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**Sample essays 2023**

**Princeton University**

**Love of Photography Anonymous**

**If you had the time and resources to perfect one skill, what would it be?**

Ever since I opened a National Geographic magazine to a five-page article on the Congo basin, I've cherished a secret desire to be a National Geographic photographer. I've always been fascinated by ecological biology, and I would love to learn about the symbiotic relationship between ants and acacia trees or the tool-making techniques of chimpanzees while taking amazing photographs. A great deal of the allure that National Geographic photography holds for me stems from the fact that it combines sheer beauty and exoticism with ecology, history, and travelling--some of my favorite things. Traveling around the globe, taking stunning pictures, learning about social history and animal behavior and experiencing different cultures is my idea of the perfect pursuit.

Unfortunately, to be a photographer one must actually be adept with a camera. Apart from taking the average stand-in-front-of-this-waterfall-and-smile picture, I have no experience in the field of photography. Given the time and resources to perfect my skills, however, I would love to have the opportunity to capture images of Scottish castles at dawn and rare Nepalese honey hunters, all the while learning about the subject I was photographing and experiencing the ambiance of a different country. The excitement of reveling in a new culture, a new language, a new food almost every day, whether it be in Venice or in Rwanda, is especially alluring to me because my driving goal in life is to have a career that will actually make me look forward to Monday mornings. After all, what could be more exciting than attending voodoo ceremonies in Togo or fending off alligators with a paddle while waiting for the light to change?

**The Personality of a Middle Child Kaitlin Renaud**

**Tell us about yourself in such a way that we will have a good sense of who you are.**

I was born May 10, 1987, the third child in my family. I enjoyed the title of "the youngest" for exactly 754 days (and 3 hours) until I lost the coveted title on June 2, 1989 when my brother and sister were born. I now hold the often-detested appellation of "the middle child," wedged between my two older siblings and my two younger siblings. This position, however, has positively molded my personality into what it is today. Largely as a result of being born in the middle of a large family, I have become a competitive yet compassionate overachiever.

Growing up, the children outnumbered the adults five to two. As a result, I often had to battle with my siblings to get my parents' attention. In my young mind, I felt attention had to be earned by doing better than my siblings. This competitive spirit sometimes manifested itself in unusual ways. For example, when I was just four years old, my older sister Jill and I began an inane two-year-long contest over who had longer hair. We both refused to cut our hair for two years, until finally she chopped off six inches of her locks, thus ending the ridiculous feud. My sister, refusing to lose gracefully, now gloated, "Ha! My hair is shorter than yours!" Looking back, this small competition had little immediate consequence, yet it illustrated the beginning of my competitive nature.

Today, I am still the same competitive person I was thirteen years ago. When I go to Math League competitions, my goal is to beat students from other schools as well as my own teammates. However, I am not competitive in the sense that I want those around me to fail. If, after a Math League test, one of my teammates does not understand a concept that I do, I will gladly teach it to them. In doing so, I am making my competitors stronger and therefore more difficult to defeat in the future. Nevertheless, I feel that it would be unfair of me to sit and watch them repeatedly make the same mistakes. This compassion for others is another facet of my personality that is a byproduct of my position within my family.

As the middle child, I hold the role of not only the competitive younger sister but also of the compassionate older sister. While we were growing up, my older siblings often asserted their superiority by teasing me. Knowing how such treatment feels, I have tried to shield my younger brother and sister from my older siblings' wrath, and I have avoided treating them the way I was treated. The compassion that came from this experience has carried through to other aspects of my life, including my approach to competition. Thus, while my competitiveness has allowed me to excel by pushing me to do well, my compassion has tempered what could have become an obnoxious personality trait.

**Perfect Roommate Anonymous**

**Describe your perfect roommate.**

Of course, the preliminary criteria for a roommate is someone who won't leave half-eaten food and wadded-up paper and underwear all over the floor, who won't blast AC/DC at 2 a.m. and who won't invite her new boyfriend over to spend the night. But more importantly, I would love to have a roommate who is somehow un-averageenergetic and unconventional and passionate about her work. Maybe she would be a budding artist, and plaster the walls with her drawings so that contorted faces and dark still lifes and Picasso-esque figures stare down at me while I write my English paper. Or, she might be a neurobiology major and read me long passages out of The Functional Neuroanatomy of Man while I'm brushing my teeth in the morning. She would hang potted wisteria from the ceilings and prefer Edgar Allen Poe to Lord Byron; she would read Nabokov sitting on the floor.

In addition to being spirited, my perfect roommate would also be from a different cultural or religious background. Some of my best friends are Indian, Italian, and Polish, Hindu, Catholic, and Jewish, and together we have had some of the most interesting conversations about our families' different traditions--and some of the most spirited debates about God--that I have ever had. She would be actively involved enough in her cultural heritage to be able to inform me about it, and she would have a strong backbone and strong convictions so that she could argue with me about religious theology.

In other words, the perfect roommate for me would have to be a dynamic, intelligent, opinionated person from a different background with different interests who would be an all-around fascinating person to live with.

**My Existentialism Anonymous**

**Discuss a book or academic subject which has aroused your interest in the past year.**

My French teacher, a die-hard fan of existentialism, assigned Camus' L'etranger last year. I went into the book apprehensively, but came out enthralled. It was not the story linea man condemned for refusing to live by society's rules--nor the dark existentialist mantra that "life is meaningless" which left such an impression on me, but instead the lighter message which I found hidden between the lines: the notion that one should rejoice in life for life itself. Although Camus did believe that life is without meaning, he also stressed the importance of life's redeeming qualities (such as friendship and the beauty of nature) as the things which make happiness possible and life worth living.

My teacher drew a useful analogy to explain Camus' philosophy on enjoying life: he compared Meursault, the main character in L'etranger, to Sisyphus in Jean-Paul Sartre's essay, The Myth of Sisyphus. Sartre's essay, which relates the "revolt" of a man who suffers from a pointless existence, parallels the struggles of Meursault and, accordingly, all of humankind. It is a twist on the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the mortal who displeased the gods and as a consequence was condemned to eternally roll a stone up a hill and then run after it as it rolled back down. Sisyphus' senseless life sounds miserable, but Sartre claims that "il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux"one must think of Sisyphus as happy. This is only possible if Sisyphus (and every other human being) chooses to embrace life despite its seemingly senseless nature. By doing this, he is free and even the gods have failed to punish him.

Whenever I am bogged down by a an analysis of Hamlet or ten-page biology lab--due the next day--and start to wonder if life really is as bad as the existentialists make it out to be, I remember that life really is what one makes of it. I could either be the Sisyphus who is shackled to his never-ending task in Hell, or I could be Sartre's Sisyphus, who takes pleasure in life for life itself: the choice is mine.

**The Value of Community Anonymous**

**Pick two things in an application on which you would place the most importance if you were an admission officer for Princeton.**

In my opinion, something which should be given a lot of weight in an application is the student's involvement in his or her community, whether it is in school or outside of school. Being involved in the community encompasses many things, from being a member of the school's newspaper staff to participating in the local outreach program to disadvantaged communities. A student who has been actively involved in the community during high school has a good chance of becoming a contributing member of society both during college and after graduating. To me, this is important because I believe that the ultimate goal of a higher education is to give back to society in some way, whether it is using one's education to become a research scientist and strive for the cure for cancer, or becoming a professor and helping enrich the minds of future generations.

For me, perhaps the most important factor which determines whether or not a student is suitable for a college cannot be found in either transcripts or standardized test scores but is actually within the student: his or her attitude toward learning. Someone who regards learning as a chore, a necessary evil required to get good grades and maintain a 4.0, will not truly profit from a challenging college. College should be an exhilarating experience which opens up new ways of thinking and provides fertilizer to fecund minds; the reason behind going to a prestigious college should not be to get a high-paying job later or to be able to brag to one's friends. Someone who possesses an actual love of learning, who finds learning stimulating and at times even epiphanal, will not only be able to take advantage of the diverse opportunities offered in college but will also enjoy the experience.

**From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The Lurid Confessions of a Member of Teeny Bopper Anonymous Janet Rosenbaum**

**Write on a topic of your choice.**

From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The lurid confessions of a member of Teeny-Bopper Anonymous

Wow. Wasn't I cool? Since this picture was taken, everything outside of myself - my appearance, my surroundings, even my superficial attitudes about life - has undergone a complete revolution. Contrasting me with that girl in the picture would be like comparing this picture with its negative; everything in this picture is now reversed, inside out.

Life started out fairly easy. Before middle school, I did what I wanted to do without regrets. If my friends wanted to do the same, company would be nice; if not, I would have just as much fun alone. Middle school changed things. Suddenly group dynamics became almost political, and social esteem, not self-esteem, became the key to happiness. Seventh grade, the time when this picture was taken, was the peak of social pressure in my life.

This picture epitomizes all of the elements that society had labelled as "important" for my peers and me, yet it also belies them through subtle clues.

For example, while I exude quite smugly what I think is maturity, the menagerie of stuffed animals and the "cutesy" picture of kittens are reminders of my immaturity.

The picture also reveals the things about myself that I'd thought were hidden away; my veneer of anti-intellectualism is belied by the often-used bookshelf and world map behind me. If I truly believed what I preached, my bookshelf would be tidy from disuse and pictures of some cretin teeny-bopper would adorn my wall.

Why do social pressures transform otherwise intelligent, creative children into lemmings? These influences to conform transcend the mere pressure of peers; they come from society as a whole. The media portray "teens" with a uniform image that tells them the way they "should" be.

A young consumer of modern entertainment (TV, movies, recent books) comes to think of the most prevalent image of "teens" as the norm.

The roles of young women in American culture are even narrower, as delineated by the following three tenets:

1. You must be trendy. Following current styles and fads is mandatory.

Additionally, the timeless rules still apply: make-up must be worn and legs must be shaven. (A careful observer might note that I am wearing blue (!) eye-shadow and blush and sport a few trendy styles: a hat, curled hair, and a T-shirt replete with pithy sayings.)

2. You must keep abreast of current events, not in the world abroad, but in your own parochial world. If you do not know in advance what everyone is wearing on Friday night or who is talking with whom, you are doomed to live alone eternally with only 13 cats for companionship.

3. Adults aren't cool. Always scowl in their presence. I was so convinced that I was living the ideal "teen" life that I had no time to think about things of true importance. Although I did homework, and did it well, I looked at school assignments as another chore to be done; I may as well tell them what they want to hear and get it over with, instead of actually thinking.

Thus, any intellectual activity that I engaged in did not permeate my consciousness. My journal from seventh grade is a continuous recitation of rumors, speculation, and other excerpts from the rather dull soap opera of seventh grade social life: proof that nothing besides this rather large mass of intellectual Spam squooshed around in my trendy blonde head for very long.

But then things changed: the advent of New Kids on the Block in eighth grade cleared this banality from my life. New Kids on the Block was an untalented group of kids assembled by a music producer for the express purpose of making money. Not only did I dare to be the only girl in my grade who didn't like them, I dared to despise them. I listened to my music and figured that matters of taste really shouldn't matter to my friends.

Wrong! Not only was I isolated from the stimulating debates about which one was cutest, but the giggles I unsuccessfully attempted to stifle certainly didn't add to my popularity. At the time, this isolation upset me greatly, but not enough to make me conform. The social vacuum in my life was replaced by ideas: books, newspapers, schoolwork, and in-class debates on subjects ranging from legalizing drugs to literature.

I summarized my feelings in my journal on November 29, 1989 when I wrote, "Let them laugh! I'd rather be an original nerd than a conformist follower."

So it was that a little less than a year after this picture was taken, its negative became closer to the truth; prominent lemming-like qualities faded into the shadows while hints of originality and intellect, previously buried in darkness, became illuminated.

**A Life's Fable From a Small Memory Stick Thomas Chen**

**If you believe that there is some fact, experience, talent, thought, or quality that didn't fit into our application but which you'd like us to take into consideration, let us know about it here.**

Recently, a seemingly small, insignificant memory stick changed my attitudes about the world and myself. The power of this small device was unleashed; all my aspirations for college were stored on the memory drive, but due to a moment's lapse, the device was stolen and my hard work vanished. Instead of wallowing and dwelling on the devastation and feeling despondent forever, I decided to review the problem and my situation at hand, and standing up, faced life again.

The memory stick was my lifeline for over a year it housed my college essays, my college plan calendar, my resume, my senior project research paper, my biology paper, and as the school webmaster, vital HTML codes. All of the stolen items reflected countless hours of my time, effort and dedication. Initially, I was devastated by the loss. I could not believe the fact that I was so outrageously careless, to the point of leaving my most prized possession and, in turn, myself vulnerable. This personal devastation acquired new dimensions when a cascade of depressing thoughts flooded through my head thoughts regarding the viciousness of the society, and the potential for violent, avaricious human nature. I felt a sense of betrayal due to this theft. I could not understand how society could produce someone so heartless in nature, because I could never conceive of taking anything that belonged to another person. For me, the guilt involved would be unbearablee.

While dwelling on the negative impacts of the loss, I realized that my reaction to this incident could mark my passage into adulthood. If I wailed like a child, the resolution of this problem would elude me, and my 12 years of college aspirations would vanish. The memory stick would be forever in someone else's hand, and all my months of hard work would be lost. But I had a vital choice to make either feeling depressed and discouraged forever, or learning to become a more mature problem solver. I chose the latter, and summoned the courage to rewrite the college essays and makeup the lost work.

The human heart, as W.F. Wright remarks, is "the larger darkness, a darkness in which lies the potential for evil and for good." The loss of this memory stick tested my emotional maturity, and it had lasting impacts for me both philosophically and practically. I used this significant personal experience to write a letter to the editor in the school newspaper. As a victim of the human's heart of darkness, I encouraged everyone to make the right choices, the choice that will bring out the good side of human heart, the choice that will celebrate virtue over vice, friendship over selfishness. Most importantly, I finally understood the importance of taking care of myself and thinking about myself not as a robotic perfectionist, but as a human being. I'm not and will not be perfect, and my life will be marked by periodic reprehensible mistakes and disappointments. The key is to let the sorrow pass and to learn from the mistake and, in this case, I learned first-hand the golden importance of backing up computer files in multiple places. Backing up is no more a boring rhetoric teachers and parents use to scare students. I know that this little lesson, albeit a harsh one, has changed me forever.

**Echoes Natalia Martinez**

**Please briefly tell us about yourself.**

I may seem to be a little bit unexpected, a tad too brash because I'm frequently rushing from one place to another, one meeting to the next, one errand to a physics lab: a windmill of both activity and laugher. However, if it seems slightly perplexing to my peers that my energy is miraculously replenished every morning, it is because such exaggerated myths are all but true; there is energy and excitement in my life not only because I wake up to a room painted in an inspiriting hue of yellow, but because I believe it is essential to enjoy what one does to do it well, with all the possible effort and passion and with little mediocrity. The human condition may need quantitative and qualitative analysis, charts of joyful days, graphs of heartbreaks, and bell curves of daily complexity, but I insist that the true power of measurement is our daily and constant effort what we bring to life.

Of relatively long auburn hair, average height, a love of running, a candid and talkative nature, and a well-known penchant for both cheese and chocolate- not particularly exceptional attributes- I would like to represent myself as an individual rather than as a look into the life of a busy teenager. Realistically though, there is no room now for a comprehensive list of my interests and likings, so I will talk about only some of them. For one, I have an eclectic music taste, one that my father has helped mold by motivating me to look into music that is somewhat atypical for my age bracket. A trip through my CD case might lead to unexpected, yet somehow coexistent, findings: Etta James, John Lee Hooker, Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, some Omara Portuondo, Celia Cruz, Ruben Gonzalez, accompanied by a flavor of Diana Krall, Norah Jones, Karrin Allyson, and topped off by a hint of Dave Matthews, Maroon 5, Barenaked Ladies, Santana, Jason Mraz, Sade, and Alicia Keys.

I also enjoy viewing and learning about art, mostly paintings whose masters are the French Impressionists, the Pre-Raphaelites, and later painters such as Kahlo, Dali, Picasso, and Miro. Not much of an artist myself however (I can manage to sketch female faces with charcoal and not much else), I've always sought expression in writing. Seemingly apropos therefore is my continued enjoyment of reading- from Borges to Cather, Bunin to Irving- as well as my thirst for traveling to the furthest reaches of the world: Spain, Greece, China. Presently however, I wake up to a daily-replenished schedule, to the same hustle and bustle of many of my peers, but as excited about each dawn as one could possibly be. And so I guess it's through our creative lenses that we can really own a personal version of the world's treasures and gather the only wealth that can truly be defined as human an acceptance of the ineffable interdependence between hope, hardship, joy, pain, and survival.

**From Clashes to Wisdom Natalia Martinez**

**Tell us about a person who has affected your life in a significant way.**

I graduated in 2000 from Rockway Middle School, at the time a "C+" crowded public school struggling to improve its programs; to the surprise of some, I did so having had the honor of being taught by several excellent teachers. They may not have been the most eloquent, or even the most knowledgeable in their field, but over the course of three years, two of them blessed me with awareness and empowered me with lessons I am not likely to forget. One of them, Mrs. Mozzarella, a somewhat elderly American woman, handled history classes full of frequently rowdy Miami children with not only poise and kindness, but also the ever-growing desire to further our moral and intellectual development. When I first met her, I was a recent immigrant an overwhelmed, confused child really and she undertook both the practical expansion of my vocabulary and knowledge, and the more complex encouragement of an impressionable and striving mind.

Immersed in stories about John Brown, videos on Ganeesh, reports of the latest earthquake in Turkey, I easily swallowed the information she gave me, for she delivered it with care; an amalgam of cultures myself, I marveled at the universality of feeling, of expression, of life in her lessons. The treasures she instilled in me are both beautiful and powerful: tolerance, awareness, hope.

She taught my fellow students and me - and I have yet to understand how - to find within ourselves the desire and motivation to express our goals and most importantly, to have no fear in doing so. My puerile hand chose to write, and, even when she faced 8 x 11 inches of grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and rambling sentences, she was the first to express the belief that I could develop into a writer. And in fact, there is now little that I enjoy as much as written expression, whether it be through poetry, class assignments, or a short story I've been working on for almost two years. I've thanked her on numerous occasions for believing in the young, unsure me, for joking that a Nobel Prize is attainable, for showing me the power hidden in hope, and the effectiveness of compassion, forgiveness, and honesty in touching other human beings.

She pushed us all to find a life and follow it, any life, every life, any dream, to question as we saw fit, to never forget that our potential was limitless, and that we have the power to strive for the unattainable. She pushed me to realize that existence should not disintegrate to complete monotony, and that an awareness of the outside world, its events, joys, and calamities, is essential. I loved learning in a classroom where even the walls were beacons of information and color, and now I enjoy learning about everyone else, learning about myself.

**In Hope Natalia Martinez**

**If you were given a year to spend in any way you wish, what would you do?**

To be given a year to spend as one chooses is clearly an unreasonable expectation, but for the sake of hypothetical situations I would say that I would spend that time around Russia's monasteries, helping rebuild those that a rise in awareness is reconstructing from the dirty and broken ruins of a Soviet epoch that, for example, even came to use some of Russia's churches as warehouses. And so now, across the nation, churches, monasteries, chapels are being shaken by the hands and warmed by the breaths of clergymen and common folk alike, communally rebuilding both a physical structure and their faith.

There was a day this past summer while I was staying with my grandfather in the Russian town of Lesnoy that I traveled with my mom to visit the female monastery at Jotkov. It was founded at the beginning of the 14th century, but in 1932 the government proceeded to strip the central church of all its marble and silver fixtures, and turned the grounds into a tractor repair shop. The cemetery was destroyed, the bell tower torn down, and the ruins slowly overgrew with bushes from within. Only in 1992 did the monastery begin slowly coming to life and functioning again.

Surprisingly, most of the reconstruction, including the painting, some of the woodwork, the furnishing, and even some of the building, is done by the nuns themselves. These women also farm large pastures, harvest crops from their orchards, fish in the nearby river, take care of their livestock, and package hay, in addition to running a convent, a church, an icon workshop, an orphanage, and managing to remain an incredibly isolated community.

Monasteries across the nation have also taken to welcoming pilgrims who wish to help for a week, a month, even a year. A friend's father chose to volunteer for a week in a small, rural monastery in central Russia, and returned recommending the trip as an unparalleled spiritual experience. He also warned that, because the physical work is arduous, and the food strictly follows fasting cycles, one must undergo a mental and emotional preparation for the efforts such an undertaking requires.

Given the chance, I would choose spend a year staying at monasteries that need hands for gardening, painting, etc. The goal would be to do more than just wake up early, attend morning mass, and leave for a day of physical labor, though that would certainly be the daily routine; I'd wish to test my physical and spiritual strength, to widen my perspective of religion, of life, to become a part of the monastery way of life their efforts, their work, their hope.

Such an existence, carried out in harmony with nature, God, and the unaffected rhythms of life seems difficult indeed, but rewarding and purposeful for those seeking to both help and discover. It is when we allow the meaningless, trivial things to glide away, when we stop the yearning, the longing for that which we think is missing, that we allow ourselves a glimpse into the truths of our existence.

