

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

# Empowering the Next Generation

The college essays in this book are the stories of 14 Boston and Worcester high school seniors from the high school class of 2014 who participate in Bottom Line's College Access Program. In just 600 words, these students write powerfully of the adversity they have overcome and their desire to use their education to make a difference in their communities. The determination to earn a college degree and desire to improve their communities are shared by all of the 2,300 Massachusetts high school seniors and college students receiving support from Bottom Line during the 2013-2014 school year.

A non-profit founded in 1997, Bottom Line helps at-risk youth get into and graduate from college, providing long-term, one-on-one counseling from college applications to graduation. Most Bottom Line students are in the first generation of their family to go to college, and many have been in the United States for only a few years. Nearly all are from low-income backgrounds.

Our model gives these students the expert guidance they need to succeed. This spring, after 17 years of successful programming, we are reaching an exciting milestone: the celebration of our 1,000th college graduate. By 2018, we will celebrate our 2,000th college graduate and just two short years later, another thousand Bottom Line students will earn their college degree. We believe that growing to serve a critical mass of young people will change the community from within and have impact for years to come.

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# My Challenge as a Man of Color

By Calvin Nash



Kalvin Nash is a senior at Boston Latin Academy. He works at Stop and Shop and the Emerald Necklace Conservancy, is involved in Mock Trial, Debate, and Model UN, and is Vice President of his student body.

He will be attending Hamilton College in the fall and plans to major in neuroscience. Calvin is also interested in astronomy.

My challenge is constant, my challenge is destructive, yet my challenge is fertile. I am Calvin Nash, a 17-year-old man of color, and every day I dare to challenge each and every stereotype against my race. Ghetto is a word that has not been used solely to describe the forced housing of Jewish decedents during World War II; it has been rectified to describe the conditions of a typical person of African descent. A typical person of African descent is said to be *violent, unsuccessful, irresponsible, and simple-minded*.

Every day I have been reminded of the stereotypes that have forcefully become a part of my identity because members of my family have chosen to follow that very path. When I was twelve I witnessed two of my brothers fall out. The term “drug” was nothing but a word until I saw how strongly it could interfere with and sever the bonds of an already unstable family.

I am prompted to act because of a woman named Merna, sensitive as a mother but as hard working as a father. I am constantly reminded that my battles are nothing compared to hers, sometimes working sixty to eighty hours a week to make ends meet. I model my choices after hers, from my classes to my responsibilities. My mom married an abusive husband so she could move to America; she chose to leave school so that she could raise her budding family. Compared to this, my battles are child’s play.

By challenging the stereotypes, I have come to be known as many things by my peers and even by members of my family: a nerd, a butler, a slave. Having nerves of steel is practically an impossible feat, but learning to pick and choose your battles is possible. I am human. I have my limits. Have I cried? Yes. Have I tried writing a journal or reading a book or screaming at a wall? Yes, but I am reaffirmed by the fact that this battle will not be infinite.

I push myself to accept nothing lower than a 90% on any test. I push myself to do chores. I push myself to work part-time, to join activities, and to volunteer. I am inspired to carve a new standard of success within my family to ease the burden on my mom. With eight children scattered across the western hemisphere, I feel as though I have no right to worry her any further.

Every time I raise my hand, every time I get an A on my report card, every time I turn down drugs, every time I choose to study, every time I throw on my uniform for work, every time I come home before curfew, I feel as though I am challenging society, and challenging myself to be a better person. I aspire to acquire my doctorate in neuroscience, and I will continue to dare to challenge stereotypes until I have achieved my goal.

# School Bus

By Wurood Mandawi



Wurood Mandawi is a senior at Burncoat High School and lives in Worcester with her parents and younger brother. She moved to Worcester two and a half years ago from Jordan, but is originally from Baghdad, Iraq. Wurood has been a member of art club, painting on glass club, badminton, and track.

She hopes to attend WPI and would like to study computer engineering.

Children crying, people shouting, sounds of shooting and bullets hitting the rough, old wall of my school. Blood and corpses lying everywhere--This was my life when I was 10 years old.

March 15, 2006, was a normal school day, or at least it seemed to be. My brother and I went to the same school where our mom taught. It was within walking distance from our house, but because of the poor safety situation in Baghdad, my mom, brother, and I took the school bus. We rode along with another teacher, Ms. Allaa, and her son, Mustafa who was in first grade with my brother. On our way to school that day, I sat next to the window, looking at the street. Suddenly, the kids on the bus started screaming. "Do not look at the right side of the road!" My mom shouted. Ms. Allaa yelled, "Turn your heads the other way!"

It was too late. I saw the corpses of a woman and child lying in the street. I turned and said to my mom, who was sitting behind me, "I want to go home." I got no response, and after a while, everyone went quiet.

At the end of the first period of the school day, there were bombing sounds close to our school. Terrorists were shooting everywhere. We saw them entering and targeting people. We needed to hide somewhere. The principal and teachers took us to the hallway where there were no windows. After two and a half hours, the shooting finally stopped.

When we got on our bus, my mom and Ms. Allaa sat on the front seat next to the door. My brother, Mustafa, and I sat on the seat behind them. A car cut off our bus, and three gunmen got out. One stepped in front of the bus and the other two came to the door. They were hiding their faces under black masks. One of them entered the bus, holding a machine gun. He looked at my mom, and with a rough voice said, "What is your name?"

