



**Bottom Line**  
Celebrating 25 Years

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**2022 Essay Book**  
*Stories of  
wisdom, challenges, and joy.*



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Celebrating 25 Years

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# LETTER FROM STEVEN COLÓN

Dear Friend of Bottom Line,



Each year hundreds of outstanding young people enter the Bottom Line Access program. They have demonstrated the determination and talent to lift up themselves, their families, and their communities. These students have contributed **a remarkable set of essays** in which share insights into their inspirations, challenges, and strengths.

Taking time to see the world through the eyes of Bottom Line students **will make us all wiser**. Their stories will also **bring you joy and might make you think differently** about cooking, baseball, hair, and equity. Over 700 high school seniors across the organization submitted college application essays, crafted with support from their Advisor. Bottom Line's free program extends through six years until college graduation and the successful launch of a mobilizing first career.

The partnerships between these students and their Advisors make up the **heart and soul of Bottom Line**. All of us within the organization, as well as our supporters, are proud to play a role in facilitating those partnerships. For over 25 years, we have refined our process to support students as they achieve each milestone that brings them closer to academic, financial, career, and personal success.

As you will see in these college essays and personal statements, Bottom Line students are remarkable people who fill us with confidence that the lives they make for themselves will be **full of profound accomplishments**.

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, Bottom Line was able to share **outstanding results** from a randomized control trial. These student essays provide the context for those remarkable data points. Research definitively proved our program contributed significantly to students **enrolling, persisting, and graduating from college** without the burden of large debt. Our program is successful because of who our students are and what they bring to the table. Plus, our Advisors are relentless allies who match students with resources and opportunities that are worthy of their potential.

These essays also motivate me personally to commit more deeply to Bottom Line's mission and our battle against educational, economic, and racial inequity. These students deserve our best.

Thank you for being a part of the Bottom Line Community!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Colón'.

Steve Colón  
Chief Executive Officer, Bottom Line



# BARBIE

## NEW YORK

**Fun Fact:** "I love to explore NYC and find new food spots to eat, parks to read in, and places to see the sunset!"



Sundays feel like home. Warm, comforting, and safe, all while being the start of a new week. On Sundays, my parents resort to resting by all means. No cooking, no cleaning, and definitely no work. My siblings spend their entire day in front of bright screens playing games that bring joy to their hearts and take them to worlds never seen before. In contrast to my family members, I spend my time on Sundays differently; I reflect on myself and practice gratitude because on Sundays, I wash my hair.

Washing my hair is one of the most important weekly tasks I have. My long brown coils are brought back to life every time I do so, and that pleases me, but four years ago my hair was my biggest insecurity. I staggered through my middle school's halls in fear that I would be judged, and my insecurity worsened as time passed and more girls arrived at school with hair that looked nothing like mine. Blonde hair, straight hair, even black hair; all of them were beautiful, but mine? It would never compare. At the time, I thought my hair was not socially accepted. I believed no one would be attracted to it or take me seriously. These thoughts led me to become a different person; one with a low self-esteem, and no sense of belonging in my community.

From dyeing my hair a cheesy-looking yellow color to straightening my hair too often, I messed with my hair to the point where it was irreversibly damaged all because I wanted to feel accepted; not by myself, but by everyone else. My low self-esteem had failed me and I realized that none of these actions would make me feel better about myself. After months of watching YouTube videos from curly hair influencers during my many sleepless nights, I realized I was not alone. Many other girls had gone through the same painful process as me. They felt isolated and rejected by society, friends, and shockingly, themselves. Following this, I decided to make a change. Their confidence and hair-journey videos helped me better myself and remove the one thing that was holding me back: my hair. After many google searches, I was able to book an appointment with a well-known curly hair stylist in my city. I was excited, yet scared at the same time, when the day to cut my hair finally came.



# BARBIE

## NEW YORK

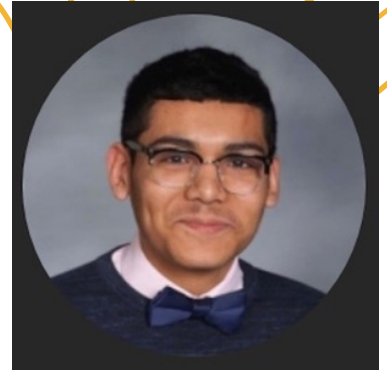
“OH... MY... GOD!”

