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**Sample essays 2017**

**Vanderbilt University**

# 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.

# "Welcome to Palestine" Arielle Ring

## SHARING INTELLECTUAL INTERESTS IS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF UNIVERSITY LIFE. DESCRIBE AN EXPERIENCE OR IDEA THAT YOU FIND INTELLECTUALLY EXCITING AND EXPLAIN WHY.

In the summer of 2000, my family traveled to Israel, the birthplace of my father. I performed my Bat Mitzvah, met relatives for the first time, and discovered my heritage in a new light. Yet, one distinct incident left the greatest impact. We were visiting the Masada, an extremely spiritual site to Judaism, symbolic of Jewish Resistance, when an Arab worker stealthily confronted me, and defiantly announced, "Welcome to Palestine." As a young, naive, Jewish-American girl, I was flabbergasted. After all, we were in the land of Israel. Somehow, I realized how those seemingly three innocent words were reflective of a great cultural conflict just below the surface. Within months, the simmering tensions exploded into the violent Intifada that continues to plague the nation. Those words, however, ignited my passion for international events, particularly ethnic conflicts. Inspired, I read Thomas Friedman's From Beirut to Jerusalem, a highly acclaimed book that examines both sides of the Middle East conflict. Now a Friedman addict, I closely follow his columns in the New York Times, as each tackles an issue with a balanced, encompassing approach.

# 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.

# Vanderbilt University: The Coalescence of Southern Charm and Exemplary Academics Daniel Dolgicer

## While each student will eventually select at least one area of concentrated study, the College of Arts and Science is committed to introducing every student to a broad range of subjects. Which academic interests and/or passions might be a part of your academic journey at Vanderbilt and why?

My academic interests are widely varied, ranging from Hebrew to psychology to architecture. Rather than briefly describing them all, I would prefer to focus on my main academic interest: international relations.

As a strong-willed first grader, I consistently planted myself on the classroom beanbag to stare at a map of the political world. The map was beyond my physical reach, and thus I could not see the minutiae representing rural farming villages and Polynesian island nations. However, national capitals were marked in a bold and imposing font, and were always accompanied by a crisp, pointed star. I was soon able to proudly recite the capitals of nations from Argentina to Zimbabwe. Amidst the crunching sounds of Count Chocula cereal, I consistently defeated any challengers during snack time geography games. This marked the beginning of my infatuation with foreign affairs. My involvement with the world beyond America's borders is the product of my family environment, early experiences with foreign travel, and a childhood spent in New York City.

My family's gatherings have always featured intellectual discussions about everything from the Oslo Accords to the long-term effects of Reaganomics. These discussions informed me about the salient topics of the day, and sparked in me a fascination for international politics and culture.  My parents grew up in Israel, and thus conversation was often geared towards the Middle East. My family's political discussions further stimulated my interest in understanding the nuances of Israeli politics. I was soon browsing through the pages of the Jerusalem Post, and obtained a greater fluency on the issues facing Israel and its neighbors.

My mother's work as a travel agent gave her access to discounted travel opportunities, which my family partook in throughout my childhood. I was able to witness the world firsthand, and was exposed to exotic architecture, cuisine, and lifestyles - from the Grand Place of Brussels to the bewildering, buzzing bazaars of Istanbul. I gained a deep appreciation for the intricacies of foreign culture, yet developed a strong desire to expand my experiences beyond the realm of the tourist.  This exposure sparked in me a fascination for other peoples and other nations, and led me to further delve into the world of international relations.

Coming of age in New York City - a place I have always felt is the Rome of the new millennium - I was privy to many experiences which would have remained foreign to me had I grown up in suburbia.  As a distinctly global city, New York offers much in the way of foreign culture. As a young child, I strolled past the United Nations on a regular basis, and remember being fascinated by the patterns of the world's flags and the native dress of the African delegations. As I grew older, it was commonplace to discuss the civil unrest in France with a waiter at the corner bistro, or listen to a Pakistani cab driver expound upon the strained relationship between the Muslims and Jews. These formative experiences only stimulated my desire to further understand the intricacies of the geopolitical arena; they have readied me for my future forays in diplomacy, working specifically on behalf of Israel as well as on broader issues affecting the world stage.

# Challenge and Complexity Anonymous

## What do you imagine your future at Vanderbilt to hold?

At Vanderbilt, I want to let my entrepreneurial thoughts run free. I have developed a successful business that provides a service to the community, and I love the challenges that entrepreneurship presents. I also find questions of efficiency, decision-making, and strategy fascinating. I plan on being an active participant and leader in the Forum for Entrepreneurship Education. If business becomes a passion, I will apply for the ENGAGE Scholars Program to further pursue entrepreneurship at the Owen Graduate School of Management.

Deep thinking will also be part of my Vanderbilt journey, as I appreciate the difficult and perplexing problems of philosophy. Some of my favorite books include Carl Sagan's "The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence," Daniel Quinn's "Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit," and Gore Vidal's "Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace." There is something very comforting in the intellectual freedom of about delving into a question to which there is no right or wrong answer. Perhaps my love of questions will manifest into an academic passion and vocation; it may also lead me to minor in philosophy.

My final area of interest is public policy, particularly conflict resolution, because it combines politics with philosophy and economics. My favorite day in Macroeconomics this year was when we discussed the ramifications of the inherent inequality of Democratic capitalism and the impact of globalization. It excites me to think that these ideas are shaping the world. Similarly, it was both disheartening and eye-opening to learn about all the factors, besides propaganda and racism, that contributed to the Holocaust. The political actions taken in the wake of World War I seemed almost to foreshadow World War II, and even current events. I will undoubtedly take courses in the Public Policy Studies Interdisciplinary Program, possibly pursuing the major.

Business, philosophy, and public policy are academic interests now and will play an integral part in my academic journey at Vanderbilt, but it would be naive to assume now that one of these will be my academic passion and possibly vocation. If there is a thread between these topics of interest, it is one of complexity. I know that Vanderbilt will provide me with the opportunity to find challenges that I can wrap my arms around and wrestle with for a lifetime.

# An Unforgettable Summer Amit Momaya

## Write about a memorable/significant experience.

What came first, science or technology?" asked a tall and husky figure, who was dressed in an unbuttoned and rather threadbare lab coat. My initial response was science because I reasoned that technology was the application of science. An articulated voice from the back of the room, however, soon refuted this idea and devised a cogent argument in favor of technology. The professor then formulated a rebuttal to both of these perspectives, and eventually succeeded in placing everyone in a state of quandary. This discussion signaled the advent of the myriad thought-provoking and challenging issues and applications that would arise during the summer I spent at the Georgia Governor's Honors Program.

Competition for admission into the program was fierce, even fiercer once in the program. Competition of the latter, however, did not exist with one another as it had during the selection process but rather within one's self. The program held a weekly competition for the science majors in which the professors would present seemingly impossible tasks to be completed within a few hours. On the first few competitions, which included constructing a rubber band powered car out of a few sundry items, I did not fare very well and felt vexed by the restrictions. However, one of my friends helped me learn new ways of tackling problems. He helped me realize that not all materials need to be used. He helped me see that the most obvious idea will not always be the most successful. He helped me start planning before acting. In effect, he helped me crawl out of my suffocating, conventional shell and change my way of thinking.

The final competition proved to stretch my mind to its greatest capacity. We were assigned the task of building a boat concocted from some cardboard, two garbage bags, and a roll of duck tape. At first thought, this project did not seem challenging at all, that is, until I discovered that two students would have to sit inside the boat and race across the swimming pool. This competition drew together many of the skills I had acquired during that summer, one of them being teamwork, something I had not learned the true meaning of until that summer. At school, "teamwork" would simply imply breaking the assignment into fragmentary pieces and assigning them to each member of the group. The activities at the program, however, soon expunged that fallacy and showed me that true teamwork requires the collaboration and unification of simultaneous ideas. Each team member would contribute his or her thoughts to every element of the boat. Resourcefulness was another determining factor in this last competition, as only one roll of duck tape would be provided and simply a few hours to build. Everything would need to be planned out meticulously beforehand because, once started, new materials could not be used if construction was botched. Other factors such as creativity, motivation, concentration, and ingenuity, when mixed in the right proportions, would produce a peerless boat, which is exactly what my team accomplished.

