

the naked
TRUTH

**COLLEGE ESSAYISTS HAVE THE TOUGH TASK OF BARING THEIR SOULS TO STRANGERS.
HERE'S HOW 15 HOPEFULS FOUND THEIR FORMULA FOR SUCCESS.**

Applying to college is a lot like standing in the middle of a crowded street wearing a sandwich board inscribed, in highly legible type, with your deepest, darkest fears and loftiest aspirations. And underneath that sandwich board, you're completely naked.

That's how I remember it, anyway. Granted, it's been awhile, but it's not hard for me to dredge up memories of the process; the college visits, the narrowing down of lists, the sweaty palms, the endless standardized tests. The feeling, every time you sat down to work on your college essay, that you were doing something profoundly counterintuitive: baring your soul, and all its craggy, musty corners, to strangers, the gatekeepers of a world you were desperate to inhabit.

Lots of kids, like those featured in this magazine, respond to this pressure beautifully, penning earnest, deeply heartfelt and often profound expositions on the big issues: race, gender, love and death. I was not one of those kids. Seized by supreme bravado, abject fear or, most likely, an intoxicating cocktail of both, I sent off an essay bearing the following title: "Why Lying Works: From the Bible to Ronald Reagan: A Study in the Art of Mendacity."

Oddly, no one stopped me from including this essay in my early-decision application. Even more oddly, I got into my first choice of colleges and spent the rest of

high school trying to avoid ever having to return to calculus class.

I am not sure exactly why I wrote about lying in an essay that was meant to convey some integral and unique part of my personality. I'm a terrible liar, so it wasn't even a particularly truthful bit of writing about the art of being untruthful – which, in retrospect, may have appealed to the admissions committee's sense of irony. I think part of the reason I wrote what I did stemmed from a tiny, underdeveloped rebellious streak that suddenly insisted upon exerting itself. But there's this undeniable truth: An essay about something that had no connection to me or my experiences was safer and far less scary than taking on the big issues. It was the equivalent, if you will, of wearing a bodysuit under the sandwich board.

Read on for essays from kids who went full Monty, gutsy enough to share their lives with the world. Their stories, and more importantly, their successes and advice, should reassure anxious high school students (and their parents) everywhere. You will get in. You will be happy. And if you're really lucky, you'll find yourself in a place that transforms you into a better version of yourself. And that, I can say with every confidence, is no lie.

Jessica Reaves

Found in translation

Oscar Guzmán

Swarthmore College / Jones College Prep

“You are no less than them,” my *tia* Nancy would say. My aunt was also my grammar school tutor and the first in the Guzmán family to attend college. Not only did she lecture me academically, but she also transformed me into a real Guzmán, an individual with dreams. Thanks to my aunt's support, I was the top student in my class, receiving straight A report cards. When I started attending a magnet high school, I began to travel 45 minutes outside of my neighborhood. The transition of environments consisted of numerous changes.

For the past four years of my high school life, I have beaten myself to the ground, making sure that I obtain passing grades and proving myself capable of climbing the highest mountains.

I am more than a number. That's why a test score was not going to prevent me from obtaining my goals.

What hurt the most was not the discouragement provided by my college counselor from applying to selective colleges. Instead, it was her proposal to stop speaking Spanish at home. To her, my language was a barrier to success.

To this day, I have never viewed the Spanish language as a fence. Instead, I have seen it as a linguistic beauty that has been passed down in the family for generations. It has been a language that defines who I am, and I was not going to let a counselor remove my identity. Even though I disagreed with her thoughts, they still affected me. Her thoughts forced me to question. “Will having learned Spanish as a first language affect my future goals? How about my children?”

For the past 18 years, I have encountered many obstacles. People have undermined my potential for not portraying the image of the “American” person, for not

reacting to issues in the same manner or solely for not speaking the English language. The main point to this issue is that I have always been capable of doing these things: the difference is that since birth, my ideas and interests are different, causing me to look at the world from a different perspective.

On April 28, 2003, my aunt Nancy delivered her first baby boy. Adrian Villafranca. It has been over two years since his birth and his first language is Spanish. As I look at Adrian's face every time I visit him, I think about the struggles that he will encounter as he grows. He will face discouragement, racism and hate. Adrian will experience these injustices simply because of the color of his skin and the culture that he was born into. I know that I will do the same for Adrian as his mother did for me. I will teach him how to appreciate the unique and beautiful culture that surrounds him every day. As a Mexican-American, he will have to carry a great cargo like I've done for the past 18 years, and I wish him a lucky passage.

Love it or leave it

Liz Dengel

Princeton / Oak Park and River Forest H.S.

