

Essays on adversity and achievement

by Bottom Line students

I am the opportunity

*Now, I don't see that next challenge
to engage me.*

Afraid? No.

Hesitant? Of course not.

Ready? As I'll ever be.



Bottom Line

Get in ♦ Graduate ♦ Go far

Success depends on you

Contents

Finding Paths to Personal Achievement	2
The Hustle by Valduvino Goncalves	3
The Flags of My Success by Valeria Cabrera	4
Mi Casa Es Tu Casa by Karen Zepeda	5
Unbreakable by Kamarah Horwitz	6
My Mother's Battlefield by Yi Me Chen	7
Empty-Handed by Alana Ponte Capellan	8
Presenting...Me by Melissa Agenoir	9
The Best Revenge by Carlos Richardson	10
The Architecture of My Life by Ina Duka	11
My Life Has Changed by Mahad Hashi	12
My Legacy by Josefa Dasliva	13
Paving My Path by Priscilla Amado	14
Only the Beginning by Mirlinda Sejdiu	15
How You Can Help	16



Finding Paths to Personal Achievement

The essays in this book were written by high school seniors from the class of 2008 in Bottom Line's College Access program. In our Access program, students learn to navigate complex college research, application, and financial aid processes. Perhaps the most challenging task of the college application is perfecting the essay. This is a piece of writing unlike anything each student has ever written: a 500 word statement that represents their past, present and future. These brief statements cannot adequately describe the versatile, multidimensional students that write them, but they do provide a glimpse of their strength, courage and perseverance.

Most Bottom Line students are in the first generation in their family to go to college. Many have been in the U.S. for only a few years; others play a critical role in providing financial support and other resources for their families. They are all remarkable young adults. Their dedication drives them to travel from all over the city to our office to spend hours with counselors completing their college applications. Their hard work pays off.

Bottom Line is a nonprofit organization founded in 1997 to help improve the quality of life in urban communities through higher education. Our staff creates opportunities for socially and economically challenged urban youth to lead successful lives by earning college degrees. Bottom Line helps students overcome the formidable barriers to "get in" with support programs and personalized attention. Our students earn college degrees at twice the rate of the national average in their peer group. Bottom Line alumni overcome incredible personal hurdles and become role models of success for their community, as well as sources of inspiration to their families and peers.

The Hustle

by Valduvino Goncalves



As a senior at the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, Valduvino Goncalves is at the top of his class and is also very involved in different activities. At O'Bryant Valduvino is a part of the Cape Verdean Club, the Journalism Club, and also is the scorekeeper at basketball games. He also works part time at Target.

Valdy will be the first in his family to attend college. He applied to ten schools including Northeastern University, Tufts University, UMass Boston, Bridgewater State College, and Boston College. He plans to major in Business, Communication, or Education.

Police sirens, dirty street corners, and the sound of firecrackers...or were they gunshots? Looking out my window one night, I saw a swarm of police cars and ambulances. My neighbor Marlon had just been shot over what witnesses said was a petty argument. Growing up in the "hood," has taught me a lot about myself, and what I want in life. After witnessing violence firsthand, I have come to realize the importance of an education and that no one can ever take my education away from me.

The problem with my "hood" is that many here have a "hood" mentality. They feel they have to hustle, by doing drugs and being gangsters. However, my mother has always told me, "Valdy, be your own person; don't do what everyone else is doing." These words come from a very wise woman, so I listen. However, I too hustle. I hustle in school and at work everyday. I strive for the best grades because I know the importance of an education. I discovered my love of writing and this year I have put my skills to work as the editor of my school's newspaper, the O'Bryant Edition. As the Features Editor, I have learned that deadlines must be met and how to work well with others.

These lessons have made me a leader in the community as well as the classroom. As a counselor at a summer camp for immigrant children called Boston Refugee Youth Enrichment (BRYE), I taught students English as a second language and other aspects of American culture. They were good kids, but some had already developed a "hood" mentality. One boy would brag about "chillin" with his boys and stealing from stores. This made me realize that to get rid of the negative aspects of the "hood", we need to be good role models and talk to the kids and get to know them.

Every day last summer, I spent time talking to the kids and getting to know them better. I feel that the kids benefited a lot by having me as a role model as I helped them to realize that school is cool, which made me realize that I must further my own education at a college institution. I will show the kids of my neighborhood, as well as my peers, that anyone can do it. In college I will put my leadership and writing skills to work, so I can shine over the stereotypes that society places on urban communities and be that role model.

