

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

Finding Paths to Personal Achievement

The essays in this book were written by high school seniors from the class of 2010 in Bottom Line's College Access program. With Bottom Line's support, these 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, multi-dimensional students who 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: 98% are accepted into at least one college.

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" and graduate 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.

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Lessons of Survival

by Alex Barber



Alex came to the United States 4 years ago because he needed chemotherapy for leukemia. After undergoing two years of chemotherapy, Alex's leukemia is currently in remission. While this was a difficult experience, Alex has retained an upbeat attitude and still speaks to his father regularly.

Alex will be the first in his family to attend college in the United States. Because of his experience with leukemia and his father's career in nursing, he is interested in studying medicine. Alex has applied to competitive schools, including Boston College, Dartmouth College, Boston University, and Wheaton College.

In the beginning of 2005 I was abruptly sent from my home in Cape Verde to a foreign country. I knew nothing about what was wrong with me. I only knew I was sick and needed medical assistance immediately. Fortunately, my mother had been living in the United States for four years. After arriving in Boston, I was diagnosed with Leukemia. I didn't know much about the disease because I couldn't understand most of what the doctors said. As time passed, I learned some terms in English that became very helpful, but I also learned that I could die at any moment. I had to stay in America if I wanted to live. The required treatment to lower my risk of recurrence was two full years of chemotherapy. During those painful days I could only think of one thing: surviving. I wanted to do anything possible to make the cancer go away forever.

Going through the different stages of chemotherapy was harder than anything I had ever experienced. I desperately wished to be dead, and wondered what could have possibly brought this horrible fate upon me. I was pierced with a syringe so many times that nurses and doctors spent hours trying to find a single decent vein to draw blood. Each time they failed to find the right one I screamed, hoping they would just get out of my room and leave me alone.

However, having Leukemia was not the only problem. Until I got my green card last December, I was also an undocumented immigrant in the United States for about four years. It was difficult to know that without a green card, it would be impossible to attend a college in the U.S. regardless of how hard I worked. For four years, I was prohibited to talk about my legal status to any person. The biggest problem was that I could not count on the government's free healthcare for any help to cover my chemotherapy and medications.

When my treatment ended in 2007, my cancer was in remission. However, over the next three months, my fear intensified. I started to act a little differently. My mom and father liked to say "You worry too much; you are acting like a little adult." I was affected by the uncertainty of cancer, but in a beneficial way. Now I really pay attention to my school and family, and do my best to have a better life through the opportunities of a good education. I didn't want to die, and that's why I take advantage of every opportunity presented to me.

My life has been full of achievements, but the most important has been surviving. When I came to America, I was given the gift of my life. Now I want to ensure I make the most of this gift by getting a college degree and making the most of the opportunities ahead of me.

The Fire in My Eyes

by Avagay Barrett



Avagay was born in Jamaica, and moved to the United States at the age of four. She is a hard-working student at Brighton High School. In 2008, Avagay spent her summer working at the Codman Square Health Center, where she advocated for environmental rights.

Avagay will be the first in her family to attend college. She is applying to schools such as Boston University, UMass Amherst and Fitchburg State. Although she is still undecided in her major, she is leaning towards either Nursing or Pre-Law.

"It's the fire in my eyes, and the flash of my teeth, the swing in my waist, and the joy in my feet." The night of my neighbor's party, I saw the police pull up in front of my house. At first I didn't know what to think because I was only seven, but after I got upstairs I got the answers that I needed. The police were arresting my mother because of accusations that my father had made. Even though the accusation was proven false, the damage was already done. Before they took my mother away, she burst through the door trying to say goodbye to her three kids. I threw myself at my mother's feet, crying. Once my mother was taken away, my father told us to wash our faces and go back to the party. It was then that I realized his total apathy towards his children. He didn't hurt like I did. He didn't feel his heart break each and every time he looked in the mirror and saw her face. For three months, I wasn't able to see her smile, hear her laugh or feel her strength emanate from her body to mine.