**Lessons In a New Tongue Natalia Martinez**

**Describe the accomplishment that has given you the greatest satisfaction to this point in your life.**

When my family decided to move to the United States I was ten years old and thought little more of it other than to regret that I'd be leaving a city that I loved, a school I enjoyed attending, and the friends I'd acquired over four years. Because I had been learning some English for almost two years, I instantly assumed that the language wouldn't be much of a barrier. But, come September 1996 when I placed out of the ISOL program at our local elementary school and walked into a class of English-speaking children, I was nowhere near excited. At times, when explaining nowadays to inquiring people the sensation that hit me, I recount a funny anecdotal experience from one of the first weeks of class. It was time to see who could qualify for the Spelling Bee! So we all took out a sheet of paper, numbered it, and prepared to write the words that were to be read aloud. Interestingly enough, out of maybe twenty-five words, I knew how to write less than half. Clearly, there was no spelling bee for Natalia.

However, having always had an avid interest in reading, I took it up once more as a possible solution to my current dilemma. One of the first books I read in English is one I surprisingly found myself reading, in the non abridged version of course, just this past year in my English and Literature class: Pride and Prejudice. As I expected, though the general concepts and actions did not escape me, plenty of the words eluded my understanding, and so I began to circle them lightly in pencil and make lists of definitions after looking them up in a dictionary. It wasn't really as grueling and as arduous a task as it may seem however, for I enjoyed not only the filling up of previously vacant niches in my mind, but also seeing the similarities some of the words had to Spanish and Russian words I already knew. My English teacher also assigned thorough reading journals for each book we read for the class, and in November, enveloped in stories and concepts I was understanding with slowly-growing ease, I joined some of my classmates in the Gifted Program, where we delved into Tuck Everlasting with the help of our teacher Dr. Locke.

As hyperbolic as it may seem, I attribute my cumulative understanding of English, grammar and all, to those first initial efforts, those childlike attempts to grasp a language that had been relatively foreign to me at the time, and I am thankful to my family for motivating me to pursue reading.

**Mr. Kassebeer Anonymous**

**Tell us about a person who has affected your life in a significant way.**

I only have to close my eyes to see this picture before me: A tall, old man standing in the middle of a semicircle of tired faces, grandiosely waving his endless arms as though he were swimming through the music. At five o'clock Friday afternoon, when the rest of us are exhausted by a long week of arduous learning, Udo Kassebeer is at his lovable best. The sun opposite me shines on the violins and cellos and silhouettes his aristocratic nose, shaggy brows and frizzy hair against the window pane and the afternoon sky.

"Sing through your instruments!" he says. Then he stomps and wiggles, bellows and whispers, puts his fingers to his chin as if in prayer and opens his blue eyes so wide they seem to leap out directly into mine, to discover that mine are closed. I am nodding asleep to the march of rhythms. But not for long. He goes through every conceivable contortion and exertion to energize our thirty sleepy faces. It is as if his wild gestures could conduct electricity as well as music through the drowsy air into the sounds of our instruments.

Every once in a while he shouts to us: "Sit straight, shoulders to the back. You look twice as beautiful this way!" Then he reverts to Prussian discipline: "If not every person practices three times as hard, I will cancel all concerts." He is exacting: we must get eight hours of sleep, be prompt, attentive, and even think about the pieces in our dreams. This is the law according to Kassebeer.

It works. His incredible energy and ridiculous remarks do make us sit straighter and hold our instruments higher. Every time he commands, "Don't be 'cool' when you play Beethoven!" there is a sudden crescendo in our music. Then he spreads his own feet wide and arches his back a little, sticking out his pot belly and hitching up his belt. He's forever tucking in a stubborn shirt tail set free by quick tempi or forte passages. There is a lot child in him. He can glower as furiously as a four-year-old when he says: "Be silent! Listen to me!" or he can smile so warmly that all his "Prussianness" seems to be suddenly swept away.

I feel very much loyalty to Mr. Kassebeer because he devotes his entire self to his work. He does more than just wheedle a Beethoven concert out of us at a sleepy hour; his endless arm is as ready to wrap itself around my shoulder with a reassuring squeeze as it is to gyrate in 4/4 time and he gives advice and drops of Kassebeer-wisdom as freely as musical instruction. Although he is now retired, I still feel his blue eyes are looking and smiling at me whenever I sit in the orchestra, and his words and laugh will always be inspiring to me.

**Mr. Mosley Cindy Hong**

**Describe someone who has influenced you.**

"If you only learn one thing all year, I hope it isn't which side won the Civil War, or how Kennedy and Krushchev saved the world," a middle-aged man with peppered hair and round glasses candidly stated from the front of the room, "but that school is nothing but a small step in the journey of your life and undeserving of all your stress. Take things one at a time and you'll find that you will be successful if you give everything one-hundred percent." When I first heard my U.S. History teacher, Mr. Mosley, state these words with such force my freshman year, their meaning eluded me. I found them idealistic and impractical. But by the end of my two and a half years with him, I realized just how practical his advice is.

I first met Mr. Mosley as an easily intimidated freshman on Halloween 2001 -- my first day at Princeton High School. The nonchalance with which he helped me adjust startled me. "Even though you took World History at your other school, I'm sure you'll have no trouble acing the test on the Constitutional Convention in two days," he told me. The idea of taking a test with so little preparation chilled me. What if I didn't get the coveted "A?" I went home and read over the chapters on which I would be tested. I had no opportunity to fret about any perceived inequality. Although I did not receive a remarkably high score on that test, I learned my first lesson from Mr. Mosley: that I should not worry about the results and give everything I do one-hundred percent. In this way, I made the most of my freshman year by becoming a helpful contributor to the debate team and the student newspaper.

The following year, I entered Mr. Mosley's AP U.S. History with greater confidence. Now, able to worry less about grades, I concentrated on grasping the Big Ideas of American history over the minute details. Teaching more mature sophomores, Mr. Mosley entrusted us with new life lessons. He revealed the unglamorous aspects of the Advanced Placement curriculum. It was limiting; it forced creative teachers to teach to a specific test. However, he was not bitter or discouraging. He wanted to initiate the change from the inside by telling his students the truth. Taking his lead, I dared to critisize such and such in my Tower editorials, sometimes taking not only the opposite stance of the school, but the opposite belief of Mr. Mosley. Our school had always had an unwritten "No-Cut" policy for Junior Varsity and Varsity sports. I spoke out against this policy in an issue of Tower by pointing out that Princeton High employs strict selection guidelines for its bands and theater group and should make no exception for sports.

I asked Mr. Mosley to become my independent study advisor for my junior year. His classes had inspired me to pursue the study of U.S. history. Although Mr. Mosley left Princeton High School halfway through that year, his have philosophies remained. Now, whenever I verge on stressing over a ten-page paper, I heed Mr. Mosley's words. I understand now that self-worth is not measured quantitively, based on test scores or dollars earned, but qualitively. I focus on each thing I do, giving it one-hundred percent.

**A Community with Honor Anonymous**

**How have you made an impact on your local community?**

"What's honor?" The student's voice was careless and lazy, punctuated with a shrug of his shoulder. He asked the question without expecting a response, dismissing the very idea. "That doesn't exist here anymore."

It hurt me to hear one of my classmates deride the system that I'd come to love and respect-the Honor System at my small, private school. The Honor system had, after all, made the suspicion and surveillance cameras of public school a distant, dreaded memory. After coming to Athens Academy in 9th grade on a scholarship, I quickly became accustomed to the trust and openness of my new community and took the Honor System for granted...until my junior year of high school.

After the winter break of my junior year, I learned that countless students had cheated during the previous term's exams. Although only a few students were convicted of Honor Offenses, the administration took away everyone's privileges. In just a few days, the Athens Academy I knew and loved for the high expectations it had of its students disappeared. I felt like I was walking into a different school, and I knew nothing would change unless students took charge.

Determined to restore a sense of dignity to the school environment, I gathered some friends and faculty, and we formed the Honor and Integrity Committee. The purpose of the committee was to figure out what had gone wrong among the student body, to correct it, and to prevent it from happening again. Because the Honor System only works if students trust each other and the school, we decided to re-establish this trust by improving communication between teachers, students, and the administration.

Last year, I initiated Committee efforts by scheduling meetings, writing letters, and publicizing our goals among students and staff. To combat the problem of broken communication, we met with students from every grade, presenting ourselves as a support group as well as extending an open invitation to anyone interested in joining our team. We informed the student body of the history of the Honor Code to demonstrate its advantages and to rebuild faith in the system. We also began a ceremony wherein students sign the Honor Code, an act that we felt would emphasize its importance to the institution. Because of our efforts, the student body again recognizes Honor as a guiding principle: last year marks the lowest number of Honor Offenses in the recent history of the Athens Academy.

Although the process was long and often frustrating, I am thrilled to see the positive results when we enjoy free periods instead of study halls or when teachers feel comfortable leaving us unsupervised during tests. Under the leadership of my senior class, Athens Academy is again the open, trusting school that I remember entering four years ago; more importantly, I approach honor as a privilege, and will never take it for granted again.

**Forever Questions Andrew Ellis**

**Using the quotation below as a jumping off point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values: “Some questions cannot be answered. / They become familiar weights in the hand, / Round stones pulled from the pocket, unyielding and cool.” -Jane Hirshfield**

In this life, there are two types of questions: ordinary questions, of mathematics, logistics, and time; and questions of love, questions of faith, questions of life, whose truth is found not in answers, but rather in the journey to find them. Too many people do not realize this, becoming numb to the passionate nature that the journey entails. I have found that the questions we ask ourselves that never change, only the answers and their scope. The truly important questions are kept in our pockets at all times, and from time to time re-assessed and re-answered based on where we are and where we want to go. This constant pursuit drives me and I am pushed on by the questions for which destiny demands answers. Why am I here? Where am I going? Will I leave this world better than I found it?

My high school football coach gave me the best advice that I have ever received. He once told me that the most important thing in life is to “enjoy the ride.” As I thought about that advice, I realized how true it really was. This simple statement holds true in regards to life, to love, and to the quest for truth. Far too often people overlook the process that results in success, disregarding the incredible coincidence that culminates in each and every situation. When one places too much in the end result, they are filled with a sense of anticlimactic disappointment. On the contrary, if one places everything in the journey, in the questions, it is impossible to be disappointed, no matter where the path leads. As long as the path leads forward, never ceding to stagnancy or listlessness, the answers are truly irrelevant.

Richard Bach once said, “You don't want a million answers as much as you want a few forever questions. The questions are diamonds you hold in the light. Study a lifetime and you see different colors from the same jewel.” This is, in essence, a fundamental belief by which I try to live my life. Questions are good for the mind, body, and soul. I truly believe that the quest for knowledge reigns superior over the actual facts and figures that are considered answers in today’s world. Questions allow the mind to hope, to yearn, and to strive for more. When one loses his ability to question, he loses his ability to live, to truly be human. If accepted to Princeton University, I would be able to continue this practice of lifelong questioning in the perfect academic and social environment, furthering my education, my dreams, and my hopes for a better future.

**Safeguarding Memories Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Common Application: Topic of Your Choice**

Leaping over crooked crevices in the sidewalk, my childhood self hopped a few yards ahead of my grandfather. As I paused to scrutinize a colorful candy wrapper, the smell of melting sugar drifted from a small blue cart where an old woman flipped flat buns on a pan. Grandpa always bought two buns: one for him and one for me.

Not long before my fourteenth birthday, my grandfather was diagnosed with a severe case of Alzheimer’s, and shortly afterwards, he moved into a nursing home. Upon entering his room, I shouted “Hi Grandpa!”

Grandpa murmured, “Who are you?”

The next day, I bought two of the sweet buns Grandpa and I had enjoyed.

“Grandpa, do you want one of these?”

He paused, then said, “No. Who are you?”

Leaving the buns in the paper bag, I replied, “I’m Rachael, your granddaughter.”

Eyes widening, he gasped, “You have to get out of here; the communists are guarding this place!”

I explained, “No, the Korean War is over! You’re safe in America.” With a small sigh, I returned home for the day.

Now, after more than three years, Grandpa recognizes me when I step into his room. However, he cannot connect the round-faced child beside the bun cart to the person I am today. Once a memory slides past the grip of his mind, it can never return.

This troubling truth has motivated me to preserve the memories of others in my grandfather’s generation through the War Stories Project. A year after joining the volunteer effort, I have become the coordinator of the project. Fellow volunteers and I collect the experiences of World War II witnesses and collaborate with local colleges to produce a documentary and companion anthology for high school students.

While managing the project, I interviewed Holocaust survivor Bruno Bienenfeld, who unraveled the touching story of his childhood. In 1943, his family was taken to the Jasenovic concentration camp, where they were only given one piece of bread a day. But one day, he reached under his threadbare pillow and found another piece of bread. His mother said that it was an answer to his prayers. The young Bruno asked, “Are there Jewish angels?” His mother smiled and said, “There are angels for all people on earth.” Every day, Bruno found an extra bit of bread under his pillow, but after three hard months, his mother died, and the deliveries ceased. He told his father “The angel didn’t put the bread under the pillow tonight.” His father replied, “He was too busy taking Mom to heaven.”

Working with primary sources like Mr. Bienenfeld, I learn about World War II from the people who lived it. I also delegate tasks and teach volunteers how to search for and sort images to be used in the documentary. In addition to the responsibilities of coordinator, I have taken on the position of Fundraising Head for the project. Besides speaking publicly on behalf of the War Stories Project in fundraising efforts, I also burn the midnight oil writing letters to more than 200 corporations and local businesses, looking up addresses, and licking envelopes until my mouth goes dry.

Each year, more and more World War II veterans and Holocaust survivors pass away, and the loss of these valuable witnesses reminds me of the urgency to preserve their life stories. Just as Grandpa forgot eating sugar-filled buns with me, we can fail to remember what our world has endured. Whether the record of our past must serve as a lesson or reminiscence, we must look back at the path of our history before laying the cobblestones of the future.

**Color Guard Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Common Application: Please elaborate on one of your activities (extracurricular, personal activities, or work experience)(150 words or fewer).**

I like to play with guns and knives.

It’s not what you think: I’m in color guard. Although events like the Virginia Tech incident have worsened the reputation of weaponry, color guard attempts to transform the traditional connotations of potentially harmful objects into an art form.

I’ve participated in this artistic and athletic manner of multi-tasking for three years, starting with flag and advancing to the weapon lines by mastering both rifle and saber. In the familiar settings of home and school, I’m your typical teenager. But at a guard show, I become a dazzling entertainer, a fluid dancer, a dexterous performer.

Crimson eye-shadow fans out over my lids, and a crown of twisting locks sits proudly on my head. Brilliant lights gush over the football field, our stage. Maneuvering through lines of gleaming instruments, I roll to the ground, quickly pick up a billowing flag, and spread its silk before me over the night sky.

**Poetry Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Please elaborate on one of your activities (extracurricular, personal activities, or work experience)**

“Poetry is a packsack of invisible keepsakes.”

~ Carl Sandburg

It is impossible to convey the art of words with more words. Case in point: try to find another word for “salty.” It isn’t bitter; it isn’t sour; it’s salty. Likewise, the terms “diction” and “tone” do not even come close to expressing the actual feel of a poem. It is the inspiration behind the poem, and that only, which drives the very essence of verse.

Just as inspiration can produce poetry, poetry can produce inspiration. Each unforgettable experience during my high school years was made manifest in a poem, and like a little packsack, my poetry harbored my memories. My poetry class trained me to reflect on our world, humankind, and myself. In my backyard, I would often sit cross-legged for hours, absorbing passing autumn breezes and hearing the twitter of sparrows in the sycamores. Homework had never been so enjoyable.

During my junior year, I led the annual winter and Valentine’s poetry seminars. As a veteran of the poetry class, I mentored many of the Poetry I students, urging my “mentees” to maintain open minds. At the end of the year, my fellow students and I held a “Readings and the Redwoods” event, except now we were not only the performers, but also the coordinators. At the start of my senior year, the Poetry Club I had founded became an official school club, which gave me the opportunity to invite several prominent contemporary poets, such as Poet Laureate Robert Hass, to our school. In addition, our club brought what we’d learned to the rest of the community, teaching our area youth about poetry.

Through every success and every disappointment, poetry has recorded my thoughts onto paper. A composer arranging each individual note, poetry has orchestrated my high school experiences into one resonating composition, bringing all of my memories together. When I want to look back at those memories, all I have to do is open my packsack of poetry, and listen.

**Summer Rachael Ji Yoon Kim**

**Please tell us how you have spent the last two summers (or vacations between school years), including any jobs you have held; 2500 characters max**

Soaring over rocky peaks, the colossal metal bird carried me in its belly, and after hours of flight, I finally reached my destination: Baltimore, Maryland. Despite the sea of people around me, I was alone on this voyage. During this sweltering summer of 2006, I resided in Johns Hopkins University to study in the Pre-College Program established there. I soon made friends with many of the high school and college students also attending the school. Absorbing knowledge like a thirsty sponge, I asked many questions and participated actively in class discussions. In the Biological Molecules class, my classmates and I conducted various experiments. Through the Business course, not only did I learn about the history of business, but also about the numerous aspects of business in the modern world.

After five exciting weeks at Johns Hopkins, my parents and younger brother arrived in Maryland. We ventured out of Maryland and into unfamiliar territory once again. We visited numerous landmarks in Washington D.C. and many colleges, including Princeton University. Once we returned from our expedition, “Band Camp” began for all students participating in our school’s marching band and color guard.

The following summer, my family and I embarked on our first cruise trip. After driving down to southern California, the Monarch of the Seas transported us to Catalina Island. There I swam and scuba-dived in the cool currents crowded with fish and kayaked over the rolling foam-crested waves. We then sailed to Ensenada, Mexico, where I practiced speaking Spanish in the city as well as the countryside farther inland.

Once we returned from our vacation trip, I took a summer course on American government at De Anza College. Motivated to learn more about the subjects juggled in class, I made regular trips to our local library. Of course, after running my fingers over the bindings of all the books in an aisle, I couldn’t help but check out more books than I had intended; when walking out of the library, I balanced books precariously between my hands and chin. On warm afternoons, I would sit in my room for hours with a box of saltine crackers and a mound of books beside me. Soon after completing the government class, the annual “Band Camp” drew my final summer as a high school student to a close. These last couple weeks of the warm season brought me to my final year at Saratoga High, the beginning of yet another little adventure.

**Racing Doesn't Always End at the Finish Line Anonymous**

**Elaborate on an experience without which you feel you would be a different person today.**

I am breathing heavily, not from fatigue but simply the anticipation of exhaustion. My heart beats fast, waiting for the sharp pierce in the air. Finally, the gun fires, and I see fifty pairs of legs begin flying, and soon realize mine is among them. I look around and see the faces of those around me. I question why I decided to participate in such a sport. Realistically, I cannot expect to beat any of them, and yet I hear cheers from behind. The people I have left behind, and will soon see again, remind me why such a painful experience will be remembered as one of the most positive of my life.

Some can find inspiration in occurrences as routine as a sunrise. On the contrary, for something to inspire me, it must truly have impacted my life in a profound way. Consequently, I find it impossible to select a single person who has influenced me significantly, for all who influence me truly deserve the recognition. Thus, I choose rather to describe a closely-connected group of people who, without their presence in my life, I would undoubtedly be a different person today.

Over the summer, my friend Justin, captain of the cross-country team, invited me to lunch. Expecting no pretext, I readily accepted. Unbeknownst to me, Justin's ulterior motive was to take me to the first cross-country practice of the summer. Had he not used such deception, I assuredly would not have joined the team; for years prior simply requesting that I join had proven to no avail. Justin had but one thing to say to me: “If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have taken AP Chemistry. I'm just returning the favor.” I had on a polo shirt and khaki shorts, yet they still expected me to run.

Initially, my participation was minimal; I never expected to actually join, thinking to myself, “Where is the fun in simply running?” However, the coach, who had for years jocularly suggested that I become a member of the team, was now unwavering in her decision to make me join. Looking back now, I am glad I did not protest. Although I am proud to have sung the motto “Our sport is your sport’s punishment,” the physical benefits of the sport need not be elaborated upon. On the contrary, the inspirational people on the team to whom I became close deserve volumes of recognition.

Coach Sabrina Lucas could not have been more encouraging in her approach to the sport. She focused on improving the scores of all members of her team, not just the top runners. Furthermore, unlike the coaches of most other sports, she ran alongside us, even participating in the New York City Marathon. I have never needed a teacher to motivate me to keep up my studies; my coach was the first one to teach me the power of encouragement.

Teammate CJ, to whom we dedicated our season, has been a major source of inspiration for me. His mental fortitude in the face of severely wretched misfortunes moves me to wonder whether I would have held so strong. Early in the season, CJ was found to have a large tumor on his tailbone. After months of frightful surgeries, he was able to return to support the team as we won a sectional title, and even ran in the last race of the season. To overcome such obstacles, running five kilometers only weeks after confronting a chillingly real possibility of paralysis – I can only hope to live to be so resilient.

There is not a member on the team I could describe without respect. Alas, I cannot go into detail regarding how Justin succeeded despite his battle with diabetes, or how Heather practiced daily despite her ACL injury. Nevertheless, I can say without a doubt that every member of the team effected me in a deeply positive way. These fellow runners have become my second family.

