

Essays on adversity and achievement

by Bottom Line students

I am the

opportunity

*Now, I await that next challenge  
to engulf me*

*Afraid? No.*

*Hesitant? Of course not.*

*Ready? As I'll ever be.*



**Bottom Line**

Get in • Graduate • Go far

Success depends on you

# One Goal. 1,800 Paths to Success.

The essays in this book were written by high school seniors from the Class of 2012 who participate in Bottom Line's College Access Program. These essays tell the stories of students who have faced incredible obstacles and demonstrated the courage and persistence to overcome them. Each student has a unique background and circumstances, but also a common goal: to earn a college degree.

The authors of these essays are 14 of 662 Massachusetts high school seniors who received one-on-one support throughout the college application process from Bottom Line so that they can reach their goal. Many will continue to receive support from Bottom Line for another 4-6 years while they attend college.

Bottom Line, a non-profit organization that helps at-risk youth get into and graduate from college, provides comprehensive college counseling services to students from Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts. 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, 74% of our college students have graduated within 6 years, more than twice the graduation rate of students from similar backgrounds.

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

# Contents

<b>Forgiving My Father</b> by Jinwoo Choi	4
<b>My Own Path</b> by Zainab Hussein	5
<b>Deciding My Future</b> by Hafsa Javaid	6
<b>Every Small Change Counts</b> by Brian Kent	7
<b>Coming to America</b> by Marege Kidane	8
<b>See You Tomorrow</b> by Kathy Le	9
<b>Understanding</b> by Maria Luna	10
<b>Endless Possibilities</b> by Lyxandra Perez	11
<b>Mrs. Dewey</b> by Mirna Portillo	12
<b>Empowerment</b> by Fernando Rodriguez	13
<b>My Mother, My Role Model</b> by Alexandra Tejada	14
<b>Rebuilding</b> by Josie Valcin	15
<b>A Mile in My Shoes</b> by Michael Vallejo	16
<b>How You Can Help</b>	17

# Forgiving My Father

by Jinwoo Choi



Jinwoo Choi is a student and member of the National Honor Society at the Boston Community Leadership Academy. When he is not at school or working at the Surreal Image Café, he enjoys sharing his culture through teaching Tae Kwon Do to his peers. In fact, last year he founded a club at his school to make the sport more accessible to his classmates.

Jinwoo is interested in pharmacy and engineering. He has applied to schools such as MA College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston College, and UMass Amherst.

My father passed away on September 1, 2009. He was not a very good father until the last three years of his life. He was an alcoholic and because of his drinking, he had diabetes and high blood pressure. He never showed his physical weakness to his family; he always pretended to be excessively strong. He did not have a job due to his old age and poor physical condition, so my mom started working at a department store when I was seven years old to support the family. He never encouraged her and he constantly insulted her when he was drunk. I was afraid to stand up for her and as a child I felt helpless. I cursed him and my miserable life. I hated being at home, so I usually played computer games or hung out with my friends.

Four years ago, my family received United States permanent residency by the invitation of my grandmother who lived in Los Angeles. My parents stayed in Korea and I moved to the United States. I was happy to leave my father, but the United States was unfamiliar and awkward. Communication was difficult and I felt very alienated. I could not adapt to the American schools. I only went outside when I was going to and from school. I missed my mom and friends.

I went home to Korea over summer vacation and when I arrived, I learned that my parents were living separately. My mom was living with a friend, so I stayed at a hotel by myself. I spent most of the time with my friends; my father wanted to get together, but I avoided him by making up excuses. When I met my mother, she told me that my father had stopped drinking and was trying to work. I visited his house with my mom and was greeted warmly by him. His house looked so lonely and there were traces of fast food delivery scattered around. For the first time ever, he took an interest in my life and asked me about living in America. That summer went by very quickly. At the airport, I said goodbye to both of my parents; I was glad to see my dad more at peace. He was working to become a better person. Hugging him, I said, "Forget the past, and let's do our best for the future." He just replied, "Don't worry."

Three days after I came back to Boston, my sister got a phone call from my uncle. He announced the news of my father's death. I was shocked because I said goodbye to my father just three days ago, and he never seemed sick. When we arrived at the funeral, there was a picture of my deceased father, and when we entered the room where my father's body was, I could not believe that my father's dead body was lying in front of me. The saddest scene was his cremation. At the crematorium we watched his big body being put into the coffin. Then, the coffin was burned and my father's body turned into small ashes. It broke my heart and my anger towards my father became ashes too. The ashes were put into a small box, which my mom, sister and I carried to the Han River, the largest river in Korea, where we spread the ashes. His death taught me about forgiveness. Before he passed away he said, "Don't live like I do." I will remember what he said and pursue my goals so that I do not live to regret things in my future.

# My Own Path

by Zainab Hussein



Zainab Hussein is a senior at the Boston Community Leadership Academy and captain of the Brighton High School Soccer Team. Her involvement with soccer extends outside of school; Zainab was named MVP of her community soccer team and has taken on assistant coach and referee roles for other organizations. When Zainab isn't at school, soccer practice, or babysitting her younger siblings, she enjoys volunteering with the Walk for Hunger and the Harbor Point Community Task Force.

