when I brought those trays to the sequencing machines, I was no longer presenting sacrifices to heartless, unfeeling idols. I was helping to create something greater than myself. I was working towards knowledge, discovery, and progress; this is what I was creating, and this was enough for me.

# The Election James Walton Gibson

## Describe a significant setback, challenge or opportunity in your life and the impact that it has had on you.

Near the end of my junior school year, I ran for senior class president. My decision was based on a few different factors. For one, I wanted to play a larger role in my school. Although I have always participated in school athletics, I have historically not participated in clubs and school organizations, and I was eager to change that. Also, I knew that the senior class president is granted an opportunity to give a speech to the graduating class at the graduation ceremony. That was the selling point for me, because the opportunity to address my fellow students on one of the best days of our lives is priceless.

My announcement was met with much excitement and congratulations from students throughout my class. Someone spoke to me about it every day leading up to the election. My opponent was a long time office holder, and she did not expect me to challenge her in the election. Election day came and I was on edge. I had been furiously campaigning and reminding friends of the event, and I was optimistic but unsure of the results.

When the results came in, I had won. Almost as soon as the good news echoed through the halls, I came upon bad news. There were reports of my voters stuffing the ballot box. I would never endorse such cheating, and the rumors dismayed me. As I heard more and more stories, I eventually heard stories with names attached. Without hesitation, I approached each of the three people that had reportedly cast multiple votes. They confirmed that it was true.

I felt that my whole accomplishment was ruined. I knew that many, many people had honored me with their votes and had not cheated. These people were lifelong friends of mine. These people were fellow classmates who had maybe only heard me give a speech in English class. A few students had ruined a very good thing for myself and dishonored all the people who had fairly voted in the election, whichever side they were on. I was about ready to announce that I would step down from my position as newly elected class president, when the head teacher of student council approached me. She asked me about the cheating, and I told her everything I knew. She informed me that there would be a re-vote. I told her that I was in favor of that, although secretly I knew it would be hard to ask voters to cast their ballots again when they thought that I had cheated in the last election. I decided I would go ahead and try it again for one reason. Even if only one person would vote for me in the next election, it would be worth it. Because if I didn't run, I would be letting that one person down.

As I had expected, it was not easy to ask people who had done me a favor to do it again, but I did it. Surprisingly enough, this time my adversary launched a huge campaign. She gave out cookies with her name "for president" labeled on the plastic wrap of each pack. She sent out electronic messages to masses of students on "MySpace," a medium I have no experience with. It would be a tough race.

It was a different election the second time. There were adults, not students, running the polls this time. Students couldn't vote without a driver's license or official school I.D. After a student would cast a ballot, their name was marked off of a list of everyone in the junior class. After the election, it took three times as long to count the ballots. They were making sure this time.

The results came in for the second time, and I had won again. The impact was huge. I had learned a lesson about "sticking with it." I had learned that friends, and forging relationships with the people around you at all opportunities in life, are always better than cookies. Also, this was an opportunity for me to teach those three students who had cheated in the first election a lesson about honesty. Honesty always pays off. Lastly, I learned that when the going gets tough, I need to look deep into my ethics and values and make an educated decision with them in mind.

# Watch Jessica Monk

## Describe a roommate in your first year of college who would greatly influence your college experience and your life.

There’s no way that it’s morning already. I hear footsteps running down the hall; eight hours ago this would have been considered typical, but now, it’s completely ludicrous. The door to my dorm room swings open with a nauseating kind of reality, shattering any possibilities that I might have been dreaming. It was her again, I knew it. What did she want now?

She pulled me out of my dreamland and into hers with an awkward transition, leaving me no room for reaction. She tugged me into the hall and dragged me toward the exit. “What is the problem?” I said to her irritably. At this hour, I was not concerned with tact. She continued to pull me outside as if it offered some sort of compromise, as if nature could possibly satisfy my current sleep deficiency. Then just as I was beginning to diagnose a lunatic, she pointed to the horizon and uttered a single word, “Watch.”

I squinted into the distance between a collection of trees and searched for some hidden wonder. In finding none, my gaze drifted back to her face, her delicate features softened in the morning air. She was seeing something I wasn’t, and I couldn’t believe I was missing it.

Suddenly, tension lifted on wings of heaven, and birds sang her song. Life began to blossom all around me, awakening with vigor and vitality. The moisture of morning cleared my senses, allowing my mind to fully participate. I looked out again, abruptly aware of a sea of color swelling over a vast land of promise. Sunlight reached outwards into every crack and crevice of the earth, slowly seeking out those in need of comfort, and offering its services with plentiful grace. I yearned for its warmth, but still hesitant to step out of the shadows, where I was safe. I searched her face once again for any human signs, but I found none. The genuine respect and pure awe that resonated around her lifted me to a place I had never before been.

This was the first time I really recognized her. I no longer saw her as some crazy girl who likes to get up early to see the sun rise, but a true appreciator of life, a connoisseur of beauty, a relic from days forgotten. As the year went on I developed a close friendship with her. Not necessarily taking her ways, but I listened, I observed, and I found knowledge.

She went to class every day just like the rest of us, but her attention seemed so much more intimate than any college student I had observed. She listened to our professor with a kind of reverence that completely floored me. She valued new and useful information with such respect and awe. She was engulfed in this trance as she absorbed every word, taking it in, deep down where definition resides. Then she came home and ate Milk Duds, religiously; life was too short to miss any kind of sweetness.

This was her, undeniable and yet so indefinable. I do not feel like a different person because of her influence, but much more aware. She took the time to see the world in all of its intricacies, finding every quirky detail and unexpected wonder. She expanded my views in the reverence of nature, intelligence, faith and character. She allowed me to learn from her abstract patterns, and develop some of my own. She was a dream from heaven and the best reality I have ever lived. She taught me the most important lesson I have ever learned: to look closer, to watch.

# How my friend affected my life Anonymous

## Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.

The crack of the shoulder pads atop two burly young men signals that the high school football season is in full swing. If not for the electric Friday nights under the lights of a shrine to hard work, there would be weeks when I simply existed and hadn’t really lived. But on these nights when the school comes together just as I do to cheer and possibly inspire these fellow classmates, you are reminded just how amazing it feels to really live life.

When I think of football, I think of my closest friend Russ. In middle school, he would use me as an elbow rest after church, but I was okay with that, because he was Russ, and he played football, and he was cool. As a freshman in high school I realized that I wasn’t supposed to like his football team because they were rivals from the town north of me. But it didn’t matter, because he was Russ, he played football, and he was cool. Russ ran faster than me, had three times as many admirers at school than me, and could lift five times as much weight as me, but we were connected by a close friendship.

I always thought of him as the wonderful big kid who played hard, worked hard in school, and gave his best all the time. At 5’ 11’’, 230 lbs., he was too small to be recruited as a big time lineman, but sure worked the hardest on the gridiron. He played with incredible passion to make up for his small stature compared to other lineman. He taught me more than books will ever teach me: to get great results you have to put your best effort into a task. He has become my most important role model and I started seeing good things in him that I needed to have in my life also.

Sometimes I wonder why he would stick so close to me as a friend. I feel, sadly, Russ sometimes saw in me a reminder of what not to do with talents. I feel too that he stayed so close to me because he knew he rubbed off on me. I have been in accelerated classes since elementary school, always a little smarter than most other kids. But as school got tougher in high school and senior high, I didn’t do as Russ did and do my best and get great grades. I often used my intelligence to just get by in classes. And it is painfully obvious when I remember Russ’s funny salutatorian speech that he gave his best efforts and was rewarded greatly, and I often have not done so.

Now Russ has gone to college and there will be a whole year of not seeing him almost every Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. It is hard for me to think of all the blood, sweat and tears that Russ put into being the best football player he could be, and the long nights he stayed awake doing homework so he would stay at the top of his class, and I realize that I have fallen short of the standard and example he set. But even if I have not always followed Russ’s example, I now can step back and see all that he has taught me. He has shown me that in order to get the most out of life, I need to give my best. He has shown me that in giving your best, you truly live life. I can now think of this year, and my entire future ahead of me, as a test to see if I have learned from Russ what he has tried to teach me all along: life is short, and if you want to enjoy it, you must give your best.

# The Lab Ryan Esparza

## Write about a significant event and how it impacted your life?

The first time that science really made sense was in seventh grade, when a frog lay splayed out on the desk in front of me. While the stench of formaldehyde made others eyes water and stomachs churn, I was too fascinated to notice. I was intrigued by the frog’s still form and innards arranged in neat array under the flap I had incised in its abdomen. Inside were precise engineering marvels, finer than the gearings within a Swiss watch, each perfectly evolved through a process I had only read about and never truly understood. Here was the basis for religion, the faith in a higher power that actually represents faith in the innumerable and incomprehensible wonders of nature.

I have always enjoyed observing patterns: the point and counterpoint in Beethoven's 15th string quartet and the intricate fingerings and crescendo in his Kreutzer sonata, as well as the rise and fall of the empires of history. However, my favorite patterns have always been found in science, in particular, (Phi) “The Golden Ratio” and its divine implementation throughout Nature, from Da Vinci’s study of the human body to Zeising’s study on plants.

But what if the pattern, the exquisite creation, breaks? What if something goes wrong, an artery bursts, the patient hemorrhages and dies within seconds? Science and engineering are beautiful in an abstract sense when dealing with grand theories, words on a page, even peaceful revelations about the frog, but perhaps the frog was not a good analogy for the experience of medicine. After all, there was no danger; the frog had already passed on. Having to explain to a grieving family why they have lost their young daughter is another situation altogether, a crushing reality that might pose a significant setback for me.

Nevertheless, working hands-on would be more satisfying to me than to remain in abstraction, in a world that, while appealing in its lack of emotional trauma, offers relatively little in the way of direct human application and personal reward. Surely in medicine and biomedical engineering there must exist great triumphs, something to balance the overwhelming defeats? The common medical adage is that "it never gets easy." I suppose this is true. In a way, I hope that it is. While some might believe that emotions cloud the mind of a superior doctor, I believe that to truly be a good doctor one must live in constant awe and fear. Those are emotions I possess in abundance: awe at the beauty of life and fear at its fragility. That, I hope, will become my legacy.

# Home in Texas Christopher J. Spradling

## The statement of purpose will provide an opportunity to explain any extenuating circumstances that you feel could add value to your application. You may also want to explain unique aspects of your academic background or valued experiences you may have had that relate to your academic discipline. The statement of purpose is not meant to be a listing of accomplishments in high school or a record of your participation in school-related activities. Rather, this is your opportunity to address the admissions committee directly and to let us know more about you as an individual, in a manner that your transcripts and other application information cannot convey.

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A year ago, I desperately wanted to go to college out-of-state. My family had been in Texas for several generations, so I wanted to leave everything behind me, go my own way, and not look back. Also, my father graduated from the University of Texas, so I felt compelled to break that mold. However, as soon as I got away from Texas I realized just how much I really was leaving behind. I now know that I want to be a part of Texas, and a part of the University of Texas.

During my junior and senior years of high school, as I considered various options for college, I found myself enamored with fanciful notions of expensive liberal arts colleges that build their curriculum around “Great Works” studies. I felt that such a rarefied classical education would feed my hunger for literature and philosophical thinking. Never mind that there was no career for me at the end of that educational path; I refused to be put off from such an interesting-sounding opportunity.

I was full of a lot of other ideas as well—I considered myself an extremely independent person, a natural extrovert who could make new friends with ease. Therefore, I was resolutely intent on going to a school as far away from home as possible. It had to be out-of-state, if not out of the country. I was going to leave my old life entirely behind me and start a brand new one somewhere far away from everything.

And, finally, I was determined not to have to pay for school. After all, I wasn’t like everybody else. A National Merit Scholar, number 10 in a graduating class of 560, a nearly perfect SAT taker, a two-time all-state swimmer, and an invitee to UT’s Honors Colloquium, Chris Spradling was entitled to the high road.

Looking back, I was very arrogant, and I was more than a little unrealistic in what I wanted. That is why I find myself in this situation, and why, as painful as it has been, it has been good for me. I’ve matured and grown significantly. I now know what I want, and I want to attend the University of Texas.

This is the way my high-minded dreams played out last winter: I was accepted into all the prestigious “Great Works” schools for which I applied. However, at the same time that I began to realize there was no real, sustainable future for me with a degree from those schools, I also realized that those prestigious schools came with prestigious price tags. Given that they offered no academic scholarships at all, it simply didn’t make sense to pay so lavishly for an education that lacked practical value, while a number of schools around the country offered me great financial incentives for a much more well-rounded college experience.

After that letdown, and after not being accepted into UT’s prestigious Plan II program, I returned to the great College Search, feeling a bit jaded about the whole prospect of college but still steadfast in my other plans for my new life. I found little that sounded particularly interesting to me, though, as my mind was still on the lofty idealisms I was now giving up. So, as final deadlines for applications began approaching, I decided, rather hurriedly, on a promising-sounding “Prestigious Fellowship” program at the University of Arkansas, and that was that. I declined all my other acceptance offers, and declared that I was going to Arkansas.

I now know that I made the wrong decision, doing that. As early as Orientation in June, I began waking up to just how improper a perspective I held on my future. That realization intensified dramatically once I arrived on campus, and since then, the time I’ve spent here have taught me more about myself than any other single event in my life.

The hard revelation that I will need a career, that someday I’ll be standing on the other side of college and I’ll need somewhere meaningful to go, has very rapidly sobered my ponderings about my major. I’ve decided that I will pursue Economics, while all my other artistic passions I will still hold dear as hobbies and pastimes and as a way of shaping my perspectives on life. Now that I’ve decided that, I have a new appreciation for all the powerful and prestigious programs that UT offers, and realize I want to be a part of them.

