

PERSONAL NARRATIVE/COLLEGE ESSAY SAMPLES

NAME: _____

PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #1

Dishing Dirt

By Emily White

The day I hear the rumor I am 14 years old, enclosed in a bathroom stall. Its walls are light blue, exactly the color of mold. Through a crack in its door, I can see three girls enter: heavy metal girls with tremendous eyelashes. They stand in front of the mirror, speaking urgently:

"Did you hear about H.?" one of them says. "I hear she did it with Mitch and all his friends, like 12 guys at once!"

"Twelve guys?" says another. "She is disgusting!"

The last chimes in. "Oh, my God, she is such a slut!" she says, drawing out the last word for effect.

From my vantage point, I can see their faces in the mirror as they talk; the way their eyes open wide in amazement as they contemplate the horrors of what this girl has done. I'm thrilled by their outrage. When they finally leave the bathroom, I emerge, reeling with what I've just heard. Twelve guys. Impossible. So impossible I believe it utterly.

I have seen the girl they're talking about. She's dark and womanly, with an air of mystery about her that the kids in the hallway assume is sex. She is usually alone, but she always acts as if she's on her way somewhere, as if she's late. I'd never admit it in school, but I'm drawn to her. Everyone looks at her, while I'm a gloomy, invisible girl with a maximum of three friends, a girl whose name nobody can remember. Beer, parties and kisses are remote. I'm a Save the Whales activist, so antisocial I've convinced myself that whales are smarter than people.

But that day eavesdropping in the bathroom, I feel inadvertently included. As I listen to the girls talking in the mirror, my heart starts to race. The scandal works on me like a stimulant. Obviously the Night of 12 Boys is an event of vast importance, and the urgency in the girls' voices momentarily eclipses anything I've felt for H. in the past. Emerging from the stall, I know what I need to do: pass the rumor on.

Out in the hallway, it's lunchtime, and the three girls I usually eat with sit in a circle in our usual spot, the gritty linoleum floor outside the science classroom. They're talking in a bored way about homework assignments and last night's television shows. I sit down with them and say with gravity, "Guess what I just heard?" Immediately they all stop talking and listen to me - the violin prodigy, the knitting girl and the nervous girl who talks relentlessly. They're captives of the information I hold, which I offer to them like a wise man offering gifts: "H. did it with 12 guys at once!" Like the girls in the restroom, my lunch mates are shocked. "Are you kidding? Ewwwww."

Over the next few years, kids tell all kinds of wild stories about H.'s exploits. Usually the stories have to do with her and a crowd of boys; the boys multiply exponentially while she remains alone. In my mind, I imagine her in the backs of cars, maybe with the windows rolled down and her hair flying, I

imagine her kissing anyone who's in front of her, hectic and oblivious. I wonder about her future; although as I sink into a deeper and deeper gloom, I should probably be wondering about mine.

That day in the hallway, as I spread the rumor of the 12 boys, though, I am not gloomy at all. Suddenly I feel a sense of communion with my lunch mates, a giddy sisterhood. We're like campers sitting around a fire telling ghost stories, huddled together and gripped by fear, only in this story the monster is an insatiable girl. As we become more and more worked up about what H. has done, it's as if we're aligned against the darkness, against the frightening and limitless underground of sex that she represents. Only later will I wonder why we wanted to talk about girls this way and never boys; why we cared about what H. might do in the dark; why we so easily believed such a cartoonish story of sex, when there were so many things we no longer believed.

Weeks pass, and the excitement of the rumor wears off. I return to my sullen existence, made even more unbearable each afternoon when a boy at the bus stop starts greeting me with "Hey, dog" and barking. I give up on the whales when I decide we're all going to die in a nuclear winter. I don't have anything to offer my lunch companions anymore, so I sit by myself. Sometimes I loiter in the bathroom stall, waiting for the thrilling girls to return with their rumors, but my timing is always off.

Walking down the stairs on the way to class one day, I find myself alongside H. She looks at me with a spaced-out expression of kindness, as if maybe she knows me from somewhere but she can't remember where. She looks real - not disgusting or corrupted. She looks deep. Even then I think I suspected that there were no 12 boys, only two girls walking next to each other, and the mutual feeling of being lost. In my memory, she's so close I can see ink stains on the tips of her fingers. But then the last bell rings, and she is gone.

Emily White is the author of "Fast Girls," from which this article is adapted, to be published in March by Scribner. New York Times Magazine; New York; Jan 27, 2002

PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #2

The Waiting

By Brian Mockenhaupt

I'm reading *Stars and Stripes* one day at lunch, my rifle on the floor between my feet, before we start the workday, driving our Humvees around western Baghdad. There's an article that says that sudden emotional stress can spike your adrenaline and stun your heart. So I add that to the already impressive list of ways you might die in this war, from bullets to beheadings. The main way, of course, is the bomb, the improvised explosive device.

