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**Sample essays 2017**

**University of Virginia**

# Ready for the Future Because of My Background Anonymous

## Please write on a topic of your choice. OR The Admissions Committee would like to know more about you in your own words. Please submit a brief essay, either autobiographical or creative, which you feel best describes you.

I never knew when I was speaking Farsi, Chinese, or English. After all, I would flit back and forth from my Taiwanese mother to my Persian father, rapidly translating words between them. Then, I'd settle into bed for my regular Dr. Seuss bedtime story.

Having parents from not only different ethnic backgrounds, but from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, has really helped create and shape my unique perspective on life. For example, this year I'm taking a semester history class, America and the World Since 1945. We began the year discussing the current situation in the Middle East along with the history of terrorism. While discussing the definition of a terrorist, I raised my hand and stated that our characterization would include George Washington in the category of a terrorist. He did terrorize the Loyalist Tories who supported the King during the American Revolution in the name of liberty. After I spoke the class went into an uproar, wondering how could I have had the gall to even suggest such a thing. How could I defile an integral and cherished man in the history of our country? I was not trying to be controversial; I was just looking at the issues from a different perspective. I consider myself a loyal and proud American citizen; however, I cannot look at life through a solely American viewpoint. I was taught to be open-minded and I value open dialogue between cultures.

In addition to a unique viewpoint, my parents have each taught me important lessons in life that have factored into my personality. My mom grew up in a poor family with six children in Taiwan, yet each of her siblings went through college and most went to graduate school in the U.S. Thus, she never takes anything for granted and values integrity and hard work. She has instilled in my sister and me these same values. She used to embarrass me all the time with her so-called lessons. For example, whenever we went to the grocery store and the cashier totaled up our receipt incorrectly, whether in our favor or theirs, my mom would insist on going back and correcting this mistake. I would try to hide behind rows of chips and candy bars, hoping that no one would realize she was my mother. She would interrupt the line, forcefully speaking in a loud voice demanding the fair change or giving back what she was not owed. After realizing she had completely embarrassed me, she would explain to me that it "wasn't the money, but the principle" of the matter. Nowadays, not only do I look on proudly as she attempts to correct the wrongs of the world one receipt at a time, I follow in her footsteps. My father, on the other hand, had an advantaged childhood. His father was the vice president of the B.F. Goodrich tire company in Iran, he attended a prestigious all-boys private school, and he rarely wanted for anything. He came to the U.S. to go to college and fully expected to return after four years. The political climate changed everything, however. The 1979 Iranian Revolution brought the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini into power, a man who had little tolerance and patience for non-Muslims. My father's family were all Bahai's, the newest world religion, so much of their land was confiscated and many of them had to escape to various countries such as England, Germany, and the U.S. If they had recanted their religious beliefs and converted to Islam, my father and his family would have immediately regained their status and property. However, they stood up for their beliefs and suffered for it. Yet, they never wavered.

My dad constantly tells me, and has shown me by his actions, that it is necessary to be strong, know your true values and stand up for them regardless of the situation. I have always believed that you have to "stand up for something or you'll fall for anything". Equipped with this belief, my distinct mix of cultures, and all the lessons my parents have taught me, I am fully ready to tackle with confidence the next step of my life: college.

# Of Life and Basketball Blake Masters

## Please describe your most meaningful experience to date.

Things are not looking good for the Griffins. They have just lost the slight lead they had over their opponent and they seem extremely fatigued. To make matters worse, there are only a few minutes left in the game. My legs feel weak and tell me that they need rest, but I reply that now is not the time. I look up the court just in time to see the opposing team's power forward intercept a lazily thrown pass and he breaks for the basket. I immediately recognize that I am the only one in a position to stop him and so without thinking, I find myself blocking the charging forward's path to the basket. There is no time to think or evaluate options... I stand firm. We brace for impact - and what an impact it is! A hush falls over the gym; everyone knows that the following call could very easily determine the game's outcome. Dazed and confused, we look eagerly at the official (who seems to be thoroughly enjoying the sudden attention). CHARGE! Offensive foul! The gym erupts with emotion, and in the Griffins emerges a newfound sense of pride and energy. It proves to be just enough to carry them over a fierce Tigers team to clinch the Regional Championship.

No opportunity that I've had throughout high school has had greater meaning to me than the opportunity to play varsity basketball. I wholeheartedly believe that my basketball experience has taught me countless important lessons and has provided an excellent medium for me to grow as a person. In the future, when I look back and reminisce about my high school years, being a part of the Griffin basketball program is sure to be my most memorable and significant experience.

It would be wrong to give the impression that I only like playing basketball because of the lessons to be learned by the experience. I don't even think about such things when I am on the court. Simply put, I love playing the game and spending time with my teammates. As far as recreation goes, there is nothing that I would rather do than lace up my sneakers and play ball with a group of close friends.

Actual court time, however, is but a single part of my basketball experience. I have learned a great deal over the past three basketball seasons, but only a little of it has to do with pick-and-rolls or free-throw shooting techniques. Presented with any sort of challenge a few years ago, I would have been full of uncertainty and possibly even fear. As a sophomore starting on Varsity, however, it didn't take me long to realize that there is absolutely no room for such shyness in basketball. To be successful on the court, one must never feel intimidated or reserved. This unabashed mentality apparently manifested itself onto other aspects of my life, and the results have been very positive. I have learned not to be afraid of pursuing my goals. In order to achieve them, I know that I must pursue them boldly and with great fortitude. Now, trying something new or deviating from the normal path is not such a big deal anymore. From academics to personal matters, the lessons of determination and relentlessness that I have learned from basketball have had an immeasurable impact on my life. As Sir Winston Churchill once said, one needs to "look for the opportunity in every difficulty, as opposed to the other way around."

Playing varsity basketball has instilled in me a fierce will to achieve and embrace my ambitions as opposed to fearing them. I am extremely fortunate to have gained these qualities while playing the sport that I love. The combination of the beautiful game and my fantastic teammates has made Griffin Basketball the best experience of my life.

# I'm No Buffy the Vampire Slayer Arielle Ring

## Personal Statement

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

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

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

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

# Into the Heart of Darkness Arielle Ring

## Describe a defining moment in your life.

As a sixth-grader obsessed with the Seattle Mariners, I read the newspaper only for the sports page. One morning, however, I came upon a special pullout section as I thumbed for my section. It was entitled "Into the Heart of Darkness," and I nearly skipped it as I had the hundreds that came before and after it. What caused me to linger on this section was the picture consuming most of the front page, a photo I will never forget. It was of a young boy in a tattered hat, his suffering evident from the meek, dark look in his eyes.

Provoked by the poignant image, I began reading the article detailing the horrendous conditions of Romanian orphans. Lacking adequate shelter, clothing, and medical supplies, they were preparing to face a tough winter. By the time I finished reading the article, goose bumps covered my body. I felt obligated to help, but the problem seemed too hefty and inevitable for a young girl to tackle. For a few weeks, the images and words haunted me as I continued my everyday life.

As the holiday season neared, my family continued the tradition of rolling beeswax candles for gifts. The idea occurred to my friend and I that we could sell these candles and donate the profits to charity. Helping Hearts, the business we developed out of this idea, raised over $10,000 for Romanian orphans over several years.

Perhaps I would have found ways to help the needy without reading "Into the Heart of Darkness" that morning. All I know is that the image of that boy moved something in me that I know will shape decisions for the rest of my life. Besides donating Helping Hearts proceeds to the orphans, I have also become a leader at the local Second Harvest Food Bank. In the coming years I will continue to help the needy in our community - both international and local - as best I can.

# I wish I didn't have to... Travis Hodges

## Finish this statement: "I wish I didn't have to..."

I wish I didn't have to turn on the news every morning to be enlightened by a perpetually worsening inventory of the events of our civilized world's current catastrophic plight. In fact, I wish I could watch the news and witness, just once, a report of mankind's benevolence rather than the wickedness that fills the daily headlines.

I haven't been able to watch an entire broadcast in ages without hearing about the faltering economy, threats of terrorism, or the war in Iraq and its current death toll of over two thousand needlessly slaughtered soldiers. There's always some mention of the incessant turmoil and saber-rattling within the Middle East, whether it's an act of terrorism by al-Zarqawi and Al Qaeda, or the relentless "holy" warfare between Israel and Palestine. Further hostilities have recently been highlighted in the news of the world's most dangerous dictator, Kim Jong Il of North Korea, who is allegedly counterfeiting hundred-dollar bills to finance his nuclear weapons program, which apparently could serve as the opening shots of World War III.

But these atrocities do not merely occur outside of our borders. Our nation is presently afflicted by Delay's money laundering and Libby's indictment. When did our politicians and representatives stop working for the common welfare of the people and focus solely on their own personal benefits? Yet our unpleasant news doesn't end with the malevolent actions of people - Mother Nature has taken on her share of the headlines lately. She dealt out more hurricanes this year, one of which was the most powerful ever recorded and whose effects FEMA was unprepared to handle.

Locally, in my own community, there is constantly mention of murder, abuse, or some other form of violence afflicting the society. In this past week, for instance, I was forced to bear witness to both the local news station and newspaper report that an AK-47 and two swords were confiscated from a student in the parking lot of my own high school.

I watch the news every day, and the continuous discharge of dreadful news disheartens and terrifies me. Just thirty minutes of this chaos forces me to question the morality of mankind as a whole. Is mankind inherently this evil? I don't think so. However, it is a sad state when evil is sensationalized for capitalistic advertisers' profits; I wish I didn't have to live in a society that craves to witness this display of our worst sides.

I wish I could turn on the news and smile at the report that someone somewhere is selflessly bettering this world. I wish this world were a little more idealistic, with more Mother Teresas than Saddam Husseins.

# A Message to a Terrorist Vetan Kapoor

## Topic of Choice This essay was written in response to the terrorist attacks in New Delhi, India, on Oct 31, 2005

Confusion and panic were clearly visible. People were running around frantically, shouting and screaming. Everyone was in a hurry. Nobody knew what was going to happen. We were all scared. Fall Fiesta was almost upon us.

The thirty or so students that were at school on that Saturday afternoon were responsible for the organization of Fall Fiesta, an annual event held to benefit our community and attended by people of all ages. At about 5:20 pm, just as the last of the preparations were completed, we all gathered around the stage. Mr. Caemmerer, the Student Council advisor, congratulated us on our hard work. "The most important thing today," he said, "is to make sure that nobody leaves feeling disappointed. Do whatever you can to make sure that people have a great time."

My first assignment at Fall Fiesta was to run an activity called the "Velcro Wall." My job was to dress participants up in a Velcro suit that would enable them to stick to a soft wall. Although business was slow at first, the activity quickly became popular among the smaller children. Parents clapped and cheered enthusiastically as the watched their offspring hanging upside down, screaming and giggling with excitement.

Just before my shift was over, a young girl (probably not more than six years old), ran over to the Velcro Wall and proudly handed me a "Play" coupon. "It's my turn now," she exclaimed, a huge grin lighting up her face. "I want to go upside down." My friend and I chuckled as we watched her shout with delight at the prospect of being suspended upside down in midair. The Velcro on the suits was a bit coarse, and an hour of lifting up little children had made our knuckles red and sore. We laughed with the little girl as we gave her a "Prize" coupon. As we traded places with two more volunteers, we decided to find some water. "These kids are definitely enjoying themselves, buddy," my friend said to me.

As I walked around exploring the other activities that had been set up by my peers, I couldn't help but feel a little proud. Our fear, it seemed, had been unnecessary. Everything was working out just fine. I watched children walking with their parents and heard the music of the school's jazz band. The scent of cotton candy hung in the warm air. Everyone was having a fantastic night.

As I approached the "Cookie Decorating" booth, Mrs. Fischer, our high school guidance counselor and the advisor for the Senior Class Government, came toward me with a strange look on her face. "Vetan, start cleaning up and go find Mr. Caemmerer," she said. Without another word she walked off, leaving me in a state of confusion. I stopped someone near me and asked, "What's going on?" The boy, someone whom I had seen playing soccer on the field earlier that day, replied, "Some places in Delhi just got blown up. They think the school might be next. Everyone is leaving."

The next forty-five minutes or so were surreal. It felt as though I had entered a dream world from which there was no waking up. Everyone was in a hurry. My thoughts turned to my 13-year-old sister, Mahika. I looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of her or her friends. I had left my mobile phone at home. I borrowed somebody's phone and called my father. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Nobody was picking up. I called my mother. One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Still nothing. Trepidation built up inside of me as I circled the area once, twice, three times. As I quickly navigated the crowd, I bumped into a small child. "Where do I go to get my prize?" he asked. Believing that nothing should tarnish a child's innocence, I determined to forget about my apprehension and led the child to the prize booth, where there was a line of kids waiting to collect their rewards. I gave him his toy, and he ran off.