The other major reason I initially chose to not attend UT was that I felt it was too close to home. However, even just my relatively short time at Arkansas has proven that assertion dead wrong as well. While I still consider myself fairly self-reliant, I’ve found quite unexpectedly that I miss Texas, my family, my hometown of Fort Worth, and all my old friends quite desperately. In the back of my mind, I always assumed that I would eventually miss my family, my old friends and maybe my hometown, but I never realized just how powerfully and suddenly I would miss them. I always wondered if this would happen, and it did: As soon as I got away from Texas, I fell in love with it.

Finally, I have lost just about all of my undue arrogance about what kind of a person I am, and adopted what I find to be a much healthier and more sober sense of self. This is perhaps the most vital change my time here has brought about. My realization that I need a different school has made me, naturally, a transfer student. I no longer possess my National Merit status, my 2200 on the SAT, or any other distinction from earlier years that would allow me an easier path in college. I am a transfer student, and I will have to work to get through college, work to pay for it, and work to attain the life I now see that I want.

And for the first time in my life, I am eager to do that.

# Most Heroes Don't Know It Christopher J. Spradling

## Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.

Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.

I think it’s safe to say that, though he may not know it, Ian Lokey made me who I am more than any other single person I’ve met. When I entered middle school, I became a part of the youth group at my church. That meant I got to meet all the older high school kids, and that’s where I met Ian. I thought he was a very cool guy—partly because he was four years older than me, of course, but also because he had his act together so well. He was an actor and a musician, which made him a rather outgoing person, and he had very refined and respectable ideas about chivalry and etiquette. All in all, he was a great role model, and throughout middle school I looked up to him more than anyone else in church or out of it.

The highlight of every summer at our church was the Youth Camp, and the one during the summer of my freshman year turned out to be nothing short of fantastic. The best part of the week, for me, was when Ian decided to “take me under his wing”, if you will. I’m sure he did so much more out of kindness than he did for the sake of my company (although you’ll never hear him admit that); I was just about to enter high school, after all, and like everyone at that age I was immensely self-conscious and still more than a little out of place in social settings. Ian seemed to think that I had potential and decided I could use a little guidance, I suppose, and so he stuck by my side through much of the week. I could not be more indebted to him, for when I was around him I picked up many, many habits that have each become an integral part of my identity today.

First and foremost, I saw Ian as a gentleman. As an actor, he was slightly eccentric, but as a talented actor, that eccentricity translated into a very refined way of carrying himself. In public, he was a perfect gentleman, always addressing others with the utmost respect and recognizing such lost practices as holding doors for others and standing when a woman enters the room. He held himself to his own code of ethics, and even in private he adhered to that unflaggingly. I hold the utmost respect for that, and for his dedication to it, especially because there are so few today that care about social graces as he does. Though I don’t know if I’m yet as refined as he, I constantly strive to be.

Also, Ian is an archetypical extrovert. He seems to have no fear. He craves the spotlight, and when he is the center of attention his performances never fall flat- I remember one evening vividly, when everyone at the camp was seeing off all the Seniors who would soon be leaving for college. We were all gathered in the big round meeting room, and each Senior would sit in the middle as the microphone was passed around and others would say their goodbyes and share stories about the person. When Ian’s brother, Grant, got into the middle, Ian made a grab for the mic and stood to give a speech that moved just about everyone in the room to tears. It was touching, but what I remember most about it was that it was masterful. He never faltered, never stuttered, and chose every word meticulously. After hearing him speak so effortlessly that night, I determined that I was going to master myself like that as well. Once again, I’m not yet Ian Lokey, but I’ve come a long way.

Ian’s career in the arts (he’s currently ranked one of the top 50 acting students in the country) prompted me to try acting as well, and I even performed in a play my freshman year. I’m no longer in theater, but I still carry a deep-seated love for performance and acting, and my single favorite undertaking in the last four years has been writing, directing, and performing in a movie for my school’s Film Festival. Ian was also a very proficient writer, and a very large portion of my own writing style is an homage to his—a peculiar, conversational style he developed in his online journal.

I haven’t seen Ian in a few years, as he lives across the country in Cincinnati. And even now, I’m sure he has no idea how much that one act of kindness four years ago has meant to me, but I would be terribly remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that Ian Lokey has been my key role model throughout my teenage life.

# Foreign Aid is a Farce Christopher J. Spradling

## Choose an issue of importance to you—the issue could be personal, school related, local, political, or international in scope—and write an essay in which you explain the significance of that issue to yourself, your family, your community, or your generation.

Choose an issue of importance to you—the issue could be personal, school related, local, political, or international in scope—and write an essay in which you explain the significance of that issue to yourself, your family, your community, or your generation.

Foreign aid is a farce.

I understand that’s not a very popular thing to say; one of the only things conservatives and liberals seem to agree on is that the poor and starving of third-world countries need some kind of help. Certainly many, many people would be very distressed to learn that their conscience-consoling donations to the third-world country of their choice were actually doing more harm than good, but that is just what is happening.

On the surface, foreign aid is a wonderful thing, the ultimate good work of society, and indeed on a personal level people helping people is extremely noble and provides precious hope for humanity. However, when dealing with nations and governments, goodwill and charity don’t always go over so well.

For example, American farmers have in the last century had serious difficulty staying in business in light of America’s remarkably low and heavily fluctuating produce prices, prompting the federal government to subsidize farmers’ sales and thus promote overproduction. Then, out of the goodness of everyone’s collective heart, all that excess grain is shipped over to the poor, starving worlds of Africa and Asia, so that the world will be a better place and so many emaciated children will have bellies full of grain tonight. A noble sentiment, certainly, but rather flawed.

Take Ethiopia. Ethiopia was once an agricultural powerhouse among African countries. Their farming systems were superb, their climate was fertile, and they enjoyed many years of net exports of various grains. Their system was by no means perfect, and poverty was a major issue in the country, but most importantly the country had a stable economic system that allowed the country to provide for itself. Now, the massive amounts of food aid pouring into Ethiopia have created rampant inflation. There is no one to buy from the struggling Ethiopian farmer’s grain stores, and before long that farmer himself will be driven to go wait on the docks for the next shipment of free grain. The poor children in the country may have American grain to eat, but at what cost? Aid of this type does not improve the problem of poverty at all. The economy is soon reduced to total dependency.

The problem isn’t only with agricultural subsidies; America and other wealthy world powers often implicitly finance poverty through international relations. In 2008, America will budget approximately $96 million for unspecified international aid, which will be given freely to poor or oppressed countries. While politically that sounds very good, the truth of the matter is that America does little more than hand the billion dollars to a handful of lucky foreign governments and say “here, now go help your country”. Unfortunately, America has just handed ostensible “aid money” to the very despotic governments that are oppressing their people. Pragmatically speaking, the impoverished of those countries are never going to see that money—unless in the form of shiny new M16s being pointed at them. Now, to be fair, there is a viable purpose behind giving that money away, and the government is serving our own national interest by helping powerful dictators or other oppressive regimes feel friendly toward the U.S. But regardless, to call that money “foreign aid” (or “USAID”, as it were) is simply a lie.

This sort of situation happens all over the world, too, and not just through governmental irresponsibility. Bono is widely hailed as a hero for the money and awareness he’s raising for the helpless in Africa, and heartbreaking TV commercials have been around for decades that depict sad, emaciated children walking through garbage in India and urge viewers to donate now to save a life. But in the long run, what good does that money do? As a matter of common sense, throwing money at a problem is never a particularly wise solution, and here is no different. Monetarily supplementing the poor will only create a welfare state in Africa or wherever the money is going, and will very quickly cripple the lower class of society and make them completely dependent on aid.

Now, not all aid is bad. I sponsor a Kenyan boy named Saiyalel Mororo myself, but I do so under very specific circumstances. The money I send goes to a single child rather than a relief organization, and it will put Saiyalel through school and give him a safe place to live, rather than providing a bread line for him to stand in. So there are good ways to provide aid, they’re just not always the most popular ones. The most beneficial thing we as outsiders can do for a struggling country is to bolster its own infrastructure and encourage public education for its people – because ultimately, our goal is to someday eliminate the need for foreign aid at all.

# My Little Inspiration Brandi Kathleen Schroeder

## Write an essay about someone who greatly influenced your life.

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K… As I enter the house, I hear the sweet melody of this song being sung in the playroom by a vivacious voice that can do nothing but bring a smile to my face. I tiptoe as quietly as I possibly can towards the entrance of the room and peek around the frame. Sitting on the floor is the most precious child I have ever laid my eyes on. Although his back is toward me, he somehow senses a visitor in the room and turns around to look at me with those beautifully almond-shaped eyes that define him. I call out, “Hi Booger Bear! What are you doing?!” He smiles and stumbles to his feet before saying, “Hi Katie,” in his stilted speech. I envelop him in a hug and wonder how I got so lucky as to have him in my life. This little boy is John Archer Fulenwider, and he has been blessed with God’s eternal innocence called Down’s Syndrome. He has changed my life in more ways than ever could be imagined and I will forever hold him near and dear to my heart.

I began babysitting Archer when he was just two years old. Having never dealt with a special-needs child before, I was more than a little scared of this first venture and that radiated unsure expectations. Questions like: what if he did not like me? Was there a certain way I need to deal with him? How would he react when his mother leaves? All of these questions danced through my head upon our first meeting. However, all my fears were washed away the moment I laid eyes on his beautiful smile that can only be described as pure childish innocence. I came to realize that although Archer differs from other children his age, his differences radiate an essence of beauty. He is less demanding than his peers, unless of course, I don’t read him his books. Then he tends to get a bit testy! He also doesn’t cry like other children. He simply says, or demonstrates, what he wants and waits as patiently as a three-year-old can until he receives it.

Patience is one of the many lessons I have learned from him. Although this is not a hard concept, it seems to be more and more difficult for people as we age. Archer has not only taught me that lesson, but he has also taught me so much about myself. He has helped me to be a more caring individual and to take a different outlook on life. Through this outlook, he has shown me that life doesn’t always have to be black and white. There is always a gray area that sometimes we, as humans, lose sight of that. I was one of these people. It took a three-year-old boy to remind me about the most important things in life.

Although most people consider Archer in conjunction with a disability, I look at him more as having a blessing from God. Our Father loved Archer so much that he wanted to create him in such a special way so as whenever Archer encountered someone, he touched his or her heart. I was no exception. Archer may not be old enough at his four years of age to fully comprehend the extent of his disabilities; but even if he does recognize it, he is not letting it stop him. His blessing is just one more characteristic that makes him who he is. Already he knows what he wants, and he will do everything he can to reach his goal. Archer’s perseverance is something I deeply admire. He never gives up, and I strive to follow in his footsteps. He has also taught me to be a better person in many aspects of my life. I feel that if every person in this world had the same mentality as Archer that our society would be a better place. Since when is striving to be the best a bad thing? Archer has helped me realize that with a little effort, it can all be accomplished.

I can honestly say that I have learned from this little boy in more ways than one. The world is constantly telling us yes, but we don’t take advantage of it. Archer, on the other hand, is constantly being told no, yet he doesn’t let it get him down. He perseveres. If he doesn’t achieve success on the first try, there is always a second and a third. I find his persistence to be an extremely admirable quality. As I continue to watch Archer grow, I notice that he is not letting, nor do I believe will he ever let, his Down’s Syndrome define him. He chooses to define Down’s Syndrome. He is saying that he will continue to overcome any and all obstacles that come his way. Because of him, I tell myself each and every day that no obstacle is too great nor challenge too difficult to overcome. If it takes learning from a very special four year old, then I welcome the change. Archer has impacted my life in so many ways, and he has made me a better person because of it.

I thank God every day for bringing John Archer Fulenwider into my life and allowing him to teach me some of life’s hardest lessons through the eyes of a child. He is the most caring, sincere, and absolutely wonderful child that would find joy and excitement out of doing something as simple as singing childish songs on his playroom floor. Archer has taught me so much about myself that no one, not even myself, could uncover. Sometimes, having a blessing in disguise is just what it takes. Although I’m not sure where life will take either of us, I do know that he will continue to be one of the strongest people I know and will forever be my special Booger Bear. I cannot thank him enough for impacting my life in such a positive way.

# Human. Deborah Lin

## Choose an issue of importance to you—the issue could be personal, school related, local, political, or international in scope—and write an essay in which you explain the significance of that issue to yourself, your family, your community, or your generation.

It’s been a while since I curled up in my closet and carefully pried open the lid of my Blue Box: 5 X-Acto knives with 10 interchangeable blades and an array of 5 different handles. A cutter’s dream. Mom would always warn me when I borrowed that Box, for an art project or some school presentation or for cutting out magazine pictures to paste on my bedroom wall – “Be careful, they’re sharp.” A wry smile comes to mind. Proceed to art project/ school presentation/ magazine cut-outs, sitting cross-legged on carpeted bedroom floor and complete art project/ school presentation/ magazine cutouts. Then retreat to closet for some acquaintance time with blade of choice, a continuation of personal art project. You know it goes: the sharp tip my pencil; my forearms the canvas; my heavy, thudding heartbeat the studio music.