"Nidaa," my mom answered, "What do you want from me? I did not do anything. Please leave me. Please do not kill me!" Then he looked at Ms. Allaa and said, "Hey, you! What is your name?"

She answered in a frightened voice. He pulled the trigger and shot her. There was blood everywhere. I stared at her as she was dying, helpless. He pulled her out of the bus and took the machine gun, and the bus driver drove us away. Mustafa cried and screamed. Right after this happened, everyone stopped going to school for a while.

At first, I tried to not think about what happened. My family acted like it did not happen; they did not want to remember it. They just wanted to forget it ever happened. But I do not want to forget. I do not want to be who I was before that day. This experience was a really important part of my life. It helped me realize that someone has to do something about what is going on in Iraq and around the whole world. Now, it is happening in places like Egypt and Syria. Experiencing this was traumatic, but it helps me focus and know what I want. I am so much stronger than I was then. I was different before. I was quiet and I accepted the way things were. Now, I want to do something. I want to change the world. I want to continue my education and go to college because I believe that getting an education will allow me to renounce violence and hatred by becoming an independent thinker.

# Hair

By Ariel Baker



Ariel Baker is a senior at Edward Kennedy Academy for Health Careers. She is Vice President of the Red Cross Club and works at Mass General Hospital where she is exploring her interest in a health career.

Ariel hopes to attend Boston University, Northeastern, or New Hampshire University where she will prepare for veterinary school.

The bright Jamaican sun peeked over the houses and shone on my face. A cool breeze rustled the leaves of the tree near the window of my room. It was a perfect scene for my eight year old eyes. Five minutes later, I heard “Ariel! Get up so I can do your hair. You have church to go to!” Oh, the joys of living so close to your aunts that they can yell across the yard to get your attention. Hearing that phrase sparked fear in me. I loathed getting my hair done. I had kinky, tangled, very puffy hair that would go through styling tools like nobody’s business. It was not the type of hair that could be combed easily; hence I could not do it myself. I trudged across the dry ground to my aunt’s house to do my hair into the regular cornrows, so that I could go to church.

Years later, I moved to America to live with my mother, leaving behind the Caribbean breeze and everything I had known. I was scared of assimilating, but I also feared being different. That was another personal hurdle that I needed to get over. My mother combed my hair into horrid, large braids that swung from my head every time I moved. I hated them. I hated them more when I looked at all of the American girls (both black and white) with their sleek, straightened “good” hair. “Why couldn’t I have hair like that?” I used to wonder all time. I would beg my mother over and over again for a perm to straighten my hair, and over and over again she would say no. I was furious. Looking back, I can see that it was immature to want so badly to conform to what society thought was “normal.”

As a freshman in high school, I experimented with different hair styles, but typically I ended up with a big, puffy mess. I still wanted to perm my hair, but my mother held firm to her refusal. I started going to the salon by myself during my sophomore year. My responsibilities and homework had skyrocketed, and my mom was just too busy with work. Neither one of us had time. I was getting cornrows, which made my hair manageable, but I was still upset I had to get my hair braided. This continued well into my junior year and I was still annoyed with my braids, but I dealt with it. One day, I decided to research cornrows, and I learned quite a bit. Cornrows were a form of bonding between a mother and her child that started 3000 years B.C. and continued during slavery. African Americans were forced to either shave their heads, keep their hair simple and maintained, or in cornrows. I was really intrigued when I learned this. I felt ignorant because I was fighting and cursing this hairstyle that had so much history behind it, when I felt I should have embraced it.

The last time I had my hair done I tried to feel my mother’s presence. Her hand in my hair, the random things she would talk about and her laugh. Her presence was comforting like only a mother’s would be and I relished in it. I had an epiphany that day. My hair was the cause of my growth over the years. I had not been as appreciative as I should have been. With those thoughts in mind, I decided to keep my hair “natural.” I see this decision as paying homage to the history of African Americans and their struggles. The decision to keep my natural hair emphasizes that we are all beautiful and should love ourselves down to every last strand of hair on our heads.

# My Hands

By Kwasi Bandoh



Kwasi Bandoh is a senior at South High Community School. He is currently Class President (for the second consecutive year) and has served as one of the captains for the South High football team in the fall.

After taking a computer programming class at Worcester State University, Kwasi realized he really enjoyed working with and learning about computers. He is looking forward to pursuing a computer science major at UMass Lowell, Salve Regina, Clark University, or WPI in the fall.

Most kids are blessed with their mother's smile or their father's height. I was born with my grandfather's callused hands. Like a quilt, these hands have been passed down in my family for generations. Each generation adds its own layer, its own story, its own struggle. When my grandmother died, it was up to my grandfather who had no job, an acre of arable land, and a house the size of a classroom to raise six children, my mother being one of them. A childhood of school-less days, and nights characterized by mosquito bites and hunger pains drove my mother to find a better life. Two years after I was born she left Ghana for America; six years later, I joined her.