Next year, Zainab hopes to play soccer for Simmons College, Northeastern University, MA College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, or UMass Boston, while she pursues a degree in physical therapy or exercise science.

Soccer is my oxygen; I cannot live without it. When I am running down the field on a breakaway, I forget everything that is on my mind. As sweat drips down the side of my forehead and my cleats bury into the ground, lifting up the recycled tire rubber, I push against the wind, shoot the ball into the back of the net, and hear the faint "swoosh." This is what I live for. Every time I step onto the field in my size six yellow Adidas cleats, I forget about everything that is bothering me. However, after every practice on my way home, I remember that I will be lectured once again about how I should be home cooking and cleaning like my sisters, not participating in sports. Throughout my life, I have been forced to navigate through two different cultures; through this constant battle, soccer has been my outlet and it has allowed me to take a risk and follow my own path.

I was born in Iraq and escaped to Turkey at age two. After three years, my family and I once again fled to avoid execution. We came to the United States, where my parents kept some cultural values while adapting to American culture in other ways. At age eleven, I joined soccer to escape from the life that I was expected to live. Before long I met Coach Jack. He has been a father figure to me while my own father spends time in Iraq. He provides advice and constantly supports me playing. He has taught me an important life lesson: if I want to do something, then I must strive for it. While playing on his team, Dorchester Youth Collaborative, I have gained knowledge about the game and become a better player. Playing on this new team entailed commitment and more practice time. I had no problem with this; however, my parents disagreed. I found myself caught in a culture clash between something I loved to do and something I was expected to do based on my gender and background.

A year into playing on my new team, I was asked to be captain. Sadly, I turned down the opportunity even though I had worked hard and knew I deserved it. I felt I could not lead a team without my family's support and my guaranteed commitment, which I could not promise. I took a new approach and tried to get on my parents' good side. I cleaned, washed dishes, cooked meals, and watched my younger siblings. In the end, I realized that I would only earn their praise for cooking and cleaning, never for playing soccer. So I decided to follow my own path and accept the captain position.

My culture is important to me because it is a part of who I am. But soccer is just as much a part of me. I still follow customs such as fasting during Ramadan and cooking and cleaning on days that I do not have practice. I have come to accept that emigrating from Iraq and growing up in the United States means having to compromise. I am proud that I have been brave enough to follow my heart because it means that I am creating my own path towards the life I want, which includes attending college and playing soccer. Most high school athletes dream of a college scout coming to watch them play. All I want is to one day look up into the crowd and see my family cheering me on from the stands.

# Deciding My Future

by Hafsa Javaid



Hafsa Javaid attends University Park Campus School in Worcester. She is actively involved with the school community through participation on the Cross Country Team and Math Team, as well as in the Music Club and National Honor Society, of which she is President. Hafsa has kept busy during the summer as a student at the Harvard Summer School Program, and most recently as an intern at the Worcester Federal Courthouse.

Hafsa's academic interests include biology, psychology, and chemistry. She looks forward to exploring these majors at Wellesley College, Tufts University, College of the Holy Cross, or Clark University.

"No parents should ever send their daughters away to college. That is the worst thing to do," my aunt said all in one breath. My mother was silent after my aunt said that. "I don't believe that a girl needs all that knowledge because once she gains it, she thinks she is the boss. The boys of the family should go to college because they have to support the family and take care of their parents. Our girls have to leave us one day and we have to make sure their priorities are their family."

It was like a Pakistani soap opera scene from where I stood by the window. My eyes were watching the drama intensely. Why wasn't my mother saying anything? Why didn't she disagree with that superficial belief? I looked at my aunt, the tall skinny woman sitting on the soft burgundy sofa holding a white cup of tea in her hands. I respected her as an adult but her ideas deeply disturbed me, especially the fact that she was against her own gender being successful and knowledgeable. I wanted to open my mouth and talk some sense into her but something held me back.

The words she spoke have always echoed in my head. I had never heard my mother's point of view on a girl going to college. My mother's family didn't even let her go to high school because it was too far from the house and they were too worried about what other people would think. My only hope was that my mother didn't hold that old state of mind. Times have changed and everyone has to create a life for themselves. Girls can step out of the house with confidence now and they are equal to boys. However, countless times I had wished that I could have been a boy instead so I could accomplish my dreams. I knew I had to confront my mother.

"Mom, you're going to let me go to college?" I asked, staring straight at her with confidence to show her that I am strong. She stopped what she was doing and looked at me.

"Do you think we sent you to school all these years to not have you go to college in the end?" she said smiling. I let out a sigh of relief.

"You will not be ashamed! I can be the family supporter; you don't only have to count on the boys of the family. I work hard and I still manage to learn my household duties." I said convincingly.

"You're from a very conservative background. You're lucky that you even have the opportunity to go to college. Appreciate what you have. One day you have to bring up a family of your own. Today, women forget their household priorities because they're too busy in their jobs or education. Your future will decide what happens."

