

I am the OPPORTUNITY

ESSAYS ON ADVERSITY AND ACHIEVEMENT
BY BOTTOM LINE STUDENTS



Bottom Line

Get in • Graduate • Go far
Success depends on you

The essays in this book were written by New York City high school seniors in the Class of 2016 who participated in Bottom Line's College Access Program. These essays tell the stories of students who have faced incredible obstacles and demonstrated the courage and persistence to overcome them. Each student has a unique background and circumstances, but also a common goal: to earn a college degree.

The authors of these essays are 12 of the 353 high school seniors who received one-on-one support from Bottom Line throughout the college application process in 2015-2016. Many will continue to receive support from Bottom Line until they graduate from college, for up to six years.

Bottom Line is a non-profit organization that helps low-income, first-generation students get into college, graduate from college, and go far in life by providing one-on-one guidance and support. We believe that students from homes with lower incomes and limited knowledge about college need long-term mentoring and guidance to succeed. With this philosophy, 78% of our college students have graduated within 6 years, more than twice the graduation rate of students from similar backgrounds. In June 2011, Bottom Line replicated our successful model from Boston and began serving economically and socially disadvantaged students from New York City. Over the next five years, we will expand to serve thousands of New York City high school and college students each year.

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>A Long Commute</i> by Dennis Belen Morales	1
<i>My Mother's Story</i> by Anjala Tamang	2
<i>What It Means to be Haitian</i> by Sharline Hilaire	3
<i>Making a Change</i> by Tommy Pichardo	4
<i>A Global Perspective</i> by Shahriar Sadi	5
<i>Note to Self</i> by Faizah Anjum	6
<i>Finding My Drive</i> by Londeen McEachron	7
<i>Taking the Leap</i> by Rawan Baalbaki	8
<i>Pastelon and Positiivity</i> by Ashley Melendez	9
<i>Adapting on My Own</i> by Dennis Moscoso	10
<i>Coming Out</i> by Dolly Ramos	11
<i>My Blue Backpack</i> by Jiang Wei Zhu	12
<i>How You Can Help</i>	13



Dennis lives in the Bronx and is the valedictorian at Alfred E. Smith Career and Technical Education High School.

Dennis will attend Hofstra University through the NOAH opportunity program to pursue History and Sociology.

A LONG COMMUTE BY DENNIS BELEN MORALES

When I exit my house to attend my internship at Lexus of Queens, the street is desolate. However, after the fifteen minute trek to my train station on Gun Hill Road, I begin to come across many hard-working people of color rushing to their jobs. On the train, I travel through three boroughs. The commute is well worth it, because I gain a ton of experience at my internship. I use this train ride to pursue my aspirations and fight against social inequality.

I grew up in a single-parent household with a mother who suffers from various illnesses. I was forced to take on bigger responsibilities because my mother could not financially support our family. This has taken a toll on me, yet I have never stopped looking forward and taking advantage of opportunities, such as working at Lexus of Queens as an apprentice. Traveling from a poor neighborhood in the Bronx to a gentrifying neighborhood in Long Island City, has revealed to me the lack of resources available to my community. Even before I get to Queens, I notice the change in environment when I transfer trains in midtown Manhattan. The people around me no longer reflect a working class or even impoverished appearance, but exhibit affluence and are well-dressed. I feel insecure about whether I belong here; unlike the new riders, all I exhibit is the restlessness of my eyes from a lengthy commute. I wonder if I am an intruder or even an outcast.

The experience of traveling to a new community in New York City has sparked my interest in social inequality. Over the past year, I have begun to question why communities in the city are economically segregated. The need to expand my knowledge overwhelmed me when I first started my internship. Eager to make change, I dedicated time and effort to researching the subject. It motivated me to create a bridge for my peers who had not had the same opportunities; I noticed that students in my neighborhood were not aware that their voice mattered and that they did not have to go along with the status quo. I realized then that I was able to play a role in society and make a difference by educating youth.

Raising awareness quickly became my commitment to society. I created a blog, "The United Coalition of Youth Activism," to relay my concerns and findings to others. It allows me to facilitate discussion in one convenient place. To mentor younger students in my school and help them stay on track, I joined the student council and the Revolutionary Student Coordinating Committee. Lastly, I created a YouTube channel to discuss monumental moments in history, so that my peers can be more informed citizens.

