**Standard Bearer A**

**Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?**

"Try the steak!" my professor says excitedly. His eyes sparkle with encouragement. I look from the glossy platter of meat, sitting a menacing two feet away from my plate, to the only tools at my disposal, a set of modest wooden chopsticks, and back again. Determined to impress him and the four Chinese students from Hangzhou University at the table, I swallow hard as I pick up the intimidating apparatus and stretch my arm toward the food, whispering to myself, "You can do it, Alissa." I successfully grasp a piece and, with herculean concentration, guide it in an arc back towards my mouth. Less than an inch from my lips, and mere moments from triumph, it tumbles from my clutches and lands on the white tablecloth with an oily splat. In that moment my heart flattens, folds, and flattens again. I feel the wide, pitying eyes of my fellow diners. But when I look up, they have all shifted their gaze and are awkwardly staring at their food as if to say, "We didn't see a thing." In a flurry of anxious politeness, the waiter rushes across the room wielding a fork. "You can use it if you'd like," my professor adds, winking. I politely decline.

I grew up surrounded by a sea of brown faces, my interactions with people of other cultures limited by race and class divides established long before I was born. My community, predominantly Black American, lacks the diversity most people imagine when they think of New York City. I, however, the product of a lonely childhood (it's hard to be popular when you love school as much as I did and are a few pounds overweight), always sought ways to distinguish myself and to seek out forms of acceptance that looked and felt different from what I knew. It was in this way that I started to explore, and ultimately immerse myself in, Chinese food, the Mandarin language and Mando-pop music. It was not enough to watch bouncing cartoons floating and singing on my computer screen; I needed to understand the words, tones and meaning. It was not enough to order standard Americanized Chinese food; I wanted to read the characters, choose the most authentic dish, and savor each bite. Eventually, though, my own research was not enough either; I wanted to meet people from China, to truly grasp the differences between us - and to understand in what ways we might be the same.

A year after learning my first word of Mandarin, while attending a summer program at the University of Pennsylvania, I noticed a group of international students struggling to connect with their American counterparts. Though I had limited knowledge of their language, we connected through singing popular Chinese songs and speaking in a combination of English and Mandarin, laughing at one another's errors and supporting one another in continuing to learn. The next summer at Rose-Hulman, my lab partner, Mo, was also struggling to make American friends because of her limited English. Armed with even more Mandarin, I was able to connect with Mo, her international friends, and our professor over dinner. At the dinner, I made some mistakes, but I refused to make another's culture bend to my own. In friendly conversation, amidst laughter, a fellow diner told me in highly broken English that his English was far better than my Chinese; I also laughed but continued to try, hoping not to butcher the beautiful language in my determination to respect it. I did all of this out of the deepest esteem for my friends and the differences between us. I did not want to confine myself to the comfortable, American way nor disrespect my Chinese counterparts as each of them attempted, in that red-tinted restaurant, to connect with the homeland that they missed, a home I wished to someday experience.

**Standard Bearer B**

**Topic:** Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

In 1993, my mother, father and sister immigrated from Guyana, several years before I was born. Though life in the United States differed greatly from life back home, they held dearly to the traditions, customs and family roles they brought with them. In the Caribbean, and especially in Indo-Guyanese homes, women are meant to fulfill a narrow set of roles. My mother cooked and cleaned, making fragrant curry and perfect roti in her spotless kitchen. She honored my father while he was alive by keeping his home just so, and by fulfilling her role as the quiet, secondary partner. Since his death, she has continued to honor him with her solitude and persistent taciturnity.

She allows her brothers to dominate family conversations while she stirs a sweating pot; she cleans others' homes six days a week, maintaining that visible invisibility reserved for those in domestic roles. My sister, raised to girlhood in the islands, learned to mimic that same womanly role impeccably. Before she came to the States, she practiced the art of rolling a perfect roti, seasoning a perfect pepper pot and maintaining perfect silence. She met a Guyanese boy at 18 and married him two years later, honoring him as she was taught.

I am nothing like my mom or my sister. I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, far away from the Guyanese culture my mother was accustomed to. So different, in fact, that much of the person I have become over these last sixteen years, I keep protectively hidden from their eyes. Since my dad passed away ten years ago, my mother has wanted only one thing for me and my sister: that we grow up to be ideal Guyanese women. Unfortunately, while my sister grew to embody these values that my mother held so dear, those ideals clashed with who I grew to be. My mother believes that a woman's place is caring for the home. I, on the other hand, prefer organizing school-wide events, mediating between students in conflict or practicing for an upcoming dance recital. Instead of coming straight home, I participate in extra-curriculars and clubs like Student Government and Student Council. When I get home late my mother will say, "Tara, why do you have to be involved in every possible thing in school? Your sister never did any of that. Why are you coming home so late? Your sister was always home on time." With every comparison, I am tempted to tell her how different I am from her and Navita,that our personalities and passions diverge in any number of ways. But I keep silent, hoping that someday, she will notice it for herself.

My mother recently had the chance to appreciate my perspective. Coming home after a grueling day, I found my uncle intoxicated in the backyard, banging intensely on the door after being locked out of the house by my grandmother. I was shocked to see how the women in my household pretended like nothing was happening. My mother continued to wipe the dining room table; my grandmother stirred a pot of curry. They seemed deaf to the pounding and profanities being hurled at the door. My mother looked at me, resigned: "He's just drunk; there's nothing we can do about it." Actually, there was something we could do; I called the police. I stepped onto the porch and told him firmly that he had to leave. We argued back and forth and he began to get physical, but I stood my ground. It was not a pleasant feeling, but when he finally left, I was relieved, knowing I had kept my mom and grandmother safe. And as I entered the house and met my mother's glance, that split second that we locked eyes, I finally felt affirmed in who I am.

