

Essays on adversity and achievement

by Bottom Line students

I am the

opportunity

*Now, I await that next challenge  
to engulf me.*

*Afraid? No.*

*Hesitant? Of course not.*

*Ready? As I'll ever be.*



**Bottom Line**

Get in ♦ Graduate ♦ Go far

Success depends on you

# Student Success. Community Impact.

The college essays in this book are the stories of 14 Boston high school seniors from the high school class of 2013 who participate in Bottom Line's College Access Program. In just 500 words, these students write powerfully of the adversity they have overcome and their desire to use their education to make a difference in their communities. The determination to earn a college degree and desire to improve their communities are shared by all of the nearly 2,000 Massachusetts high school seniors and college students receiving support from Bottom Line during the 2012-2013 school year.

A non-profit founded in 1997, Bottom Line helps at-risk youth get into and graduate from college, providing long-term, one-on-one counseling from college applications to graduation. Most Bottom Line students are in the first generation of their family to go to college, and many have been in the United States for only a few years. Nearly all are from low-income backgrounds.

Our model gives these students the expert guidance they need to succeed. Over the past 16 years, 74% of our college students have graduated within six years - more than twice the graduation rate of students from similar backgrounds. By 2016, over 1,600 Bottom Line students will have returned to their communities with a college diploma.

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# Sour and Sweet

By Jessica Amado



Jessica attends Fenway High School, where she has participated in her school's student government and, with her classmates, completed a service trip to Honduras. She has also volunteered her time at a local veterans' home, where she built relationships with veterans by sharing stories and jokes, all while making useful and decorative bags for them to carry. Jessica has also managed to have part-time jobs throughout high school mentoring young girls, helping out at the Boys' and Girls' Club, and working at Suffolk University.

Jessica is interested in nursing and health sciences. She hopes to attend schools such as the University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston College, Simmons College, or the University of Massachusetts Lowell, in order to learn how to effectively take care of those in need.

When eating a Sour Patch Kid my lips tighten and pull close together, my nose wrinkles, and my eyes narrow. Then, in a matter of seconds, my lips relax, and my taste buds enjoy the sweet piece of candy being digested. Sour Patch Kids are one of the few candies that allow me to experience these feelings, both bitter and sweet, which is a lot like my relationship with my mother. Being raised by a conservative, old-fashioned Cape Verdean woman has been a bittersweet experience.

It was late afternoon, and all of the children who lived on the dead-end street played outside with big grins on their faces. Laughter filled the neighborhood, and smells of all the mothers' cooking filled the air. As I was sitting on the bike my dad had bought me, I felt a familiar hand on my shoulder. Then the voice spoke. "Get off that bicycle and come inside. Girls are not supposed to ride bikes. Leave that up to your brother. Come inside and help me prepare dinner. You need to learn this," she demanded. At such a young age my mom taught me how to run a household.

In April of my junior year of high school, I was given the chance to visit an orphanage in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I had never before slept out of my house, and I was afraid to ask my mother for permission to travel outside the country. Not understanding why I wanted to participate in a service trip, my mother was disappointed. She was primarily concerned with what others would think of her eighteen-year-old daughter sleeping outside of the house. I took the risk of potentially embarrassing my mom, so that I could view the world from a different perspective.

My visit to Honduras was one of the best decisions I have made thus far. Most of the children at the orphanage did not have a parent in their lives. Reflecting back on my relationship with my mother, I cried every night. I cried because I felt like my mother thought I was taking her for granted, and this was not the case. My mother believes that getting a college degree is my way of insulting her way of living. She does not understand that the medical field will allow me to express my compassion, kindness, and effective listening skills to help people. These are qualities that I believe I possess, qualities my mother did not always show me growing up. I have a talent and want to share it with the world.

For me, going to college is taking a risk – a risk that could be costly. I could lose my relationship with my mother. Even so, my relationship with my mother has taught me how to be self-motivated and how to push myself to achieve. I am open to other points of view because I know what it feels like to not be heard. Even though Sour Patch Kids are first sour and then sweet, I still have the desire to finish the whole bag. I start to enjoy the sour taste, and because I know the sweet flavor is coming shortly, I just have to be patient. Although I have had sour moments with my mother, I am sure the sweet moments will arrive once she sees my accomplishments. My mother has become my motivation to achieve and be the best nurse possible; I will make her proud of me.

# My Hairstory

By Christina Arecy



Christina attends Tech Boston Academy and is an active member of the Boston Student Advisory Council. Through BSAC, Christina advocates for student rights in the Boston Public School system. She has also taken part in an Outward Bound trip.

Christina hopes to pursue a degree in Africana Studies over the next four years at one of her three top schools: University of Massachusetts Amherst, Mount Holyoke College, or Hampshire College.

I remember sitting in my living room as an eleven year old girl, staring at the television and asking myself, who is Don Imus? And what are “Nappy Headed Hoes”? The women he was referring to, the Division I athletes of Rutgers University, looked just like me, and their braids were just like mine. That moment sparked my curiosity about my ancestors and their *hairstory*. In school, I started asking my classmates which words came to mind when they thought of African-American hair. The word they often scribbled in response was “nappy.” In the Merriam Webster Dictionary, nappy as an adjective means kinky, or closely twisted or curled, but that was not the meaning I felt when it was used in the media.

