

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

One Goal. 1,600 Paths to Success.

The essays in this book were written by high school seniors from the class of 2011 in Bottom Line's College Access Program. These essays tell the stories of students who have faced incredible obstacles and have shown the courage and persistence to overcome them. Each student has a unique background with unique challenges, but they share a common goal: to earn a college degree.

The student-authors of these essays have come to Bottom Line to receive one-on-one support and guidance throughout the college application process, and throughout college as well, in order to reach that goal. They are joined by nearly 1,600 more high school and college students who are also currently receiving support from Bottom Line.

Bottom Line is a non-profit organization that helps socially and economically challenged youth get in to college, graduate from college, and go far in life by providing comprehensive one-on-one guidance. We believe that students from disadvantaged backgrounds need long-term mentoring and support to succeed in college and beyond, and using this philosophy, 73% of our students have graduated within 6 years, more than twice the graduation rate of students from similar backgrounds.

Most Bottom Line students are in the first generation of 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 who are working hard to overcome significant personal hurdles and become role models of success for their community, their family, and their peers. Bottom Line is here to ensure that they can achieve this goal.

Contents

In An Unsafe Country by Ahmed Weyrah	4
Be The Change by Xia Josiah-Faeduwor	5
Do You Remember? by Fatoumata Bah	6
Raul by Taiomi Cruz	7
Big Brother by Franny Tejada	8
Harold And The Purple Crayon by Yaritza Pena	9
On The Road by Dat Tran	10
Responsibilities by Mandy Wong	11
Dreaming of Cheeseburgers by Nikia Lynn Hackett	12
Lost In Translation by Thu Tran	13
Where There Is No Path by Nebia Zeroual	14
How You Can Help	15

In An Unsafe Country

by Ahmed Weyrah



Ahmed is a bright student at English High School. He is a member of the Somalian Community Center's soccer team and helps out at his mosque on weekends. He has worked at a local parking lot since 9th grade and works there full-time 40 hours every week while attending high school. He has even worked at the airport.

Ahmed is undecided, but he is considering majoring in Business, Political Science, or Engineering. He has applied to schools such as UMass Boston, Suffolk, and Wentworth.

Beled-Hawo in Somalia is my home, the city where I was born and raised. Routines that are often taken for granted here, such as shopping for groceries, were fearful and dangerous situations there. One day on my way to the store, gunfire began everywhere around me. The loud sounds made me stop walking. I looked around and saw people running in all directions. Many survived hidden away while the gunfire went on all night long. Behind locked gates, we prayed to God. I emerged and passed a man, a survivor of the war, carrying his child around his neck. My legs became heavy and tired as I tried searching for my family. I knew that every living being on the earth must one day pass, but I was very scared.

I finally stopped at a refugee area of people looking for family members. I was overwhelmed and could barely breathe, and I could only see dead people everywhere. A man asked, "Are you ok?" I shook my head but couldn't speak a word. He took me into his arms and said to me, "This disaster situation will end soon and you will be ok." "Thank you," was all I could reply, and we parted ways leaving that vacant place behind. I was very tired that night and missed my family.

I rose with the sun, vivid nightmares still dancing in my head. Not knowing if my family was dead or alive, I set out searching. The wounded were being treated. The dead were starting to be buried. Finally, I was reunited. My two sisters and mother were standing in front of the door, setting out to look for me.

Living in an unsafe country is the worst feeling in the world. I was forced to grasp the concept of death, loss, and devastation at an early age. The sudden deaths of neighbors, family and friends resulted in many sleepless nights. Civil war ravaged my city. The savage murders went on and on. For over two decades, suicide bombs destroyed the entire city because, with more than a dozen tribes fighting each other, the struggle for power never ends.

When my family left Somalia for Ethiopia, it was my first time traveling and the journey took us 72 hours by foot. After living in Werder for nearly eight months, my sister who went to America before the Civil War called my father and told us that she would sponsor us to come to the United States of America. After just a few days, we left Werder and headed to Nairobi, Kenya. I went to my first school in Nairobi, but I could only go one hour a day because it was so expensive.

We moved from Kenya to Boston on July 26th, 2007. My life experiences up to this point have paved my road. From these experiences I have learned to appreciate life and this wonderful opportunity I've been offered, the opportunity to be in this great nation and educate myself. I'm now determined to take advantage of this gift of a second chance. I will make sure to fulfill my duty of education, so that later on I can support and help rebuild my country. For this reason, I'm determined to use education as a powerful resource to better myself. I will enhance my education and will help Americans and others who are in need. I will continue my education until I reach my goal of becoming a professor or an international doctor.