Mostly we drive around Iraq, often we walk and always we wait. Waiting to blow up. But my luck runs strong. I've been hit with only one bomb, and it exploded too early, just in front of our truck. The detonator was elaborate, but the bomb was shoddy and did little more than pepper the truck with gravel and shrapnel. Dirt and rock cascaded through the turret hatch, and we yelled to one another, asking if anyone was hurt. Then we laughed and whooped. What else can you do? With the explosion came relief, a release of anxiety. The anticipated had become the realized, at least for a moment, until the next moment, when the worry crept back. And that's inevitable. Everywhere you look, there's a possibility. The bombs are hidden in dead dogs and dead donkeys, trash piles and fruit stands, parked cars and moving cars. They're stuffed in sewer pipes, hung from overpasses and tucked behind street signs. Any place is a good place to slip, strap or bury a bomb.

Pondering this too often overwhelms the spirit, so I tuck the worry deep. But it comes back randomly, while walking down an alleyway or watching through the truck window as the fields and markets and side streets zip by. That's when I feel my heart trip, losing its cadence. Maybe in that pile of dirt, that overturned bucket, that bag of garbage. A sharp breath and my chest contracts. The truck might protect me. There's comfort in that. And when I'm on foot, I reason I'd most likely be killed by the blast. There's a kind of comfort in that too.

This cycle of observing, reasoning and rationalizing runs faster and faster, and after many dozens of these moments, my mind moves from panic to resignation in an instant, a beat. I may still have a young man's body, but now I have an old man's heart, and I know when I'm back home it will quiver from loud noises and strain in the night, while I sleep and I dream. There will be memories that linger from those things I experience, but plenty more from the things that I keep expecting to happen.

When Thanksgiving comes around, we stuff ourselves with turkey served by the Indian and Pakistani dining-hall workers, dressed for the day as Pilgrims and Native Americans. That night I'm sent up the road with my team to clear an intersection for the arrival of our company commander, who's being dropped off by another patrol. A bomb exploded nearby earlier in the day, during another platoon's foot patrol. The blast blew everyone to the ground and sent two soldiers to Germany with shrapnel wounds. I see the crater. I stand in it. Five feet wide and two feet deep.

This is the problem with looking for bombs: They're hidden well, so you have to be close to find them. And if you do find one, you're probably too close.

With this in mind we walk, away from our trucks, past darkened houses and toward the intersection. We stop, crouch and whisper. There, on the far side of the road, is a small mound of dirt where there was none a few days ago. We shine spotlights on it but can't tell. We look at it through a thermal scope but see no heat signature. Maybe it's just dirt. I creep up with Conlon, one of my soldiers. Closer, and closer still, and we see a piece of cardboard under a thin layer of dirt. He reaches for the cardboard. Resignation. He pulls it away. Two cylinders, bigger than coffee cans, are nestled in the dirt. Two baby blue wires, twisted together, run from each into the ground. That's a bomb. Three feet from our faces. Beat. Squeeze. Flutter. I'm backpedaling now, waving off the others.

Move. Move. Move.

But this must be the trigger man's night off.

The bomb-disposal guys come later, drive their little robot out to the dirt pile and sit an explosive charge next to the bomb. They blow it up, with a flash and a boom, and through our night-vision goggles we watch the white-hot rain of shrapnel shower down, tinkling on the pavement.

We watch this and we talk about what nearly was. And we talk about next Thanksgiving, how we'll have the best story at the dinner table about those things for which we're thankful. But the next year, when I am finally at home with my family and friends at the table, I don't tell the story.

Brian Mockenhaupt served two tours in Iraq as an infantryman with the 10th Mountain Division and is now working on a book about the military. New York Times, March 12, 2006

PROFESSIONAL EXAMPLE #3

Unplanned legacy

By Philip Higgs

There is no good way to start this story. A friend of mine killed himself on New Year's Eve, and the question on everybody's lips, the one right after "How was your New Year's?" is "My God, what happened?" Sometimes I just tell people that a friend passed away. The delicate treatment doesn't work, though, because everyone wants to know the details, or they assume it was a car crash in some far-off state or that I, at 28, have been hanging out with an aged friend who just happened to pass on, ever so gently, perhaps in a slumber lullabyed by me.