Not only did I learn from other students, but also from the astute professors. They were some of the best in their profession, with a true passion for teaching and understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses. Personally, I learned to desist accepting formulas and theorems at face value. The professors supplied us with the facts, and we were the ones to go out and research the concepts and proofs behind them. These skills have surfaced rather quickly, such as on the second day of AP BC Calculus, when the teacher asked us to memorize a formula. I, however, first asked for the proof. The other students groaned upon hearing this, but I grinned, knowing that eight months from now, they were the ones who would be cramming this seemingly senseless formula into their head before the AP exam.

I could fill an immense number of pages continuing to delineate what I learned that summer, but, if there was one thing to sum up everything, it would be the Rubik's Cube. When I first encountered this bemusing puzzle, I began by turning the cubes in random configurations, waiting for something to appear. However, I soon discovered that this is exactly where I went wrong-that is, nothing in life simply emerges on its own for you; instead, you have to search for it, sometimes at greater depths than ever before. By the middle of the program, I began to organize my thoughts and preplan so my configurations would make sense. At the beginning of that summer, my mind was fettered inside the cube as I cursorily searched for meanings. Nonetheless, as the summer crept to an end, I learned to organize, revise, concentrate, and not only think ahead, but also think differently. When the program concluded, I knew that I was no longer inside the cube but outside it.

# Passion Anonymous

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

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

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

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

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

# Unfinished Symphony Hang Xu

## You have already told us about yourself in the Common Application, with its list of activities, the Short Answer, and the Personal Statement. While we leave the topic of your second essay entirely up to you, we encourage you to use this opportunity to tell us something that we could not learn from the rest of your application. Try to pick a topic that will convey some aspect of your experience or outlook that you would like us to understand better.

I play the B.

A small square office, no more than ten feet wide, holds two upright mahogany pianos sitting back-to-back. The metronome marks the beat, ta-ta-ta-ta, first 100 beats per minute, then 105, 110, working toward 120. The door is closed, the hall empty. It is a sunny Saturday afternoon; some Governor’s Honors Program (GHP) participants are playing ultimate Frisbee on West lawn, others are attending the square dancing seminar, but four pianists are practicing the opening chord of Schubert’s "Unfinished Symphony" for the first time on two Yamahas.

It is not just any "Unfinished Symphony"; it is my "Unfinished Symphony".

Or so I thought.

Jessica joins in with the F.

Two days before Dr. Indergaard had announced to us, “We will be holding a concert at the end of six weeks. I need you to submit the ensemble pieces you will be performing.” I thought back to my solo debuts, to bowing to a sea of thunderous applause, to striding toward the stage to receive my trophy, to forgetting the entire development section due to uncontrollable anxiety. I had become accustomed to playing alone, earning distinctions alone, accepting failures alone. The only time I had performed in an ensemble was with my teacher, and all I had to do was learn my part. She would accompany me. Besides, I had a program ready - Chopin’s "Fantaisie-Impromptu", Brahm’s "G Minor Rhapsody", Bach’s "Prelude" and "Fugue in C Minor" - it was my choice. So what would I do with three other pianists, taking my time and disregarding my interpretations of the piece? I could no longer work for myself, but I made up my mind to dominate, to play the first piano part, to make the piece mine.

It is now the third week, and our progress has slowed. I am frustrated with the tempo, the dynamics, and the style. Jay plays the beginning with too ominous a tone, J.D. is too loud, Jessica’s legato is more accurately a staccato, and the rhythm for my opening part is not in sync with the metronome. Making this piece sound decent is going to be harder than I thought.

Jay plays the C.

Six weeks of practice - of missing the '70s dance, of opting out of the 5K race, of running back to the dorms from Whitehead Auditorium in the rain before lights-out - amount to this. The lights dim, the spotlight finds its target: we are on stage, the four of us, eight hands, performing Schubert’s "Unfinished Symphony" in front of six hundred and seventy-five Governor’s Honors finalists and instructors. But this time, I am not alone. I look up from the keys, meeting Jessica’s glance as she waits for the next cue. I nod to her and smile.

It is not any "Unfinished Symphony"; it is our "Unfinished Symphony".

J.D. plays the G.

GHP is over. The school year has begun, and I find myself once again teaching music at a local elementary school. I look down at my students, who are sitting around the piano in the classroom listening to me play Beethoven’s "Sonate Number Twelve". They too must learn that, though the beauty of music arises from the notes, sharing it with others is the joy.

We play the F sharp.

# The Ride Hang Xu

## Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application.

September 15, 2002

4:35 P.M.

“Star 94 FM Real-time Traffic…those heading northwest on Peachtree Industrial should expect major delays due to a gas leak….”

I abruptly change the radio station. What luck! I have moved exactly one mile in ten minutes. My first car, the epitome of self-liberation, has confined me in a ten-by-five-foot box. The heat is unbearable; the air outside is stagnant; the air conditioning offers little relief. I roll up my pant legs, take off my socks, secure my hair in a ponytail, and sink into my sweat-drenched seat.

Today’s ordeal is pure frustration. My obligations begin to float and jumble in my mind: trigonometric problems, an English paper on The Crucible, an outline about China’s WTO accession. I have to get home. If I do not complete these assignments I will face dire consequences…zeros, failing classes, expulsion from school, rejection from colleges…

The clock reads 5:16. Any other mode of transportation would have gotten me home by now. My thoughts begin to wander, and I recall the vehicles that carried me here from my hometown, Yuci, years ago: a bus to Taiyuan, a train to Beijing, an airplane to Memphis, a family sedan to Atlanta. Sitting miserably in my car, awash in these memories, I realize I never enjoyed any of these journeys.

March 4, 1993

1:30 P.M.

The blue paint of the metal skeleton had begun to peel off. The seat was not cushioned. The handlebars did not even have a bell that, with a flick of the finger, would ring out with a clean and crisp tone. But it was a bicycle, and it was mine. Not being able to afford a new one, my grandfather had purchased it from a friend. Though it was dirty and old, I could not wait for my first ride.

I climbed on, pulled my feet off the ground, and pedaled to nowhere, without a thought on my mind. I turned round and round in the tiny courtyard, a brick wall blockading the dirt road on one side and towering apartment buildings enclosing another. The courtyard was an apartment in itself: a group of elementary school kids engaged in a game of “rubber band jumping,” two old ladies sitting on stools eating noodles with the aged vinegar aroma engulfing them, aproned figures hanging up lines of fresh wash in the sun, a mother from the second floor calling for her child to return for lunch. From the outlook of the concrete porch of our first-story apartment, my grandparents and great-grandmother watched me maneuver around this Chinese tableau.

September 15, 2002

5:31 P.M.

A honk from behind jolts me back, and the sound of a little girl’s laughter during that bicycle ride fades away in my mind. I look at the car two inches in front of me, the one two inches behind me. Why am I in such a hurry to go home? Must I keep dreading the ride simply because it is a means to another destination, another goal? I suddenly realize that my anxiousness and preoccupation with completing a task do not help me get anywhere any faster. I let down my hair, turn up the music, wave to my neighbor, and enjoy the day for what it is.

# An Unexpected Friend Bailey Morledge

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

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

Day in, day out; week after week; year after year. She clocks-in and proceeds to a colorful room full of crying babies and children who have long overstayed their welcome. This controlled-chaos environment, however, doesn’t even faze her. She has become accustomed to her double-life as tireless employee and devoted mother. As her shift continues and the room begins to clear out, she makes hourly phone calls home. “Estas bien?” she asks, concerned-mother evident in her tone. After a consistent response of “Si mama, te amo,” she is able to return again to her second priority.

I will never forget my first day on the job. I was unsure and frightened, second-guessing myself and wanting more than anything to turn around and walk right back out the child-sized rainbow door that probably should have read, “Welcome to Bailey’s First Job: Disaster.” I stopped myself. I considered the extensive interview process I had already endured, the mountain of application paperwork, and the commitment I had made. This was an opportunity I had no choice but to face.

As I entered the fluorescent lit room that smelled distinctly of diapers and Play-Doh, all eyes were on me. I certainly hope my facial expression wasn’t too transparent, but I was utterly shocked. When I had signed up to work at the Kid’s Club, I expected to be surrounded by employees my age, from a similar background. I could not have been more mistaken. Every woman in the room turned to greet me, and every woman in the room was from a different Central or South American country. I found myself significantly outnumbered; not only was I a non-native Spanish speaker, but I was also clearly the youngest employee. It was easy to tell from their faces, and their quick and unfamiliar chatter, that they were equally as surprised and probably just as uncomfortable.