As I headed towards the gates of our school, a parent approached me and asked me where the microphone was. "I need to find my daughter," she said. I directed her toward the microphone, and told other people to start making their way towards the exit. I borrowed another phone and called my mother. One ring. Two rings. "Hello?"

"Mama? It's me, Vetan. I can't find Mahika. Do you know where she is?"

"She went with her friend's parents. She is safe. Dad is at the Diwali party at the office, he will come to pick you up."

"Mama, the school is not safe. I'm going over to Gaurav's house. Tell Dad to pick me up there." With that, I hung up the phone and ran towards the exit, where I saw confused, scared people trying to reclaim their money.

As soon as I got out of the school, I ran to my friend's house. Panting, I arrived to find him watching the news. There had been several explosions in various markets. Sarojini, where my sister and I often shop for clothes. Govindpuri, the market behind my grandmother's house. Fire, terror, fear, chaos, anger, tears. A reporter, standing bravely in front of a camera, exposing the tragedy to the world.

My Dad returned from his party ten minutes later, and we left to pick up my sister from her friend's house. The ride home was uneasy, the silence punctuated only by the sound of my sister crying. I looked over at my father. Through his hardened exterior, I could see a side of him that he usually kept hidden. He was scared. How to console him? How to console my crying sister?

When I got home that night, I ran up the stairs and fell into my mother's arms, crying like I used to when I was a little boy. We stood in the kitchen for over twenty minutes. We didn't need words. I felt safe and relieved. For the first time in my life, I prayed to God. I asked Him to forgive me for not believing. I told him that I was forever grateful to Him for keeping my family safe.

I want to thank you, the terrorist who brought such destruction to my city. I want to thank you for reminding me about the importance of family. I want to thank you for teaching me about the importance of faith. I want to thank you for showing me just how strong humans can be. I want to thank you for showing me that the world is bigger than any one individual. Today, you have won, for today, my family, my city, and my people are frightened. But your victory will only make us stronger. Our community is resilient, and our resolve has never been stronger. Our student council will organize more Fall Fiestas in the years to come. Every death that you have caused will be avenged through acts of kindness and consideration. Unlike you, we are not alone in our struggle: all of humankind stands with us. May God be with you.

# Driven Vetan Kapoor

## Describe a significant experience in your life.

It was an exhilarating moment that set my heart aflutter. I had in my head an image of James Bond, speeding down a foreign highway in pursuit of justice, a dazzling femme-fatale steering the car ahead of him. As soon as the car stuttered to a start, however, the image in my mind was quickly shattered. I realized that like so many things, driving looked a lot easier in the movies.

My decision to learn how to drive came about after a conversation with one of my friends from America who had excitedly informed me of her new possession: a car. I asked my father to sign me up for driving lessons. At only 100 rupees a day (approximately $2), the lessons were at least financially plausible.

It was on my third day of driving lessons that I first saw him: a scrawny-looking boy with unkempt hair and a dirty white shirt who sat quietly in the back of the car. My instructor explained to me that he had just finished his driving lesson. I glanced at him through the rear-view mirror and smiled politely when his eyes made contact with mine.

Back at the instructor's office we began talking, and I soon learned that the boy was as old as I was. He explained to me that he was learning how to drive so that he could apply for a license. He would have to lie about his age, he said, but after receiving his license he would be able to start driving a taxi to help his father earn some extra money for the family. He proudly told me that he had saved money for a year to be able to afford half of the driving lessons, and that he hoped to learn enough to skip the other half.

My new-found friend, Rohan, presented an interesting contrast. While I hadn't thought twice about asking my father to spend money on me, he hadn't thought twice about pursuing this endeavor to help his father earn money. My fantasies of being able to speed down a freeway seemed shockingly immature in comparison to his dreams of being able to support his family.

A few months later, I was in the backseat of my car, when we abruptly halted at a red light. A small "Ambassador" car pulled up beside us. The black-and-green coloring gave away the identity of the vehicle as one of the many old taxis in the city. I looked across at the car, and was surprised to see Rohan looking back at me. When his eyes made contact with mine, my smile was one of warmth and respect. If my eyes had spoken that day, they would have thanked him for teaching me the importance of pursuing selfless goals. They would have thanked him for teaching me that sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice and take risks. They would have thanked him for teaching me that sometimes we have to learn to drive so that we can give others a ride.

# Kairotic Leadership Anonymous

## Please discuss in detail a situation or an event that demonstrates your effectiveness as a leader, and how that situation or event has shaped your conception of leadership.

"Live the Fourth!" The Fourth of July you might ask? Not quite. I mean the Fourth day of the Kairos Retreat, when we made resolutions and the Kairos spirit was at its peak. Kairos means a spiritual time-a time that can't be measured in minutes or hours. On this retreat, my senior class devoted four days to self-exploration in the soft hills of Toccoa, GA. As a student leader, I lived Kairos twice, once in a condensed version on the leaders' retreat, and again when I led my own table group through the experience.

Many people have asked me what the Kairos secret is, and while there are tangible secrets, those aren't what "make" the retreat. The real secret is that after only a few hours at the leaders' retreat, I talked openly about topics I wouldn't normally share: my fears and goals, my sister Ali's illness as a baby, and my love and respect for my boyfriend. Perhaps that wouldn't sound strange with close friends, but the other student leaders weren't people I knew well. Sure, I saw them in the halls and we occasionally chatted, yet while they had classes together and hung out outside of school, I was an outsider. But once we started talking, the Kairos spirit prevailed and the barriers disappeared.

Despite my excitement about sharing the experience, I worried that I wouldn't be able to lead the table discussions well enough for my group to experience the Kairos they deserved. However, once the retreat started, I was on a high, carrying a notebook scribbled with thoughts from the discussions while Jolly Rancher sugar coursed through my veins and the Kairos soundtrack-songs the leaders chose for each topic-ran in my head. As things progressed, my doubts were replaced with the realization that while it was up to me look out for anyone who wasn't comfortable with the questions or who was scared to share something, mostly I was just another attendee, finding insights about myself and my group like everyone else.

On the second day, I gave my speech on Integrity. As I stood at the podium tapping my foot to Billy Joel's "The Stranger," I knew that my leadership wasn't about standing in front of the room and giving the speech as much as it was about inspiring reflection. It wasn't always starting the conversation but rather sharing my own stories so that others would be comfortable sharing theirs. And it definitely wasn't forcing people to contribute, but instead making them comfortable enough to volunteer. When my group dedicated its Kairos symbol to me on the third day, I realized for the first time what my guidance meant to them. Perhaps I'm not the Student Body President, but part of Living the Fourth for me is helping others by fulfilling my leadership potential. Sometimes I'm in the front giving that speech, but other times I'm in the middle of the crowd organizing the event, and the rest of the time, I'm in the back supporting the one onstage. At Kairos, I realized that I embody all three aspects of leadership and that all are equally important.

# 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.

# Not Strangers Anymore Anonymous

## Please discuss in detail a situation or an event that demonstrates your effectiveness as a leader, and how that situation or event has shaped your conception of leadership. Be as specific as possible.

My eyes slowly closed to the last chords of Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah” fading from Mr. Connell’s guitar. It was the first night, and the day had been hectic, but things were going as planned. I looked around the cozy room and saw my classmates sprawled on couches and the floor, most of them already stepping outside their prescribed social barriers. It was time those walls came down. After weeks of preparation and almost cult-like secrecy, this was the senior Kairos Retreat—a four day spiritual high in the woods of Toccoa, Georgia.

Many people have asked me what the Kairos secret is, and I tell them I can’t explain it. Okay, so there actually are some tangible secrets, but those aren’t what “make” the retreat. The real secret is that after only a few hours, I talked honestly about private matters I wouldn’t normally share: childhood in China, my sister Ali’s baby years, and a rather non-communicational relationship with my parents. Perhaps that wouldn’t sound strange with close friends, but at the leaders’ retreat, a mini-Kairos lasting thirteen straight hours, the other student leaders weren’t people I knew well at all. I saw them in the halls and occasionally we chatted, but while they had classes together and hung out outside of school, I was an outsider. But once we started talking, none of that mattered anymore. That was the Kairos spirit.

At the retreat, we spent most of our time in the old dining hall, where everyone split into table groups headed by a student and adult leader. The leaders gave speeches on topics such as Know Yourself, Friendship, and Obstacles. Mine was Integrity, and as I stood at the podium tapping my foot to Billy Joel’s “The Stranger” – my pre-speech song – I thought about how before the retreat I worried that I wouldn’t be able to lead the table discussions well enough for my group to experience the Kairos they deserved. Once things started, I realized my worries were unfounded because while my job was to read the questions, more importantly, I was just another retreatant, learning things about myself and about my group like everyone else.

My leadership wasn’t about standing in front of the room and giving the speech as much as it was about inspiring reflection. It wasn’t always starting the conversation but rather sharing my stories so that others would be comfortable sharing theirs. And it definitely wasn’t forcing people to contribute, but instead making them comfortable enough to volunteer. It felt so natural that I didn’t even realize what I was doing until the third day, when my group dedicated its Kairos symbol to me, making me realize that this time I was the role model teachers and parents spoke of. Perhaps I’m not the Student Body President, but I do think of myself as a leader. Sometimes I’m in the front giving that speech, but other times I’m in the middle of the crowd organizing the event. The rest of the time, I’m in the back supporting the one onstage. At Kairos, I realized that I am all three, and that they are equally important.

# The Impact of The West Wing On Me Anonymous

## Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

During a trip to the US, my father brought back a boxed set of The West Wing DVDs. While I planned to watch them during my school holiday as amusement, the show instead became an obsession and an education in itself.

My greatest passion has always been politics and global issues. I have a keen interest in joining the political process in my own country, India, and I see myself as a person concerned about the issues of the world at large as well. This zeal has existed in me for a long time, but it was in 2006 that I began to truly understand my passion. I attribute this to many things: reading books, newspapers, and magazines and talking to people who feel similarly (or radically differently!). But nothing has given me a better understanding of the deeper issues and the effects of politics than, strangely, The West Wing and its core characters.

The series deals with a Democratic administration led by an economist-President, and offers a glimpse into the workings of the White House. Delving into the relationships between the President, various senior staff members of the West Wing, Senators, lobbyists, foreign leaders and journalists, it is a political junkie’s delight. However, it offers me something more. It reflects my image of an ideal government. The show portrays committed individuals, idealistic and yet practical, who always have their country’s best interests in mind. Though this can be mocked at as a utopian dream, it realistically blends this fantasy with a very realistic world of discord and compromise. It embodies the notion that politicians can be intelligent, honest and honorable while at the same time remaining flawed human beings.

Another feature of The West Wing that appeals to me is the exploration of complex domestic and international issues from a liberal viewpoint very similar to mine. The show’s thorough dissection of global problems such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation and foreign policy has peaked my interest to the extent that I have carried on to learn more about these issues through other sources. I attach great importance to the sustainability of the environment, and the fictional administration’s ardor toward this issue indicates a welcome alternative, albeit fictional, to the environmental policies of modern governments. The West Wing engages me far more than the average television drama by actually involving debate about our pressing problems and positing pragmatic ways in which these problems might be tackled.

In the recent past, I have engaged myself in various tasks connected to politics. There is a terrible lack of accountability among politicians in my country, caused in large part by the paucity of accurate data pertaining to elected representatives. I work extensively with a non-governmental organization in my city, Bangalore, to find and make available accurate and verified data regarding the constituencies represented, the margins of victory and the assets of elected representatives in my state. Publishing the assets of a politician is especially satisfying, since the public in a country so riddled with political corruption like India ought to know the sources of their leaders’ wealth.

The West Wing itself inspired me to get actively involved with an election campaign. For two weeks in mid-2006, I volunteered to join the campaign of a maverick politician running for a seat in the legislative council of my state. Highly educated and possessing great integrity, he seemed to me a one-of-a-kind statesman, removed from the appalling political climate of my state. My task was to campaign over the telephone to numerous constituents. Despite the fact that the politician ultimately lost, the conversations I shared with these constituents truly inspired and encouraged me.

Though The West Wing is set in the United States (a developed country whose problems are fundamentally different from the problems of a developing country like my own), it still offers great lessons applicable to issues in India as well as the rest of the world. This American television series has not only bolstered my passion to join politics but also taught me an important life lesson. I have realized that while the world order necessitates pragmatism, idealism and vision must also be present. As The West Wing’s President says to one of his advisors, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and committed citizens can change the world.” To which the advisor replies, “It’s the only thing that ever has.”

# The General Brian Ingram

## Who is a person that has had a major influence on your life? How has this person impacted or changed you as a person?

I have experienced the scene so many times that all recollections of the event blend together into a single, unforgettable memory. The seasoned, old general, with an eye for perfection, conducted his troops, me included, through daily, often mundane exercises. Any man who lost focus or made a mistake was so sternly reminded that even the slightest of errors could spell disaster, not just for the recipient of the general’s ire, but also for the other men who were counting on him.