Be The Change

by Xia Josiah-Faeduwor



Xia is an active and musically gifted student from Boston Latin School. She has been playing the clarinet since sixth grade and the flute since ninth grade. Xia is a member of the football band, the jazz band, and the concert band. She was a counselor this year at St. Paul's Victory Christian Assembly. She has worked at Learn2Teach, Teach2Learn at the South End Technology Center since 9th grade.

Xia would like to major in Engineering and Music and has applied to schools such as Brown University, UMass Amherst, Northeastern University, and Tufts University.

"*Be the change you'd like to see,*" Gandhi's words, sung over an unchanging drum beat and a light melody, are the motif in my roller-coaster of a life. I first heard the song when I was 13. It was my second year as a Boston Latin School student and it had been four years since my parents' divorce. I was still adjusting to the change, and listening to music was one of my palliative penchants. Years later, the song and its motif still haunt me. They encourage me to succeed, not only for myself but for my family, especially for my little sister who looks to me because she no longer has a mother around.

I was nine years old when the police car pulled up to my house in Alexandria, Virginia. My best friend Jalesa and I were having a sleepover. We'd had a contest to see who could stay up the longest and her loud snoring left me wandering about restlessly. My feet led me down the stairs to a horrific scene, my oldest brother and my mother fighting, with my two year old sister Satta caught between. My mother screaming for me to call the police. The rest of the night passed by in a blue and red blur, my three brothers and I being escorted to my father's house in the back of a squad car, my little sister carried to the hospital in an ambulance. Lives changed forever. Feelings of lost control and helplessness that didn't stop. One day I'm playing with Satta in the sand on Virginia Beach with mom and dad quietly arguing in the background. The next day, or seemingly so, a 12 hour car ride to Boston in a cramped Toyota filled with all our worldly possessions. Except our mom.

I can't go back in time and take the drugs out of my mother's hands. I can't lower my father's hands. But I can look in my sister's eyes and tell her the future will be better. I can encourage her to work hard and be confident in what she does. I can try my hardest to be that older female role model that I never had. I can inspire her and give her hope.

When I think of being the change I'd like to see, I think of my little sister. I think of role models. One time, my sister and I were in our room and I remember looking up at her playing Barbies and Bratz from the bottom bunk of the bed we share. I start thinking about how I look in her eyes; am I the proper role model, am I being a good sister? Am I being the change? I kick at her Hello Kitty covered mattress and tell her I'm coming up to play with her, something I rarely do, and something she is ecstatic about. And so we play. Unlike other times, the Barbies don't wear tiny miniskirts and belly shirts with high heels. This time there's school and tomboys and homework and strict parents, and surprisingly for me, lots of fun too. My sister and I play until my father yells for us to go to bed. Then I return to my lower bunk, reading, again pretending I'm too important to play with my sister. But I can still hear her up there, and she hasn't gone back to the bossy cheerleaders, now it's bossy professors and stubborn lawyers.

It really does make me proud whenever my sister listens to my advice because it shows that my words do have an impact on her life and that change is possible.

Do You Remember?

by Fatoumata Bah



Fatoumata is a remarkable young woman. She came to the United States on her own four years ago and has not had any contact with her family since then. At English High School, she is a member of the soccer team and has helped raise money for a shelter.

Fatoumata hopes to study economics and has applied to schools such as Suffolk University, Boston University, and Manhattan College.

Dear Guinea and Senegal,

Do you remember when my father died? It was 2006; I was only 12 years old. My violent uncle came and took everything that belonged to my father. He then decided to sell me into a marriage with a man old enough to be my father. The old man already had three wives and children older than me. You did nothing to stop him because in this part of the country, money and land is more important than our childhood. My mother could do nothing to stop my uncle because women's ideas and opinions did not matter. I cried day and night, nothing made sense to me. I had no hope or chance to escape from this marriage and I almost gave up my life.

Do you remember when I outsmarted the man who wanted to marry me? The day before I was to be given to the old man, I told my mother that I had made up my mind to kill myself as soon as they gave me to him. I had no idea what he would do to me once we left my country and I did not want to find out. However, my mother and my older sister came up with the idea of convincing my intended husband to pay for a trip to America for a summer vacation. Before I left with him he promised to give me anything I wanted. I told the man that what I desired the most was to have a trip to America. He told me that he would try once we got to Senegal.