I am not just a kid from Roxbury. I am Valduvino Goncalves, a leader, a writer, and a role model. I am not a stereotype, but rather a teenager with a positive outlook on life. Being from Roxbury has helped me to appreciate myself, not because Roxbury is a bad place, but because this is my "hood" and I am a product of this environment. Even though Roxbury has its negative aspects, there are still many good people here who want to do right. I am one of them.

The Flags of My Success

by Valeria Cabrera



A student at English High School, Valeria has maintained a near-perfect GPA while taking a range of honors and AP courses. She is also a leader in her school and community, serving as drill team cadet in JROTC, and youth organizer through Teen Empowerment, while also participating in Upward Bound, 826 Boston, and TAG.

Valeria will be the first person in her family to attend college and hopes to earn a degree from Boston College or Smith. Other colleges on her list include UMass Amherst, Northeastern University, Wheaton College, Bentley College, Princeton University, and Harvard University.

I will always remember the flags of the different countries that sway in the main lobby of my high school. To me, these flags are more than stars, stripes, and bright colors. They represent the struggle, dedication and hope of students who immigrate to this country. One flag especially stands out. Beautifully crafted, with an emblem reading "Dios, Patria y Libertad (God, Homeland and Liberty)," its blue, red, and white colors represent patriotism, independence, and religion. It evokes one of those long summer days that I often yearn for.

Back in the Dominican Republic, I was a paragon of academic excellence, but moving to the United States ignited a relentless fear of failure. My dread of new experiences disguised itself as thoughts of inadequacy and threatened to forever shatter my dreams and goals. The transition between cultures was very distressing. After moving to the US, I was moved from ninth to the eighth grade and placed into the English as Second Language program (ESL). I was convinced that I was a total failure. I thought I had lost what my parents swore nobody would ever be able to steal from me: my education.

I escaped from this stress by submerging myself in the world of literature. I read an immense quantity of books, everything from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen to *Drown* by Junot Diaz. I went to school during the morning and spent my afternoons and evenings reading. Without realizing it, I was creating a basic foundation of knowledge that would help me in years to come.

During the first months in school, I was very shy and never spoke up or answered any questions. One day Ms. Wong, my ESL teacher, asked me to read a book report I had written on Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. As I finished reading, I realized my classmates were staring at me, astonished, "Tu hablas ingles! (You speak English!)," one of them shouted. This marked the beginning of my confidence being renewed. Aware that I was proficient in reading and writing this language, I was determined to become that successful student I was in the Dominican Republic.

The result was the annihilation of every single barrier I had created for myself. With my success, I also managed to prove that immigrant students, especially non-native English speakers, can become very successful. All my dedication and work paid off. I was enrolled in a regular program at The English High School; shortly after an English teacher recognized in me the potential to succeed in higher level classes. I was transferred into Honors courses and finally recommended for Advanced Placement courses.

My life has been a constant struggle, from the day that I departed from my beloved Dominican Republic, to today, when I am successful, thanks to my esteemed United States education. My goal is to complete my rigorous senior year curriculum and to attend college. As I pursue a better life through education, I will keep alive the dreams of my parents and the many other immigrants that the flags fluttering in English High's hallways represent.

Mi Casa Es Tu Casa

by Karen Zepeda



Karen is a student at Boston Latin School where she takes a rigorous course load and is very involved in her school's Show Choir. She is currently deciding between several possible majors, including French, Spanish, and International Relations. Her first choice is Columbia and she is also applying to New York University, Boston College, Boston University, Northeastern University, and UMass Amherst. She will be the first in her family to attend college.

Once I hit the age of fourteen, I began to worry. Besides the usual problems of growing up, I was worrying about something bigger, something colossal. I was worrying about my Quinceañera, the Latin American rite of passage held for a young woman turning fifteen. In the eyes of my family and friends, I would transform from a girl into a woman in June 2005. Oh man.

My Quinceañera turned out to be the bridge that connected my two lives: the one I learned at school, and the one that I lived at home with my parents. Leaving El Salvador was the hardest thing they have ever done. Therefore, they tried to instill customs and culture in me so that our roots weren't forgotten. But it was not easy for me to grow up in the United States with parents who spoke only Spanish. I remember learning "American" things, while at the same time having to deal with parents still locked in their own culture. Sleepovers were just one out of many things that were out of the question. "M'hija, what kind of mother would let their daughter sleep over another's person's house? Tu casa is here."

When I entered Boston Latin School, I was exposed to non-Hispanic people for the first time. My best friends became a white girl and a black girl. I led separate lives: one in my Latino community in East Boston, and the other at Boston Latin School. In one I spoke rapid Spanish and in the other, perfect English.