This issue of self-harm, or self-mutilation as others call it (which brings to my mind gruesome situations like deliberate amputation of a limb, or someone actually taking the initiative to visit the dentist) seems so touchy and uncomfortable in general public discussion (probably because it is). But escape to that almighty, all-knowing haven of infinite knowledge and the like-minded anonymous, the World Wide Web. There you’ll find company, scores of strangers with similar experiences and perspectives, welcoming and all too willing to share. What’s the difference? The general public in “real life” comprises part of the same general population on the internet, with about two billion other human beings. And yet, when conversations in “real life” inadvertently meander towards the subject of self-harm, one or more of the three reactions seem to occur: a lapse into somber, morose stillness, as if there is an unspoken agreement to a moment of silence for our fallen brethren, nobody we know personally; awkward, uncomfortable laughter in which someone clears their throat and tactfully switches the topic; or rude jokes are made – because everybody who cuts is pathetic and on the edge of suicide, right?

I know that my generation is one that hurts, in more ways than what is merely etched into our skin, on our hearts, our minds. The stigma and stereotype of those who cut connotes hidden shame and scorn as much as emaciated figures and sunken cheeks. As I see society whispering about their hush-hush secrets, or not revealing them at all, I fight the initial instinct to withdraw as well, hearing that inner voice that tells me I am still that pathetic, on-the-edge-of-suicide girl that I was six years ago. I’m clearly not. Yes, I have scars. Yes, I survived. I have been broken down, deconstructed and haphazardly pieced back together with a certain relief, while others are still out there on their knees, stubbornly and deliberately pushing away their own pieces.

I wish mine was the voice to defend the unspoken, those whose painful silence masks shameful secrets. Yet I remain silent. I listen, I make noises of sympathy and support, yet my eyes are full with love and understanding: that great love that gets me by in those awkward moments when a truth so ugly and rampant is revealed: that I am Human, flawed and fallible. Fallen and falling. Perhaps this is the truth that seems to shut everybody up mid-conversation.

# True Beauty Deborah Lin

## Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.

Oprah never read me bedtime stories. Dr. Phil never advised me on my inspirations and aspirations, suggested careers that were seemingly tailored all too well to my strengths and weaknesses, gave me practical insight into the enigmatic minds of the male variety. Then again, to cater to my (almost) every demand from conception to college years would be a nearly impossible and thankless task. Why would these American icons bother with a job that is not lucrative, Hollywood-worthy, and possibly heart attack-inducing? Yet, in the scope of things that really matter, are we not first impacted and impressed by our parents, whether we hail from a single-parent family or a dual-parent one, whether we are raised by our grandparents or adopted into a loving foster family? Perhaps our parents are not usually the first faces that come to mind when we think about our role models of choice. Yet in the end, these leaders of our home are still present, still influential, and still as embarrassing as ever.

My mother is a complicated woman. She stands two inches under five feet, thus allowing me to tower over her in my 5’1” glory, yet her voice could command an army. In contrast, my father’s calmer demeanor is probably better suited to fighting with fellow soldiers. My mother’s mother, according to Mom’s own words, “wasn’t much of a cook,” yet my mother can make fried rice and beef stew and sautéed crab legs like none other. She didn’t become a Christian until she was in her mid-twenties, inspiring my father to rededicate his faith as well, yet the width and breadth of her knowledge and her passion for Our Father astounds me, enlightens me, inspires me. She’s sharp, blunt, and knows me inside and out. Only this woman could be my mother.

Over the years I have experienced my own joys and sorrows, my strengths and insecurities. I have struggled with my self-identity and my friends, exhausted myself over last-minute projects and homework, and she has weathered much of it by my side. To suffer it all with me would be unnecessary, as she knows that my obstinacy and independent nature requires space for me to learn and hurt and grow. Her honesty teaches me things about myself that I don’t want to know. On a car ride home from church one Wednesday evening, I remember (foolishly) asking my mother if she thought I was beautiful or not. We sped through a yellow light -- to Mom, yellow lights are simply an encouragement to speed up, not a warning to slow down -- and she finally replied, “Are you beautiful? Well... not yet.”

Looking back on that brief conversation, I realize that she wasn’t merely addressing my physical appearance (though I have to admit that I am known more for my brains and humor than my face or physique). Rarely can you find a parent who has the capability to look inside her daughter’s maturity and personality and say it as it really is. She knows my stubbornness, my occasionally bad temper, my pride -- all my flaws displayed for her wisdom and intuition as a mother. And perhaps that is the point. I have been blessed with a sacred mother-daughter relationship, a very affectionate and personal and real connection with the woman who still holds my hand when we go shopping. I have been shaped by the most capable hands possible. It might be an exaggeration to say that I would be nothing without my mother (I’d love some credit for myself), but her impact on my life is undeniable and unshakeable. And maybe one day, hopefully sometime soon, I will be able to look at myself and truly call myself beautiful... just, apparently, “not yet.”

# 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.

# Why Do We Have to Read This Book? Haley B. Williams

## Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life and explain how and why this person is important to you.

"Darcy, why do we have to read this book?" I complained after school. "This book isn’t just stupid, it has no relevance in my life at all." Because she was used to me asking questions like this, her only response was, "Because I told you. And I'm your teacher." Darcy, or Mrs. Romondo, as I was supposed to call her, was my English teacher both my freshman and sophomore year. Not only was she one of the best teachers I've ever had, her influence on my academic career has impacted me in ways that resound throughout the rest of my life.

I met Mrs. Romondo on the first day of my freshmen year in high school. I had gone to a relatively small middle school the two years previous, where I had known everyone, from the students to the faculty and staff. My high school had almost 1000 additional students along with dozens more faculty and staff, none of whom knew who I was or anything about me. On top of that, I was a little 14-year-old, walking the halls with almost seven foot tall seniors. Put lightly, I was terrified. Adding to that, the majority of my new teachers were more worried about controlling the thirty out of control students, than in reassuring one student. However, when I walked Mrs. Romondo’s calm and quiet room, she met me with a handshake and a bright smile. My day after that was no longer quite as scary. Mrs. Romondo quickly became my favorite teacher, and I spent more time in class talking to her than actually doing my work. I could talk to her about anything: school, family, boys, even problems with other teachers. She became more than just a teacher, but a confidante whom I could tell anything.

The next year, as luck would have it, I was once again in her English class. She was still someone I could tell anything to, and it became a daily routine for me to stay a couple minutes after class so I could vent to her about the daily drama that is high school. Mrs. Romondo was never too busy to hear me rant for a few minutes, and she never judged me or told me I was wrong. When I was on the verge of making a bad decision, she was always ready to offer me an alternative, but never told me which one to choose. In class, she constantly pushed me, and never let me get away with an okay assignment, but pushed me to do my best. More often than not, I would turn in papers that exceeded her requirements just to prove to her that I could do what she expected of me, and more.

From Mrs. Romondo I learned more than just the symbolism in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" or what Shakespeare really meant when he wrote "Romeo and Juliet". She taught me to never stop with good, but to get the best. She constantly encouraged me to strive to do better, even when there were times I thought I couldn't do better. When our class had to read "Red Badge of Courage" and I didn't want to, she reminded me that at times there are things we don't want to do, but we must do them anyway. She taught me to understand that not all people are the same, but we should respect them regardless. Her positive attitude and constant smile, even when dealing with freshman throwing dictionaries and licking windows, reminded me that although certain things stress you out, everything will work out in the end. Almost all the pivotal moments one learns in the transition from middle to high school were taught in her corner classroom under the butterfly mobiles.

When I hugged her goodbye the day I left, it was hard to imagine what my life would be like without her. The last words she said to me as I walked out of her room were, "Don't change. No matter what, please do not change." Her forcing me to work with other people, read "The Crucible" and other novels I didn't want to read, and allowing me to speak my mind helped form the person that I am. Without her, I would not be who am I today, and because of that I will always be in her debt. Just not to her swear jar this time.

# Personal Statement Joseph Austin Martinez

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Seeing the Homeless Anonymous

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

The entire high school packed into the auditorium on a December morning for the weekly assembly. After a few student announcements, the chairman of the Community Service Board asked us to step up our contributions to the gift drive because we weren’t on pace to meet our goal of 2,011 gifts. Roderick Demmings, a senior, stood up and asked if he could say a few words. He walked up on stage, stared out at all of us, and took a deep breath. He reminded us how he played piano in Carnegie Hall at 13 years old. He reminded us of the countless hours it takes him to master his musical trade.

He took another deep breath. With absolute poise, Rod continued his speech and told us his first keyboard was a gift that he received in a gift drive while living at Austin Street Homeless Shelter. He went on to tell us how he has been homeless twice in his life. He ended by saying that any one of the gifts that we donate could change a life.

I felt tiny in that auditorium. As Roderick spoke, I remembered the petty concerns that had been on my mind at the beginning of the assembly. I felt selfish. I knew others did too. This young man came to school every day and left his own problems off campus. He was at every sporting event and knew every student’s extra-curricular involvements. He offered to listen to a debater’s argument so he could craft the perfect approach, to hold a photographer’s lights so he could shoot in the best environment possible, and he offered to be a wrestling dummy so that I could improve my low-single. He gave everything he had to give when most of us would be in his position and say that we had nothing to give.

Why? Because even if Roderick didn’t have a house to call his home, he was never homeless. He came to school, his home, everyday to support his 864-person family, us. And because of his care for us, if he ever needed a place to sleep now, he would have 864 offers.

I pledged not to let myself forget Roderick’s speech or example. What did he have to teach me, really teach me? Homelessness is a major issue impacting all cities and neighborhoods. We can observe it as we drive up to a red light, or we can seek it when we serve dinner at homeless shelters for community service. We experience it, and then we forget it because we don’t think it affects us. But, in reality, homelessness plagues all of our communities. I have seen peers glide through these halls like ghosts just to get to the end of the day. Roderick taught me that a home is not primarily a residential structure. It is formed by love and care more than by bricks and mortar. Roderick made the micro-communities he inhabited homes not just for himself, but for everyone—places everyone felt known, welcomed, and supported in their thriving. Did I?

I resolved to make all of my micro-communities—the newspaper staff, football team, wrestling team, community service board, Poetry Club, and all of my classes—as much like homes as I could. The results were eye-opening. It turns out that there are nearly infinite opportunities to care for people and make them feel genuinely welcome every day. I see and address the nervous freshman at the edge of the wrestling mat who is terrified of try-outs. I see and address the junior with the dark circles under his eyes, behind on his story deadline and overwhelmed by problems at home. I see and address the sophomore and now most avid member of Poetry Club, who once thought he was content drifting through high school and not capitalizing on the numerous opportunities around him. Solving homelessness, literal and symbolic, is simultaneously exhausting and exhilarating. It is, in a sense, the most important thing I do every day now. And I learned it from Roderick and the anonymous person who donated the toy keyboard for a gift drive fourteen years ago, who had no idea where her generosity would lead.

# Father Mark's Stand Anonymous

## Describe an influential event in your life.

Eyes lock in on the cross and follow it down the aisle as its bearer leads the procession until the last person of the seemingly endless line grabs the entire congregation’s attention. Entering the back of the sanctuary, Father Mark’s flowing robes make it appear as if he were gliding down the aisle. His regal voice resounds off the white marble and fills the room with his presence. His charisma is absolute; his passion is sincere. It’s Sunday morning, and, while my mom had to pull me out of bed, there is no place in the world Father Mark would rather be. And for that, he is loved. He is adored.

I had just turned twelve when Father Mark shook my hand, addressed me by name, told me it was a pleasure to get to know my family as well as he did, and then said he was retiring. He finished by saying, “Always love your neighbor.” Confused, I mustered a “Yes sir.”

At the time, I didn’t understand the underlying causes of his retirement. Now, I can fully comprehend that he fell victim to a scar on the face of the Episcopal Church. He voted for a bishop based on merit—a man that was arguably the most qualified for the job. The man that Father Mark thought could best lead the Diocese of Dallas happened to be gay. When Father Mark publicly supported this bishop, some members of our church, modern day Pharisees, turned on him.

Intolerance sucked the life out of hymns and dampened sermons. The congregation ran through the motions and came on Sundays as if only to get credit for being there. Prejudice tore a community in half.

Six years later, I haven’t heard a sermon that had everyone talking and discussing after the service. I haven’t seen the sanctuary so full that collapsible chairs have to flood out into the halls and people willingly watch the service on television screens. I have yet to meet another man who can turn hundreds of heads at the same time just by entering. I don’t think I will.

I witnessed first hand a man of conviction not only persecuted for his beliefs but also take that persecution head on, unwavering in his beliefs. An inspiration, Father Mark demonstrated that all we can control are our own actions. In a world that is shrouded with opposing forces and the conflicts that arise from those forces, he proved that clinging onto integrity and principle is the only way to conduct oneself. Father Mark will be at the core of my conscience with every belief I have and every stand I make. My thoughts will butt heads with others. It’s a matter of fact. However, I can attest to having seen the correct way to conduct myself in such instances because I have seen the extreme case of a man staring injustice in the face and not backing down. I can and will do the same.

I have learned from Father Mark that disagreements are never about converting any party to the ways of another. It’s about standing strong in our beliefs whatever they may be and leading by example. More than anything, I learned at an early age that true conflict resolution is about civil discourse. Can we expect any solutions to our problems if respect flies out the window when we hear something we don’t agree with?

Maybe seeing the consequences of losing Father Mark is the necessary evil for the intolerant members of the congregation to realize the importance of acceptance. If so, than Father Mark left a legacy at our church; he left a hole that cannot be filled; he left a vacuous reminder of the importance of tolerance. Staying true to his character, he willingly threw himself into the forsaking hands of the people and changed hearts in the process. He shaped mine. He made a profound and lasting effect on a community. He induced us to take one more step in the direction of all “brothers dwelling in unity.”