"It's in the reach of my arms, The span of my hips, The stride of my step, The curl of my lips." One, two, three, four, five, the number goes on and on. The hits, the slaps, and the punches didn't stop; I wondered if they ever would. During the time my mother was gone I found out who my father really was. It all happened because of a dress and a little make-up. What can I say? I wanted to feel like a beautiful princess. I never expected my father to be so mad at me for playing dress up. When he saw me, he beat me with whatever he could get his hands on. After that incident, I felt powerless, unloved and deserted. I was just a little girl who wanted the love of her father and I was devastated when I realized that I may never receive it.

"It's the click of my heels, The bend of my hair, The palm of my hand, The need of my care." After the abuse, my mother came back for us. With nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she moved us into a shelter. Some people are embarrassed to live in shelters, to receive help from others, but I found it a blessing in disguise. I celebrated my eighth birthday at the shelter. I felt my eyes water as I felt the love that surrounded me that day. I felt special and I finally got to feel like a princess. Living in the shelter not only boosted my self esteem, but it also gave me the courage to move along without my father.

"Now you understand, Just why my head's not bowed. I don't shout or jump about, Or have to talk real loud. When you see me passing it ought to make you proud." Even though I was abused as a child, mistreated by others and lived in a shelter, these experiences have made me the woman I am today. I feel as though I'm a beast possessed; fire flashes beneath my eyes as I strive to achieve the success I know I deserve. Do you know what keeps me going? That fact that I know that he can't hurt me, no matter what he does. I now know that I am strong, I can achieve anything I want. The hatefulness of one person cannot and will not define me as a person. I have gotten this far without him and I will make it all the way. *"I'm a woman Phenomenally. Phenomenal woman, That's me."* ~ Maya Angelou
Poem Phenomenal Woman, Maya Angelou, 1978 And Still I Rise

Can You Hear Me?

by Diana Kaufner



Diana is an outgoing student who is determined to be the first in her family to graduate from college. As a senior at Brook Farm Academy, Diana has challenged herself academically while also playing soccer, basketball and softball. Outside of school, works at the City of Boston Performing Arts Program.

Diana's college list consists of Boston University, Bridgewater State, UMass Amherst, University of Rhode Island, Hamilton College and more.

Have you ever been in an environment where you wished you could tune out every surrounding sound? In my world, I have the ability to hear the sounds of traffic, birds, and large crowds one moment, and have total silence the next. I have this ability because I'm hard of hearing. Some people call this a disability, others call it a gift. I call it a cross between two worlds. I have the choice to take off my Cochlear Implant and hear nothing, but the wind in my head. When I put it on, I can hear all the sounds that surround me.

At the age of three I learned I was profoundly deaf. Doctors never found the cause of my hearing loss, but did conclude that I would never be able to "comprehend the spoken language." My mother didn't believe the doctors, and went to all the specialists that were recommended to search for ways to improve both my hearing and speech. Everyone pressured my mother to let it be because "it'll never happen." She turned to a deaf community for help, but they also told her that I should "embrace my deafness".

Despite the lack of support, my mother kept searching for help through audiologists. Then finally, help came. The 4th audiologist I visited figured out that I could hear slightly and that with hearing aids and speech therapy, I would be able to talk. Three years later, I underwent a Cochlear Implant surgery. After the surgeons implanted the magnetic coil into the cochlear, I was in bed for weeks. I had to wait for my wounds to heal before I received my processor.

Several months passed, and I gained the ability to hear. I was able to hear everything although it was difficult to focus on specific words, or to reciprocate. I had to work with a speech therapist for years. Whenever I learned a new word, I listened to how it was pronounced and watched how people spoke by reading their lips, a skill I had learned in my speech therapy. By 7th grade, I stopped working with a speech therapist because I understood enough to advocate for myself. It is still hard for me to focus on what people are saying so I have to work hard to comprehend the language that most people take for granted.

