

Essays That Worked

Below are samples of several good essays which were part of successful applications to selective American Universities. These are only examples, and are offered here simply to aid students in their selection of topic and style. In no case should anyone copy directly from these essays. Some of the essays are followed by readers' comments.

College Essay Samples: Personal Growth

A Visit to Rural Kenya (Harvard)

At the end of July of '95, I boarded a plane that would take me from my home in Cincinnati, Ohio, to Nairobi, Kenya. My parents had always wanted to take our family abroad, but when my mother signed a contract to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Kenya, plans materialized, and we were soon on our way to an exotic year in Africa.

Besides the farewells I had to make to my friends at home, I had few reservations about living abroad. What made it easy for me to come to Africa was my eagerness to immerse myself in a new culture. I knew that I might never get such an experience again, so I was determined to learn all I could about the language, the history, and the people, of that far-off place.

During the first few months of our stay, my family took various trips around the country. We watched zebra and wildebeest migrate across the Serengeti, saw hippos floating like rocks in Lake Victoria, marveled at flamingos balancing knee-deep in a salt-lake. We climbed an extinct volcano in the Rift Valley. We snorkeled in the Indian Ocean and fed fish from our fingers. We hiked 17,000 feet above sea level to the peak of Mt. Kenya. And we studied Swahili, the local language, every evening after dinner. But in late October my aunt came to visit for a month. She romanced us with stories of her experiences in rural Africa working in the Peace Corps. The sharp contrast between the simple lifestyle she described and the one I was leading shocked me as to how un-African my life was. I went to an American school every day with mostly Europeans and Asians, which, despite being a unique experience itself, isolated me from the larger Kenyan community. I was also living in a city, where shopping malls, Italian restaurants, late-night discos, and movie theaters were all available close at hand. Was this really what I had come to see? My daily activities were almost the same as the ones in the United States. I typed English essays late at night on a computer; I showered with hot water every day after soccer practice; I dined on fried chicken or fish fillets or hamburgers. I was in the midst of a swarm of expatriates who had formed a community so tight that I could live with all the luxuries of a technologically-modern lifestyle. I saw my problem: I had wound myself so tightly in the routine of my school life that I was no longer seeing Kenya or even Kenyans. I yearned to know some of the African culture, but I didn't know how that could be achieved without a drastic break in my academic progress, which I wasn't willing to sacrifice.

After talking over this issue with my parents, I stumbled upon the perfect solution. [name] is the son of [name] and [name], with whom my mother lived twenty years ago when she came to Kenya as a volunteer nurse. [name] was living with us while he attended [name] College, but he was going back to his home village to visit his family over the Christmas holidays. I could go with him and stay with his family there.

This excursion proved to be the most rewarding ten days of my entire stay in Africa. In that short period, I learned more about Kenyan culture than I had in the five months prior to that time. First of all, I witnessed how different the female role is in Kenya than in America. The women-young and old-did about twice the work the men did. They had to cook the meals, get the milk, sweep the house, chop the firewood, take care of the children; the list goes on and on. The men did some work on the farm, but mostly they enjoyed a laid-back lifestyle. And it is not uncommon for a man to have more than one wife. [Name] has had a total of three women as wives. What seems unheard-of to a Westerner is commonplace to a Kenyan.