**Failure Leads to Success Anonymous**

**Discuss a significant quote you live by.**

“I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” –Michael Jordan

It didn’t register in my mind that we were going to be living in Egypt until we were halfway across the Atlantic. I knew that the experience in Cairo would be a memorable one. What I didn’t know was that I was going to come back home three years later, after enduring many tests and enjoying some successes.

My first test came when I realized my Arabic communication skills were more text-book than conversational. I knew this would be a major hindrance in school and that I had to overcome this shortcoming if I was to be well-integrated. I decided to speak with common Egyptian folk whenever the chance arose, even if that meant I might commit numerous verbal faux pas. By making mistake after mistake, I grew to learn that the slightest change in the way one pronounces a letter can sway the meaning of a word. This ushered the way for me to learn more about Egyptian culture and to learn about what is considered taboo. After reading tens of modern Egyptian books in colloquial Arabic, studying the specifics of Arabic grammar, and conversing with hundreds of Egyptians, I am comfortable saying that I improved my communication skills tremendously.

Studying at an international school also meant traveling internationally to compete in athletics. The long awaited roster for the Junior Varsity team had just been posted and my name sat alone at the bottom of the list at the position of team manager. It was not what I signed up for; I was greatly disappointed. I put my emotions aside and went to our first practice that afternoon. I believed that the coach made a mistake but I did not complain or do a mediocre job. I knew the only way to prove my self on the court was to practice perfectly. I lived by the quote my brother used to always tell me, “Practice doesn’t make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect.” After each and every practice I would spend additional hours on the court working on my weaknesses and sharpening my skills while simultaneously managing my heavy course load. I developed my ball handling skills and foot work and perfected the form on my jump shot. I maintained my intense training regimen and started playing Varsity in 9th grade at my school in Virginia. I am now the Captain, leading scorer, and record-holder for the most 3-pointers ever made in a single season during my junior year. Being appointed as team manager with a minimal role was my motivation for success.

My experiences have driven me to believe that failure is a part of the process of succeeding. The way one accepts or deals with a loss or a failure will ultimately decide your fate. In the path to success there will be obstacles and roadblocks. If you come across them you must not turn back and submit; instead, you should work around the obstacles and overcome the roadblocks. By doing so, you get one step closer to success. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I will succeed at Harvard College.

**Robotics Brainstorming Mark Ulrich**

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

Waving our banner wildly, we counted down the seconds, not at the homecoming game, but rather the 2009 FIRST Robotics Competition Kickoff. With only six weeks to build, wire, and program a 120-pound machine, my team jumped headfirst into brainstorming. Our options included a robot that hoarded the purple and orange Moon Rocks, shot them into enemy goals, or rolled them into air locks . . . with unlimited mechanical and software solutions for each strategy. As captain, I led the brainstorming effort and concentrated on getting everyone’s ideas on the table while also keeping discussion moving forward. We soon narrowed our options down to two strategies: one an elegant ball dumper, the other a superlative shooter.

“Our team has never been more prepared to shoot for the moon.”

“A rotating turret will present a significant technical accomplishment."

“None of the other ‘bots will know what hit them.”

The idea of a shooter inspired my teammates, but I knew a simpler robot could score faster by dumping many balls simultaneously.

That night I struggled to decide if I should aggressively advocate for the more effective strategy. I dialed a few teammates and heard the excitement in their voices when they discussed the shooter. I paced endlessly and reflected on my experience with robotics, a passion I had pursued since joining Lego League in 5th grade. I had joined the Southwest Robotics Team during its rookie year in 2006. At the beginning of my sophomore year, when I became the head captain, we had only six members including myself. Now we had 26 members and a network of mentors and sponsors; we had raised over $45,000. I had worked with the larger FIRST community to test a new control system and taught programming seminars for FIRST members at Washburn High and the University of Minnesota. To interest potential young inventors, I had organized demonstrations at public high schools and The Bakken Museum of Electricity and Life. FIRST Robotics meant more to me than a competition; it brought together and inspired people to produce innovation.

Perhaps I could have prolonged discussions, swayed others to my opinion, and my team would have reluctantly built a simple, effective robot. But after weighing the relative merits of process and product and the crucial importance of team dynamics, I embraced the strategy that would generate enthusiasm on the team, wow the crowd, and score sporadically.

That build season we had more fun than ever before. We challenged ourselves to find innovative design solutions to the inherent complexities of lofty strategy. I led the programming effort to become one of a handful of teams able to autonomously track the moving targets and differentiate between friend and foe using the onboard camera. The robot looked magnificent; everyone competed for the chance to drive it. We were proud of our accomplishment.

At the North Star Regional, our members rushed around the pits, offering technical support to less experienced teams and telling everyone about our robot. The two-person drive team struggled to control our robot’s many spinning sprockets and whirring wheels. Although simple ball dumpers outscored us and advanced to Nationals, my decision to look at the bigger picture instead of game details unified our team, and everyone moved forward with a better understanding of strategy for future years. At the awards ceremony the announcer read, “The judging panel may encounter a team whose unique efforts, performance, or dynamics merit recognition, yet doesn't fit into any of the existing categories . . . [The Judge’s Award goes to Southwest Robotics] for their exceptionally strong system design and true team spirit with a positive refreshing attitude.”

**Finding My Faith Anonymous**

**Personal statement for the common application.**

A year and a day’s journey lay ahead of every fabled knight in search of the ever elusive Holy Grail, and if said knight was deemed worthy to find it, exhaustion would cause him to sleep at the feet of the Grail without ever truly seeing it. And while medieval grail legends are fiction, to this day people argue about the grail’s true nature. Most recently, Dan Brown’s novel The Da Vinci Code put the limelight back on the ‘alternative’ history as portrayed by Gnostic Gospels and guess work. In retaliation, the orthodoxy condemned the book, and sparked an interest in the matter that consumed an entire summer of private research. From my late nights of reading, I just became entirely lost in what was fiction and what wasn’t; but I did tend to side with the less spoken for side of the story.

Part of the reason why I like the controversy of alternative history is that I don’t approve of the organized manifestation of religion, churches. It is clear to me that the root of the problem is that in order to keep multitudes of people believing the same thing, the powers that be have to be strict about conformity to the message. But something gets in the way of that, it’s commonly called personal faith. When enough people’s personals faiths are very similar they like to start their own churches, and if it happens a lot, it gets coined a Reformation. But it is here faith can get lost. A wise friend once told me, “no two people can really worship exactly the same God” Likewise, two people cannot see Jesus in exactly the same way. That is why monotheistic religions took longer to develop than polytheistic religions did. In the ancient civilizations, there were gods and goddesses for almost everything. People prayed to what was important to them. With the rise of the one true God, problems arose. First, if both sides of a conflict believe in the one true God, how can either side be the worthy cause? Also, if something in one’s personal life has gone awry, how will the one God have time for small issues? This is why there are patron saints for just about everything now. Still, churches eliminate the need for any kind of substantial personal faith. If you need a group of people or a book to tell you how to feel, or what to believe than you lack faith.

My faith is basic. I believe that things happen for a reason, and if I do something wrong I will get punished for it, and if I do something right I’ll get rewarded for it. I believe that I am not in control of everything and must to my best to respect those things that I cannot control that are greater than me, Nature, or whatever else that power may be. Because I have trust in what I believe, alternative histories don’t shake the religious ground on which I walk.

**The Human Brain Ryan Juliette McCarthy**

**One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of...**

One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of the human brain. After a particularly lacklustre discussion in my religion class, our teacher gave us an extra writing assignment. “Who is responsible,” she posed to the class, “for the loss of life at Jonestown and Waco?" (These were both disasters involving apocalyptic sects.) After concluding in my paper that they were everyone’s fault, I was still left with questions. What makes certain people susceptible to ideas that most people would consider ludicrous, like fundamental or heavily apocalyptic religion?

Hoping for some clue, I took Human Physiology, knowing that most the term would be spent on the nervous system. I learned more about serotonin and dopamine, but not much else. At least I had discovered even experts understood little of the human brain. Our brain is an utterly fascinating organ. It is the only body part that can contemplate itself; while we use all of our brains, very little of it is mapped. Depending on how we use our brains, they are literally rewired as neurons strengthen and create synapses that we use and destroy the ones we don’t.

But that strategy seems limiting. Will history majors lose the ability to recall and explain the periodic table from memory, because theirs brains are not wired for chemistry? Is everyone’s brain wired from birth the same, or do we all start off differently as well? So many questions, too few answers. The brain is apparently also the only organ that can be completely baffled by itself.

I decided while going through a weight circuit at the gym (of all times) that my gift to the world will be a better understanding of how the human brain works. While mystery is a wonderful thing in monitored quantities, from as far as I can gather we’re in nearly complete ignorance of the power of the supercomputer in our skulls. Primarily, because my studies are rooted in an internal interest, I would like to understand the effect spirituality or religious beliefs have on a human brain. Do all religions run on the same neural paths, or is there a difference between Western and Eastern religion, or even between different branches of the same religion. That answer may be far off, and for the sake of not being a starving academic, I will delve further into the increasingly popular field of sports psychology. Most things in this arena are fairly logical. Pride lasts longer than pain for example is something any athlete who has won a hard fought contest can attest to. But the field lacks individuality. Why, for instance, do I need to really mellow out before a race when some of my team-mates do everything in their power to psyche up? Is this difference caused because our brains are wired differently, or is one party wrong? The important thing is to not stop questioning, as Einstein said.

**Jan the Troubadour Anonymous**

**It responds to the quote:"Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved." -William Jennings BryanDo you agree with this quote? What experiences have you had that seem to reinforce the above (or render it completely false)?**

Three months into my exchange year in Germany, my friend called me, a little dejected. She wanted to go downtown, and it was clear why. There was still something incredibly rousing, mysterious, and exciting about the European city that had recently become our home. Even as the weather cooled and the throng of people thinned, something drew us to its center, Schlossplatz (Castle Square), our thinking being that the myriad of as yet unseen faces and the layering of voices might call us out of a slightly less exciting day-to-day existence and present us with some small adventure. Kafka once wrote in his diary, “Life’s splendor forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off… If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come.” Going to the city was our clumsy way of tugging at the veil, or maybe it was the hope that the right word would be whispered to us there.

On that night we were lucky. We met someone we believed had pulled off that veil. His name was Jan; he was perched on a stone between two buildings, singing his heart out. It was fascinating. Of course, street singers were nothing new—but usually their profession was a last resort, and it showed. Jan was different; he was talented, spirited, well-dressed, clean. His eye wasn’t glued to his guitar-case, which was glittering with more than just a few two-Euro pieces. People gathered around him, wide-eyed, smiling. He was an under-cover pop star and the tickets were free. Soon he announced that he’d had enough and it was time for a coffee. The audience had dwindled to my friend and I, and some old man babbling about Hollywood. We landed in “Café du Théatre” and waited for exotic anecdotes. Jan told us about his life and what had brought him to the city. He’d followed love there but lost it soon after. Why did he sing in the streets at night? Because he was a poet born in the wrong century. We didn’t think to ask what he did during daylight, how he lived, and where. He was a real renegade. Soon the last trains were leaving. The three of us skipped through the wide, empty street, singing with an abandon that one doesn’t find in the suburbs, “Que sera, sera.”

At the train station, no promises were made, no numbers exchanged, no plans for next week emerged. My friend and I headed back to our side of town, pleased and exhilarated with the tiny adventure just given us by the generous gods of youth. We soaked up enchanting personalities, added them to our database entitled “The Richness of Life” and clicked the “save” button. We didn’t expect to see Jan again.

My exchange year continued in monotone. Winter brought on bouts of a certain pervasive drabness, periods in which I would measure the progress my heart had made on the continuum of time. I wanted change, but I didn’t know how to entice it. There was a foggy desire for a catalyst, an explosive event that would change me, that would mark the dazzling appearance of “real life.”

One day, passing Schlossplatz, I spotted a small crowd of people and, floating above it, was the vigorous voice of Jan. The gods of youth had dropped him in my lap again. With him were three punks, a business man, and a Turkish man who, though unable to understand the lyrics of his music, was dazzled, and rocked, eyes closed, from side to side in front of the singer.

It seemed as if the universe placed Jan in my path just at the moment I most needed him. Jan was less a person than a symbol for me, a sign from the stars that “the real” wasn’t far away. Singing in the streets with him was a strange sort of communion. I was getting closer. I was dreaming of a beautiful youth, filled with brilliant anomalies and bursts of light.

Nearing the end of the year, I returned to have a look at the city where I had spent so much time, the city that housed so many moods and revelations for me. I also wanted to bid Jan farewell, but he was nowhere to be found. I hardly understood it. Jan had to be there; it simply couldn’t be otherwise. Didn’t he realize that it was a fateful day, that this really was the last time we would see each other? And then it hit me, poignantly, something I’d been learning the duration of my exchange year—if I wanted something to happen, I would have to take responsibility for it. This was the border between childhood and adulthood, between a magical view of the world, filled with faith and expectation, and an adult one. Of course Jan wasn’t there. I hadn’t called him: I didn’t even have his number. Fate wasn’t watching over me, sending me everything I needed and the cues to search for the rest. The age of troubadours was over.

I suddenly remembered the other part of the story that Jan had told that first night at the Café du Théatre—that he was far from reaching his dreams; in the evening, he sang his heart out, but in the daytime, he was a mechanic, dirtying his musician’s hands with grime, oil and tears.

Recalling Kafka, I understood something: Life’s splendor was still attainable, but I could no longer naively rely on circumstance. Indeed, I had to become “the summoner.” I had to begin to perceive my freedom as responsibility.

**Opening the Door Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice - common application.**

When I was eleven, I lived in a trailer park full of kids. I preferred reading and writing to playing with them, so pretty often, when they knocked on the door, I would pretend I was doing chores. Then I would resume reading Harry Potter and writing my dinosaur adventure story in peace.

A lot has changed since then. I’m no longer homeschooled, my family is no longer on food stamps, and I read Dostoevsky as well as J. K. Rowling. I’ve gained and lost a Southern accent; I’ve experienced the savagery of public middle school and also sampled rural-style homeschooling where a day herding cows counted as Home Ec. I’ve met the other half of my family, Sicilians who speak no English, and I too quickly concluded I was nothing like them.

Over the course of a secondary school career in a New England Catholic boarding school, I’ve watched every high school stereotype I know be systematically disproved. Cheerleaders and jocks aren’t always shallow and mean; nerds aren’t always unsung heroes; class elections don’t have to be popularity contests. Peer pressure just as often favors the right choices.

I have witnessed and experienced, at boarding school, the paradoxes of the human condition. I’ve learned that priests can be simultaneously raunchy and funny and kind, that teens don’t have to be too cool to go to church, and that I can be both intellectual and religious, because, after all, my teachers are. I’ve met teachers and houseparents who were less mature than the students in their charge, and have suffered the frustration of being at their mercy; I’ve met teachers and houseparents whom I respect and love so much that merely seeing them around campus can cheer me up. I have developed a love of Latin and Greek so inexhaustible that I’m tempted to major in the Classics rather than something “useful,” just so that I can stay with Virgil and Homer a bit longer.

I’ve learned that leadership skills are more than just a college counseling cliché, and that I am willing to fight for leadership positions in order to make sure things are done right. In the course of two years I’ve gone from being too shy to write anything serious for the school newspaper to being its editor. My freshman year I vowed I would never want to be a prefect; now, I am one, and can think of no higher honor. I’ve learned, too, that I am not completely allergic to sports, and that being commended on my performance in cross country is just as sweet a triumph as watching a veteran teacher doff an imaginary cap to an essay I’ve written.

I am proud of all these realizations and accomplishments—but mostly because they stand as proof of what I am most proud of. For me, the past six years are marked foremost by a single fundamental switch of my priorities: Now, when people knock on my dorm door, I always let them in, even if I’m in the middle of a really good story. I still read, although I do it when everyone else is asleep and then drink coffee to compensate. I still write, on my vacations—since the dinosaur story, I’ve produced three more novel-length stories—but I know better than to try to write lengthily while I’m at school. When I do write at school, it’s usually to make someone laugh or feel better.

I’ve learned, quite simply, that I prefer people to books. I know that I would rather fail a test for which I need to study than leave a friend in distress, because I love them and they have done the same for me when I needed them. I’ve learned that the only thing better than reading a good book is talking to someone who loves that book, and the only way to improve a great movie is to watch it with a group of friends on Saturday night in the dorm, sharing a bag of popcorn and a food delivery. I’ve learned that I care about cross country because I care about my teammates, and I have learned more by walking in the back of the pack to cheer up the freshmen who can’t run very well than I ever would if I kept up with my equals in speed. I’ve learned that the best thing about away meets is the bus ride home, where we sing, argue about Star Wars, recite Monty Python, confide secrets to our best friends after everyone else is sleeping, and on no account do homework or listen to iPods. I’ve learned that I do have something in common with my Sicilian relatives: My favorite time of day is dinner, when I sit with the eclectic group of people that I have come to call my friends, and we manage to find things to laugh about even when there isn’t much left to say.

Friends, I have learned, are worth more than all the laurels and distractions life can offer. It has been my great privilege to have friendships in high school—not just friendships of Aristotle’s “utility” or “pleasure,” but truly ennobling friendships that have changed me for the better. What is to others a truism, is to me a late and unexpected discovery for which I am more grateful every day. I know, now, that I am at my best and happiest in the company of others.

**National Nonsensical Writing Month Anonymous**

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

My spacebar popped off of the keyboard for the seventh time that night. I snatched it from the floor and rammed it back in place, knowing that it was a futile effort. Apparently, my laptop was suffering from the tribulations of National Novel Writing Month as much as I was.

It was November 2007, and I was participating in a peculiar event known as NaNoWriMo. The official website calls it “a fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing.” Participants write 1,667 words per day for the month of November, resulting in a 50,000-word novel by midnight, November 30th. It was crazy, exhilarating, and exhausting—and I did it.

My NaNoWriMo experience was marked by a complete lack of planning and many near-failures. I plunged in without a plot or characters, scorning outlines in favor of whimsy. The first week flew by in a flurry of experimentation as I concocted increasingly outlandish plot twists. By the second week, however, I was scratching my head more often; the first inklings of frustration flirted with my mind. By the third week, I was lusting after a plot much as a zombie lusts after brains. Yet somehow, twenty minutes before December officially began, I stumbled over the finish line with 50,023 words and ninety-five pages.

Unsurprisingly, the final product wasn’t exactly flawless. To this day, I’ve kept the final manuscript private, maintaining that it’s a disgrace to the word “novel.” Still, there are bright spots: fantastic scenes of magical action, brightly chattering characters that actually make sense… Scrolling through the gargantuan document in the following weeks, it occurred to me that I had actually done something.

It was a strange discovery. While I had berated myself for undertaking such a massive project, something had kept me going for all thirty days. It was the ephemeral feeling of delight that somehow sprang forth from my self-imposed torture: the joy of twisting words and letters and phrases into something that was completely, utterly mine, no matter how misshapen. I loved the process; it didn’t matter that the final product was a failure by literary standards.

After NaNoWriMo, I started working on short stories and poems in my spare time, joined deviantART.com’s literary community, and started entering literary contests; I even won a few. And then in March 2009, I landed a post at 148apps.com, an iPhone application review site. A few months later, I’m a senior writer and being paid to write. While I’m not writing fantasy or even fiction, it’s still writing, and it’s one of the best part-time jobs I could imagine.

If the most important thing I gained from NaNoWriMo was a fierce passion for writing, the second was confidence. After climbing the 50,000 mountain, other endeavors seem simple by comparison. Speaking in front of the senior class or co-chairing a blood drive committee is nothing compared to the laughs that follow an explanation of NaNoWriMo.

While I’ve yet to “win” NaNoWriMo again, that first victory was enough to set me on the path of writing. One the surface, it was just one month of writing nonsense. To me, it was so, so much more. November comes just once a year, but NaNoWriMo is an experience that lasts a lifetime.

**Jerk Chicken Anonymous**

**Using the quotation below as a jumping off point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world:''Some questions cannot be answered./ They become familiar weights in the hand,/ Round stones pulled from the pocket, unyielding and cool.''1- Jane Hirshfield, poet, Princeton Class of 1973**

I prodded the chicken with my fork. The rest of the table was heatedly arguing about health care while I wondered how much longer the school fundraiser dinner would last. Then, an idle comment uttered by a boy I didn’t know made my head jerk up.

“…It’s all because of those Jewish bastards in Congress,” he finished.

Silence dropped like a hammer on a nail. I stared.

A friend glanced at me and said, “She’s Jewish, you know.”

I was paralyzed. Questions flickered through my mind. Chief among them was simply: “Why?”

Why intolerance? Why again?

My mouth moved. “You're the bastard, if you think that saying that is okay,” I said. My calm, forceful words surprised me. I felt like a marionette, lips and limbs moving at the whim of an outside force.

He flushed. “I wasn't insulting you.”

I went on a brief, terse rant, wondering all the while whose tongue was uttering my words. The boy stared at me, but wouldn’t apologize, and I stood and left the table. The hollow disdain in his eyes haunted me. Later that night, I reflected on his words.

I’ve always known that Jews are rare on the Eastern Shore. In elementary school, someone once asked me what a Jew was. The questions have evolved since then: What’s the story behind Passover? What makes Jews different from Christians? I love such questions. Thanks to my friends’ curiosity, I’ve learned more about Judaism myself than I might have otherwise; it’s the rarity of my religion that has helped make it precious to me. Being Jewish has become a core part of my persona, and I wouldn't trade that for all the simplicity in the world.