As the time I spent at Kid’s Club increased, so too did my sense of isolation. I was working evenings to accommodate my school schedule, and as it turned out, this was a time when few children were being dropped off. I often found myself with just one other employee in the room. While many employees would be thrilled at the prospect of quiet evenings at work, I found myself begging parents to drop their children off in order to ease the silence that fell after the last lingering child left.

One night, however, the silence was broken. We had just begun our routine clean up of the club, when Maria unexpectedly turned off the vacuum cleaner and began to speak to me in broken English. “I hope like work aqui,” she said timidly. “We like to have you.” It took everything in me not to run over and tackle her in a hug. Our conversations up to this point had been awkwardly forced; we were basically strangers. The rest of the evening was spent laughingly learning to understand one another. I used some of the Spanish I knew, and Maria did her best to portray the incredible journey of her life in halting English. The effort this took on her part, the way she determinedly struggled in an unfamiliar language to tell her story, was the first thing that struck me about Maria.

I started actually looking forward to my shifts. After fulfilling our duties in the Kid’s Club, Maria and I would settle into child-sized chairs, excited to discover more about one another. She told terrifying stories about the nightmare of crossing the border, gave hard-won opinions of America, and shared countless anecdotes about her two teenage children. Her face would light up and her timid demeanor would turn passionate as she described the hardships she and her husband had endured in order to create a better life for their children. At the same time, she was eager to understand my typical American teenage life. When I pulled out my schoolwork, she loved to analyze and study it alongside me. My Spanish knowledge, which I had thought to be adequate, grew dramatically in the evenings I spent with Maria, simply by listening to her speak.

The company’s staffing situation began to require more and more hours from me each week, and it became clear that maintaining this job while balancing schoolwork and extracurricular activities was taking a toll. Although I desperately wanted to stay, I soon had no choice but to give up my job.

I put it off until the last minute to tell Maria, because I knew the formal goodbye would be hard on both of us. Being the supportive friend that she is, Maria wasn’t upset or even surprised, really. It was as if she knew, and she simply smiled and gave me a motherly embrace, making me promise to keep her updated on the remainder of my high school career. While our relationship has certainly suffered from the lack of time we spend together, I know that neither of us will ever forget the six months that we fortunately did share.

I had never expected that my steps through that child-sized rainbow door would lead to such a welcome path of acceptance, and a true understanding of determination. Maria became an uncommon and unexpected friend, and sometimes those are the best kind.

# The Race Henry Fowlkes Weatherly Jr

## What is a significant moment in your life?

Sweat, soiled by dust and tears, seeped down my body as I thrust myself forward. With every breath, my lungs collapsed on themselves. While oxygen poured in through my gaping mouth, I still craved more air. Foot after foot, I trampled down the grassy hill amongst a crowd of runners too absorbed with their own race to pay me heed. Each runner carried a look of determination that felt noticeably absent from my face. Seconds into the race, the cruel grasp around my throat clenched harder with every pounding step. My muscles, which usually respond to my commands with an ardent desire, began to droop with weight and scream with pain as they lifted my exhausted legs. Groups of parents surrounded me, cheering on their little runners, but no one cried my name.

As the race endlessly continued, the cheers of eager parents slurred into the fog of my mind. I stopped noticing the rusty, battered playground on my right and the infinite expanse of forest on my left; I only saw the battered dirt that lay before my feet. Step after step after step, I fought ahead against the furious desires of my flesh. The other runners, whom I once trailed by a thread, now pulsed forwards at a pace that I could no longer match. Recognizing my solitude, I cleared the haze occupying my thoughts long enough to realize the significance of my situation. I was last.

With this thought, the fog of fatigue and confusion violently settled inside my head as my body lost its focus. Without a sound, my body crumpled behind a large green shed beside the path. A boy and his mother walking by paused for a moment, gave me a look of concerned curiosity, then continued with their conversation as they walked away from me. After a few moments of darkness, the sun’s bright rays filtered through my squinted eyelashes, igniting a small flame of awareness within my mind. With hesitant fear, I picked myself up, brushing flecks of dirt from my uniform. I slowly stumbled towards the tent where my team would gather after they finished the race.

Driven by fear and apprehension, I approached my coach, while wiping away the muddled tears. I failed to meet his expectations; I failed to finish the race; I failed myself.

Two years later, I perched on the edge of the starting line, quivering like an arrow. Over a hundred other anxious runners stood beside me. As the gun sounded, my body lunged forwards ahead of the other racers. Unlike the previous race, my mind focused on the path before me. Bend after bend, my legs pounded forward, churning like machines. I darted around the other runners that spotted the trail ahead of me. Occasionally I glanced at them, their faces twisted into demented scowls from the agony of running. My opponents’ weakness added fuel to my body as I blitzed onward. After a few minutes, I passed by the fateful green shed. With a brief grin and a silent shout, I surged ahead, digging energy from my newfound confidence.

At the one mile marker, the race assistant yelled out my time: “Five forty-six!” I was halfway done. I forced my mind to concentrate on the race at hand, ignoring the distractions around me. The trail meandered into the forest, and the soil gradually grew darker. Ahead, the path rounded an open-air barn then looped backward. As I rounded the horse stables, I began to pass by my teammates. Instead of shouting out words of encouragement, we would exchange glances and nods of approval to save our breath, then continue running. Steadily, the end of the race approached. Realizing this, I began to accelerate, passing more runners in the process.

As I approached the finish line, a crowd of parents and team mates gathered to cheer me on. Cries of “Go Henry!” and “You’re almost there” filled my ears as I clambered to the end. My body bordered on collapsing as I passed through the gate, which read “12:02.” The racing staff herded me past the gate and through the line of flags behind it. A woman handed me a small, ripped piece of white paper. Coughing, I staggered out of the chute and fell down onto the grassy lawn a few feet away. There was only one number written on the piece of paper -- 3rd-- a personal triumph of body and mind that marked my significant improvement.

# Another Door Opens Anonymous

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

It was our last scrimmage game before the start of the 2009 Valparaiso girls’ varsity basketball season. The clock counted down not only the time left in the game but also how many seconds I had left playing on my basketball team before I told the coach of my decision not to try out for the team that year. Though my parents always supported me in my pursuits, they gave preference to my quitting basketball, a sport I participated in for the preceding nine years. Instead, they advised me to devote all my time developing into a more talented tennis player.

The thought “to quit or not to quit” haunted me night and day. It was a major risk to quit one sport to see if I could make the varsity team in another. Increasing the risk was the fact that I had only started playing tennis the previous year. When the decision-making time came, I decided to alter my priorities and quit basketball. Though I encompass a melancholic feeling every time I watch my former teammates play a basketball game, I never expected all the serendipitous things that came from making that decision.

After the scrimmage I expressed my thoughts: “Coach, this is probably one of the hardest things I’ve had to do because never have I quit a team or backed down from any challenge, but I am not going to try out for the team this year. This has nothing to do with the way you coach. I just feel that I should focus on improving my tennis skills and studying for my challenging classes.”

Coach then responded in a way I did not expect him to, stating, “Natalie, I respect you very much for talking to me about this. I understand your decision, and though we wish you would still be a part of this team, I’m glad you have your priorities straight, and I know you will succeed.”

After that, many rewards came to me. Due to playing sports my whole life, I have learned how to manage my time competently, and after quitting basketball I acquired more time to study and join additional clubs. More time to volunteer at my Greek Orthodox Church also became available. In addition to the long hours spent with schooling and academic or community clubs, I found time to practice tennis relentlessly over the winter, mastering the fundamentals and showing the coach my improvements. There were difficulties I encountered with the current varsity players and their parents thinking I would never improve enough to play at the varsity level, but after practicing long hours, I proved the doubters wrong and became a passionate leader on the varsity tennis team. I worked up to playing at number one doubles and competing at semi-state with my partner. Quitting the basketball team really showed me how much I loved tennis and how important my schooling is to me. It also created a closer-knit family with my parents supporting me at every match, tournament, and title.

As well as playing tennis, I began working at a chiropractic clinic after school. Before obtaining a job at the clinic, the only course of work I had previously had was working as a nanny to a few neighbors and mowing their lawns in the summer. I was eager to begin working at an office and learn the behind-the-scenes aspects of the medical field and how it is intertwined with lawyers and court cases. The medical field and laws have always interested me immensely, and it is wonderful to be able to learn all about that everyday and be a part of the process before cases get sent from lawyers to clients and before the doctors’ work on their patients. Additionally, I have learned various aspects of the insurance world and how to deal professionally with patients. Being part of a professional world every afternoon opened up my eyes to numerous new aspects of life as an adult and helped me become an even more organized, mature, and well-rounded person.