The train ride to Long Island City has given me my lifelong goal of community organizing and education. I would like to be a social justice advocate and give a voice to people who feel silenced. I believe it is critical for underserved youth to understand their situation in order to overcome it. I was lucky to have this realization by being forced from my comfort zone and placed in a new environment. My long train ride from the poorest congressional district in the nation to a wealthier neighborhood only six miles away has taught me a lot about myself and helped me realize that I want to help close the gap between the rich and the poor. This experience lead me to discover a dream I never knew I had: activism.

MY MOTHER'S STORY
BY ANJALA TAMANG

"How do you spell this word?" my mother asked after another exhausting day at work. She needed to inform her employer about her schedule for the next day, so she began writing him a text message. After struggling for a bit, she asked me in our native language, Nepali, for my help. I was doing my homework, so I became annoyed. I felt like she was constantly asking me to write or translate in English. In my frustration, I told her not to bother me.

My mother was not angry, but that evening we had a very honest discussion. She recounted her experience growing up in Nepal and the limited opportunities she had to learn English and educate herself. She was unable to finish high school because of financial problems and the pervasive belief in Nepal that women do not need to achieve higher education. She said people would ask, "Why should girls go to school? In the end they have to marry, go to their husband's house, and do housework their whole lives." Unfortunately, in some rural parts of Nepal, they still think like this today. Even my mom's family did not value her education and instead pressured her to marry at sixteen.

This was the first time my mother shared these experiences with me. Although I lived in Nepal until I was fourteen, I was not fully aware of how women's education was not valued in our country. My mother valued my education, but it never occurred to me to find out why she did not finish high school herself.

My mother's story affected me deeply. I realized how fortunate I am to be in the United States and have my mother's encouragement and support to go to college. Our conversation opened my eyes to the limited opportunities she had and the sacrifices she made to get me to where I am. I understood why she worked so hard after my father passed away. She brought me to the United States to provide me with the opportunities she never had. She wanted to ensure that my choices were not limited to dropping out of school and marrying early like she did.

Soon after this conversation, I applied to a competitive program, the Sadie Nash Leadership Sisterhood Academy, which provided me with the tools to understand and reflect on what my mother shared with me that day. I developed leadership and communication skills and enhanced my confidence by learning about female empowerment. The program provided me with the tools to put my mother's life in context, to understand her experience, and to envision my own opportunities and life path.

My mother's experience coupled with the skills I learned at the Academy instilled in me a desire to share what I have learned and to help empower others. I want to travel back to Nepal and work to provide women the opportunity to go to school. I intend to use the strength and encouragement my mother has provided me, the skills I learned in the Sadie Nash program, and my college experience to achieve my goals.

My mom is already very proud of me because I will be the first woman in our family to go to college. She will be even more proud when I achieve my goal to help other women like her, who did not get the opportunity to go to school, to attain a higher education degree, and to choose their own path.



Anjala lives in Queens and attends the International High School at Union Square.

She is looking forward to attending St. Joseph's College in the fall and continuing to work with Bottom Line in the Success Program.



Sharline lives in Brooklyn and attends Clara Barton High School.

She is excited to enroll at Bridgewater State University and be a part of Bottom Line's Success Program in Boston.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HAITIAN BY SHARLINE HILAIRE

"You are too light to be Haitian." "Your hair is too curly and long to be Haitian." "How come you don't smell like a Haitian?" "You know you match pretty well for a Haitian." Every day in junior high school, I was told that I did not fit the negative stereotypes associated with being Haitian. As a result of the negative stigmas associated with my culture, I began to hate my Haitian background, I even hated the word Haitian. However, this all changed after a life-changing trip to Haiti.

On December 31, 2009, I left New York for a three-week trip to Haiti. If only my mother knew how much I despised the small country, how embarrassed I was to be called Haitian, and that I did not want to go on the trip. Unfortunately, she did not know my struggle and I left with my mother, grandmother, sister, and two cousins for the trip. January 12, 2010 marked the day everything changed for my family and me. The ground stood still for ten seconds, while everything in the house we were in flipped upside down. The earth divided in two right before us. There was so much panic on my street and in the school across the way. Cars smashed halfway into the crust of the earth. One shake brought down the entire supermarket up the block from us. The supermarket fell faster than we could blink. People were bleeding and crying. Some were lost.

It only took ten seconds for so much destruction to occur and for people to lose loved ones. Afterwards, we tried to find my cousin and my grandmother. Hours later, my cousin was found underneath a fifty-inch television and my grandmother was in her yard, locked out of her house. Before I could fully comprehend what had happened, I heard my grandmother praying. People from all over heard her praying and came together. We were sharing stories with strangers, holding hands with strangers, and praying with strangers. In the midst of this unfortunate event, we Haitians came together to support, care for, and love one another. Seeing this incited the love I have for my nationality that had been diminished by the negative views of others.

