



MOON PREP'S *Favorite Essays* 2022

We compiled a list of our favorite personal statements and supplemental essays. Drawing from past students & other resources, this book is meant to inspire students and highlight the art of the admissions essay.

One.

Six years ago, a scrawny twelve year old kid took his first steps into Home Depot: the epitome of manliness. As he marched through the wood section, his eyes scrolled past the options. Red Oak? No, too ubiquitous. Pine? No, too banal. Mahogany? *Perfect*, it would nicely complement his walls. As days went on, the final product was almost ready. 91 degree angles had been perfected to 90. Drawer slides had been lubricated ten times over. Finally, the masterpiece was finished, and the little boy couldn't help but smile. A scrawny 12-year-old kid had become a scrawny 12-year-old man. This desk I sit at has not only seen me through the last six years, but its story and the story of the objects I keep on it provide a foundation for my future pursuits.

My trustworthy, five-year old laptop sits in the center of the desk. From accompanying me on my ventures to track Null Pointer Errors in my apps to playing classic Billy Joel after a rough day, my laptop is my first-choice vehicle as I drive through a life of curiosity. Whether executing my simulations of stress-analysis tests, teaching me how to make an origami lily, or showing me a TED talk on why people find it difficult to poop away from home, my laptop has allowed me to find different versions of myself. Though I will probably call myself an engineer someday, my heart is in so many different places. I'm a philosopher, a historian, an economist, a black belt in TaeKwonDo, a tech-y, a farmer, a teacher, an inventor, an entrepreneur, a TED-talk lover, and a sports enthusiast. With each Google search, a new world opens.

To my left is a stack of books. To earn a coveted top spot in the stack, the "winning" book has to have taught me a life lesson *OR* made me cry. Currently, the book on top is *The Way of the Seal* by Mark Divine. Divine's memoir details the training required to become an elite warrior and how that mentality can be applied to success in all aspects of life (social, mental, physical, and spiritual). Like Divine, I try to avoid a tunnel-vision attitude and consider the implications of my actions on society at large, as a leader and a role model. While running my company, a non-profit that kindles interest in STEM around the world, I have been particularly guided by the principle of *leading from the battlefield*. This mantra of collaborative leadership helps me facilitate many processes, from managing social media to collaborating with potential investors. I'm also reminded to sometimes take a step back in the midst of a crisis and let the universe give me the answers.

To the right of the books is a bead bracelet identical to the ones my parents and brother wear. When I look at it, I remember my parents' secret sign language as I stood on the stage of FBLA nationals. One thumbs up means "remember to breathe", two thumbs up means "remember to smile for the photos." Regardless, I forgot to smile for the photo. When I look at the bracelet, I also see my little brother tugging on me, asking me countless questions as I repair my cube-stacking robot. "What's that weird looking spinny thing?" It's obviously a 0.81 lb, 5mm shaft diameter, 5700 rpm, 35 oz-in stall torque, 22 amp stall current, brushless DC motor. Duh.

One day you'll find me in a corner office somewhere, running a couple of different tech startups, but the desk I'll be sitting at is this same one. I never want to forget that, at heart, I am a confident skinny little nerd unafraid and eager to take my next Home Depot trip.



Two.

Sometimes, the greatest creativity can come from a single impulse. The moment my fingers touched the strings of a violin, I could feel the vibrations beneath the surface of my skin. After mastering the violin, I needed a new instrument to conquer. A few years later, my fingers were touching new strings, a gift from my cousin in the form of my own guitar.

At first, it sat idle in the corner because I had absolutely no clue how to play. The next summer, I set a goal for myself to master this new instrument. After two weeks of self-teaching, I could barely play a G chord, and my fingers were so calloused and bruised that it hurt to play my violin. It turns out the opening lick to Jack Johnson's Banana Pancakes is much too hard for a first song to learn. I decided to try a different approach and start with a song that I still loved, but had an easier set of chords. After a month of playing, I could finally play my first song all the way through, Free Fallin' by Tom Petty. My struggle to play the guitar led me to believe that music would be my only creative contribution to the world, until I walked by room W113 in Jane Woodruff Hall, the Journalism room.

I'd wandered past this room a hundred times, which teemed with bustling activity and energy. One day, during my sophomore year, I walked in to grab a friend for lunch, but she was busy interviewing another student for her yearbook assignment. Waiting patiently, I helped the teacher tape photos up in her room. While we worked, the conversation turned to discussing layouts and the different forms of photography; I was intrigued. Within the hour, I walked over to the academic dean's office and signed up for the online prerequisite Journalism course. All of my life, I have always thought of myself as a technical thinker because math is my comfort zone, but this summer course taught me that I have a creative side still waiting to be explored.

The next year started with team building and basic lessons on design and cameras, but the pace picked up quickly. Amid the chaos of that fall, I found myself assigned to my first solo set of pages. I was to cover Homecoming week, arguably one of the most important weeks of the year. After designing my first template, I began rapidly picking up skills in photography and design. By the second semester, I was assigned a feature spread on stress, but the idea I envisioned involved multiple hand-drawn designs, leading to a new problem: I had never actually drawn anything of any real importance. Despite that, I picked up an iPad and discovered that my fellow staff could actually find real-life resemblance in the images I was creating. After the success of the stress spread, I became the go-to artist on staff and was asked to draw the headlines for the senior section along with small contributions to our school magazine, The Blade.

Without me stumbling into W113, I would have never realized my creative potential. This series of encounters has motivated me to pursue a liberal arts education where I can continue to seek out new thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. If afforded the opportunity, I hope to intentionally explore a variety of different classrooms on the Wake Forest campus where I would endeavor to actively listen, collaborate, innovate and engage with unique and passionate learners in my new community.



Three.

The twisting roads, ornate mosaics, and fragrant scent of freshly ground spices had been so foreign at first. Now in my fifth week of the SNYI-L summer exchange program in Morocco, I felt more comfortable in the city. With a bag full of pastries from the market, I navigated to a bus stop, paid the fare, and began the trip back to my host family's house. It was hard to believe that only a few years earlier my mom was worried about letting me travel around my home city on my own, let alone a place that I had only lived in for a few weeks. While I had been on a journey towards self-sufficiency and independence for a few years now, it was Morocco that pushed me to become the confident, self-reflective person that I am today.