This summer I went back to Ghana not only to visit old friends and reminisce with my extended family, but because I wanted to find myself. When I arrived at the airport my Aunt Comfort picked me up in a rust bucket she called a taxi, and took me to my childhood home. As we drove I noticed a recurring trend; every fruit seller, every sim card merchant, every cookie vendor, and every yam purveyor that I saw on the side of the road could not have been much older than me. I was rendered mute by my realization. For the rest of the ride, instead of making small talk, I reflected on my life. The only difference between them and me is a hard-working mother and a bit of luck.

The cab pulled up in front of my mother's house at sunset and I was greeted by joyful cheers, teary eyes, stained clothes and bare feet. My oldest cousin, Nora, showed me to my old room. The room was a shadow of its former self. The paint on the walls was chipping and the ceiling was stained. I felt uneasy sleeping in my own bed; my legs hung over the edge and the sheets smelled musty. I was awakened periodically by restless crickets and crying babies.

Early the next morning basic tasks became tedious endeavors. Before I could shower, I had to go to the well and fetch water. I brushed my teeth in the backyard and spit on the ground near clucking chickens. I walked down the dirt road in the blistering savannah heat to use my neighbor's bathroom as they had the only working toilet for two "blocks." I'd become so accustomed to the privileges I had in America that I wondered how anyone could live like this; yet, they seemed content.

It was not until I went to Aunt Comfort's house the next day that I realized that in Ghana, the focus was not on material things and aesthetics, but on the intangibles. Their worship of God seemed more genuine than what I had witnessed in America. During my stay we prayed every chance we got and it brought me closer to God. My relatives did not care about fashion or the latest Pottery Barn sofas; rather, they made intangibles, like education, their priority because they knew what really mattered.

I have learned to disregard my rigid calluses for the same reason my relatives reject materialism—because there are more relevant matters to be dealt with. When I look into my hands, I see my mother's siblings as teenagers trying to sell their crops to pay their school fees. I see my mother working two eight-hour shifts each day to support her adolescent son and her two young daughters. More prominently, I see my layer, my story forming before my own eyes. My struggle is to become the first person in my family to go to college. Whenever I become discouraged, I look at my hands and remember that it is in my blood to overcome struggle.

# My Name

By My-Ngân Tran



My-Ngân Tran is a senior at Boston Latin School. She is an active member of her school's many choral groups and a teacher's assistant in her community's Van Lang Vietnamese School.

My Ngan hopes to attend Boston University, Boston College, or Northeastern where she will continue to be an active member of her school and prepare for medical school.

My name means "American Bank." My mother thought it was a good idea to name me after my new home, and she entertained the idea of me becoming wealthy. I love my name. It is a feat for me to be able to say that phrase because for the first decade of my life, my name, My-Ngân, meant social barriers, lack of acknowledgement, and profound discomfort. My name represents the struggles I have encountered while trying to define who I am.

My parents had one agenda when they stepped onto American soil and that was to provide everything necessary for my education, everything but the knowledge of the language itself. I was always that kid who struggled to form sentences. I heard from my peers far too often, "Sorry, what do you mean? Try again." This social barrier, my struggle with the language, was so burdensome that I often wished my parents had stayed in Vietnam. In America, I have served as a translator and an ambassador. I became a bridge between two different worlds which terrified me. However, these additional responsibilities brought me to realize that I was capable of demolishing this social barrier through hard work. My barrier was people telling me, "Try again." This challenge was something I refused to walk away from. I have "tried again" and will always try again to prove something of myself. I decided that My-Ngân meant perseverance.

I often dealt with teachers not knowing how to pronounce my name. One teacher omitted the second part, only calling me "My," while another addressed me as "Ming-Ting" until one day I suddenly became "Morgan." Finally, some teachers decided not to struggle with my name at all and stopped calling on me altogether. I usually encourage nicknames because then at least people will know who I am. Filet My-Ngân: creative, is it not? I walked away from four years of French class only caring that "mignon" means delicately pretty. I do not mind the nicknames, as long as others do not stop acknowledging my existence because my name is different. I decided that My-Ngân meant unforgettable.

Living in America as part of a different ethnic community has pressured me into leading two different lives. When I walk down the street, people sometimes shout incoherent babblings like, "Ching chong," and I have to refrain from screaming, "Come back and talk to me when you learn how to speak properly." Even people within my Vietnamese community assume that the American culture has devoured my roots. Once, I heard two ladies commenting, "These girls nowadays are so lazy with their headphones and texting like non-Vietnamese people." So if I am not considered American or Vietnamese, then who am I? Who do you want me to be? I did not want to choose between either culture, so I did not. Instead, I embraced both cultures. I have sung in both languages through my ensembles. I have danced to both languages through show choir and scout association. I have taught Vietnamese on Sundays while tutoring in English on weekdays. I have lived both cultures, and both lives. There has been no reason for me to be uncomfortable with whom I am. I decided that My-Ngân is just My-Ngân.

No longer does my name mean social barriers, lack of acknowledgement, and discomfort underneath my skin. And Bank of America can keep its copyrighted name because my name does not just mean "American Bank." Instead, I am content to embrace the fact that I am full of perseverance, that I am unforgettable, and that I am simply My-Ngân Tran. My name does not define me; I define myself.