I could not believe my own mother had that way of thinking; that I am the one to decide my future, and she is supposed to support me. I believe that I will have an occupation and accomplish everything I set out to do; I will let my children have the same opportunity. I will show them that I can be a woman who can go to school and still fulfill her household priorities. I know I have the potential to succeed in my life, and still be a traditional Pakistani girl. I will prove them wrong.

# Every Small Change Counts

by Brian Kent



Brian Kent is a senior at Worcester Technical High School, where he has competed on his school's DECA team for four years. In 2010, Brian's business and marketing knowledge helped him reach the national competition. Outside of school Brian devotes a lot of time to working, last year at Worcester Credit Union and this year at Shaw's Supermarket.

Brian is interested in learning more about the health field at a college such as University of Vermont, MA College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Worcester State University, or UMass Dartmouth.

Walking through the hallways in school as an overweight kid is tough. If you hear the word fat, you automatically assume that people are talking about you. I was teased constantly in middle school by people who weren't my friends. When it first started, I just brushed it off like it wasn't a big deal. But midway into the school year, it started to take its toll. Lunch time was the worst because everyone was down in the cafeteria and saw the bullying I went through. It was embarrassing to be teased in front of all these people who didn't know me. After seeing what other kids said about me, these strangers knew me as the fat kid. I started to get really depressed and put the blame on myself, and not on the kids who made fun of me. I eventually got fed up with this feeling and decided to make a change.

During the summer before my freshmen year, I decided I wanted to lose some weight. I set goals for myself. My goal was that I would weigh 180 pounds or less by the time I graduated. If I made it to 180, I'd lose a total of forty pounds. There are 3,500 calories in one single pound. So to make it to 180, I would have to burn 140,000 calories all together. I knew it would take a while but I was willing to do whatever it took.

I knew if I wanted to lose this much weight, I would have to change eating and exercise habits. I used my YMCA membership and started going to the gym three times a week. The trainers really helped because they told me what exercises would burn off the most calories, and that exercise was cardio. So ever since I started going to the gym, I have emphasized cardio. I do thirty minutes on the treadmill, thirty minutes on the elliptical, and twenty minutes of weight lifting. I don't overwork myself when I work out. I do what my body can sustain.

My eating habits have also changed dramatically. Soda has been completely cut out of my diet. Baked chips have replaced regular fried chips and I eat a lot of celery and peanut butter. Whenever I used to eat lunch at school, I'd always get the greasy pizza or the chicken nuggets. Now I get a salad every day except Friday. Fridays I have pizza because you need at least one bad food every few days or you'll go crazy. I use the stairs instead of elevators as much as I can. Every small change counts.

Moving forward I plan to avoid the freshmen 15. I'll maintain a healthy lifestyle when I go to college. I feel very confident that I'll reach my goal. I've already lost 27 pounds, so I only have 13 pounds to go. With school starting up again, and me working, it's going to be tough. But I didn't come this far to not come out of this battle winning. I'm not going to give up this fight. The obesity rate in the United States is growing every year. I don't want to be a part of that.

Overall, this goal has changed me as a person. I don't care what people say about me anymore; they can say whatever they want. I'm putting more time into fixing the problem than worrying about it. I have more confidence than ever. This goal started because of the way people treated me, but now I stay with it because of the way it makes me feel.

# Coming to America

by Marege Kidane



Marege Kidane is a student at the Boston Community Leadership Academy. There, he tutors fellow students in math as a member of the National Honor Society. After school, he spends 15 hours a week working as a cashier and also participates in JROTC. Last year, Marege volunteered for a program called Mission Safe, which gave him the opportunity to assist at local non-profit organizations such as Goodwill.

Marege enjoys working with computers and hopes to hone these skills at a school such as UMass Lowell, UMass Amherst, or Suffolk University.

From the time I was young, growing up in Ethiopia, I was always a very driven child. I wanted better for myself. I was not happy with the life I was living with my family in our motherland. The conditions were poor and I knew there was a better place in the world. I did not know what my fate would be in the future but I knew that I had to get out of the country. Since there was no legal way out, I considered leaving illegally. I had a friend in Ethiopia who I trusted and knew well. We put a lot of time into planning our departure. As two naïve teenage boys, we decided that we would leave Ethiopia when the opportunity came. We would travel to Sudan and live there long enough to save up enough money to come to the United States. How we would get there was still a mystery but we were determined and had made up our minds.

I remember the night I was ready to leave my home. I had packed my small bags to carry with me for my journey. I had not told anyone about my trip, including my family. My father stopped me when I was at the door. He held my hand and said, "You cannot leave the house." Without saying a word, I put my bags down on the ground and walked into his bedroom, as my father had ordered me. Immediately, I thought about my journal that I kept in my room where I wrote down my thoughts and my plans. I knew that he had found it.