None of this is true. What happened was this: shortly after midnight in the dark outside a ranch party in Texas, an extraordinary and near-perfect friend loaded his handgun, put it to his head and pulled the trigger. His name was Mark He was drunk as a monkey - which he often was - after an entire bottle of Scotch, and yet still pulled it off. All of which is the worst thing in the world to me, to innumerable people and especially to his wife of 18 months. But it's certainly no response to someone who's inquiring about your holiday. The next question is always "Did you see it coming?" as if it were something written in the stars. There are a million lines leading to the idiotic convergence of guns and alcohol, and any one of them could have been stanchied, given enough warning. But there was no warning.

He wasn't the only one who brought a gun to the party. I spent New Year's out West with Mark two years ago; and he, his fiancée and his brother all brought guns to shoot off at midnight. But too much alcohol got in the way, and they never got around to it. This time, nobody got around to it, either. Except Mark.

Maybe the only sympathetic or sensical answer is that it was an accident. I'm not hopeful enough to think he was aiming for the sky. I think his aim, at least, was intentional. But it wasn't suicide either. I try to explain this to people; nobody gets it. The pieces fit together like a suicide, but I don't think he got up that morning and thought, Here's how it's going to end.

A few years ago, I climbed out my 20th-floor bedroom window and hung there while my roommates were partying in the next room. I might have been drinking; honestly, I don't remember. I had all the things that cause a tear in the depressive personality: no money, no lover, a dead-end job cruelly draining my youth. So out the window I went. I didn't plan it. I didn't even look down. Hanging high above the F.D.R. Drive in my underwear, I thought, So that's what this is like. I certainly didn't think, It's all over when I let go. After 30 seconds or so, I got tired, so I kicked my leg up and got back into bed. That's kind of how it went with me back then. Not the ugly, desperate, hanging-out-of-windows thing, but the I-wonder-what-happens-when-I-do-this thing.

That was my first year in New York. I had moved here for a magazine internship, one that didn't offer much in the way of inspiration or vie de bohème (or cash), and soon all the troubles of being rudderless set in. I ran across Mark, someone I knew from home. In high school, we'd courted the same girls and stayed out late drinking with the girls we were courting. Mark was a card-trick genius, a bright-eyed under-age Johnny Cash alky. We would end up at strangers' parties together; on the

way home, driving through the foothills, he would hang onto the car roof while I took the turns too hard. At 16, he told my Bible-proud mother on her own doorstep on Easter Sunday that he was an atheist.

You may think that I'm being too smart-alecky for someone whose friend just died. Trust me, Mark would have wanted it this way - except he wouldn't have used the word "aleck."

Last December, when I last saw him, his new favorite song was some bluegrass thing called "Broken Telephone": The lines are down. ... Connection's gone. Over a Mexican breakfast, we got to talking about guns, and then his guns, and then - after I'd reflexively berated him for owning them - about the beauty of machinery. There was no suicide note. The whole guns-at-midnight thing could have been a ruse, a detailed and protracted ruse. But I don't think so. There was a lot going on with Mark, room for roiling in his enormous mind.

To me there's something missing, something that makes it less than a suicide. It was a mistake, one that he would take back in a heartbeat. He would have known enough to apologize profusely, overwhelmingly, to try to patch things up: "I'm so sorry, Sweets" - he called his wife "Sweets" - "I don't know what I was thinking." He'd chalk it up to bad behavior, and never do damage again. He was just putting the gun up to his head, pulled the trigger just to see what it felt like. Not realizing that what it would feel like - with the blood and the ambulance rush and the final gasps for life - was what it was going to be. There is no answer; there is no clean diagram of Point A leading smoothly to Point Z. I'm getting by, though; I'm doing O.K. Thanks for asking.

Philip Higgs is a writer living in New York. New York Times Magazine; New York, Feb 7, 2002

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE #1 FOCUS ON THE USE OF DETAILS

Rape Charge Follows Marriage to a 14-Year-Old



Chris Cummins for The New York Times

The Kosos at home in his parents' basement. "I couldn't be any happier than I am right now," said Matthew Koso, who could face prison time. The couple married in Kansas with their parents' consent.

By JODI WILGOREN
Published: August 30, 2005
Correction Appended

FALLS CITY, Neb., Aug. 29 - On Sunday evening, Matthew Koso tipped three ounces of formula into his 5-day-old daughter's mouth, then hoisted her atop his shoulder in hope of a burp. On Tuesday morning, he is scheduled to be arraigned on charges for which the newborn is the state's prime piece of evidence.

Mr. Koso is 22. The baby's mother, Crystal, is 14. He is charged with statutory rape, even though they were wed with their parents' blessing in May, crossing into Kansas because their own state prohibits marriages of people under 17.

The Nebraska attorney general accuses Mr. Koso of being a pedophile; they say it is true love.

