

Essays on adversity and achievement

by Bottom Line students

I am the

opportunity

*Now, I await that next challenge
to engulf me*

Afraid? No.

Hesitant? Of course not.

Ready? As I'll ever be.



Bottom Line

Get in • Graduate • Go far

Success depends on you

The Next 10 Years

The college application essays in this book are the stories of 14 Boston and Worcester high school seniors from the Class of 2015 that are a part of Bottom Line's College Access Program. In 650 words or less, these essays illustrate the adversity that many Bottom Line students have overcome on their educational path. The students in this book are one step closer to achieving their goal of graduating from college in an effort to improve their own lives and make an impact in their communities. This objective, shared among the more than 2,600 Massachusetts students who currently have the support of a Bottom Line counselor, is at the core of our mission.

A non-profit founded in 1997, Bottom Line helps students get into and graduate from college with the one-on-one, long-term support of a counselor. Most of these students are the first in their families to attend college and many have only been in the United States for a few years. Almost all Bottom Line students come from low-income backgrounds.

Our model gives students the tools they need in order to succeed and graduate with a college degree. Last spring we celebrated our 1,000th college graduate. As we look ahead to the next ten years, we plan to continue this growth of our programs. By 2025, we anticipate that 5,000 students will have graduated from college with the support of a Bottom Line counselor. Despite incredible obstacles, with ambition, grit and support from Bottom Line, low-income students will complete college and begin meaningful careers, in turn transforming their communities.

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Dry Erase Board

By Nazadeen Knight



Nazadeen Knight is a senior at Newton North High School where she serves as a student ambassador, a freshman guidance aide, and the vice president of the Black Leadership Advisory Council. During the summer, Nazadeen works as a Leader-in-Training at Camp Harbor View and interns at the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services.

Nazadeen is excited to learn more about careers related to criminal justice and social work at Fitchburg State University, Bridgewater State University, Rhode Island College, or UMass Dartmouth.

When my family and I lived in Boston, we had a dry erase board behind our front door. The board was my escape. Whether I was happy, angry, or sad, the board was my place to express it. I always liked drawing, so my mom put the board up for me. One night, my sister and I got into a huge argument. I went to the board, scribbling words full of hatred. I kept at it for a while before my mom called me upstairs. I moved sluggishly, not really interested in why she wanted to see me. The staircase was right in front of the door separating the two floors. I walked up slowly and counted each step, one by one, until I got to thirteen. I walked into my mom's room and stood by the window. I was too busy paying attention to the people talking outside to really listen to what my mom was saying.

On my street, I often heard fireworks. I'd gotten used to the familiar popping sound, so as I looked outside and heard loud noises, I thought it was the fireworks again. This time, however, I didn't hear the usual echo. Instead, I heard my sister scream and loud voices from outside filled my ears. My mom yelled for me to get on the ground. I was confused. They're just firecrackers, I thought.

At ten, I wanted badly to believe the noises were fireworks. I knew by my family's reaction that it was something else. My family was in panic mode; nobody had time to explain what was happening to me. Afraid and feeling lost, I crawled to my room and cried myself to sleep. The next morning, I went downstairs to see holes in the door and the walls. They weren't big holes, maybe half an inch wide. Two of them were by the couch in the living room where my sister had been sitting. The other four were in the door below my dry erase board and in the wall where I had been standing right before they went off. The noise I heard was gunfire, not fireworks. Those four bullet holes in the wall could have been four holes in my body instead.

My experiences made me grow up faster than most. I'd been stripped of the feeling that my home was a safe space, untouched by all the bad in the world. Our reaction to trauma was to leave, but it wasn't really by choice. I'd become too afraid to sit on my porch and I'd make my mom open the house door before I got out of the car to go inside. My mom eventually got fed up and recognized that she had to get me out of Roxbury.

Leaving had its problems too. We were in a new town, far away from friends and family. We ate pizza almost every day so my mom could save money for rent. Newton was a foreign country in my eyes. I'm grateful in many ways, especially because of the school I attend and the education I've received, but Newton never grew on me. At times, I feel out of place in this town. However, most of what I do is in Boston. My part-time job has its office by the old house. I always look at it and smile a little. Though my time there was often difficult, as a result of those experiences, I became stronger. When I was ten, I wished the shooting never happened, but now it is something that I won't let myself forget. I no longer have the dry erase board. The closest thing I have to it now is a chalk wall, but the only thing that's changed is the surface. Its purpose is still the same.

Chopsticks

By Quang Dang



Quang Dang is a senior at Roxbury Latin School. He is an editor for his school newspaper, vice president of his school's environmental club, and a Dorchester representative on the Mayor's Youth Council.

He also volunteers at his church, St. Ambrose Parish, and has played for his school's soccer, basketball, baseball, and wrestling teams.

Quang is interested in neuroscience, environmental studies, and biology and he will be attending Dartmouth College in Fall 2015.

A pair of nine-inch needles is no way to capture food. Yet for thousands of years, chopsticks have been the customary utensil in many households including, unfortunately, mine. The concept is so rudimentary that any adolescent can pick up the basic skills in just a few attempts. The steps are simple: pick up a pair of uniform sticks in your dominant hand, angle your arm at 45° , rotate your thumb, middle, and index fingers clockwise, and never ever form an X.