My opportunity was gone, but I was comforted by the fact that my friend still had a chance to escape. As I walked into my father's room, I could tell he was upset. He told me that he knew what I was up to during the past few weeks and noticed my suspicious behavior. He told me that it was not a very wise decision to leave. I did not have any documentation and what I was about to do was illegal. I was his son and he did not want to see me go through any trouble or danger. He told me that he had already come up with a better way to leave for the United States, but I had to be patient. My father was one of the lottery winners in the direct visa program and assured me that he was in the process of working on a legal way for the whole family to immigrate to the United States.

Weeks after my failed plan, my friend's body was sent by government soldiers to his mother's house. They told her that he had been shot trying to cross the border from Ethiopia to Sudan. I am grateful to my father for saving my life. If I had left with my friend that night, I would have been killed and my body would have been sent home along with my friend's.

On November 7th, 2009, I, along with my father and five other family members arrived in Boston, Massachusetts. We had been accepted by the American Embassy to legally immigrate to the United States. When we first got the news, I almost did not believe it. I thought about what my fate would have been if I had joined my friend. But I was filled with joy knowing that with patience, support, and guidance, my goal to come to America was achieved.



# See You Tomorrow

by Kathy Le



Kathy Le is a senior at Boston Latin School, and in addition to playing on the school's football team, she is a Praefect and Peer Tutor, as well as a member of the Recycling Club and Wolfpack Volunteers. Giving back to the community is important to Kathy and she demonstrates this commitment through participation in Child Corps and the Homework Assistance Program.

Kathy hopes to study pre-med or engineering at a school such as Wellesley College, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pennsylvania, or Boston University.

The weight room: most of the students at Boston Latin School avoid it. The musky smell, the dim lights, the cluttered equipment squeezed into that small room – *Why wouldn't you?* Although this room creates faces of disgust and the quickening of footsteps past the door, there is one vital thing that it has created: the person I am; I would soon be standing outside this dreaded room a proud, empowered, strong female.

It all began last summer. Bored, I asked my friend Zach to hang out. "I have to run first," he said. "Maybe after." Curious, I asked him why he had to. "For football," he said. "I have to start conditioning before practice begins." Oddly, that triggered something. Suddenly, I could think of nothing but football. Memories of my elementary school flooded my mind: being the quarterback and co-captain of the flag football team, the wins and losses, the friendships. I was actually really good, I remembered. I missed it. I looked back on what I had done during high school, what I had done with my life since then: school, clubs, home, repeat. Nothing stuck out.

So I did it. Football. It was a hot August morning. I was drenched with sweat before tryouts even began. I was surrounded by stares and confused looks. My ability to keep up with the sea of tall, robust males surprised me. Then it changed. The drills were never-ending. Huffing, my face bright red, I was hit by waves of that ungodly male musk as I ran at the very end of the pack. *That's it*, I thought. *I'm quitting*. But then Coach saved me. "You! Girl!" I jogged over exhaustedly. He stared me down, and then said bluntly, "Why are you here?" "I love football. I just want to play again." He took a moment, and then presented me with a choice. "We've had girls before. One senior did nothing, made up excuses, faked injuries. Another girl worked hard but didn't last either. I won't think any less of you if you don't come back. Football is hard. So, see you tomorrow?" I could not back down. "Yes, Coach."

I went back to that field every day, still exhausted, wheezing, and wondering why I decided to do this. Then the day came. We lined up outside the weight room for the paw print stickers to be put on our helmets: the final "stamp." I was finally becoming a permanent player, a real member of the team! I was the last to go. The coaches called me in and I entered, cautiously. As I handed my helmet to Coach, I felt the same surge of pride I had felt in elementary school. He took my helmet, stuck on the paw print, and then stopped. He turned to the other coaches. "She made it." There were smiles all around, but none bigger than my own. *I made it*.

I wanted to prove that girls can play, that Asians are athletic, that I could do something others thought I could not. And I did.

# Understanding

by Maria Luna



Maria Luna is a student at Worcester Technical High School. She is involved with graphic design and photography both inside and outside of school. Maria also spent two years volunteering at a local after school program, before becoming a tutor there during her junior year. Maria is currently using her graphic design skills to design the layout of her school's yearbook.

Maria intends to study psychology and education next year at a school such as UMass Dartmouth, Rhode Island College, or Framingham State University.

The morning my mom found out my brother Enrique had passed away was the most confusing day of my life. Since I was only six, I barely knew what was going on; things were happening so fast. I remember my mom ran downstairs to my aunt's house. I stood in the doorway, stunned that my mom just left and all I could hear in the hallway was her crying "mi hijo," meaning "my son" in Spanish. The next thing I knew, we were on our way to the Dominican Republic for my brother's funeral. Being that young, I didn't really understand the concept of death, but as the weeks went by, I realized I would not get random visits from him anymore or be able to laugh at his silly jokes. It had taken me a while to react, but it hit me hard. At a young age I made a promise to myself that I would help others who are in the same situation.