# Open Door

By Kathrina Ruiz



Kathrina (more commonly known as Mia) Ruiz is an International Baccalaureate student and a senior at Abby Kelley Foster Charter School. She lives in Worcester with her mother and little brother. Mia has lived in Worcester for 10 years, but was born in Manhattan, New York. Mia is active as a leader in both her school and community. She plays field hockey, is a member of the theater club, and has been the secretary of NHS for two years. She volunteers with the Maria Luisa De Moreno International Foundation and has participated in the Walk for Hunger.

Mia is interested in pursuing a career in law and hopes to attend Harvard, Yale, or one of the other highly regarded schools on her college list.

“He locked us out of the apartment,” sobbed my mother on the stairs leading up to our apartment in Brooklyn. My naïve eight-year-old eyes witnessed the sight of my mother, helpless with my newborn brother in her arms, upon returning home from school. My stepfather had locked us out of the apartment without any warning or reason. After breaking a window to enter our home and take what little stuff we had, we moved to a small apartment where the community around us was primarily gang members and drug dealers. Despite this environment, my mother tried hard to put our lives back together. Slowly, through arduous work, a sense of normality seemed to be returning, but it was merely the calm before the storm.

A year later, my stepfather filed a suit against my mother, which continues today. Since my brother, Christian, was about six months old, his father has been fighting to take full legal and physical custody. His father has expressed his desire to make sure my mother and I see Christian minimally. Due to her financial situation, my mother has been unable to hire an attorney to represent her, which has made defending herself impossible. I saw my mother break down and fall into the dark pit of depression. Seeing the woman I considered an invincible superhero in a state of such helplessness impacted me greatly.

Previously, my mother and I found ourselves with no place to sleep and no way of securing food. Trying to get back on our feet, we took refuge in a homeless shelter. Our time there was particularly distressing because I was constantly ill and surrounded by people who were not stable. The majority of the residents in the shelter were recovering drug addicts and abused souls. The prominent thing I remember from that time was praying that a door to a better life would open so that I could live more like a “normal” girl my age.

The suffering that my mother and I have lived through has set me apart from my peers and has caused me to mature in many ways. Through my experiences I learned to be tough, not just for my own advantage, but for the benefit of others. I became a pillar of strength, the person my mother could lean on and come to for comfort. Although she adjusted to this situation, I have always been there for her to help her get through the constant pain and fear of losing her only son. This court case has taught me that maturity does not come with age, but with experience.

Despite this situation, I managed to always be optimistic, keep my grades up and retain the values and principles with which I was raised. Many people express their awe when they hear of this situation and wonder how I have stayed off the streets. While I have become tough, I am also kind and compassionate. My life experiences have made me more aware of the world in which we live and guided me in realizing what I want to do with my life. Propelled by the helplessness my mother and I lived through, the desire to become a lawyer came naturally to me. Although I plan to become an attorney in order to help people, I know I do not have to wait until then to begin. I have started to help others through community service, something I wish to continue while I work towards my degree. I plan to use the opportunities available at college to further my growth and desire to serve and to open the doors for others that were shut throughout my life.

# Transformation

By Allian Erazo Rodriguez



Allian Erazo Rodriguez is a senior at Chelsea High School. Allian has been committed to cross country, outdoor track, and indoor track since his freshman year of high school. He also participated in Brown's summer engineering program and Harvard's Health PREP program in order to explore the engineering and health science fields.

Allian is interested in biomedical engineering and the pre-med programs at Brown University, UMass Amherst, Boston University, or UMass Lowell.

The whispering voices in my ears were louder than the monotonous electronic beeps that followed. I struggled to open my eyes as a blinding light shined directly onto my disorientated face. In that moment, I could only make out several blue blobs that towered over me. The initial sight frightened me; I tried to move, but every effort was just a measly twitch. Each breath felt like someone was stabbing me in the chest. I shifted my eyes towards my body and gasped when I saw the colorful wires that protruded from my chest. My eyes became heavier, and the noise became softer until it was completely pitch black and silent. Several hours later, I woke up to see stitches that ran down the middle of my chest. I spent two weeks recovering in the hospital from the heart surgery. After that surgery, my life changed.

I was not always shy and quiet; I was a jubilant and daring child who was not afraid of striking up a conversation with others. As a child, I jumped on furniture and ran down hallways with incredible energy. However, after I left the hospital, I found myself unable to do anything that I once enjoyed. Any time a person approached me, I kept a distance and avoided eye contact. My whole body trembled, and I could feel the sensation of every heartbeat. I tried my best to interact with the students at my school, but I always found that I withdrew back into my shell.

My freshman year of high school was only a few days away, and the thought of it made me anxious. All I wanted was to live a life without so much fear looming over me. In the first few weeks of school, I took small steps each day to make myself feel more comfortable interacting with others. Eventually a classmate approached me and asked if I wanted to join track and field. I was very cautious when he offered, since I had never participated in a sport due to my anxiety. Eventually I decided to try it out. I hope that if I took this opportunity, I would be able to overcome my fear and build the confidence to improve my interactions with others. Although the training put a strain on my body, I enjoyed getting to know the other students who also loved the sport. Each day, I became more comfortable with the coaches and the team, and my feelings of anxiety disappeared.

When track season ended, I looked back and realized how much I had opened up to the people around me. I enjoyed this feeling of accomplishment, and I knew I could do more. This attitude motivated me to join the school's cross country team and many more programs. From my Outward Bound trip to Minnesota to an overnight stay at Brown University, I am more confident when interacting with others. Now, I realize that it was necessary to acknowledge my social anxiety, so that I could strive to become the engaged and sociable person I am today.