I also saw an intense restlessness for change. When the men sat around the dinner table (women weren't allowed to eat with them), they would not merely discuss the weather or the latest gossip of the village. No, they debated the problems and merits of Kenya and what could be done to improve their country. They voiced their apprehension of the government, their fear that if they openly opposed the established authority, their family could be persecuted by the president's special agents. They talked of the A.I.D.S. epidemic spreading through the working class like wildfire. They expressed their anger at the drug abuse of their nation's youth. But these men were unwilling to accept the obstacles they faced and instead looked toward solutions-education, fairer elections, less corruption, and others. I also saw that a primitive life is not necessarily a painful one. Theirs is a simple life-one without running water, or electricity, or telephones, or cars. But being simple did not mean it was a pleasureless life. It meant fetching water every day from a well. It meant cooking over a fire and reading by a lantern. It meant walking to school instead of driving. But it also meant no expensive phone bills, no wallet-straining car repairs, no broken washing machines. A simple life had its hardships, but it also avoided the hassles that Americans face in their complex modern lives. In the village, we ate good food, children screamed and shouted with joy, we laughed while playing card games, we flipped through old photo albums. Their lifestyle was vastly different from mine, but they still had the same goals that I did: to have fun, to get a good education, to be comfortable. After the New Year, when I returned to my home in Nairobi, I went back carrying in my mind a vivid picture of rural Kenya, but also satisfied that I had learned something that could not be found in Nairobi's American expatriate community.

**** Comments by Admissions Officers ****

- This essayist benefited from having had an unusual travel experience and from knowing how to write about it using lots of colorful detail. Two officers mentioned that the writer could have improved the essay by making her conclusion more reflective. "What do these things mean?" asked one. "In the conclusion, the all-important self-reflection is absent. . . . Remember, if you want to write an essay about your immersion in a foreign culture, you must be able to articulate how you've grown from the experience; a mere recounting of events is not enough."

- This is very well written. I especially like the vivid descriptions of the African scenes. It shows us a young woman who is extremely open to new experiences, who wants to immerse herself completely in whatever new situation comes her way. She would be a valuable addition to an entering class.

•Solid all-around essay from beginning to end. This is one of those essays that you hope more students would write. This student knows what it takes to compose a quality essay. It is told in an expressive way that allows you to envision the experience yourself. Excellent form and writing. This student has a keen sense for details and how to tell a story.

(Stanford & Amherst) □□

Often I lie awake in my bed at night, not moving, too exhausted even to read. The ceiling fan turns slowly overhead, the sheets are smooth and comfortable, and the house lies in the quiet stillness of night, yet I do not sleep. For hours, I am lost in contemplation, my mind incessantly weaving threads of thought together in strange patterns. I silently drift in the darkness through a landscape of intangible ideas, groping for meaning behind the shadow of existence. What is it to be? I have spent years with this question, privately turning it over, searching for its nature, for the form of its answer. I have truly been haunted by Being.

Thus philosophy for me was at first a personal matter, a dream that forced its way into my head during the night. The thoughts arose as from a vacuum, unprovoked, and persisted in their senseless hold over my mind. Yet slowly I learned that others had faced these same questions, that they had spent their lives searching for the answers, and that, most importantly, they had left a written record of their search for meaning. Great minds throughout history had left a legacy which I could follow, turning my insoluble reflections into a legitimate, potentially lifelong exploration. As time permitted, I studied philosophy, reading whatever I could find, and my quest for the nature of Being took on a more tangible presence.

Last year I joined the Humanities Forum, a program in which philosophy professors from Emory University and other Atlanta area colleges offer informal courses on a variety of themes. The classes permitted me to make a more systematic and rewarding study than my private readings allowed. Each class meets for two hours once a week, and is composed of undergraduate students, graduate students, and professionals from virtually every field. I am the youngest participant. I began the program with a twelve-week course called "Our Civilization," with primary readings from Alexis de Tocqueville, Adam Smith, and Friedrich Nietzsche, in which we evaluated what modern culture has lost in comparison to ancient Greek and medieval value systems and social structures. Later, in "Plato vs. Descartes: Ancient and Modern Philosophy," we explored the distinctive natures of the two philosophical eras by examining the thought of an influential thinker from each period. I am currently enrolled in "Heidegger, Metaphysics, and Nihilism." We are examining Heidegger's thesis that nihilism is the culmination of Western metaphysics by reading and discussing a variety of his works. Heidegger is the most profound thinker I have encountered; I often find myself forced to reread passages to grasp the meaning hidden within. In Heidegger, I have found the closest approach to the truth of Being, the truth I still contemplate alone at night.