I looked at the hairdresser in shock after she had cut my hair up to my ears. She fluffed my short, noodle-looking hair and smiled at me. I could tell she was excited for my new journey. She gave me many compliments and tips on how to care for my new hair. With this new look of mine, my whole life shifted. Although I was only fourteen years old, I knew what self-hatred felt like, but this time around I was able to learn what self-love was too. I was no longer under the impression that I was “ugly” or could not fit in. I finally came to learn about self-acceptance and why it’s so important, which was a life changer for me and all of my peers who finally saw that glow on my face again; the *happy* glow.

Now, when I think back to this rollercoaster of a time, I’m always reminded of Sundays. The day that no one sees as significant, but I see as most valuable. The day where I get to see my progress and recognize the hard work I have put into being a better me that isn’t perfect, but is real and raw. This journey of self acceptance has helped me recognize just how important self-love is. From positive decisions to secure relationships, self-love aids in all aspects connected to a healthy life. In other words, self-love is like a Sunday; serene, necessary, and more importantly, a fresh start.

# JORGE CHICAGO

**Fun Fact:** "I co-founded a coffee shop."



A mix of distorted, inaudible noises was all I could hear in this foreign setting and country where I was parentless, directionless, and utterly lost. The American TSA agent gave me directions to the best of his ability, despite a clear language barrier between us. I was relieved, as I was now leaving the airport and would avoid these types of interactions for a while. I would only be spared for a small amount of time as there were many more to come, especially because I enrolled in school shortly after. While my mom, my sister, and I lived in Mexico for half a decade, my first language was Spanish, which was largely problematic when we came back to live in the United States.



This hindrance is no disease and it is no illness; however, it is equally difficult to overcome. The direct impact of this was an inability to understand basic English (much less slang). This led to the harshest indirect impact: bullying. Due to the present language barrier, I was disconnected from everything *trending* and I was in a world of my own—by myself. It was nearly impossible to hold a conversation with my classmates. Most of the time, I would pretend I knew what they were saying; in reality, I had no idea what they were saying. This led to me not having many friends, pushing myself deeper into my isolated cave, and becoming overall less interested in school. When my parents would ask, “*Cómo te fue hoy en la escuela?*” I would simply answer, “*Me fue bien.*” Truth is, school did not go well—how could it when I was made fun of for the way I spoke and looked? That didn’t stop me, however. I have always loved challenges because of the subsequent lessons I am bound to learn. Therefore, I worked hard to overcome this challenge by watching children’s shows in English, practicing flashcards with my cousin, and reading a plethora of books.



# JORGE CHICAGO

My parents never went easy on me when it came to school, even from a young age. I remember finishing my school homework and wanting to just rest, watch TV, or do something fun. My parents thought otherwise; they would always assign me practice problems relating to the homework I was assigned that day. I was not born a hard worker; I was raised to be one. My immigrant parents have always given their all for me and my sister—even leaving their home country behind in the pursuit of the so-called *American Dream*. Dreams occur when you're relaxed, comfortable, and asleep. This dream, my dream, occurs in the complete opposite circumstances. I am reminded of this dream when I am so stressed my head is as hot as a fresh cup of coffee—like the ones I make at my job to support my family with rent, internet, and other expenses. I am reminded of this dream when I am so close to giving up, but I can motivate myself to finish the sixth homework assignment of the day. I am reminded of this dream when I see my family suffering because of our—deemed—unfortunate circumstances, like the color of our skin. This *dream* does not sound like a dream; it sounds more like a nightmare.

The adversities I have faced—and continue to—shaped me to be the person I am now. I have become more community-focused, hard-working, and a leader. I have volunteered plenty of hours to serve my community. I have become an exceptional worker who is dependable and a self-starter. I have led others and encouraged their growth with our shared knowledge. These skills are ones I learned through high school, extracurriculars, internships, and jobs. College is a journey I await eagerly with an open-to-growth mindset so I can grow far more.

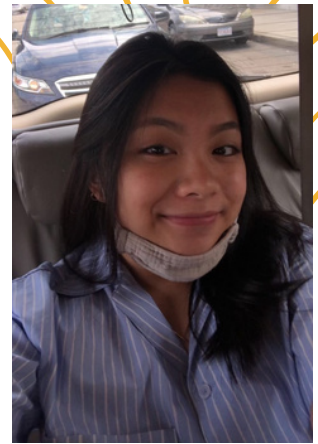




# THAO

## MASSACHUSETTS

**Fun Fact:** "I enjoy collecting Funko Pops and stuffed animals."



Pictured on the left side of my bedroom is a wall of photos that display friends and family who have done nothing but support me through thick and thin. All the images are vibrant with a variety of shades, ranging from the bright blue waters of Punta Cana to the clear broth of the hot pot that my friends and I often indulge in. Everyone who knows me knows that I love taking pictures whenever I can, as they are a way to capture the memories I have shared with those I care about the most. When times are tough and I have my head in my hands, I look over and remember all the things that I've accomplished to get to where I am today. With the images of some of the happiest moments of my life in front of me, I smile knowing that those in the photos are all proud of the things that I have done. The splash of colors that these images radiate in my room reminds me of the positive side of things. They inspire me to continue to persevere through the obstacles that may stand in my way.