The day we left my country was the worst day of my life. My mother and sisters were crying; my brothers stood by hopelessly. I was scared and feared that the old man would poison me or sell me to other people along the road. He took me to his aunt, who was to teach me how to be a house wife. I lived with this family for almost six months in which I suffered from physical abuse.

Do you also remember when I made my final escape? On September 12, 2006 my soon-to-be husband told me that he had arranged for me to go to America. I was to stay with an old couple that my "husband" had arranged for me to stay with. After three days with the couple, I snuck in the bathroom to call my sister's friend who was living in America. She said she would pick me up the next night. I was still scared because I did not know her, but hours later she came and took me to Boston.

Two months later, I found out that my uncle threw my family out of the village because they were responsible for my escape. Since then I have not heard from them because I am afraid to contact them and give my uncle an idea of where I might be.

Guinea and Senegal, I am writing to you from America, where I finally have a chance to gain an education. I am safe and I have the opportunity to create my own life. I am making my own choices. I am no longer abused and mistreated. I am surrounded by nice people who tell me they are happy to have me. I am determined to finish my studies and make a change by helping women in my community. I want to find a way to make you understand the gravity of your mistakes. If you cannot remember the things you have done, I hope that you at least remember me because I will be back and I will create change.

Raul

by Taiomi Cruz



Taiomi Cruz is a competitive senior from Boston Latin School. She has participated in student council, the Caribbean Club and the Red Cross Club. She is the captain of the South End Dynamite competitive baton, dance, and cheering team. Since 9th grade, she has been a tutor at the Blackstone Community Center, working with elementary school kids and she has worked for Keylatch as a junior counselor where she created lesson plans for elementary-aged students.

Taiomi's experiences have convinced her that she would like to major in Psychology and become very involved in student life. She has applied to schools such as Boston College, Lesley University, Bridgewater State University, and Lasell College.

Police cars, ambulances, screams, lights, complete chaos and shock surrounded me. August 16, 2002 started as a typical summer day. I was eight years old and anxiously looking forward to my closest cousin, Raul, coming to visit me from New Bedford. On our way home from the movies the day turned violent as a car turned onto my street and raced towards us at eighty miles per hour. All of a sudden Raul and I heard loud noises like fire crackers and familiar faces fell to the ground. Blood was gushing out of bodies and I recognized my friend's father screaming and agonizing in pain. I felt confused; it was hard to understand how people had so much hate in their heart to take away fathers, brothers, and friends. However, Raul later told me that a situation such as this one should not torment me, instead it should serve as motivation to make a change so children in the future would not have to see what I just saw. This was the beginning of our dream to build community centers and programs to serve neighborhood residents, to lead them towards bright futures instead of violent ones.

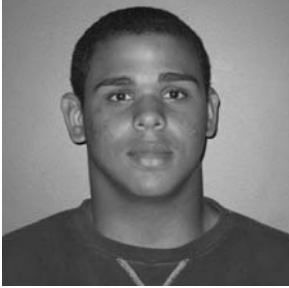
Being six years older than me, Raul had a head start on this dream. At just fifteen years old, Raul spent most of his time at community centers doing everything in his power to lead young people down the right path. Two years later, he was handed another responsibility: cancer. At first, Raul remained active in community centers, but eventually all these tasks became a struggle and he could only talk longingly about all the great things he wanted to accomplish from his hospital bed. On January 1, 2005 my cousin passed away. That was one of the hardest years of my life, but I knew I had the courage to continue pursuing the dream that we shared.

As I grew older, I began to think about all the lessons I had learned from Raul, and I constantly thought about what motivated him. I spent even more time at the Blackstone Community Center across the street from my house and began to tutor children there. I realized that these children had so much potential, yet they lacked resources or a role model. I continued tutoring and accepted a job as a junior counselor at the Keylatch Summer Program. I enjoyed giving back to the program that I grew up attending, providing a fun, educational experience for neighborhood kids who could have been resorting to violence. Every week I came up with curriculum that I would facilitate, which allowed me to take on a leadership role and teach campers lessons that they would always remember and could put to use in their future. After that summer, I was one hundred percent positive that I would follow in Raul's steps. His dream had become my own.