Alexander Graham Bell once stated, “As one door closes another one opens.” There have been times in my life when one thing ends and something greater will come out of it, but none to the extent of what became of my “closing the door” to basketball. Amazingly, making one small decision to alter my priorities presented abundant opportunities showing me possibilities of what I wish to accomplish before, during, and after college. It proved to me how important tennis, my job, and my schoolwork is, and how committed I am when I set my mind to something.

# More Than a Game Anonymous

## Write about a challenging situation that you have learned from in your lifetime.

As the puck becomes tangled beneath my skates, my body tenses, and I frantically brace for the inevitable destruction. My senses are acutely alert to the heavy breathing that radiates from the opposing player barreling toward my backside. While this pulsing sensation skips wildly along the raised hairs on my neck, I quickly resort to an impossible means of escape by “C-curling” toward the enclosing boards, abandoning the puck altogether; unfortunately, my attempted getaway is merely wasted effort. I gasp for air as if I am about to be submerged underwater. Glass flashes brilliantly across my eyes. Sharp pain races up my left side. Frozen numbness harshly grips my shoulder. In a brief moment, I am lying lifelessly on the blood-spattered ice, trying to recollect my spilling mind. This physical collision is the beginning of a downward psychological spiral, but I will eventually ascend from its depths.

Scraping myself awkwardly off the ice, I struggle over the boards and collapse on the bench with my equipment strewn about me, fully intending to skate again. As a pure-bred hockey player, my natural instinct to play under any circumstance takes immediate precedence over my common sense. However, my innate desire to keep playing is instantly dashed as I reach my right hand under my sweat-encrusted jersey in search of my sore left shoulder, only to find that it has apparently dropped off the face of the earth. All hopes of a personally successful season are crushed in a matter of seconds by an untimely shoulder dislocation.

My mind shifts gears, flooding with thoughts as quickly as it had been emptied onto the ice only moments earlier. Why? Why me? Why now? This is supposed to be our year. And now this? I am suddenly flushed with anger—anger that soon turns into debilitating agony. How am I supposed to help the team from the bench? The hurt carves itself deep into my psyche, and I immediately feel isolated from the players and coaches around me. With one simple stroke, the Hockey Gods have completely alienated me from my team.

In the coming weeks, people bombard me with questions about my injury, following up their inquiries with a seemingly half-hearted “I’m sorry,” as if apologizing could brighten my day or miraculously heal my shoulder. My smile in response to their “sympathy” only masks my true indignation. Of course, the bulky, black sling (complete with excessively large side padding and a complementary stress ball) does not help my fragile state of mind, incessantly reminding me that I cannot move my arm for the next seven weeks. And to make matters worse, I now must helplessly watch my team struggle against opponents in the next several contests, losing close battles one after another. I have hit a personal rock bottom of self-pity and sorrow.

A few weeks later, between periods of a crucial league game, I finally realize that I have to make a vital decision to shake off this pessimistic attitude. Not only am I bringing myself down, I know that I am also setting a terrible example for our younger players. I can continue to immaturely feel sorry for myself, or grow up, accept my situation, and do what I can to try to positively assist and influence our struggling team. Choosing the latter route, I interject myself into our huddle, offering words of encouragement and urging everyone to be stronger on the puck—a recurrent weakness of ours. I suddenly feel invigorated and, more importantly, I begin to see myself as an integral part of the team again. Soon, I even resume skating despite doctor’s orders to avoid all physical activity. Although holding a stick requires two functioning hands, which I don’t yet have, I realize that it only takes one good hand to be able to pull aside a freshman teammate and coach him.

# Conquering Adversity Anonymous

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

June 16, 2000 -- My sense of uncertainty had never been so overwhelming, my emotions never so mixed. Born seven weeks early on what I now view as a blessed day, my youngest brother, initially referred to as “Baby Malone,” hung on for dear life. He was being treated in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), and he had countless IVs, tubes, and machines attached to him in his incubator -- which I thought of as a jail cell, isolating him from his surroundings. Walking into Reston Hospital, I was taken aback by the sterile environment, squeaky-clean floors, and medical staff roaming the stark halls. I felt as if my heart had shattered when told that “Baby Malone” would remain in the NICU indefinitely. Because of his fragile state, the doctors and nurses went to great lengths in order to ensure his well-being. I watched the liquid travel through the tube as he was fed intravenously, the fuzzy lines and numbers on the machines constantly changing, the oxygen mask on his delicate little nose that allowed him to breathe, and the continual motion of his tummy going up and down. I felt helpless. I was an outsider looking in on his life, unable to remove the barrier dividing us. Although at the time I did not understand the reasoning for the limited access I had to my new sibling, today I fully appreciate all the medical staff did to protect his health. As if he were a missing puzzle piece, my family was not complete without my baby brother.

July 15, 2000 -- With a swift change of emotions, I became the happiest girl in the world. The opportunity that I had been longing for had finally arrived: I welcomed “Baby Malone,” newly named Jason Carter Malone, into our secure and loving home on Winter Haven Place. I will forever remember the first time I held him, sitting on the couch cradling him in my arms as he peacefully slept. Although I had not been prepared for the emotional roller coaster, as I reflect back on the experience, I realize how it made me grow as a person. At age eight, I felt powerless and unsure of God’s reasoning for placing that obstacle into my life. Now, however, I appreciate my brother and his existence much more than I ever would have because of my realization that life can drastically change without warning.

No challenge is too big to overcome. That was the lesson I took from Jason’s birth. It has been valuable in facing obstacles in my own life as well. For example, four years ago, my soccer career was threatened. I faced both a misdiagnosis of Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy and a botched surgery. Because I have faced numerous injuries over time, I have spent a significant amount of time as a spectator on the sidelines. After fractures, multiple casts, several walking boots, two ankle surgeries, months of rehabilitation, and never-ending trips to the doctor, I am thankfully still able to make use of my God-given talent. The exhilaration and emotional outlet I routinely experience through both training hard in practice and competing to the best of my ability in games is not an opportunity I will always have. That awareness motivates me to savor every moment on the field. Giving one hundred percent of myself and walking off of the field with no regrets is my responsibility in order to challenge not only myself, but also my teammates.

One instance in which I overcame adversity happened in a college showcase tournament last December. After arriving in Florida, I could not suppress my excitement. I had been counting down the days until my team would board the plane to the Sunshine State, and I mistakenly believed that nothing could go wrong in this perfect place. The warm and sunny weather was ideal for playing soccer and contrasted starkly with the mounds of snow, blustery winds, and overcast skies back home. Just hours after landing, however, I found myself distraught, sitting on an emergency room table waiting for X-ray results. Nothing could console me. All I hoped was that I could resume playing in time for our first game. I could not fathom letting my team down like this after injuring myself in a light practice the day before the tournament began. Even though my ankle was not broken, I slowly began to realize after having multiple long tear-filled conversations with my parents on the phone, receiving overwhelming support from my teammates, and getting only a chuckle from the doctor when I asked if I could play the next day that this devastating event, yet again, must have happened for a reason. Rather than dwelling on it, I moved on and enjoyed my time in Florida, where I watched my team compete and win the championship. The time I have missed due to injury has taught me to cherish every moment I get to play with my teammates. Many of my life experiences -- highlighted by my newborn brother’s struggle to survive and my oft-interrupted soccer career -- have made me aware that favorable outcomes can and do arise in spite of obstacles. I have learned that with both determination and perseverance, adversity can be conquered.

# A Surprising Role Model Anonymous

## Describe an experience you have had, a person who has influenced you, or an obstacle you have overcome. Explain why this is meaningful to you.

I could feel the tears coming. My brother’s words pierced me like bullets, one by one, slowly overpowering my determination. I turned to face him and cleared my mind. After receiving the ball, I noticed him hesitate slightly and on instinct I started dribbling towards the basket. Unfortunately, he reacted just in time; momentarily after the sure layup sailed into the air, it came right back down. More trash talk ensued. I was about to explode at any moment. He bombarded me with insults, “You think you would EVER have a chance to make the middle school basketball team? Would they even let you try out?” The hateful words came in a barrage. I ran towards the steps without hesitation and locked the door behind me. My brother was left outside in the cold for the next half hour before I finally let him in.