Sixteen years ago, doctors said I would never be able to hear or talk, yet here I am speaking better than most. My mother's determination, coupled with my hard work, has allowed me to defy the odds. I am determined to challenge myself to be the best that I can be and to better my communication skills. I have learned from this lifelong experience that you should never give up, no matter what people say. My message to those who are facing challenges in their lives is to understand your challenges but to not let them define you. I'm hard of hearing, but I don't let it deter me. Because of that, I became a leader who helps others to think of what they can do, rather what they can't do.

Man Up

by Victor Lopez



As a senior at Fenway High School, Victor Lopez leads a busy life. He is the Student Government President, a member of the varsity baseball team, a member of a cultural organization called Palante. He is also a member of TAG, the Talented and Gifted Program. Victor has worked at Simmons College in the "Technology at the Crossroads" program every summer since 9th grade.

Victor will be the first in his family to attend college. He is applying to ten schools, including Clark University, Boston College and Northeastern University. He is excited to begin college and plans to major in Business Marketing.

"Victor, man up, just man up already!" Those words reverberated in my mind. Though I have heard them many times, those words never fail to weaken me. I could not escape the feeling of humiliation. Everywhere I turned that's all I heard. "Man up already." I could feel everyone's eyes on me and felt heavy with their demands. I was pinned into a corner frustrated, confused and questioning what it meant to "man up."

Men are strong. Men are proud. Men never get scared. Men never cry. This is what it means to be a man, or so society says. Yet, growing up all I knew was a woman. That woman was my mother. She was strong, proud, fearless, and if she cried, I never saw it. She defied everyone who told her she could not be both a mother and a father. I saw her take on both roles. She did the best that she possibly could and I am so grateful. However, growing up without a male figure in my life has left me to question what it means to be a man.

With no male present, a man to me was what I saw on television. He was big, strong, macho, and someone who protected his family. When I was younger I did not understand the contradiction. In my family, my mother was the protector, but she was also the mediator-calm, warm, and always understanding. She taught us to be independent and I understand now that she was teaching us how not to be like our father. The problem with that was that I picked up on all of her behaviors and mannerisms.

I found myself to be both the protector and the mediator. I was calm, understanding and somewhat emotional. Adapting to the way my mother communicated and acted, I was in touch with my feelings. This created many problems for me not only at school but with my extended family as well. In my culture, a man's role is clearly defined. He is the bread winner, he sets up the rules, is never questioned and he is catered to by the women in his family. But I was brought up to be a man who took care of myself. I cooked, I cleaned, I ironed my own clothes. I was capable of listening and understanding and all of those things made people question if I was fitting the definition of a man.

"You need to stop acting like that, and man up!" The words still echoed as I finally became a "man." For the next few months I claimed my new title by being messier, pushing people away, and forgetting my principles, all in order to "man up". Making this decision is something I would later regret. My push to fit society's definition left me feeling alone. This error in judgment has made me realize that there is no set definition of a man. Becoming a man should be a work in progress and should be measured by the decisions you make and by the responsibilities that you take.

Cause and Effect

by Gladymir Joseph



Gladymir is a bright and motivated student at the Academy of Public Service in Dorchester. In addition to staying active at school, Gladymir has held many leadership positions within the Boston community. Last year, he participated in the Boston Student Advisory Council, where he was able to help make important decisions regarding the Boston Public School system. He also had the opportunity to work at the Department of Housing and Community Development, and he is especially excited for the Nelson Fellowship this summer.

Gladymir has applied to competitive schools such as Boston College, American University, Northeastern University, and UMass Amherst. In college, Gladymir wants to major in Sociology or Psychology.

A damp perspiration saturated my forehead. I could feel my heart beating like a speed racer as my hands shook nervously. As I entered the courtroom a solemn atmosphere overwhelmed me. I could not help but notice the emblem hanging on the wall that read "United States District Court of Massachusetts." Just then, the law clerk entered, followed by the judge.