**Standard Bearer C**

**Topic:** Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Please check the box to identify your race:

White

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Black and African American

Native Hawaiian order Other Pacific Islander

Asian

I've spent weeks deciding which box to check, and I can't say I'm satisfied with my response. My family is from Guyana, a country with a complicated history and a complex set of varying identities. Located in South America, though not Spanish-speaking, and colonized by the British, it is a country borne of slavery and indentured servitude rather than cultural pride and independence. My family emigrated to New York to find opportunities they couldn't in Guyana. Being Hindu, I don't eat pork or beef, but, despite the similarities to practices in Southeast Asia, I do not fully identify with being Indian. While many Guyanese and most Caribbeans come from African ancestry and have dark skin and coarse hair, my family has a different origin, and we are light-skinned with soft, wavy hair.

Wanting a better education than our neighborhood was offering, my parents moved me into a charter school with a 98% black student body in the sixth grade. I came in later than the other students, who entered by lottery a year earlier, and was shy and reticent, so I struggled to make friends in my first year. My classmates would pet my soft hair and call me white, assuming I wasn't colored; I felt ashamed and thought I would never fit into the community because of my physical appearance. Moreover, I felt isolated by the community's shared experiences meant to build identity. I sat silently during African American studies units and Black History month celebrations. Eventually, I was silent almost all the time.

I felt like I was the only one who was left out. However, in starting to engage with other minorities once I got to high school, such as the Latino and other fair-skinned West Indian students, I discovered that they had this same feeling of being excluded and isolated. Therefore, though I felt terrified to open up in the community, I knew I had to learn to speak up. Luckily, my best friend had already joined our debate team, and he dragged me to the tournaments. For many weeks, my fear of speaking would blot out my voice and bring a waterfall of tears down my face. However, I slowly realized that the silence I faced from the many white students with whom I debated was not personal; it was the sad fact that they didn't know how, or didn't desire, to connect with me and my teammates due to the simple fact that we were not white.

This realization empowered me and I started gaining confidence in my words behind the podium. Eventually, I built the skill I needed to address the issue that had been plaguing me for years - to create awareness that not all colored students identify with being black. During a school Community Meeting at the end sophomore year, I spoke with a small group of underclassmen and described the generalizations I often heard. One boy asked: "But isn't being black and being colored the same?" I felt my heart drop, but I persevered. "Well, do I look black to you? I'm Guyanese like you are, but don't look the same at all. For me, being called black doesn't feel right because I don't look the part and don't identify that way." I braced for a dismissive response, but he surprised me: "That's respectable." I felt a huge weight lift and the floodgates opened. Ever since, I have found myself consistently correcting teachers and other students who generalize our community as "black" without a second thought. Now, you'll see the banners of many countries in our school hallways, and common talk of "people of color," a much more inclusive term. I feel responsible and thankful for the shifts I have helped create in our community.

**Standard Bearer D**

Music served as a second language to me; a way to connect with different perspectives and cultures. After five years of orchestra, I was confident in my language fluency. Every new piece of music fueled my passion, which made me strive that much harder. So when the orchestra received the new piece, “Bolero,” I was oozing with confidence. I sat on the edge of my chair, a slight smirk on my face as I proudly held up my violin. *I got this,* I silently reassured myself as I glanced up at Mr. Kelliher, waiting for him to cue us in. I was convinced that I would sound my best.

“1, 2, and 3,” he counted, and we started to play. I glided my bow across the strings, carefully applying and loosening the pressure during the dynamic changes. My chest filled with pride as I played through the section. My attention was purely focused on the sheet music in front of me as I kept pace with the tempo. As the tempo, rhythm and string crossing increased in complexity, however, my confidence cracked. Strong bow strokes turned shaky, loud notes were now barely audible, cringeworthy notes became more frequent. By the time we finished sight reading, my confidence was shattered. I let out a heavy sigh as I carefully set my violin in its case and rested my head in my hands. Over the next few days my perfect melody became flawed and ugly. Instead of brightening up at the sight of my violin in the comforting music room, I winced when I looked at it, no longer feeling confident in my abilities as a violinist. *What went wrong?* I asked myself every time I walked in the music room.

“What’s wrong?” Abigail, my stand partner, whispered to me, snapping me out of my thoughts as she helped me set up our stand. “You haven’t been your usual cheerful self all week.”

I pulled the stand over in front of our chairs and started organizing our sheet music. “This was my first time struggling with sight reading a new piece. It was horrible.” I stared down at my violin. “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I get this piece right?”

Abigail let out a soft laugh, and I looked up at her in shock. “So what? I didn’t do well sight reading either, but you don’t see me moping around. Suck it up. Everything that you do isn’t going to be perfect, even your music.” She gave me a reassuring smile. “Even the best music pieces were flawed at one point.”

Her blunt statement left me shocked. She was right. I felt foolish. I had grown accustomed to success coming easily. I was so used to going through the daily motions of school: doing the work, getting good grades, rehearsing with the orchestra. I didn’t realize that the complexity of life would hit me full force when I least expected it. Bolero was just an introduction to the challenges that I would soon face in life, and I recognized that I would need to be prepared. It has taken me a while to acknowledge that mistakes are okay. I am not perfect by any means. I am human, and I *will* make mistakes. I can’t grow as a musician, scholar or person if I never fall down and get back up. Even now, as I make my way through senior year, I still struggle with “Bolero,” but I know that when things start to become complex and difficult, I need to slow down and attack it one measure at a time. I’ll become fluent in time.

**Standard Bearer E**

The night my mother had her heart attack, October 31, 2008, I went to bed with my belly rumbling. While children collected treats outside my window, whooping and hollering in celebration of the rare weekend holiday, and my father stumbled in, reveling in his recent relapse, my stomach growled in anticipation of a long, empty night. Staring at the plaster ceiling, I felt, and was, utterly alone.

The next morning, the house remained quiet well beyond the time my mother would normally wake. There was no sizzle on the stove, no rush of running water, only the steady snores of my father's heavily inebriated slumber. Seeing him lying there, I felt the old anger rise in my cheeks. I started toward him, only to hear my mother's voice in my ears, "Your anger is only hurting you. He may not always be the dad you want him to be, but you can't let that disappointment get the better of you." My mother's advice always rang clear and true; years earlier she had coaxed my sister home after a hasty high school marriage, getting her back on track, through college and into JPMorgan, all the while convincing her it was her idea. I turned away from my father's heaving chest and into the kitchen. Opening and closing the refrigerator, the pantry, and the refrigerator again, I was overwhelmed with the realization of all the ways my mother supported us - and all the ways in which she was now distinctly absent.