Raul has had a major influence on my life by teaching me that change is really in my hands. Even though he was only eighteen when he died, without having a chance to complete his dreams, in my eyes he did accomplish his goals because he made a difference in me. Witnessing that drive-by could have filled me with so much anger that I might have resorted to violence, but instead Raul turned it into something productive. I wish that Raul was here to see how much I have grown and learned from him. I know that I will continue to be a role-model and mentor to younger children, and that someday I will start a movement in my community that will allow others to see the difference they are capable of and give them the strength to strive for more.

Big Brother

by Franny Tejada



Franny is a motivated and athletic senior at Boston Latin Academy. He is the captain of the football team and plays defensive end and right guard. Franny is a Little Brother in Big Brothers/Big Sisters and is a member of the National Honor Society. He also works at a local restaurant as a busboy.

Franny has applied to schools such as UMass Amherst, Temple University, Syracuse University, and Providence College.

It was a unique spring day; the only clouds in the sky seemed very far away and the sun radiantly shone on my seemingly perfect world as I began my short walk home from the bus stop. I was thinking of the great thing that had happened that day; I had finally spent a whole history class talking to the girl I had a crush on. I had it all figured out; my life could not have seemed much clearer. As soon as I got to my apartment door I stopped, savoring the feeling of happiness before giving the door a gentle push to announce to my family that I was home. My smile quickly turned into confusion as I heard a wail. It didn't take long to figure out that the wail was my mother's.

Confused, I asked my cousin, "What happened?" She wouldn't answer. I looked to my younger brother for some facial expression that would give away the secret that was being kept from me. At that moment I realized I had lost the person I trusted the most, the most important thing in my life; my best friend, my father, had passed away. I was in denial, but the tears that rushed to my eyes told me otherwise. Was he really gone? No. No. No! He can't do this to me! He can't leave me all alone like this! Every tear that rolled down my face symbolized a memory I had of my father. Memories—all the times I spent with my father were just memories now.

Everything was different after that day. The sun shone less vibrantly, every type of food seemed bland, and school was boring; the world just seemed less interesting. I couldn't focus, praying that this was some cruel joke he was playing on us. But I didn't realize one thing, losing my father opened the doors to a very special friendship with my Big Brother, Matt.

When I was 12, I was enrolled in a program called Big Brothers Big Sisters and met Matt, a mid-thirties businessman who, in my eyes, had the world in the palm of his hand. After my father passed away Matt told me that his own father had passed away when he was sixteen; he opened up to me and I knew that if there was anyone who could understand what I was going through, it was him. We instantly became very close; we started talking about everything when we hung out: our thoughts, how fascinating life is, his problems and mine. The more time Matt and I spent together, the more we realized how similar we really were. I never thought that I would have had to lose my father to gain a friendship as unique as this one.

Through the past three and a half years, I have learned many lessons. But the most important lesson for me is to not take anything for granted. I have learned to seize every opportunity that I have been presented with, from challenging myself by taking Advanced Placement courses to going out with friends and meeting new people in order to learn about different cultures. I hope to one day become a Big Brother, myself, so that I can have this kind of impact on another child.

Harold And The Purple Crayon

by Yaritza Pena



As a senior at O'Bryant High School, Yaritza leads a busy life. She participates in Minds Matter (a summer program), softball, cheerleading, TAG (The Talented and Gifted Program), Panas, GSA, her church Youth Group, and O'B Volunteers. She has also worked at the Boston Aquarium.

Although she is undecided, Yaritza is interested in majoring in Business, Communications, or Psychology. She has applied to schools such as UMass Amherst, Emmanuel College, Bentley University, and Boston College.

This summer I felt like Harold from the children's book Harold and the Purple Crayon. In the story, Harold draws his own world with a purple crayon. Just like Harold uses a crayon to create his future, I used a pencil to create mine.

Harold wants to walk in the moonlight, so he creates this adventure by drawing a path and a moon. I wanted to create an adventure, so I applied to a summer enrichment program at Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut.

