

I AM THE
Opportunity

ESSAYS ON ADVERSITY AND ACHIEVEMENT
BY BOTTOM LINE STUDENTS

Bottom Line
CELEBRATES

20
YEARS

1997-2017

get in • graduate • go far





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Dear Friend of Bottom Line,

College is hard no matter who you are, and it's even harder for students who are from low-income households and will be in the first generation in their families to graduate from college, like the Bottom Line—New York Access students featured here. These essays reflect the many challenges our students have overcome – including immigration, health issues, family tragedies, and more – and the ways a college degree will help them pursue their dreams and transform their communities. We are so glad to be able to share these powerful stories with you.



This year, Bottom Line is celebrating our 20th anniversary nationally, and our sixth year of service in New York. **We help low-income, first-generation students get into college, graduate from college, and go far in life.** Each of the students in this book is a high school senior receiving one-on-one guidance throughout the college application process, from writing essays to filling out financial aid applications. This spring, all 425 of our Access students will sit down with their counselors to review their college acceptance letters and select the school that will best meet their academic, financial, and personal needs.

Our work doesn't stop at college acceptance. We continue our individualized, comprehensive counseling through the Success Program, helping over 1,700 students at 21 colleges across the state thrive once they enroll. Success students receive the one-on-one academic, financial aid, career, and life skills guidance they need to face any obstacle they might encounter. This support lasts from the summer before matriculating to college **all the way through college graduation**, for up to six years. We break the cycle of poverty by ensuring that students graduate from college with manageable debt and with the skills they need to succeed in their careers.

We know how transformative a four-year college degree can be. The average Bottom Line student has an annual household income of less than \$22,000, while the average college graduate with a bachelor's degree earns \$45,000 per year – by graduating from college, our students can double their families' annual income. A college degree offers low-income students a path out of poverty, but only a quarter of low-income students who enroll in college graduate in six years or less. **Bottom Line triples this graduation rate** by ensuring that students have the support they need to earn their degree.

As you can see from these essays, our students have the drive to succeed in college. With our help, they make that dream a reality. The authors of these essays are just starting a life-changing journey. We are grateful for the chance to work with you to guide these strong young men and women as they pursue a degree and build a better future for themselves and their communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ruth Genn', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Ruth Genn
Executive Director
Bottom Line—New York



BATOL ABDELHAFEZ

on Embracing Her Identity

I am a queer, first-generation, Muslim woman from a family of Egyptian immigrants. To be who I am means enduring internal complications of bicultural anxiety, bilingualism, duality, pluralism, and intersectional identities for the duration of my life. Consolidating such adverse identities into tangible labels was the only way that I could make sense of my seemingly abstract personality.

My complacent life in Egypt can be heavily contrasted with my rambunctious life as a New Yorker. Often, my Arab traditions were too bizarre for my American peers to comprehend. Thus, the fear of alienation and discrimination in my own country left me obligated to assimilate into Western culture, despite not being able to relate to my American peers. This led to sentiments of isolation, which created a paradoxical sense of my identity as not fully American or Egyptian.

I experienced such daunting emotions this past summer. For the first time in six years, I visited my family in Egypt. With a fresh, mature mental consciousness, I began to realize that I never could entirely relate to the culture of my people. One night in particular when I made this distinction was when my family and I were out shopping in the streets of Ismailia. At the corner of the street lay a beggar woman handing out flyers of Quranic verses to sell. Similarly, back in New York City, there would be preachers handing out pamphlets, however, they would be free. Being the New Yorker that I am, I took the flyer that was handed to me and continued to walk, oblivious to fact that the woman was selling them. From behind me, I heard my mother's trailing voice cry out my name, grounding me from my disconnection, and explain to me that the woman was attempting to sell her flyers to me. My mother paid the woman a hefty amount to compensate for my insulting behavior and apologized profusely. Behind me, my mother whispered to my aunt, "Hiya mesh misriyyah, hiya amrikkyah (She is not Egyptian, she is American)."