When I returned from this trip, I was a new person. I came back strong. I was honored and blessed to be Haitian. I was proud of who I was and I knew all the nasty things people said about me and my culture were not true. I had always known they were not true, but I did not know it in my heart; now I do. Coming out of such a tough situation alive and with my family, I learned to embrace myself and not let stereotypes upset me. I accept my culture and nation because I know that we are stronger than ever. I am a proud, curly-haired, light-skinned, color-coordinated Haitian.

MAKING A CHANGE
BY TOMMY PICHARDO

It was a regular Saturday morning and I was watching my favorite cartoons while my mother cooked in the kitchen. I heard banging and shouting in the hallway. A woman was yelling about a fire that erupted on the sixth floor, while people rushed out of their apartments. My mother told my sister and me to get dressed. I was only six years old and did not fully understand what was happening. We rushed outside and watched as our building went up in flames.

When the fire had been put out, what was waiting for us would change my life forever. We found the door lock broken and our apartment destroyed. The ceiling had caved in, anything fragile was destroyed, and the entire apartment was flooded. My mother started to cry uncontrollably and, as a child who could not stand to watch his mother cry, I did too. For the first time in my life, I was homeless.

Shortly after, my mother and I would make weekly visits to the Red Cross for clothes and food until they stopped providing help and my mother had to rely on her own income. In retrospect, it seems like I was numb to all these experiences. I did not understand why or how these things were happening, I just thought this was how things were supposed to be. In the midst of this, my relationship with my mother grew very weak. Although I did well in school, my behavior worsened. With no father figure, a turbulent relationship with my mother, and without assistance from anyone, I felt very vulnerable and lost. This caused me to become a more introverted person, which had a lasting impact on the student I became.

After fourth grade, my mother enrolled me in a Catholic school. My rebellious and stubborn behavior resulted in me losing all motivation and passion for school. Though school had never been an issue for me because of my curiosity and observant personality, watching other students prosper academically while I remained stagnant made me ashamed. I had no one to blame but myself. I was conflicted and what I lacked at this point in my life was initiative. Resentment was all I felt, and it became a deep depression that would follow me into my first years of high school.

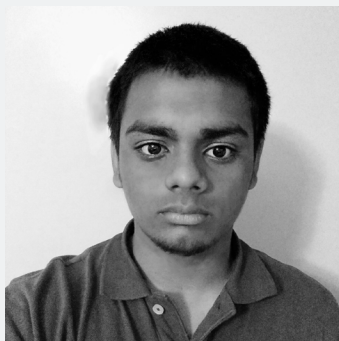
My freshmen year of high school was the lowest point in my life, academically and personally. As a naive thirteen-year-old, I made all the wrong choices without thinking twice about how they would affect my future. In sophomore year, I began to mature and progress; I started my second job and got into boxing. I learned to use boxing in a therapeutic way. Eventually, I formed relationships with teachers and counselors as I regained interest in my grades and, ultimately, my future.

High school has been a growing process for me. I have formed very important relationships and have learned that the actions and decisions I make will shape my future and determine where I end up in life. Through these relationships and deep reflection, I ultimately became a more ambitious and goal-oriented person. I volunteered to take AP courses and college courses at a local university in order to get some insight on the college experience. As a senior, I realize that when things go wrong, it is up to me to make a change. It has taken me some time to learn that my journey is just beginning, and the internal obstacles I have overcome were just minor pieces of a bigger puzzle that is yet to be completed.



Tommy attends Bronx
Leadership Academy II.

He will be attending John
Jay College in hopes of
exploring a major in the
forensic science field.



Shahriar lives in Queens and is a senior at Jamaica Gateway to the Sciences.

He is excited to study Computer Engineering at Hunter College and join Bottom Line's Success Program.

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE BY SHAHRIAR SADI

Getting out of the airplane and immediately experiencing the hot and humid air of Bangladesh was not very welcoming, but it was the air I was born breathing. After moving to America when I was only four years old, coming back almost ten years later was very exciting. I had no idea what to expect, although I had fond memories of the small nation. Faint memories of family members raced through my head as we waited to get picked up from the airport. My uncle came and greeted us with a huge smile, took our bags, and opened the car doors to let us in. My uncle and my parents began reminiscing on the three-hour ride to his home.

