

Essays on adversity and achievement
by Bottom Line students

I am the opportunity

*Now, I want 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.

The essays in this book were written by New York City high school seniors from the Class of 2014 who participate in Bottom Line's College Access Program. These essays tell the stories of students who have faced incredible obstacles and demonstrated the courage and persistence to overcome them. Each student has a unique background and circumstances, but also a common goal: to earn a college degree.

The authors of these essays are 10 of 300 high school seniors who received one-on-one support from Bottom Line throughout the college application process. Many will continue to receive support from Bottom Line for another 4-6 years while they attend college. They are joined by 1,800 more high school and college students who have come to Bottom Line to receive the support they need to reach their goals.

Bottom Line is a non-profit organization that helps at-risk youth get into and graduate from college by providing one-on-one guidance and support. We believe that students from homes with lower incomes and limited knowledge about college need long-term mentoring and guidance to succeed. With this philosophy, 76% of our college students have graduated within 6 years, more than twice the graduation rate of students from similar backgrounds. In June 2011, Bottom Line replicated in New York from Boston and began serving economically and socially disadvantaged students from New York City. Over the next five years, we will expand to serve thousands of New York City high school and college students each year.

Most Bottom Line students are in the first generation of their family to go to college. Some have been in the United States for only a few years. Others play a critical role in providing financial support and other resources to their families. These remarkable young adults are working hard to overcome significant hurdles and become role models for their community, family, and peers. Bottom Line is here to ensure that they can achieve this goal.

Contents

Determined by Azza Awad.....	1
In Control by Marriam Bah.....	2
Intern of the Year by Mariam Traore.....	3
Winner by Kureem Nugent.....	4
The Right Path by Carl-Henry Isidore.....	5
Brain Tumor by Kimberly Martes.....	6
Two Cultures by Asta Kaba.....	7
Creating Solutions by Nahima Akter.....	8
Most Improved by Ines Lopez.....	9
Working Hard by Dillon Cash.....	10

Determined

by Azza Awad



Azza attends Clara Barton High School and lives in Brooklyn.

Azza is excited to be attending NYU Polytechnic School of Engineering.

Each morning I peeked through my window and greeted the sun through the dusty lifeless glass, looking ahead and embracing the rustic skyline. We were lucky, my family and I, because we had a whole room to ourselves at the Covert Shelter in Harlem, New York. We had been forced to leave our whole lives behind in Brooklyn - everything from school to the corner store to the libraries and beyond. I had to adjust to commuting with my six year old sister two hours a day to and from school. Despite the harsh conditions of life in the shelter, I made it my duty to continue being a remarkable student, a protective sister, and a dependable daughter.

I was thirteen years old when the devastating fire took its toll. Our whole house burned, and we were left with no more than the ashes that blanketed the house. My family and I had no one to turn to since our entire extended family lived in Sudan and so our only option was to reside in a shelter in Harlem. The first week was such a difficult transition. The gang activity and prostitution in the neighborhood was so prevalent that anyone entering the building had to sign in and out. The cot was so close to the ground that I was intruding on the cockroaches who had claimed their territory next to me.

After several months, I came across a group of seven girls who lived in the same shelter. From then on, the seven girls and I met up every Friday to talk about our futures, college plans, and the steps required in order to get there. We shared stories and saved money, a total of \$23.76 towards our college funds. The most important thing that I learned from being with my seven sisters was that where we lived did not define who we were or what our future would be; it was the actions we took and choices we made that mattered.

My experience of living in a shelter has made me the person I am today. Even though it was difficult, this experience made me so grateful for the everyday things that I do have - my family's own apartment back in Brooklyn, an oven that works, a refrigerator that keeps food cool, the freedom to enter our home whenever I want to without signing in, and easy access to libraries and school. In school, I challenged myself to take on AP courses, honors classes, and internships. In the future, I want to support my parents and give back to them since they fled their country in search of a better future for me. I want to give back to my community as well by getting involved with local charities and advocacy groups. Having felt what it's like to have very little, I am determined to be successful and make a future that will benefit me and my family. I want to defy what society has labeled as success and paint a new picture of a promising person. Despite the harsh circumstances I have been through, I am still the pilot of my own plane.

In Control

by Marriam Bah



Marriam lives in the Bronx and attends the High School of Arts and Technology.