In reality, my memory pertains not to war, but rather football practice. The general, Coach Walter Barr, was preparing us for our weekly game, not an international conflict. Though the stakes involved in football and war are not comparable, the values and ideals needed to reach victory are almost identical, and Coach Barr constantly reminded us of this fact. Traits that Coach Barr demanded, such as respect, accountability, and hard work are necessary for success in regards to anything. Coach Barr did more than build a winning football team; he changed me into a young man ready for life and the real world.

Saying I played for Coach Barr is a gross understatement. A more true reflection is to say I committed to myself him, his system, and his values. Before I met Coach Barr, I had no concept of giving everything for a cause. After listening to him speak and participating in off-season conditioning, I decided to stick with the team, regardless of the situation. However, the first week of practice greatly challenged my assertion. Practice lasted eight hours, and the temperature and humidity combined to create a vast, blanketing heat which made any task seem several times tougher. To make matters worse, I was a sophomore competing against seniors who were much more experienced and physically mature. In addition to the demands during practice, it was expected that we spend our own time memorizing plays and formations. I had no hope of seeing the varsity playing field. Questions began to arise in my mind over whether my investments were worth the returns. The defining event of this period of uncertainty came when several players quit the team. Calling the remaining players together shortly after it occurred, Coach Barr chastised the quitting players for abandoning their peers. His words triggered an immediate reaction. At that moment, I decided I wouldn’t be a quitter, and I have never looked back. As a result of Coach Barr and his arduous practices, I feel I can accomplish anything, and there is no struggle that I cannot overcome.

Prior to Coach Barr’s influence, I would characterize myself as tentative. Instead of being proactive and creating opportunities for myself, I waited for special chances to fall to me and allowed my natural skills to carry me. Coach Barr quickly taught me that this attitude will not generate success, as competition forces us to create our own opportunities, whether it is during a football game or in life. Since I acquired a “go-getter” attitude, I have experienced much more than I would have with my previous demeanor. The most tangible example of this is my current internship with Susquehanna Technologies, a company that sells software solutions. Over the summer, I researched the company, contacted the president, and ultimately secured the internship. Before my experience with Coach Barr, I likely would have merely yearned for an opportunity such as this instead of making it happen.

One of the final, and perhaps most important, lessons I learned because of Coach Barr deals with personal growth. Before my senior season, Coach Barr retired, which was hard to fathom, as he had been involved in many aspects of my high school life. At his retirement announcement, he told us that he will be with us in spirit and to remember his teachings, as they are more important than him personally. After pondering this statement and reflecting upon all my time with Coach Barr, I realized that it is always necessary to be prepared for change. Coach Barr was an excellent leader and coach, but he cannot always be there to guide me, which is why I have to be my own person. This same sentiment applies to college and moving away from others who greatly influence me, such as my parents. As I prepare for the most major change in my life so far, I am thankful for Coach Barr and all that he has taught me. Under the General's watch, I transformed from an unsure freshman to a confident young man, ready to tackle the challenges of college life.

# A Pencil Anonymous

## What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?

Two years ago when I was stuck in the bustling streets of India with my mother in the scalding heat, I sought refuge in an air-conditioned sari shop. I sat down to read the short story which would forever be reverberating in my head: “The Story of the Pencil,” by Paulo Coelho. Pencils, Coelho claims, “have five qualities which, if you manage to hang on to…will make you a person who is always at peace with the world.” How is that possible? After all, it’s just a pencil.

A pencil is capable of great things but one must never forget that there is a hand guiding it. I am grateful for having such a caring family. My parents have been my mentors, guiding me and supporting me throughout every aspect of my life.

A pencil needs to be sharpened from time to time; in this period it will suffer. However, after being sharpened, its nib will be a lot sharper. Similarly, in my life I have had bad experiences. I have learned that being able to bounce back from some of my mistakes or misfortunes -- for example, the loss of my grand-father -- has made me the strong and optimistic person I am today.

A pencil comes with an eraser that allows us to rub out our mistakes. When I play the piano and make a mistake, I start over and try to correct my mistake. After correcting my mistake, I practice in order to ensure I don’t make the same mistake again.

A pencil always leaves a mark. My mother has always warned me to think before I speak because the things that I say may have an impact on others.

A pencil’s interior (the graphite) is more important than its wooden exterior. I learned this lesson on my recent trip to Cambodia. At first, I let the differences between my own cultures and that of the villagers stop me from interacting as I normally would with people. However, after figuring out how to adjust, we all managed to overcome our differences, and I wound up making some new friends for life.

This simple, yet profound story really surprised me and has taught me to appreciate all the little things in life that one normally takes for granted. As a result, a pencil is a constant reminder for the values that, today, I try my best to remember and act upon. Being a student, I am constantly surrounded by pencils and therefore will always try my best to be at peace with the world.

# Personal Statement Joseph Austin Martinez

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Last Two Summers Joseph Austin Martinez

## What I did over the last two summers.

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

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

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

# Andrew Joseph Austin Martinez

## Describe an important person in your life

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

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

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

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

# My Confusing Cultural Identity Hannah Khan

## Explain a struggle you have faced in your life that helped define who you are

“Aap meri choti shezadi ho, Hannah,” my Pakistani grandfather told me before I moved to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia. I was later able to translate his loving Urdu words into English: “You are my little princess, Hannah.” I am a Pakistani-Burmese-American, and I have been culturally confused my entire life.

Walking to school every morning in a pair of blue jeans, I am American. I say the Pledge of Allegiance, speak English, and seek company and am influenced by my American peers. Yet, the moment I step foot into my house, I am greeted with “Asalamualiakum,” and I am Pakistani again. The spicy, nose-opening scent of biryani and the beautiful native tongue of my mother are what make my house my home. My closet has a separate section for shalwar kameezai, and my television has a multitude of Urdu channels. At my family reunions, I am reminded once again of the hardships my brave Burmese grandmother and her family encountered as they migrated from Burma to Pakistan. I am Pakistani, Burmese, and American. This lineage shapes who I am today.

My cultural identity used to be a way for me to please others by obediently following customs. I would dress in a shalwar kameez to please my parents and speak a few words in Urdu to please my grandfather. As a Pakistani immigrant to the U.S., my mother could not understand my separate American identity. Over time, I became adept at reconciling my starkly different cultures. As I grow older, I feel less and less obligated to follow a cultural norm, but instead feel the need to integrate my culture and identity into one. No longer do I feel trapped within these cultural confines. Instead, I feel motivated to use it as a way of defining who I represent. I represent those first generation young adults who come from different backgrounds, struggling with the choice between assimilating into American culture or rejecting it.

I also represent the girls in Pakistan like Malala Yousufzai, who struggle daily to receive an education, which is denied to them because of their gender. As an American Pakistani living in the United States, I have access to resources that my counterparts in Pakistan have to fight rigorously for to enjoy. I strive to show those Pakistani girls and all onlookers that a Pakistani girl can and should be educated. I represent the product of the American dream, coming from parents who never dreamed of having the same opportunities I had when they were children. In this country, Pakistani girls can be journalists or lawyears, and I am honored to represent both cultures as I pursue my American dream.

My culture does not define me; I define my culture. No longer am I solely one cultural identity at a time. I am a journalist, a poet, a daughter, and a friend. I am all at once a Pakistani-Burmese-American, and I am proud.

# Why I Want a College Education Hannah Khan

## Why do you want to go to college?

Looking down at the college preparation pamphlet laying on my dresser never seemed so dramatic, but with every word I read, and every page I turned, I could practically feel my future rushing towards me. As I approach the end of my high school I experience, I look back and remember two questions I was constantly asked from the beginning of freshman year, to just last night. “Where are you going to college, and what do you want to study?" Even more superfluous than the questions themselves are the answers, telling people what I want to major in and where I want to study has become redundant, tiresome, and even monotonous.

As passionate as I am about what I want to study and the schools that I am considering, the more I think about it, the more I feel there is one crucial question that seems to be omitted from the conversation each and every time. “Why are you going to college?” Am I going because both of my parents went, or because my friends are going? Or am I going simply to follow the American standard of go to high school, then college, then get a job? With increasing college tuition, a financial recession, and jobs only few and far between, it is no shock that more and more people are turning their heads to alternatives to a four- year university. With that being said, now more than ever, is it more important to answer the question, “Why do I want to go to college?”

I want to go because I am an adventurer, I am a dreamer and I am an innovator. I am the future of this country, and instead of following, I want to lead. I want to go to explore the world with a better understanding of what I am going to explore. I want to know the feeling of waking up every day with something to look forward to. I want to have all of the possibilities of the world at my finger tips, and essentially, that is what I believe college is.

Listening to my friends tell me that they are going to go to college to get a job, or because their parents told them to, makes me wonder whether college education is just about getting a job. To me the answer is overwhelmingly obvious; no. Post secondary education is an experience that promises much more than just a simple paycheck. Not only does a college education teach skills pertinent to obtaining a job in a certain career field, it also teaches discipline, independence, and critical thinking while opening up the world to so several opportunities that were not previously available. Colleges prepare their students for the real world, which is worth so much more than a high school diploma.

I look forward to the challenges that college will bring. Being an AP student, I’m aware of the rigors and rewards of pushing myself to learn more. I’m not going to college to waste my time, nor am I going to waste the time of the university that gives me the chance to be their student. I strive for the opportunity to pursue my dreams on the road less traveled, not only to get an education or get a job, but to assure myself of my passion and what I want to spend the rest of my life doing. I definitely believe college is a time to explore and open myself to the numerous opportunities the world has to offer.

As one of the 3.2 million students graduating high school in 2013, I have my whole life ahead of me. While numerous students will be going to college due to parental persuasion as well as pressure from their peers and school, I can confidently entrust in the fact that my decision was my own. I look forward to the challenges and experiences in my future and I am grateful to the university which gives me the opportunity to pursue my dreams, whatever they may be.

# Family, my Favorite Word Anonymous

## What’s your favorite word and why?

My favorite word is “family”.

I grew up seeing my family slowly falling apart. My parents too often argued intensely, my dad imposed violence on my mom, and they got divorced eventually.

My dad was not there to protect me from getting hurt. My mom had no time to hold me tight when I cried from failing life tasks. My older sister was unable to listen to my problems because she was too busy taking on a new role as a guardian. My younger sister just innocently asked for an explanation of what was going on within the household. And then there was me, being torn into pieces but still trying to stay strong so I would not be a burden to my family.

I never understood the meaning of family, yet I have learned of its importance. In my own dictionary, family is defined as people who will stand by me when the whole world is against me, guide me through the ups and downs of life, and turn the frown on my face into a smile; yet I never truly experienced it. I just know that family has a significant impact in my life, and that as soon as my family was broken, nothing can ever replace the huge loss.

I realized from my own experience that a child can never be fully happy without feeling loved by his or her family. So “family” becomes my favorite word, whose true meaning I am still seeking as a part of my journey to find true happiness.

# Entering Musicianship Anonymous

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

When asked how to get to Carnegie Hall, a wise musician replied simply, “Practice.” Although I did plenty of practicing leading up to playing at Carnegie Hall, it was performing in New York that launched me towards true musicianship. The first time I really saw beauty in music was on that stage, getting to share my work of the past year with an audience. The sheer size and organic atmosphere of music in the Hall changed my approach to music from just going through the motions into a thinker, an analyzer, and a musician.

I can clearly remember a time when music was not a part of my life. I can remember sitting in the back seat of my parents’ car and asking about good music, cool music, and what they used to listen to. Music was a body of information I knew nothing about, almost as foreign as a new language to me. I can remember sifting through old records in my basement, from Led Zeppelin to Simon and Garfunkel. This was my first exposure to the world of music. I was hearing songs without really listening and grasping at their roots.

Along with nearly all my friends, I was thrown into band class in the sixth grade. I stuck with music all through middle school, on trombone, baritone, and tuba, but never really considered myself a “musician,” just a player of music, along for the ride. Out on stage, I was a scared little kid. I was stuck inside the boundaries of my knowledge, and knew nothing about being on stage.

Coming into high school, I began playing the bass, but was still just going through the musical motions. This new instrument presented a new challenge and renewed my interest, but even still, I was all too often lost among the jumbled lines on my sheets and rarely looked at the conductor for guidance while playing. My uncertainty and clumsiness on the bass only heightened my nervous tendencies leading up to our school concerts. To say the least, as the last chair of many basses I never even dreamed of playing outside of the high school, much less a world-renowned hall.

The first I heard of the Carnegie Hall performance was in the beginning of the next year, tenth grade. This year was soon packed with after school sectionals, Saturday practices, and playing tests. I grew more in musicianship through this constant exposure than almost any other time, I can still recall the melodies from Dvorak’s Serenade for Strings after playing them so many times. While I became a better player through this endless practice, the greatest shift into musicianship came from the Carnegie performance itself. Sitting on stage in New York was the first time I listened to music, rather than just hearing its notes. The sights and sounds of the hall shifted my frame of reference, practice turned from a chore to a daily opportunity for self-betterment and performing from a fear to a thrill.