As a child, my parents pressured me to achieve perfect grades, master my swim strokes, and discover interesting hobbies like playing the oboe and learning to pick locks. I felt compelled to live my life according to their wishes. Of course, this pressure was not a wholly negative factor in my life — you might even call it support. However, the constant presence of my parents' hopes for me overcame my own sense of desire and led me to become quite dependent on them. I pushed myself to get straight A's, complied with years of oboe lessons, and dutifully attended hours of swim practice after school. Despite all these achievements, I felt like I had no sense of self beyond my drive for success. I had always been expected to succeed on the path they had defined. However, this path was interrupted seven years after my parents' divorce when my dad moved across the country to Oregon.

I missed my dad's close presence, but I loved my new sense of freedom. My parents' separation allowed me the space to explore my own strengths and interests as each of them became individually busier. As early as middle school, I was riding the light rail train by myself, reading maps to get myself home, and applying to special academic programs without urging from my parents. Even as I took more initiatives on my own, my parents both continued to see me as somewhat immature. All of that changed three years ago, when I applied and was accepted to the SNYI-L summer exchange program in Morocco. I would be studying Arabic and learning my way around the city of Marrakesh. Although I think my parents were a little surprised when I told them my news, the addition of a fully-funded scholarship convinced them to let me go.

I lived with a host family in Marrakesh and learned that they, too, had high expectations for me. I didn't know a word of Arabic, and although my host parents and one brother spoke good English, they knew I was there to learn. If I messed up, they patiently corrected me but refused to let me fall into the easy pattern of speaking English just as I did at home. Just as I had when I was younger, I felt pressured and stressed about meeting their expectations. However, one day, as I strolled through the bustling market square after successfully bargaining with one of the street vendors, I realized my mistake. My host family wasn't being unfair by making me fumble through Arabic. I had applied for this trip, and I had committed to the intensive language study. My host family's rules about speaking Arabic at home had not been to fulfill their expectations for me, but to help me fulfill my expectations for myself. Similarly, the pressure my parents had put on me as a child had come out of love and their hopes for me, not out of a desire to crush my individuality.

As my bus drove through the still-bustling market square and past the medieval Ben-Youssef madrasa, I realized that becoming independent was a process, not an event. I thought that my parents' separation when I was ten had been the one experience that would transform me into a self-motivated and autonomous person. It did, but that didn't mean that I didn't still have room to grow. Now, although I am even more self-sufficient than I was three years ago, I try to approach every experience with the expectation that it will change me. It's still difficult, but I understand that just because growth can be uncomfortable doesn't mean it's not important.



Four.

On the first dawn of the summer, I found myself in a familiar place: sitting awkwardly in the back of a crowded bus full of rowdy twelve year olds. But this time around, I wasn't the shy, new kid at school, a position I knew all too well. I was the teacher, implementing a middle school aquatic ecology curriculum I'd developed the year before.

As New Jersey's Passaic River appeared on the horizon, I tightened the red laces on my Merrell hiking boots and checked my bag: clipboards, lesson plans, and a new water testing kit.

For the entire day, I watched as twenty-five young minds tested the Passaic River's water. Using the river as a natural learning laboratory, I taught them about pollution and industrialization, urban design and remediation strategies.

That summer, through my work in environmental education, I discovered the power of place. I realized that in a changing world, places really are the best storytellers. By tracking the Passaic's pollution levels, we toured the tales of its waters, beginning with its use by the Lenape Native Americans, to its unjust usurpation by European hegemony, to the Vietnam War, during which tons of Agent Orange were dumped recklessly.

At Bowdoin, I'll encounter this again. I find myself doing the very thing I was teaching: investigating the rich stories behind a place. As part of my major in Earth and Oceanographic Science, I blissfully get lost on Orr's Island, researching everything from the historical ecology to the changing geography of the Maine coastline. And I can't wait.



Five.

Colorful red thread intricately laces together a denim square and a flag-patterned remnant of a sweatshirt once owned by my brother. Slowly but surely, each square meeting one another transforms into a stunning patchwork quilt beneath my careful fingers.

What once began as an independent 4-H project my freshman year of high school has become a lifelong commission of using my passion for quilting to teach others to honor our military veterans. Young girls crowd around the table as I demonstrate how to line up the material with the edge of the sewing machine needle. Over fifty youth have attended the small workshops I host to educate youth on honoring our military veterans and teaching them to sew Quilts of Valor, the only recognized award a civilian can bestow to a military service member or veteran..

I will never grow weary of the gratitude written across the faces of the veterans as I wrap their shoulders in a Quilt of Valor.. Despite my regular involvement in my community's Backpack Program and functioning as president of Student Council, this singular project is a high priority in my life. Over the hundreds of hours invested in these quilts, the most fulfilling moment came when a veteran looked at me with tear-stained cheeks and said, "It truly does make my time in the service feel worthwhile when I watch young people like yourself do great things."

The effort I put into teaching young children the delicate task of sewing, to the long hours spent cutting out material, reminds me that true leadership is not about promoting myself. Instead, it is using my abilities to teach others and express gratitude. Perhaps one of my most painful life experiences was presenting a quilt to the family of a twenty-four-year soldier who ended his own life after battling PTSD. He and his family made the ultimate sacrifice. Of the eighteen men in his battalion, only one remains who has not taken his life. As I dream of serving as a nurse someday, the memory of this family and the pain they carry will guide me.

A quilt sits folded on a chair in the corner of my room waiting for it's own surprise reception. This upcoming Veteran's Day, I will cover a Vietnam veteran with this quilt as I read aloud his military honors and service history while he is surrounded by friends and loved ones in a small ceremony. Although I have spent four years involved in these ceremonies, I will not lack sincerity as I thank him for the sacrifice he has made for me. In the construction of this particular Quilt of Valor, I guided eight youth in creating the final folded work of art. Each one of us understands we are simply small pieces connected by a thread of community, patriotism and gratitude, working together to leave the world a kinder and safer place.



Six.

My passion for teaching others and sharing knowledge emanates from my curiosity and love for learning. My shadowing experiences in particular have stimulated my curiosity and desire to learn more about the world around me. How does platelet rich plasma stimulate tissue growth? How does diabetes affect the proximal convoluted tubule? My questions never stopped. I wanted to know everything and it felt very satisfying to apply my knowledge to clinical problems. distinct concepts together to form a coherent picture truly attracts me to medicine.