Marriam is excited to pursue her interests at Syracuse University next year.

Seventeen - that was the age at which my mother was forced into a marriage with a complete stranger. You see, within my West African culture, people tend to have a very traditional way of going about things. Females growing up in my village in Guinea were not expected to continue their education beyond high school. Instead, imagine waking up in the morning and finding out you are now the bride of a random man whom you have never even laid eyes on! By the way, he is also probably twice your age, maybe old enough to be your father.

Was this to be my fate as well? I had already witnessed both of my sisters get married at ridiculously young ages during their adolescence, endure affectionless marriages, and then suffer through stressful divorces. On top of that, they could not complete their education until many years later.

I definitely was not going down that path. At seventeen years old, the last thing I wanted was to be married to a foreign person, tied down to a loveless relationship, and about to give birth to my second child. I decided a long time ago that I want to pursue my education and attend a college that would be the foundation for my career. However, living within such a traditional, long-established, and fixed culture like mine, I wondered if this was even possible. I was not very sure of the answer, but I was sure that only I could make it possible.

I tossed and turned in my bed one recent morning while contemplating how to approach the topic. Overwhelmed with anxiety, I had millions of thoughts racing through my mind. I had so much to say, but no idea of how to say it. Forcing myself up, I dreadfully walked towards the kitchen. For some reason my house suddenly felt too small and I felt claustrophobic. I knew I had to get this over with, though, and that motivated me to take the last few steps to the kitchen, where my mother was.

I stuttered, "M-mom?" I gathered up all my courage and took a deep breath. Then I spoke. I spoke every single thought that was in my mind about the ridiculous idea of arranged marriages. I told her I would not accept marrying a man I had never laid eyes on before. I spoke and told her that I will pursue an education after high school and not raise kids while still a teenager. I spoke with all my might, from the bottom of my heart. I spoke with no hesitation, no fear, and no regret. I spoke until I could not speak anymore. I spoke until all that was left of me was tears.

What my mother did that day still surprises me. Instead of smacking my face, her soft hands wiped away my tears. She spoke gently in our native tongue, Fulani. She said that she had learned her lesson and realized arranging those marriages with my sisters was not the best thing for them. "You don't have to worry," she said, "because you will not have to go through what your sisters and I did." With that came a fresh set of tears, but this time happy, relieved tears. I could not believe how understanding she was. The realization hit that I could go to college, marry who I want when I want, and pursue my dream career in engineering. I could be in control of my own life! I feel very fortunate to be one of the very few women of my culture to have the opportunity to step out of our norms and take advantage of it. I could not believe I had the courage to challenge a long-established rigid belief that has been followed for many years within my culture, but it was beyond worth it.

Intern of the Year

by Mariam Traore



Mariam lives in East Harlem and is a senior at Aquinas High School.

Mariam is looking forward to attending Binghamton University next fall.

When I first entered middle school, my priorities were not focused on academics, but rather on after school activities. I was unmotivated, quiet, and afraid to speak or to lead others. However as I entered eighth grade, I was determined to change. No one pushed me to become a more confident speaker, but I soon realized it was something I needed to do to become successful. I looked for opportunities to grow and I heard about an internship program at my school.

Early in the year, I walked into Ms. Sam's office, the after-school Program Director, and asked for an application. I was nervous. She could not hear me because of how quiet and shaky I sounded. Ms. Sam looked me straight in the eye and told me to speak more loudly and clearly. I was apprehensive; however, my mind told me to be strong and firm - just like the business leaders I had seen on television. I asked for the application again, but in a confident voice. To my surprise, Ms. Sam smiled at me and handed me the application. It was at that moment I realized I needed to become more confident to succeed.

Once I submitted the application, I was called in for an interview. I never had an interview before, but I was determined to get the position. I researched typical interview questions and I practiced at night to be prepared. I entered the interview with confidence. When I got the job, I was excited because it was the first time I actually saw hard work pay off.