As I glanced around the courtroom I felt uncomfortable. While the lawyers introduced themselves, I noticed not a single person of color was in the room. As the trial proceeded, the counselors and judge exchanged words like "hearsay", "qualified immunity" and "motion to suppress." These words were unfamiliar, which intimidated me. I looked down at my badge that displayed my name, picture, and the initials JS which stood for "Judicial Staff." This badge granted exclusive access in the courthouse, which brought me a sense of pride; however, it was not enough to repress the inadequacy and discomfort that plagued me.

Later, during the trial, the defense attorney brought in the suspect, a black male escorted by security. From my view, I could see a chubby guy with coiled hair and ruffled facial hair. The look on his face was so grim that any gullible person would have presumed him guilty. Jean Baptiste was being tried for the trafficking of crack cocaine, with intent to distribute.

It was difficult to have the only black person other than me be the suspect; more alarming was the fact that this person was familiar to me: we were from the same community. At this point, thoughts disturbed my focus. What were the odds of me sitting here as a court employee, instead of being in his position? I began to reflect. My parents were immigrants from Haiti, a third world country. Although they believed that coming to America would grant them wealth, they found themselves elevated from extreme poverty to moderate poverty. Jean Baptiste and I were similar in terms of culture, community, and lack of resources, yet we stood at opposite ends of the spectrum. Surely there was something significant that caused this difference, but what?

I realized how lucky I was to be in the courtroom. The Nelson Fellowship Program gave me the opportunity to gain exposure to federal cases such as this one, as well as intern in the chamber of a federal judge. For a long time I believed that luck was the reason I scored this internship. After all, my background reinforced that theory. However, at the closing of the program, I realized that luck played a minor role, if any. My intern coordinator told us a quote, "Weak men believe in luck, but strong men believe in cause and effect." If success occurs when preparation meets opportunity, then cause and effect is the answer as to why Jean Baptiste and I stood at opposite ends of the courtroom, not luck.

Using My Gifts

by Kennysha Wrencher



Kennysha is a motivated student at English High School. Kennysha has stayed active at her school by participating in Girls Leap, a self-defense organization. She was also a member of the Youth and Police Partnership, and has worked as an editor at Teen Voice and Teen TV.

In college, Kennysha hopes to major in Psychology. Kennysha wants to attend college in Massachusetts and has applied to nine schools, including Wheelock, UMass Boston and UMass Dartmouth.

It was a steamy June day and there was excitement in the air. My classmates were filled with energy as they ran through the field back to school. Everyone was ready to throw their book bags in their closets and get started on summer. I was in the seventh grade at the time, and although it was years ago, I still remember that day as if it happened yesterday.

I had a black book that I wanted all of my closest friends and teachers to sign. I walked around from room to room asking everyone to write a little message so I'd always remember them as the years passed. Everyone said nice things, "You're so pretty. I'm going to miss you," or "You're a great friend; See you next year." Although these were things I heard all the time, they made my insides warm because it was the last day of school.

I flipped towards the middle of the book and saw an entry from my seventh grade English teacher, Ms. Doiley. It read: "Kennysha, You have no idea of your potential; Use your gifts of intellectual power to accomplish great things. Always believe in yourself, exert your best effort, and remain a lady. Ms. D. P.S. Remember to complete your summer reading!"

Reading that stopped me cold. I read the first line over about twenty times. I used to look at myself and feel as though I was nothing. I never took that extra step; I always took the easy way out. It was true, I had no idea of my potential, and I realized that I was always selling myself short.