Unentertained by their chatter, I peered through the foggy car window, noticing the dusty streets, filthy gutters which people used as bathrooms, and next to the feces-infested gutters lay about five homeless people for every block. They were thin, and every so often there would be children with them. Entire families begged and cried for money as market shoppers walked right passed them as if they were not there. We passed through many towns which seemed to have the same problems as the ones before them. Finally we arrived at my uncle's home where I was greeted by a slew of family members and given tons of sweets. After a while, I went to the kitchen and there were three girls dressed in the same run-down attire I had seen on the homeless people. They seemed tired, but still smiled as I approached them. They cooked and cleaned and ran all the errands of the household. I was astonished by how hard they worked, to be paid with only a couple meals a day and a place to stay.

My visit painted a picture of a Bangladesh that I never grasped as a child; my trip opened my eyes to the real world. I had a sense of what they were going through living in an impoverished area with a huge immigrant population. I attended a high school where many students, including myself, receive free or reduced-price lunch. The homeless people of Bangladesh and I share the title of "low-income" in our respective societies, yet I go to school while many of these homeless children work. It is so easy to give up because social mobility in Bangladesh is nearly impossible and it seems as if nothing is being done to improve the situation.

My trip to Bangladesh changed my perspective on the world, broadened my view on global issues, and showed me how similar they can be to our own lives. It is one thing to hear about terrible conditions people go through, but it is entirely different seeing it firsthand. These events influenced me to study global issues and discuss them with my friends and family. However, I feel like discussing it is not enough. I am actively involved in groups such as the United Nations Student Leadership Society, where I use social media to raise awareness of various problems in third world countries, such as water pollution in Congo and gender discrimination in Mali. It also has inspired me to take action in my own community, dedicating my time to South Asian youth groups, teaching kids to stay away from bad influences, and motivating them to push themselves in school. These experiences and living as an immigrant in the United States have helped me to find importance in giving back on a global scale.

NOTE TO SELF
BY FAIZAH ANJUM

There is a shipwreck between your ribs and it took 17 years for me to understand your kind of drowning. There are people who can't be held quietly and screams that are never externalized. If I looked at the albums of your life thus far, all I would find are decibel meter graphs of phone calls and the intensity of your silence as you read alone in the garage. You are a box with "fragile" written on it and so many people have not handled you with care. And for the first time, I understand that I will never know how to apologize for being one of them.

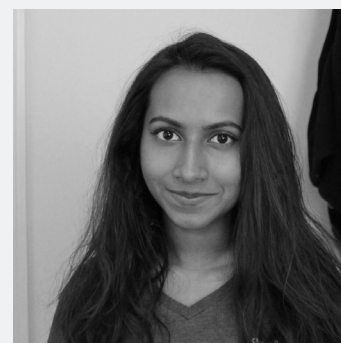
Dear 6-year-old self, Mom and Dad will read to you tonight. You will not remember the exact book but its significance will come later on. You will remember the way your dad paused to let your mother read the next word because English was not her native tongue but he never made her feel less than herself because of that. You will remember the way he beamed when he looked at her, at hope and desire in her eyes. Remembering how happy you were then is why you'll always keep this memory.

Dear 8-year-old self, Mom and Dad will not read to you anymore. They won't listen to your feeble complaints because they will be occupied with things of their own. You'll have to proudly hang your painting on the refrigerator yourself. When you hear bickering every so often, you'll turn to your copy of "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" and laugh at Greg's misadventures instead.

Dear 10-year-old self, Please don't be too disappointed when Dad doesn't show up to your graduation. It's only 5th grade, anyway. Aunt Nazreth will take you to Barnes & Noble and you'll light up at finding Stephen King's "11/22/63" and creep to a corner to vanish away from reality.

Dear 17-year-old self, Mom doesn't hate you; you just remind her too much of him. You'll never meet anyone else who has carried such heavy pitchers of silence so far without spilling a drop. When she tells you to leave her, don't. She needs you as much as you do for solace, so grab your books and spend hours of comforting silence together. One night, you'll go into her room and find her lying on his side of the bed. This time, she'll tell you a story about when she was 15 and searched for peace at the bottom of cigarette boxes chased by bottles of painkillers. But two years later, when you were placed in her arms in the delivery room, she realized that you were why she had been holding on.