Though my conscience has always told me, “Being ashamed of your hair won’t get you anywhere,” I questioned myself about the insecurity I felt towards my hair. I had these feelings repressed for many years, and finally I tried to look deeper into their meaning— why was I terrified of being different? I realized I did not yet have the courage to accept the unique gene bestowed upon me.

As I took a step back, closely observing the crowns of glory in my family, I noticed that my grandmother and I were the only ones in my family with thin follicles. This discovery alone was a time machine back to Haiti, where I had spent my childhood. Every morning as the sun rose, I plopped myself on a bucket, waiting for my cousin to style my hair. She stared down at me, puzzled at how to manage my crazy mop that lacked in luster and volume compared to her thick, voluptuous hair, and I felt ashamed. That same shame defined how I felt when Don Imus used the word “nappy.” He did not mean kinky or coiled, he meant matted, dark, dirty – he was using the word in a derogatory manner.

This faceless yet powerful word that I often encounter conjures dreadful and shameful, personal and historical memories attached to my hair. However, as my research continued, I soon recognized the beauty of my hair and saw that genetics did not make a mistake in passing down my grandmother’s gene to me. I stopped trying to avoid the truth. My *hairstory*, which is not well represented in the media, is acceptable beauty.

The seamless bond that weaves within my locks is slowly clicking inside of me, and I am even more determined to find the knowledge that is hidden inside my roots. These roots of mine are a symbol of a beautiful culture that was never shown to me at school in the history textbooks or in the media. I want to retrace my *hairstory* and embrace an issue that is a political yet personal matter ingrained in the DNA of many. By sharing my voice and my *hairstory*, I want to empower youth and young women in communities to accept who they are. After obtaining my degree in Africana studies, I will influence young people by becoming a teacher, journalist, politician, or perhaps an ambassador to the UN – the list of potential futures is endless. There are limitless possibilities in which I can inspire others with the knowledge I have already gained and will further explore over the next four years. Although I do not know what the next years may bring, I will continue my quest with my head held high, knowing my crown of glory is the beginning of the *hairstory* that lives inside of me.

# Kanatapi

By Angelica Brewer



Angelica attends Malden High School, where she competes on the crew team, plays the mellophone in the marching band and concert band, and serves on the Winter Guard. Angelica enjoys philosophical conversations, contemplating the nature of free will, and pursuing social justice.

Angelica is interested in environmental science and Native American cultural preservation. She hopes to study at a school such as The College of the Atlantic, Hampshire College, Montana State University, or UMass Amherst.

*Kanatapi* is a Blackfeet word which describes the coming together of a community so that all voices may be heard. During my time on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana, I had the privilege to attend a Sun Dance and see Native culture in an auspicious light. In the highest ceremony of Plains Natives, dancers volunteer to make great personal sacrifices for the well-being of others. It is a time of generosity, marriage, and selfless dedication. Sitting in a lodge with so many people all praying for others taught me that, in a world which can be perceived as selfish and malicious, there are always people who are working to improve their communities and the lives of those they care about.

As the light of Sun Dance began to fade, an unexpected side of the reservation uncovered itself. I saw all that ailed the community: lack of respect of the town's youth, graffiti on every building, drinkers lingering on the curb, and the ubiquity of substance abuse. Most surprisingly, the drilling towers and the lease of already scarce reservation land to private oil companies were a sign of the desperation brought about by inescapable poverty. Most demoralizing was the presence of violence in the lives of children. Each day at the playground, Blackfeet kids no older than thirteen would fight each other and throw shocking insults. Daily, I would run over from our worksite to separate fist fights or solve small problems that had turned into enormous arguing matches. One day I even had to sprint after a perilous eight-year-old playing with a serrated switchblade. Seeing the children strike each other and throw rocks at one another made me worried about the state of the reservation in the near future.

The immediate connection I felt to these children sprouted from my father's Native American culture. My devotion to them grew from the fact that when I looked at them I saw recurrences of my own childhood. Having been raised in an abusive and hostile household, I knew the array of emotions they felt after being struck—by both hands and words. I knew the alienation they felt because there was nobody to rely on. Spending my days with them at the playground, trying to influence them positively as a role model, taught me how essential a strong community is to raising strong generations of young people. We cannot ask adults what the future of their culture will look like; we can see it there on the playground. These children were not living the values that I had seen at the Sun Dance. This was not *kanatapi*.

I always heard proud talk of people "making it off the rez," but now I realize the necessity of making it back. Children don't get this way overnight—it is the end result of the abuse and abrasion brought upon them by war, politics, and cultural elitism. I cannot think of a more terrifying idea than that of the indefinite loss of traditional ways, knowledge, and languages. Despite how disheartening it was to see severe cultural degradation in a place so precious to me, those experiences made me recognize my responsibility to improve living conditions in places like Browning, to help develop communities, and to preserve culture. My time on the reservation altered how seriously I consider my own ability to create change in the lives of people around me and in a community as a whole.