The shame I felt was indescribable. I was not seen as "Egyptian enough" by my family. This created an internal paradox in my mind, as I oscillated from identifying as an American from a Western society to an Egyptian in a Middle Eastern society, from one world of images and expressions to another. It was a profoundly complex cultural and psychological internal struggle, yet I held onto the idea of maintaining my American identity. However, I was apprehensive, as I was reminded that I was not perceived as American enough either. Because of the fear-mongering ideologies of Muslims instilled in American society, I felt obligated to be ashamed of my identity. Instead of being whole, I was left with two cultures. Two memories. Two homes. There is anguish from the feeling of exclusion, the continuous inner and outer struggle of my dual identities, and the profound need to "find" myself.

That same night, I retreated into my bedroom, sulking. My mother, noticing my despondency, accompanied me into my room. Concerned, she asked, "Malek, ya habibti? (What's wrong, my love?)" I confided in her, and explained how I did not feel Egyptian or American. "Ya habib albi (love of my heart)," my mother sighed, "You are a unique individual, and play several different people at the same time. You should be proud of your ethnicity, and proud of how well you mingle your identities together. Tisbah ala khair, ya hayati (Good night, my life)." With that, my mother kissed my forehead and left me with those reassuring words.

Rather than confine myself into isolated identities, I now accept that I am a multifaceted human being who cannot be simplified with labels like Muslim, queer, Egyptian, or American. I unapologetically embrace my convoluted identity without sacrifice, and can coexist as both Egyptian and American, as queer and Muslim.

There I was, a seven-year-old sitting on the couch in my living room. In one hand, the remote control, in the other, a spoon for the bowl of milk and cereal balanced on my lap. It was a typical Saturday morning, the first day of freedom after a treacherous week of school in the second grade. My absolute favorite thing about Saturday mornings were the cartoons that were on bright and early. I would stare wide eyed at my favorite television shows without a care in the world. "Who does not enjoy Saturday mornings?" I would think to myself.

Soon enough my father came out of his room, fully dressed and with no time to exchange pleasantries as he had work that day. I would always try to get him to stay and watch television with me, maybe go to the park for a little while, but it was never of any use. He would always give me a small smile and say, "Maybe another day, kiddo." But that day never came; every Saturday he rushed out the door after quickly hugging me goodbye. He would then come home late and grab a quick bite before heading to bed. I did not really understand why he had to work six days a week, I just knew it was something he had to do. So I would enjoy the luxuries Saturdays offered while unbeknownst to me, he was undergoing the austere labors at work.

Fast forward to last summer, when I found myself wanting to go to work with my father to see what it was all about and what exactly he went through. Growing up, I always thought my father was a baker, like something out of a movie where he flung pastry dough in the air and caught it with one hand with a crowd of customers cheering for him. I later came to understand that he was a street vendor who sold pastries and coffee out of a small metal cart in Manhattan's Upper East Side. One July morning, I embarked on the journey with him. It was a feat itself getting up at 5 a.m. to travel to the city to set up before the morning flock of people lined up for their daily doses of coffee. I watched as my father arranged everything; he carried the heavy boxes of pastries, and occasionally burnt himself on the coffee machine. Of course I helped him that day, but it hurt knowing that every day – in the blistering summer heat and the frigid winter days – he had to go through this by himself. I watched as he tried to make casual conversation with the customers, but they were in too much of a rush.

He did all of this, every day for eighteen years, just to make ends meet and provide for the five people he left at home each morning. To say this experience changed me would be an understatement. For the first time in my life, I had a real understanding of where money came from, and how hard the average person has to work to get by. He taught me that you cannot escape responsibility; you cannot always be a child watching Saturday morning cartoons. All this has inspired me to get a job to help contribute to household finances as I prepare to leave for college. Four days a week, I work at the local Walgreens. Lessons I learned in the cramped cart with my father are relevant to this job and many others, such as how important it is to be flexible when working with others and that hard work pays off eventually. That early summer morning with him is what really made me understand what the underprivileged have to do for the almighty dollar.