Striving to participate in extracurricular activities has taught me how to cope with the anxiety that once held me back in school. Today, I am more social, friendly, and open to approaching others. I continue to find opportunities to help others feel comfortable, whether by helping them navigate school, pushing them to join group gatherings, or motivating them to give their all. Life is full of fears and doubts, but all it takes is a step in the right direction to obtain success.

# Escape

By Wendy Huang



Wendy Huang is a senior at Boston Latin School. She works at the Law Office of Jeffery S. Glassman and she is also involved with the Wolfpack Volunteers which allows her to stay involved in community events such as Senior's Night or Strides for Breast Cancer.

After listening to the APM Marketplace podcast, Wendy became interested in economics and looks forward to pursuing this field at Tufts, Northeastern, or Boston University next year.

"Rent...electricity...phone...internet...television...groceries," the eerie sing-song voice in my head taunted me.

I caught myself in AP Latin scribbling my expenses for the week in the margins of my Aeneid translations. I was now the breadwinner and caretaker for the family. It was sophomore year when my parents fell ill and both were hospitalized simultaneously. My dad was diagnosed with cancer. His illness has kept him extremely frail and he's in and out of the hospital going on three years now. My mom was diagnosed with thyroid and ovary conditions that ultimately kept her bed-bound for a year. I had no choice but to rise to the occasion and become the adult in my home.

Overnight, it felt like the world was turning on me. I ramped up my hours as a wage-earner and learned to resist any temptation of frivolous spending. This meant no more Saturday shopping trips. I took charge of cooking for my brother and me. On the first night of my new duties, I had no inkling of rice-to-water ratios, which way to turn the knob to fire up the stove, or what anything in the fridge was. I learned. My little brother Tony and I eventually settled for a meal of broccoli and rice that first night, and for the entire month. Once in a while we added some take-out honey-glazed pork. I was now responsible for another person's health – Tony's.

Needless to say, my time management skills improved immensely. My parents, immigrants, insisted that I not ask for help, for it would cause some unwanted rumors. I changed my sleep schedule to accommodate the craziness, making sure to include a slot for helping my brother with his homework. Now, my day starts at 3 a.m. with homework, then school until 2:15 p.m., and work until 6:30 p.m. When I return home I cook dinner and finally help Tony with homework until 8 p.m. Sleep. Repeat. My reward comes on the weekend when I can do laundry! I fold and refold our clothes, getting the proportions perfect, while listening to the latest podcasts of RadioLab, Public Radio's Marketplace, and The Moth Radio Hour. That is when I feel like I can escape for just a little.

Meanwhile I remained my parents' translator and secretary: reading letters, running errands, and scheduling a myriad of medical appointments through three-way conversations. "Your appointment is at 9 a.m. in the South Building," the operator would say in a cool tone. I relayed to my father with, "Ni yek a gew em oh nam ben goi loew" in Toishanese. "Awh," a weak voice whispered.

Through all these new responsibilities and changes, I found a part of me that felt accomplished and content. I am no longer that child who once relied on my parents for everything and who was oblivious to life's real struggles. The difficulties of being alone on a journey has made me strong and also more empathetic with others. It has not changed who I am on Saturdays, a podcast-listening girl who is perfecting every crease on every article of clothing. I fold clothes to avoid wrinkles, but I understand that a wrinkle here and there is going to be inevitable. And that's ok.

# Home Sweet Home

By Iris Pena



Iris Pena is a senior at the John D. O'Bryant High School. She has a passion for expressing herself creatively and has participated in the Berklee City Music Mentoring Program and EmersonWRITES, where she works with college students to improve her Bass playing and writing skills.

Iris is interested in studying creative writing, English, or publishing at Emerson College, Salem State University, Brandeis University, or UMass Lowell.

The expression "Home sweet home," isn't true for me. Most days there is no peace, and I have no time for myself. If I am not hindered by the responsibility of caring for my little sisters, I am bothered by the tumult around me. My mother has been unemployed for three years. Her unemployment marks an all-time low in our financial status and relationship. The refrigerator usually does not have much to offer. I go for periods of time without a phone. People have to lend us money and many times I have felt hopeless, as if things will never get better.

When times are hard you have to keep pushing forward and hope for better. At first, this situation wrecked me; I was often overwhelmed and distracted. My efforts to start high school on a good note failed. I was too affected by my home life to do my best when it mattered. However, that was only at first; I quickly matured and learned to harden myself against the reality of home life. Sophomore year marked my transformation into a more determined, optimistic, and responsible person. I realized the importance of focusing on my studies. I decided to use my experiences at home as motivation to seek a college education and pursue a better life. I see the shortcomings and struggles of my family as a cycle that I must break for the generations after me. My family responsibilities have outweighed my personal responsibilities, and I am finally trying to change that.

To deal with the chaos at home, I created personal escapes. I tried to find time to do what makes me feel good. I got involved in many activities that interest me in order to keep busy and occupied. Joining these activities has allowed me to develop time management skills and thrive in group settings. I found that I was able to juggle a lot and that when I concentrate, I can get anything done.