It is hard to separate science from medicine; in fact, medicine is science. However, medicine is also about people—their feelings, struggles and concerns. Humans are not pre-programmed robots that all face the same problems. Humans deserve sensitive and understanding physicians. Humans deserve doctors who are infinitely curious, constantly questioning new advents in medicine. They deserve someone who loves the challenge of problem solving and coming up with innovative individualized solutions.

I want to be that physician. I want to be able to approach each case as a unique entity and incorporate my strengths into providing personalized care for my patients. Until that time, I may be found Friday mornings in the operating room, peering over shoulders, dreaming about the day I get to hold the drill.



Seven.

12 is the number of my idol, Tom Brady. It's the sum of all the letters in my name. It's also how old I was when I started high school.

In short, I skipped two grades: first and sixth. Between kindergarten and eighth grade, I attended five schools, including two different styles of homeschooling (three years at a co-op and one in my kitchen). Before skipping, I was perennially bored.

But when I began homeschooling, everything changed. Free to move as fast as I wanted, I devoured tomes from Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison to London, Kipling, and Twain. I wrote 10-page papers on subjects from Ancient Sparta and military history to the founding of the United States and the resounding impact of slavery. I discovered more than I ever had, kindling a lifelong joy for learning.

While high school offered welcome academic opportunities—studying two languages and taking early science APs chief among them—the social environment was a different beast. Many classmates considered me more a little brother than a true friend, and my age and laser focus on academics initially made me socially inept. I joined sports teams in spring and built better relationships, but my lack of size (5'1") and strength relegated me to the end of the bench. Oftentimes, I secretly wished I was normal age.

That secret desire manifested itself in different ways. While I've loved football since I was a little kid, I soon became obsessed with personal success on the gridiron—the key, I figured, to social acceptance and the solution to my age problem. I had grown up obsessively tracking my New England Patriots. Now, instead of armchair quarterbacking, I poured hours into throwing mechanics and studying film after my homework each night. Itching to grow, I adopted Brady's diet, cutting dairy, white flour, and processed sugar. But in the rush to change, my attitude towards academics shifted; I came to regard learning as more a job than a joy. No matter what talents I possessed, I viewed myself as a failure because I couldn't play.

That view held sway until a conversation with my friend Alex, the fastest receiver on the team. As I told him I wished we could switch places so I could succeed on the gridiron, he stared incredulously. "Dude," he exclaimed, "I wish I was you!" Hearing my friend's voice and their confidence in my abilities prompted me to reflect: I quickly realized I was discounting my academic talents to fit a social construct. Instead of pushing myself to be something I wasn't, I needed to meld my talents and my passions. Instead of playing sports, I recognized, I should coach them.

My goal to coach professionally has already helped me embrace the academic side of the game—my side—rather than sidelining it. I have devoured scouting tomes, analyzed NFL game film, spoken with pros like Dante Scarnecchia, and even joined the American Football Coaches Association. Translating that coach's mentality into practice, I began explaining the concepts behind different plays to my teammates, helping them see the subtleties of strategy (despite Coach Whitcher's complaints that I was trying to steal his job). And I discovered that my intellectual understanding of the game is far more important in determining my success than my athletic tools: with the discipline, adaptability, and drive I had already developed, I've become a better player, student, and friend.

Physically and mentally, I've changed a lot since freshman year, growing 11 inches and gaining newfound confidence in myself and my abilities. Instead of fighting for social acceptance, I'm free to focus on the things I love. Academically, that change re-inspired me. Able to express my full personality without social pressure, I rededicated myself in the classroom and my community. I still secretly wish to be Tom Brady. But now, I'm happy to settle for Bill Belichick.



Eight.

As a young child, I was obsessed with flying. I spent hours watching birds fly, noting how the angle of their wings affected the trajectory of their flight. I would then waste tons of fresh printer paper, much to the dismay of my parents, to test out various wing types by constructing paper airplanes.

One day, this obsession reached its fever pitch.

I decided to fly.

I built a plane out of a wooden clothes rack and blankets, with trash bags as precautionary parachutes. As you can imagine, the maiden flight didn't go so well. After being in the air for a solid second, the world came crashing around me as I slammed onto the bed, sending shards of wood flying everywhere.

Yet, even as a five-year-old, my first thoughts weren't about the bleeding scratches that covered my body. Why didn't the wings function like a bird's wings? Why did hitting something soft break my frame? Why hadn't the parachutes deployed correctly? Above all, why didn't I fly?

As I grew older, my intrinsic drive to discover why stimulated a desire to solve problems, allowing my singular passion of flying to evolve into a deep-seated love of engineering.

I began to challenge myself academically, taking the hardest STEM classes offered. Not only did this allow me to complete all possible science and math courses by the end of my junior year, but it also surrounded me with the smartest kids of the grades above me, allowing me access to the advanced research they were working on. As such, I developed an innate understanding of topics such as protein function in the brain and differential equation modeling early in high school, helping me develop a strong science and math foundation to supplement my passion for engineering.

I also elected to participate in my school's engineering pathway. As a team leader, I was able to develop my leadership skills as I identified and utilized each member's strength to produce the best product. I sought to make design collaborative, not limited to the ideas of one person. In major group projects, such as building a hovercraft, I served as both president and devil's advocate, constantly questioning if each design decision was the best option, ultimately resulting in a more efficient model that performed significantly better than our initial prototype.

Most of all, I sought to solve problems that impact the real world. Inspired by the water crisis in India, I developed a water purification system that combines carbon nanotube filters with shock electro dialysis to both desalinate and purify water more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional plants. The following year, I ventured into disease detection, designing a piezoresistive microcantilever that detected the concentration of beta-amyloid protein to medically diagnose a patient with Alzheimer's disease, a use for cantilevers that hadn't yet been discovered. The project received 1st Honors at the Georgia Science Fair.

Working on these two projects, I saw the raw power of engineering – an abstract idea gradually becoming reality. I was spending most of my days understanding the why behind things, while also discovering solutions to prevalent issues. In a world that increasingly prioritizes a singular solution, I am captivated by engineering's ability to continuously offer better answers to each problem.