As April 2005 approached, the planning began for the Quinceañera. In planning the ceremony I arrived at a very important piece: my corte de honor. This court of honor would accompany me all day from the mass to the after-party. In my God-sisters' Quinceañeras, the court had always been comprised of Hispanic girls and boys. But my best friends were white and black. How was I ever going to be able to bring together my two totally different worlds into the backyard of my very small apartment?

Finally, my mom offered me wise words: "M'hija, it is your Quinceañera. It is your special day. Therefore, spend it with the people closest to your heart."

And so I did. On June 25, 2005, I became a woman in the eyes of my family. My damas and their companions formed an impeccable court of honor. The usual rites were performed, merengue blared from the speakers, carne asada sizzled on the grill. When the moment to cut the cake came at last, I was expected to speak. I looked into the eyes of the people staring at me, admiring the different races assembled to celebrate a special Latin ceremony all in my honor. My heart expanded as I celebrated my heritage and fused together, at last, the best of two worlds. I took a deep breath and said my little speech in rapid Spanish and then again-in perfect English.

Unbreakable

by Kamarah Horwitz



Kamarah is a creative and intelligent senior at Boston Latin Academy. She is incredibly involved with her school's Drama club, and has participated in multiple productions. Most recently, she has taken the lead in a production of *The Crucible*.

Kamarah is intent on becoming a Pharmacist, just like her Dad. Her top schools are Temple University and The University of Hartford. She also submitted applications to Umass Amherst, Salem State College, Umass Dartmouth, and The University of Rhode Island.

"Please, I'll do anything!" I screamed at my father's lifeless body lying on the bed before me. Tears escaped from my eyes and left sodden tracks, like footprints, cascading down my cheeks. My hands began to tremble. Each finger held a different emotion; one would cramp while the other would quiver. My brain began to notice a pain circulating through my body. An excruciating pain I'd never felt before - a pain I'd never feel again. My mind searched for a reason, an explanation that would never come. I waited in complete silence for that light bulb to appear above my head, reassuring me that I had enough knowledge to make sense of what had just happened. But the light bulb never came, and the white room began to spin. That's the last thing I can remember from the worst day of my life.

It started out like any other day. I left the house with the usual "See ya baby!" from Daddy, as Mommy chased me down the stairs to say goodbye. The day went by slowly until the phone call. The phone call that re-wrote my life. Thousands of thoughts ran, skipped, and jumped through my mind, all because of two simple words: come, and home. Buses went too slow, trains went too fast, but I got there. As I walked through the Faulkner Hospital waiting area I couldn't help but hear the sound of cries. A sniffing no one can mock, but everyone knows. My heart knew exactly what had happened, but my mind (probably for the better), knew nothing.

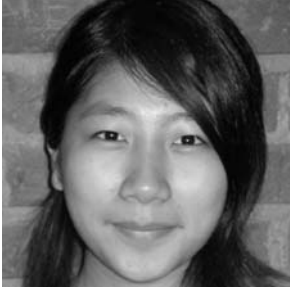
"I'm so sorry Kamarah!" A phrase many wish to hear after getting hurt. There was one problem in this situation; I hadn't been hurt. Why were they all sorry? Then that light bulb appeared. My Daddy was gone. Dead. He had risen from this world and I wasn't there to see him off. What could be more important than saying goodbye to your hero as he embarks on his final journey into eternity?

I dragged my feet across the sterile hospital floor into the room where my father had taken his last breath. I laid my tear drenched face on his motionless chest and listened. Nothing. All I could hear was my mother screaming in the background, "Are you sure you did all you could? Did you try everything?" As I lay there, lost in my own mind, I realized that I had just felt the greatest pain in life: Loss. I began to grasp at the idea that nothing could hurt me anymore. Nothing in this world would ever be hard enough to amount to losing your parent, your companion, yourself.

The passing of my father had no positives. However it helped me realize that I can get through life's challenges with a smile on my face and a song on my lips simply because I am resilient. After experiencing a great loss so early in life, that most people aren't faced with until much later on, I am now definable in one word. One single word that sums up my life from here on out: Unbreakable.

My Mother's Battlefield

by Yi Mei Chen



Yi Mei Chen moved from China to Boston when she was 12; she has since excelled as a student at John D. O'Bryant High School. In addition to participating in rigorous summer programs to prepare for college academics, Yi Mei is involved in the math team and Asian Culture Club, and she volunteers as a Homework Assistant at the Boston Public Library.

She hopes to earn a degree in engineering at her first choice school, Northeastern University. Other schools on Yi Mei's list include Boston College, Boston University, UMass Amherst, Suffolk University, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

A distinctive, irreplaceable warmth has accompanied me for eighteen years. My mother's love is the source of that warmth; thanks to her strength, I am alive after enduring the most unpleasant decade in China.