"We don't want grown men having sex with young girls," said Jon Bruning, the attorney general. "We make a lot of choices for our children: we don't allow them to vote; we don't allow them to drink; we don't allow them to drive cars; we don't allow them to serve in wars at age 13, whether they want to or not; and we don't allow them to have sex with grown men."

But Mr. Koso's mother, Peggy, said she and her husband of 25 years were proud that their son did not disappear like so many deadbeat dads.

"He's not always lived up to his responsibilities, but this time he will," Ms. Koso said. "He could have left, but he didn't. He said, 'Mom, I love Crystal; I love this child.' "

Outrage over the case has rippled through this town of 4,800 about 100 miles from both Omaha and Kansas City, and to two state capitals. The governor of Kansas, Kathleen Sebelius, embarrassed by her state's status as one of the few allowing children as young as 12 to marry, has said she will propose a raise in the minimum age when the Legislature reconvenes in January.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bruning's office has been deluged with letters, the vast majority angrily urging that he leave the couple alone. One, from a woman named Patricia, said, "I'm sure your time can be better spent putting away real criminals."

Studies show that one in five teenagers have sex before they turn 15, and about 150,000 babies are born each year to a minor parent. In Nebraska, there were 25 births to mothers under 15 in 2002, the latest year for which statistics are available. In Kansas, five girls under 15 were married in 2003, three in 2002 and six in 2001.

In Nebraska, as in many other states, intercourse between someone who is 19 and someone younger than 16 is classified as statutory rape. It is illegal here even if the couple is married at the time.

But experts said it was extremely rare for a man to be prosecuted for statutory rape when he has married his minor partner.

A judge in Syracuse last September delayed a one-and-a-half-to-three-year prison sentence until this summer so that a 38-year-old defendant could marry a pregnant 16-year-old; in Florida in 2001, charges were reduced to a misdemeanor when a 17-year-old married the 13-year-old girl expecting their second child, and he received six months' probation.

"It's odd that the state would be prosecuting someone who did not leave the girl pregnant and unwed," said Rigel C. Oliveri, a law professor at the University of Missouri who has studied laws on statutory rape since 1998. "I guess they're just trying to send a message to other men who are contemplating doing this type of thing."

Mr. Koso faces up to 50 years in prison, and Mr. Bruning said he was considering additional charges based on complaints that Mr. Koso had sex with other young girls in the past. Mr. Koso's lawyer would not allow him to discuss that, but his mother said he told her that he had dated only one other girl under 16 and that they did not have sex.

For now, Mr. Koso, out on \$5,000 bond, sits in the basement of his parents' home, where the walls are papered with the pink-and-purple, heart-filled love notes that his wife, a ninth-grader, scribbled on notebook paper in class. A crib crammed next to the bed has Winnie the Pooh sheets to match the keychain dangling from her schoolgirl purse.

The couple named their 7-pound, 1-ounce baby girl, born Wednesday morning, Samara Ann Koso, after a character in the horror movie "The Ring."

As Mr. Koso changed Samara's diaper three times in 30 minutes on Sunday, Crystal worked on a homework assignment for her world history class.

"I couldn't be any happier than I am right now," Mr. Koso said, adding of Mr. Bruning: "He's a home wrecker. He's trying to rip a father away from a child, and rip a husband away from a wife."

Matthew and Crystal met when she was 8, and he played video games with her half-brother. Mr. Koso, who was in special

education classes for attention deficit disorder and other learning problems, graduated from high school in 2001 and joined the Marine Corps, but left after four months on a medical discharge. When Crystal's mother had no car, Mr. Koso drove her to the doctor and the grocery store.

"He's always been friends with people that were younger," said Peggy Koso, recalling her son at age 5 or 6 passing hours with building blocks and racing cars with a neighbor of 3 or 4. "His own peers never accepted him."

The two became a couple, according to Crystal's "Happy Anniversary" drawing on the wall, on Sept. 17, 2003. She was 12 and he 20. Exactly a year later, Crystal's mother, Cecilia Guyer, who is divorced from her father, filed for a restraining order against Mr. Koso, writing of him: "He's too old for early teens. He needs to stay away."

Despite the court order, both mothers now say, Crystal continued to go to the Kosos' home after school and stay through supper, sleeping over in Mr. Koso's basement room on weekends. Ms. Koso said she spoke to her son about the risks of pregnancy and prison and made excuses to check on the couple frequently when they were alone. Ms. Guyer said that she asked Crystal why she seemed to be using fewer tampons, but that she denied being sexually active.