As a child, I recited this anthem in my head, "grip, 45° , rotate clockwise, no X," until it was burrowed into my brain. Despite my remarkable memorization skills, each time I attempted, the end result was always the same – delicious food splattered across the floor and an empty belly. Shame would swallow me as I went to retrieve a fork from the cupboard, wondering what was wrong with me. I could type 70 words per minute, carve the perfect jack-o-lantern, and beat virtually anyone in rock, paper, scissors. Yet when it came to picking up some celery with two sticks, my hand would cramp and my brain would freeze.

I attributed my inability to genetics, believing that I was not given the "chopsticks gene." I delved into the dark abyss of chopsticks Wikipedia pages and YouTube tutorials, only to emerge learning that I probably have consecotaleophobia, a fear of chopsticks. I kept experimenting with new techniques, laboring tirelessly in my room but to no avail. I practiced picking up jellybeans and GI Joe figurines. Once I even used a protractor to make sure that my arm was angled at exactly 45° . Each time I watched as my pride slipped from the ends of two sticks, clattering onto the floor.

I was the only one in my family who could not use chopsticks and they did not let me forget it. My family would teasingly remind me of how my four-year-old cousin Bobby Jr., who still wet his bed, could use chopsticks, while the broccoli on my plate stayed cold. But my family's snarky remarks only spurred my determination to overcome this challenge and revitalized my longing to share this common connection with them.

One day I had the wild idea to switch hands. Though it felt uncomfortable at first, I surprisingly began to pick up one jellybean after another with increasing ease. And like a caveman creating fire from two sticks, I experienced a feeling of success that is as great as any other.

In the course of my 16-year swordfight with chopsticks, I have learned lessons not about angles or grips, but about accepting my failures and never succumbing to feelings of defeat. I realize that my identity as a Vietnamese immigrant living in the United States is just another task of bringing two poles together. To be a Vietnamese-American means learning to bridge two different cultures - to wield spoons as skillfully as chopsticks, to speak English as fluently as Vietnamese, and to be a patriotic citizen of America as well as Vietnam. Trying to be one without the other is as foolish as trying to eat with only one chopstick. Who would have thought that a pair of nine-inch needles would become my greatest teacher?

Crossing Mountains

By Saint Cyr Dimanche



Saint Cyr Dimanche is a senior at Claremont Academy. He is originally from the Central African Republic and has lived in the United States as a refugee for about three years.

He is the senior class president and is heavily involved in school and community activities. He is a student leader in the African Community Education program (A.C.E.), he teaches middle school students the art of African drumming, and he helped produce a documentary on immigration reform in the N-CITE program.

Saint Cyr hopes to major in International Studies and would like to establish himself in the United States to provide a bigger and brighter future for his family members. He hopes to attend Clark University, Brandeis University or Assumption College.

My “Kari,” people always said “Foe ni tou poul mbgie ka koune,” which means that there is something you are supposed to know but do not. It is as if you are on the opposite side of the mountain or world from other people. Coming from a war-torn country, I did not have the same opportunity to get an education as many other youth and always felt behind. Somehow, I have always known that without it, I would never reach my dreams and have the life I want.

In my home country of the Central African Republic (CAR), the public schools were not as good as the private schools and the war kept people from attending either. Even the few who attended the good schools or the one university, ended up having no job and living on the street. With only one university and a population of over 5.5 million, how can people concentrate on building their future? Even if you are intelligent and motivated to learn you cannot achieve your future goal in the CAR.

In February of 2009, rebel forces attacked my village, Laura, in the CAR. Fleeing for our lives we ran in different directions. I was separated from my stepmother, my sister, father and cousin on that early morning. The rebels rapidly surrounded the entire city and took many people away, including my dad. Sadly, I later heard that he was among those who were killed risking their lives to escape. At the same time, the rebels came back to my village to look for young people my age to join their group. I recall hiding in the brush, covered by the forest, during that terrible conflict. Somehow, in that horrible moment, I realized that I needed to find a way to leave the country. I eventually fled to the country of Cameroon.

I lived in Cameroon for two years, but did not have the same rights as other citizens. I was not allowed to go to school because of my status as an immigrant. Fortunately, I was able to come to the US on October 11, 2011 as a refugee, with the aid of the Unaccompanied Minor Program. Now that I am here my life is completely different. I am in a new culture and I am receiving the education I’ve always wanted. Nobody in my family had ever gone to college or even graduated from high school. My parents were very poor and lived in a troubled country whose problems would not allow them to achieve their dreams. I can now attend school and have a wonderful American family.

Today, education has given me the ability to serve as an intern in U.S. Congressman Jim McGovern’s office and to work with a group of students from across Worcester to make a documentary about immigration rights. I also had the honor of being invited to participate in the National Honor Society in my school. I remember back four years ago when I was hiding in the brush during the terrible war and the decision I made. I looked forward to the future, beyond the country which extended in cold blankness and darkness. Today, I am no longer at the opposite side of the mountain and I want to use my experience to be a change agent for other young people like me and for our next generation. I want to teach others about the importance of never giving up and to never take their education for granted.

Writing My Dreams

By Jennyfer Frederico



Jennyfer Frederico is a senior at the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science. She works at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and has a passion for creative writing and dance.

Jennyfer's goal is to major in psychology and English at Brown University, UMass Amherst, or Salem State University.

It was the 12th of January, 2010. What started off as a perfectly normal day turned out to be one of the worst days of my life. As soon as I opened the door to my house, my dad sat me down and told me that an earthquake had struck our native country, Haiti. All I could think about was contacting my mom, who lived there. I rushed to the phone knowing that, without a calling card, the phone bill would accumulate. Breathlessly, I dialed her number. She did not pick up. All I could think about was my mom being trapped and that help would not be on the way. I could not imagine never hearing her voice one last time, or seeing her face again. And so, instead of opening the bedroom door for my worried father, I sat on my bed and I wrote. I spilled all of my emotions into that notebook, not caring about whether or not my sentences were grammatically correct, or whether I used the appropriate punctuation marks. I just wrote.