For a long time you won't understand why you love spending hours in bookstores or capturing memories in writing. Everyone has a way to cope and writing compensates for what the real world does not give. Through this, you create a world of your own, one no one can leave their fingerprints on. But maybe you need to stop trying to avoid life. Stop fantasizing about things that have no basis in reality. Flowery words are not going to conceal a life barely lived. Maybe you need to accept that not every child has both parents' hands to hold. You still have your mother's eyes and your father's mouth; on your face, they are still together. Don't let anyone, even your parents, break you. Find good people and surround yourself with them. Learn to be comfortable and love the skin you're in. You're okay on your own. Remember that.



Faizah lives in Brooklyn, NY and attends the High School for Telecommunications, Arts, and Technology.

She looks forward to exploring the course offerings at SUNY New Paltz and continuing on in Bottom Line's Success Program.



Londeen lives in Brooklyn and attends Edward R. Murrow High School.

He will attend Boston University to pursue a major in Theater Design and Production. He is looking forward to joining Bottom Line's Success Program in Boston.

FINDING MY DRIVE BY LONDEEN McEACHRON

The saw blade spun impossibly fast, millimeters from the tips of my fingers. You could not have known from looking, but every cell in my brain was screaming at me to get as far away from it as possible, as quickly as possible. I took a breath and reminded myself that I knew exactly how fast the blade was spinning (3,450 rpm), and that everything was under control. I finished the cut, the rail of the table saw guiding the wood past the blade as I pushed. This was my first unsupervised cut. Throughout the next year and a half, that blade and I became good friends, creating the detailed work involved in my school's theatrical sets. This was my foundation for the development of a better work ethic and new social skills.

I first met that saw as an incoming freshman at Edward R. Murrow. Before high school, I exerted no effort in my education. I had no specific drive, getting by with passing grades in all of my classes. I was indolent. Yet, when my freshman orientation tour group visited Murrow's carpentry shop, where there was a presentation about the technical theater program, I immediately fell in love with the atmosphere of the shop. I admired the air of work and use of the tools. I had found my drive. Three years later, I am one of the shop's head carpenters. I took this newfound dedication and applied it to all aspects of my life. In freshman year, I earned all A's on my report card. Sophomore year, I won silver in the NAACP's Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics for plant sciences. As a junior, I applied myself to the hardest AP class available at my school, becoming one of the few people to earn an A. At the end of the school year, I made a desk from the remnants of the lumber used in the spring musical production, to be used for all of my work.

My academic life was not the only thing that benefited from my involvement in technical theater. For a long time, I refused to work with others, partially out of convenience, but mainly because of my inability to socialize without anxiety. It was less scary, but there were many times where I needed a second opinion on my work and failed to get it, or just needed a friend and did not have one. This changed for me after "Senior Circle," when the tech crew would get together and share details about our experience during a play, before the show's last performance. For the first time, people told me not only that I did good work, but also that I was fun to work with. As a result, I work even harder and I am better able to cope with stressful events in my life.

Becoming involved in technical theater has made me who I am today, and will continue to shape my future career, my work ethic, and the way I communicate. With what I have learned in carpentry and woodworking, I can fill a home with furniture, make money, and even create Broadway magic. I can network successfully, talk to people with ease, and lead groups of people to a common goal. I am not who I was when I first started this journey. I have learned to use that saw, and become friends with not only it, but the people around me.

TAKING THE LEAP
BY RAWAN BAALBAKI

At that moment, everything changed: Everything felt bracing and invigorating. The air I breathed felt crisp and clean, and the words I spoke felt just right. The hugs and kisses I received felt extra humbling and special. It finally felt like everything was falling into place. I was confident in my decision because I knew it would guide me on the right path.

A week before my first day of fifth grade, I decided to take a huge leap religiously by wearing the hijab, a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. I had witnessed my parents praying for an entire year prior to this very special day and I learned how to pray by watching them do so five times a day, every single day. Consequently, I became religious and learned about my culture, and I loved it. I was never forced or expected to wear the hijab, and I had no particular reason to decide to wear the hijab that day. All I know is that I felt like it was my time to take that leap, and so I did. It felt truly amazing. I was proud of myself. Then something happened.

Sorry, wrong, lousy, and disturbing – this is how I felt after the first couple of months of wearing the hijab. My circle of friends got smaller, my self-esteem diminished, and I felt more out of place each day. My close friends, family, and teachers made me feel normal, but other classmates, teammates, and their parents made me out of place. At such a young age, it did not make sense to me that a headscarf was the reason I was being alienated and looked down upon. I was different, but the same, and most people were not able to accept that.