Until that day, each of my mother's days was the same as the one before it. Seven days a week, she followed the same rote, responsible schedule that kept food on the table and clothes on my back. But that morning, I took up the charge. Cracking eggs into a sizzling pan,

I roused my father; I set hot food and fresh coffee in front of him and made sure he left the house on time. Dressed and washed, I zipped my raincoat and took the hour-long train ride to our beauty supply store, making sure we opened by 10am as usual. Returning from my first day of real work, I cooked a simple hot meal, and my father and I sat in the dimly lit kitchen, eating greedily, and discussing our days, the first time we had ever connected as anything close to equals. Collapsing into bed that night, I stared at the same ceiling that had seemed so menacing only twenty-four hours earlier and felt a sense of accomplishment and surprise. How had I possibly taken on so much so quickly? Every night for the next three weeks, after long days walking in my mother's footsteps, I fell asleep before I could answer my own question.

When my mother returned, she was weak and defenseless. The persistent intravenous needles had destroyed feeling in her left hand; her heart was still weak so she could not walk, let alone climb stairs, do chores, or take on her full maternal role. Luckily; however, just as she returned significantly altered, she also found a very different daughter than the one she had almost left behind. I nursed her back to health, continuing to cook, clean and work periodically as I slowly returned to my schoolwork and other childhood demands. We became a team. With her help, I graduated from fixing eggs and canned soup to preparing the traditional Guyanese cooking my father and I had missed while she was gone; working together, we made piping goat curries, perfectly round roti and steaming pepper pots. With my help, the store continued to open and close each day, my father stayed on a regular schedule, and the bills got paid. We established a rhythm far different than the one of just a few weeks earlier, one that continues to this day.

It was painful to give up my valued position as baby of the family; to sacrifice the safe, coddled, indulgent existence that comes with being the youngest in a Caribbean household.

However, learning to trust myself in a time of crisis has had a huge impact not only on my family but on my identity. I am the scholar and leader I am today largely because of the confidence and responsibility I gained ushering my family through its time of need.

**Standard Bearer F**

The worst part of Sunday mornings was not getting up, it was getting dressed. I stand in front of a bathroom counter littered with grooming products, staring into a mirror scattered with toothpaste smudges. My reflection is calm, my hair is leveled, my burgeoning mustache is straight, my suit is pressed, and my shoes are perfectly shined. The only part of my ensemble not up to par is my tie, which hangs helplessly around my neck like a pair of unfastened handcuffs. I am 13 and too old for any more clip-on ties. It was a personal mockery and an explosion to my self-esteem to not know how to handle something as simple as tying a tie. All the other kids in my church had their fathers to do their ties for them; therefore, no one ever understands the embarrassment that silently screams behind the question “Can you please tie this for me?”

I want to pilot my life for myself and not wait for life to happen to me. I never imagined that taking control of my life would collaborate with the ability to entwine my fingers and assemble a nifty four-in-hand knot, but it did. That tie represented a crossroad in my life: surrender to the statistics associated with kids growing up in homes without fathers, or find the loophole to the societal contract and become my own man. That tie was not going to be my noose, but my rope to freedom from society’s expectations about me; fatherless, minority, inner-city, and ignorant to sophistication and professionalism.

Choosing personal fulfillment over the status quo was not easy. Take that tie for instance; I swallowed my pride that Sunday morning and asked someone else’s dad to construct it for me. After church, I carefully removed the tie without unraveling it. Part of me wanted to destroy the tie, but to spare myself the shame of having to ask someone to retie it again, I kept it intact. In fact, I wore that same necktie for three more weeks, repeating the action of not untying it, despite the fact that it did not match with any of my outfits. My inability to tie my own tie was my own personal enslavement and I was determined to release my suffocating freedom from the tangle of thread that was stitched together by a stereotype.

It took two days but I managed to assemble a simple, clumsy knot. Deciding that the initial outcome did not meet my standards, I continued exerting through a couple more days of sweaty palms, cramped fingers, and relentless tugging on my neck. I was not just gaining the ability to tie a necktie, I was making the choice to accomplish something instead of giving in to circumstance. I am not allowing the situation I was born in to constrain the living of my life in a half-Windsor sort of manner; I am going full Windsor all the way.

Today, I am in necktie heaven. Attending a charter school with mandatory uniforms, it is a shocking and disturbing truth to see how many other young men are incapable of assembling the ties that they are required to wear every day. Joining this particular high school was a more challenging educational choice than most of the boys from my neighborhood made, but it was the one that would allow me to attain the kind of education I needed to continue my life of being a free and cultivated man. When things get challenging, I take a deep breath, straighten my tie, and press on.

As a senior and president of our Student Government, I spend a lot of time working with our underclassmen. It still surprises me to see the vast majority of high school scholars, preferably males, that do not know how to tie a tie. That tie is a compass that helps me chart my own course on my Transcendentalist journey of self-reliance. Without their own compass, my peers are being tied to a life they are not obligated to settle for. Now, when young scholars ask me, “Can you tie this for me?” I reply, “Let me show you how to do it for yourself.”

[Standard Bearer G](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/09/business/student-essays-your-money.html?_r=0)[[1]](#footnote-1)

There it sits, sullen in the passenger’s seat like a child in time out. Here we go again — someone else’s laptop to navigate, another Wi-Fi network to hack, another stubborn connection to overcome. After a frustrating drive through the neighborhood and careful identification of a network, success is stated simply: Connected. It is a brief moment of victory, but short-lived as I race against the clock to complete my stack of assignments. Sure, it would be ideal to have my own Wi-Fi, but I’d be satisfied if my family obtained a home first. Every day there is a new challenge; it is a game of adaptation: I beat each situation before it beats me.