On the right side of my room, the queen size bed that I love dearly sits snugly in the corner and holds my pillows with bright flower cases, two pillow pets, a bubble gum pink stuffed pig, and a baby Yoda plush. Above my bed, a collage of Harry Styles, One Direction, and posters from animes and Marvel movies occupies the space on my aqua blue walls. Typically, teenagers stray away from these things because it may give off a childish connotation. Despite that, I have never thought of a reason why I shouldn't show off the things that I cherish so much. Everything in my room has a place and it'll always remind me of the things that I've grown attached to over the years. To me, having these items around gives me a sense of comfort as they are all things that I am familiar with; from spending days on end listening to my One Direction playlist to going on my fifth Marvel movie marathon, these items have influenced me to embrace who I am. Whether it be buying more stuffed animals, despite the overflowing pile that sits on my shelves or buying clothes in order to resemble Harry himself, the array of colors that these items present bolsters a lively environment that encourages me to never hide my personality.



# THAO

## MASSACHUSETTS

*Click, click.* My fingers furiously type away on my new red mechanical keyboard as I write this essay in my room surrounded by lo-fi music and LED lights set to a rainbow gradient in the background. As I look around, there are a plethora of things that scream my name. Rather than a minimalistic look, I prefer to follow the concept of a chaotic neutral. Objects may seem disorderly to the naked eye, but I know that everything is in its rightful place. As I've become older, the pictures and posters plastered on my walls have changed as well. Those around me have begun to pack up and leave their childhood behind, but I remain resolute in my choice to keep my comfort items close to me. I'll still be sleeping with my pillow pets and the photos of my youth will continue to live on my wall. No matter where I venture, the colors of my items will serve as a constant reminder to continue to embody who I am. The countless hues that fill my room bring bursts of excitement into my daily life and the monotonous days at school; they help me remember to be positive and take things easy. Whatever my future endeavors may be, I will continue to carry these colors with me and bring positivity and optimism to the places that I go.

# SULTONA NEW YORK

**Fun Fact:** "In my mind, every movie/book/show that I finish feels like I am placing a new addition into my collection of references and topics of conversation I will understand."



It was a particularly regular morning the day the loudspeaker boomed with news about a poetry slam. As an 11 year old child who, at the time, had no partiality for school, I figured that this was an easy way to get out of class for a few periods a week. This marked the start of my writer's journey, a pure serendipity. Though, the autumn of eighth grade was when I truly started writing for myself. Despite my efforts in slumber one night, I constructed a short poem in my head that beckoned me to hop off my bunk bed and scribble in the old notebook my friend had gifted me two years ago. From that moment on, I took that notebook everywhere with me. I was surely no writing prodigy, but I found a friend in those pages. I kept it close and found myself a place of refuge.

Even so, like any poet, there were times when every word seemed futile and every couplet sounded like the same vague metaphor. I would feel so empty without poetry, but get so angry at myself when I tried to write. There were times people made me feel ashamed of my poetry. The worst and most recurring shame, however, was self-inflicted. I remember thinking, if I could not even admire my own poetry, then how could anyone else?

I never fail to find my way back to poetry, though. Writers never do. After months of poetry and storytelling finding no home in my material world, I felt my chest heavy with all the words I could not say. I knew that to simply stop writing was never a choice. Thus, I unleashed my thoughts and like a tsunami they rushed and crashed over the page. It did not matter if it lacked the eloquence or soul-stirring essence that exquisite poetry contains—I just knew I needed to write. Oftentimes, it felt uncomfortable and frustrating and almost shameful, writing and then having to accept that the quality of what I had written was simply the best I could do at the moment. I had to reassure myself countless times that improvement takes patience, as much as it takes work. But when I seemed to get back into the swing of things, more or less, I found that familiar cathartic nature in the rhythm of its rhymes.