Over the years, I’ve seen prejudice in action and heard occasional insults. But when faced with such instances, my parents carried themselves with pride and self-assurance, and I took my cues from them. I learned how to deal with prejudice and moved on. Sometimes it hurt, especially when I discovered unsavory elements in people I liked. But I learned patience, tolerance, and empathy, and those lessons are easily worth a few bruises.

At the fundraiser dinner, it had been a while since I’d heard such blatant anti-Semitism. I was initially furious. But afterwards, my anger dimmed, to be joined by a sense of pride and gratitude. Yes, the boy was ignorant and spiteful, but he’d revealed some important things. I was proud of my quick response—though perhaps I hadn’t been civil, remaining silent would have been traitorous to myself and my faith. More importantly, I was proud of my companions. The next day, I learned that they’d had words with him, too, and that he’d stalked away after finding no sympathy.

Instances like the one at the school fundraiser dinner are consequences of living in the larger world; fully escaping prejudice is impossible. But more important is the way in which we approach such cases. I chose to focus on the support of my friends, the acceptance I witness every day, and the enrichment that comes from mingling cultures instead of on momentary glimpses of intolerance. My experiences as a minority on the Eastern Shore have taught me that the world is fundamentally a good place, and that it is my duty to continue to make it so. As a proud Jew, I will always promote understanding and denounce ignorance. And most importantly of all, I’ll do it alongside my many friends—Jew and gentile alike.

**Hero Jessica Dolnick**

**Who has influenced you the most?**

My hero is not the world’s hero. He is not graced with fleetness of foot, excessive charm, or vast amounts of wealth. He neither asks for nor receives much attention or help from others, and he certainly does not limit himself to the confines of normality. To me, however, he is the prime example of patriarchal perfection, and it is precisely his idiosyncrasies that make him so valuable to me.

My father, perhaps the most natural and classic humorist I have ever encountered, has filled my life with hilarity and love. Oftentimes we have debates for weeks on topics like exactly what composes a salad -- we have still not figured it out -- or what differences there are between a sweatshirt and a jacket. These seemingly meaningless debates are effective ways of interacting with each other, and I am glad to say that we like to battle our wits daily, sharpening our minds with clever retorts.

It is my father whom I credit with the greatest influence in my life, as my current pattern of existence is heavily based upon his mental and moral values. It is my father who instilled in me an everlasting love of reading. For the first seven or so years of my life, he tirelessly -- and, to my delight, animatedly -- read aloud a countless number of books, ranging from <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> by Dr. Seuss to <i>The Hobbit</i> by J.R.R. Tolkien. My father also shared his library with me, giving me an almost never-ending supply of science fiction, fantasy, and mystery novels as well as nonfiction books.

It is my father whom I credit with the development of my sense of humor. As a person who is capable of fully enjoying life, my father has influenced my outlook on situations and given me the gift of being able to laugh at myself and at situations that would otherwise be considered quite disappointing. Oftentimes when I was younger and I would injure myself, perhaps with a bruised knee or paper cut, my father would offer to pinch me somewhere else, claiming, “if I pinch you on the arm, it will make you forget about your knee!” That almost always had the desired effect of making me giggle or don a wiggly smile.

It is also my father whom I credit with guiding me in the formation of my moral compass. From preschool to high school, my father has stressed three major character rules: be honest, never give up, and try your hardest. As clichéd as that grocery list of character elements may seem, it has nonetheless served me well, and all three items have been major factors in my character development. My father’s advice is perhaps so effective because he gives it sparingly, and only when asked for. My father will not often openly counsel me, but his guidance, when given, is golden. I still recall a time when I was four years old: frustrated by some task, I exclaimed that I “gave up” and would have no more to do with it. My father, noticing my frustration and my excited utterance, looked me in the eye and proceeded to impart to me the greatest wisdom that I have ever received: that I should never, ever say the words, “I give up.” Impressed by the earnestness of his request, I have never since uttered the phrase, “I give up,” without serious mental backlash and regret. His advice from that day has stuck with me for the past thirteen years like no other advice I have ever received.

Perhaps what I see in my father is not what most people would generally consider as influential, but my father has influenced my life, personality, and happiness in more ways than I could ever express with words, and he will forever be my personal hero.

**Couch Potato Jessica Dolnick**

**Common Application essay, subject of my choosing.**

When I was young, my family owned a beat-up old couch. The couch was nothing out of the ordinary: it was a simple floral-print loveseat that had somehow survived the wear and tear that only a toddler can provide. The time came, however, when my parents realized that the family room needed a full-scale furniture upgrade. The couch had to go. Despite the legitimacy of their concerns about the worn appearance of the family room, I resented their choice to upgrade and alter the furniture set that I had grown to love and cherish. Although the entire room was about to be changed, the couch was the one piece of furniture I was most adamant about keeping. The couch was ideal in my eyes. It was broken in just enough to jump on, and its floral print was perfect for hiding juice and food stains. Looking back, my parents were right to replace the couch. It was full of holes, and there were so many stains that the floral print could no longer hide the fact that the couch had been misused. I now realize, however, that it was not the replacing of the couch that upset me so, but the fact that my life was being altered in some way. In other words, I was experiencing change.

In my earlier years, although I was unaware of it, I was afraid of change. Content with things the way they were, I saw no reason for change, and thus, I resented and feared it. I was afraid of changing schools, of leaving and making new friends, and I was completely petrified by the idea that as I grew, change was inevitable. I must admit that I wanted to remain a child forever. As time continued on, however, I realized that not only were things changing around me, but I was also subject to change, regardless of whether I was a willing participant or not. Throughout middle and high school, I lived in a limbo of sorts, not knowing whether to look forward or back, until the summer of my senior year, when I was forced to seriously consider for the first time how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I had never before been faced with the concrete idea that moving on would actually occur. College had always seemed to be a distant and unreal future, but with the comings and goings of the college process, I began to slowly accept that life was, in fact, continuing on. Of course the thought occurred to me that, in a perfect world, I would be able to remain suspended in time, continuing high school and enjoying teenage freedom, but I had to eventually abandon that idea as an impossibility. As I approached the close of the summer before senior year, I began to realize that my longing for the past would never disappear. It is a natural feeling. Nonetheless, change was happening to me and all around me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was with that realization that the truth became clear to me: I could not live in the past for the rest of my life. Change, although disorienting, is necessary, and it is nothing to be feared. I found myself much altered I light of that realization. Although at times I still long for the comforts of an everlasting childhood, I have realized that the future is an unexplored terrain, not dangerous or frightening, but exciting and novel, something to be truly looked forward to.

**Remix Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

I sat down on the bench, apprehensive. I hadn’t touched the ivory keys in almost eight years. Instead, I had actively avoided them, treasuring instead the strings of my violin. In debates I claimed that it was harder to play my instrument, belittling the plunking keys. Yet now I found myself seeking the power of the piano again, wanting music that was its own partner.

I began by sounding out the melody with my right hand. As the silky notes glided through the silence, I was reminded of my violin.

This is where I belong. I am a violinist, a purveyor of sweet melodies. This was where I took tentative steps away from the strict notes and rhythms I had adhered to as a young pianist, as I discovered that music comes from the emotions spiraling from the thin black lines. On the violin, I can close my eyes, enthralled by the music, exploring to match the compositions racing through my head. I have spent Friday nights improvising with pianists, cellists, guitarists -- whomever I can find. I have been a street musician, spreading the joy that I already give myself. The first time I wandered downtown, I gathered a motley group of an accordionist and a cellist. We unpacked in an alley between two quaint cafes, away from questioning eyes, amidst the pink daisies of early spring. As we emerged onto the sidewalk, a chilling wind raced against our dancing fingers, countering the warmth of the afternoon sun settling on our skin. And we played. Passersby -- a wrinkled man, a dancing little girl, a gangly preteen -- stopped and stared, occasionally leaving spare change in exchange for the smiles that sprouted on their faces. As our improvisations managed to cut into their everyday lives -- lives that had been absorbed in their separate paths -- I found a pastime in the streets. The purity of a melody slicing through the air simply cannot be underestimated.

Yet as the notes swelled throughout the room, I heard the force of the piano. There was no violin. Instead, I switched to the lower line of the music. The notes of the left hand outlined a beat that matched the sound of the drums.

A year ago, a friend gave me his old drumsticks. I immediately raced to the old drum set in the student center to start banging away. Fortunately, no one was around to hear me miss beats and drop my sticks. I was playing as a violinist, not a drummer, without resolving the two instruments. My initial attempts occurred at 6:00 AM to hide behind the solitude of the sleeping campus. Eventually, my confidence, if not my skill, progressed to allow early arrivals to hear my offbeat screeches.

Yet I heard the smoothness between the piano’s consistent beat. There were no drums. Together, my two hands created the perfect harmonies of the barbershop quartet I had started a year ago, born from a friendship formed in a theory class. We began by wandering around the school at lunchtime, singing our separate ways, until the next bell rang to shoo us off to class.

But here the music will not end. As I began to deviate from the sheet music in front of me, I knew that I could delight in my right hand as long as my left hand stayed steady. The piano was only a remix, a compilation, of what I had done before. In time, my playing of the piano came into its own, becoming a springboard in itself to bigger and better things.

**Soccer Anonymous**

**Tell us something that you would like us to know about you that we might not get from the rest of your application – or something thatyou would like a chance to say more about.**

I was a master of my hometown, of its shortcuts, playgrounds, and potholes. I knew all of the secrets of Cary, North Carolina -- admittedly not difficult in our traditional, white, conservative community. The houses were, by law, as beige as their inhabitants.

One early morning, I arrived at the park for a skateboarding tryst, expecting solitude on a Sunday. Yet as the sun began to rise, cars started pulling into the parking lot, filling the air with their clunks and door slams. What could possibly be going on at 7:00 on a church morning? I left the pavement to investigate.

As I neared the soccer field, the composition of the noise began to change to the rolled “r”s and fluid syllables of the Spanish language. Suddenly, black and white whirled by my feet, and I raced to kick it back to the field. As I pivoted to send the ball flying back, I looked up to meet open-mouthed gapes. For a moment, we watched each other.

Finally, a young man motioned for me to join them. I considered the offer. Something about foot-eye coordination simply evades me, and the players here could move. I knew I would embarrass myself, but I was going to try.

“You play with us,” the man told me in a thick accent. A motion towards the chest indicated the shirts versus skins division of teams. Evidently I was the only female as well as the only non-Hispanic.

I was even worse than I anticipated. I could run fast, but I simply could not keep the ball from getting stolen. Despite taking Spanish for two years, I could not comprehend the good-natured advice thrown at me from all sides. Yet I was thrilled to be accepted by these strangers, whose feet sliced the air around my own clumsiness. I smiled unabashedly at my teammates, trying to convey all of my excitement, gratitude, and apology at the same time. I think they understood.

As the sun began to loom high overhead, men trickled away. The young man called out, “Next Sunday, 6:30.” I waved and stumbled away on my bike, nursing bruised knees and sore legs.

Over the ensuing mornings of Sunday soccer, I was always the last to be chosen for teams. Nevertheless, the others soon learned that I was eager to talk if they spoke as if to a toddler. I never learned most of their names; I never knew where they were from or who their wives were. But it didn’t matter -- this was a community, and it was one of Cary’s true secrets. I may have found its roads, but I didn’t know its people. The real treasures, the surprises, lay in the scrawny 10-year-old boy and the heavyset 50-year-old man, out of breath yet still blending into the amalgamation of Hispanic males gathered to share their love of soccer. This is a group hidden in the shadows of time and place, emerging only through chance encounters of shared passions.

**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.

**Diverse Identity Anonymous**

**Common Application essay on diversity**

“Dinner is ready!” Every Sunday a member of our family takes a turn choosing what we’re having for dinner, and today was my turn. My mother had prepared all of my favorite food, from foie gras to sea urchin sushi to satay. As we began eating, my mother asked me her favorite question: “What did you get on your tests this week?” I answered proudly, knowing that I studied the materials thoroughly and did well.

My mother then smirked, “Mostly good, but an A- in history? When I got an A-, my father would hit my hands with a ruler.”

“She tried her best, keep it up.” said my Father.

“This is why Indonesia never progresses, everyone lacks rigor. When my grandfather was here during colonization, he said the people were so lazy...” babbled my mother, and the conversation continued. It was the usual back-and-forth discussion caused by their opposing backgrounds, personalities, and values. After we finished dinner and did our Islamic prayers, my mother brought us to her room to thank our Japanese ancestors. My household was like a Chex party mix – a combination of many things.

Growing up in an environment filled with conflicting ideas taught me to be open minded: I am never afraid to try new things, to meet new people, to consider different ideologies, and to take advantage of random opportunities.

Sure, a part of me is similar to the typical teenage girl (I listen to Lady Gaga, and I like to talk about fashion) but another part is much more than that. I never limit myself to anything. For instance, when shopping for a 30 Rock poster, I came across a Miles Davis vinyl. I bought it, and now I listen to his albums everyday. Inspired by the movie New York Gangster, I taught myself how to throw knives, which resulted in a broken door and an angry mother. I also taught myself how to play the flute and create DJ mixes. Over time, I have become so multifaceted that often even my close friends state, "You still manage to surprise me."

Not only am I open to new things, I am also open to new people. While I am friends with many students from different cliques, I am also very close to faculty and staff throughout the school. I became good friends with Niño, our cafeteria’s cook, and I customized a stir-fry sauce that he then named after me – a sauce that my math teacher was addicted to and, once she met me, thought fit me perfectly.

Sometimes my impartiality gets me in trouble. For example in my Islamic elementary school, I got a week of detention for reading The Da Vinci Code and being curious about “dangerous Christian values.” Situations like this made me realize how lucky I am to have been exposed to different values and to have the courage to let myself learn new things. This tendency did not come out of the blue, but was a result of my upbringing that served diversity on a silver platter to me. Without it, I wouldn't have the will to read and contemplate the Qur’an and Nietzsche’s opposing thoughts. Without it, I wouldn't have the thirst to push my boundaries, leave my comfort zone, and enthusiastically embrace the diversity of experiences and people I will encounter in college. Without it, I wouldn't be me.

**Personal Statement Joseph Austin Martinez**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Last Two Summers Joseph Austin Martinez**

**What I did over the last two summers.**

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

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

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

**Andrew Joseph Austin Martinez**

**Describe an important person in your life**

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

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

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

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

**Against the Odds Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

Unlike most children, I loved the doctor. As I bubbled after hearing the news of a doctor's appointment, I'd begin preparing a list of questions. At the clinic, the nurses laughed at me, but I was determined to get to the bottom of my quest of how to become a doctor. By accompanying me through obstacles in life, my quest for scientific education has helped me persevere to achieve my goals.

As a child in Pakistan, I lived in an environment that did not agree with my passion. As a young girl, my job was to help out at home while the boys ran the errands outside. I made the observation that boys and girls were treated differently. More significantly, girls were not expected to excel academically. To compound this, I realized that the financial conditions of our fathers determined our futures—even if we were all boys. My hypothesis was seemingly true when I realized that none of my female cousins attended college. I concluded differently for myself. I could not adjust to this and decided that I would be a fabulous and intelligent doctor that would one day be famous worldwide. I was neither financially gifted nor a boy, but I could be just as successful if I studied diligently. My passion for science and mathematics became of second nature to me. I read every book I could get my hands on, and my determination grew stronger.

Moving to the USA made my dream much more realistic. However, when we first moved, we had no home and no jobs. We did not speak English. We spent our first few months in the basements of relatives. I stayed silent during my first days of school because I did not know English. Moreover, my parents did not allow me to try speaking English at home in order to preserve our native language. Therefore, some days I came in to school completely embarrassed of having done the homework incorrectly. I often cried when the teacher yelled at me, but I never complained that my parents could not help me. I never left anything incomplete, always attempting everything with my best effort. Determined to excel, I began practicing my English in solitude with books and by watching television. I requested that my cousins to speak to me in English rather than Urdu in order to improve my understanding. After multiple tries, I eventually mastered assignments. I developed as a scholar and became a perseverant person.

I knew that I had to learn English to study medicine, and my dedication to overcoming difficulties allowed me to quickly adjust to the American education system. Adversity was not a dead end, but a learning experience that made me stronger. Therefore, my love of science encouraged me to take initiative for myself. I highly value education because I have a simple logic: increase in education increases the potential to help myself and others. My passion for science and education has always driven me to persevere.

**Foundations Anonymous**

**Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation, title and author at the beginning of your essay.**

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” (Walden; or, Life in the Woods, Henry David Thoreau)

I have always heard that it is best to be well rounded. However, I like to think of myself as pointed. Although I am involved in many activities that I love and value, the passion that most propels me forward is my desire to create. My experience with designing and building my second tiny house, which represents the culmination of a two-year independent research project, has taught me how to value simplification, be resourceful, and doggedly pursue my goals.

My thesis is about the process of planning and constructing micro-dwellings, which are essentially very small homes. At the beginning, all I possessed were a few shaky graphite drawings and my overwhelming wish to will them into existence. I began to literally and figuratively develop my foundations, mastering the basics of carpentry by watching YouTube videos and collecting tips from the local Lowe's staff when I endeavored to make my first house. I added to these skills for the second house, and at the suggestion of my project mentor, a local architect, I worked determinedly for hours on the program Google SketchUp until I produced an in-depth computer-generated model. Even with this new design knowledge, I still lacked the materials to actually build the home. To solve this issue, I spent countless weekends driving around town gathering windows and lumber from salvage yards and construction sites. As a result, 80% of the home is composed of recycled materials and the cost of the project has been minimal.

My second tiny house is 96-square-feet, which is three times as large as the one that I built my sophomore year. Looking at the structure fills me with an innate sense of pride, but being in it is another matter entirely. I can step through the doorway and glance to my right to see the transparent wall of windows, and then look to my left to see the tiny kitchen space, bathroom, and loft above them. Despite the intense feeling of satisfaction that I experience every time I think of the house, the project has only barely whet my appetite, and I cannot wait to improve it and add features in future attempts.

If there is any one thing that I have learned form my thesis, it is that I have found purpose. Ultimately, I would like to combine my love of tiny houses with a degree in architecture, in order to create a comprehensive set of designs for temporary disaster shelters, where victims could live while their own homes are being reconstructed. Reviewing what I have built, I experience a sense of contented resolution that I know is creative fulfillment. Now, I relish overcoming the difficulties and aspire to study architecture so that I can continue to innovate and experience this feeling throughout the rest of my life.

**My Cultural Identity Anonymous**

**Using the quotation below as a starting point, reflect on the role that culture plays in your life. “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy, chair of the Council of the Humanities and director of the Program in Humanistic Studies, Princeton University.**

At a strange intersection of customs exists my cultural essence; I am the product of an infinitely improbable arrangement of DNA. Seemingly, Fate threw darts at a board to select my parents from the world’s population, and just this once they landed on a Nicaraguan war refugee that I affectionately refer to as “mom” and an nth generation Irish naval corpsman from the suburbs known to me as “dad.” Such is life, and Austin came to be a child of divided culture: a child of two languages, two families, two coexisting and yet so vastly different identities.

Mom’s dancing in the living room to her favorite Zumba workout tape, and Dad’s sitting in the kitchen, screening some Discovery special as he diligently finishes his paperwork; I exist as the fusion thereof.

My Nicaraguan heritage is a subtle presence in the otherwise culturally homogenous sphere of vanilla blandness that is Fairview, Pennsylvania. However, upon visiting my family in Miami, I’m treated to the cultural variety that is the essence of what it means to be Hispanic. Two springs ago, my family and I found ourselves at the Calle Ocho festival, in the heart of Miami’s Little Havana. It was an awakening to the heritage I had yet to fully acknowledge; my integration into the Hispanic community transcends nationality and embraces the commonality of its members. The Cuban espresso shots I enjoyed served as my impromptu induction into my mother’s cultural community. It’s fitting I would rediscover myself in city my mother spent her teenage years; I found my heritage hiding in the festival’s rhythmic bongo beats.

The Hispanic community is warmly welcoming, passionate and energetic, and I am proud to be a part of it. To be Hispanic in the United States is to denounce divisive nationalities and embrace newfound ethnic commonality. My mother has given me more than just a heritage language, she’s served as my liaison to a vibrant community full of el duende, a passionate energy whose variable and untranslatable meaning is yet another demonstration of the bonding nature of being Hispanic. When I speak to my Dominican friend, our connection extends beyond the superficial fact that we’re usually speaking Spanish. Our upbringings in a predominately Caucasian environment have been subtly interwoven with our mothers’ past heritage. There’s nothing better than having a dancing mother who chastises me in Spanglish to make my bed.

I am an Irish-Nicaraguan who wishes to make the best of what his mother has given him. She’s connected me to a vibrant, welcoming community, and her dedication has allowed me to live without the poverty and disadvantage she had to withstand as an unfortunate byproduct of her community. I’m advantaged with a mother who has overcome obstacles far greater than those that I must face. My cultural experience has driven me to achieve through my duality: to succeed not just as Austin, but to succeed for the sake of validating my mother’s continuing efforts and for the diverse, energetic Hispanic connection she’s given me.