Just as in any game, I endure losses and gains. I can never forget the classic motel stays. The countless notes that stated in all capitals “MUST EVACUATE BY 4PM” were my cues to negotiate with the manager to give us one more day to make our payments. I learned where $5 would buy enough food to feed a family of 5, bus routes, which neighbors were willing to give me rides to the college for my 7 a.m. class, which teachers were able to pick me up. I moved myself around the game board. I carried my family on my back.

During the bitter winter of 2012, I reached a dead end. My family was denied residence in a homeless shelter due to my mother’s legal status. Finally, a stranger offered us refuge. Every night, my mother, sister, toddler brothers and I arranged ourselves on her kitchen floor and turned on the oven, hoping the warmth would embrace us through the night. What were we going to do? Surely, we couldn’t live in front of an oven forever, but I couldn’t see my next move.

My mother agreed it would be best for me to stay with a friend for a few days. I would have meals and a ride to school. I avoided the thought of what would happen to my brothers, and I made my way out to temporary stability. For a few moments, the weight of my family slid off my back, just long enough for me to regain my concentration and my faith in the future. I continually struggle with balancing my family’s needs and my own, even though I know that in the end they are one and the same.

My whole existence is devoted to maximizing my potential. By tapping into a stranger’s Wi-Fi, negotiating with hotel managers, accepting the kindness of strangers, and sometimes, just for a short time, putting my own needs before my family’s, I fill the cracks in the road to success made by forces beyond myself. I won’t let these circumstances victimize me. I won’t let guilt paralyze me. I remain in control, making my moves, winning the game. Attending college is the surest path to victory, and I am prepared to play along until I reach the end.

**Standard Bearer H**

“Hey !” I waved in silence and gave a fake smile. I didn’t really speak much to people I didn’t know. When the teacher called on me, I would answer only if I knew I was absolutely correct. I didn’t want to say a wrong answer and be laughed at or feel embarrassed. When I started high school in New Haven, I was from Bridgeport, and felt like an outsider. A classmate seated beside me started to ask me some questions, “Are you from Bridgeport?” the girl asked. “Yeah, I am,” I replied. She just looked at me and said “ohh ok.” I didn’t like the way that conversation happened. After several conversations like this, I shut down, and thought I’d be better off just being by myself.

As I went through school, being closed off didn’t always work to my advantage. I struggled in some of my classes, because I was shy to ask for help, and I was lonely, with just a few people I would speak with. I realized I needed to figure out what I could do to change myself from being so blocked towards people. If I didn’t take risks, I wouldn’t learn. If I kept up my same ways, I wouldn’t have anyone, and just be alone. I decided sports would be my way to break through the walls I had built. Amistad High School had a lacrosse team. Lacrosse was something brand new to me, and I wanted badly to learn how to play, but it meant I would have to try out. If I didn’t change my ways, I would lose the chance to play, so I decided to take the risk.

At the first day of tryouts a girl named Kate came up to me and introduced herself, “Hi! My name is Kate.” Instead of shrugging like I normally would, I responded “Hello! My name is Monique.” I began to ask her about lacrosse and it turned out Kate had played during middle school. She explained to me many things that I should know, which helped me a lot. This made me feel welcomed and I could feel myself coming out of my shell.

Finally the day came where I would learn the outcome of the tryouts. As I started walking towards the list my legs wobbled a little and my heart jumped through my chest. “Yes! I made the team!” Joining the lacrosse team changed me. I was able to experience something that I had never done, and also meet many different people who I never would have spoken to before. I found myself being more open, talking to more people and getting along just fine. With this experience I started to step up, and this helped out in classes as I began to speak up in seminars and ask for help when I needed it.

Taking this risk was hard for me, because I was not only taking a risk, but forcing myself to achieve a goal that has been hard for me since I was a child. As a person today I am less shy when it comes to being social, and I am more open to take risks and ask for help. Stepping out of my comfort zone is a hard thing to do, and I continue to work hard to push myself for opportunities when they come my way.

**Standard Bearer J**

As I finished Jessica's hair, unplugged the curling wand from the outlet, and prepared to enjoy the show, Shaniece ran into the bathroom with a frazzled looked on her face and her hair in an absolute mess. It was an emergency! It was Senior Signing Day (SSD), the biggest day of the year for our seniors. SSD was the day seniors announced, in front of their friends, family, and the entire school, what college they would be attending in the fall. Shaniece was due on stage in less than thirty minutes, but her hair had grown out and her roots were in desperate need of a perm. The situation was dire, so I jumped right to work. We created an impromptu hair station on the changing table in the bathroom. I plugged the curling iron back in, parted her hair in the middle and began to work the left side. Twenty minutes later, with one curl left, I turned Shaniece around, allowing her take a look at the transformation. Her face lit up.

I first started experimenting with hair in the seventh grade. I always had an eye for noticing when a friend felt insecure about her hair, but at the time, I didn't yet have the skills to leave them smiling after the job. Instead, like my poor friend Alissa, my friends left my room with burned hair and a frown on their faces. I got the hang of it over time. Before SSD, I was the one my friends relied on when they got caught in the rain on the way to school. Doing hair was just a hobby, a way to spend the time before class started. The girls did not have to pay, or even show gratitude. I was just saving a few frazzled hair strands before class.

Although I do not want to get a beautician degree in college, after saving Shaniece's hair from disaster, I realized how large a role I can play in building up someone's confidence, even with something so simple as a hairdo. It gives me the opportunity to use my talents, talents that I never even considered to be real, as a way to help others build their confidence, even if only temporarily. It brightens my day knowing that people can rely on me during their times of need. People have suggested I charge money for my services, but I would never ask my friends to pay. Just seeing a friend's face light up and knowing that I played a role in helping motivates me. While I pack my books and clothes as I head off to college, I will be sure to have a flat iron, curling iron and a comb ready in my room for those times when my floor mates need an extra helping hand.