Believe it or not, my brother has been a role model for me throughout my life. He had his own “creative ways” to teach me lessons – his trash talking caused me to be a stronger person. My confidence grew not only with basketball, but also with all other parts of my life. After that incident, no words could pierce my new suit of armor. My brother is a very strong individual. Although I was just a baby when my family emigrated to America, my brother was twelve years old, and he did not fit in at school. Regardless, he tried to find new friends and even joined the baseball team even though he did not know a single person on it. I admired my brother’s courage when he told me his painful memories years later. My brother also inspired me to pursue new interests, no matter where my natural level of talent lies. “Don’t worry about those around you; reach your own potential; and then exceed it,” he told me. His advice shaped many of my future interests as well as my approach to challenges I encountered.

For example, I have been playing guitar for five years. Although my technique on the guitar has grown substantially since I began learning, my vocals have lacked. In the past, even the thought alone of singing in front of a crowd has been enough to persuade me to pass up the opportunity. I soon realized that my fears only placed me on a never-ending path to failure; my true passion for music drove me to face my weakness. Over the past few summers at a camp, I played and sang for a crowd of a few hundred people without any hesitation. My brother’s advice helped me realize that there is no ceiling to anything I do; I can only create a ceiling inside my own mind.

My brother encouraged me to pursue many other interests in addition to guitar. As I watched my brother win consecutive national chess championships, I was fascinated and took the game up from an early age. After I learned the crucial elements of perseverance and patience, I won two state titles of my own. Computer Science is my intended major, just as it was my brother’s. I became obsessed with computer coding after I discovered how much math was involved. I could hardly wait for my brother to return home so that I could show him the new game I had programmed on my TI-84 Silver Edition.

Every time that my brother visits, a game of basketball is inevitable. We play to our peaks, neither of us succumbing to the other’s trash talk. I become more like my brother with every passing day. Even when he is not around, his ideas linger in my mind. My brother has not only influenced me in the way I live my life, he has also influenced my passions and everyday actions.

# Leadership Anonymous

## Using one of the leadership roles or extracurricular activities you prioritized as being important to you,describe what impact the experience had on you, what you contributed, what you learned about yourself,and how it has influenced your plans for the future.

Society must work together. People must endeavor to do everything they can so as to ensure that humanity upholds valuable ethics and a strong sense of goodwill. The I Club, sponsored by Rotary International, seeks to accomplish these goals on a worldwide scale. As the Treasurer of the I Club for the past three years, I have not only learned the importance of global service and international benevolence, but also the indispensable skills that have taught me to be a more effective leader and a more motivated individual.

I was born in war-torn former Yugoslavia and relocated to the United States as a refugee of a war of genocide. I have always felt an obligation to my country to advocate global awareness and peace on an international scale. Accordingly, during my sophomore year of high school, I discovered I Club. I is an international organization of students aged twelve to eighteen with more than 250,000 participants in over 120 countries. As part of its undertaking, it ventures to promote service and global awareness among the youth.

As an officer for my high school’s chapter of the I Club, I am accountable for the organization of a multitude of charitable events that benefit others on either a local or an international scale. In terms of local contributions, I have worked with my colleagues to organize a number of school enhancement and library beautification projects. Our chapter of the I Club has cultivated strong affiliations with local elementary schools and worked hard to make sure that I Club members are always available to offer our services at the schools. Moreover, as a leader of the club, I helped to regulate a number of service projects that contributed to international causes. During the aftermath of the devastating Japanese Tsunami in early 2011, our I Club worked to initiate a charity drive in which we sent boxes of food and supplies to victims of the natural disaster. Our chapter of the I Club also prides itself in having maintained a commitment to providing support for the eradication of the Polio disease worldwide. Today, Polio is impairing the lives of children in four countries – Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nigeria. Although entirely avoidable with the administration of a simple vaccine, families in these countries live in such impoverishment that such a vaccine is exorbitant to them. Consequently, our club has worked to raise funds so as to help us join in the fight against this preventable disease. With enough persistence and tenacity, my fellow I Club members and I are more than convinced that our work will help to make a positive effect on the lives of hundreds of impoverished children in these developing countries.

I Club has allowed me to raise awareness for those who are being born into the same impoverished and destitute conditions that I was born into, and I feel so fortunate to have escaped. Today, I fight to ensure that all people can have the opportunity that I was given to achieve something and to become successful.

# Regrets Evan Chethik

## 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.

It was the McCarthy era. Attorney General Tom Clark had just announced a list of fifty-six “subversive” organizations that were supposedly part of the communist crusade. My grandfather, vice president of the History Society at Tilden Senior High in Brooklyn, thought it would be a good idea to invite a few of these alleged communists to speak before the Society. The principal heard of his free speech series and shut it down. Grandpa admits now he was intending to be provocative. Nevertheless, he wrote a letter to the Daily Compass denouncing the censorship by his school. The next day, Grandpa and his father were summoned to the principal’s office.

My grandfather defended his position and his right to state it publicly. That’s when the principal told him that he knew the president of Brooklyn College, the only affordable option inner-city kids had at the time. The principal assured my grandfather that there was little chance he would get into the college unless a second letter was written to the Daily Compass recanting his charges of censorship at Tilden High.

My grandfather was torn. With a thick Yiddish accent, his father had always emphasized education. He’d barely let my grandfather do manual labor for fear he would like it and not go to college. His father said, “Enough! Do what the principal says!” But my grandfather knew that caving to the pressure would cost him. There was a cogent duty my grandfather assumed as VP of the History Society and as a young man to be courageous.

Grandpa did end up going to Brooklyn College where he became a front-line Freudian, extensively studying psychodynamic techniques. He met and married my grandmother there. Later, he became a professor, wrote a well-regarded textbook, and taught thousands of University of Michigan students. All of this was possible because he did write that second letter retracting his charge of censorship. In spite of all of these successes that college made possible, he still regrets writing that letter. He says it is his biggest regret.

That my grandfather even has regrets shocked me at first. He is so full of wisdom and grace in the way he speaks and moves about this world; it’s hard to see him as a boy my age with flaws and teenage angst. It makes me realize that I, too, will have regrets.

As I enter adulthood, I want to keep this story of Grandpa in the forefront of my mind so I remember to listen to myself. I want to learn to trust my gut when making big decisions. I may not make the most courageous decision every time, but I will be able to live with what happens, regrets and all.

# 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.

# 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.

# Of Talking Ravens and Curious Cinephiles Vikram Kejariwal

## Topic of your choice.

“Surrealism is embedded in the everyday, in the daily experience” -- Katharine Conley

It seems fitting for me to transform every moment or thought into a film screened inside my head. Cinema is my life, and guides me beyond my life. I rise from reality and I’m cast into a limitless world of my own creation. Here I am the humble king, the anxious father, or the tortured slave, the only conscious inhabitant of an otherworldly domain. Rocks don’t fall back to Earth, and instead morph into winged beavers as men in suits walk past me backwards. I leap across Norwegian fjords and land on a vibrant golden beach, but suddenly the sky cries: “Vikram, your lunch is getting cold!” Who dares to interrupt me? My canvas is left incomplete as my imagination is broken by my mother. My soul condenses and settles into reality again.

I often recite to my cousins the bittersweet tale of a boy called Vincent, who is depicted in a short film by Tim Burton. Vincent is a seven year-old who imagines himself living in a world of his own creation. In this infinite realm, he reads the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe -- finding himself particularly drawn to “The Raven” -- and practices scientific feats far ahead of a child’s intellect. Unfortunately, as he matures, he grows out of his thoughts and forgets his beloved world. My disposition feels much like a parallel of Vincent’s. My love of cinema developed because film transported me into a surreal state between the abstract and the real. It became a state of perception where I could reflect on the most intricate ideas and be elevated from the daily notions of maintaining the ideal “eight-pack” figure or tweeting about a Justin Bieber song. Without realizing it, I was soon growing alongside the classics and blockbusters of world cinema. My television became a teacher and the dingy local movie-hall became my classroom. Now, every film I begin to view sets me on a journey of deep research, exploration, and wonder.

The moment the final credits roll, I am provoked to learn what influenced the producer to couple an accurately biographical scene with a completely fabricated one, or to analyze the pioneering camerawork employed. An indirect fruit of my cinematic curiosity is the ability to investigate a subject and dissect it into its core components; I find myself using these very skills to disprove my opposition’s arguments in parliamentary debate. I have morphed from being shy to being able to connect with a variety of different people simply through everyday discussion of films and plays. As I feel the tears well during a third screening of Philadelphia, I realize that I have grown more sensitive and reflective. Often I gaze at a director’s long endeavour to perfect a production and find myself inspired to commit to challenging projects with the same rigor and perseverance.