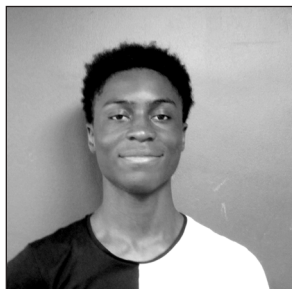
During the course of the internship, I worked every day at the office even though I was only supposed to be there once a week. I was filled with pride and determination to do my best. During my internship, I realized how important academics were for my future and I started to see a path to success. My work experiences motivated me to improve my grades and make schoolwork my main focus throughout high school.

At the end of the year, Ms. Sam held an awards ceremony to recognize her staff and their contributions over the year. Before announcing the winner, she spoke of a young woman who transformed before her eyes because she worked hard and always had a smile on her face. To my surprise, she chose me for the "Intern of the Year" award. I was surprised because I did not think my efforts, like coming in on time and working additional hours, would earn me such recognition. Those words brought me to the brink of crying as I was getting closer to realizing my dream.

Looking back, I was surprised at how much I changed during one year. I became more confident, academically responsible, and I spoke up for myself. I was able to speak more easily with teachers or guest speakers - people whom I was too afraid to speak with before. The program allowed me to realize the change I needed to make. Hard work, responsibility, self-respect, strength and confidence soon followed afterwards. This internship program created the foundation of who I am today. From this experience, I learned to take more risks and be myself. Those skills have prepared me academically and professionally for internships at Deloitte and at Weil, Gotshal, and Manges Law Firm. Not only was I able to become a better leader, I got closer to my dream every day. These are the lessons and traits that I will take with me to college because they are what will make me the future business leader I have always dreamed of becoming.

Winner

by Kureem Nugent



Kureem attends Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn and lives in Jamaica, Queens.

Kureem is excited to enroll next year at Hamilton College.

“Race me from here to that light post,” Mr. Ellis demanded. Visibly annoyed, I asked, “Why?” Again, he demanded that I race him in front of the whole track team and he made it clear that I couldn’t say no. “Three...two...one,” yelled Mr. Ellis. He took off at a sprint. I jogged behind. I didn’t feel comfortable enough to run in front of everyone and I was feeling very self-conscious. He arrived at the finish line, turned around, and watched as I cruised towards him. He had a disappointed look on his face. The usually soft-spoken teacher that I knew, turned into a vocal force filled with discontent. He was disappointed in me and I was surprised when Mr. Ellis raised his voice at me in front of everyone. I had never been so embarrassed in my life.

My experience on the track that day with Mr. Ellis made me realize I have to approach life differently and take advantage of every opportunity I can to reach my goals. I grew up with a single mother and inconsistent father figure. It wasn’t the easiest thing to deal with and having a twin brother hardly made things easier. Sure, my mother tried her best to instill values that would enable me to be successful in life, but she couldn’t be a father figure. She couldn’t talk to me about girls the same way a father could or have discussions about being a “man” in the same way a father can. Having a twin brother was always about being compared to one another, and it was tough when people failed to realize that the same appearance doesn’t mean the same personality or ambition. As I entered high school without my brother, I was finally going to embark on a journey on my own and have a fresh start. I walked into high school with the mentality that if I was quiet, focused, and completed all my work, the fruits of my labor would without a doubt pay off.

Initially, I was content with just working towards earning my diploma, but Mr. Ellis changed my way of thinking. Ever since our encounter on the track, he stressed the importance of “young black males” staying focused and looking for opportunities to learn and grow. I didn’t want to disappoint the first person to see potential in me, so early on, I decided to apply for the HPREP program at Weill Cornell Medical School. I was interested in learning more about medicine as I spent a lot of time in the hospital when I was younger for my asthma. For a year, I was exposed to many different aspects of the medical world. There were doctors taking care of patients in the ER and performing surgeries. I saw nurses tending to all kinds of patients. I learned about medical staff travelling to third world countries to provide medical assistance and help the poorest of the poor. One day, I even got to examine a cadaver, something I hardly expected to be doing at the age of 15. Sitting in on weekly lectures and working with a medical student confirmed my passion for medicine and motivated me to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor.

Mr. Ellis changed my view on life. I’ve come to realize that my previous approach to life wasn’t going to be very fruitful. He showed me that if I capitalized on the opportunities that came my way, I could go far. Had I not taken the initiative to apply to the HPREP program and seen how determined the medical students were, I don’t think I would’ve continued to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor. It is true that you miss every shot you don’t take. Thankfully, the shot I went after was a winner.