# Nancy

By Kyanna Dixon



Kyanna attends the O'Bryant School of Math & Science, where she was a member of the varsity swimming team for three years. Kyanna works as both a swimming instructor and a lifeguard at the Dorchester YMCA. As a member of the Dorchester Teen Leadership Council, Kyanna is also an active member of her community.

Although Kyanna will enter college undecided about her major, she is interested in international relations and political science. She hopes to head west next year and attend college in California at one of her top three schools: Claremont McKenna College, Pitzer College, or Occidental College.

Fourteen little ladies, dressed identically, lined the church's entrance creating a bridge of white roses in order for Nancy to gracefully wheel under. An hour-long ceremony in Spanish proceeded, and then we were all directed to pose for picture. Night fell, and we took the party to a hall decorated with arches of purple and white balloons. A gigantic four-layer cake of assorted flavors was presented. We were served a goat dish, and then I witnessed Nancy dance the "father-daughter" dance with my mother and grandfather, due to the absence of a father. Nancy attempted twirling her white lace dress with gold accents while seated, and everybody applauded her efforts. The events of the day were exhausting; however, Nancy remembered and loved every minute of her quinceañera and cherished it until her death.

For the next two years, every interaction I had with my sister was confined to the four white walls of a hospital. Nancy never let this dampen her spirits, making the two hours of visitation she had with her siblings lively. Constant pain pulsed through her body, but she never let an emotion other than happiness light up her face. I try to take the attitude Nancy projected so effortlessly and apply it to my life. In my job as a swimming instructor, I see many children terrified of water. For example, Ethan, a two-year-old boy new to lessons was paralyzed at the sight of the pool, but I calmly moved him towards acclimating to the water. At first, he did not want to be in the water, but as the lesson progressed, he was able to put his face in and even jump into the water. Throughout the lesson, I met his reservation with determination and rewarded his bravery with praise as I enjoyed the accomplishments we achieved as a student-teacher pair.

Along with enjoying her life, Nancy also always managed to look on the bright side. She hoped that she would be reunited with her family outside the hospital walls. This positivity helped build a strong relationship with the nurses; they loved being around her. Nancy's positivity was contagious. This past summer, I spent three weeks in Costa Rica hiking mountains for hours at a time. As the trip progressed, I had a decision to make: I could continue the hikes complaining about the pain and blisters, or I could remember all the pain Nancy endured without ever saying a word and with a permanent smile etched on her face. I ignored my blisters and the pain, admiring the beauty of Costa Rica.

Nancy lived until she was seventeen years old, giving me nine short years with her. Within those years she taught me about happiness and pain, the difference between living life and truly enjoying life. These attributes will allow me to excel in college, regardless of my course load, the amount of assignments, and the rigor of my classes since I will be able to see positivity in the work I am doing. I will take obstacles as they come and will not dwell on the negativity of situations. Using what my sister taught me, I will be able to enjoy the smaller victories as I set out to accomplish the biggest academic goal in my life thus far.

# Leave a Trail

By Devon Dookhran



Devon attends Dorchester Academy, where he is captain of the varsity football team. A leader on and off the field, he has helped plan field trips, pep rallies, and graduation events for his school. Outside of school, he has a strong interest in the health and safety of his local community, serving as a youth community ambassador and receiving a certificate in conflict resolution from the Teen Police Academy.

Devon hopes to study criminal justice at a school such as Bridgewater State, UMass Boston, or Salem State.

Did you hear about Devon's bro carrying a machine gun in school? You think Devon is just as crazy? These were the questions kids whispered in the hallways. When my math teacher told me that he saw my last name on the news, I immediately knew that he had heard about the situation with my brother. A few days later, other students around the school were aware, and the situation passed from kid to kid like a cheating note during an exam.

In February of 2010, during my sophomore year, my brother Darryl was carrying a Tec-9 automatic machine gun on the campus of Massasoit Community College. He was caught with it by police and was taken away to jail. Later, he was sentenced to several years in prison. When my mother found out, it just killed her inside.

As a person who always looked up to my older brother, I was broken up inside as well. My grades dropped. I skipped school, did not go to class, and slept all the time. I felt the world crashing down all around me. I did not want to be put on the spot and humiliated at school, so I just ran away from it. I just ignored other students and isolated myself from them. Honestly, I love school, but during that short period of time, I did not want to be there.

I received a letter from my brother saying all these things about him messing up his life and how much he was sorry for letting me down. Yet there was one thing that stood out to me. He said, "Make sure you will take good care of our family, and don't do what I did to screw up your life."

That had a major impact on what I was now going to do with my life. It was a wake-up call. I decided to work harder and started to apply myself to my academics again. I went back to school with a more optimistic attitude and more determination. I decided to forget about the past. I became more responsible, setting goals for myself and setting a great example for others. Instead of getting by and barely passing, I fought back and pushed my potential. I became the captain of my high school football team, a member of the Boston Police Teen Academy, and a Youth Ambassador for the Actions Boston Community Development program. These are all things I thought I would never do, but now I am doing them. The side comments from other students were no longer an obstacle for me.

Thinking about my brother did nothing but affect me negatively at first. Now I use it as motivation. In a way, this tragic event pushed me and tested my potential so that I can now live by Ralph Waldo Emerson's quote: "Do not follow where the path may lead. Go to where there is no path, and leave a trail."