Occasionally I come upon a familiar concept in my philosophical reading, one which I recognize as my own. To see my private musings, which seemed only ephemeral and abstract, expressed in the writings of a great thinker excites me to pure exhilaration. That this elusive creature Being has haunted others gives me hope; I now look forward to the setting of the sun and the sleepless night ahead.

*** Comments by Admissions Officers who Assisted in the Creation of this Course ***

•Most of our panel admired this essay for its passion and depth of thought. Here are some comments: Wow. This is a virtuoso. This essay is intelligent, creative, thoughtful, descriptive, humble, and interesting. The author is obviously a profound thinker, well beyond his years in his grasp of deep philosophical ideas. He writes with intelligence and sophistication about concepts that many of his peers seldom even consider.

College Essay Samples: Achievements

Martial arts competition (Brown)

A faint twinge of excitement floated through my body that night. A hint of anticipation of the coming day could not be suppressed; yet to be overcome with anxiety would not do at all. I arduously forced those pernicious thoughts from seeping in and overcoming my body and mind. I still wonder that I slept at all that night.

But I did. I slept soundly and comfortably as those nervous deliberations crept into my defenseless, unsuspecting mind, pilfering my calm composure. When I awoke refreshed, I found my mind swarming with jumbled exhilaration. The adrenaline was flowing already.

After a quick breakfast, I pulled some of my gear together and headed out. The car ride of two hours seemed only a few moments as I struggled to reinstate order in my chaotic consciousness and focus my mind on the day before me. My thoughts drifted to the indistinct shadows of my memory.

My opponent's name was John Doe. There were other competitors at the tournament, but they had never posed any threat to my title. For as long as I had competed in this tournament, I had easily taken the black belt championship in my division. John, however, was the most phenomenal martial artist I had ever had the honor of witnessing at my young age of thirteen. And he was in my division. Although he was the same rank, age, size, and weight as I, he surpassed me in almost every aspect of our training. His feet were lightning, and his hands were virtually invisible in their agile swiftness. He wielded the power of a bear while appearing no larger than I. His form and techniques were executed with near perfection. Although I had never defeated his flawlessness before, victory did not seem unattainable. For even though he was extraordinary, he was not much more talented than I. I am not saying that he was not skilled or even that he was not more skilled than I, for he most certainly was, but just not much more than I. I still had one hope, however little, of vanquishing this incredible adversary, for John had one weakness: he was lazy. He didn't enjoy practicing long hours or working hard. He didn't have to. Nevertheless, I had found my passage to triumph.

My mind raced even farther back to all my other failures. I must admit that my record was not very impressive. Never before had I completed anything. I played soccer. I quit. I was a Cub Scout. I quit. I played trumpet. I quit. Karate was all I had left. The championship meant so much because I had never persevered with anything else.

In the last months, I had trained with unearthly stamina and determination. I had focused all my energies into practicing for this sole aspiration. Every day of the week I trained. Every evening, I could be found kicking, blocking, and punching at an imaginary opponent in my room. Hours of constant drilling had improved my techniques and speed. All my techniques were ingrained to the point where they were instinctive. Days and weeks passed too swiftly. . . .

I was abruptly jolted back into the present. The car was pulling into the parking lot. The tournament had too quickly arrived, and I still did not feel prepared for the trial which I was to confront. I stepped out of the car into the bright morning sun, and with my equipment bag in hand, walked into the towering building.

The day was a blur. After warming up and stretching, I sat down on the cold wooden floor, closed my eyes, and focused. I cleared my mind of every thought, every worry, and every insecurity. When I opened my eyes, every sense and nerve had become sharp and attentive, every motion finely tuned and deliberate.