Ln October of my freshman year, I had to take a standardized career compatibility test. I remember a feeling of dread in my stomach as I sat at my desk in homeroom and bubbled in my name. I was giving information to the enemy.

I had devoured as much theater as possible during the previous two years. I was working to build my own identity and not to forge my own path in the world. That page of Scantron bubbles threatened all of my soul-searching. I did not want to know what the testing agency thought I should do with my life. I did not want my aspirations to be undermined by the conclusions of a computer program. For a brief moment, I considered filling my sheet with inaccuracies. When my teacher started the timer, though, I found myself answering honestly. Old habits die hard.

The envelope with the results arrived in my mailbox six weeks later. On the wheel of career options, I had tied in two categories on opposite poles. My relief was boundless. The inconclusive results were the best for which I could have hoped.

My favorite quotation is a Chinese proverb: "Love what you do, and you will never work a day in your life." I had taken the freshman standardized test too seriously. It was meant only to give me ideas about career possibilities that I might some day love, but I perceived the trap of an arranged marriage. I did not want to decide on a sensible career now and hope that I would learn to love it later.

I have carried this proverb with me through every career counseling session and every college information night I have since attended. When helpful high school counselors make prudent suggestions about my future, I

thank them, smile politely, and remind myself that choosing a path is a matter of love.

While Adrian joyously dances around the pastel-colored walls surrounding his room, I quickly realize what an innocent little boy he is, a boy unaware of the mountains that await him. In my heart, I know that he will climb them.

>>**The process:** I think teachers can do a better job of helping with the whole process. For me, it was hard because my parents don't really speak good English, and there aren't really that many people around me who have gone to college. It's different for people who have parents who are pushing them. I have friends like that, but for me it was very different. When you have a passion for learning, you are very self-driven.

>>**The decision:** The most important thing in searching for colleges is finding the perfect fit. If the school is top 20, top 30, you know it's a good school.

>>**Advice:** Just be organized. And start early.

As long as I love what I am doing, its difficulty is insignificant. Fifteen minutes of biology homework always felt like an eternity, but 15 hours of writing flies by in a breath. Ten seconds of swimming is 10 seconds too much, but 10 weeks of dance is a gift. If I have to wait tables in order to pay the rent before I go to rehearsal, then those 16 hours of work will leave me more fulfilled than a 9-to-5 life ever could. As the poet once said, "Money can't buy me love."

In the same way that my ribs feel a little lighter when I enter a theater, I find myself breathing more easily on the Princeton campus. I know the Princeton curriculum is rigorous, but I also believe I will find more to love passionately at Princeton than at any other university. Hours spent sleeping would feel like wasted time in a place where there is so much to see and to know. Four years of inspiration would feel like no work at all.

>>**The process:** I would have liked to hear more often that applying to college is a very personal process. Sometimes you get the feeling that this is very blanket advice, this is good for everyone, this is how everyone should do it. And everybody says to prewrite and write, and edit and edit and edit, and I am sort of a binge writer, I sit down with my laptop and churn it out in an hour and a half, and then my father would read through it for spelling errors and I was done.

>>**Advice:** Never do anything just because it is going to get you into college. You have to enjoy the process. Otherwise you will be so strung out by the time you write essays that you will sound joyless or sad, and no one is going to want to talk to you.

"TEN SECONDS OF SWIMMING IS 10 SECONDS TOO MUCH, BUT 10 WEEKS OF DANCE IS A GIFT" – LIZ DENGEL

Looking for directions

Alex Wolf

Yale University / Francis W. Parker School

As vital as religion has been to me in the defining moments of my life, it has also been a serious point of internal conflict and meditation. I have contemplated how a reasonable person like me could ever buy into the speculative nature of religious belief. By far the most complicated concept for me to grapple with has been the belief in God. Simply put, how can I believe in something that has no fact-checked foundation for belief? The difficulty for me has been that I do believe in God's existence, but I have never been able to explain why, a phenomenon that upsets me. And while I find it preposterous to try to understand everything, I find it essential to not only understand, but to be able to substantiate that which we believe in; otherwise, how can we be sure that we do believe?

My curiosity led me in a variety of directions, including conversations with friends and family, readings of various religious scholars, and long hours of meditation; however, none of these avenues provided me with answers. Frustrated, I approached the only person I knew who could provide me with at least some direction in my search. After formalities, I straightforwardly asked my rabbi, "How do I know if God exists?"

"You could start by finding Him," he pointed out.

"And how do I do that?"

"By looking," he strangely replied.

"I know that," I said. "But where should I look? Where will God be?"

He thought for a second, stroked his beard and replied, "I don't know. We all discover God in different places."