The imaginary world of cinema has given me permission to aspire to peaks of perception that many would proclaim impossible. Perhaps I am just like Vincent, a boy who perceives dreamlike notions as his source of individuality and joy. As I grow older, I finally hear the sweet answer to an inevitable question: “When will I mature and exit my own surreal reality?” Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

# Playground Andrew Elsakr

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

There was one playground not too far from my grandparents' apartment in Cairo (the summer home of my childhood) where I wasn't treated like the quirky, abnormal kid that I was used to being. It wasn't your ideal picture of a playground, though. Rusty railings, monkey bars so high you'd break a bone if you fell, sharp nails everywhere that would've whispered the word "tetanus" in my mother's ear had she ever accompanied me and my cousin. It was every child's dream and every parent's nightmare, and I got to enjoy it. The kids there didn't care that I couldn't speak Arabic or that I was a Christian (and not even a Coptic but a Presbyterian -- a minority of the minority). We'd play hide-and-seek, tag, cops-and-robbers, you name it. When we'd finished, we would sit together and giggle because we were all Egyptians and there was nothing to keep us from being happy.

At the playground in Cairo I could be something I had no chance of being in Memphis: normal.

Cairo was quite a sight in its glory days, once heralded as the most beautiful city in the world. It was filled with villas and clean roads and marketplaces that brought tourists from all over to behold the city's majesty. However, through horrible governing and overpopulation, the city descended, apparently low enough to take ninth place in a 2012 CNN ranking of the "World's 10 Most Hated Cities." As for me, I never really had a golden era. Sure, when I was younger I was that kid the PTA parents adored; I was the top student in all my elementary school classes, but I was never perfect. I was never balanced. As I grew older, everyone seemed to be trying to escape Egypt except for me. Egypt was a playground that I could only visit in the summers, and my desire to keep returning never wavered. I never stopped depending on it and seeing it as not only the apotheosis of my childhood, but as my childhood in its entirety. And even after I found other playgrounds in Memphis, I still yearned for Egypt with all my heart every morning when I looked at the calendar and saw the date steadily approaching June.

Years passed. The Egyptian Revolution happened, and my grandmother died during it, so we went to Cairo in the midst of all the tear gas and riots and violence, and I had to watch from the top floor of a hotel as black smoke rose from my crumbling, dying city. That last glimpse of the moribund city that had once been my fairy godmother stuck with me, telling me that things would be different from now on, that things would never be the same. That I would never be the same.

Two years later my grandfather died as well and we had to go back again. It was the third time in a row we'd gone to Cairo for a funeral, and that was all Cairo had seemed to be at that point: a mausoleum, kind of like the Pyramids. After the funeral, having nothing else to do, I went alone to that playground I had frequented so often in my childhood, and to my dismay, I found that it had changed. The squeaky, splintery play sets had been removed, replaced by new, plastic, child-proofed swing sets and jungle gyms. It looked American. I sat down on the see-saw by myself and started reminiscing, imagining the sounds of the yelling children who had stopped coming to this place long ago, who were now my age and off in the cadaverous city, doing whatever it is that makes CNN hate Cairo so much, and I realized the truth. The truth is that when there's no one left to sit on the see-saw with, it's time for you to leave the playground. So that's what I did.

# Sound of...Music? Anonymous

## Write about a time you faced difficulty and overcame it. (Common Application)

I wake up an hour before the stampede towards the shower begins in my summer camp residence hall. Quietly, I close my dorm door so as to not startle my week-long roommate awake--I had to be alone. My clothes and towel hang on the stall as I brace for the cold water to tickle my face. But first, I peek outside to reassure myself I’m the only one. I begin softly, hesitant to allow the words to escape my mouth. I become more comfortable, allowing my irreparable voice box to squeak what little lyrics my memory salvaged of the Bob Marley song I had heard the night before. Finally, after a week on campus, I can sing in the shower. A suppressed chuckle makes its way from outside the stall. Immediately I stop, pitying whatever poor soul had to endure my paltry tribute to the Reggae legend. “Somebody call American Idol,” the voice mocks. I would be leaving the campus the following morning. Surely to the dismay of my one-man audience, I unloaded my broken version of the tune once more.

Now, I cannot sing--actually, I do sing, but it would be to disgrace anybody with actual talent to qualify it as that. No matter how hard I try or have tried, the extent of my musical ability is comparable to the stutter of a car before it starts: disjointed, erratic, and undesirable. Nonetheless, I had discovered my voice, just through a different outlet.

It was the week after I was cut from the Men’s Freshman choir: a truly ambitious endeavor that not even the most optimistic would have expected to come to fruition. Forced to scout another activity to occupy myself with, I found myself in front of a pair of judges for my debate team tryout, seemingly a cliche undertaking. (Become a debater, become the next president! Yeah, right.) But I soon fell in love, and developed an infatuation with public speaking. The exhilaration behind being able to manipulate the emotions of my audience--not by the melody or harmony of my voice, but through my ability to effectively articulate and present my ideas--was a foreign yet incomparable thrill. Learning to control and calculate my body language and tone to not only captivate and seize my listeners, but also to craft my content added an entirely new dimension to the way I communicated. No longer was I held to the standard of my dysfunctional larynx; I could alto as far as my ideas allowed me to go.

My love affair with the notion of public speaking expanded as I came to discover its extensions far beyond the debate circuit. Practicing diplomacy at regional conferences and learning to structure my arguments in the courtroom setting helped me further tailor my speaking abilities in a direction I hadn’t been previously exposed to. I soon took advantage of opportunities where I could hone these skills outside the academic realm, delving into the phone centers and door-to-door operations of a senate campaign.

It would still be a blatant lie to tell you I no longer sing. The consistent glares on long car rides, the irritated pleas, the shouts and violent knocks on the door as I belt out the latest hits in the shower serve as constant reminders of my lackluster ability to assemble anything relatively close to a rhythm. But it doesn’t matter--I’ve already found my voice.

# Showtime Anonymous

## Write an essay about an extracurricular activity

He brutally murdered his sister. Driving intoxicated in the waning hours of the night, he recklessly swerves in and out of lanes until he finally loses control and rams his car into a tree. Save for a few cuts and bruises, he escapes unscathed. His sister’s lifeless body is discovered the morning after the crime--or was it a crime? The light knock of the gavel summons the courtroom to its feet; parents, teachers, coaches, spectators and competitors all stand as the single hour that months were spent preparing for commences.

Having not placed in the regional tournament in a decade, Mock Trial was regarded as little more than a team just barely keeping its head above water, far past its glory years when I first joined the school’s organization. The volume of interest and attention it solicited had faded, as had the etchings on the dust plastered trophies. My admiration for the club stretched far beyond simply checking my name off as a member--being content with mediocrity would have no place as long as I was on the team. And so to prevent it from disappearing into oblivion, I began with myself, spending hours learning, polishing and perfecting the skills necessary to succeed. With this, not only did I grow tremendously as an individual and a competitor, but I also gained the respect and admiration of my teammates, earning a leadership role.

Revamping the way Mock Trial operated quickly became a full time job, from recruiting a second coach to coordinating scrimmages with other schools. Within a year, we were able to secure a spot in the top three of the regional tournament and lift the organization back into prominence; the interest in this season produced the largest pool of applicants in the team’s 30 year history. So when the trial starts, have no doubt that the top is the only place we aim. “Your honor, opposing counsel, and members of the jury….” Show time.

# A day in the Orchard Jiyeon Kang

## Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (150-400 words)

While all my extracurricular activities have helped me shape my values, there is one in particular I have enjoyed the most: picking tangerines from my grandmother's orchard. Picking tangerines was often to me simply a burden. I had to wake up at six every Saturday and drive fifty miles to help my grandmother reap good tangerines. On the whole ride I would think to myself: I would rather be reading poetry and ponder upon ways to change the world. As far as I was concerned, reaping tangerines was not going to help me do so. The orchard belonged to my grandmother, who to save money had to "hire" me and my mom. There was no wage; the only working benefit was being able to taste a few fresh tangerines for free. At age thirteen, such benefit was enough. At seventeen, I was not so sure if it was. Working at the orchard usually involved scratches, itching, worms, climbing up the ladder, getting hurt, and demanding, long hours of physical labor.