Thirteen years have passed since that maiden flight, and I have yet to crack physical human flight. My five-year-old self would have seen this as a colossal failure. But the intense curiosity that I found in myself that day is still with me. It has continued to push me, forcing me to challenge myself to tackle ever more complex problems, engrossed by the promise and applicability of engineering.

I may never achieve human flight. However, now I see what once seemed like a crash landing as a runway, the platform off of which my love of engineering first took flight.



Nine.

Transformers are not just for boys. I loved these amazing robots that could transform into planes and cars the first time I saw them in the toy store. The boys had all the samples, refusing to let me play with one. When I protested loudly to my mother, she gently chided me that Transformers were ugly and unfeminine. She was wrong.

When I moved from China to Canada, my initial excitement turned to dismay as my peers were not as understanding of my language barrier as I'd hoped. I joined the robotics team in a desperate attempt to find a community, though I doubted I would fit into the male-dominated field. Once I used physics to determine gear ratio, held a drill for the first time, and jumped into the pit to fix a robot, I was hooked.

I went back to China that summer to bring robotics to my friends. I asked them to join me in the technology room at my old school and showed them how to use power tools to create robot parts. I pitched my idea to the school principal and department heads. By the time I left China, my old school had a team.

Throughout the next year, I guided my Chinese team-only one of three that existed in the country-with the help of social media. I translated instructions, set building deadlines and coached them on how to answer judges' questions.

I returned to China a year later to lead my team through their first Chinese-hosted international competition. Immediately upon arrival to the competition, I gave the Chinese head official important documents for urgent distribution. I knew all the Chinese teams would need careful instructions on the rules and procedures. I was surprised when the competition descended into confusion and chaos. Government policies against information sharing had blocked the Chinese teams from receiving information and the Chinese organizers hadn't distributed my documents. I decided to create another source of knowledge for my fledgling robotics teams.

It took me several weeks to create a sharing platform that students could access through the firewall. On it, I shared my experience and posted practical practice challenges. I received hundreds of shares and had dozens of discussion questions posted.

My platform's popularity created an unintended issue; it garnered the attention and reprimand of the Chinese robotics organizations. When a head official reached out to my Canadian mentors, warning them to stop my involvement with the Chinese teams, I was concerned. When a Chinese official publicly chastised me on a major robotics forum, I was heartbroken. They made it clear that my gender, my youth, and my information sharing approach was not what they wanted.

I considered quitting. But so many students reached out to me requesting help. I wanted to end unnecessary exclusion. I worked to enhance access to my platform. I convinced Amazon to sponsor my site, giving it access to worldwide high-speed servers. Although I worried about repercussions, I continued to translate and share important documents.

During the busy building season, my platform is swamped with discussions, questions and downloads. I have organized a group of friends to help me monitor the platform daily so that no question or request is left unanswered. Some of my fears have come true: I have been banned from several Chinese robotics forums. I am no longer allowed to attend Chinese robotics competitions in China as a mentor. The Chinese government has taken down my site more than once.

Robotics was my first introduction to the wonderful world of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. I am dedicated to the growth of robotics in places where it is needed and wanted. I have used my hands and mind to tear down all barriers that separate people, no matter gender or nationality, from the inspiration and exploration of STEM.

Transformers, robotics and STEM are for boys and girls, even in China.



Ten.

I'm no stranger to contrast. A Chinese American with accented Chinese, a Florida-born Texan, a first generation American with a British passport: no label fits me without a caveat.

But I've always strived to find connections among the dissimilar. In my home across the sea, although my relatives' rapid Mandarin sails over my head, in them I recognize the same work ethic that carried my parents out of rural Shanghai to America, that fueled me through sweltering marching band practices and over caffeinated late nights. I even spend my free time doing nonograms, grid-based logic puzzles solved by using clues to fill in seemingly random pixels to create a picture.

It started when I was a kid. One day, my dad captured my fickle kindergartner attention (a herculean feat) and taught me Sudoku. As he explained the rules, those mysterious scaffoldings of numbers I often saw on his computer screen transformed into complex structures of logic built by careful strategy.

From then on, I wondered if I could uncover the hidden order behind other things in my life. In elementary school, I began to recognize patterns in the world around me: thin, dark clouds signaled rain, the moon changed shape every week, and the best snacks were the first to go. I wanted to know what unseen rules affected these things and how they worked. My parents, both pipeline engineers, encouraged this inquisitiveness and sometimes tried explaining to me how they solved puzzles in their own work. Although I didn't understand the particulars, their analytical mindsets helped me muddle through math homework and optimize matches in Candy Crush.

In high school, I studied by linking concepts across subjects as if my coursework was another puzzle to solve. PEMDAS helped me understand appositive phrases, and the catalysts for revolutions resembled chemical isotopes, nominally different with the same properties.

As I grew older, my interests expanded to include the delicate systems of biology, the complexity of animation, and the nuances of language. Despite these subjects' apparent dissimilarity, each provided fresh, fascinating perspectives on the world with approaches like color theory and evolution. I was (and remain) voracious for the new and unusual, spending hours entrenched in Wikipedia articles on obscure topics, i.e. classical ciphers or dragons, and analyzing absurdist YouTube videos.

Unsurprisingly, like pilot fish to their sharks, my career aspirations followed my varied passions: one day I wanted to be an illustrator, the next a biochemist, then a stand-up comedian. When it came to narrowing down the choices, narrowing down myself, I felt like nothing would satisfy my ever-fluctuating intellectual appetite.

But when I discovered programming, something seemed to settle. In computer science, I had found a field where I could be creative, explore a different type of language, and (yes) solve puzzles. Coding let me both analyze logic in its purest form and manipulate it to accomplish anything from a simple "print 'hello world'" to creating functional games. Even when lines of red error messages fill my console, debugging offered me the same thrill as a particularly good puzzle. Now, when I see my buggy versions of Snake, Paint, and Pacman in my files, I'm filled paradoxically with both satisfaction and a restless itch to improve the code and write new, better programs.

While to others my life may seem like a jumble of incompatible fragments, like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece connects to become something more. However, there are still missing pieces at the periphery: experiences to have, knowledge to gain, bad jokes to tell. Someday I hope to solve the unsolvable. But for now, I've got a nonogram with my name on it.



Eleven.