"What about you?" I quickly asked. "Where did you meet God?"

He paused again, then responded, "How far are you from the east?"

I looked blankly, but figured he had a point, so I said, "Um, we live about a mile ..."

"No, I mean how far are *you* from the east?"

Confused again, I responded, "I guess, one step."

"Go there.," I stood up and took one step toward the

back part of the room. "Are you east now?"

I pondered, then said, "Well, no, really. I mean, east is still one step away."

"And so is God. He is as far from you as east to west, and as close to you as north to south."

I left his office with a funny feeling. For a while, I took his words to mean that I could never find God. After all, no matter how far I traveled east, or for how long I ventured south. He would be one step away, eternally past my arm's reach. Dejected, I temporarily ended my search in the same, explanationless state as I had entered it.

However, as I thought about the rabbi's statement more, I realized that this may not have been what he was trying to say. It wasn't that I could never find God; it was that I could never be away from Him. The rabbi was simply trying to tell me that while we may never actually meet God, we are always under His direction and that His guidance is one step away so that even if He's not in the form that we would expect to find him in, we see Him, in the face of a distant friend, and hear Him, in the wise words of a grandparent, and touch Him, in the embrace of a loved one. He's there, urging me to go a little farther, pushing me to work a little harder, striving to make me a little better.

>>**Worst memory:** I knew I wanted to go to Yale. I applied early there and got deferred. I had slacked off on some of my other application. I had wanted to go there so much that I sort of didn't leave the possibility of not getting in, which was, in hindsight, extremely unintelligent. I think I wrote three essays in one day, and I was really nervous at that point.

>>**Advice:** Don't do things just to make your resume look good. Instead, I would say, "What am I interested in?" and then find something awesome that you can do in that. Put your best foot forward, but don't put forward a foot that you don't have. Just be yourself, but be the greatest version of yourself that you can be.

Homeland insecurity

Ria Tobaccowala

Harvard University / University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

Tornadoes have the horrific ability to disrupt and rearrange everything. Two years ago, a tornado struck my life and made me reexamine myself, question my country and almost give up my passion.

In a burnt yellow cornfields of the Prairie State, I gazed at the world through a 50 mm lens. An array of electrical towers stood tall in the moribund monotony of cornhusks. Click. This seemed to be the exact abstraction my assignment demanded. Hoping for a little beginner's luck, my index finger made final contact and the shutter winked.

The night after the photography venture, a detective called my home. He identified us by our license plate number and needed to know why, in his words, a girl of Middle Eastern descent was taking pictures of electrical towers. Unaware I had broken any unstated laws about creating art in a cornfield, I explained the photography class and my non-Middle Eastern heritage, hoping to appease any doubts the officer had about me.

The next day, our cleaning lady heard a persistent knocking above the din of the vacuum cleaner. At the door was an armed FBI agent from the counterterrorism network. Worried whether he was going to deport her to Poland, she opened the door and the agent took a walk around the house, gave his business card, and finally asked if only an Indian family of four lived in the household and nobody else. Satisfied with her reply and his unwarranted search, the agent dropped my case and departed to investigate his next "suspect."

Myriad questions and feelings of distrust plagued my mind. Dust had collected on my camera since it was exiled to a closet. I wondered how this devise of metal, mirrors and glass prisms could instigate a federal investigation of terrorism. How could anyone suspect that I was a terrorist? So I'm brown with an unusual foreign last name and was taking pictures in the mixture of cornfields and electrical towers, but terrorism was not one of my weekend hobbies. Frustration rose within my body like mercury. How could America, my country, treat me like a forbidden alien?

The moving walkway of life carried me away from the incident and forward to the future. Support from my

photography teacher, school officials, friends, and family rekindled my passion for photography.

After a bad first experience with photography in the cornfields, now as I peer through the lens, the world looks different. Initially all the colors had blended together and I couldn't understand this situation, but at this moment, I see all the hues distinctly. I see the three perspectives of the FBI agent, the electrical company employee who made the initial report and my venture in the fields. Through rose-colored spectacles, I saw art in the corn and electrical towers as a sublime union between nature and man. The employee observed a girl standing in the middle of a cornfield taking pictures of electrical machinery, and the dutiful agent followed up on a report in order to protect America.

Today, I believe seeing life from alternate angles and other peoples' points of view is critical in our world. All of us saw the scene with a different perspective, like every photographer views the world through her own unique lens.

>>>**The process:** I think kids always complain that applying for college is a horrible process, you know just cruel and unusual punishment. But I actually learned a lot about myself and a lot about how the world works. You have to evaluate yourself and kind of think about who you are at this point. That is always interesting. Do I have any regrets? Do I have things that I cherish as the best thing I've ever done? It also made me a stronger person, more tough-skinned. Yeah, you are being evaluated, but you are who you are, so accept that.