The preliminary rounds were quiet and painless, and the championship fight was suddenly before me. I could see that John looked as calm and as confident as ever. Adrenaline raced through my body as I stepped into the ring. We bowed to each other and to the instructor, and the match began.

I apologize, but I do not recall most of the fight. I do faintly remember that when time ran out the score was tied, and we were forced to go into Sudden Death: whoever scored the next point would win. That, however, I do recall.

I was tired. The grueling two points that I had won already had not been enough. I needed one more before I could taste triumph. I was determined to win, though I had little energy remaining. John appeared unfazed, but I couldn't allow him to discourage me. I focused my entire being, my entire consciousness, on overcoming this invincible nemesis. I charged. All my strenuous training, every molecule in my body, every last drop of desire was directed, concentrated on that single purpose as I exploded through his defenses and drove a solitary fist to its mark.

I was not aware that I would never fight John again, but I would not have cared. Never before had I held this prize in my hands, but through pure, salty sweat and vicious determination, the achievement that I had desired so dearly and which meant so much to me was mine at last. This was the first time that I had ever really made a notable accomplishment in anything. This one experience, this one instant, changed me forever. That day I found self-confidence and discovered that perseverance yields its own sweet fruit. That day a sense of invincibility permeated the air. Mountains were nothing. The sun wasn't so bright and brilliant anymore. For a moment, I was the best.

Comments by Admissions Officers

- The admissions officers admired this essay for its passion and sincerity. Other suggestions for improvement were "purely editorial" such as the overuse of adjectives and adverbs, use of passive voice, and making contradictory statements. "For example, he says, 'I slept soundly and comfortably as those nervous deliberations crept into my defenseless, unsuspecting mind, pilfering my calm composure.' How could he sleep

soundly and comfortably if the nervous deliberations were pilfering his calm composure? There are a few other examples like that that I won't go into here. I would just suggest that the author look carefully to be sure his ideas stay consistent and support one another."

- What I like about this essay from the point of view of an admission officer is that I am convinced that the change in attitude described by the author is real. I do believe that he will carry with him forever the hard-won knowledge that he can attain his goals, that perseverance and hard work will eventually allow him to succeed in any endeavor. This is an important quality to bring to the college experience. Especially when considering applications to prestigious institutions, the admission committee will want to feel sure that the applicants understand the need for hard work and perseverance. Many times the strongest-looking applicants are students for whom academic success has come so easily that the challenges of college come as a shock. I always like hearing stories like this, of students who know what it means to struggle and finally succeed.

College Essay Samples: Influences

(Princeton)

It took me eighteen years to realize what an extraordinary influence my mother has been on my life. She's the kind of person who has thoughtful discussions about which artist she would most want to have her portrait painted by (Sargent), the kind of mother who always has time for her four children, and the kind of community leader who has a seat on the board of every major project to assist Washington's impoverished citizens. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her enthusiasms. I not only came to love the excitement of learning simply for the sake of knowing something new, but I also came to understand the idea of giving back to the community in exchange for a new sense of life, love, and spirit.

My mother's enthusiasm for learning is most apparent in travel. I was nine years old when my family visited Greece. Every night for three weeks before the trip, my older brother Peter and I sat with my mother on her bed reading Greek myths and taking notes on the Greek Gods. Despite the fact that we were traveling with fourteen-month-old twins, we managed to be at each ruin when the site opened at sunrise. I vividly remember standing in an empty amphitheatre pretending to be an ancient tragedian, picking out my favorite sculpture in the Acropolis museum, and inserting our family into modified tales of the battle at Troy. Eight years and half a dozen passport stamps later I have come to value what I have learned on these journeys about global history, politics and culture, as well as my family and myself.