# My Name

By Brankely Garcia



Brankely attends English High School, where she is a member of the National Honor Society and co-captain of the varsity soccer team. Passionate about community service, she founded a club which beautified school classrooms and volunteered with service organizations like Charles River Clean-Up and the Red Cross Food Pantry.

Brankely hopes to study engineering at a school such as Northeastern University, Wentworth Institute Technology, UMass Amherst, or Bridgewater State University.

Most people get excited every year on their first day of school. Well, in seventh grade, this was not the case for me because I knew that everything was going to change. There I was, listening to the teacher talk in a weird language. I was confused and asking myself “What is the teacher talking about?” At that moment, I heard “Brankely,” a name which I knew was mine, but was not familiar to me.

When I was born, my family wanted to give me a very unique and different name because I was going to be the first daughter, niece, and granddaughter in the family. They decided to call me Brankely Tibizai. My first name came from a combination of both of my parents’ names, Brandy and Kety. For my middle name, my mom and my grandmother picked Tibizai after a strong and brave female saint. After I was brought home from the hospital, my grandmother advised my family to call me by my middle name so that I could be protected from curses and superstitions. My family and friends from the Dominican Republic called me by my middle name, Tibizai.

When I heard “Brankely” on the first day of seventh grade, I felt weird and unfamiliar about everything. I started to miss my grandparents, aunts, cousins, uncles, and friends. I missed the sunny days and the place where I was born and raised. I knew that I would have to get used to America and being called Brankely.

When I came to Boston at age twelve, everything was so different and new. There were so many cars and lights, and I did not like the cold weather. At first, I felt depressed and like I left half of my heart in the Dominican Republic. I felt so lonely and different, not only because I was in a new country, but also because I was going by my unfamiliar name.

As the years went by I learned that coming to the USA was the best thing that has happened to me. I learned a new language, met new people and friends, and got used to the weather. Even more importantly, I learned that no matter what people call me, Brankely or Tibizai, I will always be the same person. I have been able to be successful in America. I have been on the Honor Roll for all four years of high school. I also joined programs that helped me succeed like Upward Bound, Summer Search, and National Honor Society. I am motivated to be the first person in my family to go to college and make my family proud.

Five years ago, I heard my first name at school, and it felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But now when I hear Brankely, I feel unique. By getting a name that no one else has, I had the privilege to give Brankely its own meaning. I define Brankely as thoughtful, friendly, adventurous, positive leader, hard worker, and someone open to new opportunities. I believe that I, Brankely, will not stop until I achieve my dreams.

# Pens

By Iryelis Lopez



Often found on the Charles River, where she is an avid rower through Girls ROW Boston, Iryelis attends the O'Bryant School of Math and Science. There, she has been a four-year member, and three-year MVP, of the softball team, a student in the Gateway to the Longwood Medical Area program, and a History and Debate Club member. Since her sophomore year, she has participated in Summer Search, through which she traveled to Wyoming, and participated in a summer program at Princeton.

Though Iryelis remains undecided as to her major, she is interested in everything from anthropology to economics. She hopes to attend Wellesley College, Wesleyan University, or Williams College and continue rowing.

Over the past two years I have accumulated over seventy pens. I have blue ones, red ones, black ones, invisible inks, and erasable inks. Spread across my cluttered desk, shoved into the pockets of my jackets, and buried in my bags, my pens are always with me. A long stream of black gel ink streaming across my crisp white notepad paper serves as my therapeutic release after an especially tough day; I save the blue inks for lengthy note-taking in class, and my red inks, those are for scribbles in my journal. This therapy I developed was fueled by my summer experience in Wyoming.

The summer before my junior year of high school, I went on a National Outdoor Leadership School course sponsored by Summer Search. On cold nights, after a grueling day of hiking, I would cocoon myself into my sleeping bag, and with only my headlamp, magenta Pentel pen, and notepad, words became an outlet for my stress. I wrote every night, after every trip down a rocky pass and every hoot I heard from within the sheets of my thin tent; I wrote how I felt and, therefore, began to understand myself on a more emotional level. Moving forward from those four weeks in Wyoming, I was sure that whatever came my way I could handle with my pens and paper.

Five months later that was put to the test when my brother was sentenced to two years in prison. My Yu-Gi-Oh-obsessed, computer-savvy older brother, who would wake me up every Saturday morning to watch cartoons for hours, was no longer two doors down the hallway from me. Weeks went by as I thought about what to write to him. Stacks of blank sheets of paper and my clutter of pens awaited my effort, my will to write.

Exactly one month after my brother went to prison, I moved my textbooks and rainbow post-its from my desk, switched on my lamp, and grabbed a pen. After a month of disuse, my tools were heavy and felt foreign in my trembling hand, but I held tight and dragged my black ink across the page. After some time, I looked up, and all around me were crumpled sheets, sad drafts lay under angry rants, which sat next to philosophical poems, each intensely written then crossed out and written again with my black gel. More hours passed, and what emerged was a simple letter that expressed my true feelings. I wrote him of my sadness about his absence, but also of my excitement for my future.