As I got older, my mom started filling me in on the details of what happened to my brother and things began to make sense. The reason for him always getting into trouble, the crazy mood swings, why he would leave the house for weeks, and all the fighting with my parents was because he had a drug addiction. I always saw my brother as the best brother in the world and he sincerely was, but I never realized how bad things were going for him. I was his baby sister and he always wanted the best for me. He often bought me clothes and toys, but he gave me an even greater gift; he left me with wisdom and the courage to say "no" to bad influences.

I grew up much more informed and cautious of life. He got mixed up with the wrong people who had claimed to be his friends. In the end, when the going got tough, he ended up hurting himself and the people who loved him the most, his family. I decided to seek a career in psychology because of the effect on my family; my nephew Isaiah played a great part in that decision. He was about three years old when my brother died, so he did not remember his dad that much, but he always asked about him. I honestly never knew what to say to him about his dad. It's not fair having to explain the "whys" or the "hows" to kids who have lost a parent. He was the inspiration I needed because I do not want other kids to have to ask what their parents were like or fall into trouble themselves.

Families break down with these kinds of tragedies because each person copes differently and no one understands each other's pain. Little by little, I saw that happening in my family. My mom became depressed, my dad worked more hours and never talked, and my other brother's only way of letting things out was drinking until he cried. I have never stopped trying to figure out what's going on in their heads and have never stopped wishing for a chance to be able to help them. I want the knowledge I get from my psychology studies to help those in need of understanding and to help them figure things out, like I have had to do myself thus far in life. I'd be satisfied to know I helped someone overcome their lows in life and move on to better things.

# Endless Possibilities

by Lyxandra Perez



Lyxandra Perez attends Boston Green Academy and is actively involved with the school community, especially through athletics; she plays softball and volleyball and participates in the Scholar Athletes program. Lyxandra actively pursues opportunities to explore her interests. For instance, her passion for law and political science led to a Nelson Fellowship and her interest in computers led to a summer at MIT's SEED Academy.

Lyxandra plans to continue exploring these fields in college next year. She hopes to attend Boston College, Bridgewater State University, or Framingham State University.

My family was awoken by a bang on the door, "Open up! It's Boston Police!" I was five years old when my dad was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to eight years in federal prison on drug charges, leaving my mother to raise me and my sisters alone. Although my mother maintained two jobs, we struggled to make ends meet. My neighborhood in Dorchester did not provide much comfort; violence was frequent and at any moment, one could get caught in the crossfire. By age seven, I had witnessed four deaths, two of which were close friends. My mother's long hours at work prevented her from fully caring for us, so I began assuming her role at home.

Between cooking, laundry, and helping my sisters with schoolwork, I spent years in and out of courtrooms and visiting my father in prison. During those visits, the outdated vending machines and television became my escape - anything to keep me from seeing my father in a khaki inmate jumpsuit. My father's release finally came in June 2006 after almost seven years. However, there would be no celebration, since on that day my father was deported to the Dominican Republic. My sisters looked to me in my parents' absence. In my community, I only received the message that nothing would be possible for me beyond Dorchester. At times, I felt my lofty aspirations of attending college and building a better life would never come to pass.

Then, something changed. In high school, I met Mrs. Motta, my Humanities teacher, who showed me that low expectations and struggles at home were no reason to give up on myself. Mrs. Motta listened to my fears, while ensuring that my obligations at home did not interfere with the need to apply myself academically. In the classroom, she constantly pushed me to express myself and become more self-aware. I began to immerse myself in a host of community and extra-curricular activities. Due to my family's experiences with the legal system, I was immediately drawn to the High School Law and Justice class, which specialized in mock trial competitions. In April 2011, after participating in Moot Court trials with over 600 student competitors from Boston, I was one of six students to qualify for the National Moot Court Competition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where I made it to the final round. I started to believe I was capable of achieving something.

With an increased awareness and newfound interest in law, I applied for and was accepted to the Judge David S. Nelson Fellowship, a six-week program that exposes high school students to the legal field. The fellowship allowed me to participate in workshops, speak with judges about their experiences, observe hearings, and see the inner-workings of the legal world. The highlight of the program involves a mock trial where the fellows become attorneys for a day and present their case before a federal judge. Never had I imagined I would be standing in such a position, in the same courthouse where my father was sentenced just over nine years ago.

Today, I see a future not marked by disappointment and fear, but full of endless possibilities. I envision assisting in the advancement of my community and reaching out to those, who like me, questioned that a positive future was possible. My hope is to motivate them to see a world beyond their neighborhoods, to rise above negative influences and low expectations to pursue something better.

# Mrs. Dewey

by Mirna Portillo



Mirna Portillo attends Saint Peter-Marian Junior-Senior Catholic High School in Worcester. There, she is active not only in art and academics, but also drama, volleyball, mock trial, and the National Honor Society. Outside of school, Mirna enjoys working with children through summer programming and her parish.

Mirna is interested in studying business and has applied to schools such as Boston University, Boston College, and Northeastern University.