Today, I look for every opportunity to play. I am part of what my parents say is too many performance groups and what I say is too few. Everything deserves to be recreated, from Mozart in Youth Symphony to James Brown in my funk band, and their notes are worth learning. I am no longer confined by the boundaries of my knowledge, but inspired by the unknown. Every new piece and phrase is an opportunity rather than a limit. The challenge and opportunity that Carnegie Hall put in my head gave me the desire to move from childhood as a player of music to adulthood as a musician.

# Les Grandes Personnes Aiment Les Chiffres Anonymous

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

I grew up in a nonreligious household, but for as long as I can remember, I’ve been taught to worship my academics as the key to my success in the future. Instead of praying 5 times daily or memorizing biblical verses, nearly every day my mother and I would sit down with workbooks she bought, always with Clip-Art pictures of apples and pencils on the cover. Through countless addition problems and grammar exercise after grammar exercise, my mother – almost militantly – assured that my reading, writing, and math skills were always 2 grade levels ahead. Instead of a Bat Mitzvah or confirmation, my rites of passage were making the national spelling bee and scoring at the 93rd percentile on the SAT in 8th grade.

Why? Because just as devout Christians work for salvation, or Buddhists and Hindus struggle to attain nirvana, I have labored along the path toward a Holy Grail (an Ivy League education) and a vague fruition that my parents define as a prosperous career. As they love to say, my high school education is “laying a foundation for the rest of my life”.

I bought into this belief, reading Wikipedia article after Wikipedia article on the college admissions process. In 7th grade, I could recite all the names of the Ivy League schools. That same year, my mom borrowed a Princeton Review book profiling the Best 377 Colleges. I read every word, cover to cover, in the massive tome. By the time I started high school, I knew most of their acceptance rates, SAT score ranges, and rankings according to both Forbes and U.S. and World Report.

In an insightful French storybook entitled Le Petit Prince, the narrator remarks that “les grandes personnes aiment les chiffres”: big people love numbers. The saying holds true for Eastern parenting. To other parents, and more painfully your own, you become a list of numbers and accomplishments – SAT scores, GPAs, awards, competitions you’ve placed in.

I think few people want to be defined that way. I know I don’t. I think of myself as far more than a handful of scores and percentiles that can be haphazardly flung onto a graph. I have much more dimension, both literally and figuratively, than that single red dot on a scatterplot, indistinguishable from the others except for its location. And yet, my brain is measured by the amount of calculus it can do or the number of grammar rules it knows.

Why not by its confidence and solidarity? Why not by the originality of its

perspective? Why not by its unquenchable thirst for knowledge? Because “quickness of mind” and “depth of understanding” can’t be put on a résumé, and SAT scores and honor bands can.

My academic career, my intelligence, the quality of my intellect should not be

measured by, or confined to a double-spaced, 12-point-font list of bullet points that can fit on a single sheet of paper. Because a parent who constantly defines their child as a series of numbers risks forgetting, and thereby devaluing, the rest of that child’s still-blooming being. I can explain the main causes of the Civil War in language that my 11 year old sister can understand. I can discuss the benefits of microloans for women in 3rd world countries. I can face a panel full of critics in a debate without faltering.

I am eloquent, inquisitive, open-minded – none of which can be measured by any amount of numbers.

# The Green River Preserve Anonymous

## Describe a space that has had an impact on you.

A home should serve as a transitional space between shelter and the outdoors. In all of the structures that I design, I try to include walls full of windows that will allow in natural light. These windows help to integrate elements of a cozy interior and the feeling of open space that comes from being outside. I first realized this principle at the Green River Preserve Camp in Brevard, North Carolina. It is the physical place that has most impacted me. Green River Preserve taught me the importance of natural simplification, a trait that I incorporate into my life and my designs.

Green River embodies a back-to-basics mentality. While staying there as a camper for three summers, I developed strong friendships with my cabin mates, as we all experienced the exhilaration of hiking and attending campfire meetings without the distractions of cellphones and computers. The twelve of us were situated in a cabin that was little more than 100-square-feet. That limited space encouraged us all the more to go out and enjoy the refreshing mountain air. I can still remember how much I loved waking up and seeing the silhouette of the Smoky Mountains in the dim sunlight of the window next to my bunk. Years afterward, I have come to realize that a small area like a cabin can fulfill the requirements for all of a person’s needs, without adding too much unnecessary space. When I construct tiny houses, I keep these principles in mind, believing that human relationships and fulfilling lives are best fostered in small but beautiful spaces.

# The Time I Quit- A Runner's Perspective Anonymous

## Write about a time you failed

I heard the final call for my race. By now I should have been done with my warm up jog and run-outs and heading over to the check-in tent, spikes in hand, ready to run the 3200 meter race at the State Championship meet. Instead of pinning on my race number and taking my place at the starting line, however, I was sitting on the top row of the bleachers, watching the race from the farthest point away in the stadium. The first thing that ran through my mind was excuses: I had put everything I had into the 4x800m relay earlier in the day, finishing my leg seven seconds faster than I had ever ran before, and promptly throwing up after I handed off the baton. I had a gold medal to show for that effort, wasn’t that enough? My mile race an hour ago was embarrassing enough, coming in ranked third and finishing seventh. What would be the point of sprinting eight laps just to be disappointed again?

The regret of what I had done hit me before the race even started. When the final call rang out through the stadium, I wanted so badly to grab my spikes and take my place at the starting line. Instead, the missing hip number in the line-up of girls at the starting line agonized me. What opportunity had I thrown away? Had I not, just a week earlier at the Regional Championships, fought my way out of fifth place - only the top four would move on - for the entire race just to get the chance to wear that sticker here, right now? What opportunity had I stolen from the fifth place finisher, who was probably sitting at home while the spot she had tried so hard to obtain was sitting empty?

I can’t say for sure what caused me to quit, to give up right then and there. I was exhausted, not just from my previous races but from the whole season, my junior year in general. The fact that the amount of miles I ran over the year was more than double the hours that I had slept surely had something to do with that. But at the same time, wasn’t this the very thing that I loved most about running - finding that strength to push myself through the last 100 meters when I have absolutely nothing left? I had let the fear of failure, of finishing the race in the back of the pack or not finishing at all, keep me from even trying. By doing this, I had also forgotten the most important lesson that running has ever taught me about life: that if you just keep moving forward, putting one foot in front of the other no matter how exhausted you are or how much pain you’re in, you will always get to the finish line.

Even though I knew that there would be other races, a whole new year to prove to myself, to my coach, and to my parents who had come to out to watch me that this one race wasn’t going to define my whole running career, it still upset me, not because of any missed title or medal, but because of the extent to which it went against all the values that I had once prided myself on. Strength, endurance, perseverance - these are the values that, as a runner, I want to be at the core of who I am. I have moved past the disappointment of that day, but I have not forgotten the lesson I learned. Never again do I want to find myself sitting on the bleachers; no matter what, from here on out I’ll always take my place at the starting line. Nothing is worth the shame of knowing you could have but didn’t.

# All for Freedom Melanie Delgado

## Please elaborate on a central story to your life

It was Valentine’s Day six years ago. There were no roses, chocolate, or any romanticism in the air; there was instead, the scent of puke, fear, sea spray, yet a trace of freedom. It is mind-boggling what a human being is capable of enduring for liberty, even risking life itself. On the eve of my third attempt at attaining freedom, I contemplated in my eleven year-old mind, what I had been denied in my native land. I was leaving behind rationed monthly food portions, callous oppression, the utter lack of opportunity for growth, an economic system where hard work did not equal success, and alas, a Godless nation.

Our previous failed attempts had left my mom and me penniless, shunned by our community, but courageously anticipating another stab at our dream. Early in the morning of February 13th , we boarded a bus from my hometown of Marianao, La Habana for a six hour ride to the westernmost province of Pinal del Rio. A bag filled with two ham spread sandwiches, a can of mosquito repellent, and a change a clothes were all the worldly possessions between us. Nonetheless, our prayers sustained us throughout the arduous journey. In between my prayers of faith and supplications of hope, I realized that I was in a state of transition. Leaving, a simple word, meant estrangement from my country of birth, my family, my friends, and my culture. I was trading it all for a chance to speak my mind freely without fear, to work hard and expect the rewards from the fruits of my labor, and, most importantly, for a chance to make a difference.

I felt my mother’s pain vainly hiding in her eyes but likewise sensed the strength of her determination in her firm grip and was calmed by the sereneness of her countenance. For my part, I was filled with thoughts of finally seeing my father again, a father who had been missing for half of my life. What would life be like in that wonderful land, I wondered. Disney World vacations could not hold a candle to the thought of having, once again, a family and finally seeing my father after such a long absence. This motivation was enough to sustain me through the ordeal that awaited me.

We finally arrived at our destination. With the bag across my mom’s shoulder we set out to walk toward the train station along the cobbled streets. After walking what seemed like the length of the Pacific coast, we finally reached the train station. It only took a few minutes for the train to arrive, and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, we sat in the last cart of the train. I did not shut my eyes the entire duration of the journey. The destination was finally in sight. The leader of the group told us we were getting off next, except there would not be a stop for us, we had to jump and hope to land standing up. It was the only way to not draw any suspicions. That was the easy part, the twelve mile trek into the forest— that made me shed half of my body weight at the time— was not. After arriving at the shore, I let out a big sigh and let my body collapse onto the foliage, but the journey was not over, not even close. That’s when the stampede began; everyone ran for their lives, as they saw the freedom at the end of the horizon. Eighteen hours later I was in another country, a whole different world with more than one cereal choice, different brands of shampoo, and freedom to speak my mind. It was not worth it for Disney World, but it was certainly worth it for the opportunities I have been given.

The chance to grow, to be rewarded for my hard work, to make a difference, and to take advantage of every single freedom this country grants its citizens has been a blessing. But with the gift of freedom, comes great civic responsibility not only to the government and the country, but also to the communities we are a part of. Not having had the privilege of freedom until the age of eleven, I valued liberty and civic responsibility more than almost everything else in my life. As such, I became involved in a program called Project Citizen, which is a call to action for teens to become involved and bring about change in their communities. I lobbied extensively, wrote and presented a bill: “The Shaye Patrick Martin Safety Act” in front of the FL House of Representatives, which levied stronger measurements to decrease the astounding number of speeding motorists in Florida school zones. To this day, I’m still in contact with lobbyists, state senators and representatives who strongly supported this measure. At the moment I am working with middle school students who are trying to improve the lives of teachers in Florida by giving them a tax break. I am using my networking skills to now bring attention to the plight of our underpaid educators. These experiences with policy-making deepened my sense of civic virtue, indoctrinated in me incredible perseverance, taught me the art of compromise, and most of all, galvanized, and fueled my desire to make a change in this world whether it be as a member of the United Nations, or the IMF.

# Coming Full Circle Anonymous

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

He reached out, unfurled his hand, and looked up at me with what can only be described as a look of pure desperation. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crumpled five-dollar bill and handed it to the man. "It's a cold one," I remarked. "God bless," replied the man, shivering in his beat-up brown jacket and even shoddier pants. "That jacket can't be keeping him warm," I thought. Not saying anything more, I rejoined my friend Patrick and we continued on towards the Washington Wizards arena.

After watching the Wizards lose a close game to the Hawks, Patrick and I left the Verizon Center in a mass of disappointed fans, talking as optimistically as we could about John Wall and the Wizards' promising future. We followed the masses, absent-mindedly strolling farther and farther away from where we actually had to go. As the swarm of people began to thin out, my friend and I realized that we had taken a wrong turn somewhere. We had to return to the station we had come from, since we were almost out of money and had just enough fare on our metro tickets to get back to Vienna, Virginia; I looked up directions on my phone. Twenty minutes away. We began walking. Passing the Verizon Center a second time, we decided to cut across a parking lot to get to our destination quicker.

While walking through the dark, nearly empty lot, we saw a man flanking us, his hand in his jacket pocket. Patrick and I quickly locked eyes and silently acknowledged each other's fear of what could happen. Fifteen feet away and still shadowing us, the man pulled a knife out of his jacket pocket. We turned, paralyzed like two deer in the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler. Approaching us still, knife pointed in our direction, the man said nothing. Everything seemed to stop, and as the man walked under the beam of one of the few parking lot lights, only a few feet away, our eyes met. He tucked the knife back into his jacket pocket, turned, and ran away into the night. Patrick and I stood still in silent shock. Seconds later, my mind reeling, I realized that the man's jacket was the same kind of worn brown jacket I had seen on the homeless man earlier -- no, it was him, I was positive. Patrick and I embraced each other, stunned, exhausted, saying nothing. Wanting only to get home, we jogged towards our destination. I never said anything to Patrick about our assailant. We just sat on the metro, thankful to be alive.

