



2017 Runner Up - Significant Challenge Essay

Essay Part A: Briefly describe a significant challenge you have faced in your life.

I have always been “the athlete”. From dominating the local Pre-K soccer leagues, to being the only girl on an all boys football team, to eventually becoming a nationally ranked lacrosse player with numerous Division 1 scholarship offers, sports have always been my passion and what I wanted to pursue long term. Most of my childhood memories revolve around being on the field, court, pool, or at least driving to one of these venues. I was voted “most athletic” by my peers year after year and won a number of national athletic awards. Unfortunately, during my sophomore year of high school, days after verbally committing to play lacrosse for my dream university, I became severely ill. My condition remained undiagnosed for most of my high school career and forced me to give up my Division 1 scholarship, stop attending public school to pursue a homeschool education instead, and to move away from where I grew up in order to be closer to major hospitals. Although my symptoms, prognosis, and social isolation terrified me, the most challenging part of dealing with my illness was wrapping my head around the fact that I was no longer “the athlete” and didn’t know who I was without my sport.

Essay Part B: Describe how you overcame this challenge. Tell us how it has shaped you as an individual.

People say that grief lives in stages and if my story is any example, this is true. As you can probably imagine, being diagnosed with a chronic illness in high school is extremely confusing and something that is nearly impossible to fully accept in one sitting. My past few years have been described as a disaster, a miracle, a rollercoaster, and a tragedy. But when I tell my story, it begins with denial. I was sleeping so much because high school was exhausting; I had headaches because of the fluorescent lights; I wasn’t hungry because the cafeteria food was gross...But as my condition worsened, it became impossible to pretend that everything was fine, but instead coming clean and being honest with myself, I wore different stories like they were costumes, trying to see if any version of the truth would make life more palatable. First, I was convinced that I wasn’t sick at all, then I told myself that this was a temporary illness, and finally, I shifted to complete transparency--admitting to my friends that I was struggling and enrolling in therapy. I made the call I had been avoiding for months: I told my future college lacrosse coach that I could no longer accept the D1 scholarship I had been offered, as my throat burned with restrained tears. Most people assume that the hardest part about becoming ill is the physical symptoms that one experiences, but in reality, the most challenging struggle that I faced during this time was losing my identity. In less than a year, I had gone from a high-achieving student athlete to a bedridden invalid. My entire life—my dreams, my plans, my beliefs about myself—had been turned upside down.

But when I stopped mourning my past life, and tried to start embracing this new reality, my grief evolved into something remarkable. I had always been driven to achieve, but now I was challenged to do so in different, creative ways. I pursued a flexible learning approach that included working off-campus as a non-profit advisor, and utilizing online language programs. When I was unable to study through traditional means, I learned through conversations and experiences. Many of my days were spent in hospitals, so I began asking doctors, nurses, and janitors endless questions about themselves, and became obsessed with finding ways to tell their stories—often through written-word or film. Although the extra-curricular activities which once defined me were now too physically taxing, I found new ways to explore my interests; I started a film club which met remotely, and created a personal development program to help my community of fellow athletes. In my struggle to adapt, I had found a level of personal strength, and a streak of intellectual self-sufficiency, which I never knew I had.

I became inspired to help other teenagers battling chronic illness and created a nonprofit organization (Promising Paths) to support adolescents facing the same struggles that I went through. Promising Paths, focuses on helping chronically ill teenagers discover who they are, what they want to accomplish, and how to achieve their goals in spite of their condition. Although I created Promising Paths in order to help other kids like me overcome the emotional pain surrounding chronic illness, I never would have imagined how much starting a nonprofit would have helped me overcome my own emotional pain. By focusing on creating the best nonprofit program that I could imagine, I stopped viewing myself as “useless” or “broken” and even moved on from my identity of being “the athlete” that had been holding me back for months.

This evolution has been tremendously difficult, but it gave me an important insight: I believe that people discover their identities through the stories they tell about themselves. My illness forced me to rewrite my story dozens of times—as the driven athlete or the aimless ex-athlete, the girl who wants sympathy or the girl who refuses it, as the person who mourns her missed childhood and who knows her adversity made her stronger. It would have been easy to dub my illness the villain and embrace the feeling of helplessness; instead, I turned the worst time in my life into a period of rapid self-growth and discovery. It’s hard for me to say that I am glad I experienced what I did, but I undoubtedly believe that this experience has brought me tremendous strength and taught me lessons that I would never have learned without it. My illness has shaped into a resilient, empathetic, and passionate person that I would not have become otherwise. Without my condition, I would not carry the same amount of drive, gratitude, and joy with me on a daily basis and I now recognize the value of my own truth and story. I am fortunate enough to have received a life-changing medical treatment that will allow me to attend college and hopefully make a full recovery. I am overwhelmingly grateful for my new prognosis, but not a day goes by where I don’t think about the millions of other people who are not as lucky as I am. I want nothing more than to be able to use my health, experience, and good fortune to make these people’s lives easier. I don’t know if I believe that everything happens for a reason, but I am determined to not waste my experience and to use my hardship to benefit of others.