In my neighborhood, one day I can walk by smiling faces, and the next I see those same faces mounted within picture frames surrounded by candles, that honor the dead and placate those left behind. In my community, what looks pretty on the outside, hides decay on the inside.

I do not have a tree to go to outside and escape to when my parents make me upset, nor do I have a friend's place nearby to escape the unfairness of life, but I have my imagination, my pen, and my notebook.

Within my mind, I am able to create a world where only I have the key. I can block out the commotion and turn it into something positive. All I have to do is pull out a piece of paper, a notepad, or even something as small as an index card, and with it, I can escape the negativity around me. There, inside my mind and with assistance from my writing, I am content.

From my imagination, I can turn my thoughts into words on a page. Writing is my self-confidence. I am perfectly content holding the pencil in my hand and letting my mind create the impossible. To me, that thin wooden instrument is not just an object, it is a release; a release from worrying about grades, a release from competing academically and fighting for my future, and most importantly, a release from the breath that I did not know I was holding. My pencil allows me to make mistakes, erase, start fresh, then repeat. By creating a variety of characters with the best and worst of me, I can see the person who I truly am, and become the young woman I am destined to be. My writing has made me realize that if there is one thing I have control over in this world, it is my mind. There is nothing more exhilarating than knowing that the words are mine.

In the future, I hope to utilize this skill and passion in whichever career I choose to pursue, whether it be a child psychologist or a college professor. My writing has served me well throughout my adolescence; through it I have been able to create calm amidst the chaos. Even though I do not have a physical place or environment where I feel content, my imagination creates that sensation of perfect contentment for me.

I do not have a story to tell, I have many stories to tell.

Rebuilding

By Lornex Rono



Lornex Rono is a senior at Brighton High School. She is the captain of the Brighton Women's Soccer Team, an award-winning debater, and is the founder of Lend a Hand, Change a Life: Kenya, a non-profit organization that collects donations for poverty relief.

Lornex is hoping to study international relations at Boston University, Northeastern University, American University, College of the Holy Cross, or Dartmouth College.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I sat on the rocky ground of a building that I could not recognize anymore. Our restaurant had paid for my education, generated income, and provided for my family's basic needs. I looked to my left and I saw the cash register, the place where I would run into the arms of my papa whose shirt was wet from sweat. I would try to hug him but he would hesitate and claim he was too sweaty, but I was also sweaty after walking three miles from school. I looked to my right; I saw a small broken chair with a pillow beside it where my mother would sit and prepare meals for the customers. "Mama!" I would shout running towards her. She tried to stand and give me the hug that I was longing for, but her back injury would not let her. My parents would be covered in sweat and I knew that their hard work was for me and my siblings to go to school.

Straight ahead, there was a metallic sink where I spent my evenings. The sink was often full of dishes that I washed as I sang happily until eight o'clock. Right in front of me in the back left corner was the most important place. The place that created a foundation for my education, the place that gave me hope for a bright future, my "pahali pa matumaini." I would put a paper on the ground and sit on the floor trying not to make my uniform dirty because I had to wear it the following day. I would do my assignments on the floor. Often, the lights would go off so I did my assignments by candlelight. Every time I looked up, I would see my mama smiling, full of pride.

I wiped the tears off my face as I looked at our destroyed restaurant. I saw hopelessness. Our restaurant had been destroyed due to political and tribal violence in Kenya in 2007. This violence also resulted to my mother moving to the United States. When I looked into my papa's eyes, I was able to understand what he was trying to tell me, "I am sorry I failed you," as he tried to hold back his tears. I could see veins pulse his forehead and his eyes turned red as a teardrop fell down his cheek. I was only ten but I understood the situation. I understood that there would be sleepless nights due to hunger and thirst, missing school due to no income. Weeks later all my predictions became a reality. I had given up and lost hope until my mother was granted asylum in the United States at the age of fifteen and I was reunited with her after four years of being separated.

In college I would like to study international affairs and later work for an international organization as a peacemaker and advocate for the victims of violence. I have been a victim of war and violence and I have learned that violence comes with losses, not gains. I started to share my story through a TED talk at Harvard University in April 2014 and by starting a non-profit organization that collects donations for needy people in Kenya. I have learned to use my experience as a source of motivation and inspiration to others. I want to inspire people to always aim high and be optimistic and also to know the consequences of violence. I have experienced a life full of obstacles with very limited opportunities, an environment where children are harassed, and a country where your voice cannot be heard. I want to help transform places like Kenya by using my abilities to bring back life and hope for the future.

Quiet

By Trang Nihn



Trang Nihn is a senior at South High Community School. She is involved in a variety of activities, including Varsity Tennis, the Philosophy Club, and the Art Club.

She hopes to continue her education and explore what college has to offer. She plans to study political science, literature, and cultural study.

Some schools she hopes to attend are Brandeis University, Wellesley College, and Clark University.