I've worked with many programs that have brought me joy. I have a great interest in music and writing, and being able to participate in those activities has given me the opportunity to escape the turmoils of my home life and indulge in a sense of happiness and belonging. I have had the opportunity to take classes at the Berklee College of Music. Everywhere I went music spilled from classrooms and it was in an ensemble class that I felt like I belonged because I was a part of something bigger. Each musician was given an instrument and when it all came together, it was marvelous. At another program I had mentors who understood what it was like to be a writer. If I had writer's block, the teachers would help me get through it. Each time I submitted my work, I was given incredible feedback; I felt like I was starting to understand more about the art of writing.

My life experiences have given me the courage and ambition to pursue college and create a better future. I have become a stronger, hardworking, and determined person. I am more responsible, confident, and able to sympathize with others. In college, I hope to be able to pursue my interests in music and writing by joining a newspaper or music club. I know that going to college will allow me to focus on my education with fewer distractions and earn the life I desire. As the first in my family to go to college, I look forward to exploring what higher education has to offer to the future generations of my family and me.

# The American Dream

By Faith Quaye



Faith Quaye is a senior at Claremont Academy. She interns in a 7th grade classroom, where she works with students on goal-setting and anti-bullying. She is also an active member of her church community as a choir member and Summer Bible Camp volunteer.

Faith is looking forward to studying chemistry or business at Sacred Heart University, University of New Haven, Fitchburg State, or Johnson & Wales in order to become a pharmacist or professional event planner.

Prior to the civil war in Ivory Coast, a normal day consisted of my eleven-year-old sister going around town to sell my mother's homemade doughnuts. The profit provided at least our day's meal, if they were all sold by noon when she returned. I was seven years old. Life was hard. Most days, we would walk four to five miles to get food from the market. My mother had to stay home with my two younger sisters. Without my elder sister going out to sell doughnuts, my family would have starved. Preceding the war, people talked about innocent children that were kidnapped in our community. Posters of hundreds of kidnapped children were displayed on our school walls. As young as we were, getting kidnapped was the least of our worries, because having enough food was our biggest priority.

One afternoon, the sound of screaming school children, shooting, and grenade explosions could be heard from what we thought was about a mile away. I ran out of the school building, following my teacher and classmates. Outside of the school I saw nothing but children screaming, crying, running, and crashing into one another trying to find their parents in the chaos. There were people everywhere and many adults had frightful expressions on their faces. Within the crowd I was able to find my mother. She yelled my name as our eyes locked; we ran towards each other and she gripped my hand tightly. We ran back to our house, which was in a church compound, and hid in the sanctuary. Time passed, and the shooting and bombing noises grew louder. At that time, my father was in another country ministering. I remembered my mother crying and screaming, "Jesus!" over and over, praying to God to protect her and her children.

Later that afternoon the fighting in our area ceased, but the country was not safe. We left our country with little to nothing. We walked nights and days, hoping to reach another safe town while the war continued. As we walked during the day, the rebels threw bombs on the roads from their helicopters, and my uncles would throw us in the bushes to hide.

In hindsight, those moments are what motivate me to succeed. I believe going through such hard times as a child made me a strong individual. I have become physically and mentally strong after my exposure to the war. The experience taught me to not give up when times get tough, giving me one of my strongest abilities—dedication. Over the years I have been dedicated to my extra-curricular activities, for example, Wesleyan Upward Bound Math and Science, an intensive college preparatory program for high school students. I have received awards for perfect attendance and once I sacrificed a job at city hall to stay in the program. My education is one of my most important priorities.

These are some of the experiences that shaped me into who I am. In college, I am planning to study abroad and use my dedication to help others conquer their barriers like I once conquered my own. I enjoy helping people have a voice and make peace because, without it, life can be a war.

# My New Perspective

By Joseph Phan



Joseph Phan is a senior at Snowden International. Since he was young he has practiced Tae Kwon Do. He has created a translation program called VietAID, where he volunteers when he has free time.

Joseph's goal is to participate in research that helps to solve chronic diseases. He hopes to study biomedical engineering at a college such as Boston University, Stonehill College or University of Massachusetts Boston.

It seems as if I journeyed into a whole new part of the world, a world that I never envisioned. There were no skyscrapers, large factories, or prestigious businesses. Even technology, which plays an essential role in my everyday life in Boston, was particularly limited. Surprisingly, it was relaxing. Observing the scenery of rich green grass and clear blue skies, which is rare in Beijing, made me feel tranquil and peaceful. I understand that not everyone can leave their family to live in a completely new environment with an exotic culture, language and history. It is difficult to do, especially when the destination is thousands of miles away from home. My trip to Beijing, China and Inner Mongolia during the summer of 2012 showed me that I can successfully care for myself and be more mature and responsible.

Before the trip, I was overwhelmed with love from my family. It was difficult to make the decision to leave them for two weeks to travel to a country so far away. Until this trip, I had never boarded a plane. My parents were very worried. Having experienced and escaped from Communism in Vietnam, they did not like the idea of me traveling to China. Everything seemed to be wrapped in danger. Even so, I decided that it was a once in a lifetime chance for me to experience a different society and have a new perspective of the world. I really wanted to know how different China was from America. I am glad I traveled to China and grateful for what I have taken as a life lesson. "Follow your gut, you'll thank yourself later. Be grateful for this moment, it is all there is," is one of the most powerful life lessons that I learned.