My pens were no longer just my way of dealing with stress; they were now my gateway to communicating with my brother. I realized, while cleaning the mess of papers on my desk, that my writing wasn't just beneficial for me, as I was no longer writing for myself. I was now using my love of writing to connect with my brother when he needed it most. Knowing that we were so similar as children and now that our paths are so different, is challenging to cope with, yet I know that I will always be close with him through the letters we will share.

So as I gather my pens or pack them into my backpack or scatter them across my desk, I know they have given me power to move on. They kept me occupied in the wilderness of Wyoming and aided me in starting to communicate with my brother, and now they are ready for what lies ahead. I see college as a blank sheet that is waiting to be written on, and I hold my pens strong, ready to write the next chapter of my life.

# Without Fear

By Trang Mai



Trang is a student at Boston Latin Academy. She works at the Student Success Jobs Program and interns at the Haitian Studies Association at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she is learning about health disparities in Haiti and the United States.

Trang is looking forward to learning more about the health field at Tufts University, Boston University, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, or Northeastern University.

She thought a pelagic escape would be the easiest route to freedom. At the age of fifteen, she was forced to leave her home in Vietnam to come to the U.S. alone. She completed two levels of schooling in Vietnam but could not speak English. She knew no one and nothing. Her first child wore clothes worn down by strangers and drank from recycled baby bottles. With her second child, born only two years later, she was fortunate enough to have welfare. When it was my turn to be born she was lost in a dangerous cycle of addiction to cigarettes and gambling. I was born on a cold December night, fatherless and poor. Through watching my mother's life, I made the decision to change my future.

All my life, my family and I had nothing. My mother did not have the money to give us everything in the world, but she gave us what she could: her care and support. We were clothed enough to keep us warm and fed enough to sustain our long days. She only had one wish for me: to graduate high school. I was naïve to believe a high school diploma would be enough. I spent my summers working two jobs, clocking in over fifty hours, and it was not enough to pay the endless amount of bills we had. I overworked myself to come home with nothing; I finally understood a bit of my mothers' pain.

I want my mother to live her life in peace knowing she has successfully provided a home and shelter for her children to grow and succeed. All but three of my mothers' children have gone to college and I am the last one. She taught us in a much different way than most people think to raise their children. She started from the bottom and told us to always look up. She gave up her sight of freedom to let us see ours.

It is not just my mother that I work so hard for; it is for my future. I want to go on to support others who did not have the support my mother had and be able to help them through tough times. I want to be able to lend out my hand to anyone who is in need. To me, it's not about the title or the money or the respect that comes with certain titles, it is about the joy and satisfaction in what I do. I want to live my life being fulfilled by providing for others. I was fortunate enough to receive that happiness; it is only my dream to pass it onto others. I take what I learned from the strongest 4'11" woman I know and continue to move forward in achieving my dream.

Many people are afraid of the unknown possibilities in life, but I am not. My mother packed all of her belongings and left her family to come to this land, and it gave her an experience she would never have received had she stayed in fear. I want to pass the legacy that was bred in the heart of a young girl who set out on a voyage for freedom. I have lived seventeen years without much, but that does not lay out the blueprints to how I will live my life in the next twenty or fifty years. My life will have much more than what I can envision now. I was never raised to fear the future so I know I can conquer the challenges ahead of me. This is how I live my life and college is my next step.

# Remembering My Brother

By Daniel Martinez



Daniel attends the O'Bryant School of Math & Science. After moving to the US from Colombia four years ago, Daniel quickly became involved in volunteering abroad and working toward justice and equality with Global Potential. He has founded his own nonprofit, Les Manos United, and created documentaries promoting social justice. Daniel received the ArtScience Prize in 2011 and has participated in the MIT MITES program.

Daniel is interested in a number of majors including international relations and physics and hopes to attend a college such as Boston University, Columbia University, Boston College, or Tufts University.

My sixteen year old half-brother Edwin disappeared in Colombia twenty years ago. He was my mother's first child and a victim of the violence and injustice in Colombia. Edwin ended up just like many other innocent people, who were killed or disappeared in the turmoil of injustice and tyranny. I was born three years later, after my father met my widowed mother and took responsibility for her children. I grew mature to support my mother, facing the memory of my brother with both curiosity and strength. The memory of my brother encourages me to overcome adversity and follow my dreams, it has taught me to value life, and it has given me the strength and determination to strive for peace and justice.

I grew up seeing my brother's picture hanging in my mother's room. She refused to lose the hope that my brother would reappear. I was not brave enough to ask my mother about my brother, fearing questions would only cause her sorrow. An old wooden box containing my brother's diary, notes, and some items that once belonged to him were the only physical connection I ever had with my brother. As a child, reading his diary felt like I was reading about my own life. I was mentored by the memory of him. I learned my brother was a poet, a leader, and a dreamer, just like I have grown up to be. Like him, I grew passionate for education, embracing a mature mentality, and caring for my mother.

My brother's whereabouts are still unknown. There is no trace of him besides his memory and our love. In 2008, I moved to the United States, and since then I have continued cultivating my intellect and developing my passion for social justice. Hoping injustices like that of my brother will never repeat, I dream of making a difference in helping the poor, promoting justice and equality. I have given the best of myself, volunteering abroad, working side-by-side with people and communities. I have confronted a world in which people are consumed by poverty and injustice. I have come to realize the strengths of solidarity and humility and found my purpose in life giving opportunity and promoting change.