MOHAMED FARGHALY
on His Father's Sacrifice



LEANNETTE FRANCO
on Open Heart Surgery

Why is Nemo staring at me? The wallpaper on these walls make me feel like I am drowning in a crystal clear sea. Seems like Nemo brought a few friends along with him. Fish circled the entire edge of the ceiling, wrapping around what seemed to be a wave pushing them all in the same direction. Their smiles are the only indication that I was supposed to feel alive. They were interrupted by a plasma screen TV, showing a telenovela that I definitely was not interested in. My bed, a pure white; my garment, a very weird material; and a bracelet on my right wrist with all of my personal information on it. And as I realized where I was, I thought only one thing, "This is a really nice room for an eleven-year-old who just had open heart surgery."

Growing up, I was a pretty average kid. Not too quiet, not too loud but never front and center. I often kept to myself and stayed in the routines I was used to. I would never do anything I was not used to doing already. Then I learned I needed surgery because the murmur I was born with grew bigger, causing my heart valves to close and blood to travel to the wrong side of my heart. This created an enlarged heart, the first time having a big heart was considered a bad thing. All of a sudden, my routine came to a halt and I was wiping tears in a chair next to my mother, older sister, and the doctor, who decided to step out to give my family a moment to let this information sink in. It didn't until my mother kissed me goodbye on February 17, 2011, as they opened the doors to the surgery room. I have never been more terrified in my life. The next three days were spent surrounded by amazing people, dozens of balloons, a plethora of food, and the feeling of becoming a new and improved person, followed by home sweet home.

My attitude towards life, people, and myself had changed completely. I had blossomed into a fearless person whose voice would always be heard and who would be involved in anything and everything. I immersed myself in activities I never would have if I did not have this surgery. Being in advanced dance, the Vice President of Sales and Marketing for a business class called Virtual Enterprise, running for President of the National Honor Society, and going to college are risks I would not have taken.

Becoming a new person inside and out has shown me that I am able to put myself out there with an optimistic attitude and always put my best foot forward because life can change at any moment. Learning to accept, adapt, and continue to be myself and always try my best has made me confident that I can channel that energy into becoming a valuable member of any community and find the benefit to myself and others in the experiences that shape us into the people that we are. Everything that has happened in my life has left such an imprint in my life that it will motivate me to become a productive and dynamic person in and outside of the university, causing a chain reaction of leaders who aren't afraid to take life head – and heart – first.

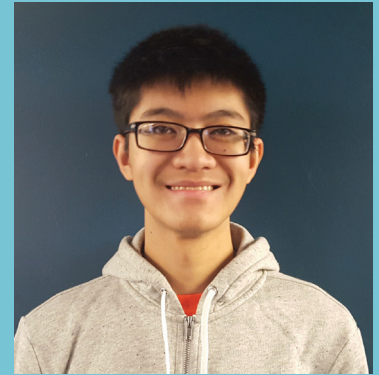
"You got left back?" I have heard my classmates ask me that question countless times. Unlike most of my classmates, I was not born in America. I did not grow up speaking English, nor was I ready to start school when I arrived in my new home. They put me in second grade because I was "too old" for first grade, but while my classmates wrote stories, read books, and spoke in a completely foreign language, I could not do the same. This left me with no choice but to drop back into first grade. Fortunately, I had an extraordinary teacher who helped me adapt to this foreign environment. Despite my illiteracy, he was very patient with me and would spend a lot of time working with me during lunch and after school. Eventually, I realized that I could not let his efforts go to waste. I had to catch up to the other students. I was able to catch up that year and move on to the next grade, and since then I have always wanted to go beyond what was expected of me.

The real challenge did not begin until high school, when I decided to join my school's Software Engineering Program. In an early discussion about learning techniques, I recall looking at a diagram that consisted of three zones: panic, learning, and comfort zone. My teacher emphasized that every student should always be on the edge of the panic zone because that is when you are challenging yourself to push the boundary further. That is when you truly learn.