# Photography Anonymous

## Prompt B of ApplyTexas: Describe a circumstance, obstacle or conflict in your life, and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?

The shutter button is released, causing a chain reaction: the lens opens and closes in the span of microseconds, and, for a moment, the world stands still to allow genius or despair to be captured.

When I was eleven years old, fresh out of elementary school, I was given the opportunity to travel in Europe for two weeks with a student group. To document my experiences, my parents gave me a small point-and-shoot camera, of the non-destructible variety. That camera’s abilities pale in comparison to even mobile phone cameras of today, but it was my tool to capture the world around me, even if the pictures were a bit grainy.

For me, photography is a way to slow down and find the individual frames of beauty in everyday life. Before I became a photography addict, life flashed by in a blur. Now, my days are filled with the images of a cottonwood blossom gently floating outside after a desert storm, or a perfect El Paso sunset that sets the sky on fire. Through a camera lens, everybody and everything looks more interesting.

Like any worthwhile pursuit, photography comes with its own brand of frustrations and disappointments. A mistake in photography is irreversible: once the moment passes it cannot be imitated or recreated. When I was 15, after saving up, I bought a professional grade camera, a Canon Rebel T3i. I hurriedly assembled the camera, felt the lens satisfyingly click into the body, and rushed outside to play with my new toy. I looked at the pictures I had taken. White. Blurry. Out of focus. My aspirations to become a photographer were dashed. I had no idea how to work a professional camera. All I had ever done was aim the lens at something and then, almost blindly, push down the shutter. I had never needed to know things like aperture, shutter speed, light sensitivity or white balance. I was a foreigner in a land with a language I couldn’t even begin to understand. I ran back inside, set the camera in the box, and began to wonder how I could’ve been so foolish as to assume that learning the rules of this new world would be easy.

I left my camera in a dusty corner of my room and tossed the unopened user’s manual on my bedside table. I guess that I was hoping that the knowledge contained inside the pages would be transferred to my brain by osmosis or magic, but no such thing happened. One afternoon, I timidly approached the camera like it was a ferocious caged animal and lifted it out of its box. I walked outside to a beautiful sunny day, and with trembling hands, turned on the camera. Slowly lifting it up to my eye, I placed a hand on the focus and made the beautiful Franklin Mountains come into view. I gently rested my finger on the shutter. The moment a hawk soared through the viewfinder, I pressed down on the button, like the trigger on a gun. I waited a few seconds, almost as if time would somehow make the photo more attractive, and looked at the screen. The picture was a little bit grainy, definitely out of focus, but not a complete failure. I had done it.

As time has progressed, so has my skill and knowledge of photography. Now, my camera feels like an extension of my body and an even better way to communicate than my own voice. I have come to treasure photography because it is a time in which I can relax and be introspective. I have taught myself to accept disappointment and setbacks - to be resilient. Most importantly though, I have learned to be flexible; when one setting doesn’t work, I simply keep searching for the one that does. I have learned to take risks; to never shy away from a vista because it is too challengingly beautiful.

# Cases Like Mine John Calvin Pierce

## Describe a circumstance, obstacle or conflict in your life, and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?

My dad is the preacher at the red-brick Southern Baptist church that I’ve attended since I was seven. It’s just down the road. Sunday school at 9:30, “big church” at 10:30. Youth Group on Wednesday nights. As the preacher’s kid, I know all the ins and outs; I’m the first one at church and the last one to leave. I used to be in the youth praise band (I’d play the piano and sing). I know all the answers, the covenant lineage, the story of Hezekiah and Obadiah and all the obscure prophets. I know the Bible verses by heart. I wore the food pantry t-shirts, the inspirational bracelets; I sang the songs, raised my hands, even cried a few times. I was the model Christian, the one who wears that "Jesus is my homeboy" shirt without any irony.

And then I got my first boyfriend.

Hear me out: I am in no way implying that gay people can’t be fully devout Christians. They, we, can. But when I heard my Sunday school teacher equate gay people with ax-murderers, when my church friends would throw around the word “faggot,” when my own father would speak so openly against the idea of LGBT rights, it hurt. A lot. When you suddenly become ostracized from the identity in which you once felt so comfortable, so at home, you look at things differently. I became on outsider, even though no one at church knew it. I still played the part. Sang the songs. Wore the shirts. But things were changing inside.

It’s not like it happened all at once, either. I didn’t forget my own old beliefs overnight. In fact, that’s part of what made the whole gay identity that much harder. I was so ashamed and thought Jesus would be disappointed, to say nothing of my parents. But through this early stage of self-discovery, there was a pair of strong arms (well, stronger than mine at least) that were open and accepting. His name was Jared, and he was a senior and I was a sophomore when we met. And he was an Atheist, and I was still convinced that I was a Christian. So in my mind, this boy, whom I cared about a lot and who made me feel remarkable, was going to Hell. Eternal torment. For what? I shared my concerns with Jared and he listened; he didn’t try to convince me that Jesus was dumb or that I should give up on my faith. He encouraged me to think for myself.

The week before my senior year started, I came out to my parents. I wrote them a letter, went to my friend’s house, and texted them instructions to read it.

“You can come home now,” was their response.

I drove home, blasting Macklemore’s “Same Love” for strength. I envisioned two extremes: being kicked out, told I had to pay for my own college. I feared that. But I hoped for the second extreme, what every LGBT youth hopes for after coming out: parents who say “So what? We knew that. Bring you boyfriend over. Let’s put an equality sticker on the car.” I hoped really hard, wished really hard, for that. And it didn’t work. They were crushed. They didn’t kick me out, but they cried a lot. They didn’t yell, but they looked at me with such disappointment. A few days later we were in Dallas, sitting in a Christian Therapist’s office who specialized in “cases like mine.”

Cases like mine.

“What the hell does that mean?” was my question. Cases like mine? A seventeen-year-old kid whose foundation crumbled around him while he tried to hide it from his own family for fear of rejection? A kid whose friends have been more supportive of him than his parents? Did he mean gay kids? Gay people who wanted to “change?” I didn’t, I don’t, want to change.

Let me tell you about me, Mr. Counselor, Mother, Father, person reading this essay, God: I can give love, and I can feel love. I don’t know exactly what I believe any more about religion, but I’m looking. I am searching for truth, under rocks and on top of mountains, on the streets and in the not-so-pretty parts of people. “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” Well, then I’m freer than I’ve ever been. I am running faster, stretching out my arms farther, feeling deeper, singing louder, loving harder. It’s been a screwed-up, terrifying, beautiful, incredible journey.

Cases like mine. Let me tell you about me:

I am strong.

# The City of Dreams Anonymous

## Describe a location that means something to you and why.

I’ve been to New York once in my entire lifetime. I was six years old and my father had to travel there on a business meeting, taking the rest of us along. I’m not particularly skilled in recalling events from numerous years ago, so when I reflect on that trip, what I can remember most is this: there’s something about New York that lifts the spirits; that leaves the instant impression that anything in this day and age is possible. The way I see it, the city of New York accurately encompasses what it means to be young: hopeful and energetic and perfectly willing to believe in the magic of unimpeded optimism.

I have known that I was going to be a writer since I was first capable of forming coherent thoughts. I used to imagine stories for the ducks on my wallpaper while lying in my crib. I have also been told, since I was old enough to voice my desires, that I should not pursue a writing career, as I would not be able to find a substantial occupation for my craft. No, I should be a doctor or a lawyer or a therapist – professions that will always be in high demand in this modern world and will pay considerably more than writing.

As a hopeful writer, the idea of New York means so much more than dancing lights and Broadway shows and fancy apartment buildings. New York itself is a destination, as well as a beginning. It is where great writers are born. Willa Cather, E.E. Cummings, Joan Didion, Charles Ford, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Miller, Edgar Allen Poe, J.D. Salinger, John Steinbeck, and Mark Twain – I envision them all walking the same streets, their struggles and accomplishments and experiences accumulating into the inspirations for their wonderful works. Being able to stand on the same street corner where Willa Cather possibly once waited for a friend, or order from the same pastry shop where J.D. Salinger might have sat reading the paper, or to gaze through the window of the laundromat where Joan Didion once cried when she realized that life wasn’t magical blissfulness – the very idea inspires in me a desire to disregard everything I have ever been told about what I cannot or should not do.

I have always known that I was going to be a writer and I have always known that there is no better place to become one than New York. In the city of dreams, inner creativity prospers, exceptional abilities are enhanced and we writers are encouraged to spill our words from the very depths of our being. I can only hope to someday write something that will alter someone’s life, as so many written works have transformed mine.

# 4N6 Anonymous

## Describe one activity that has impacted your life significantly.

When I first heard of Forensics, I imagined a combination of Family Feud and a presidential inauguration. There I would stand – on a wide stage, a never-ending sea of people staring, and spotlights shining down. Imagine my surprise – and immense relief – when I discovered that I would only be speaking in a normal school classroom, in front of six other students and a judge.

And so, as a carefree freshman, I originally signed up for Forensics with no clue about what the actual activity was – something about murder and science, right? – and only because my crush at the time was very active in it. Yet on my first day of high school, I found myself in the most crowded class I had ever seen, learning that I would not only have to write ten minute-long speeches, but also memorize them and perform them over and over again – all while wearing a suit. I was horrified.

I will never forget my first tournament, how desperately I tried to find the rooms of my rounds and how nervously I delivered my speech for the very first time. When I exited my first round, I was greeted by our team’s varsity members, all clapping and cheering for me and the other novices. It was then that I learned the magic of competing on one of the largest and most celebrated and most unified Forensics teams in the state. We were in it together, nervousness and all.

There is something about waking up on a Friday morning and thinking, It’s tournament day. There’s something about walking through the school hallways that day and seeing a select few others brandishing their ties and blazers just like me, all of us receiving strange glances from our classmates. There’s something about being friends with the cool kids, and the nerdy kids, and the weird kids. Despite the social divide normally placed between our groups, when we’re boarding that bus at six in the morning - some of us hurriedly scribbling introductions on our notecards and others whispering their speeches to themselves while puffs of frosty breath cloud the cool air - we become one team. There is no divide on that bus, at that tournament, or in our rounds. We are a team.

My freshman-year crush is long gone by now. I, however, am still in a committed relationship with Forensics, despite the early mornings and the tough odds and the moments when even I start to wonder why I persist. Once, when I had become extremely frustrated with Forensics and was raving about quitting, my coach asked me to remind myself why I kept coming back, year after year. I didn’t even have to consider before I replied that it was because I never stop learning from Forensics. No matter what I think I know, composing my speeches compels me to find something freshly eye-opening. The list of what Forensics has given me is never-ending. It taught me how to make others care as much about an issue as I do, how to take criticism as a helping hand instead of as an insult, how to never settle for simply “okay” but to strive for better, how to stay awake on two hours of sleep and lots of ginseng, and – most of all **–** how to transform my passion into words that resound.

I can speak now, which is more than I could say for my freshman self. I can chat up a customer at my job and make small talk like a seasoned salesman. I can convince a crowd that what I have to say is worth listening to. I can express happiness for others even if I’m not very satisfied with myself. I can argue for a cause that I completely oppose. But talking isn’t the only talent I’ve absorbed. I can also listen. I can see the other side of an argument I originally resisted. I find myself not only attentively taking in what a person telling is me about his or her rough day, but also genuinely caring. Since I first obtained the ability to form coherent thoughts, I felt convinced that I would someday become a writer. Forensics has only furthered that ambition. The ability to weave tales together from words, to paint pictures with my pen, and to influence a life simply by writing and then articulating from the depths of my beliefs, has never failed to astound me at every turn. Forensics has given me more to do with my words than I can ever imagine. It has given me my passion.

# Garam-miso Lasagna Terrance Alexander

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

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

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

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

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

# Lipe White Wheat Leapers Terrance Alexander

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

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

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

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

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

"Again!" she'd relentlessly respond.

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

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

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

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

# Arms Covered in Cheddar Terrance Alexander

## Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings, and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.

Grasping the knife, I made deliberate cuts. Mumbling, I couldn't focus on what I was doing. Looking outside at the bleak clouds and parched grass, I felt groggy. Gray cinderblock-like bags tugged on my haggard eyes. The leaky kitchen faucet's "ka plunk, ka plunk" pierced the room's bedlam. My shirt was disheveled and my shoelaces untied. My arms were covered in...cheddar?  
  
Making cheese sandwiches is a seemingly simple task. Not so. Especially when there are hungry autistic children tugging on your jeans and smashing mayonnaise in your hair as you try to slice the bread. Try spreading cheddar on one sandwich in that situation, much less over thirty. My volunteering at Camp Summit, a retreat for mentally disabled individuals, has led to even more bizarre experiences. Early on, feeding hungry children and assisting them in messy bathroom situations (I won't elaborate) caused me to see special-needs children as a burden. My first day at camp, a kid cut off chunks of his hair. Another mushed chocolate between her toes. Another tried to call 911. Although I had some very well-behaved children, a few rowdy ones were enough to create my distaste for this volunteering.  
  
After this inauspicious beginning, you'd think I would avoid anything to do with these children. However, as time passed, I saw past the unmentionable bathroom experiences and cheesy arms. Each time I visit, I'm received by jovial smiles, kids tugging on my jeans, and animated camp "gossip." Although the campers and I have shared many awkward experiences, I've coped by changing my attitude towards them. The children have taught me to look for people's strengths, rather than getting caught up in their faults. The campers here are genuine. When I coordinate exhilarating activities, from classic games of "Capture the Flag" to games of my imagination like "Anteater Frankenstein," I see their honestly gleeful grins or grumbling grimaces.  
  