**Standard Bearer K**

**Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?**

Do you know what it is like to be the center of attention for everyone on the train? I'm not talking about purposely being the center of attention either. The utter awkward realization that I have the undivided attention of every person in my section of the train. All I am doing is listening to music. No singing along, no dramatic interpretation, nothing. I am just sitting and listening to my music. People taking the NYC public transportation system never disappoint. They either stare at a man begging for change or a teen listening to music.

My music plays loud from my headphones. The confused head of a passenger slowly turns towards me. Concerned tapping on my shoulder stops my focus. "Are you okay young man?". It never fails. Me, being an open person, hands them the studio headphones to listen. I'd explain as follows:

The storytelling moves me. The beautiful singing contrasting the heart-felt singing just reflects the emotion from the singer. That added to the technical and interesting decisions of the instruments adds a setting to the story going through my head. Do you like it?

And that's where I get the concerned look, "Why do you listen to that devil music?"

I detest these conversations where my interests are judged to be less than others . What happened to "being different is okay"?

This judgement stems from the fact that an overwhelming majority of my community listens exclusively to rap and hip/hop. I don't believe this comes from an actual appreciation and understanding of the music, but rather due to convention. Society has divided music into racial barriers. White people listen to rock, black people listen to rap, hispanic people listen to salsa, bachata or anything in between. Anyone that strays from this risks being judged from both within and outside of their respective communities. In middle school I kept my musical interests to myself; it was easier to conform than to stand out. At the time I thought it was fine, but ultimately, what good did it do me? Hiding within myself only made others happy. People needed to know that being different is not a disease. Opening up was not easy. Each probing question came with its own judgement.

"Aren't you afraid you are going to hell?"

"I can't go to hell because of my musical taste. I am doing no harm by listening to my music."

"But that's about the devil"

"No this one tells a story about a man that survives a natural disaster"

"Wow... that's actually kinda cool"

Getting upset and holding that within myself solves nothing. My peers do not learn to accept difference and I do not learn how to productively express myself. An essential part of being a community involves accepting people for their differences. Having people that are all the same does not create a diverse and interesting community at all. In order to effectively include myself in the community I had to give my story in a respectful manner. Granted music is a small scope, it's not right to assume the "norm" and chastise people that stray from that. Following such mindset is why stereotypes are created. Because I am Dominican and African American does not mean it is safe to assume that I listen to bachata and rap. I am free to listen to whatever I please. I'd make the same decision repeatedly. I'm proud to break the racial barrier that has been placed on music. If I have to be the one to break the standard so be it. No one should be bounded by preconceived notions that are derived from their appearance. That means their identity is already determined. I have the right to my identity and no one can take that from me.

**Standard Bearer L**

**Essay Topic:** Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition fromchildhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

"Nigger!" Brianna Rodriguez exclaimed. "Nappy head!" She said even louder. "UGLY NIGGER!" She uttered with more force. She and the other popular girls sauntered over to me from the doorway of room 102, all wearing matching cutoffs and crop tops. "Excuse me black girl," Brianna said laughing. My stomach turned, knotting in every direction. "Um...Um...Hello?" I replied timidly. "Look you guys! Rosa Parks is shy!" Giggling with her friends, Brianna kept walking, leaving me in the wake of her cruelty.

There in the hallway of PS 151, at age seven, I had my first encounter with overt racism and bullying. Everything about my experience there made me assume that hate would follow me regardless of what race I encountered. If the Latina girls couldn't see me for who I was, how would people from other backgrounds ever accept me? For the rest of my time there, I isolated myself from the other students, stayed quiet in class, and hoped no one would notice me or my color.

Eventually, my mother could no longer tolerate my pain and entered me in the charter lotteries. We breathed a sigh of relief when my name was drawn, and I eagerly purchased crisp khaki pants and baby blue polos emblazoned with my new school's logo. On orientation day, I met the other families who attended the school – a community of black parents who were determined that their children build meaningful identities as college-going people of color.

"Tia, have you thought about where you want to go to college?" My principal inquired. "Your Math teacher for this year went to Fordham, and your Writing teacher went to Indiana University." No one had ever asked me aspirational questions like that before.

As I grew up at Achievement First, it was as if all the friendships I had avoided in elementary school were forming there, with other black students on a similar mission. We talked

about all the typical things - boys, music, clothes - but also about our school work, our wishes for the future, our colleges and careers.

By the time we went to high school together, we felt confident in our abilities and we continued to work hard. Due to my freshman year grades, I earned the chance to go away to Manhattan College for a summer program. It had been several years since I had been around people other than my friends at school, and I knew that there would be students at Manhattan with different personalities, styles, and complexions. Nonetheless, I felt prepared.

On the first day during lunch, I did not know who to sit with. Unfazed, I walked straight to the first table I saw. However, when I sat down, one of the young women had an immediate reaction. "Tell that black girl she cannot sit here," she said to her friend without looking at me. I swallowed hard. "If you guys do not want me to sit with you, I can move, but I'm interested in getting to know you." I responded confidently. She swiveled her head to look at me, and her eyes were wide. "Wow," she said. "I didn't think you'd be so nice." I finally had the opportunity to say what I wished I had said to Brianna Rodriguez, "Well, you never know how anyone is until you get to know them. I'm Tia." She slowly extended her hand across the table. "I'm Julie, nice to meet you, Tia."

Even in the face of adversity, I am now unwavering in my self-confidence and conviction. I stand out because I know I have a lot to offer, regardless of what others have to say. I am determined to make people see me, and helping them see others as whole people- complexion, imperfections and all.

**Standard Bearer M**

I was always told in life that there was one situation or experience that can enable you not become a new person but a better one. I sometimes think about the question what was the one experience that made you want to become a better person? That question wasn’t asked to me often but it was something that stuck with me. I would answer question by saying that learning how to my bike symbolized a greater push in life for me to want to wish for something greater.