The Right Path

by Carl-Henry Isidore



Carl-Henry attends the Bronx Leadership Academy II High School.

He will continue his education next year at York College.

It was a sunny morning in Haiti on January 12, 2010 - the first day of school after winter break. Lying on my bed, I looked at the trees dancing on the ceiling. The neighboring rooster crowed as I finally rose, put my knees on the floor and began to pray. My mother, as always, was cooking eggs. She spoke to me about education: "Son, you have to do well in school to succeed in life. Life and education are a competition. Please son, do not embarrass me. Avoid the wrong crowd. Promise me that good things will happen. Make your family proud wherever you go." As she spoke, I wondered why she told me these things. At the time, I wasn't mature enough to understand, so I agreed just to make her happy. A few minutes later, I arrived at school. Already, I had fallen in with the wrong crowd, paid no attention in class, and decided not to do my homework. After school on that day, I played marbles with friends until my mind told me to go home. When I got there, my mother asked me, "Where were you?" I replied, "Outside," as she shook her head.

One hour later, the earth started trembling. I heard a noise like boulders falling from the sky. Our television and bookshelves fell on the floor. I was terrified and thought my life would end. We tried running away from the house, but the ground was shaking intensely. I didn't know what was happening. I thought about all the advice my mother had given me. People were screaming, running everywhere and trying to save others stuck under demolished houses. I realized my mother and I could have been those people.

After the 7.0 shock-wave, my mother and I walked with my sister on the street and saw catastrophe. People had lost their families and everything they owned. We were too afraid to sleep in the house, scared it would collapse. We had no choice but to sleep on the street. Aftershocks shook the ground every five minutes.

A week later, my father came from New York to get my sister and me. I had never imagined myself leaving Haiti. I cried, and hugged my mother tightly. In tears, I said, "Mother I'm sorry for everything. I will succeed; I will learn English and make you proud." My dad smiled. I realized I would do everything in my power to make my parents proud.

When I came to America, I was ready to excel in school. As a person who knew no English, communicating in school was hard. I started reading and writing to improve my English. I knew I wanted to attend college. I started working even harder in school and came to school early every morning to study subjects I needed help in. I challenged myself to become better in school by practicing for the SAT on my own and doing extra work in class. Before immigrating, I knew no English; I am now in the English Honors class and the National Honor Society. I began acting in plays with the goal of becoming an actor and director. I want to continue being successful and I plan on working very hard to accomplish my goals.

These goals have already helped me achieve things I never thought I could, like act in front of 300 people. These skills will continue helping me as I pursue acting in college. My purpose in pursuing higher education is to succeed in ways victims of the 2010 Haiti Earthquake only dreamed about, since they never had a chance to make their dreams a reality. When I succeed my goal is to start an arts program in Haiti for teens who want to pursue their dreams. This terrible tragedy led me onto the right path and made me focus on my education.

Brain Tumor

by Kimberly Martes



Kimberly Martes lives in Brooklyn and is in her final year at the Expeditionary Learning School for Community Leaders.

Kimberly is thrilled to begin studying next fall at Buffalo State College.

My whole life changed with these two words. At the age of eight as I was laying down in an MRI machine, I felt confused and terrified. All I could think was, “what’s going on with me?” With all of these constant check-ups, something must be wrong. I must not be normal. No kid goes to the doctor this much. My mother sat next to me wringing her hands, pacing the room, worrying every single time we saw a doctor.

The first doctor told me I had palpitations, my heart was beating too quickly. I thought that since they found out what was wrong, I wouldn’t have any more appointments. I was wrong. Two weeks later, I went in for an MRI. After what felt like forever, I was taken out of the machine. My mom was told that she would receive the results soon. A few days later, the dreaded phone call came; I had a brain tumor. My mother immediately started crying and without knowing what exactly was going on, I started crying as well. The doctors informed us that I would need brain surgery. I was terrified. I became more nervous the closer surgery day came. I wondered, “What if I die? What if I don’t remember anything?”

When we arrived for surgery, we met doctors dressed in white and blue. After they marked the side of my face with a big, black X, my mother decided she didn’t want to go through with it. At some point, I remember overhearing the doctors explaining to my mom that there was a chance I would lose my memory. She was scared that she could lose me and she started crying. Then I started hysterically crying and was removed from the room. Just when the doctors were about to take off their white jackets, my aunt calmed us all down and convinced my mom that everything was going to be okay.