When I was a little girl, I imagined I had superpowers. Deadly lasers would shoot from my eyes pulverizing the monsters hiding under my bed. Mom would wonder where I had magically disappeared to after I turned invisible as she forced me to eat that plate of broccoli. It was the wish I made on every birthday candle and upon every bright star.

Who knew my dream would come true.

I discovered my first power when I turned 14. My mom had been diagnosed with Ovarian cancer my freshman year of high school. Seated alone in my room, I became lost in a cycle of worry and panic. In the midst of my downward spiral, I reached out for a small bristled paintbrush, guiding it across the canvas--the motion gave me peace. My emotions spilled out onto the canvas, staining my clothes with a palette of blues and blacks. A sense of calm replaced the anxiety and fear which had gripped me tightly for so many months. Painting gave me the power to heal myself and find peace in a scary situation.

Little did I know, sharing my superpower would lead me to unfamiliar parts of my city. I was alerted to trouble at an elementary school in Dallas where students' access to the arts was under threat from budget cuts. I joined forces with the principal and the school's community service representative to create an afterschool arts program. From paper masks in October to pots of sunshine crafts in March, it did more than teach students to freely draw and color; it created a community where kids connected with the power of art to express joy, hope, and identity. The program, now in its third year, has succeeded in reaching kids deprived of art. Sharing art with these students has given me the power to step outside of my familiar surroundings and connect with kids I never would have met otherwise. I am grateful for the power of art to not only heal but to also connect with others.

I knew my powers worked on a local level but I wanted to reach out globally. For four years, I have been searching for a way to defeat the scourge of child marriage, a leading cause of poverty in rural India. I discovered a formula in which girls' education successfully defeats child marriage as part of my capstone project through the Academy of Global Studies (AGS) program at my school.

I took my powers overseas, flying 8,535 miles to arrive at a dilapidated school in the bleak slums of Jaipur, India. While conducting interviews with pre-adolescent girls stuffed into dusty classrooms, I learned of their grey routines: rising early to obtain well-water, cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings prior to rushing to school. Despite the efforts of keeping these girls in school to prevent child marriage, their school relied on rote memorization without any creative arts programming. As I organized my art project for these girls, I was unsure if my powers would reach them. Their initial skepticism and uncertainty slowly transformed into wonder and joy as they brought their bright paper fish cut-outs to life. The experience opened my eyes to the power of art to form universal connections, and it inspires me to share and strengthen its force within the lives of all children.

Much of the little girl yearning for superpowers remains a part of me. But now I have moved beyond wishing for powers to acquiring a deeper understanding of how superpowers work. While I never fulfilled my wish to run at lightning speeds or shoot spiderwebs from my fingers, my experiences with art have taught me that the greatest superpowers lie within each of us -- the powers to create, express, and connect in meaningful ways. Every girl deserves the chance to dream, I am just lucky mine came true.



Twelve.

For most people, the slap on the face that turns their life around is figurative. Mine was literal.

Actually, it was a punch delivered by a drill sergeant at Fort Dix, New Jersey, while I was in basic training. That day's activity, just a few weeks into the program, included instruction in "low-crawling," a sensible method of moving from one place to another on a battlefield. I felt rather clever for having discovered that, by looking right rather than down, I eliminated my helmet's unfortunate tendency to dig into the ground and slow my progress. I could thus advance more easily, but I also exposed my unprotected face to hostile fire. Drill sergeants are typically very good at detecting this type of laziness, and mine was an excellent drill sergeant. So, after his repeated suggestions that I correct my performance went unheeded, he drove home his point with a fist to my face.

We were both stunned. This was, after all, the New Army, and striking a trainee was a career-ending move for a drill sergeant, as we were both aware. I could have reported him; arguably, I should have. I didn't. It didn't seem right for this good sergeant, who had not slept for almost four days, to lose his career for losing his temper with my laziness. Choosing not to report him was the first decision I remember making that made me proud.

I was not a perfect soldier the next day; neither was I the same unmotivated person who, for lack of effort, had failed at virtually everything I had previously attempted. I was determined (itself a novel experience) to apply myself to soldiering.

That was eight years ago. In the interim I have enjoyed a short but distinguished military career, married, fathered a child and resumed my college education. I am currently poised to graduate with honors from [State] University. Looking forward to law school, I can only trust that my distant mistakes are not too costly; I am certain, however, that the lessons I've learned will continue to assist me.



Thirteen.

Three years ago, a man traveled three hours on foot to the prosthetic clinic in Vietnam where I was volunteering to meet me. He sat down at my station and presented his left leg: a homemade prosthetic created from a tree limb.

Mr. Phong lost his leg to a forgotten landmine, a relic of the conflict that brought my family to the United States. Unable to afford a commercial prosthetic, Mr. Phong resorted to his ingenuity to craft a prosthetic from the trunk of a tree, walking with this “limb” for a decade. The atrophy of his remaining thigh coupled with the unconventional placement of his amputation resulted in an exceptionally difficult prosthetic fit. Consumed with the challenge of helping this man walk comfortably again, I began the dozens of adjustments needed for his new prosthetic. Without an existing above-knee socket that would fit him, I got to work with a grinder, cutting, molding, and modifying a below-knee socket to fit his atrophied thigh. As light faded to dusk, Mr. Phong strapped on his new prosthetic. Watching his first steps, I understood the opportunity I had to give back and better understand my family’s origins.

In December 2017 and June 2019, I traveled 9000 miles from home to Vietnam with the Mercer on Mission prosthetic team, taking the same journey my parents did 40 years ago, but in reverse. My perception of Vietnam came from the stories of bullet casings in the streets, or midnight escapes aboard ragged fishing boats, a war-torn country, gripped by communism. My parent’s escape from Vietnam marked the end of the road fleeing oppression and the start of a journey in a new country, faced with a different set of challenges. Being in Vietnam was a surreal experience, witnessing my roots around me and the scars on the country that brought my family to America.

Returning home, I embarked on a journey of my own. Inspired by my time in Vietnam, seeing the enormous impact of people’s lives changed by being given a second chance at walking and armed with skills learned from my school robotics team, I designed and constructed an accessible, inexpensive 3D-printed prosthetic arm for people with limited financial resources. Despite innumerable setbacks and frustration, my prosthetic slowly evolved into a muscle control-based myoelectric arm with a sensory feedback system. With each failure, the design became more fluid and finally developed into a functional, two-pound prototype, costing less than \$200. Once I was able to overcome the mechanical challenges of the design, I was faced with the challenge of testing the prosthetic and communicating the results in a scientific paper. Two full years later, after hundreds of hours spent toiling through both failure and success paid off, “The Effects of Vibrotactile Feedback in a 3D-Printed Myoelectric Prosthetic Arm” was published in The Journal of Emerging Investigators with my name as first author.