I realized that the noise that was so intriguing to me was coming from a bike. I went up to my father and asked him, “Can you teach how ride bike without training wheels?” He said, “Yes.” The bike I had picked out to ride on was bright pink and the protective gear was also pink because I always believed in being colored coordinated. After he bought the bike and safety gear he said, ‘It’s time.” Riding a bike without training wheels was a huge milestone to, so I wanted to make sure that I accomplished it because it as something that was very important to me since it symbolized something greater. It was a struggle so before I went to sleep I moved one foot after each other as if I was on the bike. Then, I felt like I was on a cloud when my dad let go without me noticing.

Nowadays from this experience I learned that there would be struggles and hardships in life that I would have to push through in order to succeed. When I had a bad grade in History I wanted to improve like I did on the bike, so I asked clarifying questions in class and focused more when I was taking the homework notes. There are many lessons that I learned from this experience yet the main one is that from theses experiences I would be able to push through the challenges in college life like a weight lifter because it has taught me that there are times where things won’t come easy to you which means that you would have to push in order to succeed. In my life gender has made me me want to push harder because in life women are still facing inequalities. I stayed after with the teacher for two hours in order to get help with my pre-calc quiz since I wasn’t there most days I needed helped with the missed content.

When I think about not doing homework I think about the struggle that I had faced when I was learning how to ride my bike and think its a pedal closer to success which is going to college and graduating. In life we are given challenges to defeat them not to allow them to determine what we as people shall do. Going to therapy for post-concussion after school was on such experience where I found this meaningful because I went the wrong way and I was becoming more weary that I would be late. But I said to myself in order to fully heal and finish developing one must act like she’s pedaling on bike in order to give one the strength and courage to continue on in order to get better.

Pre-Calc is actually a class where initially going into it I thought I am going to fail this class but as the days went on I no longer feared failing but of becoming too becoming because I grasp Pre-Calc like a calculator. Such as me staying after school with Ashley and helping her by answering her questions the best I can and revealing the errors in her math that I was able to see. Since when we write something we have our own way of seeing things but when someone else looks at they can see the flaws in the work.

**Standard Bearer N**

Car door slam. Front door opens. Keys dropped on the dining room table. Loud footsteps gets louder as it gets closer to my room. All of a sudden, my door opens faster than the loading webpage on my laptop. At the doorway, my father’s face appears, papers in one hand, the other in his front pocket, rolled up into a fist. Surprisingly, I wasn’t scared like I used to every time my father came home from Progress Report Night. I just looked up at him from my laptop with a blank stare. He seemed calm, but I could tell by his frown and clean arched eyebrows that he was angry. “*Bori,* what’s going on?... One teacher said you aren’t doing your homework, the other teacher is saying you didn’t do your last essay, which is bringing your grade down. Come on, man! You can do better!”

Even though I’ve experienced this conversation countless times, it’s like every time I get more and more discouraged. Yes, I have my father’s 100% support, but it makes me feel like I can’t do anything right. *I’m never going to do better.* Memories of 5th and 6th grade flashes through my mind of my report card. As and Bs in my classes, my parents being so proud of me, happy for my accomplishment. *That was 5th and 6th grade, I’m in 11th grade! School gets harder throughout the years. The ambassadors from the high school who came to Amistad Middle even said it themselves!* I use not only my father’s words, but my teachers, friends, and even my boyfriend’s talks as an excuse to putting myself down. I get easily distracted by social networking sites, I don’t seek for help when I struggle on an assignment, and I have a big dislike of participating in class. I have a craving of being independent, so getting assistance from teachers was the last option in mind. Being dependent and other bad habits affects me in not only school, but at home and when I hang out with friends. I am not the greatest big sister, and find her very annoying. I seclude myself from my family because I feel like no one wants to hear what I have to say. I tend to push the people I love away when they are trying to help. I don’t own up to my mistakes, which makes me seem like a little girl who blames others for the promises I break. So, instead of facing my problems like a real woman, I sit in bed, the car drive home, bus drive to my grandmother’s house or in school, think negative thoughts, and put myself down. I cry myself to sleep almost every night, and wake up in the morning with negativity on my mind.

Thinking of all this, my father knew that I knew this behavior was childish and unacceptable. My family loves going to Puerto Rico every year during the summer, but if I end up attending summer school, those plans are canceled. “Don’t screw up my vacation,” is what he said, and he had every right to say that. He spent his money on my school supplies and uniform, and asks nothing but good grades. For me to not take my education seriously is a slap to his face. That is why I refuse to carry this trait for the rest of my life. Going to college is my key to happiness. *It can teach me the importance of Independence, courage, and success!* I want to carry these traits with me beyond college to make my family, true friends, and myself proud, prove to the people most important to me and myself that I am not a little girl, and I want nothing but positivity in my life. Like my father says, “You can be whatever you want in life. You just gotta put your mind to it.”

**Standard Bearer O**

The constant tapping of my hands on the wooden table wears me out to boredom as I sit in class. My interest gets lost with every word I hear from my classmates. My feet slide back and forth on the cold hard teal floor. Everyday it’s the repeated routine in American Literature. I struggled with the subject literature. More than struggled, my mind wrestled the understanding of author’s craft with my attitude towards literature. Well my attitude always win the battle. My mindset of ¨I don’t understand¨ made me comfortable to flow in the ocean with the class.

When the excessive break packet arrived at my desk, I threw it in the trash bin. My C grade persuades me that I don’t need it because I’m passing. I didn’t manage to see it as my problem, always blaming it on ¨I don’t understand.¨ The ongoing routine of coming home tossing my bookbag on my bed, spreading on my bed like water and turning on my tv overruled possible time to do my homework. However, one day when I came home from school, I noticed a white envelope with my school’s name on it. I knew it was my progress report.

I carefully sit on my bed with the envelope clasped in my hands. My heart protrude through my shirt as I opened the envelope. My eyes fiercely scan through the white paper as if it was a race. My hot cheeks began to swell my face. Time stops. ¨I got an F,¨ I whispered. Failure.

The black letters bulged the paper like a magnifying glass was put on top of it. My shaky hands were intolerable and could not stop. Disappointment polluted my room. The F reflected the opportunity I lost when I threw the break packet in the trash.