>>>**What's the best role for parents:** For parents, they have to be hands-on. A lot of parents think their kids will do it, this is their thing, but it really helps when your parents are sitting with you, brainstorming ideas with you, reading your essays critically, and, you know, maybe not pushing you and hitting you on the head to write an essay tonight, but they are your best outlet. More than counselors or friends. Your parents know you the best.

Speaking for myself

Ameerah C. Phillips

Amherst College / The Latin School of Chicago

It's only October and still about 50 degrees outside. The Zaragoza wind is ferocious enough to make me think I'm in the middle of January. Leslie and I walk vigorously in an attempt to keep warm and arrive home quickly. We chit-chat for awhile, simply filling what would otherwise be a long, awkward block of time. It's not that we don't want to talk – we are friends – but our day began at 7:30 in the morning, and all we want to do at this point is collapse onto our beds and not wake up until we hear the excruciating sound of our alarm clocks.

Leslie politely inquires how my day went and after a “pretty good” response I return the question. We continue chatting about the weather, the tremendous amount of homework, our host families in Spain, friends and family back at home, etc. We're passing Dyper, Zaragoza's premiere beauty and cosmetics store, when

she asks me if I mind stopping for a moment and going in with her. Despite being tired, hungry, and anxious to get home, I do what I think is right and simply murmur. “*No me importa*” as we proceed to enter the store.

Two minutes later. Wait!!!! What just happened? What did I just say? No really, what just came out of my mouth? I didn't think about it? I didn't plan it out first. It wasn't premeditated. Was it grammatically wrong? Or right No, it was right, in fact it was absolutely perfect.

Grabbing Leslie's arm I gasp. “Do you know what just happened? Do you know what I just said?”

Confused she responds. “Well I know what you said, but what happened?”

“I just spoke in Spanish without thinking!!!”

Then it clicks; she understands why I'm so overjoyed, and shares in my excitement. I did not stumble and trip over words, butchering them as they came out of my mouth; instead, I simply said what first came to mind. I did not attempt to use the most proper Spanish, taking too long just to tell her, “*No tengo una pre-, prefa – preferencia.*” I didn't spend minutes just thinking of where the verb or noun should be placed. No

My secret past

Summer Abdoh

University of Wisconsin / Nicholas Senn H.S.

Everyone has a story tell, a hidden secret, and sooner or later will have an epiphany on their true existences in society. My story begins at the age of 5, when reality showed me the other side of the green pastures. It was around May of 1993, when my brothers and I were taken from school and put in a foster home. We were completely unaware of what was happening and the

time spent wondering if I was saying the phrase with the proper Spanish “th” accent. What I'd done was simply open my mouth and say the first thing that came out. Most importantly, Leslie understood me.

I hurried home to share with others what I'd just experienced. Upon entering the house I immediately informed my host mother of the wonderful news. She smiled and told me, “*Muy bien.*” Even so, the truth shone through. My host mother, just like Leslie, didn't comprehend what a huge accomplishment this was, but I didn't let her response hinder my joy. Maybe my host mother hadn't understood me because I didn't explain the situation clearly; after all, my Spanish was still a bit shaky. Most of the time I did have to concentrate on where the verb should be placed, or should it be in the singular or plural tense. I couldn't think of any other reason for her not to be bouncing off the walls right along with me. So I called a few friends back in the U.S.

I shared the revelation I'd had and how proud I was of myself. There response was even less enthusiastic than Leslie's or my host mother's. In fact, one friend was critical of me. They felt that I'd been living in Spain for a month and a half and at that point speaking without thinking should have been second nature to me. I took their comments to heart. I became disappointed in myself for not having had my breakthrough sooner.

That evening, in a phone conversation, my mother reminded me that I'm not perfect and that everybody learns and adapts at different rates. Doing what mothers do best – nag – my mother helped me recognize the achievement I'd made and helped me regain my sense of pride. She had struck a chord: I realized that I couldn't hold myself up to other people's expectations – I'd have to work for myself. My “*No me importa*” may not have been a grand speech or anything spectacular, but its significance is enormous.

>>>**Decision:** It just has to feel right. The last two weeks in April I narrowed it down to three schools, and I honestly saw myself being really happy at any of them.

whereabouts of my mother and father. Later, we found out my mother was in the hospital fighting to stay alive and my father disappeared.

I spent five years moving from house to house, living with complete strangers, and enduring struggles and pains that no child should. These details of my life are hidden from everyone outside of our nuclear family.