The most memorable moment was spending time with the kids who never seem tired of learning new things, especially English. During my time at the small but wonderful school, I got the chance to do farm work and help grow vegetables. I learned that when you earn something due to your own effort, it feels exceptionally satisfying. Even today, I reminisce about how hard each of the students worked. They woke up at dawn for class and spent hours studying after school. Their actions made me reexamine myself as a student. Like many other students, I complain about the abundance of work and long school hours. I came back to America with new goals and a new motivation.

After the trip, everything felt like a dream. I could not believe that I was in China, and only weeks later, I was sitting at home and having a late night snack with my family. The whole trip seemed to have built a new character inside me. I realized that I had grown into a more mature and responsible person and it was my turn to care for the family. I wanted to take the heavy load off their shoulders and become a dependable young adult. I believe that what I got from my trip and the experience I had in China will benefit me in college. The experience will remind me to be a dedicated student with the wisdom to look at things from different angles. I also will become a more knowledgeable and productive thinker, reflecting my goal to obtain an education.

# Eyes Open

By Kiara Sanchez



Kiara Sanchez is a senior at Doherty Memorial High School. She works as a Crew Member at McDonald's, and also as the Assistant Farm Manager for YouthGROW, where she works with student volunteers to maintain two urban organic farms. As a member of Doherty's National Honor Society, she also tutors other students after school.

Kiara plans to study political science at the College of the Holy Cross, Northeastern University, Brandeis University, or Trinity College, where she hopes to study abroad and prepare for law school.

I had just arrived home from school. Most kids would be happy, but while I was home I was looking for one of those bold exit signs on top of an escape route. My mind only thought of the day where I no longer had to return to the living hell that was my home. My soul slowly deteriorated day by day. Even the outside world, beyond the exit, appeared dull to me. I saw no hope in anyone or anything. I was drained by one of the people who gave me life.

"What did you just say?" My father shouts as he unbuckles his pants. I just told him I would not clean my room because I have a ton of homework. Fear floods through my body. My mind races back and forth between the thought of how much homework I have to do and how painful it will be when he hits me. Suddenly I enter a dark, foggy place, yet I had not left the comfort of my home. I want to go in search for the answer as to why this all has to happen to me, why I am not living the life my American classmates are. I am brought back to reality as the whip of my father's belt triggers the nerves on my posterior. I feel the trace of the belt paint a picture on my behind as a vivid bruise forms. How does the same man that overwhelms me with excitement and joy fill my body with terror?

Two years pass and the situation is ongoing. Now I am empty. I have no soul, no personality. The fake smile I once presented to my classmates was gone. Now I am sitting here, playing video games with my younger brother. I hear my parents outside the room, arguing. As time progresses the bickering escalates to fighting. The usual occurs. Plates break, doors slam and tears fall. I know my mother thinks about leaving my father every day. But the thought of supporting my brother, my sister and me financially stops her from actually leaving. When will she find the courage to overcome her fear? Today. I continue to play video games, in an effort to conceal the situation from my brother. The door to his room bursts open as my father enters. He approaches us with luggage and tells us, "I am leaving." At this moment I realized that even though my father treats me the way he does, I love him.

This moment was defining.

I realized there was something positive in this mundane picture. I gained insight into the different lifestyles people may live and how they influence both the person they become and their community. Negative experiences do not always lead to negative results. I obtained a positive, humble attitude. Every whip embedded a new motive in my mind. Each blow manifested an increasingly stronger passion to prevent any situation like this from recurring. I will paint the story of my life with each and every action. The painting will be vibrant and powerful. The bruises will become the legacy I leave on society. After becoming a lawyer to empower people who are in situations that make them feel inferior, I will have a positive impact on my community. I am going to work to turn my community into a sustainable and just environment. My first step is to become educated.

# Reunion

By Manica Thelusca



Manica Thelusca is a senior at Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH). She works at the Boston Public Health Commission as a Peer Leader. She leads discussions and workshops with other teens on a variety of pertinent issues. She also advances her knowledge of her potential future career through the ICAN Medical Scholars Program.

Manica hopes to learn more about public health and psychology at Bridgewater State, Alfred University, Fitchburg State, or University of Hartford.

Across the entrance of the airport, her anxious, minuscule eyes are darting back and forth, frantically searching for me. I should probably signal that I have arrived, however, I was not prepared to face this woman who was separated from me for nearly eight years. As I gaze at my mother, I wonder if I am actually happy to see her again. Did I make the right choice? It is not an issue now; I have already made my decision. At the moment our eyes meet, relief engulfs her whole face. She greets me with a jubilant, yet uneasy smile, as I strain to return her cheerfulness. She bombards me with questions, to which I have no interest in replying; there will be plenty of time for that.

I was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and resided with my mom and maternal aunt. I attended a prestigious private school in Haiti: L'école de Sainte Trinité. I excelled in school, and I was well-liked among my teachers and classmates. My days consisted of attending school, going to the market with my mother in the city, and spending leisure time with friends in my little neighborhood. At the age of seven, I was told that I would be residing in the United States with my father and his family. My paternal aunt eventually seized my mom's place in my heart, for the years that my mom was absent. Years later, I was given the option of staying in Miami, with my paternal family, or moving to Boston, to live with my mother. I was faced with pleasing my paternal family, especially my aunt, who cared for me, or pleasing my mother, who journeyed to America to reconnect with me. I was confident my mother and I would resume where we left off; so I decided to move to Boston.