While I treasure the various worlds my mother has opened to me abroad, my life has been equally transformed by what she has shown me just two miles from my house. As a ten year old, I often accompanied my mother to (name deleted), a local soup kitchen and children's center. While she attended meetings, I helped with the Summer Program by chasing children around the building and performing magic tricks. Having finally perfected the "floating paintbrush" trick, I began work as a full time volunteer with the five and six year old children last June. It is here that I met Jane Doe, an exceptionally strong girl with a vigor that is contagious. At the end of the summer, I decided to continue my work at (name deleted) as Jane's tutor. Although the position is often

difficult, the personal rewards are beyond articulation. In the seven years since I first walked through the doors of (name deleted), I have learned not only the idea of giving to others, but also of deriving from them a sense of spirit.

Everything that my mother has ever done has been overshadowed by the thought behind it. While the raw experiences I have had at home and abroad have been spectacular, I have learned to truly value them by watching my mother. She has enriched my life with her passion for learning, and changed it with her devotion to humanity. In her endless love of everything and everyone she is touched by, I have seen a hope and life that is truly exceptional. Next year, I will find a new home miles away. However, my mother will always be by my side.

Comments

- The topic of this essay is the writer's mother. However, the writer definitely focuses on herself. She manages to impress the reader with her travel experience, volunteer and community experience, and commitment to learning without ever sounding boastful or full of herself. The essay is also well organized.

Essays that Worked at Connecticut College

Dushane Ramsay '06
Fieldston School, New York, NY

The long hand crept to the seven digit; the short hand stayed glued between the two and the three. The silent bells went off in everyone's head, triggering automatic devices that enable us to pack up, signaling to the teacher that it was time to go home. They poured out into the hallway, filling the space in the same manner that blood rushes into blood vessels. I stood in the midst of the un-connected segment of the senior corridor, the chaos did not blockade the thoughts passing through my head, as I stood, in observation. I observed the similarity of their rosy vanilla pigment, their GAP slacks and their Abercrombie and Fitch shirts, the tax brackets their parents fell into, their upbringing, even their names: mostly Dans, Julias, Jakes, Emilys and Johns. Not to deny the uniqueness of each of the students, but the recurring epiphany I have is that there is only one Dushane. I smile.

The sun is shining brightly, and there is a faint wave of actual heat; heat, it is usually joked, I should absorb most of because I am the darkest person in the entire school, whose population might be something close to one thousand. My eyes peruse the area, jumping from clump to clump. The clumps are the students who flock together because they are birds of a feather, as they say. I can overhear their weekend plans from my position in front of the unofficial main doors at the top of the stairs. Trips to country houses, sleepovers, concerts, parties at clubs that have thirty-five dollar admission prices, and me... chillin'. I do not have any country house to travel to, or anyone's house to spend the night at (nor parents who would allow it), the money for concerts or expensive clubs; the only means of entertainment I have are my friends. My financial

affluence, now that I think about it again, is, was, and maybe always will be the reason why I haven't spent more time with my other classmates. On no weekends have I gone into "the city" to "chill" with Jonas, or play video games with John, or walk Fifth Avenue with Julia. Moving into a new social climate where everyone is alike, grew up together and knew each other well intimidated me, but not nearly as much as being the poor kid. I preferred to stay in the Bronx rather than be the poor kid who held everyone back from what they really wanted to do; I loathed the idea of being the dead appendage in the instant of spontaneity, all because I did not have enough money. And stay in the Bronx I did. I went to the projects with Shyquon, or played video games with Shaun, or walked down White Plains Road with Simone, because in this environment, I was not the poor kid.