In almost every project we are assigned in the Software Engineering Program, the students are offered three options for the assignment: tough, tougher, and toughest. Depending on the difficulty of our choice, we get extra points on our grade. Many students stay on the tough level because as long as they meet all the requirements, they still can get a perfect score on their project. I, on the other hand, always choose the toughest option because I believe that I will learn more. In one of my most successful projects, I had to make a remix of the original game of Pong. For the assignment, we only had to make a single-player game. But I knew that there would be no point in creating the same project as all my classmates, so I decided to make it a two-player game instead. It was much harder to make, but also much more rewarding. I felt accomplished because not only did I learn more from making something harder, but my classmates who explored my project were also able to learn from the code.

My software engineering teacher always taught me, "We learn ten percent of what we see and ninety-five percent of what we teach others." After a year in the Software Engineering Program, I knew that this was true. I decided to spend two days every week helping other students learn. At first I had trouble teaching others because I was having trouble understanding some of the concepts myself. But as I explained the concepts that I did understand, the process of teaching helped me learn and progress much faster than I could have by myself. For the first time I felt like a leader, growing and learning, then guiding others to achieve the same success.

Every now and then, I look back and realize how far I have come since my first year in America. At the same time, I can visualize my future becoming even more demanding than my past. But I believe that if I continue to challenge myself outside of where I am comfortable, I will gain more valuable knowledge, whether I fail or succeed.



JUN HUANG
*on the Value
of a Challenge*



HAWA KEBBEH
*on Public Housing
and Homelessness*

As I entered, darkness invaded and I smelled a horrible stench. The homeless shelter was filthy and crowded with messy beds scrambled all over the place. As I gazed around the room, I noticed all the homeless people had on ragged and torn clothes. The shelter was old and rusty, with paint peeled off the walls. Roaches roamed the place. Just when I thought my living conditions were unbearable, volunteering at this shelter really put things into perspective.

I have spent most of my life in New York City public housing. Growing up in the projects has been nothing but a burden and a huge obstacle in my life. Criminals come in and out of our building every day selling drugs. Police are always on the lookout around our building. The conditions in our apartment are not any better. Having a family of eight and only three bedrooms is a very uncomfortable lifestyle. There are about three people sharing one bed, meaning someone always ends up on the floor. There are times when we experience severe hunger because the fridge is nearly empty. There are times during the winter when they turn off all the heaters, leaving us with no choice but to freeze. There are times when they take away the hot water without notice, leaving us to shower in the cold or to not shower at all. I thought that things could not get any worse than this.

Reality finally struck me during my sophomore year of high school when we took a trip to volunteer at a homeless shelter. We served lunch and helped clean the shelter. As we served them food, they were grateful and asserted that they really appreciated our generosity towards them. It was my first time in a homeless shelter and the experience was eye-opening. There was a particular moment that touched me. An African American man found a penny in the shelter and put it in his pocket. My heart felt very broken as I watched that. I called him over and gave him five dollars. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he gave me a hug. He thanked me repeatedly and told me if everyone had a good heart the world would be a better place. At that moment, I realized helping others is something I am passionate about.

Volunteering in the homeless shelter and seeing the conditions they live in changed my viewpoint. It taught me to feel grateful for the things I have and opened my eyes to what is going on in the world. Lending a helping hand to others in need and seeing them smile in return puts joy in my heart. I know that this is something that I want to do for the rest of my life, which has helped solidify my decision to become a social worker. I come from a similar background to those who need support. I understand what it is like to live in tight quarters and dangerous neighborhoods. Becoming a social worker will allow me to give back by transforming my community and by creating organizations that give away items to those in need. I want to provide support and guidance to those in tough situations. I want to make a positive impact on people's lives and I am willing to do anything it takes to accomplish that goal.