I remember waking up and immediately saying my phone number and address to prove that I still had my memory. I could see the relieved look on my mother’s face. Half of this nightmare was over, but now the doctors had to determine if the tumor was cancerous. I spent the next two weeks in the hospital recovering while the doctors examined the results. Finally, they informed us I would be completely fine! The tumor was not cancerous.

The large straight scar on my head, the result of twenty stitches, marks a part of my life that will never leave me. Every time I brush my hair and look at the mirror I see it. To me it is a reminder to be strong and to never give up. Occasionally, I think of what could have happened if my surgery went wrong. Would I be standing in front of this mirror right now? What would my mother be doing? Going through a life changing experience at a young age taught me to be grateful for everything I have. It made me view life as something precious and I realized I had another chance to make a change and be whoever I wanted. My parents moved from the Dominican Republic when they were in their twenties with the hopes of finding an opportunity to impact the world. I realized that it was my responsibility to ensure that my parent’s dreams are realized. While I was in the hospital, I also met other people who had cancer and were in a worse position than me. They showed me that I was lucky and blessed with another chance to do better. After surviving a brain tumor, I now feel fearless and willing to give everything a try, no matter what obstacles are in my way. I’m grateful to be alive and have the chance to do something no one in my family has done. I will be the first college graduate in my family. I will be a success and I will hold my mother’s hand and make her proud.

Two Cultures

by Asta Kaba



Asta lives in Brooklyn and is a senior at Bedford Academy High school.

Asta is excited to study at the University at Albany next fall.

The onions were cut up and prepared. The meat was thawed. The oil started popping—it signaled to me that there was no turning back. It was my turn to learn my way in the kitchen and I was starting with Mahn-fin Ghee. It was the most basic Guinean dish, meaning “stew of water.” But it didn’t look like the dish my mother made. It tasted tangy, with a bitter aftertaste and the color was not rich like my mother’s. Despite my initial attempt, I kept making it every other weekend, because I felt like I had to prove myself to the “real” Guineans. My cousins at the Arabic school at the mosque would always say how great their dishes turned out and I wanted to create something that everyone would eat and like, too.

But most importantly, I kept practicing my cooking because it helps me preserve my culture as a Guinean-American. As I grow up and evolve into a young woman, I realize that both cultures - American and Guinean – greatly shape who I am. The American culture is a product of where my parents decided to give birth and the Guinean culture is in my blood. The fusion of both cultures helps me make decisions that impact my future.

Even though I was not born in Guinea, my parents emphasized the importance of preserving our culture and traditions, which I have grown to love and cherish. For instance, in a Guinean society, family is first. Family members are obligated to look out for one another whenever needed. I adore the idea of always having someone to go to during times of hardships or even bliss. For holidays, weddings, funerals or birth ceremonies, I see people commute from all parts of the world just to share the love within the family by being together. Also, Guineans believe that parents have kids so that they can take care of their parents in the future. With this in mind, I know that when I leave my familial home, the actions I take represent my family as a whole. This is one reason why I work hard in any activity I do. For instance, as a freshman and sophomore, tutoring was mandatory, but as a senior I still go to tutoring even though it’s not required.

Though I love most things in the Guinean culture, there are certain elements of the culture I don’t agree with. One of the main things is depriving a woman of her education. As a young child, a girl is taught how to do domestic work and cater to their family. Education is not as important as the role women have in a family. Because of this, I cherish the value and stress Americans put on education for everyone. Most women in my family, including my mom, are uneducated. They struggle with the simple tasks of paying a utility bill or reading a letter. When I see this, it motivates me to get the best education possible.

As I envision my future, I realize that my Guinean-American culture will have a positive impact on me in college. Since I was raised with the mindset of representing something greater than myself, I know that wherever I go, I cannot forget where I come from. Tradition holds a special place in my heart but I refuse to let anyone or any idea deprive me from taking advantage of the opportunities I have as an American-born citizen. The importance of preserving my culture through cooking is just as important as continuing my education because both give me a sense of worth and self-discovery.

Creating Solutions

by Nahima Akter



Nahima attends International High School at Prospect Heights in Brooklyn, where she lives.