"You're so quiet!" The words are harmless, or at least they are supposed to be. But I'm a bit neurotic. What do you mean? I could have sworn I have been talking the whole time; so much that I'm thinking the teacher is throwing cautionary looks my way. My internal monologue did not make it out, instead I sigh dejectedly-disappointed because I have been hoping never to hear those words again. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

As a child, I squeezed myself into some overcrowded van with the owner hollering as he advertised his trip to Saigon trying to get as many costumers as possible. The city, I thought, was too loud. I stayed by my mother's side; still uneasy of the setting. I would hear my aunt's mocking comments about my quiet and introverted demeanor, as my mother urged me to go play with other kids. I hesitantly approached the crowd - loud and self-assured - and made my presence known as I prepared myself to project my voice with a "Hello, what are you guys playing?" As loud as it sounded to me, the kids crunch their brows together in questioning looks, and I realized they could not hear me. With red cheeks and head down, I said timidly, "I'm sorry."

I was ten when I moved to what seemed like a larger world with a new language that became a further excuse for my introverted bearing. I remember standing in a neighborhood grocery shop when a woman started friendly small talk. I hear the words "too much " and "snow," my face reddened with my lack of understanding, but I kept nodding as the lady spilled out her thoughts as if we were friends meeting up for coffee. When it was her turn to the register, she bid me goodbye and patted me on the shoulder whispering something I could hear but could not understand. Later, I would scan for the word "quiet" in the English-Vietnamese Dictionary textbook -"making little or no noise," it read.

Every time I moved to a school from elementary to high school, I was determined that if the word "quiet" was ever to be used, it would not be to describe myself. Accordingly, I talked a bit louder and said things I would otherwise have kept inside. My effort only lasted for a few days when I would grow exhausted, it was like playing a character in a movie that never seemed to end.

Bad habits die hard, so I put on a show again during the one-week summer lectures about the Foundation of Western Civilization, finding myself yet again disappointed. We are put in discussion groups; everyone had something to say and was not hesitant to rudely interrupt others to be heard. In all the chaos, I heard a small voice from the timid girl with her hand slightly raised, and I noticed she reddened with realization that no one heard her. I looked at her with a smile to say "I'm listening," and she smiled back gratefully.

I thought for so long that being quiet was something I needed to work on, like improving your painting techniques, but I realized it is a part of a person. I have learned to accept my introverted personality; I no longer apologize for my quietness nor reject the word I had detested for so long. I am quiet because it is loud enough already in my own mind, and there is no need for more noise. I live too much in my head, observing and analyzing, things that are otherwise overlooked. Quiet has its power, even if it simply means making other people feel heard and understood, it changes things and change means progress.

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

By Nick Singer



Nick Singer is a senior at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. Besides Brazil and Cambridge, Nick has also lived in Malden, Massachusetts and Conegliano, Italy, which is where he was born.

He serves as a tutor for Breakthrough Greater Boston and is a member of his school's wrestling and soccer teams.

Nick is hoping to study chemical engineering at Tufts University, Boston University, or Harvard University.

I was ready. Standing in the Champions Team Fighting Gym in Colatina, Espirito Santo, Brazil, sweat trickled down my face and splashed onto the mat. Blood had already stopped flowing inside my lip, but its iron-like taste still clung to my mouth. All eyes were on me now. It was my turn to fight for the third time that day. My heart ached for my first win, demonstrating what I had learned during these first three weeks of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. The whistle blew and in a matter of seconds, the man who I had just shaken hands with was reaching for my sleeves, reeling me in to attempt a move.

The plane landed in a country that had once been home to me before. Signs read: "Welcome to Boston's Logan Airport." I had been living in Brazil for the past three years and had been molded by its culture. I learned how to dance samba, cook brigadeiro, and even play the pandeiro. My close family, with whom I'd had no deep contact until then, also shaped my personality. Harmonious days at the beach, exciting celebrations for my favorite soccer team, Botafogo, and of course the satisfaction of being with those I loved, transformed me. Life had given me so much to live for and be proud of, yet I left. I left in search of a strong education at a good, American university, but leaving behind family, friends, and so many lovely experiences punishes the heart. I was stranded. Everything was new.

I defended myself, pulling him into my guard. Any slight movement or shift required extensive strength and persistence. Head held high, I inverted the position, landing in a full mount, a dominant position. All that lay between me and victory now were his desperately flailing arms, but suddenly, when I least expected it, I was on my back.

I found myself in a difficult position. New people, customs, and languages surrounded me. During the first week of school back in the states, I thought I would never fit in. I was beginning to regret the biggest decision I had ever been solely responsible for in my life. I knew I couldn't wait too long to turn things around, so I wrapped his closer leg with mine, pulling him into a position called a half guard. I adapted. When I noticed he was becoming increasingly tired, I completed my guard and caught him in a triangle choke. After a few seconds of powerful struggle, he gave up. I heard his hand strike the mat four times, making faint "thud" sounds. As I let go, and he fell back gasping for air, a proud smile painted itself across my pulsing, red face. My sensei nodded in approval and my companions applauded. I couldn't remove the smile. I had found myself almost losing, but was able to reverse the match and make the best out of a challenging situation.

There is always a way to escape, always a way to adapt. After a bumpy transition getting accustomed to the language and culture, I realized there were so many opportunities to embrace in the US. Rather than mulling over what I had left behind, I got myself involved in athletic programs and clubs, enrolled in honor societies, took challenging academic courses, and joined Brazilian cultural groups, all of which helped me battle my homesickness. By constructing new friendships and readjusting to the academic environment, I gained control.

From there on, all I had to do was endure and advance. It was the first of many victories and one of my biggest adaptations so far. From it, I learned how to strive for success and adapt to any obstacle thrown my way.