Then one afternoon when Ms. Guyer and her daughter were shopping at a second-hand store for a dress for an eighth grade dance, Ms. Guyer noticed that Crystal had stretch marks. The couple confessed, but said they were not interested in adoption. On May 3, after consulting with a lawyer, they were married in a judge's chambers 18 miles away in Hiawatha, Kan., both in jeans, she

carrying pink carnations, he with a matching boutonniere.

The local police came the next day to question Crystal and her mother, but no charges were filed until Mr. Bruning's office, which frequently prosecutes crimes in rural counties, got involved in late July.

"This was not a close call," the attorney general said in an interview. "We weren't talking about a 19-year-old-and-one-day senior in high school and his 15-year-old-and-364-day sophomore girlfriend. We were talking about a grown man and a child."

Mr. Bruning said he was shocked that more than 80 percent of the 250 people - most from outside Nebraska - who had contacted his office opposed the prosecution. Similar sentiment abounds here in Falls City, where people say putting Mr. Koso in jail would most likely land his wife and child on welfare, an unnecessary double-burden for taxpayers.

"They are trying to make a right out of a wrong," Mardell Rehrs, 67, said of the couple on Monday morning. "Give them a chance."

Residents here said Mr. Koso was being unfairly singled out. One 1995 graduate of Falls City High said seven girls in his class of 60 had babies before graduation, including one who was pregnant, like Crystal, in the eighth grade.

Ron Prichard, who works at the railroad and has a 12-year-old daughter, said Matthew and Crystal would not be parents today "if her parents were being parents."

"Yeah, the kid did wrong, but the parents allowed it to happen," Mr. Prichard said.

Mr. Koso's mother spent the last three nights sleeping on the living room couch, next to the baby's bassinet, to handle the nightly feedings. She and Ms. Guyer, who each receive Supplemental Security Income for disabilities, say they will take care of Samara during the day, once Crystal returns to school after Labor Day.

The families hope that Mr. Koso is placed on probation instead of being sentenced to prison so he can keep his \$9.27 an hour job loading trucks.

Maybe a year from now, the couple says, they will be able to afford their own place. Crystal, who is good at math, said that she had no interest in college, but that she would finish high school and perhaps become a nurse. They plan to have two more children.

"But later on," said Crystal, who says her favorite part of motherhood thus far is when Samara is asleep. "Much later on."

Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article.

Correction: Aug. 31, 2005, Wednesday:

An article yesterday about a 22-year-old man who is being prosecuted for the statutory rape of the 14-year-old mother of his child, whom he later wed, misstated the baby's day of birth. She was born last Wednesday, not Thursday.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE #2 An update on the above story

Source:

Lincoln Journal Star

Monday, February 8, 2010

http://journalstar.com/news/local/article_9d7bfa6a-14c8-11df-981e-001cc4c002e0.html

Koso couple still in love

By COLLEEN KENNEY

Crystal Koso was 13 when she got pregnant, 14 when she and the baby's father went to Kansas to get married. Matthew Koso, then 22, was charged with rape, and the story went global. He served 15 months in prison and has been out since May 2007. Today, the couple still lives in Falls City and are awaiting the birth of a fourth child.

FALLS CITY -- "There's a monster in my bedroom."

Sami Koso, a little girl with corn-silk curls, says this solemnly. She coughs. Her nose is running. She runs across the carpet and climbs the couch to a safe place under her mom's arm.

The mom laughs.

"A monster? The only monster is you."

The mom is Crystal Koso.

Remember her? Five years ago, when she was 14 and pregnant with Sami, she got her mom's consent and married her baby's father, Matthew Koso.

Remember him? He was 22 then, and he went to prison for having sex with an underage girl.

They were interviewed by "20/20," "Good Morning, America," People magazine.

To some people, Matthew was a monster. To others, he was a man trying to do the right thing after doing the wrong thing.

Five years later, Crystal and Matthew are still married. They have three kids. There's a baby in Crystal's belly. They live in a yellow house that has a swing set and a sandbox in the front yard.

Sami is "a pistol," Crystal says proudly, looking down at her. She loves her Valentine's Day stuffed bear, which is bigger than she is.

She loves to jump rope.

She loves to draw pictures.

She loves all the cotton-candy ice cream her parents have been feeding her the past few weeks because the doctors say she has to gain weight.

But there's a monster in her lungs. Some nights, her parents tiptoe into her bedroom to make sure she's breathing.

Crystal strokes her daughter's curls.

On Dec. 7, Crystal's 19th birthday, doctors told them what they'd feared.

Sami has cystic fibrosis.

They can see the Richardson County Courthouse from their porch.

Matthew will never forget that February day four years ago when he watched Crystal stand up in that building and beg the judge for leniency, when he didn't get it, not even probation, when he fainted in a back room after the verdict.