I have struggled to keep this a secret, but as time progressed, I have become more mature about the subject. Sometimes, when I reminisce, I can't believe that was my past. I remember going to school in 2nd and 3rd grade, and all the kids would ask me what was my ethnicity, and why I didn't look like my mother. I would come up with these elaborate answers that would appease them momentarily. My true identity was not known until I saw my mother for the first time after she got out of the hospital.

When I first saw her, it was probably the happiest I have ever been. She couldn't stop crying when I asked her questions about our background and my father. When the visit was over, my heart broke when I watched her go back to the hospital. My mother amazes me sometimes; she endured several court appearances, visitations and goodbyes. She is the strength that encouraged me to see the brighter side in the never-ending darkness.

In 1998, my mother victoriously walked away with us by her side. That year opened more than the front door to home; it opened me up to my father. When he came, the truth about my mother's hospitalization and us being in foster homes was revealed. I couldn't bring myself to give him a hug or even call him father. In my eyes, he had caused the worst five years of my life.

Storybook life

Ariela Rotenberg

Wesleyan University / Walter Payton College Prep

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Ariela, who lived in a town called "Rains-a-lot." Thus began all of the nights of my childhood. For 12 years, my father would tuck me in and lie down next to me. There were times when I was so eager to hear the story that I could scarcely breathe. And then he would say those 18 magical words. My father spun me stories, both original and borrowed from literature. I was first made aware of quests through one that Ariela Too-Many-Cocoas (for that was my character's name) went on with her friends in search of rings that represented the five senses. I later learned that this particular epic story that took my dad over a week to tell was loosely based on "The Lord of the Rings." It seems remarkable to me that even 11 years later I can remember "dust bunnies" (a particular version of villain in the story) and smile.

During my American Girl phase, after I read a "Felicity" book in which she saves a horse and develops a friendship with her. Ariela the character too found a horse who soon became her friend. Even today, although I cannot remember the exact

My father was a very respectable man in Jordan. However, behind closed doors he was abusive. Now, at the age of 17, I have forgiven my father for what he did to my family. I have spent so many years trying to forget the past. In reflection, my experience in foster homes has proven useful to me. It reminds me that I should never take anything for granted because you never know what you will have till you lose it.

My mother has inspired me to fight for what I want. Her near-death experience didn't stop her from fighting the state to get us back. She only got stronger when they told her she will never succeed. I refuse to ruin my future or become another statistic that blames her mistakes on a father or a horrible childhood. The reality is that nothing comes without a struggle, and if you don't experience sacrifice while you're young, you will when you grow up.

Granted, I haven't had my life's great realization. I solemnly believe that college will help me develop character and enlighten my psyche to life outside the comfort zone. My communication and educational skills will have dramatically improved and that will have a profound effect on my fate. Through my years in high school, I noticed that everyone has a story, something to hide, and a vision, but it takes a great and unique person to mold it to their advantage.

content of my dad's stories, I can remember perfectly the feeling of anticipation they inspired and my regret when he went back to his room after each night's installment. Because I developed such intimate connections with stories so early, I have continued to be fascinated by them, although more recently I have begun exploring beyond fiction.

My father stopped tucking me in when I was around 13 because I thought I was too old; I wanted to be treated like an adult. With no tuck-in, there were no more stories. My mother used to tell my dad, "Write down the stories. Write a book, or at least put something onto paper that Ariela can tell her children." My father's reply was always the same: "Ari will come up with her own stories."

In a way, my father's prediction has already come true. I do tell stories, although they are different from the kind that he told me growing up. Last year I started writing creative non-fiction essays. My friends sometimes mock me for writing essays for fun, but my dad gets it. I write about my life, and I try to get some sense of who I am as I relate to the world through my essays. They are

non-fiction, but I write as if I were telling a story, as if Ariela is a character whose thoughts at a particular moment should be expressed. I add detail to personalize my “character,” to make her as memorable as the “dust bunnies” of my childhood.

At my bat mitzvah five years ago, my father started his speech to me with the very words with which I began this essay. By the end of the speech we were both crying. It is the only time I can remember my father crying. But the “Ariela of Rains-a-lot” stories were more than just a connection with my dad. He wanted me to love the written (and spoken) word even before I was old enough to appreciate works like “The Lord of the Rings.” In return, I will continue to love and explore them.

A winning hand

Jose Acevedo

Pomona College / Walter Payton College Prep

Pedro Camuy, my grandfather, is the strongest man that has ever graced my life. His influence has affected my spirituality, my ability to take risks, and most of all my sense of identity. He’s touched my life in the most profound of ways; making me feel that at his age of 63, he’s experienced more than I ever could even if I lived to be 200 years old.