Ms. Doiley's message inspired me to go out there and show the world my best effort. She was always there for me. Her smile was one that made you want to smile right back, even on one of your worst days. She had a relationship with all of her students that could never be broken. She made sure we kept our heads in the books, and checked if we needed help, or just someone to talk to. Ms. Doiley knew potential, and I felt special that she had recognized it in me. That was the push I needed to take the extra step

I constantly asked myself who I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and how I would get myself there. I no longer walked the streets with my head down. I no longer told myself I wasn't good enough. Although there are some days when I don't feel at my best, I don't give up. The message Ms. Doiley wrote inspired me to be true to myself and dedicated to my future. I promised myself I would read her quote whenever I felt discouraged.

I believe when an old part of you has passed along, a greater you will emerge. The thing is, that person has been there all along. You just need to find it within you to bring that person out. I want to aim high, be all that I can be, and show the world what I am really made of.

A Second Chance

by Laila Abdul Nabi



Laila and her family have lived in Boston for the last three years. Laila's family moved to the United States because of the situation in Afghanistan, where Laila was born. Her father was killed by the Taliban during the Afghanistan Civil War. As a result, her family was forced to flee to Pakistan, where they lived for seven years before moving to Boston.

In Afghanistan, Laila didn't have many opportunities to get an education. Now that she is living in the United States, she is determined to go to college. Along with her older sister, Laila will be the first in her family to go to college. She was recently accepted to Bryn Mawr with a full-tuition scholarship through the Posse Foundation. She is thrilled to know that she is one step closer to making her dream of attending college a reality.

"Kushnanu, WAKE UP! We have to get out of here, it's not safe...bullets hit our house, come on...we don't have much time...everybody stick together," said my mom one night during the Civil War in Afghanistan.

The biggest challenge I have overcome is living under the Taliban, struggling to survive. My father was a man of principles and beliefs; he was one of the most respected men in Kabul. Because he was against the atrocities of the Taliban, they blew up the company where he worked. After his death, sorrow and danger surrounded us. In addition, the Taliban chased my brothers because they thought that if our father could go against them, then so could his sons. We spent three years hiding, struggling to survive and trying to escape the Taliban. Our house was made of only walls but no roof. During that time, we experienced hunger, bomb shells, and poverty.

After my father's death, relatives turned their back on us, so my mother began to work outside of the house doing other family's chores to keep our family alive. We were in a nation that was unsafe with a lack of resources. When I was ten years old, my brothers and I started working to help my mother financially instead of attending school. During the Civil War, I have witnessed the atrocities done to women and the suffering of many helpless people. Mostly, what I cannot forget is watching my mother suffer mentally and physically.

In 2002, my mother learned of an opportunity where poor widows who cannot take care of their children alone were being sent to the U.S. for better lives. When we moved to the U.S., life seemed perfect because we had a roof over our heads, we had enough food to eat, and especially because we began to attend school. I started school in 8th grade, where I first learned to write my name and the alphabet. My teachers communicated with me through hand signals because we couldn't understand each other. I couldn't speak English as well as my peers, so I was unable to progress in my classes, and I couldn't catch up with my work. It was also difficult for me to adopt American culture because I continued wearing a traditional long veil. I became an object for my peers to make fun of; they wanted to show their superiority to me. I wasn't valued as a member of my school and I never had many friends. However, the behavior of my peers, combined with the encouragement of my teachers, made me determined to go to school and show them that I was worth being part of their community.

It was frustrating, but my lifelong dream of getting an education was coming true. I began to take advantage of the opportunity by studying after school for hours to learn English. Coming from a background where neither of my parents ever attended school makes me want to reach a place that they never got to go. Because I remember the experiences that my family and I have been through, I am much stronger and more prepared to face any challenges that stand between me and my education.

Angel

by Tony Linh Pham



Tony is a creative and hard working senior at Boston Latin School. Tony has been involved in a variety of activities including the Wolf Pack Volunteer Club, Snowboarding Club and the Red Cross Club. Tony is most proud of serving the Chinatown Community as a Junior Counselor for the Chinatown Adventure Program.

Tony applied to 8 schools, including Boston University, Northeastern University and UMass Amherst. Tony wants to pursue an advanced degree in Business or Law, but hopes to obtain his undergraduate degree in Education.