**Rights to Defend McKenna Judge**

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

I grew up hating history classes. They were always the same—read, remember, regurgitate, repeat—and I stubbornly insisted that no teacher could ever make the subject appealing to me. Freshman year of high school proved me wrong. With a focus on current events and disdain for the bland and repetitive, Mr. Levine had created the impossible: a history class I could sit through. Often, I lingered afterward to continue a debate or remark on the day’s topic, but it was not until the end of the year that he mentioned the Human Rights Club. Curious, I decided to visit his classroom for the next Wednesday afternoon meeting—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Warmly welcomed by the club’s handful of members, I fell into its rhythm with ease. After identifying and thoroughly researching an event like the Barakat Walk for third-world literacy or the Boston Pride Parade, we would hold fundraisers or pay out of pocket to attend. As I began actively seizing chances to organize or participate in these trips, I found that I was driven not only by the individual gratification each one brought, but also by the reassurance that there was always another cause to support, another opportunity to make a change that reached far beyond the scope of my own life.

Of the many events I attended with human rights club, the most memorable have been the annual Amnesty International “Get on the Bus” trips to New York City for a series of rallies at the national embassies. I remember my awe upon watching for the first time as crowds surged at the buildings’ feet, shaking signs at windows and shouting demands for the repeal of oppressive laws or the release of prisoners of conscience. Immediately I was handed a board emblazoned with the name and photo of Khenpo Kartse, a Tibetan filmmaker imprisoned for opposing the Chinese regime. As I raised the sign into the air, a thrill seized me; I realized that my friends and I were part of this diverse community, united to defend the rights of others. Overcome by the raw energy surrounding me and the adrenaline electrifying my body, I grabbed the megaphone circulating around the crowd. Static crackled from the speaker in anticipation of whatever chant I was about to start, and as I raised the megaphone to my mouth, I could not quell my wide grin as everyone around me earnestly joined in: *"This is what democracy looks like!"*

The protests were undeniably the highlight of the trip, but what truly solidified the bonds forged between my fellow club members and me were as much the long bus rides as the demonstrations themselves. One year, a classmate and I took seats beside each other as acquaintances, but after a four-hour trip spent candidly and unexpectedly vacillating between laughter and tears, we fixed each other’s smudged eye makeup and stepped out onto the Manhattan sidewalk as friends. On the ride home, another friend of mine was asked to junior prom by means of a heartfelt slideshow played to the whole bus through the seat televisions, and even complete strangers burst into applause.

These are memories which I know will remain long after I leave high school, memories of people who impacted me more profoundly than I ever could have foreseen on that first afternoon in Mr. Levine’s classroom, and they culminate in my recent election as club president. More than just a nominal role or elevated set of responsibilities, the title is a validation of every hour I have devoted to the club, whether sitting at a table full of baked goods or fighting to keep the club alive after Mr. Levine’s decision to leave Haverhill High. Beyond a cafeteria bake sale with a conscience or a weekly meeting in a classroom, my participation is a piece of my identity without which I know not only my Wednesday afternoons but my life as a whole would be incomplete.

**Metaphysical Musical Meanderings Anonymous**

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

The clock strikes, marking the passing of another hour. He speaks to me, a soul emerging from a simple shell, a shell of intricately carved, French wood. Kai finally comes alive with the downward glide of my arm. He cries in anguish, sings in pure ecstasy, eerily mirroring the whims and ambivalence of human emotion – my human emotion. He and I engage in an eloquent interaction in this blue-curtained practice room, seemingly intertwined, yet independent. The most frightening part: my presence dictates that sudden vitality; I have that absolute power. Nonetheless, I struggle to find that fine line where I end and he starts.

One summer ago with my violin, touring Europe with the New Jersey Youth Symphony was one of the most surreal experiences of my life. The brick colored roofs seemed to me a defining factor in the streets of Prague, just as the constant appearance of "Mozart Balls" chocolate has been in Vienna. There, music thrives with vigor and verve. I recall sitting among my best friends in the Musikverein, pulling at the heartstrings of both audience and musician. The immense capability required to share this music left me in a state of warmth, as if I were crawling into soft, just-washed blankets after a tiring day in the city. At the climax of Tchaikovsky's finale, a sudden, stark realization that seldom comes directly to one washed over me: I was purely and genuinely happy. I wanted to share this with the entire world, a piece that contains the power to transcend differences among people and bring them together in such ways that strangers begin to feel like closest friends, and audiences are held captivated by a single, unwavering note. At this moment, I knew I could do far more with music than merely play notes, matriculating outside the bounds of the intimacy of the practice room, into the real world. This ability to communicate in ways that were at one time unimaginable I knew would be the driving force that holds my violin to me as my lifelong companion.

Although the theory of music can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance – to humanist scholars who attempt to construct a structured theory, a "sufficient reason", for music on a mathematical and scientific basis – how does the study of counterpoint and harmony explain the very spirit that a piece entails? Music is an inexplicable form of infinite expression that I am able to evoke. It is a free, airy, and warm sound that touches a soul with a passion that is intimately complex, when the mind transcends tangible thought and into a deeper realm of true music, converting the dynamic nuances into a living, breathing, being, and speaking the mind of the long-dead composer, bringing him back to life. Just as Gottfried Leibniz, who serves as my role model in stimulating my fascination with philosophy and science, ponders in his metaphysical meanderings the theory of existence, I ponder what it truly means to play music.

Without a musician, music ceases to exist. Back in the practice room, as I meticulously arrange my fingers on the fingerboard, I attempt to convey an expression I cannot otherwise do without Kai. Outside of his sleek, silver case, my violin seems fragile, seemingly incapable of such an expression. Music takes on a form of a fleeting living entity, melding into my everyday life, inseparable with myself and my character, dictating my everyday mindset. Asking why I like music may as well be asking why I like to breathe: it is at once a difficult question and a simple concept. Nevertheless, the practice room is the fountainhead of harnessing my musical ability and technique, and holds true for all aspects of art and knowledge. No matter where I end up, what newfound love I pursue, education is an inevitable pleasure.

**On Open-Mindedness Anonymous**

**“One of the great challenges of our time is that the disparities we face today have more complex causes and point less straightforwardly to solutions.” Omar Wasow, Assistant Professor, Politics. This quote is taken from Professor Wasow's January 2014 speech at the Martin Luther King Day celebration at Princeton University. Using one theme as a starting point, write about a person, event or experience that helped you define one of your values or in some way changed how you approach the world. Please do not repeat, in full or in part, the essay you wrote for the Common Application.**

Infrastructure. Cuban tourism. NSA. Global warming. The words flow out of my mouth, scripted, rehearsed. For the nth time, the eighth year, I recite, "Hello, my name is Katie Liu, and I represent the Mount Olive Affirmative Team. My partner and I support the resolution, be it resolved..."

The familiarity in these first ten seconds is short-lived. Soon, counter-arguments are improvised, under the pressure and scrutiny of our adversaries. Questions are fired, each one aiming to subdue and render the other speechless. Each debate yields its own unique twists and turns; although our affirmative case remains verbatim, the variety of responses that are received opens our minds to overlooked obstacles. It expands our horizons and forces us to think on our feet, attempting to articulate on an infinite amount of possibilities. The manner in which we present ourselves determines the victor of the round. Nevertheless, one inevitable truth rings clear. The victor neither yields a solution in any form, nor gives the slightest indication of what is "right". In the end, the negatives may seem like our worst enemy, yet they are our closest friend. In the midst of pressure, an underlying notion remains constant: we are all on the same side. The beauty lies in the contention, the ability to subtly and even unknowing work together to bring about a seemingly impossible resolution.

Perspective is key. A complex world of issues brings about an unfathomable variety of viewpoints. The unattainable concept of attempting to achieve a singular solution, a "best of all possible worlds", leads to an unpredictability of the world that makes room for an ability to harness an open mind, and to synthesize and break out of a shell of bias. The subjective nature of "right" and "wrong" leaves a multitude of gray area, resulting in a conglomeration of jumbled up ideas, discord, and a perceived inability to come to any form of resolution. Overwhelmingly enough, the intersection of opposing views instills an understanding within me to become receptive to all outlooks, accepting all as justified on their own basis. After all, what is the determining factor of moral justness? Acknowledging moral relativity thus emphasizes the importance of embracing rather than rejecting contradictory views, and diverges from parochial outlooks.

Soon after the round ends, the negatives are warm smiles as we exchange compliments and insight, "I liked how you brought up a point we completely overlooked!" We soon transcend the roles we take as "adversaries" as we fully integrate the other's contrasting views into our own. Simultaneously, we cultivate a humility at the grandiosity of issues. Regardless of what topic is given every year, being a member of the varsity debate team has exercised for myself a flexible mindset, opening up to new possibilities. Just as the appreciation of multifaceted interpretations of musicians are based upon individual preference, so too does intellectual advancement find its roots not in a firm notion of what is "right", but paradoxically, in the acknowledgement of the lack of truth.

**An Unlikely Romance Anonymous**

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

Our acquaintance began when I was four. I still remember my mother shouting in horror when I would hold lightsaber battles with my bow, recreating the scenes from *Star Wars*. But thirteen years later, I have put thousands of hours of practice into taming its rough voice, which is now equally capable of producing roars of rage as it is sighs of satisfaction. Without my violin, I never would have played in the Maison Symphonique Hall in Montreal or given elegies for eldercare residents as a music therapist, or been able to meet Chris Hadfield.

It has been getting harder to find time for music in my hectic lifestyle, especially since I have to travel an hour or more by car three times a week to do so. I remember one memorable day when I raced to a masterclass after a tennis match, sweaty clothes and all. But despite the debate tournaments, math contests, tutoring, and the cornucopia of College Board exams, I somehow find time to devote to my violin every single day. Even on those “days from hell” where I leave the house at six and get back at midnight, I slap on a metal practice mute and silently grind through forty minutes of Brahms before collapsing from exhaustion.

My commitment to music enabled me to join the National Youth Orchestra of Canada. To say it was the best experience of my life would be hackneyed, and that’s the problem with overusing the extremes of language. It becomes harder to describe the truly fantastic experiences in life, especially since I was lucky enough to be provided with full scholarships from NYO Canada.

“You guys made it. This is the hardest orchestra to get into in Canada for students such as yourself. Give yourself a pat on the back. You deserve it!” a staff member proclaimed to wild cheering. It was intimidating at first, having to live with ninety-five other strangers, most of whom were college students - some already had their bachelor’s in hand.

The next seven weeks turned out to be the most grueling ones of my life. The nine-hour days, cross country flights, and the shuffling in and out of hotels during the tour took their toll on me. But this total immersion ensured that I learned to value hard work, grind through multiple three-hour recording sessions, and handle pressure.

NYO was what it was because of the people. Despite the age difference, I was amazed at our ability to converse freely as equals. On that first day, I never would have thought that these strangers would become my lifelong friends, my life support, even my family throughout communal exhaustion. It wasn’t an uncommon sight to see people slumped against one another during lunch, desperate to catch just a wink of sleep before the next rehearsal.

As actors go on stage for their final bow, and as classmates part ways at school’s end, there is a sense of finality in the air, a sense that something more profound than themselves has died, something they can’t quite put their fingers on. I felt very much the same way at the end of the past two summers with the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

I am a solo violinist, an avid orchestral member, and a passionate chamber musician. It isn’t only the passing of the years that has aged me; music first evoked in me the emotions that even now, words and pictures cannot. I find a refuge somewhere in between D major and G minor. When I turn the final page of a Mahler symphony, adrenaline surges through my every vein, and my palms grow sweaty. There’s nothing more satisfying than being able to pull off a flawless Bach Partita, and nothing more frustrating than cracking a note. But ultimately, there’s nothing more fulfilling than having played the violin throughout my life.

**The Pint Sized Emerson Anonymous**

**Tell us about a person who has influenced you in a significant way.**

Sometimes, I find thought-provoking wisdom in the most unexpected places. From Wii error messages that state “Everything saved will be lost” to Hellman’s mayonnaise telling us to “Keep cool, never freeze,” I occasionally get my daily filling of enlightenment from inanimate objects.

But other times, sagacity comes from children.

I’ve actually never seen or read Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, but I can’t imagine that my day could have been much better. A power surge during the night ended up resetting my alarm clock; I forgot to bring my lunch to school; My teachers piled on 3 essays and 4 tests due on the same day(I couldn’t believe this one wasn’t a conspiracy).

After classes, I was in the public library planning out the next issue of the school newspaper. A biased article had come up, and I was arguing with the editor about the slant of the piece. The conversation ended on bad terms, and I sat at my laptop, going through the rest of the content, trying not to think about the looming deadline or the fact that I might have just lost one of my most prolific colleagues.

Then a sound like a small gunshot made me jump. A small girl and her even smaller brother were over in the next aisle, staring forlornly at the remains of a clearly once-mighty balloon. The boy started to cry, and the girl reassured him: “Don’t worry, Felix. Sometimes balloons DO pop!”

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And that’s true. Sometimes, balloons pop, editors leave, clocks reset, tests pile up, and stuff happens. What distinguishes the wheat from the chaff is the ability to deal with it and get on with the things at hand; often, the anxiety of all the upcoming tasks leaves me more paralyzed than the tasks themselves.

I like to romanticize myself as a machine, but I know that this is not the case. I am just as human as the next person when it comes to anxiety and stress. Most problems we can recover from-for example, missing a deadline, but the fear of missing a deadline is so puzzlingly incapacitating that it can take over our lives. The pint-sized Emerson that day helped me to realize that things outside our control only cause us distress if we let them.

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I closed my laptop and started towards the exit. The staff were busy closing the blinds and turning off the lights.

As I passed by the aisle, I overheard the nameless girl piping up again, “We can always get another balloon!”

I smiled. Emerson had spoken again.

**Something from Nothing Minh-Thi Nguyen**

**Tell us about someone who has influenced you**

I have been solving problems my whole life, from mathematical proofs to the dilemmas of the pendulum. These problems are the glowing embers inside my heart. The elegant approaches of masterminds, like Gauss, are the kindling to the flame. I fell in love with the beauty of their ability to transform complicated phenomena into simple solutions. Yet, everyday challenges, like my crosswords, cradle that fire. It was not the answer; it was the process. The mental exercises created something ineffable–something that vigorously forced the adrenaline through me. The simple solutions to the complex problems struck as beautiful and exhilarating. If there was an answer to be found, I was comfortably in an all-consuming state of wonder and lust until it surfaced.

Last summer, I worked as a Fellow at Stony Brook University under the mentorship of Dr. Tzu-Chieh Wei in theoretical physics. My enthusiasm vanished within the first hour of meeting Dr. Wei: after trying to comprehend his onslaught of graduate-level discourse on Hamiltonians, I inquired, “So what exactly will I be working on?” His face scrunched up as if perplexed by my question; he replied, “Come up with something of your own.” Rather than presenting my summer to me, he explained that he was merely a “helpful guide” along my research journey. Going to the university, expecting the ultimate mental exercise, I was shocked to find that the problem I was meant to solve was non-existent. I was livid.

Three sleepless weeks of reading *Quantum Mechanics for Dummies*, along with scientific papers, I still had nothing. I felt vanquished. Everyday, I would venture into Dr. Wei’s office, politely asking for some source of inspiration, and he would rejoinder the same unhelpful phrase. Finally, seeing my distress one morning, Dr. Wei offered me advice: “ask questions.” Although I initially scoffed at the platitude, the following morning I greeted him with twenty carefully-picked questions in hand. As we conversed, questions were released before I could consider their scientific validity. In lieu asking the “right” questions, I allowed my thoughts to naturally flow. For the questions he knew the answers to, he mumbled unintelligibly about the subject matter, but for those he did not, he asked me to figure them out for myself – design and execute my own quantum simulations.

Everyday, I came back with more questions; after a week, I realized that I started talking to Tzu-Chieh. Not the typical “Good morning”, but conversations that encompassed every realm of the universe, from his daughter to Einstein’s Relativity. I began to call him by his first name. I began to realize that my lack of knowledge had an inherent beauty; it fostered my thoughts without barriers of knowledge. Through Tzu-Chieh, I acquired knowledge that I was before too afraid to understand and too hesitant to grasp. His instruction to ask questions created a daunting freedom that I had never experienced before, unleashing an influx of trapped curiosity and imagination. All my life, I had been given the problems. The questions that I asked Tzu-Chieh acted as the catalyst that stimulated the creation of those problems. I wasn’t simply solving the problems; I was producing them as well. Tzu-Chieh became a friend and confidant; talking to him exposed me to a new world of physics, creating sparks that fed the fire of my passion for

Tzu-Chieh became a friend and confidant; talking to him exposed me to a new world of physics, creating sparks that fed the fire of my passion for problem solving. My quest to both solve and create problems led me to make original discoveries in quantum optics, and an unconditional respect for Tzu-Chieh. I finally understood. His methods of nonchalance and superficial ignorance allowed me to establish an independence, a curiosity, and an appreciation for the freedom and infinite boundaries of my mind, to create something out of nothing, and these are the values I would like to bring to Princeton.

**Growing Up STEM Minh-Thi Nguyen**

**Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences that was particularly meaningful to you**

A girl drops in her seventh Alka-Seltzer tablet, still perplexed that her cough medicine can transform her mundane plastic bottle into a colorful lava lamp.

“Again!”

Five boys laugh as their Coca-Cola rockets spiral through the air. The 300 kids squeal at the sight of the "Flaming Chicken" demonstration. Welcome to Growing Up S.T.E.M.’s Family Science Night.

In 2015, I founded the club Growing Up S.T.E.M with my friend. With the help of high school volunteers, Growing Up S.T.E.M. hosts community events to inspire and foster scientific interest among the youth of Los Alamitos. Seeing high school students trudge into their science classes everyday, I find contentment in observing not only the children, but also the volunteers who refuse to declare themselves a “science-person” become captivated by the hands-on experiments and projects.

Although I teach the students science, I never cease to learn; the powers of naivety in the young children intrigue me.

“At what age do I become an adult?” Vivi, a Kindergartener, once asked. Under my mentorship, her question transformed into an insightful Psychology research project for our S.T.E.A.M. Fair.

Not only do we provide opportunities for the children to learn, we also provide outlets for them to explore and pursue their own endeavours. Through my leadership with Growing Up S.T.E.M., I discovered that knowledge doesn’t define a scientist. Anyone can be a scientist; anyone can recognize the beauty of science. Growing up often diminishes that fascination, but watching it flourish in the volunteers and children fulfills me.

**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.

**The Machine Anonymous**

**Describe a significant turning point in your life.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**The Third Shot Steven Michael Wang**

**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.**

On any given dusky afternoon, I find myself asking the pressing question: Will I make it a third time in a row? I raise my arms, examine a dulled orange orb clinging to my aching, sweaty palms, and squint at the near-invisible net. Far from aspiring to become an NBA player, I use my recreational basketball skills as a daily relaxing ritual. I fall into a rhythm, a fluctuating combination of layups, free throws, and outbursts: "3...2...1!" I imagine shooting the game-winning basket in the last seconds of my coliseum game. But, no matter how tired I am, my workouts always end the same: three baskets in a row. Of course nobody is there to enforce this law, but it feels wrong to leave without accomplishing this arguably foolish task.

My tendency to set arbitrary goals serves as a sort of closure for me. Seeing the third basketball swish through the net evokes such a euphoric feeling; it represents a consistent end. I admit it - I need closure. I enjoy stories with a beginning and ending; I furiously research movies that end with cliffhangers after watching them; I demand answers to unsolved problems: Is there a universal cure for cancer? How can we stop aging? Where do we come from? It thrills and perplexes me that explanations currently unperceivable to the human mind will someday answer such questions. Therefore, I approach each pursuit as a basketball challenge I have to complete: knowing I will miss many shots along the way, I will persist until I make my magical three and reach a conclusion that satisfies.

While the third swish of the net is always an enjoyable sound, my true satisfaction from this self-imposed three-shot test stems from the journey the basketball takes: the perfect backspin, the initial angling of the shot, and the beautiful arc of the ball's trajectory. Likewise, the most meaningful aspect of my search for closure lies not in the actual discovery of the truth, but in the arduous journey of reaching such a conclusion. It's within these journeys that I expand my perspectives and understand new viewpoints through interactions with other individuals. In my search for technological ways to alleviate human suffering, for example, I've started to question the meaning of "impossible" after interacting with Mick Ebeling, an inventor who 3D prints prosthetic limbs. Like every three-shot challenge, no pursuit I undertake is ever the same. I have the opportunity to stretch my perspectives to great lengths in any direction I choose, to learn from the untapped memories and experiences of unique individuals. It all exists within the journey.

So will I make three-in-a-row tonight? I raise the basketball up in the air and fling it with calculated force. As I watch the illuminating orange sphere twirl in the air, I remember that my need for closure transcends the final conclusions I reach. Each question I seek to answer holds a journey, an arduous mid-region to traverse, that will inevitably expand my viewpoints, values, and beliefs. The ball swivels on the rim before finally dropping into the white mesh. A day's journey has ended; a new one has just begun.

**Days of the Week Anonymous**

**Tell us about yourself.**

Everyone associates something different with each day of the week. Mondays are lethargic and painful, Tuesdays are not much different, and generally, as the week progresses, our outlook steadily improves. Because of this progression, some people find it strange that I used to hate Thursday nights.