Buried underground, apart from the stark halls, a covert haven exists at my school. Every time I enter the room, I see a white poster board with her handwriting and the words “NO LAME ART” transcribed in black capital letters. Going down the stairs, I see a petite woman obscured by stacks of Crayola markers and paper, ebony pencils and erasers, sharpeners and shavings. She looks up and smiles. Orangey curls frame her pale face and cherry red glasses swallow her eyes. The woman is Mrs. Dewey – who has instilled in me a love of art and fostered my curiosity and self-development.

In one of her moments of sheer madness, she booms “Let the creative juices flow!” as D-Period Art lulls between a state of reality and fatigue in the dimmed room. With the “click-clack” of her clogs, she moves to the assorted tea pots and mugs, and strategically rearranges them so the high beamed lamp creates a contrast of dark and light. I begin to drag my pencil, to see where it takes me, reluctantly undertaking the task of sketching the centerpiece. I feel her presence behind me as she gazes at my effort. “Nice contrast and proportion, now concentrate on the shades of gray,” she says. But I only vaguely recall the “value scale” I worked on last week, and I squint at the mug, hoping to see the answer before me. However, as I examine the white mug further, it no longer seems like just a white mug. Rather, I see a mug composed of a series of gray shades. With this insight, the mug is saved from being categorized as just another white mug in my sketch.

As my new realizations progressed and her encouragement continued, my passion for art was ignited. I craved to put everything I learned to use and opted to take more advanced art classes with Mrs. Dewey. At her suggestion, I began to frequent the art museum, staying for hours at a time, lingering to observe works from the greats. I would bring my sketchbook and jot down ideas, seeking to innovate as Roy Lichtenstein did with his Ben Day dots. My appreciation for art developed in a way that veered further from just the aesthetically pleasing and caused me to question the artist’s symbolism and technique. She urged me to produce more pieces, to try different media: palette knife painting, oil pastels, and paper mosaics. I strove to become better, aiming to perfect my creations, her critiques giving me an opening for growth. Staying on top of project deadlines proved challenging, but as she said, it’s all about how I use my time, and I’ve learned how to manage it well.

Mrs. Dewey’s instruction, honest and simple, makes me sit up straighter, hold my pencil better and try a little harder. Her exuberant energy and belief in my work makes me focus when I want to resign. Some days she sits at her desk after class and I sprawl on the blue armchair beside her, and she lends me her ear and nods her head understandingly, always giving me drops of wisdom and advice.

On the blurry window on the back door of her room, the words of Pablo Picasso are written in faded purple paint: “Every child is an artist; the problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Mrs. Dewey helps me to accomplish just that. With her guidance, I have developed my skills, curiosity, and most importantly my love of art. Mrs. Dewey is not only a mentor and friend, but an inspiration.

# Empowerment

by Fernando Rodriguez



Fernando Rodriguez attends the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science where he is not only the Co-Founder of the El Movimiento organization, but also the Class President. He has participated in Upward Bound, Outward Bound, and Summer Search, which gave him the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua to perform community service. Last year, Fernando received an Honorable Mention for Best Delegation in a Model UN Conference.

Fernando is interested in political science and hopes to study this at a school such as Boston College, Hamilton College, College of the Holy Cross, or Brandeis University.

I flip through the pages of my U.S. History textbook, and my eyes focus on the images of African Americans in shackles, of Native Americans being killed and stripped of their homelands. As the pages continue to turn, I notice a pattern in these pictures: very few people of color are represented, and the few that are seem to be depicted as savages. Looking up from my textbook, I survey the rest of the classroom and I see the faces of all my peers. We are a diverse group of people, but at no point does our textbook depict us in an empowering way. The contributions of our people and ancestors to this nation are ignored and completely left out. Can this really be considered U.S. history when such a huge part of this country's past is excluded or undermined in these textbooks? My educational experience has been one where my culture and my voice have not been represented. However, I believe it is of no use to simply complain about this issue, so instead I strive for a solution to reverse this trend.

My journey towards a solution began with a conversation about Black History Month that I had with friends from different schools last spring. We realized that the only thing our schools seem to do in recognition of the month is show a clip from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Although it is a speech full of passion and empowerment that deserves to be remembered, we agreed that Martin Luther King is not the only African American who has contributed to this country. We also realized that other ethnic groups are rarely celebrated or recognized for their accomplishments by society as a whole, but especially in schools. For example, very few people know that Latino Heritage Month even exists because schools do not celebrate it. Meanwhile, society has become extremely diverse and the lack of awareness and understanding of other cultures leads to stereotypes and misunderstandings among peers.

It was that day - May 4th 2010 - that El Movimiento/The Movement was born: a student-led grassroots organization dedicated to empowering youth and implementing ethnic studies in Boston Public Schools. Since then, many of my friends from that first conversation have moved on to college, and I have found myself leading El Movimiento. In addition to educating ourselves about various cultures and ethnic groups, we hold monthly meetings where we invite the community and run ethnic studies workshops. We also research Ethnic Studies programs at universities across the country, which we are now turning into a curriculum for Boston Public Schools with the help of our teacher allies. Although I am now a senior and cannot go back in time and change the education I received, I want to empower those who come after me. Many of my peers are confused and are looking for an identity. To know where they come from and have an understanding of their cultures will allow them to understand themselves and others around them. Pride is the ultimate representation of empowerment and, once you have it, nobody can take it away from you.