I sat there, hands folded neatly over my lap, sweat on my brow, and looked straight ahead as I was getting interviewed for my first serious job. "So, how did you hear about us?" I tried to remain calm. He was a college student at Harvard, but I ignored that fact. I swallowed, and proceeded to answer. I do not recall what my answer was, or what happened for the rest of the interview. I was so sure that I did not get the job that I tried to forget about it, but in the next few days, I received an email that I got the job.

My interviewer's name was Angelico Nathaniel Alarcon Razon, and although he does not know it, he has played a huge role in my life. Our backgrounds are completely different, but we found a common ground and a friendship inevitably began to bloom. It was because of his decision to give me a chance that I was able to find real friends, and of course I had him, as both a friend and a mentor.

Loneliness has been a recurring theme throughout my life. I was never meant to be born into this world, for my very existence was the outcome of two people's careless flirtations. I was excluded from others in my neighborhood, because as one particularly cruel child put it, "Chinks aren't good enough to live in the ghetto." The irony is that I am not even Chinese, but I always get mislabeled due to my slanted eyes. I continuously woke up in the midst of a cold, damp, and empty apartment. This is what I had been calling home, until Angel came into my life. Angel's college life was dedicated to helping other people through social justice work. He was active in Chinatown and also on the Harvard campus, but he always made time for me. There were lots of times when I needed help, from schoolwork to prepping for the SAT, and he was only a phone call away. I was taking Angel for granted, but it was not until Angel prepared to leave for medical school in California that I realized it.

There was a farewell party for Angel, and everyone was gathered in a room. People took turns telling their stories of Angel, and how much they would miss him. I sat in my chair, listening to their memories when my friends looked at me and said, "Come on Pham, you know him more than everyone else, stand up." I knew what I wanted to say. Everyone began to applaud and the party was ending. I just sat there, the speech still in my mind.

Hi my name is Tony, the kid you usually see next to Angel. I could go on for days about how much of an impact he made on me, but I'm going to make it short and simple. This guy is like a needle in a haystack, difficult to find but worth every penny. It's going to be hard to not have Angel around here, but if he plans on coming back, he knows where to go. Hopefully he is happy in California, but he knows that Boston is always going to be his home, and hopefully he won't be gone too long...

It's been almost a year since his departure, and subtly it feels like I'm filling his shoes. I am still active in the Chinatown community and also on the Harvard campus. Now, I have a mentee that looks up to me and asks me questions. I sit down in the same chair where I was interviewed, hands folded neatly over my lap, but now I'm the interviewer. I can still hear his voice, "So, how did you hear about us?"

Realizing my Blessings

by Lucia Bostrom



Lucia Bostrom is currently a senior at Boston Latin School. At BLS, Lucia is involved with several activities including crew, which she has participated in since 9th grade. Outside of school, Lucia is involved with her church.

Lucia was introduced to Bottom Line through Summer Search, a program she has been involved in since 10th grade. Through Summer Search, she was able to participate in a service learning trip to Cape Town, South Africa over the summer after her junior year. It was during this trip that Lucia was inspired to one day major in International Relations. Lucia's final college list includes Tufts University, George Washington University, Trinity College, Fordham University and Boston University.

A home is meant to provide us with shelter, security, and privacy. The homes in this South African township provide none of these; they are made of tin and thin pieces of wood. The children of the township run barefoot on broken glass, playing in piles of trash. In America, I go home to a two-story house with a roof and doors. I wear shoes, and the only time I touch trash is when I am bringing it outside. There is no comparison between this world and mine, and yet from this township came a person who taught me more about myself than anyone ever has.