I have realized good intentions are not enough, and one must commit to action. I have shown leadership creating my own social venture, aiding communities in Haiti, Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, and day-by-day spreading global awareness among my peers and my community. Since I have the opportunity, I want to give back and help. Life is short, and I want to follow my dreams. I carry the responsibility to be my mother's first child to go to college. Unlike my brother, I have the luck and opportunity to help my family and also the world. I have no time to spare, for I have a long way to go and the chance to succeed.

# Self-Discovery

By Tuyen Nguyen



Tuyen attends Boston Arts Academy, where he helped establish the Health and Environmental Club. Tuyen enjoys collaborating with other student groups to explore solutions for reducing waste and climate change. He began a waste audit project at his school to identify issues with the waste management system.

Tuyen is interested in liberal arts studies and hopes to pursue his interests and service work at Boston University, Bard College, Goucher College, or Hampshire College.

The name is Nguyễn Phan Tuyền, but none of my friends can say it correctly. As a child, I used to be proud of my name because it represents and connects my mom and dad's sides together. After arriving to the US, the name slowly lost its meaning as I transitioned into a new lifestyle. As a consequence, I struggled to find a path that worked best for me. Fortunately, one step to finding myself has been knowing that there is more to what defines me than solely my name.

When I first arrived in Boston in 2007 to live with my dad, my name on every official school document was changed to Tuyen Nguyen. My dad said that the name was stripped of its accent marks so that it would be easier for people in school to pronounce, but it did not help me at all.

"Hey, new boy in the back! How do you say your name?" Ms. Sloan, my new homeroom teacher, projected her voice across the room as she was taking attendance.

Sitting in the back, my body went numb for a few seconds as I tried to collect my thoughts to make a grammatically-correct sentence. "It's Tuyen, Tuyen Nguyen," I murmured under the searching eyes of all the students in class.

"T...Tu-yen Nu-yen?" she asked, shifting her neck toward me to hear me better. I quickly nodded to pull away the attention, and from that day, Tuyen Nguyen became "Tu-yen Nu-yen." The name Tuyen Nguyen was the last connection that I had to my origin, but at that moment, I had to let it go. Days and years went by; I adapted to the new environment. One day, I suddenly woke up and saw myself as a junior in high school. I was having lunch with Jake, a close friend of mine.

"Tu-yen, what does your name even mean? Does it have a real meaning behind it?" Jake asked me out of wonder, but my mind went blank. Little did I know my identity, as my name had been changed and distorted to a point where I could not see myself.

With the hope of finding my authentic identity, I started on a project entitled "Self," in which I translated my unconscious thoughts into abstract movements for a visual arts performance piece. Through reading a few philosophy books and learning different teachings, I was led to meditation. The process brought me into the unconscious and helped me realize what I need out of life. The experience gave me a sense of release from the human condition, and made me value my own potential.

As of today, although I still haven't accepted the real value of my past, I am aware of what comes next. Throughout the years I have learned that moving forward comes hand-in-hand with having something that conflicts us, in this case, the conflict of finding the meaning of my name. Given that, I have decided to confront those conflicts, thus fighting for things that really matter, to find myself. I have accepted my names, both my given and assimilated names, although these do not truly define me. Nevertheless, I am capable continuing to find my true self and willing to keep going.

# Closing Argument

By Yewellyn Sanchez



Yewellyn attends Excel High School, where she is the secretary of the National Honor Society and a committed volunteer for the school newspaper. Yewellyn has participated in the Nelson Fellowship, which provides her with public-speaking classes and opportunities to perform mock trials in front of a Massachusetts judge. She has also lent her Spanish speaking skills to her community by volunteering to help younger students understand their homework assignments and translating important documents for the elderly.

Yewellyn is interested in pursuing a journalism or communication degree at a college such as Boston University, Emmanuel College, Brandeis University, or Suffolk University.

Despite the fact that I am an intelligent, compassionate, ambitious, goal-oriented young woman, for much of my life I have been labeled as “the blind girl.” I have had to contend with the assumptions and limitations imposed upon me by others. Most were well-intentioned, but still inimical to my independence and self-reliance. My eyesight is negatively affected by a condition called corneal opacity, so I am visually impaired. Regardless, I am determined to pursue postsecondary education and a career in journalism. Moreover, I intend to do it my own way, independently.

Last summer, I dealt with a very challenging experience that confirmed the benefits of diligence and tenacity. I had taken a position as an intern at the John J. Moakley Federal Courthouse, and my duties included taking courses on various aspects of law, attending seminars, and completing organizational tasks in a judge’s office. The final step of this internship was to participate in a mock trial in which the role of defendant was assigned to me. On one hand, I was very flattered that my teammates on the defense team had selected me for a pivotal role; on the other hand, I had never taken on such a challenge and I will concede that my self-confidence suffered a setback. After thinking about it, I reasoned that if I was thoroughly prepared, practiced my summation and committed it to memory, and if I did my very best, I would be successful.