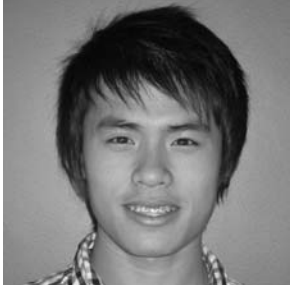
Along Harold's path, he faces an ocean which causes him to lose his sense of self. Similar to Harold, I faced an obstacle on my journey. I forgot who I was in the big Choate campus and among my intimidating peers. I received a full tuition scholarship to attend Choate. Most of the other students did not need such help. As a result, I felt that we came from different worlds and they would not accept me. I also could not feel at ease in my own room because my roommate left in the middle of the program and it seemed like I had no one to confide in. I found myself alone in my room, with a journal on my lap and a pen in my hand. So I wrote, "I don't know what to do, should I lie and tell my mom everything is fine, or ask for the next ride back home. I'm lost. " - June 27, 2010.

Harold finds himself grasping for air in the ocean he created. With his crayon, he draws a boat to bring him back to shore. I found myself alone for the next five weeks of classes, quickly coming back to my room to write. With my journal, I wrote to remind myself that I belonged at Choate; out of the thousands of students who applied, I was good enough to be accepted. Then my hands ran free as they guided my thoughts onto the blue lines, "I am a leader of my church's youth group, I took care of my mother after her knee injury, and I earned college credit at Harvard Secondary School". I knew that I could thrive at Choate because of the obstacles I overcame in the past. I quickly put my journal away and walked out of my room with a new sense of confidence. I joined the debate club as a way to interact more with the students. After conversing more with the students, I realized that I should not fear them, but admire them for showing me the broad range of people that there are in the world. Some of them came from countries like the Bahamas or Columbia. They shared with me how they were happy that I was bold enough to walk up to them, showing interest in learning about new people. Little did they know that I did not feel as courageous before writing in my journal.

After sailing to shore, Harold searches for his way home. He uses the moon from the beginning of his journey to direct him. I use my journal to find my way. My journal is my moon. It is right there with me when times get tough. I will always be safe as long as I have a journal on my lap and a pen in my hand. Writing is my refuge, and much like Harold, I overcome obstacles through self reliance and by embracing creativity. I am grateful to have set out a new adventure for myself. Without this experience, I would not have been able to gain new perspectives on life while also discovering my inner strength through writing. These discoveries are what assure me that I will succeed at my next adventure in college.

On The Road

by Dat Tran



Dat is a creative and musical student at Excel Academy. He has kept himself busy by trying many different activities such as Soccer, Art Club, and Web Site Club. He is also an Urban Scholar and a member of Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps and National Honor Society.

Dat does community service activities through NHS and Summer Search. He even taught himself how to play piano.

In college, Dat plans to major in architecture or computer science. He has applied to schools such as Holy Cross, Connecticut College, UMass Amherst, Bridgewater State, Boston University, and Stonehill College.

It is 10:25 p.m., and I find myself sitting in front of a blank Microsoft Word document, dazing at the blinking cursor. My mind is full with things to say, but every time I place my hands on the keyboard nothing comes out. I look at my calendar. It is filled with scribbles, due dates of college essays, supplements, chores, plans, goals. Every time I check the calendar a wave of pressure knocks my heart against my rib cage. I can't ask my family for help. From an early age I learned to rely on myself. My hands curl into a fist, my eyes close, blood rushes to my brain, my face turns red, and with a long deep breath I let out a cloud of hot air. I have had enough. I'm driving out tonight. There is no destination; I just want to leave the house.

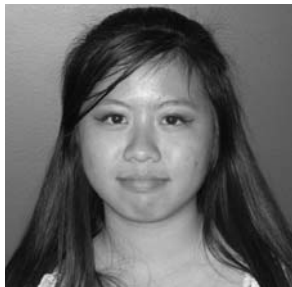
I drive past my school, past my friend's house, over the bridge, down the tunnel, by the beach; I've been to every corner of Boston. I feel relaxed being on the road at night, just by myself in the car. The city is quiet; the streets are clear. No traffic, no people. Everything feels calm. It reminds me of when I was in Oregon last year in the wilderness. I wandered aimlessly in the woods, hiking up mountains. I felt like an explorer, discovering my own path, with no one to guide me but myself. At the top, it looked like the Earth was being skinned alive--- one side green, one side brown. Like the forest, my childhood has been cut down. Since I moved from Vietnam at age 6, I have had minimal contact with my absent father. My childhood was further chopped when my mother began a life full of gambling. My parents' mistakes provide motivation for me to branch out and be successful. I feast on knowledge in order for me to grow, to overcome my obstacles as a tree grows against gravity.