Over dialysis machines and hospital meals, because of failure of both kidneys, his heart, and complications of infection due to diabetes, Pedro Camuy has taught me to be at peace with God. While lying in a hospital bed for weeks on end he’s taught me to not curse the situation you are in, but to pray that you are given one more day to live, regardless of how hard that day is. With the recent birth of a grandchild, my cousin, he’s shown me more than anything that if you believe enough, you can survive anything. With a new life to guide, he’s been given a new reason to fight through every day. He has been in and out of the hospital since I was 10 years of age, yet he has always emerged stronger. He is a fighter, claiming that it was a love for his family and faith that brought him home.

Over poker tables, amidst the thickest of tensions, he has taught me to play the odds. He told me when to set your cards down on the table and take a loss, but he also taught me something else more important. He taught me when it is worthwhile to lay down every dollar you have for what you think is a winning hand.

It is with this in mind that he came to America, knowing that the well-being of himself and his family was riding on his ability to succeed here. He did this with fear in his heart, but a poker face exposed to the world. This is how he taught me to think about life. He

>>**The essay:** I try to be a modest person, and I don’t like the idea of having to make myself appear wonderful to someone so that they will want me. On the other hand, it was a good opportunity for me to think introspectively – to see how can I portray myself on paper in a way that is honest and true to who I am.

>>**Stress:** I like lists. The process of checking stuff off made me feel more comfortable, in control. Also, having a really strong support system of friends. It was really helpful for my parents and friends to remind me that if I was rejected from somewhere I wanted to go, it in no way reflected my ability or my intellect or anything about me. It is heartbreaking to be rejected from a school you really want to go to, but it isn’t about you.

showed me to not be afraid to lose it all, because that could be the one experience that makes you a better person. He told me to never be afraid to bet the deed to your small business on a poker game, because you just might have the other guy beat. He lost that hand: he has lost a lot of hands. But, more than anything, he picked himself back up after every big loss. That’s how he played poker; that’s how he lived his life; that’s how he showed me who I was.

On couches in houses surrounded by the most overt display of heritage, we have talked. We’ve talked about me, and all the things that came before me. We’ve talked of family lost, family gained, and told stories that you can only believe when coming out of the mouth of those that lived them. He has told me the stories of my people, of the discovery of America, and the people that all Puerto Ricans originate from. During these talks, the look in his eyes was one of fire. It is a look I could never duplicate, but I can only hope that my DNA has allowed me to give an imitation of this look that would prove I was my grandfather’s grandson. These were the talks that made me Puerto Rican; these were the talks I’ll have with my grandchildren one day.

Ernest Hemingway once said, “There are some things which cannot be learned quickly, and time, which is all we have, must be paid heavily for their acquiring. They are simple things, and because it takes a man’s life to know them, the little new that each man gets from life is very costly and the only heritage he has to leave.” My grandfather has never heard this quote, but has proved Hemingway’s words as the truth. All that a man has to leave is what he has learned in his life.

What my grandfather has taught me is where I came from. His teachings have made me want to take a risk, put on a brave face, and go to a college away from home, knowing my heritage and that I am under the protection of God. His teachings have given me the lessons that no classroom ever could. For this, he is the most influential person to ever grace my life.

Starstruck

Kelsey Andersen

Mount Holyoke College / North Shore Country Day School

One may gaze at the stars to marvel at the romance of one shooting across the sky, to illustrate a tale through a constellation, or to study the hydrogen and helium composition of the spectacle. Someone else might wonder at the possibility of life on other planets beyond our reach or of the infinite realm of scientific exploration available to us. I, however, prefer to inspect the finiteness of our own existence. Just as the smallest creatures observe the foreboding beings that walk above them. I realize our defined scope in life. The stars can represent our limits as much as they are associated with the limitless.

When looking up at the stars, I am reminded of the precious time one is given and with which he or she has a choice to make a meaningful contribution. Even the slightest act can make a difference, and one must be cautious that it is not destructive. This is what the stars tell me. The vast blackness is dotted with their brilliance, just as our lifeline is marked by our achievements, contributions, and connections to others. I prefer to see the stars symbolically, rather than scientifically. As the shooting star sweeps the sky and disappears into oblivion, a child cries for the first time and the elderly and sick cry for their last. These fleeting moments can have profound significance.