Entering the field of medicine, I know more journeys lie ahead. When Mr. Phong lost his leg to a landmine, his struggle dealing with the turmoil living in Vietnam mirrored the hardships that my parents experienced. My parent’s journey took them to a new country of possibilities, but were faced with seemingly insurmountable cultural and language barriers. My own journey involved finding a creative modification for Mr. Phong’s prosthetic leg and the months of struggle I spent finding creative solutions for my prosthetic project. Through tenacity and persistence, we can only hope to end the journey better than we started it. My parents showed me that to get through the hardest journey, we need to take only one step at a time, but we must keep on stepping.

As Mr. Phong returned home to his farm and family, he walked those same miles he covered to meet me once again, but this time with a more prosthetic leg. His confident steps continue to inspire me.



Fourteen.

There are few scents that can mask the distinct smell of the disinfectant of a medical treatment room. I learned during my clinical research internship at Rare Diseases Research (RDR) that infusion treatments have their own particular scent, but also that the smell can be masked by none other than the aroma of Chick-fil-A nuggets.

Twice a week during my internship at RDR, 7-year-old Bobby sat in the infusion chair wearing a small smile that hid the unrelenting pain that Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy inflicted on him. When we first met, he occupied himself with a box of Chick-fil-A nuggets, gluing his eyes to the floor. I asked him a few questions while I worked to prepare the room for his infusion treatment. As the treatments went on, his answers grew from single-word answers, to full sentences. On our third meeting, I found myself in a chair across from his contagious laughter over his new Lego set, sharing his nuggets. The bond we developed may not have been over the experimental treatment that slowed the progression of his disease, but the conversations we shared gave us both a friend in the clinical research center.

That same summer, I had the opportunity to shadow a doctor in a rural family practice in Sandersville, GA. As one of the few doctors in the area, Dr. Kim Kitchens served as the first and last line of defense for his community. After my clinical experiences in Atlanta, what immediately struck me were his first-name greetings with every patient, and the sense of familiarity and trust in the office. Chainsaw, firearm, tractor accidents: he treated them all. In addition to his extensive skill set necessitated by his environment, the sense of community he shared with the residents shone through in every encounter. At the end of the day, Dr. Kitchens retired to his office, breathing a heavy sigh of relief through his KN-95 mask, knowing the responsibility he owed to his town.

In stark contrast, the weekends I spent at Boat People SOS (BPSOS), the public health clinic where physicians volunteer their time to the uninsured, were filled with patients who were so far removed from medical care that they were often living with multiple undetected medical problems. Mr. Tran was once found semi-unconscious with critically elevated glucose from undiagnosed diabetes. Uninsured and living without regular checkups, he did not seek medical treatment in advance. Every patient walking through the door could have been Mr. Tran. I saw the daily medical struggles of uninsured people and developed a true heart for their situation. I remember the countless times when I checked a patient's blood pressure twice, unsure if the astronomical readings were correct or a failure of the cuff. Our medical system may not be perfect, but these physician volunteers help fill the gap in medical care for the uninsured.

Medicine is a career with the potential to have the most significant impact on the lives of others. I have observed this time and time again in clinical research at RDR, in a primary care setting in rural Georgia, and in a public health clinic at BPSOS. This impact is expressed not only in a clinical sense, but through the relationship between physician and patient. I am deeply drawn to this aspect of medicine: asking about a patient's brother without looking at the chart, and making medicine accessible to those with the most need. No matter where my career as a physician takes me, I hope to infuse this sense of familiarity and trust into my exam rooms, down to knowing my patient's order at Chick-fil-A.



Fifteen.

All light beams were fixated on me. Beyond a few visible feet ahead of me, there appeared to be a gradient of pitch black. I didn't see a single person, but I could hear the murmur of thousands. Feelings of nervousness diffused throughout my body, even though performances were my commonplace. As the background music started playing, I opened my mouth and hoped the right pitch would escape my larynx. The moment the notes filled the air, the nerves vanished, and everything clicked into place.

My voice is the place I call home. Although unconventional, it's the source of my comfort, memory, and true self. Like a physical home, my self-expression is the base from which my innovative ideas stem. In a more creative sense, I use my voice to express my forte in music by bridging Western and Indian classical styles, creating a fusion. The confidence it takes in stepping onto a stage before strangers mirrors the strength it takes to voice my opinion among my peers. Additionally, through my musical foundation I view communication as a different sort of dance, which requires its own rhythm. As easily as I traverse notes in a song, I find patterns during communication.

A home, whether physical or mental, should be the place where one feels liberated, protected, and supported. My voice is the unrestricted outlet of my personality and the root of my confidence and strength.



Sixteen.

With a final connection of the battery to the electrical board, the being I had spent the last two months bringing to life whirred into action. The wheels on the intake spun into motion, the drivetrain buzzed with energy, and the lights on the motor controllers flashed bright green with life. I felt a sudden surge of pride knowing the meticulous detail of the 3-D design I made in Solidworks had been executed to perfection, from the initial design concept down to each individual screw.

Although all the students in Cortechs Robotics were given the opportunity to design and create a First Robotics Competition robot, this project connected with me on a deeper level. Since elementary school, I've always labeled myself as a "STEM kid;" all of the electives I've chosen to take have always been science or math-related, the clubs and competitions I have involved myself in almost all incorporate elements of technology or engineering, and even the video games I enjoy playing at home involve large amounts of strategy and critical thinking.

With this building project, however, undiscovered depths of creativity were brought to the surface. The original structural design allowed me my first experience envisioning the broad picture, and took weeks of research and design. Working with other teammates to develop the software that would determine the robot's personality and functionality allowed me to fully extend my computer science abilities, putting a real-life application to one of my favorite school subjects for the first time. The actual building process allowed me to utilize the collaboration skills we had so often practiced in school.