While most people view Thursdays as a satisfying final obstacle before the jubilation that accompanies the weekend, I used to dread them. In fall of my freshman year I was offered to play in the Western Connecticut Youth Orchestra’s Wind Ensemble. Although I usually jump at any opportunity to play my trombone, there was something extremely daunting about WCYO’s Thursday night rehearsals. Whether it was the forced socialization with other kids from all over Connecticut, the two-hour long evening rehearsals after a long school day, or the lack of nourishment, Thursday nights were equivalent to purgatory for ninth-grade me. Despite their unpleasantness, I withstood four months of these rehearsals, and eventually our winter concert rolled around. After an encore performance of Robert W. Smith’s *Africa*that warranted a standing ovation, I scanned the audience, with only one thought subsisting in my mind: “*This is great and all, but I can’t sit through four more months of this”*.

On the car ride home that night, I implored my mother to pull me out of the WCYO, but through some complicated and confusing rhetoric, I was convinced to attend one more rehearsal. The next Thursday I walked into the rehearsal room expecting the same mundane routine, but was pleasantly surprised. Gone was the previous conductor that had been teaching me for the last four months, and in her place stood a man who has since grown extremely close to my heart: Mr. Albert Montecalvo, a short and balding seventy-something Italian grandpa, with his trademark little grin imprinted on his face. Rehearsal that night was revelatory for me, but not because Mr. Monte taught me something life changing about music. No. Instead, he displayed true passion to me for the first time ever. Mr. Monte greeted each of his students with a glistening and endearing smile, and ended the rehearsal by sincerely thanking us for our time and our dedication to the art of music. I went home that night deciding that, just maybe, I could come back next week.

That was about three years ago, and I have been playing with Mr. Monte ever since, progressing to principal trombone in the Wind Ensemble. Mr. Monte has been constant in his dedication to conducting the Wind Ensemble, and the sincerity and passion that he displayed that first rehearsal has been unwavering over the last three years. Mr. Monte is a conductor, yes, but he has the ability to teach his students an intangible aspect of music: the enthusiasm and emotion behind it that separates a good performance from an exemplary, goosebump-inducing one. Full of adorably horrible puns, a drive to push his group to perform the best they can, and a sincere zealousness for his craft, Mr. Monte has influenced me more than anyone I know. Although occasionally his heartfelt lectures may drag on a little too long, he has ultimately taught me to not only go through the motions, but to put meaning behind my actions, and to preserve an unbounded passion for my hobbies. Because of Mr. Monte, everything I do, whether it is something as small as completing my homework, to something as significant as applying to a college, seems to hold much more gravity behind it. Mr. Monte is an excellent musician, yes, but his greatest impact has been in conducting the idiosyncrasies of my life.

**Catalytic Summers Aris Raj Agarwala**

**Please tell us how you have spent the last two summers (or vacations between school years), including any jobs you have held. (About 150 words)**

During my summers, I passionately pursued humanitarian endeavors to alleviate suffering, learn about the medical field and fortify my Catholic values. In the summer of 2015, I began devoting more time to working in low-income ophthalmic clinics, shadowing and helping the ophthalmologist with patient-care by translating Spanish for him and assisting with surgeries. The summer following junior year, with my newfound ability to drive and the declaration of an Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy by the Roman Catholic Church, I found myself continuing the work of the previous summer while also taking time to volunteer at nursing homes and shelters to fulfill the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy that God called all Catholics to do. With ample free time in the summer, I had the opportunity to wholeheartedly give back to God via charity and volunteerism which could only be done on weekends during the school year.

**Mi Amor y Mi Lucha Anonymous**

**Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences that was particularly meaningful to you. (About 150 words)**

While learning a new language is extremely difficult, its benefits outweigh the numerous hours that must be devoted to it. Throughout my high school career, a decent ability to converse in -broken- Spanish has been vital to my volunteerism.

Many of the patients that come to the clinic where I work solely speak Spanish. Even with my mediocre conversational skills in Spanish, I recognize the importance that lays within my ability to translate for the ophthalmologist and the patient to reach understanding.

“Necesita usar las gotas oftálmicas,” I nodded, reaffirming the statement as I returned my gaze to numerous patients throughout the day. I saw numerous men and women of varying accents and skin colors, illustrating to me how widespread the language is and how interesting the various dialects are. My limited knowledge of this language allowed me to connect with an entire group of people that I would not be able to otherwise.

There are no detriments about desiring to learn another language. With the United States’ vast Hispanic population, knowing the language will build bridges that can be used to connect to entire communities.

Overall, developing a fluency in Spanish will forever be an ongoing process for me. However, these work experiences demonstrated that the numerous years that I spend in Spanish classes were not for nothing. Instead, I got to apply something I learned for the good of humanitarianism and that alone makes Spanish class and these workdays worthwhile

**Making Space for My Muse Anonymous**

**Please write a letter to your roommate.**

Dear roommate,

Don’t be afraid if you hear noises at night. It’s probably just my muse going out for a walk. I know, she’s really loud. But she never listens to me when I tell her to keep it down.

And she’ll be back in the morning, so please make room for her. She’s greedy and takes up a lot of space. She’s really annoying and she’s also a lot like a rabbit. If you don’t pet her and give her enough attention, she’ll die. Maybe it’s for the best.

Why do I put up with her? She’s my muse. Without her….I don’t know how I’d live. My writing would be absolutely crap, and..I don’t know how I’d live.

What’s I’m trying to say is that right now she has gone to the fridge to get us snacks and that’s why I’m so incoherent in explaining what I mean. Oh good, she’s back. With guac.

My muse is like a lovable golden retriever. Long golden locks. Big brown eyes. A smile as bright as the stars. A smile that can light up all of Palo Alto and cure cancer and -

Sorry. She took over the keyboard for a few seconds, while I was distracted by my guac. Do you see what I have to put up with?

I’m just kidding. She’s the inspiration for my stories and she is the reason I create and she’s amazing. Can’t cure cancer, but amazing nevertheless.

I apologize in advance.

**My Culture Samra Vithlani**

**“Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy, chair of the Council of the Humanities and director of the Program in Humanistic Studies, Princeton University.**

With six layers on, I waddled out the door, feeling and looking like an oompa loompa. My mother had dressed me in layer after layer, and, begrudgingly, I had allowed myself to be smothered with an array of puffy jackets and scarves. The weather abroad was nothing like that of my neighborhood in sunny California, where I needed only to wear one layer regardless of the season.

To say I only grew up in the average-sized suburban city of Chino Hills, California would be a lie. Although it is the only place I have resided, I did a lot of growing up in other places due to my parents’ desire for me to learn about the world. My parents are self-made people, both of whom worked hard to travel from their birthplace in Africa to England for an education, and then to America to make a living. Perhaps this is why it is of the utmost importance to them that I not only cherish my education and relationships, but also that I learn about other cultures. Because of their persistent belief that I should experience the world for myself, I have had the opportunity to do some incredible things: including cheer at the Olympics in England, watch a high-speed lion chase in Tanzania, and venture inside the beautiful Taj Mahal in India.

Although my parents were raised in traditional societies, I grew up in an unconventional traditional household. I was raised with the traditional Indian mindset that elders must be respected and taken care of, the traditional African mindset that the family is more than those who are related by blood, the traditional British mindset that breakfast must be eaten before I leave the house, and the traditional American mindset that I can achieve anything if I work hard enough. Together, all of these traditional mindsets created one very unconventional and unique culture.

So who am I? When asked in America, my response is that I am Indian. When asked in India, my response is that I am American. However, the truth is that I do not fit into either of these molds. I am not the brazen and rebellious American, nor am I the modest Indian girl who quietly does as she is told. Instead, I am a mix of India and America—and of Africa, England, and a multitude of other cultures that have seeped into my own. It is these things that make me unique: the fact that every Diwali, my family dresses up in matching outfits and delivers plates of food to our neighbors, and the fact that we celebrate Thanksgiving with a variety of deep-fried African foods instead of the traditional turkey. What does it matter if people think my family is eccentric because we don’t have a television downstairs? It lets us talk to each other during mealtimes, which has brought us closer together. What of it if I sometimes subconsciously intertwine Swahili with Gujarati while speaking? All it does is add a little bit of flair to the conversation.

And so, those layers of clothing I often spent my winters abroad wrapped in soon came to symbolize myself: a complex person with many layers. Although I may be a patchwork of many different experiences and civilizations, I have come to be proud of my discrepancies, and have finally acknowledged that this is what makes me who I am today. I am proud to have created a culture, one that is not widely shared, but is my own. I am proud that I can call my family my best friends, and call my best friends my family. I am proud that my home is not just a small city in the U.S., but is scattered throughout the corners of the world.

**The Art of the One-Month Novel Anonymous**

**College application personal statement**

*One Way Out of Gym,* the mystery of a murdered gym teacher, is not a timeless classic. It’s a novel that spent zero weeks on *The* *New York Times* Bestseller List. There’s only one copy—I published it myself. Few care about Detective Charley or the gym teacher’s demise. But that doesn’t matter. These are *my* characters, in *my* novel—I care.

They exist thanks to National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo). Every November, people worldwide struggle to write a 50,000-word novel in 30 days. I was 15 then, and had written maybe 50,000 words in my entire life. Writing so much in a single month seemed impossible.

Yet I was attracted to the challenge. So, in late October, I toted a notebook wherever I went, making flowcharts of events and lists of characters, planning my assault on NaNoWriMo. This was when I met my main character, Detective Charley, who chased down cheating husbands and the occasional murderer. Charley was fictional, but that didn’t affect our friendship.

When November finally arrived, we really got to know each other. I came home from school each day eager to develop our relationship. I wrote quickly, wondering how he’d solve his case.

After the second week, I began to tire. On some days the words flowed naturally, but on others a measly page took forever. Not meeting my self-imposed word quota on one day meant more to write the next. The November 30th deadline was stalking me. Detective Charley was struggling, too, interviewing suspects to no avail. It was grueling, but we both soldiered on.

Somehow, I reached the 50,000-word finish line a day early. Happily, Charley found his murderer at the same time. I celebrated our mutual successes with a cupcake and a whole night of sleep. Charley rested in his Word document.

I remember describing my novel to a classmate, accidentally referring to Charley as “my friend.” I laughed, but there was truth to my slip. During NaNoWriMo, my characters *were*my friends. They were with me every day, whispering ideas in my ears as I sat in class, sharing their deepest secrets. I wrote on the train home so I wouldn’t forget their stories. I even kept a notebook at my bedside in case they appeared in my dreams.

The following year, NaNoWriMo again seduced me, and I wrote yet another novel. Imagine: me, author of two books! NaNoWriMo pushed me to write incredible amounts. It put me on a deadline and showed me the value of cranking out a first draft without worrying about perfection. Save that for the rewrite.

Writing novels is like having your own universe. At my computer screen, I am all-powerful. I tell my characters what to do and how to live. I can make them fall in love, get filthy rich, or die painfully.

Granted, when I step away from my keyboard, I am once again mortal. All authors are, but that’s the point: it gives me perspective. After all, too much power corrupts.

**Chainsaw Granny Bakes a Pie Anonymous**

**Write about someone who inspires you.**

Is it weird to say that an 84-year-old woman keeps me young?

My Grandma Nan may have arthritis, bad eyesight, and a couple of new knees, but she is an unstoppable bundle of geriatric energy. Her age is merely a number that keeps her humming show tunes from the 1940s into the wee hours of the night. It doesn’t stop her from moving furniture, sculpting marble, and driving ten miles per hour over the speed limit.

Once, I was on the field outside my family’s old log cabin in Canada where we go every summer. My brother, cousin, and I were tearing apart a dilapidated dock with hammers so that the wood could be reused. We were doing pretty well, I thought. The dock was more or less demolished. But there was one plank that—despite the combined might of three youths—would not break off. We must have grown visibly frustrated, because Grandma Nancy soon came over.

“Here, let me help,” she said.

She proceeded to pull a chainsaw seemingly out of nowhere, and began to hack the dock to smithereens. It was like the beginning of some bizarre horror film—*Chainsaw Granny*. When she was done, she stood up, and hobbled back to her chair.

Grandma Nan has always lived by her own rules, even when it comes to mundane, grandmotherly things like baking. I have always looked forward to spending time with her in the kitchen. She taught me that the real joy of cooking is inventing your own dishes. Together, we look at recipes for ideas, but inevitably veer off course with our creativity. We have made mouthwatering raspberry pies, scrumptious lemon squares, and surprisingly tasty potato chip cookies. Of course, we have made vile creations, too. (Tip: Don’t make cookies out of sour cream and raisins.) But the outcome is not what is important. It is the process of exploring the unknown with no repercussions.

Grandma Nan has shown me that you are never too old to use chainsaws and never too young to invent recipes. By example, she has given me confidence in my actions. I can sing songs in Spanish in front of audiences, and dance to music on my iPod as I walk down the street. Whenever I feel constrained by limits placed on me, I think about Grandma. If she can do so much at age 84, shouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want? Surely, it’s in my genes.

# The Voelcker Program Helen Smith

## What is an experience that has impacted your life?

“I believe the process of going from confusion to understanding is a precious, even emotional, experience that can be the foundation of self-confidence.” Brian Greene, as quoted in This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women

As the protein bands darkened, distinct and in the arrangement I had predicted, I prepared the National Institute of Health-mandated lab notebook, eager to show my results to Dr. Dong. I handed the notebook page to her, grinning as she carefully inspected my procedure. By the time she handed it back to me, she had already concluded her succinct congratulations and begun instructing me on the way she wanted me to transform the qualitative data so it could be quantitatively analyzed. My triumph concluded, I walked slowly back to the lab, ready to learn a new procedure.

Working as an actual member of a research lab certainly humbled me and provided an opportunity for me to connect with PhD students on a personal level. I matured as a result of the expectations of the Voelcker Academy and the accountability to those in my lab. I found that the privileges and community associated with the lab made the long days worth it. The numerous scientific articles I was required by Dr. Dong to read allowed me to understand what I was doing. The nights where I was the last to leave and the weekends where I worked to finish tests that could not simply be halted over the weekend made exciting results worthwhile. The added work I put in enabled me to establish rapport with the others in my lab, who were unaccustomed to working with undergrads, let alone high-schoolers. And when a medical doctor worked in the lab, I was proud to be given the task of explaining familiar procedures to him, initially to his chagrin as he assumed I knew little.

The first time I presented at a weekly lab meeting, I was terrified. Even though I spent the majority of the day worrying about how every word on my PowerPoint would be judged by the lab, I did it. The lab members might have just congratulated me afterward to reassure me, but they congratulated me nonetheless. At the first lab party I attended, I talked mainly to the lone, approachable undergrad. At my most recent party, however, I felt completely at home making dumplings, singing karaoke, drinking delicious coconut milk (I was the only member of the lab under the age of 21), and looking at old photo albums of Dr. Dong’s. I talked to lab members -- my friends -- and was completely comfortable.

My participation in Voelcker has shown me that an earnest desire to learn goes well-rewarded. Through the friends I make and the clubs I participate in, I strive to learn and connect with others who share the same intellectual values. If accepted to Princeton, I will involve myself in the diverse intellectual environment, participating in clubs such as the American Whig-Cliosophic Society and the Bioethics Forum, and taking advantage of opportunities such as lectures by those such as Jonathan Safran Foer. I am ready to build on my own "foundation of self-confidence."

# Building Robots, Breaking Barriers Anonymous

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

I looked down at the robot before me. I had spent weeks and weeks programming and building it, putting in countless hours of concentration. Then I looked up at my robotics teacher, excitedly, as he tested it himself — and it worked perfectly. The robot moved as the camera identified the colors correctly and gave the proper responses. I was thrilled. Then, his attention moved from the robot over to my partner sitting next to me. He had hardly helped at all with the project, and when I had talked to the teacher about him, I was shrugged away. My teacher extended his arm for a handshake and told him, “My, what an excellent job you have done.”

Needless to say, I was furious. This wasn’t the first time that my teacher had belittled my efforts in the class - “Robotics is not for girls, sweetheart,” he had directly told me - but it was the final project of the class and my eighth grade heart was so excited about it. Even worse was at the end of the year, when the technology department - headed by the same teacher - gave its Student of the Year award to my male partner, who was credited for my efforts that somehow were not mine because of my gender.

I immediately went to the school board, writing a letter explaining my predicament- the effort I had put in, the sexism I had faced, the recognition I was robbed of. I poured myself out onto that paper, and then waited weeks for a response. I was certain that they would have applauded me for standing up and persevering. Finally, when it came, I tore open the envelope with enthusiasm, and saw their response. As I read it, my attitude turned from excited to confused, and then to discouraged. They had not seen a problem and had not wanted to pursue it. “Mr. E is a good individual,” it read. “Perhaps you simply misunderstood him.”

That day, I was forced to realize an uncomfortable fate. As a queer girl from a low income family, I was going to face discrimination no matter where I went in life. It was an inevitable fact. As much as I could try to ignore it with hopeless optimism, I wouldn’t be able to fix it all. I realized that I was just going to have to try harder throughout my life to surpass discrimination.

However, acceptance of discrimination does not mean that we can stop fighting for equal treatment. If anything, this event has inspired me to push harder. I picked up a pen and paper and started writing about discrimination in my own community. I started conversations about the role that inequality has in our schools. I kept going, and I am very grateful that I had. Quite simply, we have a long road ahead of us before we can ensure equality, but this road can still be travelled. We need to keep trying harder. We need to keep pushing discrimination. We need to tell young girls to keep building robots.

# Running for My Life Anonymous

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

As the cliché states, anything worth achieving only comes through blood, sweat, and tears. Well, in my case, it was lots of sweat, some tears, and a little bit of blood—I tripped over branches periodically. At the age of fifteen, I encountered an obstacle I couldn't simply circumvent: my weight. Unlike most difficulties I had encountered up until that point in my life, there was no instantaneous fix for being obese. I would have to persevere and remain diligent to see any sort of result; after a sobering doctor's appointment, I decided I would wake up the next day and do what any sane person would: pound some pavement and go for a run.

With "Don't Stop" by Fleetwood Mac blaring in my ears - if Bill Clinton could win a presidency with that song, it could motivate me to run - I set off for a jog. Let's just say "Don't Stop" was still playing when I decided to stop running and start walking. I realized that I didn't actually know how to run; I imagine I may have resembled an extra from the Walking Dead mixed with Phoebe from Friends in my attempt. I decided that it may be prudent of me to begin my journey with a "single step" and walk instead since I once bought the Lao-tzu quote on a bookmark (so it had to have worked for someone).

Well, walking became speed walking, speed walking became jogging, and, before I knew it, I was a runner. I had lost nearly fifty pounds in the process, and it seemed as if every person I knew was complimenting me on my weight loss. I relished in the way I looked because Anna 2.0 seemed better in every sense of the word.

Anna 2.0, I would soon come to find out, was not better in any way than Anna®. I still tripped over my own two feet as I walked, snorted when I laughed and ate from the "USE SPARINGLY" compartment of the food guide pyramid (occasionally). I was still insecure about the way I looked, and deep down, I was maybe even more concerned with my external appearance than I had been previously. Losing weight was not a panacea for the idiosyncrasies I had so hoped it would cure.I had accomplished what I had set out to do quite successfully; in the process, however, I had failed. I was trying to completely forget the person I was beforehand. I figured that if I lost weight, it would lead to an "aha" moment so life-affirming, Walter Isaacson would be knocking on my door asking to write my biography.

One seemingly unremarkable morning, while on a run, my "aha" happened. Looking back, there were two salient realizations that I came to that morning. One was that Oprah was a liar. Unlike her "aha,"mine didn't involve Dr. Oz telling me to eat kale on my stage at Harpo Studios (I was wearing sweatpants). Moreover, if I stopped to look around at what I had already accomplished, I might realize that I wasn't the magnificent failure I accused myself of being; in reality, I was the perfectly imperfect Anna®-constantly falling, evolving, and rising again ("being human" in Dr. Phil'sterminology).

Running is quite comparable to therapy (albeit more cost-effective). I am never the fastest runner on the track or the runner setting state records; in fact, I'm usually the person getting lapped by those runners. Running, however, has never been about beating other people; it's always been about beating myself, especially on those days when I am two steps away from quitting. On those days, I think of the first step I took that partly-cloudy April day; I then break out my special presidential campaign playlist - including, but not limited to "Take A Chance On Me" (McCain) and "I Won't Back Down" (Obama) - and take that first step for the thousandth time.

# Poetry Makes Nothing Happen Anonymous

## “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.”

Poetry makes nothing happen, so W. H. Auden famously said. And there are Sunday afternoons where I wonder why I am teaching it to middle school students. Make no mistake: for all my enthusiasm and bantering in class, I understood from the beginning what sort of transaction this was. I had some skill with words and needed the money, the students I tutor needed to bump that B in English to an A. That, at least, was something poetry could make happen.