Nahima will matriculate at John Jay College next fall.

Before moving to the United States, I used to live on a small island back in Bangladesh called Sandwip. Every morning, farmers would go to work in their rice and vegetable fields and merchants would go to the open markets to trade for goods. The men would go to the river to catch fish - either to bring them home for dinner or to sell them at the market. This was a normal day back in Sandwip for most of my life, until a natural disaster disrupted everything. In situations where disasters happen, I learned that the power of the people is stronger and more useful than the power of the government.

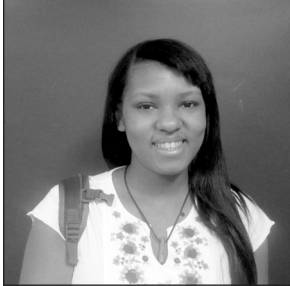
The majority of Sandwip is surrounded by human-made clay barriers that prevent the island from being flooded. One night when I was a child, while everyone was sleeping, the man who was on duty to watch the water levels came to our house yelling, "The barrier has fallen down. Evacuate immediately!" There was a lot of chaos outside with everyone trying to get to safety with their goats, chickens and cows. My family took a taxi to drive to safety in the middle of the island. Inside the taxi there must have been ten people all squeezed into one tiny car. When we got to the emergency shelters in the middle of the island, they were already over capacity, and so we had to seek shelter in a bank. The winds kept slamming the windows, we had no electricity, and we had to use a fire lamp for light. On top of that, it was a bit awkward having to sleep around strangers. Even then, I remember thinking that compared to other people sleeping in shelters that were over capacity, my situation wasn't as bad.

We stayed there for a day and a half. Since everything was flooded, we had to walk all the way back home. When we finally made it to our town, the water was up to our knees. Some mothers lost their children and farmers lost their farm animals. The government didn't take any immediate actions to provide aid for those in need, so everyone got together as a community and drafted a letter with all the things we needed assistance with. The little bit of help that was provided came after all the families had already built their own homes and crops again. This action proved that we can take care of ourselves, but we should also be able to rely on the government to help out sooner, by providing rocks instead of clay to prevent some of the flooding and helping rebuilding homes. It is their responsibility to provide these services for citizens, but that didn't happen in Sandwip. This experience led me to ask the question: How can people hold the government accountable?

Now, living in New York during Hurricane Sandy, I have seen how much a government can help its citizens. Back in Bangladesh people rebounded because of the community working together. In the US, I watched people work together as a community and get support from the government in these kind of situations. This experience inspired me to do more. In tenth grade, I joined Global Potential, an organization that creates awareness of global issues such as racism, natural disasters and human trafficking. We helped fundraise to rebuild homes that may have been affected by natural disasters and participated in community service to help those in need after Hurricane Sandy. In college, I plan to major in sociology and start a club that continues spreading awareness and creating solutions. One day, I plan to start my own natural disaster prevention organization to help my island. Just like the people of the US, the people in the Bangladesh should not only have the power of the community but also hold the government accountable for helping out in situations like these.

Most Improved

by Ines Lopez



Ines lives in Brooklyn and is a senior at the Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics.

She is excited to enroll next fall at Syracuse University.

I was born an American citizen in Brooklyn, New York on August 12, 1995, the daughter of Jenny and Raphael Lopez. After the loss of my father when I was just eleven months old, I was sent to live with my grandmother in the Dominican Republic for the next eight years of my life. My grandmother placed me in a school in which I did not excel academically. After a few months, my grandmother noticed that I was further behind than the other kids in my class. While I was in the Dominican Republic, my mom was here in New York trying to get herself financially stable to be able to bring me back to Brooklyn. She was able to do this when I was nine years old.

Returning to New York was the hardest transition that I have faced. Living in a Spanish speaking country for the first nine years of my life greatly impacted my language ability. Specifically, my English language skills were not as advanced as the other students in my 3rd grade class; therefore, I was always bullied and struggled with my work. I withdrew from my classmates and pushed away the work that they assigned in school, simply because it was too hard for me to understand.