Born into poverty, my mother's life was filled with bitterness and obstacles. My birth was the biggest challenge she ever encountered. A newborn life should symbolize jubilation and hope, but in communist China, where having more than one baby in a family was prohibited, a baby brought fear. Under those inhumane rules, lucky people fled to foreign countries to start their lives over, but many poor pregnant women were forced to abort their children.

When my mother found out she was accidentally pregnant, she had a hard time making a decision. Most of her relatives suggested that she have an abortion since she already had two children, but she used to tell me, "Every time I touched my belly, I could feel the heartbeat tick-tock, tick-tock like a clock that telling me you were coming to the world." The decision was made: she wanted me to see the world. Unable to continue living in the same house, my brave mother hid herself in an adjacent village where clinics were easy and safe to access. In early August of 1989, I was born and wrapped in a blanket and placed next to my mom. Although I was born at such an unpleasant time, my mom told me that I looked happy and beautiful, and she felt comforted.

Twelve years later, when we came to the U.S., I could no longer comfort her. In a competitive world, the United States can feel like a battlefield for the people who are the warriors fighting for triumph. Learning the English language is a skill Americans must have to compete, and those unable to learn can only stare at the shininess and will never be rewarded. As an adolescent girl who came to America with her mother, I thought that learning English could help me to lessen the embarrassment I felt in America. I admired those who could speak fluent English and talk eloquently. Eventually, I learned to love speaking, reading, and writing English. Meanwhile, tears would roll from my eyes while I looked at my mom attempting to study English. She was unable to learn due to her age, and there was nothing I could do to help her.

A photo album refreshes my memory of the strong woman my mother is. Among all the photos, I love the one of her holding me tight in her arms when I was an infant. My mother has given up so much in exchange for a comfortable life for me. We have gone through such a hard time together in the past, and although I have grown up joyfully, I know that the joy and opportunities I experience are the reward for my mom's hardships and sacrifices.

Empty-Handed

by Alana Ponte-Capellan



Alana is a senior at Boston Latin School where she has been involved with several activities. She is a member of the Talented and Gifted Program at BLS, as well as an after school tutor. She has participated in multiple community service projects, including Horizons for Homeless Children and Head Start.

Alana also works at Brigham and Women's and has aspirations of becoming a nurse. Her top school is Northeastern University. Alana's college list also includes Boston College, Umass Amherst, Umass Boston, Curry College, and Salem State College.

Today he returned after two months, with a tan and a face full of worries and bitter disappointments. To anybody else he would have appeared to be a man content from visiting his beloved country and maybe just a little bit homesick. But I noticed; I could tell the difference between homesickness and disillusionment. This was yet another one of my father's empty handed visits from Spain.

There are two important things that I will remember throughout my life about my father: his relentless encouragement towards my education and his love for his country. Looking at my background, many people may consider me to be destined to a certain lifestyle. Some may have expected me to drop out of high school, become pregnant at a young age, and end up with a dead end job. Although my parents have endured a hard life plagued with inevitable problems, they never expected the same future for their children. My parents came to this country with just the clothes on their back, yet they never failed in trying to provide a better life for me. My father often reminds me that as soon as I was old enough to listen he would talk to me about life and how difficult it would be for me if I did not prepare myself. "Alana, you know we are a poor family, but nothing is set in stone. Your life does not have to be this way. Just always remember to find something that you have a passion for. Once you know what that is, the hardest part is done. "

My father would repeat this to me so many times that I began to memorize his lectures. As just a seven year old girl, these conversations may have seemed like nothing more than a typical "do your homework" lecture, but I now realize that my father's words are truly something that I hold close to my heart. I feel that if it was not for my father's consistent guidance, I may have taken another path in life and would have had a different perspective on my future.

Gun shots outside our apartment, music blasting in the background; this is just a typical night in my neighborhood. The day my father returned from his visit to Spain he was welcomed by the sound of bullets flying in the back of our Roxbury project complex. It was just 4 in the afternoon. I want something better from my life. I want to be able to have the lifestyle that my parents have only dreamed of providing for their children.

Despite my humble upbringing, my environment is exactly what influenced me to become who I am today; strong, compassionate, and proud. I feel that despite everything, I am the richest girl there is. I have seen my parents struggle to make life easier for my brother and me, which is why I am dedicated to making their efforts amount to my success.

Presenting.....Me

by Melissa Agenoir



Melissa is proud to be a senior at Brighton High School, and is one of the top students there. She shows her school spirit as captain of the school's varsity cheerleading squad. She is also an active member of the Key Club as well as the National Honor Society. Melissa is interested in both Business as well as Forensic Science. Her top school is UMass Amherst and she has also applied to Wheaton College, Simmons College, Clark University, Suffolk University, Northeastern University, and UMass Dartmouth. Melissa will be the first in her family to attend college.