For weeks, I constantly thought about the night: how lucky I was, how unfortunate the man had looked, how bad he must have needed money, and how the hotdog money I had given him may well have saved my life. I was born into a life of comfort, one in which I would never have to panhandle and struggle and sink into desperation just to get by and live another day. Many of the people in the world are not this fortunate: whether they rely on multinational charities or the alms of strangers outside a stadium, they depend on factors beyond themselves for their sustenance. My purpose in life is to serve others and to give them what they would otherwise not have. I know what I want my life to amount to -- making the lives of others better, helping them, doing my part to make the world a better place. I was set in this purpose before that night: now I know that saving the less fortunate is a way of saving us all.

# Big Sky Country Jacob Sebastian Gaither

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

Everyone has that unforgettable experience that they would like to capture and relive. For some, this may be a certain day; for others, it may be a special event. For me, though, it is a place that I hold near and dear that constantly reminds me of how much I enjoy visiting "Big Sky Country." Montana has certain characteristics that when you take notice of them you feel the true power that the natural world has to offer. I haven't been able to pinpoint the source of this feeling, whether it is the crisp, cool, and clean air, or the soothing sounds of nature in its most elemental form. Everything about the atmosphere of Montana captures all of one's senses, and leads them on a journey into what feels like a world without cares, or perhaps what Lewis and Clark experienced seeing the Rockies for the first time. It is the feel of the radiant sun and the effect the boundless sky has on one's perception of their own significance that is the essence of Montana herself.

In what seems to be a very calm and relaxed state, I occasionally find myself doing nothing more than gazing off into the distance which is filled with untamed sagebrush, wild grasses, and small gravel roads. Aside from just gazing, I enjoy hiking and blazing new trails into untouched, pristine wilderness. I get a sense of empowerment and brazenness knowing that only I and likely a few others have ever taken this exact path. Just knowing that at any given moment I could cross paths with an elk, moose, or other remarkable wild animals forces me to stay constantly alert and energizes me to continue trekking. Once this endeavor eventually ends, I lightheartedly continue to my next unknown expedition. There are innumerable other activities with which one can occupy their time, but typically my two favorite are kayaking on an undisturbed lake and running on the gravel of county roads. While leisurely kayaking through the water, leaving nothing but a small ripple, the quiet sound of the oars kissing the water and the faint sounds of all different animals captivate and relax me. All I am able to absorb is the serenity of my environment, and all I am able to capture is the everlasting memory of it. My fun really begins once I start my regular run, although running in Montana is everything but regular. Throughout the run there is an unbroken rush of refreshing air, a constant sound of my feet pounding the gravel, and so much scenery to marvel at, all of which compound the ensuing adrenaline rush. These feelings combined surpass any other experience that I have undergone before.

Montana more than likely conveys a much different significance to me than it does to others. I treasure Montana for the reason that it is a place where I can escape busy, urban life. Time spent in Montana seems to last longer and provides more meaning than spending my time in other less serene places. It gently reminds me that simpler things in life can be the most important. The other reason Montana is so significant is that it is home to my grandparents. Thanks to all of the toil and labor my grandparents have put into their property and log cabin, it is a family favorite for vacations and reunions. They work constantly to make improvements so that our family will be comfortable every year that we visit. My entire family greatly appreciates what my grandparents do, but the gratification I receive from their effort is what ultimately inspires them to continue. Together, the cabin and the atmosphere that I associate with Montana make it the only place that I can go to be completely relaxed while enjoying myself at the same time.

# Constellations Phoebe Pumilia

## What is your favorite word and why?

My favorite word is constellations. The word itself is simple: the prefix “con” means together and the root “stella” means stars, but they together, to me, say everything: the stars are together. Stars are all individual points of light, floating around in space millions of miles away from one another. Likewise, we humans may all seem isolated in our thoughts and struggles. However, man’s desire to connect these dots into constellations is the purpose of life, since the only way any one item or person holds meaning is in its relationship to something else. My life means nothing if I stay a solitary star, unwilling to connect with the stars around me. No matter how bright I am individually, no Big Dipper will emerge. No great contribution will be made if I do not collaborate and interact with others and challenge myself to understand how others feel, think, and contribute. I can only leave a legacy if I pass it on to someone. Galileo said, “I’ve loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night." Indeed, many of us are fearful of the great dark expanse that is night because it is so ominous and empty: we feel so small in comparison to the darkness. And yet, this concept of emptiness need not scare us; instead, we must find meaning by looking to the stars and asking ourselves how they are connected. This is far more rewarding than living in fear of the unknown because, if you look long enough, everything is connected and the unknown can begin to be truly known.

# My Life as a Third Culture Kid Grace Kim

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

My family faced tragedy shortly after we arrived in Afghanistan. We struggled through our first six months, but my parents were new missionaries filled with excitement for God's work. Even when we timidly bought food from strangers who spoke Dari and ran around naked in the house because of the heat, we plowed through. One terrible night, I woke up in shock as I saw six masked robbers point guns and knives at my parents. I stared at the sharp glints of the knives so dangerously close to my parents' necks. These six raggedy, armed men looked so out of place in my pink room that I did not believe they were there until my baby sisters started crying at the sight of them.

When my sisters continued to wail to high heaven, the men pointed their guns at my sisters and told my mother in Dari to shut them up. My mother bravely tried to soothe my sisters, but they took my mother and father so that they could guide them to our money. I, as a seven-year-old, was left with my sisters, but I watched everything in a dream-like state. The robbers literally carried out everything, including electronics, closets, and even our mini gas stove. Finally, they rounded up our family and locked us up in the basement. My head was in a whirl, so confused, and so afraid. We stayed all night in the basement, waiting to see if the robbers would come back and shoot us. Thankfully, we found out they left, and in the morning, we packed up what few belongings we had left and crossed the border to Uzbekistan.

I left Afghanistan with a lot of bitterness. Even as a seven-year-old, I felt an emptiness knowing that this place was now a place of could-have-beens. Not only that, but the good memories of Afghanistan were forever marred by images of robbers hurting my parents. My parents were the two people who had always been constant in my life no matter where we moved, and seeing them so vulnerable created a fear in me I had never experienced before. I did not know the meaning of “safe” anymore. I wanted justice against these six men who came in, took our possessions, stole our futures, and traumatized our whole family. The Middle East had changed into a land of painful memories.

Despite this pain I often associate with Afghanistan, as I lived in Uzbekistan, and now Turkey, the Middle East as a whole has become my home. Much of my cultural experiences in Uzbekistan and Turkey have been similar to Afghanistan, and living in these different Middle Eastern countries have allowed me to re-develop an appreciation for this culture despite my past hurt. As time passed, I could associate the familiar arid air that slaps my cheeks and the booming sounds of the call to prayer as elements of “home”. In a mass of olive-skinned men and women, I always stand unique with my shiny Asian hair, but these differences are a part of who I am now. Sometimes it is still hard to forget the past, especially when sights, smells, or people remind me of my last day in Afghanistan. However, I have learned to reconcile the bitterness of my past and cultivate a new heart of compassion for this land and for these people, acknowledging the unmistakable print the Middle East has left on my heart.

# A Transformative Experience Anonymous

## Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

As the sunlight began to dim, my panic rose. The street signs were incomprehensible, and any request for assistance only resulted in a barrage of unfamiliar German. I found myself hoping for a rapid rescue, yet I knew that I needed to find my own way out of the urban confusion of downtown Stuttgart. I was terrified. I found myself racing around a train station, frantically asking all the cab drivers in broken German if they knew where my temporary residence was; finally, I was directed to a bus stop. Unfortunately, I would have to wait quite some time before the next bus arrived. As I sat on the cold stone bench, dejected, I began to notice what was around me. The city was filled with images that were so incongruous with the strict mold of my past experiences that I was stunned.

Born in India and raised in the most traditional manner possible, I had lived a very sheltered life. It was drilled into me that "your success depends on your dedication to your grades," which left little time for "superfluous" activities. I became a diligent worker, yet I lacked the conviction to pursue more than just my education. The structure of my life led me to believe in the universality of my work-driven code, yet this belief was now being shaken.

On every corner of the city was new evidence that my principles were not shared. Teenagers with beers were strolling through the streets, leaving me dumbfounded, only able to wonder: "What would their parents say?" It surprised me further to know that their parents followed close behind, beers in hand. In other areas, I saw other children walking through the city late in the evening, even though school would begin early the next morning. The entire metropolis was full of individuals my age, not just having fun, but developing -- working, volunteering, training, networking, and engaging. The freedom and relationships astounded me and opened my eyes to new possibilities.

Upon leaving the train station, I begin to recognize the imperfections in my perspective. If individuals across the world had found such apparent comfort, confidence, and success by following different beliefs, then maybe my beliefs were not as universal as I had thought. Over time, I departed from my single-minded focus on academics, and began to take a greater role in the activities which had once seemed "frivolous" or "secondary." I discovered ways to reach well beyond textbook education: computer technology, music, and tennis became paramount. Every day, I learned and practiced, developing my skills in Python or HTML, refining my tone and expanding my range, or honing my stamina and shot selection through rigorous practice sessions. Though I only gradually arrived at my future course of study, I envisioned the possibilities for the first time: developing software to propel the next generation of spacecraft, researching neural pathways that influence physical capabilities, or even performing music professionally.

The experience at that German Bus Station, Schloßplatz, remains one of the greatest influences on my life. Its destabilizing nature gave me the opportunity to observe the world unbiased, and to derive a perspective more global in nature. Such a drastic variation has taught me that education is far more than a textbook: it is a method to expand on your passions and strive towards something greater, the essence of the fulfilling yet unexpected lifestyles that I observed, from a bus stop bench, that day in Germany.

# The Job That Changed My Life Anonymous

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

I work in one of the most loved, yet most hated industries in the world. Criticism comes from all angles in the fast food business – whether the guests' food is not prepared to their liking, their table isn’t as clean as they would like it to be, or their server did not give them a remarkable experience. Basically, I’ve heard it all, and I’m surely glad that I have. Although the fast food industry has a bad reputation – both in the media and in casual conversation – I love working at my local Chick-fil-A. Through many strenuous days, months, and now two and a half years of fulfilling orders, I have learned the lessons that have catapulted me into adulthood.

Awkward conversations used to ruin my day. Sure, once in a while I will meet a new person and still have a stilted exchange, but now I can just about talk to anyone that I meet. Before I started at Chick-fil-A, I was very awkward, but as I got more experience talking to new customers I became more confident in myself. I’ve learned what to say to make an impression, how to say it quickly and decisively, and, most importantly, how to make anyone feel special, regardless of where I am. I can hold conversations with authority figures I used to be scared to talk to, talk to people I don’t necessarily like but still have to interact with, and be a leader who brings people together in any way necessary, all because of my day-to-day experiences at Chick-fil-A.

And let’s face it, customers can be annoying. Often, they complain about the freshness of food that is fresh out of the fryer, complain about the wait times to get their food (which only takes so long because it is being made fresh), and complain about problems that we employees simply cannot control. Sure, everyone makes mistakes and those mistakes are often easily fixable, but the right person has to fix them. That is where I come into play. Because I have dealt with so many upset customers, I have developed problem-solving techniques that allow me to resolve real life issues in seconds. When customers come up to the counter and say, “We didn’t get the right salad!” I am able to get the correct salad in an instant, for free, and not fret over their frustration. I have dealt with customers calling me vulgar names and yelling at me for someone else’s mistakes; I have learned to always stay positive and work the situation out openly and honestly.

Holding a steady job has prepared me for my future. Ever since I started working at Chick-fil-A, I’ve become more independent. Instead of putting a financial burden on my parents for my clothing, car insurance, and gas, I pay for most of these necessities with my own money. And once those essentials are paid, I can do what I want with the rest of the money that I work hard to make – a few luxuries, and a lot of saving for a prosperous adulthood. Every day, I work hard to be a leader and a role model in my community. I would never be at the place where I am without starting at Chick-fil-A.

# My Hidden Story Monica Gonzalez-Cejo

## 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.

If I had a dollar for every time I heard, “Wait, you aren’t white?” I would probably be a millionaire. Unfortunately, dollars do not shoot at me whenever I hear that question. To clarify, I am half Puerto Rican, half Cuban, and half I-have-blonde-hair-and-am-really-pale. We have a running joke in the family that all the Hispanic was used up on everyone else, and by the time I came around there was none left. Now, this is not to say I see my appearance as a burden. Frankly, it is a characteristic I have come to hold dear.

When I was a kid, my mother simultaneously taught me to speak Spanish and English. I remember clearly the many little books she would share with me, each full of new words and phrases, and how there seemed to be an endless supply of them. On top of this, I enjoyed playing a game with my older sister called repeat-everything-Nicky says-until-she-starts-wondering-why-I-am-alive. “¡Para de repetir lo que digo!” and “¿Dónde están las galletas?” became two of my favorite phrases. Once I started school, I discovered that most of my classmates spoke only one language: English. I did not understand. Why had they not learned both? My Spanish felt like a secret superpower. Later, my parents explained that I had a remarkable culture to thank for my bilingual gift.