Eventually, the lack of effort caught up with me and I was not able to pass on to the next grade. When my mother told me that I was going to repeat the 3rd grade, I felt like I let her down. I knew that she was very disappointed in me because I hadn't tried and I knew that I needed to excel the following year. In my second year as a 3rd grader, I received awards for "Most Improved" and "Student of the Month". After receiving those awards, I realized that hard work really does pay off. I was happy and knew that I needed to stay focused academically to benefit my future. I was determined not only to pass the 3rd grade, but to better understand the English language. I knew that success could only be determined on how many times I tried.

In order for me to accomplish my goals, I started to read books every day to broaden my vocabulary. As a middle school student, I continued to push myself by taking two high school courses - Algebra and United States History. I then entered high school, and knew that I could prove to myself and others that I was ambitious. Currently, I am taking Advance Placement English Literature. I am happy that I have the opportunity to take this advanced class because I can show my academic growth, but most importantly, I can demonstrate my proficiency in the English language after all of my hard work.

Maya Angelou once said, "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it." I remember this quote every day to demonstrate that from failure, I can learn more about who I am. Not only have I grown academically, but I have also matured as a person. I've come to understand that failure is when I don't try at all and that when I try, no matter how hard it may be, I can succeed. Experiencing failure in my life will continue to drive me to accomplish what I want most in life.

Working Hard

by Dillon Cash



Dillon Cash is a student at the Expeditionary Learning School for Community Leaders. He lives in Brooklyn.

Next fall, Dillon will be a freshman at Canisius College.

Growing up, my father never said “no” to my brothers and me when we asked for things, no matter what we wanted. We asked for a dog and two weeks later, we came home to meet our new puppy. We got go-carts for Christmas, and the house was always full of presents. We had a big house, a built-in pool with a slide, and all the toys and pets a young boy could dream of. At age ten, I never really thought about where all of these things came from, or how my dad earned his money. But when the police walked through my house, all of that changed. My father’s incarceration influenced the course of my life significantly, in both positive and negative ways.

During the fall of 2006, when I was ten-years-old, I awoke one night to police breaking down my door. They escorted me and my brother downstairs, where my parents sat handcuffed. My mom and dad were taken away and my life changed dramatically that night. I had to go live with aunts, uncles, and cousins since both of my parents were in jail. Even our puppies were taken from us. Two weeks later, my mother was released and we came back to our home, which had been raided and completely torn apart. Our furniture was ripped to shreds and piles of clothes covered the floor. I was anxious and worried about my father; I didn’t know how long he was going to be gone. I didn’t know what he did and why this was happening.

Eventually, I moved to Florida with my aunt and uncle while my mom stayed in New York because she thought it would be good for us while she sorted things out at home. My uncle was strict with his money and would only buy us the things we absolutely needed, like food, clothes and school supplies. At first, this frustrated me. I was used to getting whatever I wanted. However, this experience helped me to realize that I need to work hard to earn money to buy the things I want and that luxuries cannot just come to me when I want them.

Around this time, I realized that I wanted a different path from the rest of my family. I didn’t want to end up like my father or my older brother, who still didn’t seem to understand the importance of working honestly for his money and education. He dropped out of high school and lived in our basement up until his late twenties. I noticed how hard it was for my brother to make money and support himself. People always talked about how much we look and sound alike, and how similar our mannerisms are. This comparison plagued me; since we are so similar, I worried that we might have a similar fate. That’s why I decided to be different, to stay in school and further my education in college.

The incarceration of my father was a momentous event that helped mold me into an adult at a young age. It motivated me to further my education and work hard for the life I wish to live. It also helped me to appreciate the things I have today, like a secure home, clothing, and the opportunity for education. All of this will lead me to a better future where I am able to support myself and sustain my own happiness. This fall, I anticipate broadening the possibilities my future will hold as the first in my immediate family to attend college.

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:

- Next fall, over 25,000 NYC students will be heading to college
- Only a third of NYC students who begin college next fall will complete their degrees
- Nationally, only 10% of students from the lowest-income families will earn a bachelor's degree

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 program 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.

Since 1997, Bottom Line has been able to offer a high-quality advising service at no cost to our students, thanks to our generous supporters. As happens with any quality service, word has spread quickly about the work we do and the demand for our programs has never been greater.

Three years ago, Bottom Line opened our first office in New York City. With your help, over the next five years we will grow to serve thousands of New York City high school and college students.

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

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