



**Significant Challenge College Scholarship
2022 First Place Winner - Julia Decker**

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

I was born in Enshi, China with a congenital disorder known as a bilateral cleft lip and palate. My upper lip and palate did not form completely, leaving gaps in my lip and the roof of my mouth. I was abandoned when I was a couple of days old and brought to an orphanage where I spent the first three years of my life. An anonymous donor sponsored my first cleft repair surgery in China. I believe that this surgery was the catalyst for my adoption. Without this life-changing surgery, I might still be living in the orphanage without the ability to speak or eat properly.

Six months after I moved to the United States with my parents, doctors closed the large hole in the roof of my mouth. It was the second of twelve surgeries that I would undergo. My parents told me that I understood English in one month. I may have comprehended what they were saying, but the words that spilled out did not sound like English to anyone. I could not say my own name. “H o o l i a” came out of my mouth each time I attempted to say Julia. Even after I tackled the “J” sound, there were many others that I needed to master. I spent my elementary and middle school years establishing new speech patterns. I tamed my loquacious nature to avoid scrutiny by teachers and peers. It was easier to keep quiet, than risk embarrassment.

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

Years of intensive speech therapy eventually helped improve my speech. Repetition and perseverance were key factors in manifesting change. I cannot recall one specific turning point when everything snapped into place for me. Instead, there were small victories. The cafeteria aide was finally able to understand my lunch order. I was able to read a passage aloud in class with confidence. The popular girls picked me for their team in gym class. It became more important to finish my own sentences rather than have someone else finish them for me.

High school brought many opportunities to practice articulation and use my voice. I joined the field hockey team and started speaking out on the field. I am now a team captain, shouting plays and encouragement during games. I became a peer leader to help freshmen transition to high school. I speak about my experiences with bullying and hope to inspire others to make a positive change in their own lives. My years spent “being quiet” have helped me to become an effective listener. I actively listened to the opinions of my peers and gained their trust. I joined student

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government, ran for student council president, and won! While my middle school self would have run the other way, I now seek out opportunities to be heard.

Inspired by the wonderful care that I have received, I started “The Smile Project” in partnership with the non-profit organization, Love Without Boundaries, to raise awareness and funds for cleft-affected children living in underserved communities throughout the world. I sold candy, bracelets and toys at sporting events and promoted my project on social media platforms. To date, I have sponsored the cleft repair surgeries of seven children living in China and Cambodia. I am overjoyed that my story had a positive impact on their lives.

My future career path was born out of my life experience. I have had over ten surgeries and spent countless hours in doctor’s offices and hospitals growing up. I know what it is like to be scared and confused when faced with overwhelming circumstances. Nurses were my superheroes. They wiped my tears, listened to me ramble on about my fears, and figured out my needs when I could not speak. It is my mission to help children in similar circumstances. I look forward to pursuing a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing, to turn my mission into a reality. My long-term career goal is to become a cleft nurse specialist and work on a cleft team. I want to provide support and care from diagnosis through the treatment pathway for cleft-affected children and their families.

Last spring, doctors moved my jaw into a new position to correct a severe underbite. This much-anticipated procedure that positively affected my appearance, also created new challenges. My teeth and tongue are now in unfamiliar places. I am revisiting speech therapy to fine-tune my slushy articulation, except this time, instead of longing to sound like everyone else; I am striving to perfect my strong and unique voice. My struggles with speech have taught me the importance of perseverance, resiliency, compassion and self-acceptance. I am a work in progress, always evolving, just like my speech.

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