Activism in Vietnam

By Huynh Tran



Huynh Tran is a senior at Excel High School, and immigrated to the U.S. from Vietnam during his junior year.

He is the president of the Math Club, a member of the Debate Team, on the South Boston soccer team, and the former vice president of the Environmental Club. He is currently working as a translator for a Vietnamese YouTube channel and as a Peer Leader at VietAid.

Huynh hopes to attend Boston College, Boston University, Northeastern University, or Tufts University. He is interested in studying business management or finance.

“Draw anything you want, regardless of the reality,” he said, “You shall show me your dream, for which you could risk anything and give all effort to achieve. Nobody is going to stop you; it is your dream.” That was the assignment from my eighth grade art teacher in Vietnam. “Well,” I thought, “If he was so sure about that, I know what to do.”

I drew a person delivering a speech in front of cheering crowd; behind him was the South Vietnamese flag. It was one of my biggest aspirations - to create or at least to revive a much more humanistic and progressive government than the one I was a citizen of at that time. Unfortunately, that dream was not a typical idea of Vietnamese people then; it was instead forbidden. I showed the teacher my drawing. He was petrified. After staring at it for ten seconds, he told me to hide it. I had totally foreseen his reaction and I gladly accepted it. If he had been another teacher, I may have been expelled from my prestigious school. After that risky moment, nonetheless, I decided to fight for that idea for the rest of my life.

Some may not understand why such an action was so jeopardizing. In Vietnam and other communist countries, there is one paramount belief, acclaiming the Glorious Communist Party. In fact, every child was taught that ideology since kindergarten. Consequently, the Party’s influence and power have been rooted in many people’s minds.

I was supposed to be a product of that brainwashing process. However, my inquisitive nature led me out of that gloomy path. I was a strange kid who would lock himself in a room, trying to read as many books and watch as many documentaries as he could. In sixth grade, I came across an economics book of my father’s and realized that, with all the information I had gathered, the Glorious Party was actually ruining our country. Furthermore, I discerned that everyone could easily be cognizant of that fact; they just have locked themselves too long inside of their obsolete belief and ideology.

From then on, in defiance of many impediments and obstruction, I became a polemicist. I wanted to make my country better; I wanted our every resource to be exploited judiciously. It was difficult, since beside me were only reason and evidence, which people refused to accept. They called me treasonous for not believing in the Party. My work concerned mostly on the Internet, where I had been a member of a Facebook page called “Patriotic Journal,” and later its Co-Administrator. After two years of writing satire, analyzing, debating, and being insulted, I had met a lot of obstinate, government-funded polemicists as well as brilliant people who shared the same will and ideas as mine. Unfortunately, because of overwhelming school work and exhaustion, I had to resign that position. However, I have never stopped fighting for our ideas, especially when I came to the U.S. where I would be provided excellent opportunities to continue my works.

After all, as revered Minister Winston Churchill had said, “The truth is inconvertible. Malice may attack it, ignorance may deride it, but in the end, there it is.” I always wish that I could do more for my country, and if I could travel back to the past, I would improve my works and find a better balance for my academic life and that pursuit. If I had not been a weird kid, I would have become an ordinary student who would follow cluelessly anything he was taught.

Scenes of Cape Verde

By Darina Barreto



Darina Barreto is a senior at Excel High School. In her free time she likes to go to movies and go out to eat with her friends, especially to places she's never been before.

Darina hopes to major in business and get a minor in psychology. Darina is really looking forward to graduating high school and going off to college.

She is interested in attending Framingham State University, Fitchburg State University or Bridgewater State University.

My cousins and I would climb trees like monkeys challenging each other to see who was the most fearless. Moving from branch to branch on the tree and looking out onto my family's land in Cape Verde, I felt like we were the only people in the world. The land was filled with short grass and tall grass, not like the grass that you would see if you go to Boston Common. It was grass that was so long it would hit your legs as you walked on it. There were endless trees, land, and rocks. There were trees that grew types of fruits you only find in Cape Verde. My favorite spot was under the cashew trees because the fruit was beautiful, growing in different colors. My cousins and I would always go observe the trees to see if the cashews were growing and if they were ripe, we would pick some and sit under the tree for a long time. When I think of home, I think of how green the land was in August and especially the cashew trees with their colorful fruit.

I grew up in the countryside. The walk to school was long and no transportation was provided. My cousin Katia, who was like my sister, and I would walk to school together every day. Walking was a way of getting places because almost no one drove or owned a car. I would walk to the store, church, my cousin's house, uncle's house, or aunt's house. I felt independent even though everywhere I went one of my cousins was with me. I was able to travel alone, without any adults. I miss being able to just walk somewhere and feel safe doing it alone. Living in the city of Boston is so different. The city is full of people, buildings, and cars everywhere.

Every day in Cape Verde ended with a family dinner. The dining room had one long table with six chairs to fit my mom, brother, two cousins, uncle, and me. We gathered to eat beef, rice, beans, and fries. I loved the homemade fries because they were very crispy and soft on the inside and it had just the right amount of salt. We drank cold water that was very refreshing since it was always hot in the tropical climate. During dinner we talked in our native language, Cape Verdean Creole. I began to realize that I was always smiling and laughing around my family. Now I don't speak as much Creole to my mom and sometimes find it hard to translate into Creole. We no longer eat dinner together. When I get home I just take my food and eat while watching TV.