I was the only girl wearing a hijab who participated in the church's after-school volleyball team. My confidence went down due to the comments, looks, and rude remarks from my teammates. Looking at the crowd and noticing parents' reactions made me feel uncomfortable. However, despite these negative outcomes, I pursued my passion for the game of volleyball because I decided that those outcomes were not worth giving up the sport I love.

This experience was very difficult because I did not have the strength to ignore everyone and focus on what I wanted, which was to move forward religiously. I did not have the strength to not let it bother me, and as a determined person, this was unusual. I felt like I disappointed myself. But the worst part of it all was that all these outside forces made me feel that way. They alienated and undermined me. In a society and country where I was promised to be accepted and treated equally and respectfully, I felt the complete opposite.

Undergoing this intense and life-altering experience, where I was pressured to choose between completing my religious journey or taking a huge step back to feel accepted was one of the hardest choices I've ever had to make. I felt degraded and weak, as though the world's opinion mattered more than my own, which is not the way it is supposed to be. I am thankful for this experience because it made me become a stronger, more determined, and courageous person who no longer puts the opinions of others before my own. This experience motivated me and made me want to be one of the many amazing Muslim women who break the image of how Muslim women are portrayed in modern society.



Rawan lives in Staten Island and attends the High School of Telecommunication Arts and Technology.

Rawan is excited to attend SUNY New Paltz to pursue Biology and Psychology and join Bottom Line's Success Program.



Ashley lives in Brooklyn and attends Teachers Preparatory High School.

She will attend SUNY Stony Brook University through the EOP Program and is excited to be part of Bottom Line's Success Program. She is interested in a career in health or business.

PASTELON AND POSITIVITY BY ASHLEY MELENDEZ

"Hello? Hello?" The only response I heard was a cough. Puzzled, I strode through the kitchen to my mother's bedroom and was astonished to find her in bed. She was pale and her cough rattled violently in her chest. "I'm sick," she said, "but I'll be fine." Characteristically understated, she attempted to assuage my concerns, but she did not get up for two weeks. Due to her extended illness, she lost her job and was unemployed for eight months. I was only twelve years old, and while I did not understand what was happening, I did know that I needed to take on additional responsibilities.

After school, I would complete my homework, sweep, mop, and clean the dishes. Before she fell ill, my mom had taught me how to put together basic dishes like rice and beans, but it was during her illness that I developed my culinary and domestic skills. I perfected a dish called *pastelon*, known as "Puerto Rican lasagna," using sweet plantains instead of pasta and seasoned ground beef with plenty of cheese, and I would leave the kitchen immaculate.

She recovered, but only physically. For some time, she was depressed; she could not find a job and we were surviving on unemployment checks and food stamps. I continued my new responsibilities and, although it felt like our family was on the verge of collapse, I tried my hardest to keep a positive attitude for both of us. There were days when we did not have enough food to eat and I would lie and say that I had already eaten; there were days when I would have to get groceries on loan from the corner store; there were days when I would fall asleep sobbing in my bed. It became hopeless, but I wanted to show her that I had learned from her to always focus on positivity and the more important aspects of my life, which at that moment was school.

My situation helped me understand the hardships of those around me. I realized that I am not the only one who had a mishap in my life, and that many students from my neighborhood grew up with similar situations. Because of this, I needed to ensure that I would not let my situation get the best of me. Despite the struggles at home, I pushed myself to constantly grow and improve in school. The best way to improve one's circumstances is through an investment in education, and I have taken this to heart. I will graduate first in my class and have consistently exceeded the expectations of my peers and teachers. This success was the first step toward my future.

I also invested in myself and my community. I engaged in several different clubs to keep myself as busy as possible. As a senior, I became President of Educators Rising and was elected Senior Class President. Being the first of my siblings to graduate from high school makes me want to set a precedent in my family. I want to be an example to those who have experienced the struggles of living in a single-parent home. College is one of the most important steps towards a triumphant future. A college degree will allow me to attain a lucrative career that would give me access to resources that I never had as a child. And I will still be able to make a pretty delicious *pastelon*.

ADAPTING ON MY OWN
BY DENNIS MOSCOSO

When I was 10, my family decided to travel to the U.S. from Ecuador, or at least that's what I was told. My dad said that it would only be for a few days and that we would be back very soon to see my mom, who stayed behind. When I got to the U.S., thinking that my family and I were going to have a new and amazing experience together, I was informed that we were moving to the U.S. permanently, and my family was being torn apart; my mom would not be joining us. I couldn't believe it.