I stop at a red light, and I see a homeless man holding a Dunkin Donuts cup in one hand, a cardboard sign in the other, walking from car to car. I see windows roll up, doors lock, and drivers looking ahead, ignoring the homeless man. I feel guilty at red lights in my community because there are always homeless people with cardboard signs: "Need money for rent", "Need money for food," "Need money for alcohol," "Need money for gas." While homeless people are begging for money, my mom is gambling. I must admit, I usually don't give them money because I have none. My mom told me to take care of myself before I take care of others. Maybe she knew I would need to be independent at a young age, since she and my father rarely helped me. I hope that one day I will be well off enough to roll down my window at a red light, so I can give the homeless man some money, regardless of what cardboard sign he is holding. I hope one day my mother will be able to do the same.

Once I make a circle around Boston, I come back home. I don't want to stop driving, but there are things that I need to do. The blinking cursor is still blinking and the blank document is still blank. I head inside and sit myself down in front of my laptop. I check the time on the lower right corner of the screen; it is 11:11 p.m. - the perfect time to make some wishes. I wish the homeless man will have food in his stomach, socks on his feet, and money in his pocket. I wish my mom was a beggar, so she could learn to stop gambling. I wish I didn't have to print this essay because it is killing trees in Oregon. I wish my calendar was clear because writing a college essay shouldn't be as hard as holding a Dunkin Donuts cup in the cold of late October, or forgetting about your children, or learning to give up addictions to connect with your family.

Responsibilities

by Mandy Wong



Mandy is an eager student at Boston Latin Academy. She is involved in the Big Sister organization as a little sister. She attends Chinese school and plays the dulcimer and drums in the Boston Chinese Ensemble. She has volunteered as a tutor at her Chinese school and has taught there part-time. Mandy has also worked as a computer lab tech at the Asian American Chinese Association.

Mandy is hoping to major in Biology or Health Professions. She has applied to schools such as Mass College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Simmons College, Brandeis University, and Emmanuel College.

When I was 14, my dad was diagnosed with diabetes. It had gone undiagnosed for a while, causing him to go blind and have heart and lung failure, kidney problems, and unstable blood pressure. From this point on, he was in the hospital full time. Since my mom was the only person supporting the family and could not speak English, I began to take on more and more responsibilities.

Before my dad was sick, things in my family were totally different. I argued with my mom almost every day about hanging out with friends too much, talking on the phone, and spending too much money shopping. I believed my friends were better than my family. After my dad got sick, my mom needed a lot of help. She could not speak or understand English and my two little sisters were too young to help. I decided that it was up to me to help my family.

I began to go to the hospital every night for the next three years. I would bring food from home and feed my dad dinner while talking with him so he would not be so lonely in the hospital. I also had to translate for my mom. When I started talking to the doctors about my dad's medical records, they mentioned words I was unfamiliar with, such as the process of dialysis. I had to do a lot of research about medical terms in order to understand my dad's medical records.

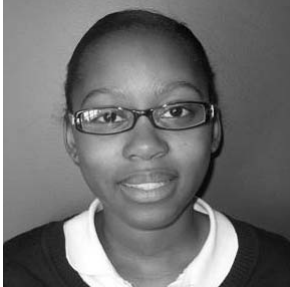
As I started meeting more doctors and nurses, I started to deal with disrespect, which was a struggle for me because I was an emotional person and my feelings were hurt easily. I felt that people looked down on me because of my age, but I had to learn to stay strong no matter how much disrespect was thrown at me. Yes, I may not have been an adult, but as a teenager taking more responsibilities than others, I had to act like one. I learned to stand up for myself and speak up confidently to people. Taking on more responsibility became easier for me. I was not scared of anything.

My dad passed away on Wednesday, May 24, 2009 due to heart failure. Although I was sad and wanted to cry, I did not show it to my family. I had come to be viewed as the head of the household and I knew that if I broke down crying, my mom and sisters would break down too. Instead, I stayed strong, held in my tears, and continued with my responsibilities.

At such a young age, I had to deal with many things, but I managed to do a good job. Taking on the responsibilities I have makes me feel that I am capable of doing anything I put my mind to. Now it is time to focus my mind on college. I am very proud to be the first person in my family who will attend college. I know that, through college, I will be able to continue to develop the skills I need to take care of my family.

Dreaming of Cheeseburgers

by Nikia Lynn Hackett



Nikia is a motivated student at New Mission High School. She has participated in cheerleading and student government and is a member of the National Honors Society. Nikia has completed an internship as a lifeguard and currently works at Old Navy. Last summer Nikia traveled to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and worked in a day care center.