Volunteering at the homeless shelter is an opportunity I will never forget. It has made me realize I am fortunate despite my circumstances. I experienced a deep joy and satisfaction that I never felt before, and that is when I knew becoming a social worker is what I want to do in the near future.

When I thought of myself in a college lecture hall I envisioned my body dwarfed by hundreds of desks, but the Columbia University classroom was surprisingly small—in fact, I dwarfed the desks. This inversion of assumptions would become commonplace. Professor Pamela made a point to shatter every assumption as though she took a sledgehammer to it. For instance, one would assume given her small stature that she would be a mousy woman, but within that small frame she held a dynamic voice and easily commanded the room. To some, that larger-than-life demeanor might be intimidating, but I found it to be empowering, something I sought to emulate.

And emulate is what I did—I raised my voice often to participate and to share my work. In that classroom I realized how starved I was for an opportunity to do just that. I learned to command space for myself, to accompany it unabashedly.

Writing began to pour out of me, in and out of that lecture hall; I spent the majority of my time outside of class dedicating myself to her prompts. Each prompt provided an unique opportunity to push myself. I fell deeper in with love my first passion: creative writing. Oftentimes, I ended up outwriting my peers and taking on their load for paired projects, all of this due to my hunger to define myself outside of a conventional academic environment. I learned that I thrived just as well, if not more, in a creative one.

This revelation exposed me to the fact that my creativity was valuable within itself. Prior to this, I had been dismissive of my creativity, thinking, like many other students, that it would be meaningless to pursue a “worthless” arts degree. I only knew the stereotype of the starving artist, and closed myself to the tremendous benefits of the arts. I did not know that artists even existed outside of art schools or the conventions of the music industry. My eyes were opened to the importance of the arts and to artists like Professor Pamela who surprisingly resembled myself. Artists like her could be black like me and still be prosperous.

The pursuit of prosperity was the reason I was so fixed on STEM, influenced by my Ugandan immigrant parents, but in that lecture hall I learned I had no need to be so narrow with my vision of success. What would my world be without the stories, the television shows, the films I loved?

Through this shift in perspective, I was able to build confidence in my storytelling abilities as well as in myself, and saw tangible results—my play was chosen to be performed at the annual summer showcase. At the end of the summer, I was determined not to squander my creativity, so I applied to every free art program I came across, not restricting myself to just screenwriting. Ultimately, I found Reel Works, a film production company where I would participate in the fall documentary lab.

I was able to find a union between my love for storytelling and the scientific nature of video editing; creativity and computer science coexisted in a way I hadn't witnessed before. If it hadn't been for that first step into Professor Pamela's classroom, I would have never opened myself to the idea. I have come to love filmmaking and I would have never had the courage to try it without Professor Pamela.



ELIJAH LUTALE
*on Science
and Storytelling*



**KIMBERLY
MALDONADO**
on Life After a Fire

When I turned fifteen, I was hoping for a quinceñera to be welcomed as an adult by my family, but life isn't predictable. The summer prior to my sophomore year, I lost my house in a gruesome fire. I was the first to wake up; I heard screams and smelled burning metal. Cautiously looking out the window, I saw the flames rising. No one was waking up, so I screamed "fire" until my uncle and parents finally woke up. They all left the building assuming I was outside, and no one was allowed back in. I pulled out the loose screws from the hinges in my door and hit the door to push it down. A fireman came in and brought me outside. I was given oxygen for a few minutes before all the real problems started.

Until that day, I was reserved, afraid to ask questions, and I blankly accepted what happened in life, but in this moment it all had to change. Right after the fire, we were swarmed with questions from firemen and the Red Cross. My parents don't speak English, so I had to share my family's information and deal with questions. After two days, we moved into a shelter in Brooklyn, but the responsibility did not stop there. I had to speak with housing authorities as well as seek help from many other adults. I asked questions, trying to figure out what I could do to get us into public housing. I was responsible for reading and translating every contract my parents signed. However, there were always problems with the way papers were filed, which delayed everything. I sought help from an empowerment group named ASET, where a social worker helped me understand the process better to explain it to my parents.