He told us to call him Sox. We met this past summer when I was sent on scholarship to a three-week program in South Africa. Sox was the youngest of five mentors, and I was one of forty students. My most memorable day began in a leadership workshop where we read an article about Eleanor Roosevelt. When we had all formed a circle, Sox picked up the article and said in his thick Xhosa accent, "I don't know about you, but I'm sick of reading these. I don't want to hear her story-- I want to hear yours." I instantly thought of my brother, Timmy, and I began to share my story.

Timmy was diagnosed with autism when he was three and I was four. Memories from my childhood are hazy, but I can distinctly remember my parents telling me that if anything were to happen to them, I would take care of Timmy. It was a heavy thing to be told at such a young age, and I began to think of him as a burden. That's not to say I neglected him; whenever Timmy fell down, I was the first one to see if he was ok. Even now, as Timmy is developing crushes and becoming his own person, I'm always willing to talk. As I was telling my story, the tears began to flow. I told the group how disgusted I was with myself, and that I thought of my brother as both my burden and my entire world. I looked at Sox, who always knew what to say. He said, "The fact that you're crying is proof of your love. I know that whatever decisions you make in the future will be good for both of you. Never question your love for him- it has always been there."

After everyone told their stories, Sox told us his. He was born in a township in Johannesburg, where he grew up with his father, stepmother, and younger brother. Sox was abused by his stepmother, and his brother was the only person who kept him alive. His brother was not only his brother, but his parent, mentor, and best friend. Knowing that Sox had such a poignant relationship with his brother made me believe even more in what he said about my love for Timmy. He understood the importance of siblings, of our unconditional love for them. He understood me.

I'm probably never going to see Sox again. I might even forget what he looks like, because in reality, I only knew him for three weeks. The memory of his words, however, and his understanding of my internal struggle, will forever be engrained in my mind. Sox has changed the way I view Timmy; I know that the good decisions I make in my life will inevitably help him, and that he will always be a part of my life because I want him to be. Sox taught me that having a sibling is a blessing, not a curse. Although it has taken me awhile to learn this, I can honestly say that I know what my blessings are, and I wouldn't be the same person without them.

A+

by Takii Rivers



Takii is a charismatic leader at New Mission High School. Throughout her high school experience she has advocated for student rights as a member of Mission Advocates and interned with the Supreme Judicial Youth Court. Takii is also an excellent student; she chose to take advanced Spanish courses with native speakers to increase her fluency. Next year, Takii hopes to attend Brown University, Boston University, or Boston College.

"I know you're being a good girl," my brother Eric said to me while we walked to my bus stop. "Yeah," I said, holding his hand to keep my balance as I dodged the slippery ice on the ground. "So what you gonna get today?" He smiled at me as I repeated my answer to our daily question, "An A+!" "That's right!" he said. "I'm always gonna get an A," I stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "You better," Eric calmly demanded. Even with a smile added to the end of "you better," I could hear the seriousness in his tone, but I still looked at him with great admiration and love.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, taking in the crunching of snow beneath our feet, the smell of school bus exhaust, and the nose biting winter morning air. We approached my bus stop just in time and I boarded, not forgetting to wave at Eric as it pulled away. He responded by waving back before turning to walk towards home. Later that day, my brother Eric was shot and killed while visiting his girlfriend. The perpetrators waited in the bushes adjacent to the house, aiming for Eric's best friend, but a bullet has no name. He was only sixteen years old. That night I made the decision that I would not only live life for myself, but for Eric as well. From that point on, I decided to honor our sibling promise and use his words of encouragement to achieve academic excellence.

Although I was young, during the court proceedings that followed, I still remember the sight of my mother's streaked makeup and red, bloodshot eyes sinking into her pale complexion. The sight of her crying in front of me made me uneasy, but I listened hard as she explained what was happening. There were many words that I did not understand; I decided to one day learn their meaning. Over the years, I have discovered that the term "immunity," which was used by the jury, was responsible for allowing the perpetrators involved in my brother's death to "walk" free. This word of safety, fertilized by the persuasiveness of the defense attorney's argument, and ironically the words "not guilty", birthed my interest in law and legal terminology. I found myself developing a curiosity for understanding every side of a court case involving criminal matters.