With my heritage firmly in my heart, over time I began to realize something: every year, I visited my cousins and family in Puerto Rico, and every year people there looked at me in a strange way. I did not understand it until it struck me one day in vivid clarity. I was different. I was missing characteristics they all had, and it frustrated me. I began to ask my parents why I had different hair and different eyes. They always answered the same: you were born this way! “But why?” I asked over and over again. This cycle repeated until one day I stumbled upon a photograph. It was of all of my cousins and me, piled in my aunt’s kitchen making all sorts of goofy expressions, and it struck me again. I was different. Except this time it occurred to me in the most amazing way possible: I was unique. All my cousins were unique in their own ways. I realized that there was no prescribed way I had to look to be proud of my Hispanic heritage.

I will never forget the look of surprise I received over the summer while volunteering at a local hospital. I was helping out in the ER as a guide when a Hispanic mother came in, frantically wanting to know what was wrong with her ailing little boy. There was no translator in sight. As one of the nurses desperately searched for help, I began asking the mother questions in Spanish to calm her down and understand what was wrong with the boy. The nurse looked bewildered but began telling me what questions to ask in order to get their history documented. Once the official translator arrived, the nurse thanked me, pointing out how astonished she was that I was Hispanic. I told her I was very grateful for the experience because I got to truly help in the ER, as well as break down a stereotype.

I may not fulfill the expectations most have for what a Hispanic “should” look like, but my heritage is in my bones. It is my wonderful little secret just waiting to burst out with every person I meet. Instead of them already knowing where I come from, I get to SHOW them. My appearance has taught me endless lessons and I am grateful each day for them. I love being Hispanic, I love being different, and I would not trade either trait for the world.

# Tackling the "Gloria" Anonymous

## What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?

The pianist plays the final chord, the conductor lowers her hands, and the audience pauses in awe before applauding the beautiful rendition. Three hundred pairs of eyes relax and slowly look around, secretly celebrating what has just been accomplished. After hundreds of rehearsals, four months of practice, and 12 movements to learn, we have performed Vivaldi’s “Gloria.”

Months earlier, my teacher had placed on my lap a score with almost 1000 measures in it. I remember staring at the foreign object in my hands half in fear and half in excitement, wondering where it would take me. The longest piece of music I had ever sung was no more than six minutes long, and here I was holding a thirty-minute marvel. As I flipped through the unfamiliar pages, I became increasingly invigorated and resolute. I could do this—no —I would do this.

For countless hours every week, I put “Propter Magnam Gloriam” on repeat while doing homework to learn the melismata in the movement. I listened to the imitative polyphony in “Domine Fili Unigenite” while exercising to memorize my entrances. The Vivaldi "Gloria" became my life for four months, and in those four months I learned more about music than in all my life before. In the first few minutes after the performance, I felt an incredible sensation; a feeling that could not be granted through words alone, a feeling that could only be bestowed through music.

# Why M.S. in Commerce? Anonymous

## The Admission Committee seeks candidates with a strong academic background whose goals and motivation are a good fit within the culture, content, and opportunities presented by the M.S. in Commerce Program. Please describe the unique aspects of your background and motivations and how you see them fitting into what you know about the program. Be sure to include in your discussion what you hope to gain by participating in the program and what strengths you feel you have to contribute to the program. (500 word limit)

The University of Virginia has been good to me. I had the college life of storybooks—lazy afternoons on the Lawn, head-scratching debates about philosophy, and spirited evenings at athletic events. As a third year, I should be looking forward to a traditionally exciting fourth year, when I can frequent the Corner more often than Clemons. However, I’m one step ahead.

First year, I learned about the M.S. in Commerce, but I shied away from it for the same reason why I didn’t consider McIntire as an undergraduate. Back then, “business” only meant “doing things for money” to me. I wondered why so many smart people would go that route, when there’s so much more to life than material gain. While I majored in economics, my motivation was to better understand decision-making, politics, and the science behind our economy, not to make money. I concluded that the competitive business world simply wasn’t my best fit.

Long story short, I was wrong. Since then, my ideas have matured considerably due to experiences that have shown the pervasiveness of business skills in the places that matter to me most. I first tasted this as a sales associate at LUSH Cosmetics, where I did more than just sell makeup and soap. Through clever marketing and brand positioning, Lush sells the idea that its products will make people beautiful inside and out. I was proud to work for a company that sourced all ingredients ethically and fought against animal testing, but I was more impressed by how these feel-good initiatives transformed into profitability.

I then began working at a local nonprofit, the Center for Open Science (COS). As a human resources intern at COS, I got an insider look at the employer challenges of small startups and nonprofits. After studying abroad, I returned to COS this summer as a software tester intern. While building technical skills, I also learned the importance of strong organization and leadership. Due to rapid expansion, the communication between developers and management faltered, and the community team faced increased publicity and pressure to expand the userbase. As a result of my internship, I also discovered that I enjoyed being at the point of intersection of technology and society.

Now I know that the true meaning of business is creating value, not money, for all parties. To sharpen my business skills, I enrolled in the McIntire Business Institute, but the M.S. in Commerce is the ultimate destination. Instead of waiting another year, I’m seizing the opportunity to jumpstart my career now with the program’s global perspective and immersive education. Furthermore, the business analytics track would accelerate me to the forefront of innovative business software, which I can leverage toward a more tech-focused environment. With energy and passion, I would like to help inspiring companies reach their goals through a career in business analysis or consulting. The M.S. in Commerce would build value on top of my existing foundation of undergraduate courses and diverse, hands-on experience.

# Quirks Carlos Holden-Villars

## We are a community with quirks, both in language (we’ll welcome you to Grounds, not campus) and in traditions. Describe one of your quirks and why it is part of who you are.

The reason I did so well on my Math Analysis final exam in my junior year was because of Blink-182 and black tea. By the time May came around, my study session for math went like this – pour the water in the kettle and check Instagram while the water is boiling. Spend about two minutes trying to decide which tea will jolt my brain into math mode. Steep the tea bag for another five minutes, which means more Instagram. Get down to my desk, open Spotify, and blast some Blink. Take the first sip of Earl Grey Black Tea and let it do its magic.

I started this ritual back in November of my junior year. Math had always been my Achilles heel, so I was looking for something that would help me conquer it. Tutors are too expensive, it’s not worth calling my friend the Math Genius because he’ll just get impatient, and coffee is much too bitter. So I settled on tea. Tea is more than the elixir of life. It’s like a pipe of tobacco for Einstein, or absinthe for Hemingway. Tea gives the perfect amount of caffeine – it’s enough to focus the mind on the task at hand, but it doesn’t make me feel like a bomb is ticking off inside my brain – like coffee. Blink-182 is just heavenly. Hearing that ‘90s punk beat in the background does wonders for my brain. Verify the following 300 trigonometric functions? No problem – let me just turn up the bass on Travis Barker’s blissful drumming.

This is my idiosyncrasy. Everything that I am fond of becomes a part of who I am. In a world where humans appear to be so uniform, quirks are the best way to truly find out who someone is. Everyone has their own black teas and Blink-182s; without them the world would be a very dreary place.

# Rapscallion Anonymous

## Answer one of the following questions in a half page or roughly 250 words: What is your favorite word and why?

Scrawled as haphazardly as it demands, the word braids from a continuous thread of twists and turns. There is a sense of urgency as the letters come to life in a flourish. The plummeting stroke of the “p” appears out of place, as if the weighty consonant is dripping down the page. It stirs trouble as it trespasses into the lines below before petering out with the double-humps of the cursive “n”. Rapscallion.

As an elaboration of “rascal,” the outlandish word “rapscallion” expresses the lackadaisical mischief that characterizes childhood. Though usually deployed pejoratively, it is a slangy, whimsical term I associate with youthful curiosity. It defines a scoundrel who craves tomfoolery and desultory havoc. The word sounds as preposterous as the miscreants it describes, like an unconventional form of onomatopoeia. It is derived from two disparate words that are mashed together willy-nilly. Its slapdash usage prompts readers to wonder: “just how legitimate is the word rapscallion?”

While many gems get tainted by overuse, rapscallion has remained an outré word. It stays just long enough to make a cameo appearance before it curtsies and skulks back to its origin in sixteenth century colloquialism. It transports me to the quaint, fictional town of St. Petersburg along the meandering banks of the Mississippi River. It is a world of juvenile rapscallions and scalawags who take on life, one escapade after another, while existing in an eternal state of wanderlust--uncontained by the whitewashed picket fences.

# “blak-he mook-ha” Anonymous

## What is your favorite word and why?

My brother knocks down a glass from the kitchen table and it shatters; my sister makes a joke, teasing my Dad; I receive a bad test grade in my math class. As different as these situations are, my family reacts to each with just two simple words: “blak-he mook-ha”. This phrase has no inherent meaning: “білий муха” in Russian; “metal fly” in English. My Dad often incorporates Russian words from his youth into his speech, a great source of entertainment for me and my siblings. First hearing my Dad mutter this exact phrase under his breath, and then learning its absurd meaning, we all laughed. But for some reason, the words stuck with us.

With this phrase, I am reminded of the power of interpretation, that despite the vast English vocabulary I may possess, no words will ever precisely capture the essence of the aforementioned moments as well as these words do, solely because of their significance to me and my family. Sometimes, you don’t need logical words or sentences to express how you feel; you need to let out your frustration in a way that satisfies you. When I mutter these words to myself in class, no one understands how I react to the poor grade. Upon returning home, however, this simple pair of words is all I need, and my family understands.

# Floccinaucinihilipilification Anonymous

## What’s your favorite word and why?

Floccinaucinihilipilification [flok-suh-naw-suh-nahy-hil-uh-pil-uh-fi-key-shuh n] (noun) - The action or habit of estimating something as worthless.

As long as written languages have existed, curious words have been nestled in the pages of out-of-the-way texts. In English, words such as set (with the most definitions of any word, at 464), rhythms (the longest word with no vowels) and abbreviated(why is it so long?), have fascinated logophiles (lovers of words) for centuries. As an avid reader and former Latin student, I have always considered floccinaucinihilipilification to be my favorite word due to its origin, length, and unique definition.

In the 18th century, one page of the book Eton Latin Grammar listed several synonymous stems, “flocci, nauci, nihili, pili,” all roughly translating as “of little value.” After one schoolboy of Eton College concatenated the stems and added -tion to the end (purportedly as a joke), he breathed life into floccinaucinihilipilification. The word achieved prominence as the longest non-technical word in English.

The word first caught my eye for its utter absurdity, excess syllables, and novel backstory, but it has remained my favorite for other reasons. I have observed that the definition of the word perfectly describes the common reaction it elicits. Many individuals believe such a gargantuan word has no value. In other words, the characteristics of the word have led to the floccinaucinihilipilification of floccinaucinihilipilification. Despite this humorous unintended consequence, the word can be a valuable teaching tool. When I first learned the word as a child, I was curious to find out the meanings of each of its constituent parts. My vocabulary soon expanded as I learned other words such as floccus, pilus, and nihilist. The interconnectedness of root words, and the fact that every word has an origin story has amplified my love of language, and floccinaucinihilipilification typifies these interests.

# The Unsettling Hypocrisy of Justice Anonymous

## What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?

As a staunch believer in the absolute nature of human rights and justice, I never expected the struggle of a distraught, middle-aged Chilean woman to challenge me quite in the way that it did. From the moment I was first introduced to Ariel Dorfman's play "La Muerte y la Doncella" in my IB Spanish literature class, I was gripped by the complexities of the character of Paulina, an innocent woman who was kidnapped, raped, and tortured during the rule of a ruthless dictator, and who finds herself face to face with her torturer 15 years later.

Throughout the duration of the play, Paulina agonizes over her dilemma of whether to kill the man who has caused her unfathomable suffering, or whether to let her husband, the head of the truth and reconciliation commission, press the man to publicly acknowledge his abuses, but ultimately let him free in an attempt to reunite the fractured nation. Dorfman leaves me desperate for an answer at the end of the play, as Paulina's ultimate decision is enveloped in a shroud of mystery, yet through his masterfulness he forces me to consider daunting questions reaching far beyond the apparent ethical dilemma of when is it justified to kill.

After the curtains draw shut, I am left grappling with questions upon questions. Just how absolute are human rights? If Paulina were my sister or daughter or mother, could I blame her for desiring vengeance over justice? And yet if we cannot guarantee the human rights of even the most ruthless torturers, are we then nothing more than hypocrites?