The atmosphere in the courtroom was tense on the day of the mock trial, and my teammates were very nervous. After all, a real appellate court judge presided over the trial and several members of the legal profession were in attendance. I tried to project my usual air of poise and self-assurance, but all this was new to me and I confess that I was very anxious in spite of my extensive preparation. My primary concerns were to not speak too quickly, and to not lose my train of thought; if I had to refer to my notes by placing the paper close to my face, my voice could be distorted. Finally, it was my turn to deliver the closing argument.

Summoning a mental picture of the mnemonic acronyms I had created to structure my argument, I addressed the court, projecting my voice authoritatively and clearly enunciating each syllable of our case. After that, everything went according to plan and my confidence soared. When the jury found in our favor, my teammates congratulated me for “carrying the ball” for our side and the judge herself came over and said, “Well done, Ms. Sanchez.” I was particularly proud of the fact that I had not allowed a brief moment of self-doubt or waves of anxiety to undermine my performance.

That experience showed me that I am a resilient, forceful person and that the judgments and put-downs I endured earlier in life only motivated me to prove myself. My ultimate goal is to become a journalist and do feature stories or investigative reporting. I see journalism as the key to freedom of expression for all the speakers of the world.

# Recipe for Success

By Jessica Teixeira



Jessica attends Urban Science Academy and is a recipient of the Christian A. Herter Scholarship. She participates in a peer mentoring program and volunteers at a childcare center, BPS elementary school, and with the Red Cross. This past summer, Jessica was an office assistant at MASSPIRG, where she supported environmental awareness efforts.

Jessica's goal is to work with animals, and she hopes to study veterinary science in college. She would love to follow in her older sister's footsteps and attend Boston University.

It is the first of the month and I hear my mother cursing as her feet pace across her bedroom floor. "Vida de probe, what am I going to do?" Once again she is worried we will not have enough for rent. Slowly walking to my room, I am careful not to make a sound. I want to be alone, but thoughts of being homeless and hungry surround me. Minutes tick by, and my thoughts are interrupted by the sniffles creeping under my door. This financial hardship was not always so common in our family. Growing up, there was consistently a meal on the table and fresh clothes to be worn.

My mom is the person upon whom I depended throughout my life. The care she possesses is evident in all she does, whether helping me find a misplaced shoe or acting as my alarm clock in the mornings. In 2007, her family role was redefined when she was hit by a drunk driver. The accident left my mom with a damaged left hand and forced her to retire early. Our entire family was affected. Prior to the accident, my household chores were limited; thus, I used too little salt in my spaghetti and way too much detergent in the laundry. White clothes became pink, baggy pants became too tight. While I struggled with these new responsibilities, my sister proved to be my greatest critic. No matter how carefully I prepared a meal, her initial disparaging remarks were always, "Jessica, this isn't good," and evolved into screams of, "Please don't make me eat this horrible food!" Eventually, she chose to simply make packages of ramen noodles to avoid my cooking.

Angered by her reaction and determined to prove my skills, the Food Network became my salvation. From Rachel Ray's 30-Minute Meals to Bobby Flay's chicken fried steak, I was determined to replicate these meals and see my sister eat them. Every Saturday brought more of an improvement. Little bites from my sister turned into chunks. One plate turned into two. Soon she began to eat my meals as if she had never eaten anything in her life. Pretty soon I did not need Rachel Ray or Bobby Flay to assist me in creating my meals. I was creating my own, from Alfredo chicken to spaghetti with homemade sauce. I had triumphed with just enough salt!

My mother's accident forced me to face challenges I never expected. Ultimately, these challenges prepared me for my future. Rather than give up and accept defeat, I persevered. Not only did I learn how to cook, but I also learned the importance of seeing things through. This experience taught me that sometimes struggles are necessary. If we are allowed the chance to go through life without any obstacles we would be deprived of the opportunities to grow and develop the qualities and characteristics that help shape us and our lives. I was a girl who made dishes with no taste, and rather than crumble, I emerged with an award-winning recipe: never give up.

# Where I Will Be

By Nelida Teixeira



Nelida attends Boston International High School, where she is a member of National Honor Society and volunteers as a teacher's aide after school. Nelida has also volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and Quest Adventures. She works at Fenway Park and Bird Street, and has taken courses at MCPHS and Harvard. When she is not volunteering or working, she spends much of her time babysitting her cousins and taking care of other family responsibilities.

Nelida is interested in biology and sociology, and hopes to attend Boston College, Boston University, or UMass Lowell.

The first time that I missed having a father in my life was in fourth grade when we were assigned to write about our dad in class. I looked around and noticed that all my classmates were writing. Meanwhile, I was biting my nails, doodling and erasing so the teacher would not find out that I was not working. I imagined how different it would be if I had a father and how moments such as my graduation would be different if my father was present. I envisioned him clapping when I received my diploma, or just saying "congratulations."

For the first thirteen years of my life, I lived with my mom, four sisters, and brother. I officially had a father when I was thirteen and I even took his last name, but he never recognized me as his child. My mom arranged for him to give me his last name so that I could eventually move to America as his "daughter." My mother knew that I did not know him and that I was going to be living in a country far away from her, but she wanted me to have a college education. She had not been able to afford to send my older sisters to college, and with no other choice she sent me to live with a stranger.