"Nothing is going to help me now," he told Crystal that day. "I'm going to die while I'm up there."

"I know it probably was one of the most tragic days in my life," he says now. "But yet it was one of the biggest learning days I ever had, too. I learned a lot of stuff, like you can't do something that you may think is going to go unnoticed and think you're not going to get caught.

"I got caught, although I wasn't trying to save my butt, like the attorney general was thinking I was trying to do. I was doing it for the girl I loved."

He thinks the attorney general is a nice guy.

In a strange way, he's thankful. It made his family stronger. It gave him a better outlook.

But the years since haven't been easy. He has to register as a sex offender. He can't visit Sami at preschool. He lost the pickup he loved while he was in prison because he couldn't keep up payments.

His parents own this house, which helps because he and Crystal don't have jobs now.

"Who's going to hire a felon?"

But maybe there's a bright side to that, too, because now he can help Crystal take care of the kids.

Cystic fibrosis is a genetic disease that causes mucous to build up in the lungs. They have to give Sami treatments twice a day, in a vest that shakes her thin body. If they don't, she could die.

Crystal is not at all thankful, looking back on that February day. She's still angry the judge didn't listen to her tell him how much she and Sami needed Matthew.

"When Matt was home, he was my only protection. And when he left -- when he was sent to prison -- I had no protection."

Matthew went to prison for 15 months. During that time, Crystal got pregnant by someone else. Elijah is 2. The little boy lives with them five days a week.

Crystal graduated from high school early. She says she got good grades. Ten months ago, she gave birth to Mariska, who looks a lot like Sami.

The baby in Crystal's belly is a boy.

Crystal loves being a mom. She loves this house, this life. She still loves this man by her side.

She's happy with the choices she made that led to the little girl now sleeping under her arm, under a large purple-crayon drawing on the wall that Sami made. It looks like a person. But who knows?

Sami breathes slowly and loudly as she sleeps. Congestion rattles her chest.

Four years ago, Matthew and Crystal Koso thought that what went down in the courthouse that day was the worst thing that could happen to them.

They were wrong.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #1

Lying rather uncomfortably on the examination table while facing the painfully bright ceiling lights, I fidgeted nervously, desperately trying to ignore the gloominess of the situation. I attempted to focus on staying warm in the bitterly cold room, but the events of just a few months prior kept running through my head—the intense pain, my overwhelming fear, and the frantic scrambling of surgeons and nurses in the Emergency Room. The doctors told me I had broken a vertebra in my lower back. Briefly, I now smiled thinking about the innocence of my response to the news: “So I have to wear a brace now when I play football?”

Waiting for the doctor now, I became unbearably impatient. I had waited for three months to find out whether or not I would be cleared to play football again, but the thought of waiting another five minutes seemed impossible. Then Dr. Pittinger entered the room. He was friendly, but perceptibly uncomfortable, almost sad. The question remained unasked and unanswered as we went through the standard procedures of a physical and I could tell that I had cleared all of the tests. The time had finally come for him to tell me whether or not I could play. His eyes focused on his clipboard for a moment, and he then lifted his head, frowning. He spoke slowly and softly, but still rather matter-of-factly, as he told me that I would never be able to play football again.

The realization sunk in immediately. I wasn't surprised, or at least I shouldn't have been, but that did not make the order any easier. I refuted the idea wholeheartedly, and for months after I was released, I continued to condition with the football team in hopes of returning the next year. I woke up every morning at five to be at the gym by six for rehab. Even though I was ashamed to wear my back brace, I wore it devotedly, with some sort of false hope that the more I wore it, the quicker and better it would heal the broken vertebrae. At night, I slept on the floor because my bone doctor told me that sleeping on a firm surface was good for my back.

I was determined to play again.

Nonetheless, in the end, just as the doctor ordered, I never played another quarter of football. After several nights in a row of coming home from conditioning barely able to walk, I finally gave in. For a while, giving up felt like an admittance of defeat rather than the acceptance of a truth that should have been painfully obvious, but over time, I realized that like most of the difficult decisions I have made and will have to make, life would go on. Rather than focus on what was undeniably unattainable, I understood that even though this particular option was no longer open to me, I had countless other choices to make in its place.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #2

I punched in 3-7-5-2 and hit 'Send.' An electric motor gave a muffled buzz, and the door clanked and hinged until it was overhead. From the dim opening, the smell of gasoline, motor oil, and lacquer thinner slowly escaped. I smiled. Carefully stepping over a few stacks of cardboard boxes and ducking below the bumper that hung from the rafters, I reached the switch. After a short pause, a noisy fluorescent bulb flickered and then illuminated the garage. My heart beat a little faster. I stood there for a moment and took the whole scene in. The garage was in complete disorder, but I can't say I was surprised; I'd known its owner long enough to expect that. I counted four engine stands. A greasy push rod V8 sat atop the one nearest to where I was standing. A faded badge on the valve cover gave away its identity as a Buick 400. On another rested a supercharged Pontiac 3800. Probably from the Bonneville sitting outside, I thought. The other two stands had covers over whatever formidable power plants occupied them. I glanced over a few sets of cylinder heads and five complete sets of Buick rallies on my way to the other light switch, which was hidden behind a dusty sand blaster.