When I was a junior, I used to watch the seniors stressing out about applying to college and think, "Yeah right! Next year I'll have my college applications and essay mailed out by October. No stress!" I wish someone was there to give me a smack of reality. It is now December 20, 2007, 10:22pm and I'm sitting at my computer starting my college essay over. I am disposing of my previous essay right out the window. Yes, this is a big risk, but it is one I am willing to take.

I am not doing this because the first essay I wrote in October was horrible. It was a good piece of writing, but when I re-read it, the essay did not elucidate who was speaking. The point that I had grown into a leader due to cheerleading since my freshman year came across. However, my personality did not. Besides the fact that I am a leader now, there was nothing else apparent about my individuality; nothing about who I am at eighteen.

I did not want the admissions office to receive my essay and after reading it, say, "Okay? Who is this girl?" Because then, that would mean I did not follow through with the assignment, which was to let them "become acquainted with you in ways different from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data", according to the Personal Essay directions on the Common Application. Hence, I am writing the entire essay over. I'd much rather start fresh than submit a personal essay that barely says anything personal about me.

I thought starting fresh would be easier than changing the old essay around a little bit but this is a challenge in itself. My life hasn't exactly been influenced by many dramatic events, just simple things that I learn and grow from (that's why "cheerleading" was my initial topic). But my dissatisfaction with the essay is pushing me to take this challenge because I could not settle for what was on that paper. Although everything in the essay was important, it just didn't sound like a "college essay" to me. Yes, the amount of appreciation I have for my squad is beyond measure, but maybe I could utilize that essay as another assignment, where the reader already knows me, but not here.

I am determined to make it clear to the admissions office exactly who I am; a high school senior who takes her commitment to excellence very seriously, and will not settle for less under any circumstances. I did not settle for an ordinary position on my squad, rather I became the squad captain. Similarly, I could not settle for submitting a mediocre personal essay. My individuality is defined by my effort to carry everything I do to a higher level. With these motivations, I chose to rewrite my college essay because I wanted it to reflect who I am and the type of college student I will be. I now have conquered the assignment.

The Best Revenge

by Carlos Richardson



Carlos Richardson is a senior at John D. O'Bryant High School. He enjoys playing squash and intends to continue to play in college. Carlos wants to pursue a degree in accounting. He applied to 11 schools and has already been accepted to Babson and Bentley College. He is waiting to hear from Vassar College, Boston College, Boston University, Harvard University, Northeastern University, UMass Lowell, Bowdoin College, Wesleyan College, and Bryant University.

According to The Boston Globe, there were a total of seventy-four homicide victims last year. This number nearly increased to seventy-nine on October 10th. The five people would have been my mother, her fiancée and my three younger brothers. Three young males invaded my mother's home, searching for a large sum of money that did not exist. They pointed guns to the heads of my mother and my three brothers. They sliced my mother's fiancé's back. The neighbor upstairs called the police after hearing unusual sounds and unfamiliar voices. Fortunately, the criminals panicked and ran into the basement. This did not lead to an escape route, and as a result they were caught and arrested. I was angry because I was not there to protect my family. This experience has further motivated me to pursue a college education which will in turn set a positive example for my brothers and allow me to give back to my community.

I need to set a positive example for my siblings. I believe that the image of a gun to their mother's head and their own heads will remain vivid in their minds forever. As the eldest son, my brothers recognize me as their role model and it is likely that they will follow in my footsteps. I do not want them to allow their anger to drive them to take drastic measures that will eventually lead to imprisonment or even worse, death. My pursuit of a college education will show them that there are other opportunities in the world besides what they see in front of them everyday. This achievement may also encourage them to stay focused in school, so that they too can aspire to achieve greater things.

In addition to setting a positive example for my brothers, I feel an obligation to give back to my community. I have been successful up until now due to the support of a program known as SquashBusters, an academic and squash program for inner city youth. SquashBusters has benefited me by connecting me with the Grand Circle Corporation which provided me with a paid summer internship and a free trip to Africa. Being a member of SquashBusters has also helped me to define the sport of squash as my passion which in turn provided many additional college opportunities. If it were not for SquashBusters, I would have easily fallen into the life of a criminal, similar to the ones who attempted to hurt my family.

Although I was not there to protect my family, the experience revealed my purpose in life. Marcus Aurelius said, "The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury." I could have easily chosen to seek revenge against the criminals, but that would have closed the door towards a brighter future for my brothers and me. Instead I have chosen to pursue a college education which will reap benefits that many deemed impossible.