Regardless, I was determined to be a good teacher. From my eleven some years of experience as a student, I realized what separated good teachers from dictation machines was their uncanny ability to make both unmotivated and externally-motivated students internally-driven. Rather than expecting students to be naturally engaged (really, it’s a Sunday afternoon, and they’re learning), I had to adapt my delivery. What better way to learn about rhythm and rhyme in poetry than by exploring rap? That lesson, we clapped to the lyrics of Hamilton and listened to rap lines in Korean pop songs so that, divorced from lingual meaning, the intonations of rhythm stood on their own. As a challenge, we compared romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s Ozymandias to Coldplay’s Viva la Vida, which, though composed in very different time periods, share a similar theme: the ephemeral nature of power.

Some days are slow; there are challenges. I still have yet to come up with a fun way of teaching essays, and some students, you can tell, truly have no desire to be in class. Sometimes, they get too loud, the projector breaks down, or someone decides to play hide and seek during breaktime and refuses to come out. Yet, there is no better feeling than hearing a whispered “Now that was really fun” at the end of class.

No, there is a better feeling than that. I remember collecting their first poetry assignment, expecting nothing more than a few rhymed lines. Instead, I received:

The lone ancient tree  
bathed in golden light  
casts a creeping shadow  
on the green grass behind.  
Its tentacle like roots  
slithers deep down into earth,  
its withered bark  
and its frail boughs  
sway back in time.

It begins. And it concludes:

I ask the tree,  
How old are you?  
What type of tree are you?  
And how do you live a life of an outcast so jubilantly?

But I only getthe rustle of the leaves.

I read that again, smiling at the By: Dennis Lu running beneath the title, The Tree. Forgive me for perhaps reading too extensively into the work of a seventh grader, but I saw so much there: the recognition of time beyond oneself, a sort of courage, a boy daring to demand answers from an indifferent universe. Beyond that, the appreciation of existence we can only get from a detailed, poetic eye. And I am reminded of how I fell down the rabbit hole and became engrossed in poetry myself--it made me see the world in such visceral detail and possibility: shadows creep, roots slither, and “frail boughs / sway back in time”.

My piano teacher said, “My mother wanted me to be a doctor. And now I say to her, I am a doctor! A soul doctor.”

In The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath writes, “People were made of nothing so much as dust, and I couldn't see that doctoring all that dust was a bit better than writing poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick and couldn't sleep.”

And I--I perhaps cannot be a soul doctor; I do not claim that my poetry can heal bloodied knees or protect people from harm. But maybe--I can provide others with a new way of seeing, capture a snapshot of our time, jolt people with a breath of fresh air. This is what I can offer, my way of happening.

# People Becoming Community Caroline Stahl

## “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy and director of the Behrman Undergraduate Society of Fellows, Princeton University.

I met Hugo last summer while backpacking in Alaska. He was a small Inuit man who lived north of the Arctic Circle in the Nunamiut village of Anaktuvuk Pass, which is accessible only by foot or plane. We entered the small museum where Hugo worked in search of a bathroom with running water. However, we ended up spending the afternoon with him, listening to his soft voice tell the story of his people. After giving a museum tour, Hugo led us into an office where a map of the village and its surrounding mountains carpeted the floor. While labeling sites on the map with a red dry erase pen, Hugo told us about his life.

Across Hugo’s life, the culture that defined him was constantly morphing. As a boy, his identity centered around becoming a hunter. He watched his father and other men in his community, learning how to live a fruitful subsistence lifestyle. He believed the meaning of his life lied in his physical abilities. Hugo further explained that when Alaska became a state, people flooded north. Roads leading to potential oil fields snaked their way through the tundra. To protect themselves, the Nunamiut abandoned their nomadic lifestyle and settled in Anaktuvuk Pass. Soon after, missionaries arrived to build churches, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs built a school, which kept Hugo and other children from learning to hunt. Hugo’s culture shifted. His family began shopping at a small grocery store. They hunted caribou from the seat of an all terrain vehicle. The future Hugo had imagined for himself began to fade. He no longer knew his life’s meaning. Hugo explained he found his identity again when he realized that the most important aspect of Nunamiut culture still remained: community. I learned that for the Nunamiut, communal needs have always taken precedence over individualism. Hugo told us when the Nunamiut adopted English, they forgot the words “yes” and “no.” Phrases like “depends on what you think” and “up to you” replaced them. Hugo said Nunamiut identities are completely rooted in one another and that the tribe has been able to overcome the traumatic invasion of their home by remaining a supportive, caring community.

Walking through the village, I saw evidence of Hugo’s sentiment. Words and artwork expressing community values adorned the sides of dumpsters. Children rode bikes through town, stopping to talk to each passing community member. In the grocery store, a freezer held caribou meat that was shared freely among the people. Villagers stopped our group to ask about our experiences, showing a rare openness to new connections. Hugo’s stories were wrought with sadness over the loss of many Nunamiut traditions, including the language, which is now forgotten by everyone but him. However, Hugo also rejoiced in the resiliency of his people and their ability to preserve the most important aspects of their culture: communal respect and support. When the physical way of life that defined the Nunamiut people was changed forever, Hugo found meaning in something outsiders could never take from him: community.

# My Cultural Fusion Anonymous

## “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy and director of the Behrman Undergraduate Society of Fellows, Princeton University.

I always dread the first day of school. Each year, seven unlucky teachers get the opportunity to butcher my last name horribly (Ne-guy-yun, Neg-ren, Nu-gwen and every other imaginable mispronunciation), while my classmates get their entertainment for the school year. Correcting my teachers’ pronunciations has become a futile feat.

Nguyen: My last name is fairly common, at least in California, Texas, or areas with high concentrations of Vietnamese people, but in Upstate New York, this last name is as common as a sixth finger. Aside from professors and students at Cornell University, I have never met an Ithacan who correctly pronounced my name at school, at church, or in the community. Just as the entire Ithaca community revels in the mysteries of my last name, I struggle to unravel the enigma of my cultural identity.

All eyes focus on me as I blush and turn away from the amused and penetrating stares. Clatter-Clatter-a softly muttered “Oops”: The cursed utensils known as chopsticks fly awkwardly from my hands and onto the table, landing next to my rice bowl. (Rice just happens to be my weak point with chopsticks. I swear.) At family gatherings, I feel my aunts and uncles judging me as I struggle to showcase my Vietnamese heritage through my eating habits. Clank-Clank-a frustrated “Ugh”: Flash forward to my first high school slumber party when my friend’s family served pasta for dinner. As hard as I tried, I could not wrap the noodles around my fork, and I felt utterly despaired. My friend’s siblings watched in amusement until I finally requested chopsticks, and my friend’s family looked at me like I had two heads.

I am a hybrid of different cultures. I wait for the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve with my friends, but I celebrate Tet with my family in February because I get the chance to devour customary Vietnamese holiday foods. Usually, I eat American food and listen to American music because I find them more readily available, but I feel comforted by Vietnamese pop music, and I often crave Vietnamese food. I cherish food and music, but nothing compares to my respect for languages. Unlike people who think that different languages are a barrier to communication, I believe languages facilitate the connection of ideas and promote understanding. Although I speak Vietnamese at home and English at school, I often translate between these languages to gauge my understanding of new concepts.

Throughout the struggle to discover my true cultural identity, I realized that no “perfect balance” exists between my Vietnamese heritage and the American culture. My preferences and actions do not determine the veracity of my cultural identity. Every time I falter with the lyrics to a well-known Vietnamese song or flaunt exotic foods at lunch, I learn to treasure the imperfect beauty of culture a little bit more. Culture should not be forced to fit stereotypes. Instead, it should be blended, created, and enjoyed like the masterpiece it truly is.

# On Scars Anonymous

## Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation, title and author at the beginning of your essay

“Scars have the strange power to remind us that our past is real.” ―Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses

There is a crescent that runs across my thigh, then down my knee, pauses, and continues in an uninterrupted path across my calf. It is going to be there forever, just like the moles on my skin and the almond shape of my eyes.

“You seem to be healing well,” Dr. Kullman said at my second post-accident check-up, examining my mutilated thigh, “but in all likelihood, there will be some degree of scarring." At the time, I was sure that this was some kind of punishment from the universe. The last thing I wanted was a reminder of the accident on the surface of my skin. Mistakes like tipping a tin of boiling water onto my leg were supposed to be filed neatly away in the back corner of my mind where they could be kept hidden forever. Each morning, I stood in front of my mirror to evaluate the wound's progress. My summer tan was marred by a red blotch that crawled across the front of my thigh and down my calf. Shiny meat on the sides was exposed where flesh had been cut away.

Once the wound had sealed, I resigned myself to a new dress code: long pants, maxi dresses, anything that would help me forget that my flesh had been cut open and colored in brown by the burn. At my final checkup Dr. Kullman looked at me with sympathetic eyes.

“I promise, after a little while you won’t find it as shocking as you do now” she said kindly. I tried to force a smile, but could not manage the task. A year later I sat on the bleachers at school with seven of my classmates, the only debate nerd on homecoming court. As pictures were shot for the pep rally, I stood uncomfortably in the stands, tugging at the hem of a knee-length sundress I had worn to match the attire of the other girls on court.

After we had finished taking pictures, I quickly changed back into my jeans. As a junior on student council uploaded the photos onto his laptop, he consoled me: “I’m great with editing. You won’t even be able to see the scar.” With a swipe of his cursor he edited the skin on my right calf, leaving it a mirror image of the left. I stared at the picture of myself standing on the bleachers, my legs clean, identical, and somehow unsettling. I thanked him and went home, the photo still vivid in my mind.

As I traced the brown mark on my leg, I thought about how nobody ever tells us to be okay with our scars. We are taught that positive events are more important to our identities than the negative ones, and that painful memories are best left forgotten. My first instinct was to try and forget about my scar—just as I had always done when faced with painful experiences—except this time I could not. I now had a constant reminder; this memory could not be filed away.

For a long time I feared that my scarred skin would obscure the picture of who I was. Nevertheless, as time passed, I came to know my scar the way I know the curves of my face. On the eve of my last homecoming dance, I decided to allow all my scars to remain unfiled. As I walked up the steps to the gymnasium, my legs felt the cool breeze of the outside air, uninhibited by fabric for the first time in months. I did not wear a long skirt to shield my eyes from seeing my body. For all their ugliness and beauty, my scars had become my own skin.

# Memleket Anonymous

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

The trick to picking a perfect peach is simple: Gently squeeze the chot (stem and fruit junction); if the inside of the fruit is juicy and dark yellow, carefully roll the fruit and pull while holding the stem to avoid bruising.

After nine summers, countless days under the burning sun, and an overwhelming amount of fruit wasted, I became a connoisseur in picking the sweetest and most fragrant peaches in the village of Dipsizgol (bottomless lake), dramatically situated in northwestern Anatolia along the Sea of Marmara.

It was the memleket for the family, the homeland - the birthplace of my father and me, and home of my grandparents, my two uncles, and their wives and children, all living in a one-story house with a tiny stable and a coop in which they put two cows and half a dozen chickens. Somewhere near the house they had a small orchard with blossoming fruit trees; come early July and harvest time, they would need extra help, and we would leave behind our busy lives in suburban Istanbul and take a 4-hour ride to the memleket.

Being the naive, obnoxious kid that I was, I would complain about the place – how it always stinks and there is nothing to do. I had to wake up early to go for the morning prayer and help collect eggs. My knees hurt as I sat down on the floor to eat, clumsily trying to put the cloth on my lap. The sheets of the makeshift bed on the floor smelled like naphthalene and vintage fabric.

It was different, and I didn’t like it.

When I sniffed or curled my lip at something, my father would take me aside and tell me this was home. Slightly annoyed, I would swallow my anger and apologize, although I was never able to understand exactly why I had to get used to living in this strange, outlandish place when we already had a home.

To my further surprise, my father would become a completely different person in the memleket. He would speak the cryptic local Turkish dialect, wear rubber shoes, and drive a tractor around town. Watching him enjoying every bit of the memleket made me wonder why he had left in the first place.

After dropping out of middle school to earn money by herding sheep, he went on to high school despite my grandparents’ earnest efforts, abandoning the memleket for the first time. He never went to college, but he did build a stable career and life platform for himself - one he would never be able to achieve if he hadn’t left.Yet there he was, twenty-five years later, having the time of his life at the same place he willingly left behind.

Last summer was my last time in the memleket before leaving for the United States to turn over a new leaf in my life, just like my father did when he was sixteen. In hindsight, I don’t think I ever understood what he was trying to say until now, ten thousand miles away. I realized I have grown to long for the memleket, ​for something that is quite a ways from me - something that I felt I belong to and that belonged to me. Memleket is never only a place - it is part of one’s self-definition, embedded in human instinct. Memleket is the place that will gladly welcome us years after, where we are able to turn into the sixteen-year-old that we were before leaving. I am glad to have somewhere that I can call the memleket - wherever this path that I chose goes, I will have one foot behind in the memleket, where I will go back to be the same kid who wakes up for the morning prayer and collects eggs.

I will be the same kid picking the sweetest and most fragrant peaches in the entire memleket for the whole world to see.

# A Special Session of Physics Tutoring Anonymous

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

“Ridiculously disrespectful,” I mumbled to myself. I’d just seen two students stealthily looking into their desks, utterly disinterested. Shocked by their distracting whispers, which rose above the sound of my voice and the harsh scratches of my marker against the whiteboard, I kept writing solutions as if I’d seen nothing, my anger growing. My responsibility was to the class… Turning back again––on the brink of losing composure––I, and 22 other students in the room, stared squarely at Jimmy and Zack, now blatantly speaking at normal volume as they played video games! As class tutor, I couldn’t tolerate such insulting behavior. Apparently my lesson on Kepler’s Laws interrupted their “strategizing.” But I didn’t know how to control the situation as eyes turned on me.

Emotionally, I found myself thrust back into a classroom at thirteen. My deskmate, Jessica, teased me for being short, making me cry. The class’s meddlesome, snarky whispers mocked my breakdown as I just stared at the ground to avoid eye contact. Later that day, I complained to my social science teacher, expecting her to assign me a new desk partner. How could she not? Jessica was the bully. My voice trembling and legs shaking as my teacher did nothing and encouraged me to instead self-reflect whenever I felt uncomfortable again. Why? Her answer stunned me: Jessica claimed she’d been bullied. I walked home stunned, pondering how that could be.

“Jimmy and Zack!” I yelled sternly, demanding their silence that instant. No such luck. Zack stormed out of the classroom, offended by my reprimand, accusing me of not being the authority. I instinctively ordered him back to no response. He was gone. Jimmy, on the other hand, stayed, but not because of my reprimand, but because his attendance was a detention requirement. He unabashedly continued playing, ignoring me. Everyone was surprised at how I’d reacted, and even though Jimmy’s phone noise and audible reactions resumed, I tried my hardest to keep tutoring, to dedicate myself to the lesson and the others. But my thoughts raced, my emotions swirled, I realized I’d lost control, I’d lost my authority and connection. What happened was the exact opposite of what I’d intended.

After class, I immediately visited the head teacher's office to complain. But as she responded, my mind was miles away, when suddenly, I remembered my social science teacher’s words, “Be responsible for controlling others’ perceptions of you.” I didn’t know exactly how, let alone what the reactions would be. But I had to. That night, researching ceaselessly online, I watched demonstration classes to see how other tutors instructed. The ones I gravitated towards weren’t simply lecturers but conversation facilitators. They didn’t command students; everyone shared information.

As I changed the format of my classes to emulate collaborative seminars, I became a more passionate instructor, no longer a routine task-master. Before long, the classroom came alive, excited students wrote complicated derivations neatly on scratch paper. I’d successfully earned others’ respect by giving them a platform to engage. As I continued tutoring by dividing the class into small groups that year, the head teacher recognized me, my classroom behavior and instruction becoming more bold, more energetic, my heart finally winning the battle against self-doubt.

From these experiences, I discovered a way of being that I applied often. When I faced doubt from my robotics team co-leader, Steve, regarding differences in how we’d address a fatal flaw in his robot design plan at 80% completion, we openly discussed the issues diplomatically and I got him to feel comfortable inviting others’ without titles to have their opinions to be heard as well, making us a more united and efficient group. That one change in attitude made us VEX Worlds finalists. To this day, I always self-reflect. It’s become my mantra, and I believe that fostering strong team chemistry, rather than commanding, is what earns a tutor, team leader, and decent person respect.

# Finding Christmas Anonymous

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

I woke up at six that morning. My mom had left an hour earlier to work her two full-time jobs. It was a routine weekend; surrounding me was our ramshackle apartment decorated with sparse furniture, a Hindu temple in the corner, and a telephone I used to call my mom with when I was afraid. This day, however, was different. This was the day: Christmas.

My mom and I arrived in the United States as refugees from Nepal. We moved across the country until we finally found a home in Colorado. It was amidst the frigid air and festive decorations that Christmas became an enchanted time for me.

I didn’t know what Christmas entailed; I listened only to the parts I wanted to hear, and those parts were dominated by the word “presents.” While my elementary school peers brought homemade cuisine to lunch, wore luxurious light-up shoes, and engaged in an assortment of lavish activities, I led a life of free cafeteria meals, hand-me-downs, and the company of mundane apartment walls. To me, “presents” signified more than gifts. Santa’s presents offered me a way to leave my rigid, unstable home life behind for one day and finally feel like a carefree child.

Three months before celebrating my first real Christmas, I found a magnificent three foot tall, worn, plastic tree by our apartment trash bins. I carried it home, washed it off, and showed my skeptical mother. It was our tree, my tree. My incredibly unsanitary, bona fide Christmas miracle. On December 24th, 2004 I plugged in my Christmas tree, laid out dollar-store cookies, and went to sleep filled with anticipation.

6:00am, December 25th, 2004. I ran out of bed and raced to the tree. The cookies were still intact . . . maybe Santa was on a diet? I turned the corner and stared underneath my tree. Empty.

Confused, I looked around. As the tears gathered in my eyes, I called my mom.“Nanu?” she said.I broke down. Through sobs I explained the events of the morning. Silence ensued.“Mamu?”Her voice cracked. Speaking through tears, she explained what no seven-year-old wants to hear: Santa is not real. “Nanu, it’s different for us…”My mom started apologizing to me. Our conversation stretched beyond the nonexistence of Santa; it was an unspoken talk about the struggle we faced to simply survive, about all that we didn’t have, and never would. My mom’s voice radiated hurt, for she knew she could not give me my dreamed storybook childhood. I had no choice but to face the truth and learn to cope, for Santa did not exist.

That night, my mom came home with a cake decorated with a Santa figurine and frosted holiday decorations. It wasn’t my illusioned fantasy, but it was enough.

While my childhood lacked immediate gratification or childish magic, it was supplied with the notion that working hard would eventually payoff. My background is my backbone; it molded who I am today. I learned to find ways around barriers; I grew up knowing that wasting opportunities would render my struggles insignificant. I coped with my harsh surroundings by developing a sarcastic, humorous personality. I valued every moment I experienced. My successes arose from the failures I combat, for my failures have shaped my identity to adapt to any obstacle I may face in the future.

When I think of what lies ahead, I get the same butterflies I got when I thought about Christmas. My childhood was filled with uncertainty and disappointment, but it was also marked by resilience, hope, and an unequivocal excitement about the future. One day, I will create my own Christmas, and keep the idea of Santa alive for as long as I can. As I cross the threshold to adulthood, I know that while Santa may not exist, my real life North Pole is out there, waiting to be discovered.

# Quoted Anonymous

## Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation, title and author at the beginning of your essay.

“This looks not like a nuptial” - Much Ado About Nothing

For a split second hanging in the air, I could feel the forces of gravity drag me toward the packed-down snow. The knowledge that I had made a horrible decision swam through the pink folds of my inner thoughts. Something completely unexpected physically stole the breath from my lungs as my lime-green POC helmet slapped against the white “brick floor.” On the eve of the twelfth year of my life, there was no possible way to anticipate what would follow.The simplest of tricks gone wrong; years of training -- countless hours of practice -- for the whole journey to quickly end during an accident in the warm-up. Nothing could have prepared me for what happened and the delicate balance of life immediately thrust to one polar end of the spectrum. I dreamed for years of skiing that trail -- “Avanti” -- but unfortunately the reality ended in a ferocious crash. The ability to remember vanished in an instant--the same instant that spurred a neurochemical reaction caused by the harsh impact, which knocked me out cold.

The December day was stale, cold, and gloomy. Finally, I pushed my poles into the ground, broke the thin layer of ice, and skated toward the jump. On the first post-lunch run down the hill, I toppled off of the rail and landed directly on my head. What I originally believed to be a cake-walk ended up as the worst injury in my life to this date--a day that still haunts me. I cannot recall precisely what I was thinking during the event, but I can recollect the fuzziness of the snow-covered Rocky Mountains and the grey sky as wavy as heat waves above a turf field in the summer.Looking back, the accident was a turning point in my life. It made me realize how fragile I truly am and that one small moment, just one tiny mis-movement, can upset the balance of life forever. Never before had I thought of myself as vulnerable: I ran around like a mini-superhero and had never had so much as a sprain before, but now I had a full-on concussion. My brain had literally been shaken up in violent fashion like a banana in a blender. Since that day, I have never gone near another terrain park. The risk does not seem worth the reward. My memory of the incident, or lack thereof, still terrifies me. My opinion of an activity I loved so much has completely turned upside down; all my excitement gone forever after that harsh fall on a mere warm-up run. The result did not come close to my expectation and highlighted the importance of memories.