I barely look at the sky at night, but if I did, I would have to look hard to see stars. In Cape Verde, the sky was pitch black with millions of stars. It was breathtaking. The moon was so bright my family relied on the moonlight getting home. As a child, walking home sometimes I would think there were street lights because the moon was so bright. Now I am surrounded by lights day and night and I miss the night sky. Most of all, I miss the sense of community that I experienced growing up, but that is something I always carry with me. Cape Verde is a part of me, just like my family is. When I am homesick, all I have to do is close my eyes and I am home again, in the trees, able to see the world.

Tomboyish

By Elizabeth Walkes



Elizabeth Walkes is a senior at Worcester Technical High School. She is very passionate about sports and is involved in soccer and track and field. She also works as a referee during her free time.

When she's not on the field, Elizabeth works as a Clinical Assistant at the West Side Animal Clinic. Her future goals are to attend college and move on to veterinary school. She would like to work in a zoo with animals.

She hopes to attend UMass Amherst, Framingham State University, Boston College, or Mercy College.

There I was, standing in line at the DCU center. For what? I do not remember. All I can remember was that someone called me sir. I was crushed and angry. I thought to myself, "How can I look like a boy to you?" "Was it because I was not in a dress, or was it because I sounded "manly" to you?" I guess in a way I got what I had always wanted, to be treated like a boy, to not be coddled like I was going to break at any moment. At least I thought that was what I wanted, but what I really wanted was to be treated with respect and still be me.

When I was a child all I ever wanted to do was to pretend that I was a princess. For three or four Halloweens straight, I was a princess. To me being a princess meant finally being what I never could be: tall, fair, blond, and most importantly perfect. I always wished I could be like Cinderella or Snow White, having all my dreams and wishes come true and never worry about getting my "Happily Ever After." When I was unable to pretend, I made myself as girly as possible which made me feel just as much a princess as pretending to be one. As I got older I came to realize that the word "princess" came with negative connotations. Apparently I was as stuck up and snobby as all other "princesses". Later I noticed that being called a girl or things being girly was supposedly a bad thing; that by being feminine you automatically have less value, you have little to no ambition. I refused to let myself be known by those characteristics, so I did what I felt I had to; I gave up my femininity.

I decided to be as much of a tomboy as I could in order to be respected for what I can do and aspire to, rather than what I can obtain by superficial means, which sadly worked. Once I became a tomboy I was treated differently; adults around me started to take me more seriously (actually listening to me as opposed to absently nodding their head and pretending to care) and I came into a group of friends that felt the same way. All of us agreed that being boy-like was better and easier than being girly. However deep inside I felt like this was all wrong. While it was great that I was being taken seriously I had to deny a part of me to get there and it felt wrong. Coming into ninth grade and losing touch with my old friends, I wondered if it was really worth denying a part of myself if I felt so miserable. It was then that I returned to my old girly self and found that even though I was what was supposed to be "bad," I was treated with the same respect as before.

While I denied the more feminine part of me, I felt sad and angry. I wished I could be so confident and well-respected as so many others were and I envied them for it, and I was disappointed with myself for not allowing myself to be like them. It took me a while to come to understand the idea that other people's opinions have no effect on how I live my life. I can be as feminine or as masculine as I want to be and still have the same level of respect. If who I am is supposed to be inadequate by someone else's standards then I guess I just have to prove them wrong.

My Grandfather's Keeper

By Daniel Martinez



Daniel Martinez is a senior at Boston Latin Academy. He plays tenor saxophone in a jazz ensemble, works to train inner-city youth on job safety and workers' rights as a manager at MassCOSH, and has participated in track.

Daniel is hoping to study astrophysics or astronomy at Boston University, Columbia University, or Tufts University.

I woke up dazed and confused. I was half-dressed, my mind was functioning at half-capacity, and I was not able to make out the fuzzy shapes I was seeing in front of me. My mom and sister had woken me up; they looked frightened and worried. Their faces cringed when they told me to come with them to my grandparents' room. My grandfather was crumpled on the ground, dying. As I saw the huge mass that was my grandfather moaning on the floor, an electric pulse went through my body and stung me to my core. Death was routine for people as old as my grandfather, but what left me speechless was seeing my grandfather so close to it. At this moment, I knew that the future of my grandfather's health and my family's resources depended on how committed I was to helping him recuperate.

As long as I can remember, my grandfather has been a stern man. He was not the kind of person to emanate warmth or caring. I still respected and loved him a great deal. My grandfather was like an eroding mountain, getting less monumental as the years passed. At this point in his life he had prostate cancer, diabetes, glaucoma, and Parkinson's, which crippled my grandfather's ability to move. With all the illnesses he had, I thought of my grandfather as suffering in a human form. Ever since the night he fell, it was my duty to help my grandfather who was no longer able to take care of himself.

Initially, I was not happy helping my grandfather. I was responsible for feeding him, dressing him, bathing him, sleeping with him, walking with him, and, in my opinion the worst of them all, taking him to the bathroom. I thought I was so unlucky. I was seventeen-years-old and ready for the world, which for me meant having the freedom to drive, going to R-rated movies, and being able to buy video games without the fear of an employee asking me about my age. What I had not realized was that I would have to be a primary caregiver. As the weeks passed, I felt ashamed for the way I felt about helping my grandfather. As a person I respect and love, I owed him a duty. This sense of duty hit me in the face when I was helping him in the restroom one day. While I was assisting my grandfather in the restroom, I thought about the time before I was born, when grandfather was just a father. Here was a man who in his native country was a man among men, a cowboy with guns, machetes, and horses, who gave off an air of confidence. Now, there stood a man who had been withered by time and disease, who could not even use the bathroom by himself. It was the most humbling experience of my life.

