



**Significant Challenge College Scholarship
2022 Honorable Mention Winner - Norah Carter**

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

I have been overcoming great odds since day one. I was an anomaly at birth having a list of medical issues including a tethered spinal cord, hip dysplasia, a solitary kidney and scoliosis. Doctors expected that I might never walk or talk and watched as I did both. My path has included twelve surgeries, renal failure and years in body casts. At 4'9," despite being a senior, I am the shortest person in my high school. Additionally, my leg length discrepancy and spinal curves cause me to have an awkward gait. I started my high school experience by unceremoniously falling down the main staircase after which it was not uncommon for me to hear "gimp" or "cripple" as I made my way through the halls. The biggest challenge I have dealt with in life however is having people prejudge my intelligence due to my physical stature and the way I walk. Adults often assume that I have a cognitive impairment simply because of my physical disability. As a result, they frequently talked down to me or excessively praised the most basic of skills. With peers, on the other hand, I have had to fight to be heard and taken seriously. They falsely assumed I am easy to talk over or what I had to say is less valid than able-bodied students. People had a paternalistic attitude toward me as if I was incapable of making my own decisions or taking responsibility for my life. They couldn't be more wrong.

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

Specialists and geneticists entertained various diagnoses to explain my condition over the years, but in my mid teens it was determined that I have Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser syndrome (MRKH) Type II. This rare disease causes the uterus to be underdeveloped or absent and results in infertility and a myriad of health challenges. Although there is grief associated with this diagnosis, the relief I have knowing that I am not alone in this experience is incredibly cathartic and empowering. This sense of belonging and community has served as a foundation upon which I've built my academic and equestrian achievements, community service volunteerism, and leadership endeavors. I have realized that projecting diligence, ingenuity and confidence allows others to overcome their false perceptions of me while dispelling myths they may have about the disabled. Moreover, the pride I have felt when I make an impact on a community or a difference in an individual's life is unmatched.

As an academically high achieving student carrying a 3.9 UW GPA, I have chosen rigorous courses and studied hard. In doing so, I have thwarted the notion that teens with physical

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limitations are somehow less cognitively capable. Instead of being bitter if someone has a preconceived notion about my intelligence, I remain patient and consistent. Across time, I have developed many positive relationships with teachers and school administrators as I serve on our board of education committee for curriculum development. Other students have come to treat me as an equal and I have developed additional connections as a volunteer peer tutor.

Similarly, I have used my experiences as an equestrian to show others that you should never underestimate someone based on their physical presence. Those that have watched my journey from therapeutic rider at age 8 to hunter jumper state qualifier and state reserve champion at age 14 see an example of perseverance and determination. Seeing a need for an intermediate adaptive class within the 4-H system, I worked with state leaders to develop and implement a transitional independent riding class for therapeutic riders which came to fruition last year. Because of this work, future therapeutic riders will have an easier path toward full independent riding.

I have also embraced experiences to serve my greater community. Over the last two years I developed a positive mental health educational program targeting teens and tweens focused on resilience and coping. I facilitated this program online during the pandemic shutdown and was able to compare the impact of the project on three groups: tweens from a suburban area, teens from an inner city area, and teens that were previously incarcerated and at high risk for recidivism. Participants walked away from the six session initiative with their own personally developed list of triggers and targeted coping skills. We concentrated on reducing their stress, particularly as it related to school, parental loss of income, and their feelings surrounding political upheaval and racism. As a result, these youth articulated that they felt stronger, more confident, and in better control of their lives. This project was honored with a National Invisalign Changemakers award in the civil rights category in 2021.

Moreover, I have sought out opportunities to develop my leadership skills. My time as the first president of the Allegheny County Teen 4-H Council illustrates my aptitude for leadership. Our group was diverse and inclusive and was composed of many racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and developmental levels. At an early meeting one member who has developmental disabilities began referring to others as “the black girl” or “the black boy” understandably resulting in tension in our group. Because of my commitment to her personal growth, I was able to talk to her about this in a way in which she understood. Likewise, I shared with the group that I had recognized and addressed the issue. I am proud to say that the council went on to develop and execute educational seminars for youth leaders countywide on inclusion. Without the qualities I

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showed as a leader during that early misunderstanding, we would not have developed the mutually respectful relationships needed to execute training on what can be a sensitive topic.

In addition, this past year as the Vice President of Operations of the Pennsylvania's State 4-H Council which oversees 80,000 youth I advocated for a statewide theme of accepting diversity titled "Be Different, Together." I am proud to say that this unifying theme became recognized and accepted by both the Pennsylvania 4-H and the National 4-H councils. Also in this role I was tasked with presenting a retirement address to over 400 youth and adult volunteers at the State Leadership Conference. During my speech I shared my personal story of living with a disability and overcoming obstacles. Afterwards, a younger 4-H member who uses a wheelchair approached me to say how much she appreciated my vulnerability and how my address motivated her to seek out more opportunities for herself.

I know that I have been blessed with intelligence and excellent health care and that not all individuals with disabilities are as lucky as I am in that regard. By projecting strength of character and a strong work ethic I have been able to overcome the preconceived notions that people have had about my cognitive abilities. I have used my strengths to make a positive impact. My personal experience with disability as well as the successful experiences I have had working for inclusion have shaped me into a strong young woman who will use her passions to evoke change for those that are not able to advocate for themselves. Specifically, these experiences have led me to study political science and public health as an undergraduate. These majors align with my personal passion to evoke change, while maintaining a strong commitment to disability advocacy. Later, I plan to attend law school so I can further prepare myself to take on the challenge of advancing the laws that protect those with physical and mental health challenges. With a degree in political science and global health, I am confident that I can fight for disabled people in the United States of America and across the world, and bring the injustices that face them to the public eye.

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