In a stressful moment. I choose to glance up at the sky. In this, I can find peace as I realize the insignificance of my worry. I feel my lonesome smallness, but also that which ties me to the larger world. In wide-open landscapes, among the tall grasses of the Midwest prairie, or the sand dunes of the East, and the cool waters of the shared oceans, the stars shine clear; their message reaches me. I am reminded of the love I have for my family as well as my connection to my fellow man. Staring into the expanse of the sky and in my peripheral vision. I can take in my immediate surroundings where I grasp the meaning of time, its beginnings and ends, and that which is continuous. My concern is then but a blink, and my life a flicker in the greater universe. My thoughts turn to the more important ideas in life, of my loved ones, my good fortune and how I could possibly better that of my fellow neighbor.

I do not feel disconnected looking into the darkness, but more united with my brother and sister here on

>>Advice: It's never too early to start looking at colleges and to make sure your GPA is where it needs to be. As much as we all like to think that they only look at the person, a lot of it goes into grades and how well you are performing. It is just the fact of it.

>>Advice for adults: I would say to parents that they need to let their child leave the nest. If it is in Juneau, Alaska, let them leave.

Earth. I think of the stranger I have not yet had the opportunity to meet, and what might be the circumstance of our encounter. I sense our commonalities more than our differences. One culture is not upside down and the other right side up, one progressive and another backward. We share the guilt and the praise for what has been done during our time, the time before, and the time to come. The interconnectedness of generations and cultures is prevalent in my thoughts as I look up at the stars.

I am not overwhelmed by the immensity of the night sky nor of its ominous associations, but rather overwhelmed by the wondrous life I have been afforded, and of the endless opportunities I shall find to leave my own lasting mark. Whether it be a personal gesture of kindness or a more organized act of humanity. I look to the stars to remind myself of my goals.

I think of my ancestors' spirits sprinkled amongst the stars as the Native Americans do, and of my own descendants who someday may think of me, their great-grandmother. I look to the stars for an understanding and awareness of myself and others. Stars can shine on the path of my quest in life, my purpose, showing me how I fit into the constellation of society and how I shall shape it as I journey.

>>Looking back: You spend so much time in the admissions office that you don't really know what the faculty is like. Somebody could have said to stop in, bother a professor, knock on their door and find out about them. It would get you a little further than the tour.

>>Advice: Get to know your college counselor but don't take it all so seriously. You still have four years. Just kind of ignore it until you take the PSAT.

>>Best role for adults: The whole family went to Brown, but they didn't push me in that direction. I think there are those kids who have trouble with the process because their parents are putting pressure on them. They end up not going to school that is the best fit. The whole name brand thing that parents and adults put on you is not helpful. And I suppose for other adults, to remove their experience from your own. It is nice to hear about adults and their perspective and what their experience is like, but when they impose it on you, none of us like that.

Stepping up to the plate

David Mejia

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign / Northside College Prep

I sat on the bench staring across the turf at the opposing team's dugout. Looking back at me was a familiar face proudly sporting a baseball cap and smile.

I remembered the first time they escorted me to the basement to tutor. It was not a place meant for learning, but for storing broken chairs and books that were in old Corona boxes. It was a place where kids were expected to get help, but mainly where objects were left and forgotten about.

These children were teenagers, young Latinos just like me, certainly not the age group I had experience with from my work as a camp counselor. They were resistant at first, embarrassed to ask for help. When the sun broke through the barred windows I would see their enigmatic expressions. I sat down feeling rejected. Noticing the boy's baseball jersey next to me I inquired about it, hoping to achieve some social interaction. He talked about baseball and we shared our mutual respect and love for the game. He replied with a no when I asked if he played for his high school and he explained

that it was for academic reasons.

I persisted in helping him with his homework but remained confused by the information in his book. Finally I came to the startling realization that he couldn't read. My supervisor asked me to talk to him because he did not know how to go about it. I encouraged him to keep trying and continually worked with him. Gradually his grades soared from D's and F's to C's and B's.

Seeing his smile that day at the game, I smiled back and the feeling of completion overwhelmed my body. I attained victory before the first pitch was ever thrown. My trance was broken when the two most appropriate words were uttered: "Play ball."

>>>**Advise:** Get started early. Just take a day or two and write things out for the essay. I have to say that at first I wrote the most terrible, awful things and just got them out. But if you wait until the last day, those terrible, awful things are going to be what you send into the college and that is what they will see.

Names and phases

Samantha Wanling Tsang

Georgetown University / New Trier Township H.S.

My name is Samantha Wanling Tsang. Or at least that's what it says on my birth certificate, but in real life I have many aliases. No, I'm not a secret agent working for the CIA. In fact, as we all grow up, we gain many aliases – what others may call nicknames. Although seemingly meaningless, these nicknames all define a certain era in our lives. I have gone through many nicknames, and each reflects a vital aspect of who I am.