Assisting my grandfather helped realize that I have a commitment to help people who cannot help themselves. This experience marked my transition to adulthood through learning skills such as commitment, duty, and responsibility. This experience with my grandfather influenced what I have chosen to do for work. At MassCOSH, I advocate for abused workers. These workers range from immigrants and teenagers to union and non-union workers. At my job I spread awareness about labor injustice and help people claim their legal rights in the workplace. One notable story I can remember is when I aided underpaid janitors fight for fair wages from the AMC theater chain. Before, I used to only know of people in tough situations through articles and the news, never in a real, personal way. Through aiding my grandfather I discovered that I can make an actual difference. It starts by helping just one person.

My Own Standards

By Bryan Paula Gonzalez



Bryan Paula Gonzalez is a senior at North High School. After moving to the United States from the Dominican Republic, he realized the importance of education and worked arduously to become successful in his studies.

Due to his love of student leadership, Bryan is vice president of Student Council and Student Body, and is also a member of the National Honor Society. Bryan also has a passion for the arts, which is why he participates in all of the Drama Club productions at his school.

Bryan is looking forward to gaining more knowledge about animal genetics or biology at a school such as Columbia University, New York University, Boston University, or Northeastern University.

As a child, some of my fondest memories were of the times where I went to my grandmother's house. She owned a farm, which was something that I enjoyed very much. Her yard was illuminated by all the different colors of the flowers that were planted; all as if a rainbow had landed in her yard. I always could tell when we arrived at her house because she had this bright red roof. The aroma of mangú y pollo guisado diffused from the kitchen; my grandmother always made this meal because she knew it was my favorite and she also enjoyed making it because it was one of the iconic meals in Dominican culture. I was sitting in the spacious kitchen when all of a sudden I heard my mother and grandmother argue. In a swift action, my mom threw a cup out of the house. All I could remember was the piercing sound of cups shattering right after the other.

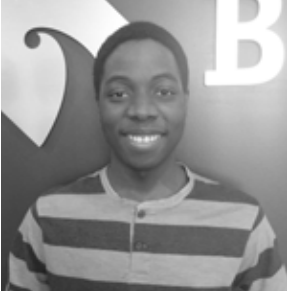
At that time, I was five years old and did not comprehend what was going on. Then I heard the word "gordo", Spanish for fat. They argued over my size. Conversation ceased between my mother and grandmother for a while, and it had all been caused by my obesity. This marked the moment in time when I began to have insecurities over my weight.

Waking up in the morning and having to change from that point on became one of the most devastating times for me. Whenever I changed clothes, there would always be a pile on the floor because I never knew what to wear; finding that I was never comfortable with my body. At times, it became difficult for me to be confident in myself. This is a distinction that still exists to this day, but does not affect me as it once did before. Being the person who stands out in a room can be extremely challenging. There are times when you just don't want to be the center of attention, and it always seemed like I was because of my size. A child should not have to stress over cholesterol and high blood pressure, but this is what my life became; obesity took over. For quite some time, I was afraid of having to meet new people; this became a big issue when I migrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic. I thought I would be treated like I was in my home country, little did I know that New York was a big city and it accepted all those who came through it.

Moving to New York City taught me many valuable lessons, but most of all it taught me to accept myself. It did not matter what others thought of me, what mattered was that I was content with who I was. I could not control what anyone thought of me, so there was no sense in dwelling on the intangible. I did not have to conform to anyone's standards of who I should be; in fact, I only had to conform to my own standards. I had realized that thinking negatively took too much energy. At this point in my life, I realized that what others thought of me did not matter. I had to enhance my future, and focusing on negativity would not allow me to fulfill this. These are many of the values that I will bring to college. I plan to not let others stand in the way of my success, and will only surround myself around those who choose to support me, and will treat others in the same way. I want to become cultured, and in order to do that I will have to have acceptance for others just as New York City did for me.

Faith and Science

By Roosendy Saint-Fort



Roosendy Saint-Fort is a senior at Boston Latin School. He is the Front Desk Assistant at the Bottom Line office in Jamaica Plain and is involved as a youth leader with Cru, a member of the Boston Latin School Gospel Choir, and also as president of the Bethesda Haitian Baptist Church Youth Ministry.

Roosendy hopes to become a missionary doctor and is looking forward to majoring in biology at Brown University, Boston University, Boston College, or Northeastern University.

“Okay class, can anyone tell me who created the world?” Ms. Church asked. I raised my hand instinctively.

“Go ahead, Sam.” My family and church call me Samuel, my middle name. “In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth.”

Growing up in a Christian community, particularly as a pastor’s son, I have had unlimited access to the “Infallible Word of God.” I had consciously accepted them as truth early in my childhood. Most of that time, my faith remained unchallenged, since everyone around me believed the same. Along with a passion for God, an innocent curiosity towards nature quietly arose in me. I loved to learn, and I loved the idea of a hidden deeper truth, one that was beyond my understanding of a subject. Before I knew it, my desire to seek that truth led me to science, and the study of how the world really works. I began asking the big questions: “Mr. Bio? How did the first living creature come to being?”

I already knew God made it happen. I just wanted to see if there was more to what I already knew. Despite caution from others that science and God could not agree, I believed I could bring my two passions together to satisfy my curiosities.

“Good Question, Roosendy! Most scientists agree that through the random assembling of molecules in an environment suitable for life, the first living cell was developed, from which all organisms descended through evolution and natural selection,” stated Mr. Bio.