The Architecture of My life

by Ina Duka



Ina is a stellar student at Boston Latin Academy. She is involved in many activities both in school and in the community. She is a Senior Class Officer, a tutor at her school, a volunteer at the American Red Cross, and a Youth Leader at Portal to Hope. She wants to become a Civil Engineer and is applying to Tufts University, Northeastern University, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Cornell, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Brown, University of New Hampshire, UMass Amherst, and UMass Lowell.

Buildings sometimes seem to pop up overnight and people rarely consider the labor and hard work that engineers and the construction crews have put into them. Just as a building is constructed, my family and I have had to start our life in America from the ground up. I moved from Albania to America six years ago with my mom and my little brother, and brick by brick, we have been constructing our new lives.

My mom was one of a few women to go to college when Albania was under the influence of communism. Although she worked as a civil engineer for sixteen years, as the corruption was overtaking the country she decided that it was best for my brother and me not to grow up there. Well aware that by moving to America, she would never find a better lifestyle than the one she was leaving behind, she was willing to sacrifice everything for her children. She gave up her engineering career which she loved and picked up a job at Dunkin Donuts where she makes coffee and works hard all day long to support her family. She still hasn't adjusted completely to this lifestyle; nevertheless she gets up everyday and does it again.

Just as my mom has had to face new changes, so have I. Building a new life in an unfamiliar place was something I had never pictured. I took my life in Albania for granted because everything was there for me. I was a very lazy, spoiled kid. Many times I wanted to give up and go back but the misery in mom's face showed me that she had demolished her past life just for me. This encouraged me to go to school and make new friends, learn English quickly so that I could call the bill companies to change the address every time we moved from house to house, and help my mom look for a job. Although I was only twelve, I had to grow up more quickly than most kids at that age. Not only did I have to baby-sit for my brother, but I had to take my mom to her appointments rather than her taking me, the child. Along with these new undertakings, I also had school to worry about. I knew that the only reason I was in this new country was for a better education, so I worked hard and graduated as the salutatorian of my class in middle school. Also after only two years of learning English, I was able to attend one of the best exam schools, Boston Latin Academy.

Just as buildings don't pop up over night, my life wasn't built in a day. I had to stop being that lazy spoiled girl and become responsible, hard working, more understanding and the voice of the family because my mom didn't speak English. So my mom's difficult sacrifice not only gave me a chance for a better education but also to build up my life in her footsteps because I always admired how she was so independent and successful. I plan on becoming a civil engineer like my mother. I now have the blue prints for success; I can't wait to construct my future.

My Life Has Changed

by Mahad Hashi



Mahad Hashi is currently a senior at Snowden International High School. His family immigrated to Boston five years ago and since then Mahad has been very focused in making sure that he gains a good education. At Snowden he is a good student who does not shy away from challenging courses. He is also athletic, having participated in track and field and soccer for four years. Mahad is excited about attending college. His list includes UMass Amherst, Boston College, Syracuse University, Emmanuel College, and UMass Boston.

"Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allaaaaaahu Akbar!"

The call for noon prayers sounded throughout the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa one muggy summer Friday. A man with a huge beard and white gown stood in front of hundreds of people gathered for this week's sermon. His words were convincing to some, but not so convincing to others, including Mahad Hashi, an eleven-year-old Somali boy without any interest in the wise words being preached. He only went to the mosque that day because his cousin had forced him.

The hundreds of people attending the sermon that afternoon were learning the lessons of the Prophet Muhammad, the man who received the revelations of Islam more than a thousand years ago. In the centuries since, his teachings have changed the lives of millions of people. But despite being raised as a Muslim, I have spent most of my life ignoring those teachings. Not many issues in the world, like the Arab-Israeli issue or the AIDS crisis, mattered to me. Worldly pleasures took over my life, demanding that I forget who I was, what I stood for, and what life was supposed to signify. But one day last year, everything changed.

I was practicing my typical way of life, pursuing personal pleasure rather than helping others. That day, after my cousin invited me to come to prayer, I experienced a great change. What struck me was the imam's talk about life after death. As I heard him speak, I began to reflect deeply on the value of my life. As it was now, would my life matter? How would my life in the hereafter be? Would I be remembered as contributing to the world, or costing the world? Would I bring honor or shame to my family? These thoughts produced a sincere change in me. I was ready to commit.

Now I see myself in the Prophet in terms of his righteous actions. For example, today I am a great help to my family, while before I was just someone who lived in my parents' house and ate their food. I take my mother to her doctor's appointments, translate for her and help with chores. I also volunteer at my mosque as well as my school. Many times at the end of the school year, I helped my teachers move books in and out of class, and also volunteered to paint classrooms and restrooms.