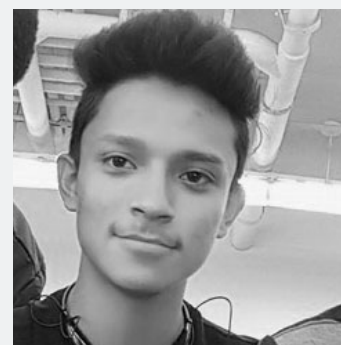
I had always looked to my mother for everything and anything I needed, and in the blink of an eye, that was taken from me. My mom was a literature teacher for high school students and an amazing mother. Although my dad is an amazing father, he is not as well-educated and well-informed as she was, and so I had to figure out how to adapt to my new life on my own.

Joining my new school was one of the worst experiences of my childhood. I was overwhelmed, and I didn't think I could handle it. Because I did not know the language, everything was difficult – making friends, doing homework, asking questions. Even asking to go to the bathroom was hard. Every homework assignment was a new nightmare. The frustration and disappointment of not understanding the language was very stressful.

I was so mad at my family for breaking my mother and me apart that I shut them out until I understood. I come from a poor background where we believe that education is the key to everything. They wanted what would be best for my siblings and me in the long run, and my mother was willing to give up her life as she knew it to see us have a better future. When I understood what her sacrifice meant, I decided to give it my all in school. For six months, I studied day and night to be able to understand, read, write, and talk in English. It was a lot of work, but it finally paid off when I was the first of my siblings to learn the language. I could look after myself in everyday situations and even hold a conversation with others. Inspired by my mother's sacrifice, I tried to make myself and, most importantly, my family proud by giving it my all.

Since then, I have done many things that seemed impossible or extremely hard in the moment, mostly on my own. Moving to the United States helped me become more independent and develop my own moral compass. There were many moments in my life in which others tried to persuade me to do something I would have regretted for the rest of my life, like doing drugs or cutting class. Thankfully, thinking of my mom and my priorities helped me do something very simple yet extremely hard at my age: say no.

Thanks to this tragic yet beneficial experience, I can thankfully say I have made my family proud and that I have, with the help of those around me, become an independent young adult who is always willing to learn and give it his all, plus a little more. This whole experience has shaped me and provided me with the right qualities to perform to the best of my ability in my future studies, career, and life in general.



Dennis lives in Queens with his father and recently immigrated mother. He attends Information Technology High School.

Dennis is excited to study Computer Science and Engineering next year at Clarkson University, where he will receive the support of the HEOP program.



Dolly lives in Brooklyn and attends Benjamin Bennaker Academy.

She is looking forward to joining Bottom Line's Success Program at SUNY Albany next year, where she plans to study biology and eventually become a pediatrician.

COMING OUT BY DOLLY RAMOS

I was hot and sweaty even though my windows were wide open and my fan was on full blast. I had always hated the fact that my mom would not buy an air conditioner. I let my radio lull me to sleep, as I did each night in the desert of my bedroom. I was almost asleep when my mother's phone rang. She answered and began to blab about some television show. Then she started to speak in a hushed voice, something she never did.

"Yeah... I know right? I hope Dolly never turns gay, 'cause if she do, she won't be living in this house. I don't play that gay stuff, you know." My heart instantly began beating faster; suddenly, I could not sleep. That was the summer before I started high school.

I tend to think of myself as a backward lesbian. Many adolescents in the LGBTQ community do not openly express their sexuality because they are fearful of not being accepted. They feel a lingering feeling of opposition that never seems to go away until they openly express themselves. However, when I first realized I was interested in girls, I told everyone: classmates, teachers, friends. I waited to tell my mother, though; not because I was scared, but because I knew that if I told her she would act weird – not allow girls in my room, stop letting me go to sleepovers, etc. – and I did not want that to happen. I wanted everything to stay normal.

I had always told myself that it would not matter if my mother accepted my sexuality; after all, this was just one little detail about me. It did not define me. After that summer night, it was like my sexuality did define me. Now I was living in constant fear of rejection.

I went to extremes to try to protect myself from the horror that my mother would express if she found out. I started to fear being rejected by everyone else. By the time I started high school, I had completely isolated myself. I barely talked, and I was so focused on hiding that school work was the last thing on my mind. I was no longer the girl who did not care about others' opinions. At times, I would lie awake in my bedroom all night, wondering if I should tell my mother. Would she really kick me out? Would she stop talking to me? What if I can't find another place to live? How would I tell her? These questions kept creeping inside my head like a child's nightmare, until on one of those nerve-wracking nights, I decided to come clean.