# My Mother, My Role Model

by Alexandra Tejada



Alexandra Tejada attends Cristo Rey Boston High School. As a Peer Tutor and Vice President of the Events Club, she is an active member of her school community. Outside of school, Alexandra makes time to volunteer for organizations such as City Year for Kids and Ethos, where she provides companionship for an elderly woman. Alexandra has an interest in the medical field and has interned at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Novartis Institute for Biomedical Research.

Alexandra is interested in receiving a liberal arts education. Her top choice colleges include Dartmouth College, Hamilton College, and Boston College.

When I was six years old, I spent countless evenings with my face pressed against the cold window of my godmother's apartment, staring out at the brick buildings. I was mesmerized by the image of the gray rectangular lawns, each containing two trees and surrounded by a bleak, wire fence. Every night at eight o'clock, I would anxiously wait to see my mother's figure emerge from the darkness. One night, excited to see her figure moving up the walkway, I jumped up from my seat, grabbed my jacket and backpack, ran to the door, and waited for her to knock. It felt like I had been waiting forever, and when she finally arrived at the front door, I asked, "Mom, why do you work so much?" She smiled and said, "I need to be able to pay for your ticket and clothes to go visit your grandmother in the Dominican Republic, a place where the lawns are a luscious green and fences do not exist." She wanted me to experience the world, to know that there is something more than those unwelcoming brick buildings. A month later, when she was dropping me off at the airport, I said to her, "You can stop working now, Mommy. See? I have all my clothes, and the ticket is paid for." She laughed because as a six year old, I did not fully understand why my mom worked late into the evenings and on weekends; I only knew that I wanted her to stop – I still want her to stop.

My mother has always had one or two part-time jobs as a cleaning lady in addition to her full-time day job. She works very hard in order to provide for me and ensure I have everything I need, but the most important thing she has given me is a sense of social responsibility. My mom has always emphasized that you do not have to be rich to help others. Her selflessness inspired me to give back to my community through service. I volunteered at a camp called City Year for Kids, and working with children was extremely satisfying. It helped me to better understand what keeps my mom going through all of her struggles. Witnessing the kids' joy when they accomplished something made me want to keep encouraging them; I realized this was the same feeling my mom experiences whenever I excel.

My mother has always encouraged me to challenge myself. I did the same with the children at City Year for Kids when they felt they could not succeed. There was one little girl, Alejandra, who was always afraid to approach others and make friends. She did everything she could to be by my side at all times. I would always walk her over to the other kids and encourage her to have conversations to make friends. One day, I went outside during recess, and I saw Alejandra playing hopscotch with two other girls. When she saw me, she ran over smiling, showing me her missing front teeth and said, "I did it! I made friends all by myself!" When she hugged me, I felt overwhelmed with joy and pride in her achievement.

I plan to continue following my mother's example by persevering and pursuing a career in which I can help others work toward their goals. I want to make my mother proud. She gave me all of the tools I needed to start my travels, and I want to tell her, once and for all, that she can rest because I am ready to guide myself along my journey.

# Rebuilding

by Josie Valcin



Josie Valcin attends the John D. O'Bryant School of Mathematics and Science where she is a member of the Gateway to the Longwood Medical Area Program. As a member of this program, Josie has had the opportunity to intern at prestigious labs in Boston during the last three summers, building her interest and skills in the medical area. In addition to her many research endeavors, Josie tutors students at the library through the Homework Assistance Program and Drop in Science, and writes for the school yearbook.

Josie has been accepted to attend Brown University next year, where she plans on pursuing her goal of entering the medical profession and using these skills to improve conditions in developing countries.

"Do you have HBO?" two girls snidely asked another who was sitting all alone at the lunch table. Watching from the table next to them, I thought to myself, 'Why do they want to know if this girl has HBO?' Intrigued, I watched on. After a fit of laughter that seemed to last forever, the two girls finally told their still puzzled victim that "HBO" stood for "Haitian Body Odor" and because she was Haitian she must have it. Seeing the face of the girl crumble after being ridiculed made me terrified; that could be me. From that point on I made a vow to myself that I would keep my Haitian identity a secret because I knew that I would not be able to handle such harassment.

I made the promise to keep my Haitian identity a secret in the third grade and at the same time I began to build a new identity for myself. I established myself as a goal-driven, hardworking, and tenacious student, who was always excited to learn. I used my work ethic to compensate for the fact that I was hiding a part of me, the Haitian part. My drive was unstoppable and as I began to build upon this new identity, I kept pushing the Haitian one further away. I distanced myself from the other Haitian students and even cruelly mimicked their accents. I never made eye contact with them, living in constant trepidation that they would discover and expose my identity to everyone else.