Isn’t it really our memories that define us? Our memories are how we measure our experiences and without them we cannot fully gauge the course of our lives. One fall on my head and my entire personality -- all the memories defining my life -- completely changed. Indeed, there are about seven days of that ski trip that never fully came back to me. It is as if I had not really been there at all because I cannot recall that period of time. Life is tenuous: only one thing has to go wrong for everything to change. All it takes to alter a life is a mis-step on a ski jump, a moment of distraction during a drive, or even a bad marriage. But, at the same time, the preciousness of life is what makes it beautiful. Nothing has ever made me happier than being with my family by the fire the night of my accident, sitting with a flannel blanket wrapped around me, a piece of pizza in my hand -- knowing that I was safe.

# Father Tongue Bea Duric

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

Even with her sharp, monosyllabic words that often lack vowels, my mother is a gentle language whose simple phonetic spelling and liberal syntax nurture me. She is my first love and the first proof of my infatuation for words. She is the essence of my wholeness; her Slavic roots form the straw-colored strands of my hair while her rolled r’s and her unforgiving grammar the sharpness of my moon-shaped eyes, the faint blue vein that runs through my forehead. My father is a different animal; his singsongy tones and mellow rhythm evoke in me an unfathomable joie de vivre and a fondness for storytelling. He, the Swedish language, bridges the cultural gap between my Croatian mother tongue and himself by allowing me to understand the slight nuances of different languages and how various concepts may well hold variable meaning in other dialects.

My bilingual upbringing, which later led to my quadrilingualism, is as essential to my intellectual vitality as bright pink manteaus and pin-up style dresses are to my identity. In fact, my fluency in four languages is a direct cause of my extroverted, eccentric nature and my permanent status as a pochemuchka, one who asks too many questions for their own good. At its core, each language is a story canvas; when I dress, I, too, see myself as a canvas for my own stories. I wear polka-dotted ribbons and indigo overalls because French has instilled in me the confidence to express myself and my raison d’être. Every morning, I devour Ujević’s poetry and articulate his verses in my science class because Croatian made me find subtle connections among a variety of concepts.Swedish reminded me of each language’s cultural heritage; I singsong about this to my friends while I brew them tea and explain the liquid legacy of each mug. Here are the leaves of China’s sweetest oolong; the hands that picked them eight-hundred years ago for Emperor Taizu now pick them for us, too. The empress of my linguistic empire, English, introduced me to the idea of language as an artform when I first started debating. The omnipresence of rhetoric and argumentation continues to instill in me the desire to explore, to invent, and to create while debating has solidified my natural self-motivation and leadership.

Multilingualism as a whole, moreover, has enabled me to link my knowledge of different languages to numerous subjects and thus redefined how I perceive the “boundaries of knowledge.” I recognized, for instance, that the structured nature of languages translates directly into the structured complexity of the human body. For a language to function, words must be placed in the correct order while their meaning is influenced by their connotation. Moments before my biology test, this information helped me understand that for the heart to pump blood, certain chambers must contract before others and that the blood’s oxygen content depends on its location in the body.My fluency in four different languages has, in turn, formed the intersection of four different worlds where I stand and hobble insecurely every now and then. Each world brings with itself its individual legacy and requirements; the more worlds I live in, the more difficult it is to maintain them all.

One of the few things that nobody had ever warned me about multilingualism was how easy it is to feel like you’re losing bits of yourself whenever your fluency in one language weakens. It is daunting and sometimes disheartening when I substitute words from English during a conversation with my Croatian friends. Rather than humiliation, disappointment overcomes me when I forget the appropriate noun case in a sentence or when I use the wrong form of the past tense. Yet the complexity of internally sustaining four cultures is equally empowering as it is difficult. In fact, I no longer abide by the monotonous command, “wherever you are, be there,” because there is something wonderfully riveting and fascinating about living on the intersection of four worlds.

# Mini-Woodstock with Balalaikas Leena Prakhina

## In addition to the essay you have written for the Coalition Application, the Common Application or the Universal College Application, please write an essay of about 500 words (no more than 650 words and no fewer than 250 words). Using one of the themes below as a starting point, write about a person, event or experience that helped you define one of your values or in some way changed how you approach the world. Please do not repeat, in full or in part, the essay you wrote for the Coalition Application, the Common Application or Universal College Application. “Culture is what presents us with the kinds of valuable things that can fill a life. And insofar as we can recognize the value in those things and make them part of our lives, our lives are meaningful.” - Gideon Rosen, Stuart Professor of Philosophy and chair, Department of Philosophy, Princeton University.

The pungent odor of my mother’s borscht drifted across our campsite, along with the smoky smell coming from the fire. The field was filled with cars, tents, and a large stage. Onstage was a famous Russian group, “Masha and the 3 Bears,” playing one of their most popular songs at full blast. In our corner of the field, I sat by my mother, wincing as my father played the guitar and sang a tune of his own, a kind of war ballad that sounded suspiciously like Beyonce’s “Crazy in Love.” To some, this setting might seem bizarre, but to me it was all too familiar.

Since I was five, my family and I have been going to Eastern European music festivals all around the East Coast. At some point, these were a chore, but by now they have become a part of my life, not quite as favored as our annual vacations to Cape Cod but, at least, something that I have grown used to. It is normal for toddlers of Russian ancestry to learn how to walk at their first “Sleyt,” or Russian camping festival. It was here I learned how to play the guitar, and how to make my mother’s most treasured Slavic dishes.

Whenever I told my American friends about these experiences, however, they could not understand why anyone would want to hang out in tents in 45-degree weather and sit by a campfire singing old folk songs. Going to these festivals has kept me connected to my Russian heritage, which runs the risk of getting lost in my blandly Americanized life. Even though my ancestry on my mother’s side is solidly Russian, it took me years to develop a taste for the Russian folk music that was blasting at full volume or to finally sing along to the off-key renditions of “черный бумер” (Black BMW) at 3am. I managed to grow comfortable with the women who would pinch my cheeks and tell me how tall I’ve become, pretending that I remembered them, as they would thrust bowls of lagman (a Uzbekistan beef noodle soup) or plov (a kind of pilaf) into my hands.

Over the course of a weekend, I escaped reality and launched into a kind of surreal mini-Woodstock with balalaikas. “It’s like Coachella,” I would try to explain to my friends, “but for Russians.” My mother, who came to the U.S. from Kazakhstan when she was fourteen, had deep ties to her cultural roots and expected me to share her feelings. However, she also had respect for the roots of others. After all, she married my father, a Jew who happened to be an Alaskan Native, and I was born and raised in Memphis, which clearly has a culture of its own. Given my multicultural mix, my family made sure to teach me about the traditions of the people whose blood ran through my veins. My southern origins gave me a liking for cornbread and Elvis, but I still learned the art of playing that balalaika, singing the Kalinka, and making latkes. I was also ingrained with arcane superstitions that came from who knows what culture.

While most kids were told to look both ways before crossing the street, I was taught to never sit on the edge of a table or I might not have children and God forbid if I whistled in the house. Being able to experience and embrace my own culture has taught me to accept other cultures without judgment. Diversity can positively and negatively influences people’s views, values, humor, hopes, loyalties, and fears. Understanding my own culture and gaining perspective on the culture of others has helped me build relationships and work with many different kinds of people. I plan to draw on that capacity as I move ahead in life.

# Metaphors of Music Henry James Gilchrist

## Describe someone who you admire

I can’t eat Werther’s butterscotch candies anymore. For eight years Mr. Werth, my piano teacher, always kept a bag of Werther’s Butterscotch candies in his bag that he would share with me and my siblings. I have an enduring association between the taste of those candies and the lessons Mr. Werth taught me, the most important of which did not involve sheet music or a piano.

Mr. Werth drove thirty minutes to our house every week for our lessons and would spend all of Sunday afternoon with us. I remember asking my mom one day why he always dressed up the way he did in slacks, dress shoes, a button down shirt and tie, and usually a nice coat. She told me that he thought his job was important, and he took it seriously. Whenever I felt reluctant to practice, I would remember how much Mr. Werth wanted me to succeed. Watching him sit and play the piano between the lessons of me and my siblings, I could tell that playing piano delighted Mr. Werth, and it was his goal to show others how music can bring them joy as well. Early in my piano experience, he waltzed through the door one day, his trusty old German Shepard Josie by his side, and announced that he had something for me. That ancient, but well-maintained, copy of Huckleberry Finn rests on my bookshelf today, accompanied by other treasures that had in some way prompted Mr. Werth to think of me as he wandered his neighborhood Value Village. That day, like many others, my piano lesson lasted two hours instead of the scheduled forty-five minutes, as Mr. Werth was willing to stay as long as a student maintained interest.

For one of our recitals, Mr. Werth suggested that I play “Hey Jude” for the second year in a row. When I had voiced my concerns to Mr. Werth about playing the same song as the previous year, he had merely smiled and said that I played it differently this year. This was a recurring theme throughout my lessons: the idea that one can play a song multiple ways- that a musician is not restricted to how the original author performed the piece. Mr. Werth always encouraged me to transform the music, telling me that I was capable of uniquely interpreting every song. So as I played the first verse of “Hey Jude,” I tried to understand the piece differently and just let the music speak to me. Afterward, Mr. Werth told me that my performance was the best he had ever heard me play.

A few years later, I was in the passenger seat of our family van driving to downtown Seattle with my mom. Mr. Werth had hepatitis-related liver cancer and we were on our way to see him for what I hoped wasn’t the last time. While it was discouraging to see Mr. Werth so restricted that he couldn’t leave his chair, his eyes and his smile told me that his sense of vivacity and joy remained. I sat at Mr. Werth’s ancient piano and played the only song I could think of in an effort to “Take a sad song, and make it better.” As we drove away that night, I still remember the look on Mr. Werth’s face as he listened to me play. He died early the next morning.

Through “Hey Jude” and many other songs, who he was, and how he lived life, Mr. Werth taught me to make things my own. He lived life with a unique style similar to the way he played. His effort and commitment to his students was evident in the joy he experienced at our success. To him, music was important because it becomes an extension of the musician, and each musician can play a piece of music and live life in a way that no one else can.

# Time in 4(+1) Anonymous

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

anacrusis

A basic C major chord followed by an equally basic G major chord, arpeggiated: use your left hand to hit C-E-G… that sounds accurate. Now, slide your hand down a bit further and hit G-B-D. Good. Hit the first chord three times, do the same for the second, one-two-three one-two-three one-two-three; build up a rhythm and once you’re steady, divert your attention to your right hand to play the melody! Lean back and channel the spirit of Mozart for approximately thirty seconds before – your hands are out of sync (again).

My mother loves music. I love hearing her sing, which she does all the time: in the shower, while getting dressed, while doing the dishes, little snippets of her new favorite song are always floating around the house. She’s happy to oblige whenever I join in, but what she really wants is an accompaniment: several of her siblings know instruments and it was to her great disappointment that she never had the opportunity. As such, I wasn’t surprised when out of the blue, I was gifted a keyboard. The surprise was how bad I was at it.

One-handed songs were easy, but I couldn’t handle a second. No assured practice-makes-perfect could convince me that my hands would ever cooperate, and after a year of on-and-off self-tutoring I gave up. My mother sighed and helped me haul the keyboard to the basement.

interlude

At the beginning of third grade, my mother offered me a violin with a hopeful smile. I turned her down. “Maybe sometime else,” she supposed, and it too was left to gather dust. A few weeks later, I draped an old blanket over its case. I didn’t want to see it.

melody

I joined band partially out of spite. My friends told me I’d flunk, so my eleven-year-old pride obviously had to prove them wrong. The director gave me a once-over and said to dig a trombone out of storage. I didn’t even know what a trombone was, but to my eternal relief it was a one-handed operation, and it felt right. There was a good weight to it. The mouthpiece was cool against my lips, there was something amusing about blowing glorified raspberries to produce music, and most importantly there was a sense of redemption.

I had critical issues with trombone, too: high notes, fast notes, proper embouchure, it was all beyond me. The first few weeks I swung between loud squawks and complete silence to the sneers of the otherwise all-male section. I had already taken the easy way out twice, however, and I was unwilling to ditch thrice; I had to have something to show for my efforts. I spent hours practicing afterschool, waiting until I had grasp of a few rudimentary tunes and a clear B-flat scale before taking the instrument home.

After the first song, my mother clapped politely before asking why I couldn’t have just kept at piano. “Trombone doesn’t seem fit for a lady,” my father continued.

da capo

The violin’s been dragged upstairs. My little sister’s middle school offered free lessons and she found herself talented. Moreover, she was dedicated, and my parents would gather in her room to listen to her practice. It felt like another failure.

I found an extra stand and started practicing downstairs.

al fine

There are few things more satisfying than nearing the end of a clean concert. As the first chair, I have the best view of the audience, and sometimes I can find my parents (sometimes not). It’s alright. Things have to be done purely on personal drive, just for yourself, even without approval or validation. Secondhand motivation just doesn’t make the cut.

They aren’t here this time. Lips burning, chest heaving, I bask in the stage lights, holding the last note, and after a moment of silence, stand for a bow with the rest of my section.

# My Realization Anonymous

## Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

The American Ballet Theater (ABT) Gillespie School parent/student meeting back in March started off with nothing exciting, nothing new. New drop off and pickup procedures. The June showcase. Spring evaluations. Yawn. But then the school’s artistic director announced, out of the blue, that she was restructuring the entire program!

I bolted upright, suddenly very wide awake. Going forward, the program would no longer support students wanting to dance in college. Instead, becoming a professional dancer immediately upon high school graduation had to be every ABT dance student’s goal. It was all in or entirely out. Class times for the upcoming fall were moved from after school to 1 pm, an impossible time for me to make if I wanted to continue with my rigorous AP/honors course load and school activities. My world felt like it was crashing down. I was faced with a stark choice: professional dancer or college? Until this point, I always thought I could do both. Now, at age 17, I was forced to make a decision that would affect the rest of my life.

No one was more committed to dance than I was. I spent the last 15 years training up to 30 hours each week. I danced for several years at ABT, one of the nation’s premiere programs, where I blossomed into a highly accomplished ballerina. The only time I ever missed a class was the day our beloved Goldendoodle unexpectedly died. I spent two summers at the prestigious Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet training with some of the best instructors in the world. But I was equally committed to school and my rigorous curriculum. Would I be a quitter if I gave up dance after spending all of those years perfecting my craft? Then again, would I regret not having a traditional college experience and developing my other interests? Would my parents, who had sacrificed so much for me to dance, be disappointed? The decision was consuming my every thought. Now I couldn’t concentrate on ballet or school. I paced incessantly. My heart felt like it was going to burst. My mother reminded me to breathe.

In late spring, I made a decision to focus on my academics and my high school experience. While dance had always been my driving force, when faced with the choice, I realized that I had other passions as well. One of them is politics. I am one of thousands of young women who were energized by the last presidential election. First, by the exciting possibility of a female president and second, by the desire to make a difference given the current political climate. I realized that dance has actually made me into this person who understands politics. When I started dancing, I was shy, introverted and lacked confidence. But over many years of training, I gained discipline, preparedness, resiliency, charisma, and, most importantly, inner strength. I worked through the physical pain of ripped toenails and blisters bleeding through my pointe shoes and the emotional pain of constantly being corrected by teachers, which I then equated with failure. I learned to go beyond just nailing choreography but to embracing the collaboration with fellow dancers and expressing my artistry and passion to move and inspire viewers. These are the same skills I will use as a future politician or lawyer. Thanks to dance, I know how to connect with people and get things done. Criticism will never tear me or my message down. I am poised under pressure.

Ballet will always remain a part of my life. I still take open classes and plan to dance in some capacity in college and beyond. I see now that dance and academia are not mutually exclusive. I am who I am because of ballet. But now I am ready to star in next big production of my life, An American in College, and eventually impact audiences in the political theater.

# The Dragon and I Anonymous

## Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realizationthat sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

It felt like performing dental work on an apprehensive clam without any gloves; the ridges of the Dragon’s bony mouth scraped combatively against my knuckles as it swallowed its treasure. “I cannot imagine the faces of the horrified crowd behind me,” I pondered privately, “Could my parents show their faces here ever again?” This did not matter for me now. That Dragon iguana and I were the happiest beings on the beach for that sweet, beautifully disgusting moment.

Taking a pride in my heritage, I relish the yearly trips my parents and I take to visit my father’s family in Puerto Rico. From the quaint, vividly colored buildings in Old San Juan to the tropical, harmonious cries of coquí frogs and the breezy, palm tree studded beaches lining Santurce, the surreality of the island is enchanting. I hold great respect for the biodiversity that accompanies a tropical island, and I consider this respect an integral part of shaping the way I pursue a career.

Being scientifically fascinated with animals, I seek my dream career of helping the health and survival of various animals. Over the years, my basement has slowly transformed to a research laboratory, with glass tanks and screened enclosures shining glassy, round eyes at their viewers. Focusing my love for animals on exotic species such as amphibians, reptiles, and fish, I consider this passion an emulation of the fascination for wildlife that originated with my trips to Puerto Rico.

Having an impressive range of biodiversity in terms of fish, coral, and land animals, I consider the coasts of Puerto Rico to be the El Yunque of the ocean. An iconic animal for the coasts of Puerto Rico, the green iguana has always been for me an animal of elegance, stature, and power. With a head enameled with green, eyes shining like obsidian, a tail full of spines, feet full of fine scales, and claws like poison darts, the iguana looks like one to call Godzilla its little brother. Inspiring innumerable products and logos in Puerto Rico, the iguana is the undisputed King of all lizards.

And yet I challenged the King. Upon a patch of grass under a palm, I spotted a fierce-looking male iguana, the obvious Head of the Dragons. The sheer length of the Dragon and the curvature of the knife-like serrations that made up his reptilian mohawk told me the creature was an old lizard, unlikely to respond well to a curious human.

I made an adventure out of the Dragon I saw staring me down from his throne. How does one go about approaching the King of lizards? I climbed down to my knees, gradually descending to the grass to pay respect eye-to-eye with the now-curious King. I tore a piece of a soggy bread roll and held it in my finger tips, extending it slowly towards the direction of the King as a king would a sword to a knight. I was lucky to have been the hand to catch a stale roll thrown into the water of the ocean. But was my hand worthy of being the King’s grail?

I suddenly recalled all the instances when my grandmother would warn a boyish me not to go outside: there was an iguana near in the backyard, and it would cut me with its spiny tail. Something had jolted me out of these memories. I was lying in the grass hand feeding a wild green iguana, and the day could not have been better. I was hooked; I knew from then on that I had something special with the animals that I was fascinated with, and I even gained the King’s permission to pursue my passions in the process.

# Avoiding Checkmate Anonymous

## Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a starting point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world. Please write the quotation, title and author at the beginning of your essay.

“There is no point in arguing if you are not susceptible to reason. Embrace your cynicism. Hug it.”  
- **Christopher Buckley**, **The Relic Master**

I have never played a game of chess in which I anticipate every move my opponents make. Typically when I forget to expect the unexpected, the eyebrow-furrowing move before my eyes boils down to one of two themes: Plan B against John-Gabriel is better than Plan A appears, or my lion’s roar of a move is actually a meow on the other side of the board. Did I overlook a check when calculating a sequence? Do they want me to go for that fork? Dear Lord, help me see that secret fifteen-move sequence of 64-square annihilation that composes the epitaph on my notation paper!!

Understandably, chess makes me squint my eyes at choices on and off the board. So many times I ponder the opposite of positive cynicism - whether ignorance really is bliss - and then I laugh at the irony of my dissecting the argument of a philosophy I’ll never observe. My experiences in competing alongside the chess team have governed much of how I formulate the best way of thinking.

Of course after investing 5+ hours per week at practice, countless Sundays at an off-school chess club, Thanksgiving weekend, the weekend before midterms, and even four plane tickets each year, we chess guys appear pretty obsessed with a board game. I certainly would be admiring the puffy walls of padded room from the confines of a straightjacket if I thought chess wasn’t teaching me how to think. When I play chess, I don’t feel like a kid shuffling game pieces around for hours. I really feel like a researcher trying to solve a complicated problem. The world is my board, and my choices are my pieces. I’ve learned that Plan A almost never solves a problem. The world breaks Plans A, B, C, …Z, and my goal is to set up a new, innovative attack. If I position my pieces just right, I can solve any problem that challenges me in chess andin life. As long as I hold true to the maxims of reason, I have no problem dealing with all that life throws me. Once I assume and once I fail to investigate, I lose; I’m checkmated.

According to chess theory, there are two main themes that often decide the victor of a game: space and king safety.

Space leaves a player with multiple options and lucrative opportunities for the future. I use this concept of space to remember that I must leave my mental philosophy free from the infiltrations of others. I think on my own terms and frankly don’t give a hoot if someone disagrees. If I start to make room for other people’s limitations in my morals and philosophical tenets, I kiss my opportunities for greatness away. Again, checkmated.

King safety transcends all other priorities. It is this concept that drives my investigation towards consideration; all choices must consider the safety of myself and others. When I find a potential solution, it goes right in the trash once the side effects start piling up. In terms of undertaking challenges, I want my struggle’s king to be right smack in the middle of the board getting the business from my rooks and queen. This is how I approach challenges.

When I plan for the future and interrogate every candidate choice, I win. Space and safety win me the game of chess and the game of life. Checkmate!