Nikia hopes to major in biomedical engineering and has applied to ten schools, including UMass Amherst, Catholic University, University of Rhode Island, and UMass Dartmouth.

A greasy, dripping cheeseburger, with ketchup, lettuce, pickles, and tomatoes, was the dream burger at a typical twelve-year-old birthday party. But as I sat at the Strawberry Shortcake table, I was the only one with a plain Jane burger—two buns and a patty—the story of my life. Birthday parties were a dilemma I faced numerous times a year because of my health. When I was twelve years old, I was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis, an inflammatory bowel disease. It has affected me physically, mentally, and emotionally, in both positive and negative ways.

A few times a year, I would have flare-ups; stomach pain, bleeding, and inflammation would send me to the hospital. Unfortunately, during these times each year I had to miss several days of school. My disease made me feel like an outcast because, while others were eating their burgers and chicken fingers with fries, I was eating a boring sandwich from home that wouldn't cause yet another dreaded flare-up. In addition to the stomach pains, I also developed juvenile arthritis in my knees and ankles. This added to my difficulties and made participating in activities that I desired much harder. I joined the cheerleading team at my high school because I did not want this disease to stop me from doing the things I always wanted to do. During cheerleading practices I took multiple breaks because of the pain in my knees. It was difficult to execute the standard jumps and toe touches because of the burning sensation and sharp discomfort I often felt. Even though this disease has been an obstacle that has prevented me from participating in many activities, I have not let it consume me. I continue to try my hardest to manage my condition so that I can be successful at what I love.

After my diagnosis and years of experience with this disease, I have become more aware of my body. At an early age I was forced to be more conscious of my diet and learn how to take care of myself. By age 12, I knew more about what was good and bad for my body than most other seventh graders. I didn't have the help of family members; when it was time to take my medications, it was up to me to remember which pills to take. I had to learn how to keep track of multiple medicines and take enemas and suppositories in order to be "normal" on the inside. Going through this disease alone has been one of the hardest things that I have experienced. It is an everyday struggle knowing that there is no cure but only treatment, and to know that it's up to me how I want this disease to play out. I can either make choices that will keep me healthy or suffer the painful consequences.

Having this disease has taught me to be independent, responsible, and determined. This mentality will benefit me in the future because I will not be afraid of going after what I want and trying new things on my own. The experience of having Ulcerative Colitis has made me want to study biological and biomedical sciences because I have a desire to learn and understand how I came to have this condition. This curiosity motivates me to help find a cure, not just for my disease, but also for other auto-immune diseases that affect children like me, who are surrounded by the common burger but only can grasp the boring one.

Lost In Translation

by Thu Tran



Thu is a bright, active student at Boston Latin School. At BLS, she is a member of the volleyball team, ASIA, VSS, and BLCDC. She has volunteered as a teaching assistant at her church, the August Moon Festival, and the Spring Festival. Thu even goes to rallies and protests with her father, who was in the Vietnam War. She has also interned at Boston Financial Data Services and State Street.

Thu has applied to competitive schools, such as Boston College, Boston University, Northeastern University, and UMass Amherst.

I deemed the task my father gave me impossible. It would take many precious hours, thousands of days, countless weeks and months to finish. "Don't worry, just focus on your schoolwork for now. This can be like a fun little project on the side. I don't expect it to be perfect," he said encouragingly. Hearing those words made me cringe; I was always being signed up for things I did not want to do but had to do anyways. This time, my father had asked me to translate his four volume memoir, from beginning to end, into English. He had dreams to expand his readership; he believed that young people could read his story and understand the hardships of a spy during the Vietnam War. Doubt had seeped into my mind, a regular visitor ever since I hit the teens. I had to read the material in a language I only used to communicate with my parents, and dissect my father's writing style in order to put together a piece that sat well with everyone. It was only when I began the first page that I saw the true problem behind it all.

Every word has its own unique meaning, whether it is in Vietnamese, English or any other language. I found that phrases and ideas could not be translated the "right way" and would only sound remotely correct if I added some words here and subtracted a few there. I found that there were many words in Vietnamese that simply did not have a parallel in the English language, even if I had a Vietnamese-English dictionary by my side. Numerous expressions my father used would not sound right to a foreign ear, as traditions were entirely different from one culture to another. I sat there, slumped on top of my scratched wooden desk, feeling helpless and restrained by the language barrier I did not realize was there.