Poetry teaches me more than just how to express my feelings. It gives me more than just a lighter heart. It has been with me for so long that I'm not quite sure who I would be without it. It instills such empathy in me, for others and also myself. Every once in a while, poetry shows me that I'm human, and sometimes I feel I need to be reminded of that. Poetry helps me see the world in a more forgiving light. I realize it helps me see life as more than just existing. Throughout the years, writing has molded me into a softer person simply by being there, whether in my head or somewhere in my eyes. Even when my words sounded like the most cliché thing on Earth, even when my metaphors were lousy and my meanings too explicit, my pen continued on the page and wrote me into someone of diligence and gratitude.

Most of all, poetry teaches me about life in the way that it compels me to appreciate the glorious minutiae of living. Even with all the painful and ephemeral aspects of life, poetry opens my eyes to the joy that remains. It is an important thing, to find momentary peace in every ring of joyous laughter, love in every gentle brush of wind. So, in time, as the edges of life soften, as the bind tears and the pages fill, I will keep what poetry taught me in every breath I heave and press onward.

# ELIZABETH MASSACHUSETTS

**Fun Fact:** "My favorite food is ice cream."

## Farmer's Daughter



The number was no longer legible, the brown ring from his coffee mug left a mark on what was supposed to be the number twelve. As I was trying to discern the number, my thoughts were interrupted by the deep intimidating voice of my father.

"What's taking you so long? You should know subtraction by now." My sweaty fist tightened around my pencil; I knew his biggest fear was consuming his mind. His daughter could not be bad at math.

This was not the first time. He interrupts my homework flow frequently; often his anxiety compounds mine as general worry over arithmetic theorems hovers over the kitchen table.

The academic pressure I faced from my father was grueling. The first thing I would see on Saturday mornings was a Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System practice textbook strategically placed on my nightstand. Like clockwork, every quarter, tense anticipation would surround the day of report cards for weeks, eventually, all the accumulated stress would be punctuated by the report card placed proudly on the fridge.

Starting at the early age of seven my dad was a farmer growing up in the countryside of Gondar, Ethiopia. His days were spent rigorously working in his backyard taking care of his cows.

What was never revealed in my father's reminiscence was his obligatory sacrifice of raising cattle instead of pursuing an education. The view of his seven older siblings walking to school from the steep hill as his callous hands were clenched to a metal milk pail, taunted him. Eager for education and desperate for the shared childhood experience, he would often try to sneak off to school, but would eventually get caught by his scolding mother.

# ELIZABETH MASSACHUSETTS

As a first-generation American, my father's humble beginnings and determination toward the pursuit of a better life for his children pressed my pen to my paper and glued my eyes toward the books. I had a compelling urge to excel in school for his validation, with the intention of fulfilling his dream.

Entering high school was a new realm of schooling for me. From the diversified course selections to the niche clubs and electives, for the first time, I had the freedom to personalize my learning to best suit my interests and career goals. Released from a never-ending quest to gain my father's validation— I became enthralled and fulfilled by my own pursuit of learning.

I raise my hand in my Women's Literature course because I'm empowered by the sage remarks of Toni Morrison. Reading her novels almost feels cathartic as Morrison eloquently articulates the shared Black female experience. In her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, I was Pecola maneuvering my way toward confidence in a society that only praises eurocentric beauty standards. My nine-year-old self felt validated in her Black beauty and no longer felt alone, I was now one of many.

My intellectual enthusiasm also manifests in my once reserved artistic creativity. No longer was my art simply a casual hobby, but rather a craft I now have the privilege to hone in on and nurture. Through my studio art course, I was introduced to the style of pointillism with acrylics and developed a love for the style. The small, impressionistic dots of color kept making their way into my art pieces, slowly becoming my signature.

Suddenly, my father no longer questioned my mathematical abilities because he trusts my diligence and sees value toward education within me. As I pack my bag for school in the morning, I carry twelve years of schooling in my front pocket, but the largest pocket holds a heavy load of my strong desire to pursue my education to the fullest. Although growing up, my father put a lot more at stake by pursuing a forbidden education, I took after his passionate desire, and I am eager to enter an institution that protects and cherishes these inherited principles.

# ARA CHICAGO

**Fun Fact:** "My favorite dessert is froyo (can't get enough of all the toppings!)"



As a child, making bilo bilo, a traditional Filipino dessert, was my specialty. On Saturday mornings, little balls of rice flour surrounded me as I happily rolled dough together between my hands. My palms were coated, my fingers were sticky, and my forehead was damp with sweat. Yet, it didn't irritate me; in fact, I beamed as I knew what sweet treat awaited me. My father, knowing too, smiled back with crinkled eyes, revealing deep lines throughout his face. Those lines told his story of a life led by diligence: one filled with warm smiles and laughter as much as it filled with frustration and fatigue. My mother's tale was no different. Diligence was the key to their success as Filipino immigrants assimilating into American culture, and now, they convinced me it was the key to my own.