It appears I was wrong. Nothing in that scientific explanation seemed to have anything to do with God. That was the first time in my life where something contradicted what I held true with all my heart, the “Infallible Word of God.” There could only be one truth, and to me God was truer than anything else. As a response to what I perceived as a challenge of my faith, I became increasingly critical of scientific theories, especially those regarding the origin of the universe and life. Samuel, my spiritual self, would not compromise with Roosendy, my scientific side. My identity was conflicted, and for a long time, I struggled to reconcile the two. In spite of this, my curiosity in nature continued to grow.

Then, a thought came to me that perhaps science and God could agree after all. What if science and the Bible were one, just as Roosendy and Samuel were one? Two years later, I presented my idea to Mr. Bio. He said the reason why he believed that science and faith cannot agree was because they operate by different rules. I thought about it some more and decided that it did not have to be that way. I decided that if the Bible, which to me has yet to be proven fallible, could support the claims made in science, then perhaps the areas where they disagree could merely be misunderstandings or different interpretations of the same ideas. As I tested this hypothesis, I found significant evidence to support it. One particular case was when I revisited the accounts of creation in Genesis and found many references to concepts of evolution and natural selection. The main difference was that the Bible attributed to Jesus what scientists attributed to randomness and chance.

Ironically, the very same conflicts that commonly separated faith from science actually united and strengthened the two in me. The more Roosendy learns about the meticulously organized biological processes in living organisms, the more strongly Samuel believes that God directs them as He claims. Now I, Roosendy Samuel Saint-Fort, seek the deeper truths with twice the passion.

Fighting for Justice

By Genesis Perez



Genesis Perez is a senior at the John D. O'Bryant High School. She currently works at the Cheesecake Factory and was a member of the girls' varsity soccer team and the LGBT Alliance at her school.

Genesis is looking forward to attending New York University, Boston University, or UMass Amherst next year where she plans on studying political science, in preparation for law school.

At the end of a poorly lit room, sat one of my best friends anxiously gnawing on his fingernails. The happiest person I had ever known was sitting there staring into space, with a worried look in his eyes. Perceiving something was wrong, I sat next to him and offered him a sip of my latte. I knew the last couple of weeks had been very hard for him since he had done something very brave; he came out as a gay man.

That morning my friend had another argument with his parents, who did not want to accept his decision. His parents abashment and lack of understanding was hard for him to take in. However, the last straw came when he realized his friends were no different than his parents. He was ostracized at school, particularly in the Native Spanish class where his peers avoided him and made him feel uncomfortable with his identity. He soon became a ghost, never really seeming present. This experience filled me with anger as my friend was not the only one who I had seen be isolated before.

I am particularly sensitive to others being isolated because my mother and I experienced this treatment in our native country of Guatemala. My mother was sexually abused by a man of high profile. Due to his position, he faced no prosecution and my mother's case was shut down. Guatemala's government was the first one to close a door and isolate my mother. Family and friends who believed the assault was her fault came second. The assault affected me greatly. Somehow, my friends at school had become aware of what had happened to my mother. Being in a Catholic school and known for not having a father, this event did not help me in feeling less like an outsider. I started getting picked on by kids at my school who believed my mother was "dirty" and unworthy to be near a church. Later on, when my mother had to leave the country for safety reasons, my reputation grew even worse. Isolated at school, soon my only friends were my dog Lobo and my cousins.

The experience of not being accepted as a young child at school, has created a growing empathy for those who were in need of support. Knowing very well what it felt like to be treated as an outsider, I decided to help my friend by encouraging him to join the Gay Straight Alliance club at our school. I knew that the club would be a place that he could let down his guard, and get advice from students in our school that had a similar experience. I wanted him to see that although this was hard, he was not alone. After encouraging my friend, and being a member of the Gay Straight Alliance, I was motivated to join other social justice advocacy groups in the Boston community which have shaped my perspective and future goals.

A quote spoken by Martin Luther King Jr. that has truly followed me is: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". My mother's and friend's experiences made me realize that justice has not been achieved even slightly in some places. I became more aware of people's feelings, their reactions, and grew this immense urge to advocate for people in need. I will not abide to any kind of injustice - any at all. People have always said that I am a strong person, and that I am a great debater. I intend to use these qualities to one day become a lawyer, where I will be able to help people who would otherwise be silenced and left in isolation. I believe in justice and equality, and I will strive to achieve it.

How You Can Help

Thank you for taking the time to read the stories of these determined young people. This year Bottom Line is supporting more than 2,600 disadvantaged students in Massachusetts; however there are many more students in our community that need our support.

The OECD reports that the United States has one of the highest college dropout rates of the developed world. Only one-third of low-income, first-generation students enrolled in public colleges graduate within six years. Based on an analysis of Labor Department statistics by the EPI, college dropouts will receive, on average, 98% less in earnings than people with a four-year degree. Additionally, students who drop out of college experience a poorer overall quality of life, including, poorer health, decreased involvement in civic life and shorter life expectancies.

Bottom Line works to ensure low-income, first-generation students are provided with the one-on-one, in-person support they need to succeed. In fact, more than 80% of our two most recent cohorts of students graduated from college within 6 years, double the rate of their peers.

We rely on the support of community members like you to grow and help more students achieve their dreams of a college degree. You can become involved in Bottom Line by attending events, providing pro-bono services, making a donation and supporting our students through job and internship opportunities.

To learn more about our organization and how you can help, please contact us, visit our website or come in to one of our offices. We look forward to hearing from you.

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