I know that in the field of human rights, which I want to work in, I will meet countless Paulinas, all of whom have suffered abuses that no human should. And while I may not have the answers to Dorfman’s questions or to the suffering of the Paulinas of the world, I know that we cannot simply abandon our most steadfast principles in the face of complexity. I am certain that as long as we can find exceptions to human rights, we will be incapable of stopping the wrongs of humanity.

# A True No Man's Land Anonymous

## Student self-governance, which encourages student investment and initiative, is a hallmark of the U.Va. culture. In her fourth year at U.Va., Laura Nelson was inspired to create Flash Seminars, one-time classes which facilitate high-energy discussion about thought-provoking topics outside of traditional coursework. If you created a Flash Seminar, what idea would you explore and why?

The way my family tells stories of the sugar mill in Cuba, one would swear it was paradise. Dolores was the pride of my family going back generations, and even though they fled the little piece of heaven 56 years ago, the oldest of my living relatives can never accept that the rural town is anything less than home. When I first traveled to Cuba last summer, however, it was clear that the communists had since erased Dolores from the map and replaced it with Jaime Lopez, a town where the sugar mill stands as a mere carcass, and only the oldest townspeople remember why the massive smoke stack shoots to the sky at the town’s center.

As Cuba finally begins to transition to a more open political and economic system, one incredibly contentious question will dominate the minds of millions of people: do Cuban refugees have the right to take back the land that the communist government seized from them, or does this property now belong to the families who stayed through the hardship and have called these places home for three generations?

I would be thrilled by the opportunity to lead a flash seminar on this very question at the University of Virginia, as it is a critical issue with implications reaching far beyond Cuba. I believe that -- through a close examination of history, intense discussion and dialogue from varied perspectives, and an understanding of others’ suffering -- the issue can be resolved through unique solutions benefiting all parties that have suffered greatly. A resolution may not be easy, but it will alert all of us to a political and economic dilemma that is closer to home than we think.

# The Tap Shoes Anonymous

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

On my first day of third grade, I wore tap shoes to school. The majority of my elementary school years was a blur, but I vividly remember this occurrence as it is the earliest memory I have of going decisively against the crowd. They were a creamy beige color with a dainty ribbon tied into a tiny bow, and aluminum taps that were so reflective if you turned them towards the light in a certain way, they’d blind you. Although my interest in dance was short-lived, those shoes made me feel like an icon, a Fred Astaire of some sort. My eight-year-old self made the executive decision to wear them to school.

So when the day came, I, with the utmost defiance, slipped on the tap shoes, ran onto the bus, and made my way to school. As I strode into the building, nearly all the students turned their heads in response to the rhythmic clacking that echoed from the aluminum taps hitting the shiny, epoxy floors. Only a few hours into the school day, my English teacher pulled me aside and curtly explained that the noise from my shoes was distracting, then proceeded to walk me down to the nurse’s office. The nurse was lighthearted about the situation, mentioning how my footwear dilemma was the first one she had encountered in her career. After a brief discussion with the teacher, the nurse pulled out a roll of masking tape and began taping the bottom of the shoes in order to dull out their sound. Considering that I chose to wear them solely for their unique silver taps, I was thoroughly disappointed. My special shoes were now like every other pair I owned, with no sign of the individuality I possessed at such a young age.

My footwear of choice that day was not to purposely garner attention, but instead represented the non-conformist attitudes I continued to stand by throughout my life. To my fifth-grade school pictures, I wore a ridiculous pink dress because it was my desire to do so, and even then, I was comfortable with being different from the majority. Fitting in with my peers was a secondary concern when compared to my need for self-expression. As my academic career progressed and my interests grew, I learned to embrace what was unique to me - even if it was challenging, even if it was outlandish. I didn’t dress, act, or even draw a certain way in order to seek approval from my peers, but because my nonconformist qualities were what shaped my identity - mostly, after a time, my psychology.

Is the power of non-conformity only displayed through outward appearances? Of course not. Even when faced with hardships or opportunities, I approach them differently than someone else standing in my shoes might. And in doing so, I make the problems I encounter my own, and often, come up with a solution that no one would have expected.

Those old tap shoes and frilly dresses are most likely stuffed into a closet collecting dust, yet they are still a reminder of my non-conformist choices that I am proud of - the very first symbols of individuality that eventually shaped my life and my future.

# Arabian Nights Anonymous

## What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way? (250 words)

Every year as the air turns frigid and wreaths start to adorn front doors, you’re bound to hear cheery, classical music from Tchaikovsky’s The Nutcracker. Not only is it an internationally popular ballet, but also a ballet representative of Christmas. The most typically heard pieces in the media are the Russian Dance, March, or Sugar Plum Variation. However, a less well known song in the Nutcracker, uniquely intriguing for its distinct quality, is the Arabian dance sequence.

In the midst of the classical ballet, this music changes the energy for a moment and transports one to a mysterious place in the Middle East. The woodwinds and violins create a swaying, languid melody with a smooth and bold, drone bass underlying. A quality of a truly artistic and advanced dancer is the ability to visually, with movement and expression, portray the music.

The Arabian Princess was my first lead role, my first time carrying the weight of this expectation. Learning to feel the earthy, lyrical melody and to know every nuance of the rhythm was as challenging as it was rewarding. When it came time for my own Nutcracker show, it was like my pulse aligned with the hum of the bass when I took the stage. Taking the time to wrestle with the unique character of the Arabian music let me be able to escape into some mystical, ancient place in the Middle East and allow my body to illustrate the music through dance.

# Moving On Anonymous

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

As I reach into the back of my closet for my go-to tee and gently tug it off its hanger, its hem brushes against a yellow tote bag that hasn’t left its spot on the bottom shelf for months. Without opening or even peering down into it, I can visualize its contents.

This monogrammed tote with its worn canvas interior is my dance bag. I still like to think it has similar mystical powers to the bag Mary Poppins carried, limitless in what it can hold. Inside, is a seemingly endless accumulation of dance shoes of every kind. There’s a single tan jazz shoe in addition to two black ones, reminding me of the gratification that accompanied my first pair of black jazz shoes in lieu of tan ones, a badge of maturity and progress toward being an advanced dancer. The same is true for the black and tan pairs of tap shoes. Next, are two canvas ballet shoes, with holes at each big toe just like the countless blown out pairs of ballet shoes I’ve had before. But the principle culprit of the entanglement? The three pairs of pointe shoes I kept in my bag at any given time, laden with satin ribbon, annoyingly apt to catching in the zipper pocket and fraying.

Once I’m past the chaotic mass of shoes, there’s a black ballet skirt I wore while learning many elegant, classical variations that made me feel like a prima on stage at the Met instead of a student in a studio in South Georgia. Finally, beneath the skirt, is a large, purple pouch. Its contents, carefully selected for the utmost preparedness, include extra hair pins, hairspray, safety pins, a sewing kit, scissors, second-skin ointment, and a consistently deficient supply of blister band-aids.

Dance was my labor of love, my foundation for hard work, my outlet for passion. It was the place that I had spent the overwhelming majority of my time outside of school. The thought of leaving that behind scared me like nothing ever had. As gut-wrenching and sentimental as it was to snap my worn, yellow tote shut and place it on the shelf, I realized that it was what I had to do. I can acknowledge now that I had been unknowingly and tediously preparing for that moment for the past thirteen years. Because I’d felt first-hand the fulfillment and joy that come with giving my whole heart and efforts to something, I knew it was time to move forward and do just that in the classroom.

My bookbag lies open now against the desk in my room. Its front two pockets, dedicated to my graphing calculator, page markers, highlighters, several pads of post-it notes, and a consistently deficient supply of black ink pens, are stocked for the utmost preparedness. The two larger pockets are an accumulation of textbooks and corresponding binders along with spiral notebooks filled with meticulous notes, a new kind of labor of love. Instead of poster-board projects I carried as a child, I now carry research papers on my laptop, a badge of maturity and progress as a student.

I realize now that leaving dance allowed me to be a more fulfilled person by allowing me to pursue knowledge and satisfy my passion for learning. The nylon at the ends of the zippers is beginning to fray, and the backpack is beginning to look more worn; still, it has a ways to go before it can carry the same weight as my dance bag did after all of those years. So as my shirt hem brushes over the closed dance bag, I send a mental salute to that old yellow tote, thankful because I am ready and capable to move forward with my bookbag and all it might carry in the future.

# A Slow Start Anonymous

## Write about a time you failed at something

She runs so gracefully, her arms swinging back and forth, her legs flying, barely even touching the ground as she laps the girl in front of her. I am that girl—not the graceful one but the slow one who runs like a beanbag chair, hunched over and shuffling across the gravel, getting passed by the athletic ones. That pretty much sums up my freshman year of cross-country—a time when I could not even make it from the entrance of the school to the end of the parking lot.

During the summer going into high school, I thought I would branch out and join the cross-country team, craving that team-togetherness of high school sports without the required coordination of other activities like soccer or field hockey. My thinking was that cross-country would be relatively simple—run fast and don't fall. No balls, or nets, or sticks to confuse me or reveal my incompetency. The first day, I laced up my worn out P.E. sneakers and tied my hair tightly with not one but two hair ties. As the team took off, their feet rhythmically tapping the pavement, I followed suit, eager to prove myself to these strangers—an intimidating collection of high school girls whose maturity radiated from their brace-less faces. For the first seven and a half seconds, my heart and feet raced in unison and I was a part of the pack.

I soon realized the inverse relationship that existed between my heart and feet: for some reason as my heart quickened, my feet slowed. I was the little engine that couldn’t. I managed to make it all the way to the entrance of the parking lot, at which point I stopped and keeled over to catch my breath. That day, I finished half of the run and made it back to the high school around a half hour after the rest of my teammates, who by then were done stretching and sat waiting to be dismissed. When I shuffled into view, they starting whooping and clapping and cheering me on until I reached the sidewalk that marked the end of the run. I laughed, embarrassed by the attention. I debated quitting cross-country with pretty much every step along the run but for a fleeting moment as I made my way to the team, I forgot all about the pain.

This fall will be my last season of cross-country. And while I may not be able to lead the pack on our runs or help the team win a meet, I can always make them laugh. All I have to do is bring up my first day of practice and remind them of the girl who couldn’t make it out of the parking lot. I would be lying if I said that I never thought about quitting after that first day when the girls cheered me to the finish line. The possibility crosses my mind all the time. Cross-country challenges me every day to run faster, run longer, run harder. Sometimes I ask myself what I have accomplished from these past three years of mediocre running. But the truth is, I love it. I love my teammates and I love the thrill and I love pushing myself, not only in running but in all that I do. I will never be the best at cross-country and I accept that wholeheartedly. The funny thing is that despite this knowledge, I will never stop trying. When the gun goes off during each cross-country race, my heart still pounds and my chest still tightens. I step up to the line hoping, praying, believing that I might win. And when I don't, I am not defeated. I think back to that girl who could not run past the parking lot, I lace up my sneakers, tie back my hair with not one but two hair ties, and I laugh.

# My quirk Anonymous

## Required of ALL applicants, regardless of school or program. Answer one of the following questions in a half page or roughly 250 words (Please select the prompt you are responding to): We are a community with quirks, both in language (we’ll welcome you to Grounds, not campus) and in traditions. Describe one of your quirks and why it is part of who you are.

“Hey now, hey noowwwowww.” A Hilary Duff Song set to the tone of a grieving walrus. That is basically what I sound like. All the time. Why all the time? Because I sing all the time. Why a grieving walrus? Well you probably haven’t heard me sing. But if you did, you would understand that I am an unapologetically terrible singer. The world is my shower, except with far worse acoustics.

This sudden need to sing is often triggered in the most random of circumstances. Someone will say a line like, “Don't go—“ and before he or she can finish I will start belting out “Don’t Go Chasing Waterfalls.” For the whole day. Each day brings some new song, or rather some new verse of a song, because I never manage to remember the whole thing. Instead, I inevitably end up singing just a few lines, often the chorus, and beat it till it’s dead.

My friends, my classmates, my acquaintances have all accepted that about me. It is in my nature to be outgoing, to make people laugh, even if it is at the expense of my terrible singing voice. Yet, despite the fact that my voice isn’t the best, or that my ears aren’t the most key sensitive, I will sing as long as it makes me happy. I am unafraid of embarrassing myself, or of exposing my flaws. If practice makes perfect, eventually I’ll be great. Until then, plug your ears.

# Female Struggle Anonymous

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Facades Anonymous

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

I often travel through a land of backpacks, ironed silk suits, Hawaiian slippers, colorful shirts, low-waist jeans and outfits that do not even have a name. This is a land where shoes are worn and pants are stained with adhesive, where tie knots are just so and fingernails are perfectly polished. This land is simply the microcosm of the world where all types of people from all backgrounds travel: The New Delhi Local Metro.

The first time I travelled in it, the one thing that intrigued me was the silence in the train even though it was packed with people. Each and every person was reserved, self-contained and absorbed. It was like a peaceful chaos moving slowly through time, like a single unit, where the only sound was that of the voice on the PA system informing us about the next station, as if reminding us of the reality waiting beyond the bubble of our consciousness.