Before the fire, my family was not close and we didn't share time together. After moving into the shelter, our family values changed for the better. We helped each other, had conversations, and even started eating dinner together. Although we were all together, depression ate away at my mother; she had lost her job as well as her home because she worked in a daycare below our apartment. Before the fire, I would cry alongside my family if they were struggling because I could not bear to see them in pain, but after the fire, I learned to not cry because I knew it wouldn't help. Throughout the year, I remained calm and steady for my mother. I reminded her that we were all alive and that we would find a home, even if I did not believe my own words sometimes.

My dad was also struggling. He was at risk of losing his construction job because he was missing a certification for working with scaffolding, so I did research and found a special program to help him get certified. I spoke with his boss, and his boss saw it was a great opportunity for all his employees. He later required everyone to take the classes, along with covering the expenses.

Throughout my sophomore year I was constantly on the move, and there was no down time. Although I sometimes had to miss classes to help my mom hand in paperwork to the Housing Authority, I was able to keep my grades up while still being on the football team, doing community service, helping my dad, translating papers, and even helping my mom apply to get help for her depression. It was an uphill battle, but the result of it all was worth the while. My family and I have found housing, and we are closer than ever. These experiences shaped me into who I am today: a mature, confident person who will not stop at anything to achieve her goals.

In 2014, I received the news that would go on to change my life forever. "You have been accepted into The Fellowship Initiative (TFI) sponsored by JPMorgan Chase." Those words turned my life around. During these two unbelievably amazing years, I have been given the chance to learn from thirty-nine other African American and Latino males like myself, and it has made me feel like we could change the world.

Before TFI, I never found anything interesting because I was always a quiet student. I was afraid to try new things or explore. What I do know about my younger self was that the color of my skin made me feel very insecure. It made me isolate myself. Growing up, I had friends who were afraid like me. I would talk to them and tell them of my plans to be a young man who stands out from the group; I wanted to be more.

When I joined TFI, I was excited to work with students like me and have a mentor who would teach us about college and the business world. The first program manager left after a few months without saying goodbye. This was a severe blow to us. We were working with an African American man who looked and talked like us and who was a Harvard man. We thought of him as a leader who was showing us how to represent ourselves in this scary society we live in. Fernando Lorence replaced him as the new group leader. From the moment we met Fernando, we had nothing but high praise for him. We needed someone to continue guiding us.

The moment I knew that I was capable of being a leader was when Fernando asked me to speak at a fundraising event for Outward Bound. At first, I was horrified. So many people would be watching me. I was not yet comfortable in my own skin, but I knew I could not disappoint Fernando. He had chosen me and if he thought I could do it, then I did not want to let him down. Right before I went onstage, he told me, "Mark, you can do whatever you want to do if you put your mind to it." Fernando believed in me. He was instilling in me the tools I would need to self-motivate and conquer my fears.

Fernando has consistently believed in my abilities to be a leader and has motivated me to be an example to young men like me. In order to channel this energy and make a positive change in my community, I became a board member for the Neighborhood Advisory Board. This group helps allocate funds for projects within my community like after school programs, playgrounds, and books. Through TFI, I have had the opportunity to speak at other events and be on a panel with accomplished adults. Being able to represent my TFI brothers and JPMorgan Chase at these events has made me very proud. Looking back, I have realized that if I had not accepted the challenge of joining TFI, I would not be the person I am today.

TFI has empowered me and I feel a duty to give back to my people. My dream and purpose in life is to inspire others to believe in their dreams. I am confident that I will change the world by helping the young people in my community find the best within themselves. All it takes is one person, one thought, or one encouraging influence to help set them on the path of greatness. I am proud of my skin, I am determined, and I am ready to reach back and help my community.



MARK NOLASCO
*on Leadership
and Empowerment*



DONNYV PIERRE
on Learning English

The TV was essentially my teacher.