As I entered high school, my persistent efforts proved fruitful. My advisor referred me to an accelerated program to propel my growth. However, my parent's uneasy glances towards the tuition fee spoke for themselves. Yes, there was a scholarship available, but it was still a financial burden. Since my mother was earning minimum wage, and my father did not have many clients for his handiwork service at the time, we had to decline the offer. Initially, I was resentful. They were my motivators; they continuously praised my efforts, they inspired me to strive for the highest academic achievements. How could they deprive me of this opportunity? How could they limit my growth? However, I reminded myself of their sacrifices. After all, they left their country, assimilated to a new land, worked long hours—all to improve our quality of life. It gave me a renewed perspective. Rather than a missed opportunity, it drove me to work harder. Now, not simply for myself, but for my parents as well.

Nowadays, I still find myself with coated palms, sticky fingers, and a damp forehead. The clock spins, and my hands ache each time I prepare the mixture, roll the dough, and wait for the water to boil. Soon, a sweet scent fills the room, and as I close my eyes, I am brought back to those Saturday mornings with my father. Making bilo bilo was no longer merely making dessert; as a child of immigrants, it was a tie to my parents' home, and as a child of the working-class, it was a symbol of their persistence, a symbol of our diligence.

# STAR MASSACHUSETTS

**Fun Fact:** "I am a fan of pineapple and mushroom pizza."



## Freedom From Perfection

My name is Star  
Like the North Star  
A faint yet bright symbol of viable freedom  
For the enslaved  
Whispering in their ears that they are almost free  
From the slave trade  
Colonization  
White supremacy  
Poverty  
It is the first seed of the highly sought after  
Harvest of freedom  
A luscious forest green field full of carefree  
All expenses paid  
White picket fences  
Two story houses  
In wealthy districts  
"Your traum- sorry *hard work* was all for something"  
The American Dream  
Is the North Star that I originated from  
Chased by those who need to be freed  
From this generational strain of codependency  
With failure





# STAR MASSACHUSETTS



School had ended  
Summer had just begun  
And in the middle of a luminous afternoon  
I could not bear to look up from my hands  
The walls in my family's small apartment  
Cracked and peeling under the pressure  
Of Cs and hopeless teacher-parent conference meetings  
All which should have been avoided  
So early in the chase for freedom  
For the North Star  
I had failed the 6th grade  
So my head hung low  
Weighed down by the impact of this first irreversible  
failure  
A broken promise of the North Star  
Which had tricked my Nigerian immigrant parents  
Into believing that having their one and only daughter  
Born in the city of winners  
Would expedite their place in this chase  
Propelling our family's status so that the luxury of failing  
Was something we could afford  
What a facade  
Yet this dream was all that was needed  
To keep the North Star in sight  
For them and not for me  
Thereafter my early failure in this chase became an essential  
And internalized  
Part of my identity



# STAR MASSACHUSETTS



Gazing into my early high school experience  
My pen had run out of ink  
Stripped away the natural instincts of my performance  
My roots nurtured with curiosity and passion  
Were overwatered with the obsession of absolute excellence  
Passion was uprooted by unhealthy comparisons  
Curiosity was replaced with asking emptier questions  
Than the ones that enlightened my mind  
My journaling  
Weekly library retreats  
Became robotics  
Forgotten dinners  
Compete as much as you can Star  
Until it is physically impossible  
To appeal to this forced path  
False sense of self  
And this chase for broken promises tore open a chasm  
A deep blue ice cold  
Sea  
That I was slowly sinking in  
Alone  
Until I broke free



# STAR MASSACHUSETTS



Junior year loomed over me  
This new year of mystery succeeding unprecedented times  
Of mass tragedy  
I had already prepared myself to face the worst  
And was ready to hit the ground running  
Or so I thought  
In the middle of classes these waves of emotions hit me  
With uncontrollable speed  
Waves of realization in the diminishing of my relationships  
With my loved ones and most significantly  
Myself  
I felt the effects of my personal neglect  
Echo off of me  
Hammering into wounds disguised as scars  
When I could no longer take the consequences  
Of my life revolving around the chase  
I began to armor myself with my own words  
Poetry  
Is the timeless realm  
I give my all to  
The scorched overheating of my being  
Is relieved when I turn to  
Poetry