As I see flashbacks of my past, I often say to myself, "I wish I had done this..." or "I wish I had done that..." Then I notice that the "I wishes" do not really matter anymore. My regrets are washed away by what I have achieved since saying those words. I have accomplished so much thanks to the major influence in my life, the Prophet Muhammad. It was he who changed me from feeling useless to feeling useful.

My Legacy

by Josefa Dasilva



Josefa Dasilva is a senior at Jeremiah E. Burke High School. Although she has only been in the United States since the tenth grade, she immediately became involved in her high school as a member of the yearbook club and the girls' soccer team. Josefa also been a tutor at St. Peter's Church for two years. Aside from her involvement in school, Josefa also works part time to help support herself and her daughter.

Josefa is undecided in what she wants to study. She will be the first in her family to attend college. Her first choice is UMass Boston. Her list also includes Curry, Emmanuel, Simmons, UMass Lowell, UMass Dartmouth, and Salem State.

The reality of becoming a parent at thirteen years old was very unsettling. I remember the afternoon I found out I was pregnant as if it were yesterday. I was consumed by the thoughts running through my mind: how would I manage parenthood at such a young age, what would my family say, should I get an abortion? Physically I was still developing and here I was trying to create another life. I became more terrified as days went by; wondering what my father would think if I told him about his best friend's son. Would he believe that a twenty-one year old man took advantage of me?

My dad was the authority figure in the house and everything had to pass his scrutiny. I was sure what his edict would be, so I decided to keep my pregnancy a secret. When the truth was finally disclosed, I was horrified as to what would take place next. My belief was correct; my family found it hard to believe that I was pregnant and willing to jeopardize my future. My dad's emotions did not allow him to think logically. It was too late for him to lecture me on something that could not be reversed. I did not expect him to be happy, but I did need him to protect me as he had done my entire life prior to this incident. I felt all alone.

I soon found myself kicked out of his house and homeless. Fortunately, I had an understanding, supportive aunt who stood up for me. She made life easier for me in so many different ways. She made sacrifices to include me in her immediate family. With nine children, this was not an easy task. She helped me emotionally, financially, and spiritually. This all came to an end on October 20, 2007, when she succumbed to cancer. I realized that some things could not be repaid, but my wish was for her to see that her efforts were not in vain. My future is her legacy and the love I have for her could only be surpassed by the love I have for my daughter.

In 2005 I arrived in the United States with my daughter. I didn't really like it that much. One of my initial thoughts was to pack my bags and return to Cape Verde. The thought of raising my daughter without my aunt's assistance was unbearable. However, education became a priority in my life, and I soon understood the benefits of strong academics.

Often, the insurmountable task of caring for my daughter, school and work was harder than I ever imagined. I made many sacrifices to be a good mother, a good student, and a good employee. I lost a lot of sleep staying up all night to complete my homework after coming home from work. Somehow my daughter was enough to motivate me through impossible times. I learned to manage my time and take on responsibility just because of her. All of the things I faced in my eighteen short years, especially being a mom, have made me a stronger person both physically and mentally. Without these experiences I have no idea if I would be on the threshold of graduation today.

Paving My Path

by Priscilla Amado



As a student at Brighton High School, Priscilla has excelled both academically and in her co-curricular activities. Priscilla has been a member of the Girls' Varsity Basketball team since her sophomore year. She has also served on Class Committee, as well as the Yearbook Committee and has been a Teen Leader for PathFinders for four years. Priscilla is interested in Business and Finance. Her top schools are Howard University, Babson College, and Bentley College. Her list also includes, Pepperdine University, Bryant College, Simmons College, and Umass Amherst

I heard the phone slam to the floor and I didn't even give it a second thought. Yet when I saw my sister's terrified look, as she blankly stared past me, I knew something was not right. She pushed through me and hurried towards my mother as I rushed behind her in confusion. The hallway turned into the padded walls of a mental institution as the walls seemed to close in on me. My oldest sister had just been shot three times and was being rushed to the hospital. At that moment my sister's short life flashed before my eyes. She had gone to high school, completed a year of college, and had two beautiful children. Throughout her months of recovery I couldn't help but think about how much effort she put in to save up money and enroll back into Newbury College; all for it to be stripped away so easily because she happened to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

This horrible incident brought my entire family together, and showed us all how emotionally wounded my mother was. It really hurts to know that after all the hard work my mother put into raising five kids, not one of us has graduated from college. The sad fact is that all of my older siblings put college on hold after school, and although they all went at some point in their lives none of them managed to finish. They put college second to other aspects of their lives such as work and their social lives. Since college wasn't a priority there was no drive to push them through their difficulties. My siblings showed me how challenging college life is, and I noticed how complicated it is to study and meet deadlines. I learned from them that it is important to manage your time and to balance college with the rest of your life.