I was nine years old and had just moved to the United States from Haiti. I remember when I got off the plane and I heard people speaking; the words coming out of their mouths were just noise. I could only comprehend it as blabber and nothing more. As my family drove to my new home, I noticed that my mom sounded different. I was so used to hearing Creole from Haiti, but now she was speaking “Crenglish,” a mix of Creole and English. She peppered English words in with the Creole as if it were normal.

When I finally reached my new home, the first thing that caught my attention was my new teacher, the television. I turned it on and started flipping through the channels, ending up on a kids’ channel. I would watch television for hours on end. I was fascinated by the 24 hour electricity, and by the new language the television was spewing at me. At first, the words went in one ear and out the other. Eventually, though, I began making connections. When I would see a red fruit on the screen that I knew as “pomme,” I learned it was called an “apple.” I would pay attention to the pronunciation to learn how to say English words, absorbing as much vocabulary as I could. All that hard work did not pay off right away, though, because when I finally attended school, the teacher sounded different than the television. Now, I had to get my ear accustomed to accents. I remember sitting in front of class while the teacher explained something to me. When she realized I did not understand, she would slow her English down as if that would magically translate English to Creole. I would sit in class so lost and lonely because everyone would communicate with each other and I could not. I started to understand simple greetings such as “hi” and “bye.” I connected those words to “bonjour” and “bonsoir” in Creole. I started to know how to interact with others around me, which led me to finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Teaching myself helped me to become independent and not rely on anyone, not even teachers or parents. If I wanted something, I learned at a young age, I had to go after it. I applied this endurance in my A.P. classes. U.S. History was extremely challenging for me as we were not being babied anymore by our teacher. I had to sit for hours and teach myself each chapter. I had to break down every difficult word and translate it back to my language. When my teacher was not around, I was on my own. I had no one in my house to help me. My parents cannot read English well enough to help me, so matters had to be taken into my own hands. I learned how to be extremely assiduous. I did not get the grade I wanted on the A.P. exam, but I did extremely well on the U.S. History Regents, and I can take credit for that. Even though the teacher laid down the foundation for us, we had to be the ones who take action and start building our education.

I would feel so safe in front of the television. It did not look at me like I was dumb or get stressed when I did not understand. The television was more patient. The average person would turn the television on for entertainment, but I turned it on to learn. I learned how to read, I learned how to interact, I learned how to become American. I learned how to succeed.

Raised in a Buddhist community, I was taught that compassion and kindness defines a human. I was taught to be altruistic and that our prime purpose as human beings is to understand and help each other. These Buddhist values taught me to see the world through the eyes of a helper and a healer. I was taught to see the light in everyone, but this luminosity blinded me from seeing the malicious reality of our world.

My naiveté faded at age seven, when I found out that my family and I are Tibetan refugees. Most people are unaware that a country named Tibet existed and that China ruthlessly annexed it in 1950. Decades later, China continued to use violence against Tibetans who revolted against them. My parents suffered under an oppressive government but never resisted, fearing for their daughters' lives. My grandfather had been a valiant leader of the Tibetan Independence Movement, but when the Chinese government discovered his involvement in the rebellion, they brutally murdered him in front of my mother. Out of grief and fear, my parents fled Tibet and sought refuge in Nepal. I was a year old, and my sister two months old, when we became refugees and homeless. Struggling to create a living in Nepal, my parents decided to migrate to the United States, but couldn't take us with them. Being too young to understand any of this, I grew up believing that my parents abandoned me, unaware of my Tibetan roots. After learning the truth, I became extremely angry at the Chinese government for taking over my country, for oppressing my people, for killing my grandfather, for being the reason my sister and I grew up without the love of a mother and father, and for making my parents suffer. I didn't understand why anyone would inflict such suffering and hardships onto someone else.