Fai JuJu. This Chinese nickname translates into "fat little pig." Like my two older sisters, I had to endure this nickname for seven years. As part of the Chinese culture, it is considered a form of affection to relate your child to an animal, usually a pig. However, my parents also say that this nickname was a reflection of my love for food. They recalled my first steps, claiming that the only way I was willing to take my first step was if there was a cookie waiting for me. I guess you could say that, in a way, the "little fat pig" is not only still in me, but is hungry for more. Not only do I have a hunger for all types of food – Chinese, Thai, Italian, French – but now I also have a hunger for new experiences – traveling, sports and learning.

Sunny. When I was born, my mother debated between Samantha and Sunny, and although she chose Samantha, Sunny became my alias for four years. These

were the years when my creativity developed. Playing off my nickname, my sisters would joke that my boyfriend was the man on the moon. They would write me love letters, claiming that they were sent from my boyfriend. At this gullible age, I readily believed them. I would write my own letters and think of ways that I could visit the moon. Although I eventually realized the fictitiousness of the man on the moon. I never lost my ability to imagine.

Samantha. From 11 to 16, people knew me as Samantha. This name reflected a period of my life when I matured tremendously. In church, I took a more active role that developed my responsibility: teaching 3rd grade girls in Sunday school. At school, I became immersed in my studies and learned to love so many subjects – biology, English and Chinese – as well as endure other subjects – U.S. history and pre-calculus. Outside of school, I became interested in many eclectic extracurricular activities such as varsity badminton, Chinese Club, Christian Club, piano, and social service. The "Samantha Era," however, was perhaps too much about standards of achievement, titles, rankings and winning. What was lacking was an active social life, and this imbalance has led to Sam.

Sam. This is my current nickname, marking a new era of balance. Nowadays, you can find me, if done with

my homework and studying, hanging out with friends at the beach or various restaurants. Knowing how to work hard is essential, but so is knowing how to relax and socialize. Instead of imagining a friend from the moon, I now have real friends that I write to and think about. Instead of my hunger for just food, I have grown to hunger for so much more, like experiencing different cultures. And instead of being a reclusive bookworm, I am now – yes, still studious – but social as well. I guess you could say that Sam has become an embodiment of

Caroline Kleeman

Brown University / University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

>>**The process:** I think that a lot of parents, especially, are too involved with the process. What ends up happening is that those kids feel their parents won't be happy with them if they don't get the school either they or their parents want them to go to. Parents should step back and say that the whole reason of going to college is to be out on your own and that should first happen in the application process.

>>**Advice:** Stay on top of your work. Don't let anything be too much for you. You really can get through it. It will seem like a lot of work at first. It is new and kind of scary, but it will be okay.

>>**The essay.** The essay is a chance to show who you really are, other than numbers and grades.

Sonia Roberts

Vassar College / University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

>>**Advice:** Visit colleges. If there are some things you really care about, research schools first, then go visit them. You never know if you like them until you get there. If you visit only the colleges you are going to get into, that is fine but go see them. Parents should make sure their kids know that admissions people deal with a lot of kids every day. And they know what you are going through. They know you are stressed out and that you probably are not doing your best on the application essays. That you are probably are not doing your best on the application essays. That you probably are not that

all: Fai JuJu, Sunny and Samantha.

Although three of these eras in my life have come and gone, I have taken something from each one. I know that this is not the end of my many name changes, and I can't wait to see what the future holds. But, for right now, you can just call me Sam.

>>**Advice:** I wish I had researched colleges at the beginning of junior year. I could have seen the ones I wanted and their requirements, and then worked toward them. I would have been more prepared.

Keith Jackson

University of Wisconsin / John Hope College Prep

Advice for adults: Be there for them. Guide them. Don't just let kids go out on their own. Help them research colleges and schools as early as possible. You may have to assist them way more than just thinking they are doing what they need to be doing.

>>**The essay.** Let them see you as though they are really meeting you: like reading your biography or something.

>>**The future:** I expect the unexpected. I know that college is way different than high school. It is a whole other level. I know I will have to work harder and study harder than I did in high school.

“THE SPOTLIGHT TO ME, IS A MOMENT OF SUCCESS, EVEN IF IT'S FOR SOMETHING SMALL.”

- KEITH JACKSON

bad of a student, even if you get a 26 on your ACT. They can look at your GPA and say, “Calm down and apply to schools that are within your range.” Don't stress out over it. It is not worth stressing out over.

>>**The essay:** Don't try to be somebody else. Try to illustrate who you are rather than what the college is looking for. If you just let your personality flow through the paper, then they will pick up whether or not you will fit. If you aren't a good fit, then they will pick that up. Trust them.