# STAR MASSACHUSETTS



It is the only technique that is able to ground me  
Writing short pieces and rambling think pieces  
I am given the opportunity to deeply inhale  
Finally quench my heart  
With restorative growth  
The ability to peer into my reality  
Through the naked lens of my authentic thoughts  
And overcome what I was challenged to be  
Triumphantly discovering that I truly am  
The first and only daughter of Nigerian immigrants  
Conditioned to make space for everything excluding failure  
Yet I am now committed  
To building up space for all of me  
Including my setbacks  
Mistakes  
Failures  
Not just warped dreams of an eternal victory lap  
In hopes of capturing a nonexistent  
Star

# MCKINLEY MASSACHUSETTS

**Fun Fact:** "I read the entire Harry Potter series in 4th grade."



The cryogenic sleep chamber that resides in my humble abode can never run out of steam. People tend to use their very own methods to simply recharge their bodies and prepare for yet another stressful day, but that is not the case for me. A sleeping chamber (aka. my bed) is capable of so much more than what people make it out to be.

My connection with my sleeping chamber is something that is out of the ordinary, yet fulfilling towards my spiritual freedom. As I lay down in the sleep chamber, I feel the rest of the world fade out of existence and it is just me and my thoughts. It's a place that protects me from the monsters that reside in the dark alleyways of my society. My sleep chamber aids me in connecting with my spiritual being in a way that your average human being would go out of their way to call "lazy", but in reality, it is totally the opposite. It provides me with the utmost privacy that I require in order for my mind to take its time to figure out a solution to an obstacle that I might be facing.

You see, a couple years ago, my grandmother, who I thought was an invincible woman, had a stroke. Our entire family was on edge as to whether she would make a recovery from it or not. In the end, she made a recovery, but I noticed that there was something different about her. She had changed, in ways that I never believed possible. She could barely walk without a walker or a cane, she had difficulty going outside, and could not eat without someone feeding it to her. I was angry at the world, at my family, as to why they could let something so horrific happen to such a wonderful person who was a part of my life since birth. In that time of rage that I had, my sleep chamber had given me the space that I needed to clear my thoughts and just have a minute to think. It was where my transformation took place. I was able to re-focus, ground myself, reflect, and prioritize rest. For a Black man in America, like me resting is resistance. Resting and recharging are the ways that I can prioritize myself and my survival. When I am resting, I am able to come to terms with powerful realizations.



# MCKINLEY MASSACHUSETTS



I learned that everything in our lives grows old or becomes weaker than it was at one point. It had gotten me to think that this is not a place where my grandmother would want me to be. My grandmother was a woman who loved everyone with her whole heart and would help anybody and I mean anybody who needed the assistance. She was a woman who was patient with any and everything, even the snails that she would come across showed her huge amounts of respect. Ever since that day, it had gotten me thinking that in order to truly make my grandmother proud, would be to follow in her footsteps of peace and understanding towards everybody I come across. My cryogenic sleep chamber aided in helping me figure out a piece of my destiny: in order to keep being there for others the way that my grandmother is, I am learning that peace and understanding has to start with me when I learn to rest and prioritize self care. Through the learning, I can continue to add on to my knowledge of my community and how I can find ways to help better it through kindness and altruism. I am able to be there for others if I am at my best. In the future when I face challenging situations, I will lean on lessons learned both from my grandmother and my sleep chamber to continue being there for my community.

# PRISCILLA CHICAGO

**Fun Fact:** "I love to play solitaire."



I stood in the middle of my class stuck frozen in place. My mouth was slightly open as if to speak, but no words came out of my mouth. My teacher was at an arm's reach away and asked me again, "What did you say?" Nothing. I could not say a word. My brain was telling me to say something, to do anything, but I physically could not. That day I realized that my shyness would be a bigger issue than I expected it to be.

Being shy, especially from a young age, felt like I was stuck in a black box with only my thoughts to accompany me. This box was something that was inescapable; it didn't matter who I interacted with, it always seemed like there was a barrier that stopped me from being able to fully express myself. I would try to interact with people but the black box had me completely surrounded. As I began to open my mouth to speak, the box would creep around me and I would begin to stutter on my words. I had been completely submerged by the black box.