Another hesitant fluorescent bulb lit up the far side of the building, the side I hadn't seen before. In contrast to the mess of automotive parts behind me, this side was organized and clean. Next to the wall sat the diamond in the rough. I looked down the side of the beautiful machine. Not a scratch, a dent, or even a

hint of orange peel. The black convertible top was almost as shiny as the aquamarine steel that it was attached to. Over the smells of various fossil fuels, I sniffed a trace of Armor-All. The chrome emblems still had the mirror finish, but I already knew what I was admiring. Skylark Convertible, I thought to myself, sixty-eight or sixty-nine.

I heard my hood latch release. I emerged from the wonderful world that is a gearhead's garage. Compared to the beauty I had just seen, my car looked like it was ready for City Scrap. I stole a glance down the body. The deep scratch from the air compressor and the sizable dent from my dad's car made me cringe. I peered under the hood to find that he already had my fifteen-dollar chrome air cleaner off and was adjusting the old Quadrajet. I looked with envy at the shiny Holley that sat on a shelf to my left. I had been wanting to replace my carburetor for a while, but I couldn't justify the cost. My car was running well enough. It idled roughly, and like a spoiled child, refused to move if it thought it was too cold outside of the garage. My car came alive. He started whistling to himself as he checked the timing. We talked about my car, his car, his friend's car, cruise-ins, and drag strip nights. For a while I think he even forgot that I was dating his daughter. As the mid-day heat was just starting to bake the driveway, I filled the oil pan with fresh Mobil One and the tune-up was finished. I swung open one of the big red doors, sat down on a square of beige carpet that covered the tear in the seat, and turned the key. The small block started without complaint. Even with brand new oil, I was annoyed when I heard the old rocker knock still ticking under the hood. This is quite common in Buick engines of the sixties and seventies; Buick couldn't seem to make an adequate oiling system. I started thinking about ways to improve the oiling system. My train of thought shifted a few times, and before long I had a prototype for a completely revolutionized internal combustion engine rotating on an engine stand in my brain.

“So, have you thought about what you want to go to school for?”

Yanked back to reality, It took a moment for me to comprehend the question. I had been asked it many times before, and I never had a confident answer. At that moment, though, I felt as though I had a fairly solid grasp on it.

“Right now, it's looking like mechanical engineering.”

He nodded, seemingly impressed. I was certainly more impressed than he was. I'd never really come to a conclusion on a college major, but after a few hours under the hood, I felt like I knew what I wanted to do. As I drove my delightfully smooth-running '71 Buick Skylark home, I began to envision my future as a mechanical engineer.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #3

“You’re not important, you’re not important, and you’re not important.” The words tumbled from my lips as I pointed to Andrew, the nerdy kid with glasses, Jason, the wannabe-skater boy, and Randy, the lanky guy with buck teeth. “I just need to ask Billy a few questions for this survey,” I continued, pushing haughtily through the group as I searched for their leader, my friend Billy. As I questioned Billy, I saw some boys dribbling a soccer ball around the football field and I heard the giddy buzz of the girls’ conversations. Jason, Randy, and Andrew leaned against the metal chain-link fence, almost in a daze under the glare of the mid-May sun. After I finished chatting with Billy, I jauntily walked away without another glance at the rejects that he called his friends.

Many months after I had forgotten the events of that day, I somehow developed a crush on the wannabe-skater, Jason. When Jason finally asked me to be his girlfriend, I was ambivalent to the possibility of dating a guy who spiked his hair with blue gel, played the guitar, and wore Army-green camouflage pants. Sure, I loved his sharp-witted humor, his zany antics, and his compassionate ways, but our common interests were minimal and our social statuses virtually never crossed. Reluctantly, I accepted Jason’s offer on the condition that no one, save our close friends, would suspect that we were together. After imparting the news of what seemed like an illicit relationship to our friends, Jason and I discussed their unique reactions. Jason delicately explained that Andrew was less than thrilled. Fortunately, I read through

Jason's euphemisms and recognized that Andrew abhorred me. Since I could not imagine what atrocious thing I had said or done to arouse such antagonism, I asked Jason to enlighten me.