Living with my mother was an experience I was not fully prepared for. She welcomed me into a one-room apartment with minimal furniture. She scampered around the little room, fixing my clothes, giving minimal eye contact, while I stood immobilized at the doorway. Soon, we commenced heated brutal arguments, mostly started by me. All of those years apart had built a barrier between us. I joined many sports, clubs, and gained many friends, as a way of staying away from home as much as possible. However, in tenth grade, everything collapsed. I fell back on nearly everything, I was no longer able to take refuge at school, and my personal life was at a breaking point. It became completely impossible for me to balance everything and flee from my home. Entering my eleventh grade year, I made up my mind that I would face my problems at home, and I would get back on track because I had goals for my future.

Without making frequent adjustments to my surroundings: schools, cities, states, weather, and people, I would not be the flexible person I am today. I had to acquire traits of acceptance: accepting my mother, our situation, and my decision. I also learned to be more optimistic and mature. I had to make the best of my circumstances and have a firm belief that the dark clouds will not be permanent, and the sun will shine soon enough. These experiences have helped me stay on track and reminded me to never give up. I will successfully overcome every challenge that comes my way, take advantage of opportunities and adapt to new places quickly and successfully.



# A Job, A Family

By Djimy Theragene



Djimy Theragene is a senior at Boston Arts Academy. He is an active member of the BAA Dance Company, and he works at Boston Market. He has received a grant for his senior project, through which he will mentor youth in the Dorchester community.

Djimy plans to study engineering at UMass Amherst, UMass Dartmouth, Howard University, or one of the other excellent schools to which he applied.

My mom cannot speak English, and that has been a major challenge. Last January, I was translating for my mother at my workplace, where she was applying for a job. I remember the anxiety on my manager's face. After the interview, my manager called me over and said, "I gave her some papers to sign, but she signed in the wrong place. I don't know if I can do this for you, Djimy." I told her I understood and thanked her for trying. I walked to the dining room to start my shift, and my mom was sitting there with the usual sad, hopeless look on her face, with her hands clasped together on her lap. I felt I had failed to help her once again.

My early childhood in Haiti was the best time of my life. I grew up very fortunate because my mother put us over everything else. I remember her resilience and how strong a woman she was. She knew how to care for, nurture, and love a person. In 2002, my father filed for my two brothers, my mother, and me to come to America. Because of some complications, my mother was left behind. I later found out that my father had stopped the process for her because he had met another woman. The next eight long years disrupted my relationship with my mother.

Three months after the 2010 earthquake, my mother finally came to the United States. It felt like a reunion, like we were picking up where we had left off. She talked about experiencing the earthquake and how much damage was done. All she wanted now was to find a job so that she could send money back to help family members. My brother did what he could to help her, but three years passed and rejection followed rejection. The thought of not being able to help her family hurt her deeply. She would cry at night, and her sobs became mine. Her pain became mine. I felt obligated to help. My brother brought her here, so the least I could do was try to find her a job.

In January 2013, my manager told me that she had a position open for a dishwasher. I told her about my mom, but also mentioned my mother's limited English. She told me that was okay and to bring her the following day. That brings me back to where this story started. About two hours after my mom's interview, my manager noticed my mom still waiting. She called me into her office and told me that she had changed her mind and was willing to give my mom the job. I felt so blessed and grateful. It was like a burden lifted off my shoulders. I went over to my mother, handed her the papers, and said, "You got it." She smiled and tears rushed down her face, but this time it was tears of joy. She stood up and hugged me, jumping up and down as if I had just given her the Christmas present that she had always wanted.

It is not the easiest job. What counts is that it gave her hope and rejuvenated her spirit. One night as I was helping her finish up after my shift, she kissed me on the cheek, said "thank you," and smiled. That made me realize that the small things that you can do for someone make a big difference. I began to notice that my happiness revolves around the people that I could make happy. Helping someone, especially my mother, not only gave me positive feelings but also helped me grow up. Suddenly, I was thrust into a parental role, assisting my immigrant mother. For the first time, I experienced the responsibilities that adults feel, but also the pleasure and love of helping someone in need.

# How You Can Help

Thank you for taking the time to read the stories of these remarkable young students. Bottom Line supports more than 2,300 students across Massachusetts, but there are many more disadvantaged students from our community that need support.

The OECD reports that America has the highest college dropout rate in the developed world. Only one-third of low-income, first-generation college students enrolled at public colleges graduate within six years. Dropping out impacts these students for a lifetime. Students who fail to graduate from a four-year college can expect to lose an average of \$600,000 in lifetime earnings, experience poorer health and even face a shorter life expectancy.

Bottom Line's model, built around one-on-one, in-person support, can solve this crisis. With your help, we can serve many more student in need. We are in the second year of a five-year growth plan to double the number of Boston students enrolled in our program. By 2018, we will grow to work with more than 3,000 Massachusetts students annually.

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

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# Bottom Line

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