The death of my brother forced me to not only learn how to handle trauma, but also introduced me to the complicated yet intriguing world of legal proceedings. Even though my brother has been gone for eleven years, I am still living out my promise to him every day. As I move forward with my education, Eric's warm but stern, "you better," will continue to resonate inside me and allow me to keep ending my day with an A+.

My Brother's Keeper

by Uniqua Mason



Uniqua Mason, who lives in Boston with her mother, will be the first in her family to graduate from a four-year college. Uniqua a very involved senior at Boston Community Leadership Academy. She has been Captain of the BCLA Step Team for 4 years, and has competed in track and field and cheerleading since sophomore year. Last year, Uniqua's effort in track earned her the Coaches' Award. Outside of school, Uniqua has worked at the Breastfeeding Research Center at Boston Medical Center. Uniqua applied to ten schools, including Northeastern University, University of New Hampshire and Boston College. After graduation, Uniqua hopes to pursue a career in nursing.

My heart started racing when I first heard that my brother was sitting in a holding cell. I was in my room when his girlfriend called me on my cell phone and said a word that I thought I'd never hear: murder. I was distraught. I felt a tingling sensation travel through my body as the word processed. "He was in the wrong place at the wrong time...they have two suspects in custody, one being your brother," was the general idea of the conversation his girlfriend was attempting to have with me. As much as I didn't want to, I slowly walked the ten steps leading into my mother's bedroom. I didn't have enough courage to tell her myself, so I handed her the phone.

For a moment, a glimpse of my brother's and my childhood flashed in my mind. As soon as my mom heard the six letter word, she was in disbelief. "What? This can't be right. Are you sure? No, no!" she responded, now beginning to weep. I retraced the ten steps leading to my bedroom and begged God to wake me from this nightmare. Even now, writing this as a personal essay, it is still hard for me to believe. The brother that I know isn't capable of such actions. The brother that I know is intelligent, goofy, creative, and outgoing. He was my inspiration for excelling in school. Growing up, I remember seeing all of his awards hanging up on the wall and being sure that one day my awards would be hanging right beside his.

For as long as I can remember, the two of us have been inseparable. I remember a song we used to sing around the house that drove my mom crazy that went, "I remember/last December/ Sha-boat, sha-boat, sha-boat," and we'd laugh hysterically after. We would have cooking contests and he would always win, but encourage me to keep trying. He'd say, "Next time watch and learn Nene, watch and learn," and smile.

When my brother began getting arrested, I was young and couldn't understand why my brother wouldn't be home for a few months at a time. I knew he was in trouble, but I didn't know why or where it was leading him. Now, old enough to know the difference between juvenile detention centers and jail, I wish I could've done more for him. Mommy said she told him time and time again to stay away from the streets, but for some reason they always called for him and he went. She tried getting him a counselor, transferring schools, and moving from the neighborhood. I didn't see it then but all my mother was trying to do was avoid the predicament he is in now. My brother is currently awaiting trial.

My brother's pending case has deeply affected me. I can clearly see all the potential my brother has within him that he failed to use. He is good in so many areas that can contribute to this society that it hurts me to find him wasting his life and abilities behind four walls. Because my brother has always pushed me to do my best, I am going to do just that. His current situation had caused me to acknowledge all the potential I have, and the opportunities that I must take advantage of. I have watched my brother's future slip out of his hands and I will catch it in mine.

We both have so much potential. He can't use his, so I am determined to use mine to my fullest extent. The challenges that my brother is facing have allowed me to become more focused on succeeding and living up to my fullest potential.

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 situation is more daunting:

- ◆ There are nearly 3,000 high school seniors in the Boston public schools
- ◆ Only about 2,000 of those students will enroll in college
- ◆ Fewer than 700 of those students will graduate with a degree in 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 thirteen 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 disadvantaged 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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