Every corner contained a new character; one holding his smooth leather office bag tightly to his stomach as if nervous before his first job interview; another looking out of the window at the moving blurred landscape lost in reverie. These characters that I encountered each day filled an emptiness in me. I always characterized this emptiness as a lack of knowledge of the world on my part and everyday while travelling in the Metro I would gain something, something new about the world, something new about the mechanics of it, something which would fill this partial void.

The small acts that these characters performed would actually speak louder than any words. For example, take the small act of paying for tickets. On one hand there are some people who will meticulously count the amount of money and diligently arrange the denominations after taking it out of the folds and creases of their wallets or bags; on the other hand there are some people who will simply take out the roughly folded and crumpled bills from their compressed pockets and will expect the cashier to do the job of sorting the cash. Through these simple things I would learn a lot about people, about how certain people act in certain situations. However, little did I realize it then that this trait of mine of being observant would turn out to be significantly valuable in the future.

In the spring of 2011, I moved to a boarding school and my connection with the Delhi Metro was broken. Although I met new people there, I could not find anyone like my good old ‘characters’. I needed the relationship back; I needed the connection back. So I embarked on finding this connection. I started acting, and somehow through that I could relive the connection; I could play out the characters that I had encountered in the past. Sometimes I mixed the different traits, different behaviors of different characters and the result always came out to be new. I could actually, as many actors would say, ‘get under the skin’ of each character I played. The connection was so healthy and strong that I could actually imagine the hand and body movements of each character fastened to my memory.

I applied the same thing to the difficult situations I faced. If I can put it in simple words, ‘I acted my way out through them’. Because I would never be myself or what I am inside, people often labeled me as ‘pretentious’, and that would always intrigue me to think:

“Am I really losing my identity by doing this?”

I started questioning my individuality and only one answer came to my mind:

“A virtue of a good actor is to be able to lose his identity.”

And a virtue of a reasonable, rational person, however, is to recognize that.

# Overcoming Negativity at an American High School Anonymous

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

“I hate coming to this school.” I vividly remember overhearing during the first week at my new school. I couldn't believe someone would say such a thing in America. Back in Japan, students certainly complained about school but never with such anger. However, over the next couple of weeks, I could see why my American classmates professed their hatred on a daily basis. Our campus was covered in graffiti with profanity written on the walls, along with constant vandalism and trash littering the bathroom floors. It seemed the students at my school were just zombies who attended classes out of obligation, rather than out of interest. As an outsider looking in, it was difficult not to succumb to the negativity of some of my peers. Instead, I focused on the positives and what I found is that American high schools have many advantages too. On my way to lunch, I spotted a large bulletin board filled with application forms for sports teams and clubs. Immediately, I was tingling with excitement. It seemed like a whole new world where a school could be used to develop my hobbies and interests. My previous schools in Korea tended to focus only on education, with every student rushing to leave at the final bell. Out of curiosity, I signed up for any and every club that interested me, hoping to make new friends and discover the benefits of my American education. After becoming more involved, I made friends and slowly learned the whole story about \*\*\*\* High School. Overall, it was a great place but it was not without its faults.There were many areas that required improvement and programs that desperately needed to be established. Instead of complaining, I decided to be proactive; I asked teachers and friends about the shortcomings they saw and invited opinions on how to improve. After listening, I jotted down potential solutions or ideas I had in mind. Even though I wasn’t confident whether I could make big changes, I decided to give it a try and scheduled a meeting with my principal to make a proposal. "I want to paint the school." The principal blankly stared at me with a perplexed look. "You want to do what?" I explained how painting our school will make our campus cleaner and promote a sense of belonging. Looking unsure, he told me I'm not allowed to alter any exterior walls due to school regulations but I was welcome to come back a week later with a formal written proposal. For a week after our conversation, I stayed up late at night thinking about how to make my plans a reality. In the end, what I proposed was bathroom mural project. Since it would be nearly impossible for me to paint all eighteen bathrooms by myself, I suggested that each club could adopt a bathroom and develop a theme related to their subject or interest. Unlike before, the principal gave his consent and club officers were more than happy to help out. As the president of Math Honor Society myself, I directed our club to paint our school’s mascot, “A Patriot,” outlined with mathematical equations. Even though the project is still in progress, all the improvements our school made in such a short amount of time made me extremely proud. It was gratifying to see teachers and students willing to cooperate and strive to create a better campus and community. Furthermore, I have learned to stay optimistic and to see the potential in the bad things, instead of capitulating to a negative atmosphere that threatened to take over our school. Even though I still occasionally hear people say "I hate coming to this school," I blame it on stress or their classes rather than the campus. After all, this place has become more welcoming and beautiful since I first started, what is there to complain about?

# Challenged by The Cobra Event Anonymous

## What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?

A novel with a body eating itself from the inside is sure to generate some deep thinking, especially when, while fictional, it presents real scientific possibilities. The Cobra Event, a bone-chilling novel by Richard Preston, does just that. A secret counter-terror operation starts off with a high school student feeling ill and a few hours later, she undergoes self-cannibalization and dies soon after. With the occurrence of similar ghastly deaths, a pathologist is sent to investigate. A federal crisis is discovered – someone in New York City has been breeding a virus and using it as a bioweapon. Their actions go against my morals; I would never intentionally hurt someone even if I thought it was for the greater good.

We live in a world where there are high threats of terrorism. Preston brings the fear of bioweapons to the forefront, creating feelings of anxiety. While the story is fiction, it’s based on the dreadfully real possibilities of modern science, making it unsettling that it could potentially come true. The fact that our military has had a biological weapons program since 1943 does nothing to allay my fears; there are biological weapons potentially waiting to be used. Utilizing these weapons would impact our world severely. There could be war, mass death, and epidemic.

Preston also challenged my thinking about humankind. Yes, the ever-growing population of the planet causes many social, political, and natural issues, and a decreased number of people might help alleviate some of the problems. I can see how a person might think the world needs a quick fix. However, the villain’s method of killing millions of people is just not legitimate. It’s not ethical. I have faith in the brilliant minds of this world to find superior alternatives in fixing ongoing problems without using bioweapons.

# Why Food Is My Favorite Word Anonymous

## What is your favorite word and why?

When I think of food, the first thing I think of is happiness: memories of my family and friends eating, chatting, and laughing together flash through my head. In particular, I am drawn back to a birthday dinner for my dad. I can almost taste all of the mouthwatering cuisine we ordered: juicy steak, creamy pasta, crispy crab bites, and refreshing raspberry lemonade. But the thing I truly remember most is how my family – my mom, dad, and sister – formed an even closer bond that evening. My sister was laughing so hard her hands were shaking, causing her to spill her lemonade. Instead of yelling, my parents just laughed. It made me realize that even though we may make mistakes, those with whom we eat will forgive us for them.

Out of the estimated 1,025,109.8 words in the English language, my favorite is “food.” It’s not because I love food (although I really do love to eat); it’s because of the impact food has had historically and culturally, as well as the way it helps forge lasting memories. Food is a unifier, a common ground for people across the globe. Without it, we wouldn’t be where we are today (literally).

Every culture has different foods that they eat on a daily basis, yet the one thing that all cultures have in common is that the foods they eat bring them together. It makes them who they are. It will always amaze me that food, a necessity for individual survival, plays a greater role than just sustenance: its roles are multifaceted in enhancing our lives culturally and mentally while helping forge lasting memories.

# C810 Anonymous

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

“C810,” the judge announced. I check my code again — it’s mine. Rising from my seat, I step towards the front of the room. The other competitors clap, as is customary for speech events, breaking the sacred silence that previously occupied the room. It is only my second Speech & Debate tournament — and my very first competing in Original Oratory.

In my head, I hear the echo of my coach drilling her last minute tips and reminders two days prior to the tournament: “Remember to ask for time signals!”, “Move! Don’t stand still like a robot!”, “If you forget something, just keep talking!”

“May I have time signals?” I ask. The judge consents.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

After briefly scanning the room, my lips part and sound emerges. “We humans tend to…”

Focusing on the judge while I continue my speech, I notice her leaning on the desk like a bored student in math class after an hour of lecture. The other competitors exude an aura of disinterest and fatigue. Not good. I scour my memory of my last practice with my coach. I can’t recall anything as I am still focused on speaking, and nothing seems to be helping. An electric shock runs through my body as the judge held up two fingers. The brakes are slammed on my train of thought, leaving me stammering as I attempted to comprehend what two fingers meant. The realization hit me: two minutes remaining. I take four steps back to the center. And just like that, after what felt like hours, my speech reached its conclusion. The five remaining preliminary rounds fared with similar results, albeit the hesitation and anxiety left my voice after acclimating to the event.

“Statistically speaking, you have a 54% chance of making the Top 6 since there are only 11 competitors,” chimed the voice of my team’s president as we were awaiting the semifinals postings. “I don’t think…” Suddenly, a swarm of people rushed towards the wall, ravenous and eager to see if they had made it. I located the posting for Original Oratory, adorned with six codes printed in 36 point, Times New Roman font. My heart dropped. Missing from the posting was C810. Checking the live results, I could see why. “C810” appeared dead last, trailing 20 points behind the next competitor. I had no chance to begin with.

At our next Debate Team practice, the truth was revealed in the feedback on the judges’ ballots: “Needs more sources,” “Use hand gestures to emphasis points,” “Use word coloring to add contrast to your speech.” Novice mistakes. Pitted in an open round, I had been up against competitors that had three years of experience on their backs. Equipped with the feedback, a red pen, and a copy of my speech, I spent the rest of practice dissecting my speech. Revise. Perform in front of a mirror. Cut out the awkward parts. Repeat.

Each following tournament, my ranking rose continually upward — starting from the bottom 25%, then to the bottom 50%, and then to the top 50%. While I may never have reached the Top 6, I broke quarterfinals in a national circuit tournament three months later and came within arm’s reach two months after that when I came in seventh place in my last regular season tournament.

Utterly failing in my first tournament taught me humility and armed me with keen observation skills to learn from other competitors that consistently placed in the top three. Even having researched the event for months, that paled in comparison to the experience earned in the battlefield. With vigor and drive, I started from the bottom, just to climb my way towards the elusive Top 6. Pure talent may be a factor in oratory, but hard work, experience, and commitment are too — and that I can work with.

# Revelation Anonymous

## What's your favorite word and why?

Revelation. This one word describes my learning style, my writing habits and my insights. I can be in a library studying for a subject I don’t quite understand and out of nowhere I receive a revelation. Revelation, to me, is the missing puzzle piece that links all the ideas together and lights up my dim light bulb. It is that spark which compels me to awaken from my slumber at 2am and furiously write down an idea for an essay.

Sporadic, spontaneous, silent. It comes upon a midnight dreary (literally). A revelation is the fruit of immense thought, when the right neurons fire and the thought forms. Many people have had revelations that changed the course of humanity: the discovery of electricity, specialization. Heck, the Bible has a book named the Book of Revelation and that same bible has been central to Christianity today.

Revelations, in essence, are bits of truth. It is the sampler that drives us to towards greater discoveries and knowledge. Without revelations, without having hints at the truth, it is hard to know that it even exists in the first place. Gravity wasn’t well known until after Newton had the revelation after being hit in the head by a falling apple. We have all sorts of revelations, ranging from remembering that you forgot to feed the fish to discovering the next big thing. Revelation ultimately compels us to do something more, to push further. How far will I get? Only time can tell.

# Tastes Like . . . Quirkiness Matthew Jones

## We are a community of quirks, both in language and traditions. Describe one of your quirks and how it is a part of who you are.

I walk into the cafeteria at 7:30 AM and make my way to the microwave, taking a tupperware container out of my lunch box. I look around the lunch room--I see people eating donuts, bagels, and breakfast sandwiches. What do I have? Chicken. The microwave beeps and I take my container back to my seat.

Why would I opt to eat grilled chicken this early in the morning? I am a powerlifter, so I need to make sure that I consume enough protein throughout the day. Also, since I have a late free period, I need to eat a nourishing meal between my 6:00 AM breakfast and 1:00 PM lunch so I can focus during class.

At first, I thought that the other students would judge my eating habits with disdain. However, they genuinely inquired as to why I would want to eat chicken this early. Some friends admired the practice, but others still viewed it as gross. One day, I went to the microwave and saw that my friend John, a swimmer, was already using it. To my surprise, when the timer hit zero, he pulled out a tupperware container full of chicken! He realized that although eating chicken in the morning is out of the ordinary, it would make him a better student and a better athlete. I felt honored that another person would use my ideas.

I am a leader by example. If I believe that something will make me better, I do it no matter how out of the ordinary it is. One simple act of eating chicken in the morning influenced another student to improve his own eating habits. I was responsible for improving someone else’s nutrition as well as my own.