



2019 Honorable Mention - Significant Challenge Essay

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

It felt like a part of me died. "You can no longer compete in basketball." Those words pierced me like a knife. I was only at the cardiomyopathy doctor's office out of abundance of caution after all. I wasn't experiencing any symptoms. "There's something a little funny on your EKG. We're going to do another test." "There's a bit of anomaly on your echocardiogram. It's probably nothing but we're going to order an MRI." Though I was sitting in front of my third specialist now, I was totally unprepared to hear this devastating statement. "You can no longer compete in basketball." Seven words that changed my life forever. The doctors had found a weak spot in my heart, a condition called Left Ventricle Noncompaction Cardiomyopathy, which carries a risk of sudden cardiac arrest and with that, my athletic dreams were over. Growing up, basketball was my everything. I practiced daily as I aimed to one day compete at the collegiate level. Basketball was my greatest passion, representing my aspirations for my future and driving me forward. Now my biggest passion was stripped from me and I felt broken. I had been locked out of the most significant parts of my life. I became depressed and spent the next two years lost, frustrated, depressed, and angry. I couldn't even watch a basketball game on TV because all I wanted was to play again. I missed my sport, my teams, and competition. I missed the part of myself I cherished most.

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

Two and a half years later, the head varsity basketball coach at my high school invited me to become a student coach and learn the in's and out's of coaching. The experience was life changing. I went from being depressed that I could not compete in sports to feeling on top of the world as I was reunited with my passion for basketball through an alternate avenue—coaching. Once again I was able to feel the thrill of being on the court, the adrenaline rushes, and the pride of being a part of something bigger than myself. After that experience, I began talking to my mom about how we could support other athletes who could no longer participate in their sports for health reasons. I had struggled on my own for a long time before



I was able to find acceptance and I couldn't help but feel that other sidelined athletes likely had a similar experience. Unfortunately, there were no support resources available to help me during that transition and it was a difficult process. Research reveals that permanently-sidelined athletes experience a range of emotional responses including anxiety, depression, anger, loneliness, diminished life satisfaction, alcohol and opiate abuse, and even suicidal ideation. Perhaps the hardest aspect of becoming permanently sidelined is there is nothing you can do to get back to playing your sport. No amount of pushing through pain, training harder, or putting in longer hours will give you back what you have lost. Regardless, I began to experience newfound purpose when, with the help of others, I realized it is possible to adapt to my restrictions by becoming involved with basketball through an alternate avenue. This gift changed my life and allowed me to turn becoming sidelined from a negative experience to a positive one. Becoming sidelined for me was not the end. In fact, it was the beginning. Just as the head varsity basketball coach helped me to this realization, I wanted to do the same for others. With this in mind, I began to formulate a vision for how we could serve the community of sidelined athletes and reunite them with their passions as well. After eight months of preparation, my mom and I launched our nonprofit organization, Sidelined USA, to support athletes who can no longer compete due to career-ending injury, health condition, or concussion risk. We reunite these athletes with their passions and inspire them to find a meaningful way forward through providing resources, connection, and mentorships. We empower sidelined athletes with research-based coping resources, create spaces for them to connect as a community, find former sidelined athletes to mentor those who are struggling, and inspire and equip them to reconnect with their passions through alternate avenues by offering mentorships in sports-related fields. We also offer training and resources to lead parents, coaches and athletic trainers in helping these student-athletes move forward in a positive light. Since, I have had the honor of seeing Sidelined USA make a difference in those who are struggling. Sidelined USA reaches and supports hundreds of sidelined athletes each year. We have created first-of-their-kind online resources for sidelined athletes and their support networks—their parents, and athletic trainers. One parent impacted by our resources emailed me thanking us for giving her hope for her daughter who, as a result of becoming sidelined, was suicidal, depressed, and began an eating disorder. Later, the parent

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followed up with us saying, “Thank you. She is doing better and the information you provided has helped us to understand the issues better.” More than just helping sidelined athletes, Sidelined USA has helped others in the athletic community to serve sidelined athletes as well. We have a partnership with Next Student College Athlete (NCSA) which has allowed us to reach 360 of their medically disqualified athletes. NCSA’s President Lisa Strasman says, “We work with tens of thousands of athletes every year, and unfortunately, some of them end up with career ending health injuries. Sidelined USA and their wonderful network can really help these athletes discover their new passions.” Sidelined USA also reaches the sports medicine community having trained 650 Athletic Trainers with our speakership: Understanding and Supporting The Permanently Sidelined Athlete. In addition to prestigious partnerships with the National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA)(whose organization embodies over 50,000 members), we also work directly with Physical Therapy companies to help them better serve sidelined athletes. NATA President Tory Lindley says, “[Partnership with Sidelined USA] reinforces our commitment to improving patient care by assisting sidelined athletes in holistic recovery.” I overcame a really difficult circumstance in my life by “overcoming” my imposed-limitations in a creative way. My personal transformation was so meaningful to me that I was inspired to make a difference in the larger community of sidelined athletes across the country. Those who thrive in life are those who are able to adapt to challenges in their path. I have gained the mindset which seeks to overcome the challenges I face, making the best of what is before me. This mindset will not allow obstacles to stop me, but grow me. However, what’s more important than just being able to overcome one’s challenges, is being able to take your transformative experiences and use them to benefit the lives of others. I feel tremendously blessed to have already experienced the joys of being able to conquer significant challenges in my life and then use those experiences to make a difference in the community. I want to continue to make a difference in the community by helping others to overcome their challenges. If awarded this scholarship, the Richie’s Spirit Foundation would invest in my future by helping me to overcome my financial obstacle of attending college—a challenge I cannot overcome on my own.

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