After getting acknowledged about my performance in literature, instead of coming home and watching CSI: Miami, I stayed after school to get further assistance on my assignments. The cold hard teal floor began to warm and welcoming as I started to understand the concept of Romanticism. My ¨I don’t understand¨ transformed into ¨I’m not really sure, but I think it

means.¨ Although I was not the top student of my class, my attitude is the foundation to my success. In order to succeed in literature I had to take chances to answer unfamiliar questions.

That F was not going to be my ¨I don’t understand¨ throughout the rest of high school.

The countless nights staying up doing homework started reflecting within my grade. In literature class, the sound of my voice fills the quiet room as I sit with posture. My pencil doesn’t tap the table; it rathers race across the classwork. Every question I answered, my attitude slowly blossomed into “I do understand”; I became more alert to the content of literature.

I slowly started to fit into the the “vigorous” student I wanted to be. In order to do that, I had to reconnect with myself and think deeply of the student I wanted to be vs the student I am.

Each week, I adapt new skills that I can apply within classwork and homework. The excessive hours payed off, and I fully understand to always work to my full potential to get the best me. I have bloomed from a student who barely cared about literature into a intellectual scholar who to be audacious. I redeemed myself by overcoming many opportunities I lost when my attitude won the battle. My failure has turned into success. I now know that in order for myself to strive; I must always overcome my attitude.

**Standard Bearer P**

“He’s crazy! He fights all of the time.” My angry outbursts created preconceived notions about who I was as a child. Despite my love for learning, everyone labeled me as pugnacious. I bought into the label. I remember telling myself, “Fighting is the only way to earn respect.” I firmly held onto this impulsive belief as I was growing up, in order to hide who I really was. Whenever I felt threatened, I fought. “You look like a girl with those long braids!” When kids made fun of me or disrespected me, I fought. My mom always tried to help me control myself. She wanted me to be more like my twin brother, in control of my emotions, but I never “turned the other cheek.” She encouraged me to draw on Martin Luther King’s ideas of peace and nonviolence. “Marcel, fighting should be a last resort - you need to learn to think first.” It took me years to embrace my mother’s words and to understand why pacifism made Dr. King successful.

The book incident changed everything. Everyone in my 8th grade class was obsessed with the Manga Series Fullmetal Alchemist. Books were an outlet for me, allowing me to escape into the pages of the fantasy world where I didn’t need to fight to feel acceptance and respect. While reading, I learned new words, dissected characters and connected the plot of stories to the world around me. I just couldn’t wait to crack open Fullmetal Alchemist. All of a sudden, I felt it slipping from my hands as a classmate ripped the cover off. I watched in horror. I had patiently awaited this book’s release and at that moment, my rage was on the brim of boiling over. This became the final showdown between succumbing to my anger or embracing Dr. King and my mother's peaceful approach. I clenched my fists in vexation. All eyes were on me. Murmurs. Jeers. I scanned the room. The widened eyes. The gasps. I stopped to think about what I was doing. I stopped to think. I didn’t want to be defined as a volatile kid. It was time for me to show what was on the inside, under my cover. My breathing became steady as all of my frustrations were exhaled out of my system. It was my first brush with the art of self-control.

As ludicrous as it sounds, all it took was the book incident for me to embrace thinking before acting. With the ripping of the book’s cover, my “cover” also ripped, and I found myself turning outward instead of inward. By proving that I know how to control my temper and continuing to demonstrate self control, I have been able to take advantage of several opportunities in my high school years. Through my outward curiosity, I became a founding member of the Global Learning Club, exploring different cultures while also eliminating stereotypes. I felt the most powerful sense of connection when I was able to shatter the stereotype of people from the Middle East as terrorists. Early in my life, I, too was automatically labeled a fighter by most people. Giving into these stereotypes would only solidify the kind of narrow, false image that used to define me. My feisty middle school self would have never been able to have the opportunities I’ve been afforded throughout high school, such as attending pre- college programs and being trusted by peers and adults. In high school, I’ve defined myself by turning the other cheek and focusing my energy on being positive. Those around me would label me now as a gregarious and mature leader, and I am excited about what that will mean for my future.

**Standard Bearer Q**

Dribble! Dribble! Splash! I shot the ball over my brother’s outstretched arms. My twin brother Arik and I spent hours outside riding our bikes or taking jump shots on the basketball court. Ever since we were born, my brother and I have always been together. We depended on each other for everything. When he had a problem, he could come to me first, and I would do the same. We supported each other, but we could also be fiercely competitive. Arik’s voice would shout across the room, “Daquan, you stink.” “But I’m better than you,” I would say. “One on one at the gym,” he’d respond, “let’s settle this once and for all.” “Fine, but you know I’m going to win.” Our back and forth was constant.

The truth is, having a twin is a complicated thing because he is my rival and my inspiration all wrapped into one. The drive to be better than my brother had me out on the basketball court shooting jump shots until I couldn’t feel my hands anymore. I knew deep down inside that, to be the best, I had to start with the person who is most like me. At least that’s what I thought, until the day everything changed.

One dreadful afternoon I walked in the house and my mom told me “Your brother’s been arrested.” I couldn’t believe what I heard. My brother would be locked up for 18 months. I thought I knew Arik better than anyone, but discovered so many things were different than what I had thought. I began to think the person I once called my best friend, is gone. I realized that maybe he hadn’t been my inspiration all these years; in fact, the one who had been pushing me to be the best I can be, was myself. In that moment, I realized that I control my own destiny, and to be successful, I must want it for myself and no one else.

Silence filled the gym. I took a deep breathe and began to warm up with 40 jumpshots. It hasn’t been easy to be without my twin, but not having him around to be my rival has opened my eyes. I haven't been playing basketball these past 12 years because I was bent on being better than my brother, I played the game because I loved it. My brother’s mistakes also made me realize that my dreams are bigger than the court. Beyond the basketball court, I want to be successful in my academic endeavors as well. During my academic career I have been faced with a lot of obstacles, and I will be the first to tell you that I dropped the ball. Instead of rising up and accepting the challenge, I froze up and lost the battle. I am here to let you know that I have not lost the war! I now have my eyes on the prize; when people tell me that I’ve done well, the first thing I do is ask myself how I can improve further. Although my transcript depicts otherwise, I am here to let you know that I am ready to commit 100% to being successful in the college that grants me the opportunity to study at their place of higher learning.