Ma, I have something to tell you. Ma, I have something to tell you. Ma, I like girls. Ma, I have feelings for girls. I practiced those lines all day in school and after, I rushed home – I wanted to get it over with. She was in the living room, watching television. I tapped her shoulder, "Ma, I have something to tell you." She ignored me; she knew what was coming next. "Ma, I like girls." Silence. "Ma, did you hear me?" Still silent. I walked away. I was a bit upset, but the huge sense of relief I had overcame that feeling. Everything suddenly was better, lighter, and brighter.

We never really spoke about it. I soon realized that this wasn't about me telling my mother about my sexual preference; it was about asking her to let me be myself openly. I began working on being open again, though I still pick and choose whom to tell. But more importantly I am focused on being that intelligent, optimistic, outgoing girl I used to be, who just happens to be a lesbian.

MY BLUE BACKPACK BY JIANG WEI ZHU

From a young age, I lived in the city of Ma Wei in southern China. Starting in primary school, I had to walk myself to and from school four times a day because I would return home for lunch. There were two ways to get to school: One was a flat path that took an hour, and the other was a mountain road, which was difficult but only took forty minutes. I always took the mountain road. In the middle of the road there were many trees, and I once saw a monkey on a telephone pole. Sometimes I felt too tired to walk home from school. I carried many books in my blue backpack every day for different subjects. The backpack was heavy, and it made me feel like I would fall down, especially midday when I was hungry. But gradually I learned how to keep walking even when I was tired. I told myself the goal is not that far but it feels hard to reach, and so I need to work twice as hard to reach it.

In the summer after fifth grade, my mom told me we were moving America. I was excited, but it was hard to say goodbye to the place I had lived for twelve years. We met my dad in America and moved to New York City, and almost everything about my life changed. America is not a utopia. In China, people told us America was a great place where money falls from the sky, but that was not true. A few months later my mom found a job in Pennsylvania. That night, she cried because she did not want to leave me, but I held in my tears. I knew if I cried my mom would feel even worse. I was fragile, but I told myself I would have to be strong and independent, so I could take care of my parents.

Because my parents work far away, I now live with my aunt and I have to take care of myself. I do the cooking, laundry, and cleaning; I pay bills for my parents and translate the mail for them. Being independent like this will help me in college because I feel comfortable being on my own in a new place. My sense of responsibility will help me to help others and push me to attend class every day, respect teachers and classmates, and be on time with assignments. There will be a lot of new challenges, so I will try my best to address them, and if something goes wrong, I will reflect and improve myself. I am excited to go to college because it is a new start, a chance to learn more, meet new people and continue to grow.

I have grown to appreciate my blue backpack from when I was eight. I have since had a few backpacks, and now I have a simple black one. But what has not changed is the spirit that my blue backpack taught me. In the road that I walked to school in China, I would see animals, cars, people, and new sights. I was not able to predict what would happen, and it is like my future road in life. The backpack is the responsibilities that I carry. Like when I was eight, in the future I will not say "I don't want to walk this" because I am tired or hungry. I will walk my road wherever it takes me, and I will carry my responsibilities gladly.



Jiang Wei lives in Brooklyn and is a senior at Brooklyn International High School.

He will be attending SUNY New Paltz through the EOP program and is excited to be a part of Bottom Line's Success Program.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

We hope you agree that these essays tell the stories of some remarkable young adults. Each of these students fortunately had the support of a Bottom Line counselor throughout the college admissions process – and several of them will have Bottom Line’s help until they graduate from college. Unfortunately, the reality of most other New York City students is more daunting:

- Next fall, over 25,000 NYC students will be heading to college
- Only a third of these students will complete their degrees
- Nationally, only 9% of students from the lowest-income families will earn a bachelor’s degree

The message is clear: Students need better help getting into the right schools and they need ongoing support while in college. Bottom Line’s proven programs address these formidable issues head on. We work with students to help them gain access to college and we provide continuous, comprehensive, and individualized support until they graduate.

Thanks to our generous supporters, Bottom Line has offered our high quality services at no cost to our students since 1997. As happens with any quality service, word about our work has spread quickly and the demand for our programs grows every year.

Five years ago, Bottom Line opened our New York City office. We have grown to serve 1,600 of NYC’s low-income, first-generation students this year, and expect to serve at least 3,500 by 2020.

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

Phone: 347.889.7627

E-Mail: info@bottomline.org

Web: www.bottomline.org

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