The camera does the action again; it widens the scope from my inner thoughts to the real world, and just in time, before I collide into a miniscule middle-schooler. "My fault big man," I apologized with my acquired urban, Bronx, accent. He nodded and skimpered away to board the big cheese bus that would take him home. There were cheese busses at my old school as well, that's where I picked up the expression. It is also where I picked up the "ghetto" accent I use. It is where I had to adjust myself to a certain mind frame that proclaimed I was tough. My mind frame emanated everything that I had absorbed from MTV, BET, Puff Daddy, and all the other gods of hip hop culture, the things I had picked up from the popular kids in school, and the social skills I needed to survive. This climate was one that was very charged (I am not certain if the charge was positive or negative), where if one wanted to "fit in," everything from the way one spoke to the way one walked needed to be similar to the majority. Although there were beneficial aspects of going to school and living in this environment, it contained elements that would set me back when I came to Fieldston, and when I realized that the world was bigger than the "ghetto." I reminisced about my freshman year, how difficult it was to dissolve into Fieldston, not only socially, but also academically. For a moment I wished I were that miniscule middle-schooler who would not have to make the transition between public school and Fieldston. The techniques necessary for his survival had been given to him without his even knowing it. He would never have to wonder why his grades lacked and spiraled downwards; his mind was already set to a standard that he would keep when he entered high school. My standard was substantially lower, I remembered, with mostly apathetic teachers only trying to make a buck, regurgitating lesson plans from years before to save them the trouble of actually teaching. That middle school boy would not have to realize that his best grade where he had come from was the equivalent of a median grade at Fieldston, that he was behind in the race and missing a shoe. I wished I were he. But the feeling passed.

My feeling of envy was washed away by a wave of feeling accomplished. Now, as I walk towards the bus that will take me back to my neighborhood, I realize that what hasn't killed me has only made me stronger and that something great must result from these trials. Great things lie ahead of me. There are new places to be explored, new adversities to overcome with the techniques I have learned from the Fieldston experience. This experience has given me a new zest for life, a new quest for education, and a yearning to apply my acquired knowledge to life. I now have pride, which shortens the gap between my disadvantages and another's advantage. I have broken out of my cocoon, now yielding to no social boundaries and meeting head-on any academic challenge. After the night, comes the day. I have lived through a night that has lasted four long, hard, beautiful years; the day brings great things.

Emelia Meckstroth '06
Princeton Day School, Princeton, NJ

Rishikesh smelled of mildewed incense and cattle. The Ganges shimmered, with crowds of women washing clothing to dry under the midday sun. It was cold, the mountains still casting long shadows across the ashram, my hair damp from bathing in the river.

"You bathe in Mother Ganga? Cleanse the mind!" a street vendor told me as he placed souvenirs on his table. The creases of his face deepened as he smiled and pressed a stack of bangles over my knuckles. He could barter each rupee, but his soul would be cleansed with every touch of the waters.

To a westerner, the innocence was startling; the purity of the lifestyle and the devotion to religion was incomprehensible. How odd it was to pass farmlands where the people lived in mud huts when their temple was painted bright colors and shimmering gold. I could accept this about India, but felt as though I would never be able to understand it, no matter how hard I tried.

I thanked the man, smiled and turned away. His calls of dropped prices trailed me down the street.

In a dark corner of the next shop, I opened a purple wall hanging with a complicated print of Ganesha, his elephant eyes staring back with eerie attention. Entranced, I barely noticed the small hands fingering through my hair, peeling back the curled red strands from their messy bun.

I turned to smile, and caught the eyes of a tiny girl, no more than six. She wore a red-brown school dress covered by a dirty sweater so tattered it bared her left shoulder. The girl jumped, lowered her eyes, and clasped her hands behind her. Her hair hid her face, but when she looked out, I saw a tear roll off her cheek. I leaned in and smiled, hoping to shake her embarrassment.

"Namasté," I whispered to her, bowing my head to clasped hands. She giggled with brightening eyes, but quickly turned back to her feet.

"What's your name?"

She stood there, shy eyes darting from me to the floor and back again. I reached for my hair, pulled it from the bun, and let it cascade over my shoulders. She giggled and reached out to touch, but ran off before her fingers could grasp.

For a moment, I tried to stop her, but instead watched her run down the riverbank. She stopped there, but waved back.