I've come to enjoy volunteering at Camp Summit not because it has changed me, but because I'm part of a community free from inhibition. I'm not expected to tiptoe around conventional norms, discuss politics, or create a facade. The campers' disregard for established mannerisms has liberated me. Campers of dissimilar ethnicities, experiences, and ages spontaneously hug each other, throw tantrums, and do as they feel. Although society sees my campers as "disabled," I've learned that its members are "disabled" in their inability to freely express their emotions. Although people may think I volunteer to benefit others, that is only one part of my reason. I dutifully spread cheddar and swing my nose in "Anteater Frankenstein" not only to serve my campers but also to gain perception for my own life. In the end, I like to think that I accomplish both.

# Tendinitis Anonymous

## Describe a circumstance, obstacle or conflict in your life, and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?

Saturday, early December 2012. Auxiliary Court 3. Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois. The last match of the day’s tournament had finally come to an end, and I lay cowering on the court in eye-watering pain. The nature of my agony perfectly matched our team’s performance: we had struggled to win but a single game of the three that we had played that morning. Our coach, who also happened to be the director of the entire volleyball program, was far past the point of purple-veined vitriol, and could scarcely even muster the energy to dole out his trademark squinty-eyed glares of contemptuous disappointment. But none of that mattered to me at the moment, because I knew that something was horribly wrong with my legs.

Later that day, I made a visit to my family doctor, who confirmed what I had been dreading for months. I had developed severe tendinitis in both of my knees. I had to quit volleyball completely, which meant that my participation in the upcoming spring school season was also terminated. But that was just the beginning. I went to weekly physical therapy sessions for about five months; I am still recuperating today.

Despite all that, I don’t see my injury as some devastating handicap. By approaching the whole fiasco with a positive attitude, I soon found that my newly-allotted free time allowed me to focus more intensely on the important things in my life, such as my studies and my family. It also led to the cultivation of my love of physics, for which I am very grateful. I could not play volleyball, but I could certainly delve into the intricacies of momentum and velocity that are the lifeblood of the game. If anything, my experience showed me how easy it can be to turn negatives into positives, that there may be much to value in such consequential events as career-ending knee injuries. They may be difficult to recognize at first, but beautiful things can certainly come in banged-up packages.

# Weak Eyes, Strong Mind Sarah Noor

## Please write five sentences describing yourself, your life, and your experiences that form an accurate portrayal of who you are.

I have weak eyes, strained but experienced; they peer through windows of thick, -11.75 prescription lenses.

They have curiously looked outside during countless road trips, widening in awe at the giant redwoods of Yosemite; marveling at the magnitude of the Hoover Dam; shining at the countless stars on a clear Texas night.

Conversely, they have dampened and hardened at the multitude of global injustices depicted by the media: women’s rights in the Middle East, school shootings in America, abusive labor practices in Bangladesh.

Despite all of this, or perhaps because of it, my heart is young, my body is able, my mind is focused.

I will gladly listen and debate and petition for change—because I want my weak eyes to glow at the radiance of our beautiful world becoming even better.

# Toddlers on a Plane Arianna Rafaele Payson

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

My family is anything but sedentary. Already in my life I have lived in Florida, Oklahoma, Texas, and have found myself in England nearly every summer. I have explored the rainforests of Australia and New Zealand, braved the oppressive heat of Utah, wandered the packed and pulsing markets of Thailand, had a staring contest with the Mona Lisa, ridden a malevolent camel in Morocco, made popsicles for elephants at the San Diego Zoo, watched the colors and outlandish fun of the Brighton Gay Pride parades, traversed lush green slopes in Ireland and Scotland, floated with fish off the coast of Bermuda, gazed at ancient monuments in Greece, and spent many a night in dark airports because flights were unceremoniously delayed. Everywhere I go there is a distinct taste, smell, sight, and sound, the un-announced heartbeat and lifeblood of the culture, like a whisper so soft you can only feel it. Stagnancy, it seems, is the bane of my existence. And so, I suppose, that I why I am most content in one of the most hated places on the globe: the airport. Not because of the lines, the security, the dreaded TSA agents, the tiny cramped economy section, the lukewarm airline food, the twelve-hour flights, or the rushing to make connections and the incessant lines -- like everyone else, I have no appetite for any of this -- but because being there means that I’m going somewhere. I’m moving. I’m in motion. And I will soon be somewhere else entirely.

My parents love to tell the story of my first time on a plane. I was about one and a half, and they were extremely worried about the prospect of me crying and making a scene in a tiny cramped vehicle hurtling above the ground at an altitude of several thousand feet. But as soon as the plane took off, my parents couldn’t keep me in my seat. I was off down the aisle, meeting the people, taking my shoes off, and collapsing in fits of giggles every time somebody so much as even looked at me. Some nice lady even let me play with her makeup, so I probably wound up looking more like a demented banshee than a real human child. At the end of the flight, the captain even gave me his captain’s pin, which I still have today. I can just imagine myself, peeking my head around the door of the cockpit, eyes wide and surrounded by raccoon makeup circles, and the captain suddenly finding himself face-to-face with a shoe-less, unidentified child of unknown origin.

That was the start of my career on planes, and ever since I’ve found myself completely at home in them. Well, as much at home as I can be in the cramped economy section next to a person who may or may not have bathed in the last few days. But no matter how bumpy the ride gets, how uncomfortable the seat gets, how noisy the snoring gets, or how boring the flight gets, it doesn’t matter. There’s that untouchable feeling of an adventure just out of reach, which you’ll be able to grasp as soon as those wheels hit the tarmac and you finish taxiing in. I always get this image of Bilbo Baggins as he heads out of the Shire, or Harry Potter as he takes his first steps onto a Quidditch field, or even Doctor Who as he steps into his Time and Relative Dimensions in Space, ready to see what other wonders he can find. Admittedly, many of my own wonders are on Earth, but then again, it’s an incredibly beautiful place, and I know I will never be able to even begin to drink it all in. It doesn’t necessarily matter where I end up, be it Africa, India, Canada, South America, or even just a hop across a state or two. Just so long as I’m a body in motion. And, as we all know, a body in motion tends to stay in motion. So let’s just say I’m on my way.

# Multi-Culture ESL Anonymous

## Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.

The school day is over, which means it's time for ESL American Social Studies. Spread all over the table are primary sources from the Civil Rights Movement. Sitting across from me are Carlos from Mexico and Durgam from Iraq. As a peer tutor, I was supposed to lead the discussion and be the most knowledgeable person in the room. I could count on being organized and well-read, but I couldn't predict that these two students would have so much insight to share about their experiences, their lives, and why they came to America. Insight doesn't know a language barrier.

When I signed up for the peer tutoring position, I expected mostly to be working with students who just happened to be a little behind in English. Perhaps they had recently come to America because their parents had found new jobs, and thus had gotten a late start on the language. As a son of immigrant parents, the only immigrant experience I know well is my own: my parents and some of their friends hail from less-developed countries and came to America to pursue higher education. What I heard in my ESL room were not stories of the pursuit of prestige and advancement, but of escape from harsh realities.

Carlos was one of my students, and someone with a story I'll never forget. He was from Juarez, Mexico, and his parents moved to Portland after a mass disappearance in his neighborhood. Apparently, drug cartels frequently cause large numbers of people to simply vanish. Durgam was another student from an area of chaos and uncertainty, this time Iraq: his family finally moved overseas because they were constantly surrounded by bombings. He had shifted from house to house in his home neighborhood as explosions destroyed each one. What struck me was how plainly these students told about where they came from, as if the incredible circumstances they had escaped were just typical facts of life. I can’t imagine being in that type of world, much less moving to a completely different society just to survive. Hearing about their cultures and experiences, I understood my luck in life for the first time. I used to take for granted the vast opportunities available to me -- cultural acceptance, and the peace of mind that comes from living in America, far away from war and widespread violence. Carlos and Durgam ended any and all shortsightedness on my part.

The students I tutored were completely unfamiliar with American history: they would frequently stop to ask about words like “discrimination,” “segregation,” and “liberties.” We came from such different cultures, but we worked together to unpack complex ideas and, ultimately, open each other's eyes by absorbing each other’s experiences. My resume may say "peer tutor," but I learned just as much from my students as I taught.

# The Engineer's Dilemma Anonymous

## Describe a circumstance, obstacle or conflict in your life, and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?

Maggi is desire. Maggi is beautiful. There are few things I wouldn’t give up to have Maggi. Just so things are clear - Maggi is a brand of instant noodles.

Every night in our dormitories, my friends and I used my kettle and cooked up exactly these noodles. In twelfth grade this became a ritual, and every night, after a long and tiring day, we would just sit together and share laughs and steaming bowls of Maggi. All was great, until the day we discovered that our kettle had started over-heating quickly, and always got shut off by its automatic over-heating mechanism. We were crestfallen, until I decided it was time to find a solution.

I sat down with the kettle and a set of screwdrivers. While I proceeded to unscrew all the screws holding the outer shell of the kettle together, I mentally tried to track all the wires in the kettle. They formed convoluted, weird patterns which were frustrating to figure out. I wanted to get a look at the internal heating system of the kettle, but it was welded shut. This was even more frustrating. Some screws were difficult to reach and the constant twisting of the screwdriver was taking a toll; my fingers ached and I needed to strain my eyes to see what I was doing in the dim light of my table lamp. My friends also kept giving input, on occasion. One of them had a physics book open on his lap, and was reading aloud the text on parallel and series circuits and the various components of said circuits. Even though it helped, for some incomprehensible reason, reading from a book seemed so much easier than practically working out the mechanism.

My plan was to find the wire which activated the over-heating system, so that I could cut it and disable the system. After spending half an hour hunched over the kettle, I finally decided upon a wire and cut it off. Someone passed me some water to put into the kettle. Someone fidgeted excitedly. Everyone sent up silent prayers to whatever God exists. And I plugged in the kettle and turned the switch on. Half a minute passed. A minute. Two minutes. The water reached full boil, and yet the kettle kept roaring on. We chimed in with the kettle with roars of our own, embracing each other as if our favorite team just won the World Cup. That night, Maggi graced the occasion again.

This ‘obstacle’ may seem trivial to most, but to me it holds tremendous value. I’ve always had a proclivity for tinkering with machines and mechanics, but this was the first time I tried to solve a problem in a machine. It reinforced my faith in pursuing Mechanical Engineering as a career, as I love machines and their intricacies. Mechanical Engineers can contribute things of value to society, which is exactly what I want to do. I wasn’t deterred when I was having trouble with the kettle; I’d rather say it only motivated me further to find the solution. I loved every minute of it, and the feeling of success one experiences when one sees an innovation work out well is truly amazing. Thus not only is Maggi pleasing to the palate, but also led me to an obstacle which made me surer about my choices for higher education. Cheers to Maggi!

# The Wai darian Kane-stolz

## Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings, and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.

We climbed out of the van and into the lush Thai jungle, overgrown and wild, unlike anything in America. The soothing trill of the locusts was met by complete silence, aside from the deep breaths of the colossal creatures across the road and the occasional gasp from an amazed service member. The thick, damp air that was hung like blankets over the treetops wrapped us in the scent of an organic mixture of musk and grass. I soaked in the atmosphere, mesmerized by the elephants, who seemed gentle and serene despite their daunting stature.

The first few moments of my service trip to Thailand to volunteer with endangered Asian Elephants were filled with beauty and wonder. But as my service group and I returned from our awe-induced state, we got to work caring for the elephants. The group leaders introduced me to my Thai mahout, Pun, who would be helping me care for our elephant Tantawan. I reached out my arm to shake his hand, but his palms were pressed together in a wai, the customary greeting in Thailand. I was taken aback and filled with panic; for the first time in my life, I was in a situation where I did not know how to properly communicate. Pun barely even spoke English, and I knew the next week would be challenging. I would have to work to communicate with Pun in less conventional ways than language could provide.

Rising with the sun each morning, Pun and I would trek into the jungle to find Tantawan quaintly munching on banana leaves. On the way, Pun would teach me his language. He pointed at chickens and exclaimed "kai!" and, in his happy-go-lucky nature, burst into Thai song about different animals. Though I couldn’t understand what he was saying, the tone of his voice told me everything I needed to know. If Pun’s voice had a gentle lilt, I knew he was happy with my work. But if he took on a solemn tone, I knew that I was doing something wrong. Together, we fed Tantawan—I always snuck her extra sugarcane—and examined her for any wounds.

Immersing myself in the Thai culture and diving into service enlightened me in ways I could never have predicted. Among the most valuable lessons was one from Pun: that relationships have no limits. Though language divided us, Pun, Tantawan, and I worked together in harmony. I will never forget Pun's smile when he made me a hat of banana leaves or Tantawan's joyful trumpet when she took her baths.

When I first discovered that Pun and I did not share a common language, fear overwhelmed me. How can I possibly collaborate with someone I can’t communicate with? I wondered. But my worry was without reason; the language barrier was not a barrier after all. Pun and I communicated with body language and tone to care for Tantawan in the best way possible. Different cultures do not hinder achievement, but rather encourage joint effort. My initial distress was washed away with every task we completed.