In 2011, after nine years of separation, my parents brought my sister and me to America. I thought Tibetans were the only refugees, but as I got older, I learned that there are millions of refugees throughout the world. When I read about the thousands of refugees who died fleeing Syria on boats, I was heartbroken. I couldn't comprehend how the entire world could watch and let that happen. I couldn't understand how this world, which I always perceived to be benevolent, could allow there to be sixty-five million people like my parents, who were forced to flee their homes out of fear, pain, and oppression. I started to doubt all the morals I was taught as a child. I've always dreamed of helping and protecting everyone in this world, but I also started to wonder whether my dream was too unrealistic for the cold reality. I was bewildered about my beliefs, the purpose of my existence, and my value in this world. I lost a sense of my individuality and character.

After being adrift for a long time, I found myself again one day when my mom told me, "You remind me a lot of your grandfather. You're as brave and tender as him and like him, you have the power to heal others. He healed others by being the village doctor and being the voice of us Tibetans and you heal others through your smile, warm words, and accepting heart." That was the first time I truly connected with my mother and reconnected with myself and the world. I decided that I won't give up on my childhood dream. I want to start this dream of mine by approaching a similar path as my grandfather: by becoming a nurse. My dream to protect everyone might be the most utopian and maybe even an impossible dream, but I will never surrender to this cruel world. I will always look at this world through the eyes of a helper and a healer.



FNU TSERING
*on Refugees
and Immigration*



NICHOLE VALERA
*on Community
and Gentrification*

It is a hot summer afternoon; the sun is blazing on our backs. Everyone from the neighborhood is outside drinking ice cold sodas, talking and laughing as we enjoy the summer breeze. All the children are running around, getting wet in the fire hydrant as they play tag and wait for the ice cream truck to pass. Those are the days I miss most from my old neighborhood.

South Williamsburg was a community where everyone treated each other as family and took care of each other. In this neighborhood, the buildings were five or six stories high and close together, which gave the community a stronger bond. It was easy for everybody to reach out to each other. If I did not have something I needed when I was cooking, I would knock on someone's door and ask if they had it. Because of the amazing neighborhood I grew up in, I was raised to make sure that everyone around me was taken care of before anything else. During the years I lived in South Williamsburg, I babysat for free because when I was younger my neighbors did the same for me. The community also helped shape me into the outgoing person I am today. Before I became comfortable with the people from my community, I was very quiet, shy, and restrained, but friends and family made sure they broke me out of my shell. The block parties allowed everyone to bond and spend time with each other. I also learned to value people's feedback and feelings. Growing up in this neighborhood with such loving people helped me develop my identity as an optimistic, bright, outgoing young lady.

Unfortunately, I had to move out of South Williamsburg when I was nine. People who owned a bigger and more expensive company bought the building I lived in. The rent was raised, and my mother could no longer afford to pay it. The neighborhood I live in now is nothing compared to what I consider my home. People do not associate with each other often, children do not interact, and no one treats each other like family. I miss my old neighborhood, and I visit once in a while because my family pharmacist is there. When I go back, the changes I see break my heart. The building that I lived in has been replaced with a larger, modern building with an elevator and much fancier apartments inside. The daycare that the children I babysat used to go to was shut down and replaced with a condominium. Most of the buildings I grew up seeing are being bought, shut down, and knocked over because people want to make businesses where there is low rent. Gentrification is causing everyone from my old neighborhood to move out because they can no longer afford it. All of this change has taught me to cherish the things I have in life, because I never know when I could lose it or when it might change. I cherish everything that comes my way, whether it is a rough experience or a precious experience. I have become extremely grateful after seeing all these changes happen in such a short period of time.

The community I grew up in has taught me almost everything I know, from playing sports to cooking to caring for others, and it helped me develop my identity. Without all these loving people, I would not be as confident as I am today. Today, I am not shy, I dance in performances, and I help anyone who needs it. My confident personality has helped me with my first job working with children in a summer camp, where I had to socialize and interact with everyone around me. Although it has changed, I am grateful I grew up in South Williamsburg.



HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

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