I smiled as I tried to take in my surroundings, the peace of the river and the innocence of the girl. The sense of belonging here was overwhelming, and I reached down for a rock to keep that moment with me.

Later, tears fell from my eyes as I watched Rishikesh fade away through the bus window. Something about the girl sticks with me when I think of India. It might have been the brief moment of understanding between us where our barriers faded away. It might have been how the differences between us, so ingrained at first, became as superficial as the color of our hair. I still keep the rock in my pocket. It's grown a little smoother and lost its smell, but it reminds me of all that I learned in Rishikesh. It murmurs to me of how that bath in Mother Ganga did cleanse me, how I started anew, with an understanding of innocence, and with it, India.

Jesse Estrin '05

Windward School, Los Angeles, California

I wasn't quite sure how to react. I had never been called a "white boy" before, especially by someone I hardly knew. As I turned my head not knowing what to expect, I found myself face to face with a grinning boy, whose crooked smile gave him an almost devilish appearance. This was my first encounter with Oscar Jovel, an El Salvadorian student on our Global Routes trip to Thailand over the summer.

You could imagine my delight when I heard that we would be living together with a Thai family and sharing the same bed for six straight weeks. During the next couple of days I was faint with apprehension. The first thing both of our eyes fell on when we arrived at our tiny Thai house was the five by four foot bed we would share. It was extremely small, in respect to both length and width, with a bright pink mosquito net hanging around it. That first night, we often woke up, cramped and hot, to discover ourselves literally on top of each other. Although initially embarrassing, we began to find the situation more and more comical. To our surprise and delight, we discovered that we had the same sense of humor. From then on, we discussed our sleeping habits openly and complained about the other's loud snoring. We began to stay up late into the night discussing our lives and the difficult issues we each had to deal with.

One night we talked into the early hours of the morning about his life in San Francisco. I could only listen wide-eyed and in disbelief as he talked about how close he had been to joining an El Salvadorian gang. I watched him with intense curiosity as he slowly told his story. I noticed how he would almost squeeze his eyes closed with his large cheeks when he was remembering something that made him angry, or thrust his chin out in a clumsy manner when he was excited. He told me of how he had been ready to be beaten into the gang. When I asked him why he would be willing to do that, he responded by describing how vicious his world was, and then explained that the initiation was a tiny price for the protection he would get from the gang in return.

My respect for him only increased when I sat silently as he told me of his best friend who had been shot in the head in a drive-by shooting. Oscar had been playing basketball with him in a park when it happened. I saw his eyes search our dimly lit room as he vividly recalled the horrifying moment. I felt as if a sealed door had just blown open. That door could never close again. As I sat with the real Oscar who lived daily with gunfire, gang violence, and lost friends, our souls connected, and we began to bond in a way only two young, eager, curious, and blossoming seventeen year-old boys could. I began to recognize that he was just a young boy with the same dreams and ambitions as I, who was seeking the same success and happiness in this world. I

then noticed how his dreams of becoming an architect or a famous soccer player for El Salvador were quite similar to mine.

This intense relationship with Oscar has opened doors to new understandings for me, and has drawn me further out of my sheltered cocoon. Oscar not only changed my perceptions, he impacted the way I live my daily life. It took meeting Oscar for me to realize that, although I have visited many poor countries, such as Africa, Vietnam, and Mexico, some of the most extreme poverty actually does exist in my own backyard. By being an activist in several organizations, particularly the Drug Policy Foundations, a group determined to change the way our country is fighting drugs and gang related problems, I feel much more connected to my community. I remember being intrigued and concerned when I first discovered that our country's war on drugs is discriminating against difference races, especially Hispanics and Blacks. Now I better understand and relate to what Oscar said to me during one of our first deep talks. "The most important thing you can do," he said, directly and without the slightest trace of hesitation, "is help out your community. Never forget that."