# The Invisible Bully Anonymous

## Explain a time in your life when an obstacle changed who you were?

The screen glowed brightly in her face as she would check her Facebook, and wonder why people did this to her. “Who would be mean enough to treat a person like this?”, she would always ask me. The cruel, menacing, and terrifying words that some of the students had left behind on her Facebook page drove her more and more towards instability. They tortured her for no reason and they stripped away all of the confidence, assurance, and resilience that she had once acquired. Each week I would check on her multiple times to make sure that she was still holding up, but each time my presence seemed less wanted. No one knew what to do and how to deal with the problem that had arisen, and the idea of her depression increasingly affected all of the people around her. Eventually the cruel students comments had made her reach her limit.

That summer she had taken her own life. I could not look at anyone, my eyes glued to my feet as they stomped on the ground leading to her grave. The black dress and coat that protected me from the cold air seemed to do nothing to block out idea that the person that I had declared my honorary sister was now gone. Her whole family, friends, and I had been hit deep with the idea that other teenagers could make another human being take her own life. They could not even stand up, or apologize, or feel sorry.

In October of 2012, I found out that a girl just like my friend, Amanda, had taken her own life due to online ridicule. This news went viral, and spiraled into a debate targeting the cruel people behind the walls of the Internet. The problem with Amanda's story is that several people knew, just like they knew about my friend, but no one did anything because no one had been educated on how to take care of such a large problem with kids and teenagers. Still, the thought that even if the students knew but they could not stop it was not what angered me the most, but the problem that seemingly innocent students would fuel the problem by joining in on the “teasing”.

Not only should students be informed on the ways to deal with online bullies, but also with bullies who openly mock and hurt a person. The two problems are inseparable. Parents and staff should also be informed when a bully is spotted, whether online, or on the school premises. If I had known what I could have done to keep my friend alive then she would be here now, and so would Amanda.

# Resilience Jacob Isler

## 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. What is the one thing that you think sets you apart from other candidates applying to the University of California? What perspective do you feel that you will contribute to life here?

If I had to describe the culture of my family in one word, it would be "resilient." Every year, my father gets a new assignment... fight in the skies above Iraq, train future pilots in Mississippi, advise a four star general in Hawaii, and now, command an entire base in Texas. There is a motto in our branch of the military: "Home is where the Air Force sends us." True to this sentiment, regardless of the disposition of my father's new assignment, my family fights to remain strong. When orders come, we move, leaving behind our friendships and worldly attachments, but always taking a little bit of that place's culture with us.

This transient lifestyle is not new to my parents. My mother is a product of the Vietnam war, born in Da Nang to a native mother and a U.S. Army officer before they immigrated to America and raised her, like me, as a military brat. My own father had a similar upbringing, living with his Army chaplain dad even during extended deployments in Panama before joining the force himself. Being raised in military households taught my parents to embrace the lifestyle they now choose to have. When given orders, one must accept them and make do with what one is given. Growing up in a household that upholds this philosophy -- to make the most out of situations -- has shaped me as a person. Because I often change schools every year, I cannot always devote myself to the same sports or extracurricular activities. For example, when my family moved to Hawaii, my new high school did not offer the robotics program in which I had excelled through my previous school in Mississippi. So I joined the debate team, and have managed to break into the state finals every year since.

In the same manner, living in 13 different places over the first 17 years of my life has impacted my view of the world and of what makes me feel at home. With every move, we add something to our family's traditions. When my family moved from Hawaii to Texas, I brought with me a newfound passion for boxing (a required skill for youth growing up in the Pacific) and started a self-defense club at my current school. It is now impossible for my mom to cook fried rice without adding Spam. My baby brother still talks about paddle boarding in Hickam Harbor with the sea turtles. And sometimes, I think about the friends I used to have a move or two ago... I don't wonder if they miss me, just if they remember me, whether I had any impact on their life, or if they would even recognize me today. Not whether I look the same, but how my behavior has changed... if I've really matured like I think I have, or if I've fundamentally changed as a person.

I was raised in a house characterized by resilience, a trait needed for the military lifestyle. I was also brought up in a dozen different societies, each showing me a different perspective on things and changing me in some way. At Boy's State, I had the chance to interact with students from every corner of life in Texas. As I talked to them and befriended them, I realized something... no matter how different from me that person may seem to be, we could relate to each other. Regardless of whether we were strangers minutes before, we could become comfortable and share some of the things we experienced in our lives, because chances were that at some point, I had gone through something similar to them. My past has taught me many lessons. I hope for the chance to share them with my university.

# Hooked on Teaching Rebekka Anne Strom

## The Statement of Purpose should be 2-3 pages in length, double-spaced. It should describe your academic and professional background, plans for graduate school, your professional goals, and how and why you are a good fit for the program. It should be tailored to this college and your specific program of interest.

A week after New Year’s in 2011, the cherry blossom tree outside my apartment’s living room erupted in pink and my best friend died. Two weeks later, I stared into the eyes of seventeen eager 9-year-olds in my first classroom. By the end of the semester, my fingertips were stained with paint from every color of the rainbow, complementing the crimson blisters that settled themselves on the backs of both heels. Measuring cups, silly string, and yo-yos were strategically situated on my desk chair. That winter, I declared myself an English and Spanish double major at Oglethorpe University. Settled in the worn gray chair in the Registrar’s Office, I was flooded by the incredible possibility—which everyone has, but few use—to create for the better.

Since serving as a fourth-grade Language Arts teacher in my sophomore year, I have become “hooked” on education. In the classroom, I aim to create an engaging and challenging environment that fosters communication and collaboration. In an academic realm conventionally ensnared by standardized testing, I am the teacher who, reminded by my grandfather’s love of humorous delight, regularly DJs “dance breaks” when the material gets tedious, cooks homemade pizza to introduce angles and symmetry, emcees American Idol competitions to teach state capitals, and invites students to present topics on the “Strom Stream” – from a Shakespearean monologue to how Ninjago Legos simulate the Battle of Bunker Hill.

I believe that the Teachers College at Columbia University is the ideal setting for pursing my Master’s in the Teaching of English; after all, the Teachers College encourages work that negotiates multicultural boundaries within urban settings, recognizing that each student learns differently. Within Columbia’s English Education program, I would seek to study under Dr. Sheridan Blau, to promote critical thinking and visual literacy by constructing effective dialogic and imaginative processes within the context of literature and composition. Like my research on storytelling in a digital age for Harvard University’s Project Zero conference, Dr. Blau’s work illustrates how to foster inferential comprehension within diverse learning environments, validating the idea that a shift in emphasis from explicit to implicit instruction and assessment validates the value of quality communication and, thus, seeks to meet the pivotal challenges of today. Because I emphasize children’s literature as a method for curriculum-based assessments, Dr. John Henry Brown’s analysis on the Teaching of Reading Instruction within the scope of theoretical and pedagogical principles also fascinates me. Finally, by building upon the research of my independent study thesis To Instruct and Delight: A Historical Survey of 18th and 19th Century English Didactic Children’s Literature, I would like to further explore how to best reach an adolescent audience via the written word, creating an emphasis on the relationship between texts and readerships. Therefore, Dr. Ruth Vinz’s research on the synergistic relationship between cultural relevance and linguistic responsiveness within secondary education is a facet I would like to study in relation to literacy and language acquisition in high-needs schools.

Throughout my graduate journey, I aim to earn a Master’s in the Teaching of English. During my time as a student teacher in a classroom with 70% of students diagnosed with learning challenges, I recognized firsthand that every student learns differently; thus, the curriculum—relevant, problem-based, and interdisciplinary—should be presented with a variety of “multiple intelligences” in mind. Thus, I seek to design methods of developmental reading strategies to implement organizational techniques in earlier grades that impact future literary capacities. Building upon my experience in Curriculum Development in the lower and middle grades, I will research how 21st century practices can increase accuracy in fluency and comprehension at appropriate and extending grade levels. Additionally, I hope to research how a “new world of children” in England and the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries is starkly relevant to today’s instruction; such an inquiry could be conducted even—or especially—under the guise of “amusement.” Indeed, learning should be fun! From exploring areas within literature, I would like to effectively incorporate classic texts in my future classrooms and therefore, and aim to understand the progression of children’s literature as a genre and as a pedagogical method for Curriculum-Based Assessments within the context of oral fluency, reading comprehension, and grade-level proclivity. During my time in graduate school, my overarching objective will challenge me to most effectively reach adolescent audiences with the delight of the written word via literary techniques, grammatical styles, and the development of characters, plots, and themes. To that end, I aim to be a teacher who encourages her students to treat writing as a craft rather than simply as another box to check on a college transcript.

Education, then, is more than a hobby, a chosen discipline, or merely a line on my résumé; rather, this decision tests my intellectual stamina while providing an outlet to give back to my community and make a mark on my world. Indeed, I feel called to be an educator, inspiring students to recognize the meaningful relevancy of English prose, novels, and research. From William Blake’s juxtaposition and Shakespeare’s unmatched wit to Jane Austen’s social criticism and Geoffrey Chaucer’s endearing colloquialism, I hope to equip students with confidence in literature, instilling a lifelong zeal for the written word. Energized by the desire to succeed, I chose to follow what I love to do, seizing the limit of happiness, meaning, and fulfillment every day. C.S. Lewis said, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.” I believe that education should equip students to be culturally, linguistically, and cognitively prepared to thrive in our ever-changing society. As a teacher, I will inspire my students to take an active role in their own learning, systematically redesigning the objectives of “typical” education to encompass meaning, relevancy, and resolution in the twenty-first century. If accepted into the Teachers College at Columbia University, I aim to utilize this instructional schema to its fullest potential, challenging my students to achieve excellence in the classroom—and in life.

# The Mothers from Hell Noelle Simon

## Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings, and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.

We have a saying at work: “Dealing with an angry mom is like dealing with a burglar; just give her what she wants, and no one gets hurt.”

I see it almost every day at the pool - a mother’s desperate desire to have everyone acknowledge her son as the fastest, strongest, and simply the best. I believe that mothers hold a special place within the animal kingdom, possessing the power to instantly transform into the scariest species on the planet. They will pounce instinctively for the betterment of their offspring, and they’ll do it all without chipping a nail. And I witnessed this unabashed, maternal aggressiveness recently when a mom felt that her son was not being recognized as the alpha in the pack.

I watch as she confidently strolls towards me from the side of the pool, eyes locked, head raised, and shoulders back. All I can do is brace for the impending verbal barrage coming my way. “Why is my son with this group?!? He deserves to be in the next level. Look! He is swimming perfectly. At home, when I swim with him, he goes all the way across the pool without stopping! Put him in the next level class!”

Keeping my composure, I periodically glance at the pool to check the safety of all my other swimmers while she continues for another five minutes about how her son is number one in some other program and has been doing this for years. I think to myself - he is only four years old, was he doing the backstroke in the womb? Staying true to our workplace adage, I nod until she finishes her tirade and reply with a polite, “When this exercise is completed, you can go talk to the department head, and she’ll move your son to the other class.”

As she stormed off, I couldn’t help but think about how differently my mother would have handled the situation if I were in the lower level class. I reflected upon the idea that parenting styles differ greatly from family to family. I know that mothers sometimes overstep their bounds, but ultimately realize that such overstepping is solely for the benefit of their children. A mother’s child is her prized possession, the thing she loves most in life. From personal experience, I know my mother would scale a mountain, fight off a pack of hungry wolves, and sell all her belongings if it would help me achieve my goals.

Mothers are simultaneously the most supportive yet most combative people in the world, making them tough to deal with at times. However, having now worked with many families, I have developed the skills to reassure parents and maintain my equanimity. If I can soothe an offended mom at the pool, I can do anything. At the end of the day, all mothers wants the same thing; they just choose to employ different tactics.

# Surfacing from Stress Noelle Simon

## Describe a circumstance, obstacle or conflict in your life and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?

Diving in a pool is an experience like no other. It’s like immersing yourself in a world with no sound and no communication. Underwater you can do things that would be so much more difficult to do on land, for example: a backflip or a handstand. It’s a beautiful thing, but like most other beautiful things it has its downfalls, as well; it can be dangerous, and overwhelming. The water can swallow you up and the farther and farther you’re pushed down, the more pressure is put on you. You know that pressure that squeezes your nose and makes your head feel like it's going to explode? That pressure continues the deeper in you get, until finally it is too much to handle.

This is how I felt my sophomore year of high school. I felt like I had plunged too far down into the immense pool of life, and I couldn't find my way back up. The pressure, or stress, was boundless and never-ending. I had always been that girl who would take on too much at one time. For some reason, I always believed I would be able to get everything done. It got to the point where I would have to wake up at 5 o’clock in the morning just to finish my school work.

During my sophomore year, I didn’t understand that I needed to take some time to de-stress myself. I use to get colossal headaches every day and just ignore them. “All I have to do is get through today,” I used to remind myself. It took me until my junior year to take a step back and put everything into perspective, when I started volunteering in the Memorial Assistance Ministry English as a Second Language class.

The first day I came to help teach the class, the teacher was late. I was stuck in front of a group of middle-aged men and women who I had never met before, and of course being the awkward individual I am, I waited, silently, and hoped that the teacher would bust through the door at any moment, apologizing furiously for being late. But, not shockingly, no luck. So, I took the stack of papers that was handed to me upon my arrival and began to babble. “Ok, students does anyone know what the idiom ‘going out on a limb’ means?” I looked out at them. Silence. Then suddenly, seeming to understand my pain, the Peruvian lady Yolanda raised her hand and said, “Just start with your name”.