When I look at what happened to my sister and the rest of my families' lives I know that I don't want to follow their paths. Their failures have motivated me, to say the least. Despite the struggle ahead, I know that I not only want to go to college, but I want to be the first person in my family to graduate.

Regardless of all the hardships I've been through, I've always kept school first and always managed to maintain good grades. I have been a dedicated student-athlete, but I have sacrificed basketball my senior year to do an internship at Harvard Business School as well as pick up another part-time job at The Walking Company to help my mother who has recently been laid off. I know that all of these sacrifices and responsibilities are preparing me for college. It takes a lot of hard work to be successful in college. I know how much my mother appreciates my sacrifice, and I know she'll be proud when I receive my degree in four years. College is my top priority and college is only the first step to starting my career. Twenty years from now I want to be a successful career woman and a role model for my niece and nephews, by confidently guiding them in a positive direction, and putting my family's past experiences behind us.

Only the Beginning

by Mirlinda Sejdiu



Mirlinda Sejdiu is a senior at Boston Community Leadership Academy where she has been an academic all star. Mirlinda has also been an active volunteer at the Lynn homeless shelter and a member of the Teens In Print Magazine group helping to edit and publish various articles throughout the school year. Mirlinda is looking forward to attending a four year college. Her first choice is Tufts University, and her list also includes Simmons College, Wellesley College, Boston College, Boston University, and Northeastern University.

On April 5, 1999, as the sun went down in the colorful bright orange and purple sky, the birds went to their own houses, but not me. I left my home empty, the doors open, my heart broken and filled with fear, but also with the hope that I would be back soon. I passed cities, countries, oceans, fleeing from my home country due to war. I lived as an involuntary immigrant, a war refugee, who was forced to come to America. I feel that I bring a new twist to diversity. I look like a "typical white American," but I am Kosovo Albanian. I am an escapee of ethnic cleansing and a war survivor. My experience has made me dedicated to bridging the differences between people.

The fact that Serbs, who controlled Kosovo, embarked on a campaign to create a greater Serbia, unified as one nation, by driving out all Kosovars through an ethnic cleansing, has changed me forever. It taught me a lot about human behavior, different people and places. Living in various refugee camps allowed me to talk with people. Getting to know new friends and surroundings in different parts of the world, different from where I grew up, wasn't the same. Eventually, in my journey I came to Boston, where I faced more trials: struggling with a new language at school and adopting new life style.

My experience with discrimination has taught me valuable lessons that I can share with others. At home, my culture was looked down upon. In America, I do not face discrimination due to my skin color, but because of other factors. Here, my family has difficulties that range from problems, like others' misunderstandings about people who do not know English well, stereotypes about my culture, and people who are not conscious of our struggle to come here. I know what it is like to be treated differently. People hate others because of their differences, but I still have hope. I feel like my life has just started; my unique perspective as a war survivor, refugee, and second language learner has helped and motivated me to use my experiences to teach others. To explain what it is like to be discriminated against, and what it is like to survive war, makes me proud! I want to use my experience to make a change so the mistreatment of others does not happen.

I want to share my experience with everyone, especially in a college environment, with groups of students who want to know, need to know, or at least understand the importance of fighting discrimination and hatred. I want to offer my perspective to those students who have not seen a world of suffering and have no idea how important life is; to those who don't appreciate what they have, to those who don't know what it is like to sleep in constant fear. My hope is that it will spark a reaction and have an effect on people. As I journey forward, I believe that I can have a positive influence on someone and make a difference, and that is my goal for the future: to educate and raise awareness about the struggles of others.

How You Can Help

Thank you for taking the time to read the essays in this book. We hope you agree that the preceding pages tell the stories of some remarkable young adults. Each of these students was fortunate to have the support of a Bottom Line counselor throughout the college admission process. Unfortunately, the reality of the overall Boston situation is more daunting:

- ◆ There are 3,500 high school seniors in Boston public schools
- ◆ Of the 2,300 students who identify themselves as interested in seeking a higher degree, only one third are expected to graduate from college within 6 years.

The message is clear. Boston students need better help getting into the right schools, and many of them need ongoing support while in college. Bottom Line's proven programming model addresses these formidable issues head on. We work with students to help them gain access to college and maintain a constant presence in their lives until they graduate.

For the last ten years, we have been able to offer a high quality advising service at no cost to the students. As happens with any quality service, word has spread quickly among our constituents about the work we do and the demand for our program has never been greater.

To learn more about how you can help more Boston students get in to college, graduate from college and go far in life, please contact us or visit our office. We look forward to hearing from you.

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