I am grateful for the ways my twin has inspired me, and I am proud of the ways that I am becoming my own man. Last year I would spend all my time at the basketball court, and when I got home I would be too lazy to do my homework. Now, instead of going straight to the court after school, I go to the library to get my homework done. If I am going to be the successful man that I want to be, I must first start by changing the bad habits that I have, no matter how small they are.

**Standard Bearer R**

I unbuttoned my shirt as if it was on fire and placed it gently on the table pretending like I was ironing it. The room erupted in laughter as the teacher’s face turned red with anxiety. She cast a glare towards me for derailing her class.

As I walked to the principal’s office, I felt upset with myself. I knew I shouldn't be acting like that. I kept missing class because of these kinds of incidents and it showed in my grades. “Hey boss, what’s up?” I hung my head as I responded to the principal, “I messed up. I was trying to make people laugh.” “It seems like you are always following your peers who make poor choices. Is that what you want?” Following that crowd was never what I actually wanted to do in school, but it always seemed to be the option I chose.

After that talk, I began to work harder at making good choices so that I could be in class more often. I knew that I couldn’t learn and bring up my grades if I was getting kicked out frequently. While my teachers noted my increase in maturity, it was too little too late. The damage had already been done.

I saw the letter from my school sitting on the kitchen table. As I opened the envelope and pulled out the note, I read “Mr.Gray you will be retained for failing more than 3 classes.” I was disappointed and frustrated. Sitting in the kitchen I thought to myself “I could have avoided this. I should have done more homework. I could have asked for help.” As I thought back, I realized that I couldn't blame anyone but myself. School is what you make of it and, I didn't make anything out of it this year.

As I started freshman year for the second time, I came in with a new attitude. I was embarrassed about being held back and I didn’t want to disappoint myself or my parents again. I began to think before I spoke. I began to think before reacting. Things began to change.

“Alright scholars, today we are going to have our first seminar and talk about The Odyssey.” I looked around and saw blank faces. No one wanted to start, they were so nervous. I raised my hand and started the conversation which eased the tension in the room and suddenly more students were participating. I realized that I was being looked at as a leader and I embraced that role.

I saw the letter from my school sitting on the kitchen table. I opened the envelope and pulled out the note. Literature: B, Physics: C+. My report card was no longer riddled with Fs. I earned honorable mention on the honor roll, my work was paying off. For a moment, I was aggravated. If only I had done this the first time around. But quickly, I realized that being held back was the thing I needed to get me on the right track. It made me grow up, I had found motivation and set my mind to getting myself to college.

Throughout the rest of high school I have continued to focus and work hard to raise my grades each year. I have learned how to ask for help when I need it, and I take advantage of opportunities to stay after school. My reputation around school has changed. The same teachers who used to worry that I would take away from their class were excited to have me participate. Though I still love to make people laugh, I’ve learned that there is a time and a place for it. I used to follow the crowd and concern myself with the wrong things but now I am a self aware and hard working student excited to start a new chapter of my life in college.

**Standard Bearer S**

“No matter what you go through in your life you're always going to have challenges, best thing to do is overcome them.”

It was 6:30 in the morning, it was still dark as I was just now getting up whipping the eye crust out of my eyes. I glanced at the TV as I heard my mom saying ,“Naquan get up so we won’t be late dropping you off.” I stumbled getting up out of the bed. “I'm up” I said. On the television I can hear the news broadcaster say “A 16 year old male was shot dead in New Haven, on Dagget Street.” I wasn’t paying any attention. I was just trying to go to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. I turned my phone on to listen to music as I got ready for school, and was met with a terrible surprise.

I had 28 text messages from all different people I couldn’t believe it, I thought I was dreaming. “Sorry about your loss,and keep your head up.” That’s when I knew it was real. I threw my phone and broke down. My mom ran to my room “and said,” “What's going on”, I try to get words out of my mouth but the only thing I could say is “he is gone”. “She knew who I was talking about when she picked up my phone . She knew how I felt about Tj. I called him my little brother and I did anything for him.

This was a big challenge and change in my life. This experience helped me open my eyes, and made me really start to think. I need to change the stuff that I used to do and the people that I hang around. I didn’t want anyone in my family to go through the same things I went through.

I’ve been through so many losses, but this loss helped me open my eyes and realize that this isn't the way I want to go. After TJs death, I went through a tough stage not talking to anyone just staying to myself. One day I said to myself I have to do better, and I can’t let this bring me down. I have to get up and push myself to do better and live life to the fullest for the both of us. My mom always told me, “What breaks you makes you stronger you just have to go through the rough stages of life to be where you want to be.” This was the rough stage of my life, and I wanted to overcome that.

From losing my brother I learned that life is too short to just not do anything with your time. I didn’t want to feel like I couldn’t get up because I was slipping, but I had to make better decisions, and prove to my mom that I can get up. I noticed that when you are going through a strong challenge just focus, and keep your mind set on a positive path. I grew from this by knowing how to except that challenge that can either make me or break me. Im still hurt that he is gone, but I have to take that in. You're going to have deaths in your life. It may take a long time to get over it, but it can make you strive to work harder to chase your dreams.

I wish I can say thank you to Tj for giving me a rude awakening, but I will just show him by staying on the right path. The only person you are hurting is yourself, if you stay miserable. Tj made it easy for me to change. I showed this by doing better in school, and not getting in trouble. I started to pay more attention in school, not being a class clown ,or just trying to make people get distracted in class. My loss was painful, but I have improved my life because of what I learned from losing my friend, my brother, Tj.

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/09/business/student-essays-your-money.html?_r=0> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)