But as I worked through the years with tangerines, I began to recognize all the beauty my labor had. Everything in the orchard began telling their own stories. A tiny, pruned tree took pride in its small fruition, all the while a chunky tree demanded attention for its crooked children. Their offspring--tangerines--told by their taste who their trees were; some of them edgy, some of them warm, and some of them implicitly angry. Bugs would tell me which tree needs my help. No tree is without a hope. Within a few days of assistance, all the trees fought back those tiny enemies and always claimed victory. They became ever more proud, stronger, and complete. Enemies came back; but this time the trees didn't need my help. Some tangerines would go bad--in extreme cases would give up under negligence. We grieve. But we simply carry on. We learn to proceed more carefully, and we let go.

The orchard is for me a story of life--human life. It makes all the complications of our lives more simple, easier to grasp, and more available at my tongue, hands and feet. So as of right now, my Saturday is

# Music Anonymous

## Topic of your choice.

Another failed sports season passed: no hits, no touchdowns. I entered 6th grade with my dreams of becoming a jock squashed. Then my parents informed me that I was enrolling in band. Still clinging to my ESPN hopes, I warned my parents that taking band would be social suicide. In the end, I entered school with a new trumpet, expecting the worst.

Luckily, my prediction was wrong. Music transformed the way I understand myself and helped me understand the world.

As a teenage boy, I can naturally have a hard time expressing my emotions. Music helps me recognize my feelings and gives me an outlet for them. I remember the first time I played Holst’s “Planets Suite.” During the famous Jupiter ballad section, I felt a rush of indescribable vitality. I was initially intrigued by the mesmerizing strum of the harp, and then was lost in the powerful tone of the trumpet. I felt tension building and layers of depth adding up until the final release on a joyous open chord. I was surprised by my goosebumps and moist eyes. Music had released my bottled-up inspirations.

As I studied more, I came to value the connection between music and social change. Each is a tool that helps me better understand the other. For example, the 4th movement of Shostakovich’s “7th Symphony” starts with a mood of foreboding and fear, but suddenly transitions to a "happily ever after" ending. This shift was puzzling to me at first, but when I considered Shostakovich’s need to express the anguish and resilience of the Soviet people, combined with Stalin's strict monitoring of his music, I saw that the ending was fitting. Understanding history gives meaning to music, and understanding music makes history real for me.

Much as music has advanced from simple Gregorian chant to Mahler's complex, emotional compositions, I have evolved from a resistant student to a dedicated music aficionado. Music is for me a punching bag, a journal, and a teacher. Although I gave up my dreams of being a star athlete, I have gained a better reality as a musician.

# My Earthbound Path Anonymous

## With the understanding that the choice of academic school you indicated is not binding, explain why you are applying to that particular school of study.

The chirps of crickets in lush grass, the gurgling of a clear book on a warm summer day, and the eerie whistling of a north wind in the winter all impart to me a different understanding. Nature and the environment have been treasured subjects for me since the days of my youth, when I parked myself in front of the TV to watch marathons of “Amazing Animals”. As I approach the age at which I must choose a career path, I realize that my choice has always been made; I want to pursue the study of the environment, and of its interactions with mankind.

This summer I had an experience which even further affirmed my desire to major in environmental science. I had been chosen by my school to attend the Keystone Policy Summit in Colorado. The purpose of the Summit was for students from across the nation to convene to debate and draft legislation regarding the future of U.S. energy. I had been assigned a stakeholder to research beforehand and to then represent at the Summit, a group determined to ensure that coal was a player in the future of U.S. energy. I was one of a small handful of students given such a “non-green” stakeholder. Over the course of the week, I argued for research funding, tax breaks, and lenient standards for coal companies – ironic, as I considered myself an enemy of any particulate-emitting energy source in the universe! I met stiff opposition from “green” stakeholder-representing students, who argued vociferously against my ideas. The debates escalated in intensity, but I was impressed by the novelty and variety of the ideas proposed. The Summit taught me that while there is no one right way to solve the energy problems we face, the most important tools we have are open minds.

Such energy issues are at the forefront of our principal environmental problems. I consider the environmental issues that plague us, and then I consider what I can do about them. I must know the answers. And that is why I wish to attend the College or Arts and Sciences, as an Environmental Sciences major. It is my earthbound path, as I call it, and hopefully it is a path that I can pursue to great heights.

# Hooked on Teaching Rebekka Anne Strom

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Vanderbilt's Opportunities for my Personal GrowthSamuel Tao

## While each student will eventually select at least one area of concentrated study, the College of Arts and Science is committed to introducing every student to a broad range of subjects. Which academic interests and/or passions might be a part of your academic journey at Vanderbilt and why? Please limit your response to 500 words.

In the crowded waiting room of a medical facility, the tension was palpable. The few doctors rushed around, overwhelmed by the number of sick children. The kids’ cries and screams filled the air, while mothers competed for the staff’s attention. The saddest part of this story is that this facility was located not in a developing country, but in a working-class South Florida neighborhood.

This image has been imprinted into my mind, as if it were inscribed in stone. Healthcare is a vital component of our livelihoods, yet, miles from my house, too few doctors and too many overcrowded clinics have undermined our liberty to obtain health care. Cornelius Vanderbilt stated: “I have always served the public to the best of my ability. Why? Because, like every other man, it is to my interest to do so.” Having seen the state of urgency of our health care system, I’ve committed myself to become a physician to provide healthcare and help to contribute to alleviating the human bottleneck pervasive in many clinics.

Conventionally, students like me pursuing a career in medicine ambitiously seek to study biomedical engineering, molecular biology, or chemistry. Science courses become compasses to course selection. Vanderbilt, however, offers an interdisciplinary Medicine Health and Society (MHS) degree, which focuses on the scientific backgrounds crucial to medicine, yet at the same time can foster a comprehensive offering of other subjects, preparing me for the demands of the workplace and supplementing my education with more diverse disciplines. Unlike conventional majors that provide “tunnel” learning and focus exclusively on science or health, this track draws inspiration from a variety of courses and fields from Social Sciences, Medicine, Health Economics, and Global Health. I don’t want my passion for medicine to limit me to studies in one concentration; rather, during my time at Vanderbilt, I want to be exposed to a motley of disciplines and subjects that will greatly improve my college experience.

MHS has a rewarding study abroad program in Cape Town that will help me further see the state of medical care in a foreign country, and will allow me to gain experience in international medical care. My interest in geography coincides with the program. I will obtain experience of serving some of Cape Town’s most disadvantaged communities while seeing health care from the perspective of a city burdened by mass inequality. Being a doctor consists of more than just science or anatomy courses. To fully understand the objectives and purpose of the occupation, one must understand the socioeconomic and political factors that affect the patients and the entire industry. This opportunity provides me with the tools to unlock my future career.

A physician with the MHS background will understand the system better and serve the community more efficiently and effectively. MHS gives me a context to pursue my goal of becoming a doctor, as I learn ever more about the importance of my career and the impact it has on the community.

# First, Sketchbook Anonymous

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

I gasped when I peeked into Christine’s sketchbook, a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors and eye-popping characters. Hoping to see more of her drawings, I eagerly tried to befriend her. Although Christine covered her sketchbook at first, she slowly let her guard down and opened it.

As we became closer, we would sit at our circular table in the cafeteria and talk about our common interests: drawing and social justice. Passionately identifying the micro-aggressions around us, she often asked for my view. I felt naturally indignant about those injustices, yet too shy and immature to express my opinion. Frustrated, I joined the speech and debate team to keep up with Christine. I competed as an expository orator to better articulate my ideas and a Lincoln-Douglas debater to polish my arguments.

Heavily involved in debate, I spent less time at our circular table with Christine. Although we were still friends, I only heard snippets of her life. So when I heard about her decision to forgo college, I was astonished. Knowing her potential, I was convinced that without a degree, her artistic talent would go unseen in this materialistic world. I needed her to go to college. I returned to the circular table. Surprised, Christine immediately introduced me to her post-graduation plan of working on her web-comic. She reached for her sketchbook, only to gasp when I shoved it aside. Understanding both Lincoln-Douglas and her character well, I bombarded her with preemptive arguments regarding the importance of college.

Had there been a judge sitting in front of me, no doubt that I would have won this debate; except there were no ballots, only a girl who cowered back to clutch her sketchbook.

Indulging in the echoes of my eloquence and naively expecting a token of appreciation, I barely noticed when Christine took her sketchbook and left without a word. Since then, she has scarcely updated her art blog or talked to me. I couldn’t believe that what she pushed me into, debate, was the very thing that pushed her away from me. But how? After all, everything I said was in her best interests… Or was it? I tried to apologize, but I was the inarticulate one this time. Even now, her sketchbook remained closed to me.