Creative inspiration was drawn from unlikely sources throughout the duration of this project. An English class, while outside my usual realm of academic strengths, provided timed writing exercises which allowed me to build confidence in my creativity, ultimately aiding me in visualizing the concept of the FRC robot. There is something special about the methodical approach authors such as Truman Capote and Jon Krakauer take to captivate their audiences and subtly plant their own opinions in the minds of the reader. Even more rewarding is reading through these works, analyzing these approaches, and being able to write them down in a way for others to understand. I quickly found that this process appealed to my drive in understanding how things work from the inside out.

This building block mentality I used when building the FRC robot is something I have used to structure other life areas. A 5-week internship at Optum, a technology company focused on creating solutions to solve issues and lower costs in the healthcare industry, allowed me to grasp the background details of a future career in the healthcare industry. I was intrigued by this insight into the professional lives of doctors, from a different perspective than my job shadowing experiences provided. Understanding problems in this ever-changing industry from the view of not just a physician or patient, but as an outsider revealed a lot of underlying issues not visible on the surface. Through this experience, I was shocked to learn the amount of money lost in the referral system, and concerned at the number of uninsured patients reluctant to seek medical help due to fear of medical bills.

My team effectively prototyped an application that consolidates information from hospital chargemasters (lists of prices and codes) and makes the information user-friendly. The application also allows users to compare prices for procedures and medications at different hospitals so that they can choose the care that best suits their needs. At the culmination of the internship, I was able to pitch the application to Optum Health executives and physicians for future development. Working on these technical solutions aided my understanding of the entire medical process through the eyes of the patient, and has allowed me to view the medical field from a different angle than just a physician in a clinic.



Seventeen.

I've always had an affinity for language. Ironically, I'm weakest at the language I was born into: Gujarati. My struggle is not comprehension, but my inability to independently form my own words and phrases during conversation. This linguistic divide has weakened my relationship with my grandmother for years.

This past year, I completed my Visharad, or vocal mastery of Hindustani Shastriya Sangeet (Indian Classical Music). Equivalent to a Bachelor's Degree in Music, the seven-year intensive course was filled with nerve-racking practical and written exams along with performances. Despite this, Indian music has been the single most constant and liberating interest I've pursued. It has taught me how to improvise and has given me a voice, aside from my literal one, to glide through strings of *swars*, or notes, to create *alankars*, or graceful melodies.

Almost 70 years ago, my grandmother received the same Bachelor's Degree and to this day she expresses herself using this style of music. As the first in my family's generation to uphold this tradition, it has become the critical tie connecting us together.

Instead of communicating by speaking Gujarati, the years between us melt away when we connect through music. It encompasses moods, tones, melodies, and meaning that words simply do not capture. My goal at NC State is to continue establishing creative ways of communicating with others, by embracing and sharing this diverse, but dwindling form of music.



Eighteen.

High in the icy mountain ranges of Lycea, humanity waged a desperate war against invading alien forces, barely holding them back with the help of a few heroes—a stark contrast to the geometric diagrams and math problems on the other side of the paper. This was just one of many comics I drew on the backs of my worksheets between classes. Over time, I had built an entire world in those comics: forging friendships, exploring realms, waging wars. Though I no longer deface my notes, I still carry with me that same drive to explore and find novel ways to approach situations with my own personal touch.

No matter the subject, I'm always itching to get my hands on something new. Last year, I joined professors at the National University of Singapore's Department of Chemistry to do just that. Initially, I was assigned a minor project to design a water sensor. But I knew there was so much more I could do. During my research, I chanced upon molecularly imprinted polymers (MIPs), which seemed like the perfect material for my sensor. Gathering some research papers, I set off to develop an MIP-based sensor to detect unhealthy levels of heavy metal ions in drinking water and wastewater.

Though perfect as it seemed in planning, none of my early attempts at making the sensor were successful. Naturally, I was disappointed at first. But I resolved to not get discouraged and knew that I just had to look at the problem from a new angle. So, I consulted my mentors for their outside perspective and scoured the literature for alternative procedures and reagents to use. Using this combination of ideas I collected, my change in perspective paid off when I finally produced a successful prototype.

Often, my creative traits help to twist initial challenges into success. Alchemy Club, my high school's chemistry club, keenly felt the impact of the coronavirus. As chairperson, my planned laboratory experiments (such as the Briggs-Rauscher reaction) were cancelled, and we could only hold sessions online. Though this restriction came as quite a disappointment, I saw it as a challenge instead. Once again, I looked at the problem from a different angle, and decided to design a virtual escape room. Blending suspenseful thriller soundtracks and a gripping scenario where teams had to defuse a chemical bomb and escape a laboratory, I kept the club members on their toes. Unbeknownst to the club members, my inspiration came from the old comics I used to draw—a particular episode where the heroes found themselves trapped in a nondescript room with no obvious way out sprang to mind while I thought of ideas for club activities, and all that scenario needed was a refreshing chemical twist.

Whether it's creating a website, racking my brain over a cybersecurity challenge, or training an AI model, the challenge of constantly adapting to solve problems in programming thrills me. This year, as part of a competition, my team and I programmed an AI algorithm for a rescue robot. The task itself—rescuing survivors in a simulated disaster site—wasn't too difficult, but we wanted to spice it up. I came up with the idea to surprise the judges with a victory dance after the robot completed its mission, complete with a disco ball and the rhythm of *Astronomia* straight from our phone speakers. The wide grins on the judges' faces were a reminder that with the right creative mindset, it's easy to bring a little fun to the most serious of situations.

Above all, my greatest thrill is discovering new realms of possibility anywhere and everywhere. In college and in my career, I'll continue to seek out new opportunities to learn more about my passions and hobbies, or even in an area that's totally unfamiliar. New things to learn are always lying just out of sight—it just takes a little creativity for them to come to light.



Nineteen.

“SAI SEVA TRUST. ORPHANAGE + DIGI-SCHOOL,” the faded sign read. Our car pulled into a narrow, bumpy, dirt road and parked by a small cement building. Emerging, I greeted my grandpa in front of the orphanage he founded. He eagerly introduced me to a group of children in the front courtyard, happily laughing as they kicked a ball with their bare feet.

“These are my relatives, visiting from America. Why don’t you let them join your game?” he told them in Telugu, the native language.

“Brother, what is America like?” asked a young boy of roughly 8 years, with messy dark hair falling into his eyes and an ear-to-ear grin.