By the time I entered high school, I had achieved much of my goal of defining myself as a hardworking student while simultaneously hiding my Haitian identity. On January 12, 2010 my foundation was shaken when a 9.0 magnitude earthquake struck Haiti. The next day in school the Haitian community was in mourning and it hit me that I could not join them because I had successfully pushed them away. Sitting in French class, I longed to join the other Haitian girls who were emotionally expressing their feelings and frustrations. I sat there stoically like a statue devoid of outward emotion while falling apart on the inside. The community that I had distanced myself from isolated me, and it was at that point that I realized I could not hide my Haitian identity any longer. Just like the buildings crumbled in Haiti, I watched the walls that I had built for myself to hide from this same community come tumbling down.

As my country continues to rebuild itself, I am in the midst of my own rebuilding process as well. I have begun rebuilding the relationships that I severed, and started accepting the fact that without my Haitian identity I am incomplete. In search of completion, I joined programs that would bring me closer to my Haitian peers, such as the Haitian Culture Club, and I donated to charities that would help Haitians affected during the earthquake. People say that from great tragedy rises great opportunity and I will accept the opportunity that has been given to me. I have been given the opportunity to integrate my Haitian identity with my hard-working identity, and it is only once I have achieved this feat that I will be complete.

# A Mile in My Shoes

by Michael Vallejo



Michael Vallejo has been involved with Student Government at Fenway High School since he ran for office his freshman year. He is also involved with the school's step squad and student ambassador program. Michael enjoys volunteering and has done so at the local level, leading tours at the Museum of Science, and at the global level, when he travelled to the Dominican Republic to teach children about social justice. He is dedicated to increasing opportunities and raising awareness for various cultural groups, which he does through participation in El Movimiento, Boys to Men, Palante, and Men of M.O.R.E.

Michael's academic interests include sociology and political science, subjects that he is excited to study at Union College next year.

*"Me gustan tus zapatos. ¿Me lo puedes dar?"* I was shocked. This fourteen year old boy named Wilson was asking for the shoes off my feet. At that moment, I had no response. You see, these were not your average sneakers. They were limited-edition Six Ring Jordan's, an expensive collector's item that people wait in line for days to get when they come out. As a Nike connoisseur, they were part of my rare collection. I could not imagine giving them away.

I happened to meet Wilson when I was in Caraballo, Dominican Republic, building a community center with a group of students from Fenway High School. There I witnessed children as young as eight years old working as cobblers. I was surrounded by children who had very few resources; they lacked water, electricity, and good sanitation. Some were naked and others wore tattered clothing, yet they were enthusiastic and happy. It saddened me to see kids so young working tirelessly.

As my group walked to a restaurant for lunch, all the kids ran behind us. One kid ran up to me and took my hand tightly, as if he would never let go. I asked myself, "Why do they have to live like this?" Once we arrived at the restaurant, he eventually let go. He reunited with his friends across the street, and they watched us eat. I lost my appetite, as the malnourished children stared, without lunch. There were at least fifteen of them watching. I knew that I had to give my plate to someone, but to whom? There were too many to choose from. One by one, they each got a plate from my peers and one from me. I knew that the food would last only two days, but what about the days, months, and years after that? Our day was ending, and we headed back to our van.

I got into the van nervous, not knowing what to do, feeling I had to do more. I spotted Wilson, standing, his head hung low. I opened the window and called Wilson over. As he made his way to me, I hunched over, untied my laces and handed over my Jordan's. A smile flashed across his face. He took them and vanished.

This moment burst the bubble I had been living in my whole life. I had not understood the privileges that I have. I was able to drive out of there in a van and fly back to my home in Boston, where I never have to worry about whether I will have food for lunch. Being poor here is different from being poor in an underdeveloped country where water, electricity, and shelter are non-existent. I might be considered poor in the U.S., but in the Dominican Republic I was seen as wealthy, just because I am an American. Having clothes and nice shoes were an indication of wealth there, but in the U.S. I can wear "fancy" clothes and still, in the eyes of many, be a struggling low-income student.

After this trip, I am even more determined not to take my opportunities for granted. Wanting to pursue politics or international relations, I want to help children like the ones I met in Caraballo and in towns like it around the world. I am now somewhat ambivalent about my Jordan collection. It reminds me of just how fortunate I am, while also putting things into perspective. Who would have thought I would have learned so much from someone else walking a mile in my shoes?



# How You Can Help

Thank you for taking the time to read the essays in this book. We hope you agree that the preceding pages tell the stories of some remarkable young adults. Each of these students was fortunate to have the support of a Bottom Line counselor throughout the college admission process. Unfortunately, the reality of the overall situation is more daunting:

- ◆ There are nearly 4,000 Boston and 1,500 Worcester high school seniors
- ◆ About 3,500 of those students intend to enroll in college
- ◆ Less than half of those who successfully enroll will graduate in 6 years

The message is clear. Students need better help getting into the right schools, but they also need ongoing support while in college. Bottom Line's proven program model addresses these formidable issues head on. We work with students to help them gain access to college and we provide ongoing, comprehensive support until they graduate.

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

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

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