Debate had taught me that there was little to fear if my message was clear and selfless. But communications were not like debates. Under a condescending assumption, I arbitrarily told Christine how to live her life. In fact, I hardly listened to her feelings because I was too busy feeding my voracious ego and arguing for the satisfaction of arguing, instead of for Christine’s future. Ignoring her feelings, I misinterpreted debate as a panacea to communicate with a dear friend.

Now, sitting at our empty circular table, I regret not listening. I hope to never lose friends like that again. Since then, I have switched my style from attack to exchange in Lincoln-Douglas debate. I felt calmer and more confident once I stopped worrying about not being the skilled one. As a result, I found fresher perspectives of the subject-matter and articulated my ideas clearer.

I used to enjoy showing off my clever yet impractical methods to the students I tutored. Now I try to withhold judgement, patiently observe how they approach the problems, and then kindly point out potential mistakes. We currently work together to correct fundamental misconceptions we originally overlooked.

What my stressed out friends need most is not a bombastic preacher, but a firm shoulder to lean on. So, when they come for consolation, instead of forcing my opinions on them, I appreciate their trust and respond with unconditional positive regard while listening.

Now, I would prefer to be kind rather than right in communications. Unlike speech and debate, my aptitude for speech is useless until I looked at other people’s sketchbook first.

# Unclouded Eyes Wendy Zhang

## 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?

"My six year old could do that," a woman behind me remarks. I feel a twinge of irritation, but I don't blame her; a few years ago, I would’ve agreed. To the average eye, Grace Hartigan's work of Abstract Expressionism, The Gallow Ball, appears to be a splotchy mess of dripping colors.

I grew up belittling the work of world-renowned contemporary artists, baffled at their lofty prices. I believed that art should be beautiful or meaningful, and never understood how indecipherable images fit either description. Creating abstract art myself was out of the question—until last year, when a painting caught my eye as I was browsing online for inspiration for my AP Art portfolio. It was a painting that I normally would've dismissed as child's work, but the longer I looked at it, the more captivated I became. I marveled at how a simple composition could evoke such strong emotions within me, and yearned to create something that could affect others as much as this painting had affected me.

My first attempt was acrylic on canvas. I did my research—spent days studying paintings and reading about the history, practice, and techniques of modern art. As I dipped my brush in paint and raised it to the canvas, I tried to imitate the techniques that I'd seen. Neither the process nor the result was enjoyable; I struggled constantly, and my product was a hot mess that lacked direction. Two hours and several canvases later, I bitterly vowed to never pick up a brush again.

The brush was back in my hand within an hour. I’d judged abstract artists for the seemingly minimal thought and effort that they put into their work, but now I’d learned the hard way that creating abstract art isn’t as simple as it seems. This time, instead of letting preconceived ideals limit me, I let my emotions take over. When I finally stepped back from the easel, I felt a sense of satisfaction. My work was far from a masterpiece, but I knew that the experience was a success because I’d learned about both art and myself. I'd always thought of myself as adventurous and open-minded for my love of traveling and trying new foods, and with art, I'd enjoyed experimenting with different mediums and styles. But I realized that everything I’d tried was within my comfort zone, and that there's more to being open-minded than merely doing new things. True acceptance comes from the genuine desire to learn and understand.

Today, Contemporary Art Daily is one of my most visited sites, and I make a beeline for the modern exhibitions at art museums. Art is no longer confined to my original ideals of representational beauty. Although I still can't claim to be a master of abstract art, I am a much more receptive person than I was before. I can now visit any contemporary art museum and thoughtfully stroke my chin while discussing work with critics. But even further, I can meet strangers with different backgrounds and perspectives and not only get to know them, but consider why they think as they do. My initial failure to appreciate abstract art taught me not to judge before I attempt to understand, and to respect even what I may never understand.

Now, as I stand in my local art museum, I fully appreciate The Gallow Ball. That lady may have seen a meaningless mess of colors, but I see lively movement and energy portrayed through bold brushstrokes backed with emotion. I see the details and layering as I clearly distinguish Hartigan's techniques in each deliberate mark. Now I see through unclouded eyes.

# No, I Don't Speak Mandarin Anonymous

## What does culture mean to you?

“You know how in Chinese, the first character for swan…”

“No.”

Stop right there. I do not know anything about the characters for swan. Turning to my classmate, I repeat the phrase for the hundredth time in my life: “See… I don’t speak Chinese.”

Starting when I was young, it’s always been a sore spot; I was the child of two Chinese immigrants, yet my vocabulary in Mandarin was limited to “Hello”, “Want” and “Refrigerator.” Worse, I felt like the only one with this deficiency; anytime I visited a Chinese friend’s house, I couldn’t understand many of the conversations, leaving me feeling awkward and clueless. Sure, our family celebrated Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival, but outside of that, I felt that the culture was at least a linguistic ocean away. I regretted that my parents had never taught me the language, feeling that I didn’t fully fit in as Chinese. So where did I fit in?

“No, I don’t speak Chinese,” yet it also felt like I’d missed some lessons on American culture. Cultural osmosis had given me a vague idea of what things were “supposed” to be like, but both my parents and I were clueless about the specifics; I still hadn’t found my place. It didn’t help that by the time I was ten, I’d moved twice, placing me in an unfamiliar environment where friendships and peer groups had already been solidified with time. The one thing that did help was my propensity for passion, or something like it. This let me find a shared environment in middle school, befriending others with similar interests through math team and Lego robotics competitions; I made a few friends who matched, or even exceeded my enthusiasm. Yet, it was short of critical mass; it didn’t feel like a team, a community. Perhaps two or three of us could bond over the excitement of solving competition math problems or building a robot, but at the middle school level, there was too much variation in commitment, in intensity.

“No, I don’t speak Chinese,” but who else cares? At Mathcamp, the only other language that matters is that of equations and symbols—of logic and problem solving. Though I probably heard fellow students speak more Mandarin than I would in school, I might as well have felt “No, I don’t speak Klingon.” It was here, amongst games of bughouse at midnight, commutative diagrams, and Klein-bottle hats that I found what I was searching for. I had never before met so many peers with the same unbridled passion, and it felt wonderful—to be part of a union of like minds echoing off one another, finding solace in similar things. I saw passion as the key, the unifying factor.

I took this attitude with me to high school, and even when I moved across the country, I never again worried about where I belonged. After all, I am easily ignited. Certainly in math, but also in theater, in Academic Decathlon, or in computer science, my enthusiasm makes me burn with fire. And between 12-hour rehearsals or cramming material on the plane to AD Nationals, I knew that there are others who feel the same—those willing to throw all their energy at something, because that’s just how much they love it.

“No, I don’t speak Chinese,” but I don’t care any more. I may miss out on conversations and be clueless about characters, but many of my friends that understand Mandarin will never know the joy of singing show tunes at midnight after a successful show. And most friends I made in theater won’t understand the mathematician’s sorrow when restaurant napkins are too small to solve problems on. So I will go forwards, allowing my zeal for any and every activity I do to lead me to others. For it’s when I’m contributing to a community of similarly passionate people that I feel most at home.

# Always Dancing Anonymous

## Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences. (150-400 words)

Blazing lights appear suspended above the stage, like shimmering fireflies in the night caught in midflight. I hear the nervous chatter of my friends around me as we all try to peek out from behind the heavy wings that separate us from the audience, stubby little fingers tugging eagerly at the edges of the soft fabric. My pink ballet slippers are too big for my tiny feet, and I impatiently wiggle my toes underneath the scratchy material as I wait for the performance to begin. After what feels like an eternity, the red velvet curtains glide smoothly across the sea of shining black marley, and I excitedly stomp out. The memory of stepping onto a stage for the first time has been etched into my mind: Five year old me, a midget who was completely clueless and always hopelessly lost, could not keep an enormous smile from spreading across her face the entire night after the performance despite forgetting almost all the choreography on stage.

As years passed, I became more aware of the fact that the world of the age old art of ballet is not a fair one. The long legs, arched feet, flat knees, and slim bodies were all characteristics of the prima ballerina that I did not have. At the beginning, I became increasing frustrated by the factors I could not change, and at times, I lost sight of the true reason I always came back to that studio dressed in those pink tights and black leotard - I love to share what I love to do. Dance has allowed me to perform all across the world, from Radio City Music Hall to Hunan, China, but the true transportation occurs in the story of the dance, whether I am transported into the tragic world of Giselle or the comedic world of Coppelia. I have faced my trials and tribulations in dance, but that has only made the passion for the art stronger, a seed watered by a determination to succeed despite the odds and by a desire to pursue and share an art form I love.