It took me a minute to realize he was talking to me since he called me “brother.” Here, your friends were your “brothers and sisters.”

Not knowing where to start, I gave my own broken Telugu a shot. “It’s very different from here,” I responded. “The weather isn’t always hot. In winter months we have-” I stumbled over the Telugu word for “snow.”

“It’s like powdered hail,” I finished weakly to the confused faces before me.

Sensing my awkwardness, my grandpa began showing me around the facility. The orphanage resembled a farm from the 1950s, with a water pump and a small garden. The open classrooms on the rooftop had no doors, all sharing a dozen desks. The computer lab held ancient monitors and keyboards underneath layers of dust. Over the week I spent there, I immersed myself in games with the children and assisting staff members in managing their daily lives.

Finally, on the last day, the same boy ran up to me. “Brother, will you ever come back?”

“It’s very far from home, but I hope so,” I responded.

“What if I want to come see the snow?” he asked, hope stretching across his face imagining this unknown notion.

“If you ever make it to America, I would love to show you the snow,” I promised. As I left my email address to stay in touch, my mind drifted to their ancient computers.

Before I left, it felt right to leave some parting gifts. In addition to a monetary donation to the orphanage, my family gave cricket bats and soccer balls to the children, along with the introduction to American candies. Their joy mirrored my own, but I left wanting to do more. I could not simply return to the comforts of home and forget what I’d seen. As I flew home, I reflected on how these kids inspired me, finding happiness in so little. They had touched my heart.

As soon as my plane touched American soil, I researched large corporations for fundraising. That’s where the roadblocks began. I looked up the most generous companies donating to charitable causes, and reached out to ones whose missions seemed to align with the orphanage. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, no response. The Walmart Foundation, no response. Microsoft for Nonprofits, no response.

Through my research, I learned that the orphanage resided under a larger corporation owning many orphanages. Although I continued to try to fundraise in my local community, it was difficult to pinpoint where the money I raised was actually being directed; which orphanage received the funds. I believe there should be an easier way for the individual to connect directly to similar causes, without having to use these large corporations as middlemen.

I intend to continue to address and draw attention to this global issue. In college, I will partner with like-minded organizations to transcend borders by raising funds to help children in developing countries receive an education and necessary resources. Although I am thousands of miles away from that orphanage in India, a piece of it stayed with me. I am eager to use my own education to help bring about real change, education for all children, and attention to global issues that plague the most vulnerable.



Twenty.

When you're young, growing up in a loving family, it's hard to imagine the day you will not all be living under the same roof. A few years ago, my father accepted a job to be part of an extended project that would last at least two years. The job, however, was in India-halfway around the world.

I noticed his absence in little ways at first: more time to get ready in the bathroom every morning, fewer dirty dishes to wash, the lack of Mission: Impossible movies that would play on repeat in the background on weekends. But as the weeks passed by, the changes became more personal. The house began to feel empty, like a room was missing, and I suddenly found myself feeling restricted. Who would help me reason through answers when I was confused with math homework? Who would wish me good luck before every debate tournament? Who was my standing date to the movie theaters to watch every highly-anticipated film of the year? I found myself resenting how alone I felt in my daily routine.

One night, my brother opened up to me about his own difficulty in adjusting to our new circumstances. Our house was lacking structure, he said, and he was becoming increasingly disconnected, both in school and at home.

Preoccupied with my own set of difficulties, I had failed to notice the impact my father's absence had on my brother. I realized that he too, had essentially lost a role model at a pivotal moment in his life. That night, he opened up about the need to take on a greater role in the household while managing his academically challenging workload. We had been fighting parallel battles the whole time, and yet my recognition of his distress was delayed. I blamed it on the fact that we were never very close as children. We grew up as two strangers living under the same roof, each of our noses buried in different genres of books.

Despite our differences, my brother and I were able to unite as we both stepped into new household responsibilities. I found myself in brand new positions, sometimes taking charge of yearly spring cleaning or even assuming role of interior designer. My mother also faced new challenges, balancing her own professional workload with her new head-of-household duties. This experience taught me the importance of realizing the universality of personal struggle. Everyone faces adversity, everyone has conflicts, and everyone certainly has pain in their lives. I understood then, more than ever, the importance of recognizing the pain of others, even when you are at your lowest point.

Empathy has been a major player throughout most of my activities since this pivotal experience. Despite my extensive volunteering through the Speech and Debate Club and Student Council, the most rewarding experience has come from the time I spend with elementary students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in an unofficial tutoring role.

With science as my strongest subject and intended major, educating had never exactly been high on my radar. When I was first asked to tutor students who were struggling in this area by the elementary school's principal, I agreed because she was a family friend. Now, the reason I continue tutoring is because I love watching the light in a child's eyes when they finally connect the dots of the problem before them. This opportunity has opened my eyes to the world that exists outside my own little bubble. I was introduced to a community full of young minds, who, despite being from an underserved area of the city, are full of determination to make something of themselves.

The connections I see sparking in their young faces inspires me to seek connections on a deeper level. In my opinion, healing is the highest form of connection we can hope to achieve. This desire for connection is the motivation behind my pursuit of medicine.



Twenty One.

The wheat comes from across the globe to unite with the cage-free eggs. Next, the baking soda reacts with each grain of sugar, salt, and baking powder. In the oven, all of the chemicals slowly, but elegantly, resolve into dome-shaped muffins. I expected perfection, but after the first bite, I realized it was lacking something: the element of surprise.

Hours of watching *Cake Boss* turned into an insatiable desire to design my own masterpiece. Searching recipes on Pinterest left me uninspired, so my creative mind came to the rescue. The process of baking remained the same, but this time with hints of unconventional ingredients. Orange juice, an unexpected addition to most recipes, bursts onto the palate when sampling my signature banana muffins. Now the creations I pull from the oven are no longer figments of my creative imagination, but tangible proof of my ability to improvise and invent.

In my opinion, baking is a lost art among the youth of our generation. To me, baking is not just the ability to follow a recipe, but an opportunity to put my own spin on a classic taste.

My creations that come to life in the oven are snippets of my personality: the designs I envision shows my inventive nature, the intricate flavors convey my attention to detail, the secret ingredients within illustrate my spontaneity, and the batter represents my ability to rise to the occasion.