Stacey Petrek'05

New Trier Township High School, Winnetka, IL

Follow the Leader

Her spry, Timberland-clad foot planted itself upon a jagged boulder, motionless, until her calf muscles tightened and catapulted her small frame into the next stride. Then Sara's dance continued, her feet playing effortlessly with the difficult terrain. As her foot lifted from the ground, compressed mint-colored lichen would spring back into position, only to be crushed by my immense boot, struggling to step where hers had been. My eyes fixated on the forest floor, as fallen trees, swollen roots, and unsteady rocks posed constant threats for my exhausted body. Without glancing up I knew what was ahead: the same dense, impenetrable green that had surrounded us for hours. My throat prickled with unfathomable thirst, as my long-empty Nalgene bottle slapped mockingly at my side. Gnarled branches snared at my clothes and tore at my hair, and I blindly hurled myself after Sara. The portage had become a battle, and the ominously darkening sky raised the potential for casualties. Gritting my teeth with gumption, I refused to stop; I would march on until I could no longer stand.

Suddenly, Sara's light step halted and she turned to face me. From her hazel eyes blazed an intensity of exhilaration and courage, which mingled with pride and concern as she surveyed my resolute expression. I watched longingly as Sara unfastened the Nalgene bottle from her side; one sip of water sloshed tantalizingly at the bottom of the bottle, heightening my senses into acute desire. Sweat poured down from my face, biting at my eyes, and after I dabbed at them with my shirt, I saw Sara was presenting the water bottle to me. Both anticipating and squelching my refusing, Sara said simply, "Drink, Stacy. You cannot help the group when there is nothing left of yourself to give." For a moment we grinned at each other, as gratitude and wonder for her selflessness coursed in my veins. The cool water instantly revived my strength and love for the trail. Then Sara removed the rustic compass from around her neck and slid it over my own. She swung her arm around my shoulder and raised an eyebrow, inviting me to lead.

Euphorically, I grasped the smooth plastic, flushed with pride that Sara believed I could lead the group to safety. Then ruthless doubt sliced through my enthusiasm as I realized that I completely lacked a sense of direction. Frantically, I tried to remember the idiotic mnemonic device for the compass we had learned prior to the trip: was it "red shed over Fred?" or simply, "Fred's red shed?" What came after I put "Red Fred in the shed?" How could "Fred" possibly make sense of this green abyss? I turned my confused face up to Sara's and saw the confidence in her eyes reflect the possibility of my own. In her smile I saw permission to fail, in her eyes the reassurance of success. I stared pointedly at the flickering red needle, oriented Fred, and raised the compass to the green. Without hesitation I pointed the direction onward and the group advanced.

A year later I found myself again in the land of the redwood pine. Only now ten bright, excited, youthful faces believed I had all of the answers. I was to be their leader through the wilderness; their guide to a world of awe-inspiring beauty, elemental priorities, and fulfilled potential. I fervently wanted to instill a love for the trail within each of my campers; to share the overwhelming appreciation of nature, others, and self that resulted from my own experience. However, apprehension whispered self-doubt: what if I wasn't ready to lead? What if my girls hated the trail? What if I was not strong enough? Suddenly the memory of Sara flared up in my mind's eye and silenced all doubts, her examples once again blazing a trail for me to follow. With her memory as my core to security and knowledge, I packed my campers into the canoes, and we set off, a camp song on my lips and hunger for the wilderness within my heart. Whenever challenges arose, Sara stood beside me; her rational eyes scrutinized the sky for advancing storms; her inexhaustible patience built a roaring fire out of wet wood; and her deft fingers secured fishermen's knots to hold up a tarp. Because her skills had built a firm foundation for trail life within me, my confidence now positioned the girls into lightening stances; my hilarity amused the girls as we huddled under the protective tarp; my voice sang reassuringly over the pounding of the fierce rain. At last, when a fantastic rainbow fanned the brilliant blue sky, it was the love of both of us that abounded the joy and fulfillment of leadership being passed on to a new generation.