One day, my teacher decided to do a peace circle, which is a way for a group of people to heal and learn by listening to other people's experiences. I knew that I would be forced to get in another battle with the box that was constricting me. The question for our peace circle was, "What is something that you would like to work on?" When it finally reached me, I grabbed the marble-looking rock that we used as our "microphone" and said that I would like to work on my shyness. My teacher nodded at me and took note of it. As the peace circle went on, I realized that I was not the only person dealing with this issue. It made me feel better to know that this was something that we would all work on together. I was not alone in my fight anymore.





# PRISCILLA CHICAGO



As we continued to do more group work and presentations over the year, my classmates and I became more vocal. I was able to talk to people without stuttering. By the end of the year, I didn't have much of an issue with talking to the people in my class. It was a huge improvement from where I was. I was finally able to fight back against my invisible mental barrier. I continued to speak up and helped out at my middle school by joining a tutoring program to teach other students around the school, which helped me to continue working on my social skills. By the end of eighth grade, I was voted and selected for the student of the year during my graduation.

My mental black box continued to crumble as I continued to engage with my volunteer work at my church, tutoring, and becoming a counselor at my summer camp. In my high school, I helped out with freshman orientation and an IB visit, which evaluated the IB courses in my school, during my sophomore and junior year. As I continued to have new experiences, like getting my first job, I began to feel more comfortable and confident with myself and with my voice.

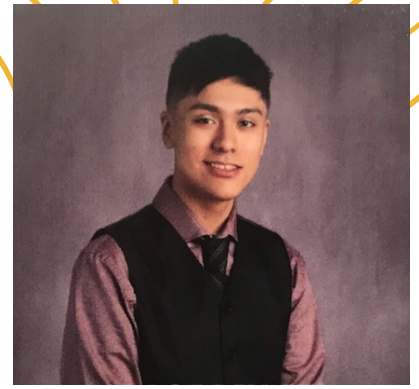
I, later on, discovered that the black box that had completely surrounded me was a mixture of anxiety, stress, and doubts. Once I was able to discover this, that is when I was finally able to defeat and conquer my own personal Pandora's box.

Through the help of my teachers, classmates, and friends I was able to fight and win against my own personal struggle, which is my shyness. Doing this revealed my passion for helping others and my strong sense of dedication and perseverance towards my goals. Qualities that I would not have experienced and discovered if I had not confronted my black box.

# ARMANDO

## CHICAGO

**Fun Fact:** "I consider myself a geek. If something catches my interest, I become very invested in it and attempt to learn everything about it."



As the only boy living with five girls, I have the appearance of “uniqueness” in my family. As a result, I received different treatment than my sisters, in some ways, like our mom having my back most times due to my sisters being able to gang up on me, but not enough special treatment where we weren't truly equal. By living with women I gained insight into their personal lives and experiences, which allowed me to better understand the challenges faced by them on a daily basis. I learned how to appreciate women and the struggles they face, which slowly grew into gaining and maintaining a feminist perspective. I truly didn't think twice about the special treatment I received within my home life since every child is different, it seems common among families to treat every child as such. Once I went past the concept of a family, I started to wonder why women are treated differently from me and other males in almost every possible way imaginable. You would think the only way you would be treated differently is from your age and experiences, but not the gender you were born with.

Years of sexism are hard to undo, especially when it's been taught subconsciously. It can be hard to notice it, unless you have a special advantage, such as having older sisters. As a child, I was often told by older males that being born a boy meant certain aspects of life, like household chores and staying home, were best left to females to take care of, while I was to focus on the other aspects of life, such as working and providing. I did not understand this because, in my family, my sisters and I were treated slightly differently based on behavior, but not based on our sex.

# ARMANDO

## CHICAGO



As a child, when I would go to school, I could expect equality amongst me and my classmates. I didn't notice how my female classmates were treated differently from me and my fellow male classmates until I really thought about it. I remember once playing in the park with a group of other kids, I noticed how the girls, including my sisters, were instructed by the boys to operate as background characters, rather than contributors to our games. I didn't think much about that experience until I compared both scenarios and understood how people assume that women could only do less.

As I grew older I started to notice how I, as a male, was treated differently in the world compared to my sisters. When we would go on walks as a way to enjoy ourselves, I would realize how my sisters always stuck together a few steps back, while I would be a few steps ahead of them, leaving this gap between us. I would stop and wait for them to catch up, but as I took in my surroundings I saw why I was here while they were there. I didn't have to worry about the looks of older males objectifying me, seeing me as a reward. I could walk freely in the world while they would have to look in every direction before taking a step.