When I walked off the plane in Boston, I looked for any man that fit the "father" type. Suddenly, a man approached and hugged me. I felt hopeful. For the first two weeks everything was going well. He presented me to my family, took me to doctor appointments, and we ate lunch together. I was happy. Soon after things started changing – no more affection, no more time together. He was the stranger I imagined. I felt that I didn't fit in with the family, that here wasn't my place. I isolated myself, avoiding people. I realized that my father was trying to impress me, but at some point he had to be himself. His actions showed me that I couldn't rely on him; I had to do things on my own.

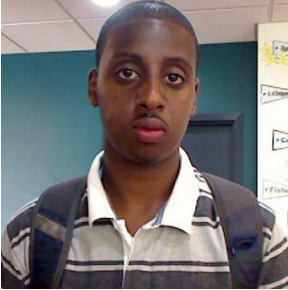
Almost three years have passed now, and although I have spent more time with my father and five step-brothers, I still feel that I am not part of their family. They discourage me by telling me that I am not going to make it through college and that I will not be who I want to be in the future.

But I am not going to let where I am now determine where I will be. I have taken responsibility for myself and my education since my first day in America and will continue to do so on my own. I want to show the people that discouraged me, that doubted me, and that made me feel inferior, that I did what I set my mind to – that it was not impossible. Going to college is something that I am deciding to do for myself and for my mom. I want to prove to myself and everyone else that I can and I am different than the rest of my family.



# Give It Your All

By Salah Yusuf



Salah moved to Boston from Somalia eleven years ago and will be the first in his family to attend college. He attends West Roxbury Academy where he has been a member of the Debate Club and Hope for Haiti. Outside of school, he volunteers regularly at the Somali Development Center, develops leadership skills through Summer Search, and learns about the business field at PricewaterhouseCoopers' Impact program. This past summer he completed a community service project in Ghana with the Global Leadership Academy.

Salah is interested in pursuing a career in accounting and hopes to study business or economics at a school such as Bentley University, Northeastern University, Union College, or Hamilton College.

Growing up in a small village in Somalia was peaceful at first, but our peaceful village soon erupted with chaos and civil war. I witnessed a man begging for mercy as he was shot and killed right in front of me. In a nonchalant voice, the killer told me to go home. I ran as quickly as I could to tell my mother what I had witnessed. My mother realized then that if my siblings and I didn't leave, we would eventually die. She decided to take the journey of her life.

I was very young at the time and naive about the struggles that my mother had endured. I didn't know how much she risked her life to get my siblings and me a better one. After finally finding a place for us to live, my mother worked two jobs to support us. I was five years old and was just starting pre-school. I didn't know any English, but I learned quickly. I was fascinated with this new language and would always recite the alphabet nonstop until someone told me to be quiet.

At first, I loved to go to school, but when I started middle school, that changed quickly. My mom and I would spend hours at night talking about college, but during the school day, I would act like the class clown. My grades slipped from As to Cs, and one day my mother saw my report card. She asked me what I wanted to become and handed me the report card. I looked at it, wishing it would burn and disappear. My mother said, "Doing sloppy work will get you nowhere in life. Give it your all, or don't try at all." She walked away, and I could sense that she was disappointed in me.

One day in eighth grade, my music teacher told us that we would have a valedictorian who would speak in front of everyone on graduation day. Something clicked within me; I wanted to be that person. On that day, I made a promise to myself that I was going to be the valedictorian of my class. I was motivated to study and felt that something had changed. That term, I received straight As for the first time in my life, but I wasn't satisfied. Then another report card came in with the same grades, but still I wasn't satisfied. The end of the school year was near, and everyone was gearing up for graduation.

One day my music teacher stopped me in the hallway. I thought she was going to tell me to go to study hall, but instead she told me that I was the valedictorian of my class. I was overwhelmed with joy; all the hard work I had put in had finally paid off. I kept this a secret from my mother so she would be surprised at graduation. On the day of my graduation, I was extremely nervous as I went on stage, and my mother looked shocked to see me there. I dedicated my speech to her, and for the first time, I saw my mother cry. I had always pictured her as a strong woman, but that day she cried tears of joys. I ended with my speech by quoting my mother: "Doing sloppy work will get you nowhere in life. Give it your all, or don't try at all."

# How You Can Help

Thank you for taking the time to read the stories of these remarkable young students. Bottom Line supports almost 2,000 students across Massachusetts, but many more disadvantaged students from our communities need our support.

The OECD reports that America has the highest college dropout rate in the developed world. Only one-third of low-income, first-generation college students enrolled at public colleges graduate within six years. And dropping out will impact these students for the rest of their lives. Boston students who fail to graduate from a four-year college can expect to lose an average of \$600,000 in lifetime earnings.

Bottom Line's model, built around one-on-one, in-person support, can solve this crisis. With your help, we can serve many more student in need. Over the next five years, we will double the number of Boston students enrolled in our program. By 2018, we will work with more than 2,600 Boston students annually.

To learn more about how you can help students get into college, graduate from college, and go far in life, please contact us, arrange a visit to our offices, or browse our website. We look forward to hearing from you.

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