From then on, I loved teaching the classes. It was a great way for me to de-stress, because I was able to focus on other people’s problems as opposed to my own. That class taught me to not take the little things, such as language and communication, for granted. Rather than allow myself to feel bogged down by my commitments, I needed to relish them. However, I also needed to prioritize and concentrate on the ones I found rewarding. Coming to this realization has made me calmer and more focused; it has also redoubled my commitment to a career in the field of communications. I want to spend my lifetime in a collaborative work environment, building relationships with a team and guiding projects as a leader. That first ESL class was just my first dive in.

# Lifetime goals Noelle Simon

## Considering your lifetime goals, discuss how your current and future academic and extracurricular activities might help you achieve your goals.

The athlete-to-captain relationship is the lifeblood of any functioning sports team. After all, the team captain essentially acts as a mediator between the other players and the coach. Some other jobs of a team captain include, but are not limited to: best friend, problem solver, bearer of bad news, etc. For example, if all the swimmers rebel because they do not like the type of kickboards the coach bought, or because the water is too cold, or because practice went over time, the captain has to be the one to convey the feelings of the team to the coach. In reality, team captains should be branded with a tattoo that says “Don’t shoot the messenger” on their chests, but unfortunately we have to put up with it all because we were chosen to be the coach’s right-hand-men (or women). Team captains can also never slip up. Any mess-up could result in the classic “But Noelle did it, and she’s Team Captain!!” If this happens, I suggest you hop on a plane, change your name, and start a nice shepherding farm in Scotland that will leave no paper trail.

My point is that a team captain must exhibit an immense amount of leadership and deal with the weight of extensive responsibility. Being a team captain has prepared me for a career in Public Relations in two ways.

Way one: Leadership. As a team captain I am in charge of a large group of people, some rooting for my failure. These people are counting on me to be able to help them with every problem they could possibly have. It’s very unrealistic that I would be able to fix your completely broken goggles, but I will try until my fingers bleed. Coping with such a conundrum mirrors the obligation of a Public Relations specialist, because as a Public Relations worker I will always be in charge of different clients -- usually in times of trouble. And when they need something fixed, I’m going to be the one who fixes it.

Way two: Responsibility. As a team captain I am responsible for keeping all my teammates and my coach happy. I walk the very thin line of best friend to my fellow athletes and tattle tale to the coach. If a swimmer messes up big time, my hide gets tanned. Similarly, in Public Relations, I will be in charge of a person or a company. From that point on, I am responsible for keeping everyone in line and making sure they do not make any mistakes. If they make a mistake I will be the one deemed blameworthy. But I am determined not to let such tricky scenarios get the best of me. I want to put words to work; I want to represent clients expertly. I do my best work under pressure, when I must pull from all of my skills -- leadership, responsibility, and communication -- and execute with surefire precision.

# One Step Back to Take Two Steps Forwards Anonymous

## What was the environment in which you were raised? Describe your family, home, neighborhood, or community, and explain how it has shaped you as a person.

When I was younger, my mother attended ESL classes every Wednesday evening at our local church. When she came home, it was straight to the dining table to complete her given assignments. It would not be uncommon for her to take hours just finishing one activity, often erasing answers only to re-write them minutes later. Unlike my mother, I was very impatient. It came from my Korean roots, the “Bbali-bbali” pace of life which championed quantity over quality in the household. Even so, she remained patient and took time to understand every problem. I offered to do assignments for her so she could move on, not wasting any more time on something I saw as insignificant; however, my mother refused my help, telling me that “learning something for others” was “not a substitute for self-learning.” As she forced herself to repeat this long process every week, I slowly began to learn that being content with just “finishing the task” was not enough, and that true commitment to learning meant that quality, not quantity, was important.

Shopping for groceries every week with my mother was a test all in its own. She was forced to use all she knew of the English language; her thick accent and mispronunciations made conversations with employees a linguistic mess, but eventually she would get across what groceries she needed. I felt waves of embarrassment come over me with every trip, but the constant smiles she would have as she talked with workers each week told me she felt otherwise; it was an uncomfortable and new way of learning English, but she was happy to have others catch her mistakes. Rather than seeing errors as setbacks, she saw them as opportunities to expand her understanding of the language. I began to see that the embarrassment I felt was unfounded. I was only worried about failure, not looking past to see the potential learning opportunities these failures opened up for me, as they did for my mother.

All of this frustration came to its culmination this year. As I began the last year of high school, my mother sent me an unexpected text message. She wrote, “You going to graduation this year, and I very proud to seeing you become adult now.” It was imperfect, but this was the first time my mother had ever been able to communicate how she truly felt to me in English. The language which had once kept us emotionally distant now helped wash away all of the frustrations and misunderstandings we once held. This became the latest lesson I learned: nothing worth learning is ever learned without hardships, but a hard lesson brings with it rewards that last a lifetime.

Through the past fourteen years, my mother’s persistence in forcing herself to learn the English language has put my own learning efforts to shame. I realize now that if I had simply had told her what to do or what to say, she would have not harbored the excitement that she experiences as she learns the language on her own today. Because of her, I could have never imagined myself wanting to take on new challenges on my own, no matter how easy or how arduous they may be, as I now know I have the ability to turn my own efforts into progress. Much as my mother found a reason to keep improving her English, challenges or no challenges, I hope to find a reason to maintain the same enthusiasm with every challenge I face, today and in the future.

Fourteen years ago, I knew this land by its Korean name, Miguk. Today, I call this land America, and name it my home in both languages.

# Lessons from the Produce Section Hyun Chang

## Most students have an identity, an interest, or a talent that defines them in an essential way. Tell us about yourself.

Monsoon season began the day after I arrived at Jeongok, a small town where the rushed lifestyle found in most Korean cities was in abundance. My grandmother, who owned a grocery store in the town, asked me to take over during a particularly rainy morning. Mrs. Baek, a long-time customer, was the first to arrive at the store, and she had difficulties stuffing her umbrella into her handbag. I opened the door for her and invited her in with a welcoming gesture. Expecting her to give a warm smile and return the greeting, I was instead met with a confused face as she cautiously slid past. Every customer I opened the doors for maintained the same uneasy gratefulness as Mrs. Baek that day, as if meaning to ask, “You’re doing this for me? Why?”

People I knew back home appreciated extra efforts to show friendliness, unlike the suspicion or indifference these customers had shown. But I began to learn later on that what I had done was appreciated, albeit unheard-of in Korean society. My efforts at extending a hand of kindness helped me recognize a key value of my own, and helped me—at least within the store—begin to break a tradition of social silence.

Taking a walk around the main street after that morning, I discovered that this rushed lifestyle did not leave much room for pleasantries. Greetings were restricted to cursory glances. Businessmen bumped shoulders without apologizing. A woman’s umbrella slipped out of her hand and onto the street; while passersby walked around it, no one offered to pick it up. Cold behavior, but Koreans understood that they all had places to be, things to do, and, as a consequence, too little time to care for others’ needs. However, it was not appropriate for Jeongok. A small town needed residents that cared for one another and could trust each other to go the distance to benefit others’ wellbeing, to see each other as part of one family. If this behavior was to begin here, it would begin with customers showing goodwill and compassion at the little grocery store in the center of town. Going beyond opening a door after that day, I began to carry groceries for the elderly who found their bags too heavy to carry all the way back home in the monsoon rains. Mothers left their children in my care while going around the store buying vegetables. While evenings were unbearably hot and sticky, I offered to stay after hours for customers who could only shop at night. By the end of my stay in Jeongok, I began to see exactly what I had hoped for, the store filled with conversation between fellow residents, a sharp contrast to the silence that dominated the store days earlier. Afternoon heat waves were quenched with cold drinks, all free in part by customers chipping in to buy out the daily stock. In a surprising turn of events, Mrs. Baek began to greet me at the doors, saying “Have you eaten?” with a warm smile. My efforts had finally brought out the hospitality characteristic of the small-town attitude so desperately needed here.

My actions in that little grocery store showed me that putting in extra effort was not just a nice thought. It was an indication of my commitment towards self-excellence and improvement, that if there was any potential for a better situation to arise, I would force myself to make it happen. Today, I am willing to spend extra minutes studying the details of a topic for a project, to review a concept with friends a third time when the first two did not suffice, or to take time out of my day to do something special with family, regardless of how mundane the occasion may be. It does not matter to me whether the task is something I like, or how vital it may be to accomplish it; all I could ever ask is that the effort creates a positive change for me and those who are central to my life.

# Castles, Kayaking, and College Kylie LeeAnn Northam

## What was the environment in which you were raised? … explain how it has shaped you as a person.

It’s a Saturday. I am nine years old, with my bright blonde hair blowing in the humid Corpus Christi air. Ryan and I are building a sandcastle as the sun is setting. Using the tools we made with shells and pieces of wood earlier in the day, our tiny hands work quickly to finish our castle. We decorate our castle with the seashells we found as we had walked down the beach earlier. Later, after our castle has been destroyed by the rising ocean tide, we venture alone through the sand dunes in search of buried treasure. We settle for tiny white crabs and name each one of them. “Jeffrey, Frederic, Fabio, Carly, Jack…” we say, as we point at them.

Flash forward six years later and you’ll see I am packing an ice chest with water, six bags of Goldfish crackers, and blue Gatorades, the best kind, for my cousins. We are at Coleto Creek, a reservoir known for its huge alligators. After placing the ice chest in my kayak, my cousins, sister, and I set off on a five-hour trip to paddle through the channels we predicted would be replete with alligators. We bravely decide that if an alligator jumps into one of our kayaks, we’ll hit it with a paddle.

In both of these memories, my parents are blithely unaware of the specific details of my epic adventures. Sure, they know I am on the beach or in a kayak in deep water beset with gigantic reptiles. They also know I could be in danger, but they let me explore anyway.

Perhaps my parents are different because they are the children of German immigrants who spent their childhoods slaughtering animals and working fields to ensure their livelihood, or because they are the only people in their families to graduate from high school, or because we live out in the country, where it always feels unquestionably safe. Unlike most parents, mine couldn’t offer much help on my schoolwork, and have never actively sought out opportunities for me or advocated for me in instances when most parents would. Instead, they allowed me to choose the sports and activities I wanted to join, monitor my own grades, and run around my neighborhood all day.

But freedom can be suffocating. I remember hating my parents when they told me, “Do it yourself. You’re big enough.” This was a common response when I got frustrated with math and asked for help or when I wanted them to talk to coaches or teachers on my behalf. Looking back, this parenting style forced me to either get over it, be resourceful, or, most importantly, become my own advocate and take ownership of my life and choices. So, on my own, I chose to attend a school forty minutes away from my home, join the National Hispanic Institute despite identifying as a white female, and work tirelessly to become the valedictorian of my class while obtaining my associate’s degree. These choices, in retrospect, were no different from capturing crabs or kayaking with alligators. They were choices that emerged from the courage, independence, and adventure-seeking environment my parents created.

My parents empowered me to welcome risks. They shaped me into a scrapper, what my unique redneck family calls resilient people who don’t necessarily seem rugged, and into a young woman who is unafraid to speak up for herself, to take risks, and to never stop searching for my next adventure.

# The Machine Anonymous

## Describe a significant turning point in your life.

Scrolling through the lines of G-code iterations, I rubbed my eyes as my cursor hovered over the “Run” button on the monitor. The image of the Arc de Triomphe taunted me. My finger rested on the mouse in anticipation, but the high stakes furthered my anxiety.

I had toiled endlessly to develop a printing system that would construct three-dimensional objects, ranging from chess pieces to human ears, using gels instead of plastics. After working out some kinks to my prototype – a high-resolution 3D-printer whose center was a labyrinth of rainbow-colored wires – I was ready for another test.

I clicked my mouse and retreated, unsure of what to expect. The machine emitted a cacophony of beeps. Gears clattered. Motors screeched. Sparks and crackles confirmed that something was wrong. My once-confident smile faded. I knit my eyebrows and reluctantly hit the red “Emergency STOP” button. The machine froze mid-print, and  
the lab went silent.

As a boy who yearned for tangible challenges, I gravitated towards LEGOs. I disregarded the sets’ pre-determined designs, preferring to construct my mind’s fabrications instead. My dogged determination to find the perfect piece meant spending hours rummaging through my ten-gallon tub. Years later, Zumba posed a greater challenge to my willpower. The fast-tempo Latin dance program was merciless to novices like me. Initially, I was afraid of humiliation, especially in front of my friends, and struggled to keep up with the instructors. But after dozens of embarrassing attempts, I finally found my groove.

I owe much of my resolve to saber fencing. I began as a “speed demon,” recklessly rushing onto the bout strip and hoping to slash my way to victory. With my lack of technique, I won a few matches, but I eventually started losing consistently. Practice after practice, I learned technique and tweaked my tactics. The sweat stains on my mask and the nicks on my lamé were tally marks of my improvement. I stopped rushing for victory and waited for my  
opponents to strike. A shift of their eyes indicated an imminent attack, but the tip of my saber was there waiting. After months of tedious training, my win-loss ratio grew exponentially.

Working as a summer intern in the lab of Dr. K, a chemistry professor at D, I was  
assigned a project that was gathering dust. The gel-printer, previously attempted by doctorates and undergraduates, represented the kind of challenge that I desired and provided the most important reality test of my perseverance learned from LEGOs, Zumba, and fencing. From day one, I remained confident and enthusiastic throughout my nine-to-five shifts, during which I familiarized myself with fabricating components, soldering wires,  
and experimenting with various hydrogel formulations.

From time to time, my mentor would stop by. The sight of his precious machine, now dismantled and inoperable, frightened him. One of Dr. K’s visits coincided with one of my tests. With him was a group of other scientists. They all watched as my hands deftly loaded gel-filled syringes into the contraption. I turned toward the Arc de Triomphe on the monitor, which presented a plethora of structural challenges. I moved the cursor over “Run” and paused. Questions inundated my mind: What if I fry the motherboard? What if the arch collapses? What if I embarrass myself?