Realizing all of this made me understand the female perspective in how despite some women having the upper hand in certain situations they would still be seen as unqualified simply for not being male. Having sisters gave me the advantage to realize that the world is an unfair place simply because of the way you were born. Because of them, I was taught to never underestimate someone simply because of their gender. I used to believe that I would need to be a shoulder for them to let everything out on, but they showed me that they simply wouldn't be disheartened, but rather striving forward.

# PEDRO NEW YORK

**Fun Fact:** "Favorite song: Guerrero by Eladio Carrión"



## *Love Letter*

**2 pieces of leather and 216 stitches.** For seven years now my ability to hit and throw you has determined my success and happiness. You've taken control of my life and mentality. Because of you, I follow the same monotonous routine daily. Wake up at 4 am, see you at practice, go to school, see you again, do homework, eat, sleep, and repeat. Every day. I'm not complaining though, I'm thankful because the routine shaped my perspective on life and the world. It makes me despise mediocrity and view those without a passion as unmotivated. The routine helps me aim towards greatness and excellence and do anything necessary to reach your highest level. If doing the same thing daily is required to reach that level, I'll do it no matter what. Many hate how attached I've become to you, how I place everything aside for you. They say my attachment to you hinders me from living my life to the fullest. But I don't care, you're the love of my life, and I'll go through anything to go where I want to go with you.

**2 pieces of leather and 216 stitches.** I've sacrificed so much for you. Friendships, relationships, vacations, and family time. Things that were priorities for others—gone, for you. However, this path you showed me has been successful and caused exponential growth between us. Therefore, all those sacrifices are worth it and I'll continue to make them to reach that level.

**2 pieces of leather and 216 stitches.** Unexpectedly, with no explanation at the time, that glass of progress we made shattered. That growth that was always there stopped. Our breakup put me in excruciating pain, mentally and physically. The most heartbreaking thing is that you took my addiction, the routine, with you. Without it, and without you, who am I? Life without you and this addiction was unimaginable, and now I have no purpose and nothing to do or look forward to. Without you, I've become the person I despise. I've become nobody. I pray(ed) to God to reunite us and revive that growth between us. I've tried relentlessly since May to rebuild that glass, but no matter how hard I try, I never can.



# PEDRO NEW YORK



The pain won't subside. So I sought help in September. The doctor told me why you parted. She found a tear in my shoulder. The critics started talking again. They said that if I wasn't so infatuated with you and our routine, that tear would've never happened. They can talk all they want. I love you, and I promised myself that eventually, I'll reach your highest level. So this month I'll undergo surgery, hoping to repair that broken glass. When my rehabilitation is done I promise I'll return, continue our relationship where we left off, and fulfill that promise I made myself.

**2 pieces of leather and 216 stitches.** You weren't an aspect of life, but life itself. Evidently, my addiction became uncontrollable. I feared that when I return from surgery, I wouldn't have self-control, stay highly attached to you, get hurt again, and lose you forever. I feared that in your absence I'll lose motivation to pursue you, end up becoming the person I hate, and not fulfilling my promise. I'm never quitting on you however, our journey is far from over no matter how many obstacles we face.

**2 pieces of leather and 216 stitches.** We've been through a lot. Our journey helped me realize who I am, both with and without you. It helped me build discipline and learn to prioritize our future. It helped me deal with how people view me. But most importantly, it strengthened my faith and connection with God. Thank you for all you've taught and done for me, the lessons learned, and the connections made because of you. But mostly, thanks for giving me a purpose and completing my life.



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We hope our students' stories have given you a glimpse of the inspiration the team at Bottom Line feels everyday working alongside these remarkable young people.

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[Info@bottomline.org](mailto:Info@bottomline.org)



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## Massachusetts

500 Amory St. Ste. 3,  
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130  
617.524.8833

## Chicago

65 E. Wacker Pl., Ste. 800  
Chicago, IL 60601  
312.219.6254

## New York

44 Court St. Ste. 300  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
347.889.7627



# About Us

For nearly twenty-five years, Bottom Line has been fighting for educational equity by ensuring that the right to a quality college education is accessible to the many, not just the few. Our vision is to create a far-reaching ripple effect, launched by the transformative power of a college degree and a mobilizing first career. For degree-aspiring students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds, Bottom Line is a relentless ally who partners with them to get in, graduate, and go far.



## Our Mission

We partner with degree-aspiring students of color from under-resourced communities to get into and through college and successfully launch a career.



## Our Vision

To create a far-reaching ripple effect, launched by the transformative power of a college degree and a mobilizing first career, that will uplift individuals, families, and entire communities.



**Bottom Line**  
Celebrating 25 Years



# Bottom Line

Get in • Graduate • Go far