Just as with popular, well-written books being maladapted to the big-screen, key points and subtle little details were lost when they were translated. I could not do anything about it, even if my level of Vietnamese was good enough to properly translate. My father's voice behind the text seemed long forgotten, and I had no choice but to gather up my pride and tell him I could not translate it. I was disappointed in myself for losing his voice in translation, and most of all, I was mad at myself for not being able to bring his dream to life. I was halfway through the fifth chapter and I had to stop. I expected a frown or a sigh of disappointment from my father but surprisingly, what I received was a lopsided smile. He had not expected me to be able to translate his masterpiece without a lot of difficulty.

He showed me manuscript after manuscript of other authors and friends who had tried to translate his memoir into English, but none were successful. He raised his eyebrow at my lack of self-confidence going into the project and set me straight on the spot. Fear of failure and rejection will simply take me nowhere. He was proud of me for trying my best at the translation and for being able to face him and admit I could not do it. It turns out this was also his attempt to make me realize that each language and culture is its own for a reason, and sometimes just staying true to its simplest form will keep it alive.

Where There Is No Path

by Nebia Zeroual



Nebia is a motivated and active student at O'Bryant High School. She has been involved in many different athletic and extracurricular activities, such as volleyball, track and field, swimming, Debate Club and Recycling Club. This year, she is Vice-President of the Volunteering Club. Last summer she participated in the Boston Architectural College Summer Academy to explore a potential career interest, and she also returned to Algeria, where she was born.

Nebia has applied to schools such as Wentworth Institute of Technology, UMass Amherst, Boston University, and Northeastern University.

"Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." I came across this quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson during my first days in high school. Since then, I have realized how strangely, yet thoroughly this quote applies to me and the way I steer my world in intangible directions. I am an Algerian-American girl, or at least that is how I like to think of myself. I was born in Algeria and I spent my childhood there, speaking Arabic and attending a public elementary school. Yet I grew up and spent more than half of my life in the United States, the melting pot country, where I reached a better understanding of the world and my place within it.

In Algeria, ninety-nine percent of the population practices Islam, which links everyone together. It feels nice to live in a community where you belong and are in your comfort zone, but only for a while. The people that surround you in your life should provide a gateway to the world, an opportunity to learn about different cultures. That is why I choose to be surrounded by friends who live far outside my traditional background. My friends are from all around the world; they have different beliefs from me and include all sexual orientations. This is a surprising path for someone from my fairly closed culture to go along. However, having my diverse friends makes me who I am. I do not always have to believe in everything that my friends believe in. I have my own opinions and beliefs that I follow, but I still accept and enjoy them for who they are.

If you see me outside, you will notice that I always wear a head scarf. I choose to wear the scarf as a symbol of my Islamic religion. Many girls who also choose to wear the head scarf think of it as an excuse to hide themselves from the world. That path is not for me; I do not let my beliefs, or my attire, get in the way of pursuing my interests. I love the water and the feeling of the rushing splashes of clear water running across my body. When I made the decision to join my school's swim team, I knew the difficulties that came with it. I wanted to swim, but I did not want to let go of who I am. I made it work, even though I was the only swimmer in the city with the bizarre long swim suit, which went from my ankles to my wrist, as well as a blue swim cap to cover my hair. The exhausting processes of putting on and removing the tight, uncomfortable suit and learning how to swim were challenging, but the team support and spirit that I experienced made all my work worth it.

I live my days in a merged universe, and every day I challenge myself to further combine both worlds. Whether it is getting my family to eat my homemade pasta for dinner, alongside the usual tagines or couscous, or keeping up with fashion, another passion of mine, while matching my scarf to my outfit, I take the best from both my native culture and the home I live in. My multicultural upbringing broadens my perspective and increases my curiosity about everything around me. I am not afraid to compromise or change things in my life, because I know that it will always lead me down new paths that will only make me bolder and stronger.

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
- ◆ Only 800 of those students will graduate with a degree in 6 years

The message is clear. Students need better help getting into the right schools, but they also 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 we provide ongoing, comprehensive support until they graduate.

For the last fourteen years, we have been able to offer a high quality advising service at no cost to our students. As happens with any quality service, word has spread quickly among our constituents about the work we do and the demand for our programs 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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