I clicked, and the machine hummed. The printer’s needle-sharp nozzle extruded a shimmering line of gel 250-micrometers wide and stopped. The professor became ecstatic. His colleagues began to chatter. Their expressions confirmed the functionality of the printer. But I wanted to conquer the arch.

I returned to fine-tuning the printer, spending hour-after-hour in an endless loop of trial-and-error. Weeks later, I once again clicked “Run,” and the printer hummed. Although nowhere near the monument of perseverance and strength as its real-life equivalent, the little gel Arc de Triomphe that proudly stood on the build platform served asmy own testament to the power of perseverance.

# Hope, Ambition, and Ravioli Anna Speed

## How did your family shape your identity?

My childhood memories were mixed by hand. Hunched over Formica countertops my grandmother formed my earliest ephemera between her palms. Side by side we rolled the hours away perfecting the one dish that continues to define me even now. Roll, drop, fold, cut, boil, and bowl. This was no Chef Boyardee. These ravioli were a homespun delicacy. I have never grown out of my love for continuing this tradition. This dish, while simple, represents everything that makes my family both so special and so complex.

Ravioli dinners are always filled with affection and valuable lessons that have each shaped me in their own way. Every New Years the custom is repeated. The family always gathers at the table after the ravioli is done to talk with one another about the year that has passed and the year ahead. Eating the food of his youth always put my grandfather into a nostalgic mood. He was an altogether different force from my Grandma. My grandfather was a kind old man with an exterior toughened on the streets of Detroit. When he was alive, Grandpa would wistfully begin to tell us chronicled tales of suffering and struggle. Back then, the American Dream appeared to him as a promised future. Unfortunately, the Depression had swept away the hope of gainful employment. Without the guarantee of work, there was no guarantee of food.

From a young age, my grandfather trudged through life in the hope of subsistence; what was once an oasis was now only an insubstantial mirage. Despite his hardships, my grandfather matured into a success story, securing for himself the family and the future that the American Dream promised. He would finish his sermon by pointing to the faded photographs on the walls that depicted his own small business. Finally, without fail, we kids would tuck these thoughts away and return to our desserts.

It is clear now that the stories he told were not legends, but parables. I took these images of death, hunger, and hope to heart; I was able to glean invaluable advice that could have only come otherwise through trial and error. Struggle and achievement became two ensnared inevitabilities. The past proved that anything worth having would require great effort. Yet, I was no longer stopped by the idea of fighting my way towards my goals. Following in my grandfather's footsteps was easier with his words as a guiding hand. Moments from long ago became an inspiration and route to any success that could be sought. In that way, Grandpa's long, faded narrative became mine.

Ravioli, while delectable, are not dear to me for their flavor. Instead, it is their pivotal role in tradition. In each handmade raviolo is a little love, and in each story is key advice. The affection of my family and the lessons they've gifted me have shaped me into a daring young woman. I cannot help but ask for a heaping helping of both.

# Debate Joel Abraham

## 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.

“…Thus I advocate for the global suicide of humanity as a solution to anthropocentrism…” I dropped my pen, frozen in shock and hilarity. Surely this was a joke; although I had only attended a few debate tournaments, I had never encountered anything so radical. Mildly flustered, I stumbled over my words trying to explain to the judge how nonsensical my opponent’s proposition was; I had scoffed at the apparent ridiculousness but couldn’t quite articulate why this was so appalling. When the judge announced the decision in favor of my opponent, I was in disbelief—I couldn’t fathom how anyone could vote for such an obviously facetious argument—until he explained his decision. I realized that my opponent wasn’t seriously arguing for global suicide, but was merely using it as a starting point for discussion: he was provoking us to think, and think critically.

Debate is far more than just an activity: it’s a universe, a space for advocacy, change, discussion, humor, a microcosm of the political world. Debate offered a space in which I could role-play as a policymaker in my tattered hoodie and basketball shorts and tackle real-world social issues while sipping a Coke.

The progressive nature of the debate space allows it to accommodate a variety of arguments, ranging from micro-political advocacies to criticisms of representations. Debaters so frequently discuss the pressing issues of our time and thoroughly interrogate proposed solutions. Congressional bills, revisions to international law, consulting the Ministry of Magic, and every other imaginable policy option had a place. For every argument justifying a potential policy, there was another criticizing it, exposing its concealed social problems. I learned about everything from ableism to colonialism and began to understand the permeating effects of these “-isms” on our society. My participation in this wonderful activity was a taste of reality that brought me out of the cave; it was a rude awakening, opening my eyes to the harsh sunlight until I craved more, no longer wishing to be blind.

I remember the 2015 March/April topic was “Resolved: Just governments ought to ensure food security for their citizens.” I initially perceived the topic as heavily skewed—how would anyone argue that food security is immoral? Sure enough, debate slowly unraveled the intricacies intrinsic to such complicated issues. By debating with others who had approached the resolution from different angles, I was exposed to arguments I hadn’t previously considered, such as disadvantages to the plan arguing that increasing food production is unsustainable or interpretations of the topic advocating for security from humans for the plants and animals that constitute food.

Fundamentally, debate is about challenging others’ beliefs, but through my debate experience, I challenged my own preconceived notions of society. Debate revealed to me the concealed darkness and complexity of the world of today and taught me that a multifaceted approach to problem solving is necessary; social issues must be deconstructed and critically examined from multiple perspectives before a solution can be reached. Debate woke me up from my naïve slumber and provided me an avenue for political experimentation. The debate space was effectively a trial site for policy action, and I was an eager beta-tester. Debate taught me that pure idealism fails in practice, that one man can’t change the world, but together, we can teach the world to change itself.

# The Game of Revelations Yugena Gunawardena

## Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings, and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.

I walked past a building labeled “prayer room” and knew I did not fit in. A Buddhist boy playing basketball in a Christian basketball league, I found myself walking through a parochial school on a Saturday in search of a gym.

I ambled through two doors emblazoned with a maroon cross and entered into something resembling more of a church than a basketball court. Red, blue, and yellow light entered the building through the stained glass windows that adorned the walls and came together to illuminate the image of what looked like a bible at center court. I was lost. Buddhist temples, which I didn’t even attend regularly, were much simpler: merely rooms with a statue of the Buddha centered at one end. Here in this ominous gym, it was as if God himself was in attendance. I was a fifth grader who went to a school where nobody seemed to be overly involved with religion at all. I wasn’t just blind to it; I was genuinely scared. I was scared of the symbols, I was scared of the institution, I was scared of the people. As my teammates and I finished our warm-up drills, we were called to center court to gather around the outer edge of the bible that glistened before us on the floor. I saw parents, I saw coaches, I saw not only members of the other team but my own teammates as well assemble into a circle and join hands. Not knowing what to do, I took the hand of one of my friends and that of a kid on the other team and stared on.

A man in a grey tracksuit bowed his head and began to speak. “Lord, we thank you for this game today,” he said. “We thank you for protecting our children and for shepherding them through the hardships that they have faced thus far.” He went on but my mind went blank. What was I supposed to do? I knew nothing of “the Lord.” I had never said a prayer, much less gotten into a prayer circle. I closed my eyes and tried to block out my surroundings, trying to isolate myself as an individual independent of my surroundings. After a very uncomfortable “amen,” that I said not knowing at all what it meant, I stepped out onto the court, ready to finally start the game. I found myself guarding the same boy I had earlier joined in prayer, the same boy who seemed to be an almost a direct source of my unease. No matter, that was in the past and this was now. Forget about it and move on right? However, with every post up, with every shot contest, with every box out for a rebound, I began to see similarities. We were both awkward, lanky kids trying to do our best to win. As the game wore on, with each layup and each crossover, I wanted to say something. I felt an obligation to make some sort of attempt to make up for my earlier misconceptions. Whereas earlier I had envisioned this kid as being something totally different, nothing close to a kid like me, I now saw us as one and the same. “Hey nice shot.” I told him. He looked at me, confused almost, seeming to have come to the same realization I had made moments earlier. With a simple “thanks man” we became equals.

My foolish notions of religion setting us apart as different people had been dashed in the mere time it took to shoot a free throw. Just because this kid prayed, said “amen,” and looked to God for guidance didn’t mean he was something so different. At the end of the day we both wanted to do our best and win. There was no reason for me to cast him off just because he was of a different religion. That day I learned that religion does not divide us as a society but instead shows us the many ways in which we can try to achieve our goals and get guidance in our lives.

I was no longer a Buddhist boy playing basketball in a Christian basketball league. I was a boy playing basketball in a league with kids just like me. Encountering these people with differing beliefs taught me to embrace the diversity of those around us. When I encounter people of differing beliefs today I don’t just shun them and try to find those who act like me, I keep an open mind and interact with them, understanding their viewpoints and sharing my own as well. It is this mixing of ideas and practices that spurs progress. If we talked only with those of similar beliefs we would merely keep the same beliefs forever and never have the chance to develop newer, better ones. Whether it was God’s plan or Karma, we lost the game that day, but looking back I learned perhaps the most important lesson of my life.

# Flip Flops Rawan Hedefa

## What was the environment you were raised in? Describe your family, home, neighborhood, or community, and explain how it has shaped you as a person.

“Don’t turn the flip flop upside down!” I heard my grandmother let out a screech, that truly, could have awoken the dead had my mother not briskly calmed her down. Weird, I thought to myself. It was only a brown leather flip flop that my brother had unwittingly laid upside down on the soft carpet thickened with a decade’s dust. Why was she so enraged by something that was, well, extremely insignificant?

This was not the first time that my grandmother had allowed a superstition to be the cause of her distress. In fact, I can recall numerous superstitious beliefs that my grandmother adhered to– leaving the scissors open brings bad luck, throwing grains of salt over the shoulders leads to great cooking, knocking on wood protects from misfortune, and more. Beyond amusing to think of now, these superstitions had only prompted blank expressions and enlisted fear throughout my childhood.

For the majority of my childhood, I was raised by three guardians–my father, mother, and grandmother. My grandmother, however, carried out what seemed to be the most crucial role of the family. Despite the peculiarity of many of her requests, the Egyptian tradition of respecting the elderly regardless was to be carried out. Her requests were fulfilled, and inevitably, her beliefs were present in my family. In fact, I had also once ensured that every pair of flip flops was not to be turned upside down. I put in optimum effort to avoid “upsetting the holy spirits” which “brought misfortune”. The beliefs that my grandmother had offered were the only ones I had been exposed to in such a closed community. Perhaps, having been exposed to only these beliefs, I thought to myself, this must be true. However, to my surprise, the superstitions that I had once held so firmly to, were essentially revealed to be false. Frankly, following through with these engraved beliefs did not bring about any sacred outcomes. Placing the flip flops in an upside position certainly did not intervene with my health or happiness.

Though superstitions were formerly prominent in my family, and still are in a plentiful of families in my home country Egypt, they no longer constitute any aspect of the lifestyles of my family members, myself included. That is, following the heart-rending death of my grandmother, my father decided to accept a job offer in the Saudi Arabian oil company, Aramco. The company was located within an explicitly international, diverse community.

My parents, brother, and I had fortunately been exposed to various cultures. We became friends with Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Jews. We were invited to celebrate Vesak, Diwali, Christmas, Hanukkah, and more. We had even, for the first time, come across individuals who did not believe in any absolute, divine ruler. Though we all experienced a critical transitional period, we ultimately adapted to the varying beliefs that each individual we met had exemplified. Contrary to the immediate adoption of my grandmother’s superstitious beliefs, we learned to accept and respect other beliefs without altering our own set of morals or opinions.

Transitioning from an enclosed community in Egypt and an internationalized community in Aramco has undoubtedly influenced my character today. I have developed a global mindset and gained the ability to assess situations through distinct perspectives, and value different opinions and approaches. Turning the flip-flops upside down surely did not hinder my progression in the past years, and I have come to the realization that no other external force can possibly interfere with the power that I possess to change my own future and reach success. It is all under my control― not that of the flip flops.

# Education Helen Smith

## What is an issue that has shaped your life, and why?

In the fifth grade, I touched a human brain. The children in my enrichment program clustered around the sterile table with little regard for the stench of formaldehyde that engulfed us. Granted, much of the interest we showed can be attributed to the sheer morbidity factor of the novelty before us. However, a sizeable faction, including myself, relished the chance to find the brain stem in person, to feel the ventricle that hollows upon death.

My peers and I certainly were no neurologists. We were normal, albeit bright, kids who later pretended to be secret agents with the notepads given to us on the bus ride to the UT Health Science Center. Yet our school district saw fit to allocate funding to the weekly gifted and talented program. Increased educational opportunities open one’s eyes to that which he or she is interested in. Exposure to different areas of study is of the utmost importanceIn a country with a trillion dollar budget deficit, government looks for easy cuts. Sadly, education is often under-funded and maligned. We should not herald as an easy fix something that will endanger the success of future generations. It is imperative that we maintain, if not increase, our rates of school funding.

Touching a brain was a formative experience for me, one that led me to pursue science and one day return to the Health Science Center to research Type 2 diabetes. I volunteered for an expo there. I guided students, this time middle-schoolers, through the process of examining a sheep’s heart. I then pointed out the dull scalpels with which they could each dissect the hearts I placed in front of them. Although their experiences were slightly different than mine, I was surprised and excited to find that the opportunities that helped shape my interests and ambitions.