"Dani, don't you remember that day last year when you came over to us and asked to talk to Billy? Do you remember not talking to the rest of us and telling us that we weren't important?"

Jason inquired. Suddenly I felt as if my heart had dropped to the very pit of my stomach—I clearly remembered that day, but I never once considered the effect I had on Jason and his friends.

Immediately, I began to realize that if Andrew remembered my disdainful words, Randy, Jason, and anyone that I ever ridiculed probably remembered my taunting as well. But why had I teased and mocked my peers? What horrendous things had they done to me? I laughed at Randy, Andrew, Jason, and others because they were different from me; they were unusual and dorky; they were enigmas to me. As I contemplated my words, I saw that my statements were completely unfounded. Day by day, Jason and his friends became increasingly important to me—I came to understand that they were amazing people whose company I enjoyed immensely. Once I was completely aware of my misconception of Randy, Andrew, and Jason, I knew that I must have made numerous other fallacies.

After thinking about my past, I attempted to calculate the number of potential friends I had lost as a result of thoughtlessly judging people. The exact figure was impossible to determine, but I knew it was enormous. I realized that if I continued to act in this manner, I might miss the opportunity to develop friendships with incredible people, so I finally decided to make a conscious effort to think carefully about how I treat others, to choose my words prudently, and to be more accepting of others' differences.

Today, almost four years later, I can see a distinctive change in myself. Instead of mocking people for their unique traits, I embrace the diversity of people and am grateful that I have the opportunity to know and encounter a limitless spectrum of people. Most importantly, I have learned the true meaning of equality among people; I now am able to accept that I am neither above nor below any other human being. I believe that I am now a tremendously tolerant and open-minded person.

STUDENT EXAMPLE #4

As I opened the giant doors the sun pierced my eyes, forcing me to squint just to make sense of the parking lot. It was a hot day, almost 90 degrees, but it still felt cool compared to the smoldering 110 degrees of my work station. I tried to look down the seemingly endless rows of cars, shielding my eyes from the tremendous glare that reflected off the windshields. I had blocked the sun with mild success, but my vision had become blurry from the sweat dripping into my eyes. It felt like I had been swimming in the ocean with my eyes open all day, and based on my appearance an observer would have thought I had done this in my clothes. I tried rubbing my eyes with my t-shirt to remove the burning saltiness, but since my shirt was soaked through, my actions only intensified the pain. After a few moments I was finally able to make sense of the parking lot and I began my trek toward my car.

Unfortunately Lincoln Electric has a parking lot that would rival most major amusement parks. It wouldn't be a problem if I were an executive or an actual employee, but welding school students had reserved parking at the very back of the lot, three quarters of a mile from the building. I had been walking for what felt like an eternity, yet I didn't feel any closer to my car because of the stifling heat that I could see and feel. Eventually I saw my jeep through the thick haze, which was what I needed to reassure myself that this parking lot did end and that it didn't just fade into the horizon. When I finally arrived at my car I hesitantly got in.

Fatigue had consumed my body, and any excitement I felt about leaving was dampened because I knew I would have to return early the next morning.

Becoming a welder, I am convinced, is one of the hardest things any 18-year-old can do. My summer of factory work and school was the best and worst experience of my life. I learned more about life in 90 days than I had learned in the past 18 years, though this did not come easily. While my friends were sleeping, at 6:45, I was showered and dressed. I often wanted to call in sick and just catch up on all my sleep, and at times, I couldn't see the benefit in going to work, especially when I looked at my arms and examined the burns on them. By this point my protective leathers had become worn and the molten metal spitting from the arc had begun to burn my skin. Yet, these days when I didn't want to work were the days when I learned the most. Between the long car rides and almost endless walks I realized what was happening. If the summer taught me anything it taught me what I didn't want to be, and what I have to do to ensure this. School, for example, has now become more important than it had ever been before.

My newfound appreciation for education alone was worth the grueling experience, but welding gave me so much more. My whole life I had fit in, but on the first day of work I was the outsider. Not only had I not had any welding experience, but I also had not been exposed to factory life on that level. I had no idea what it was like to be up every morning before dawn, and I had no idea what manual labor was all about. In previous summers, I worked as a landscaper, but even the challenges I experienced then paled in comparison to true blue-collar work. Fortunately the other employees at Lincoln Electric didn't know of my sheltered work experience. Generally, to factory workers, kids like me had no business being in the shop. These men knew what it was like to work in order to eat. They knew that the company depended on their output, though often times their pay didn't represent their importance. To them kids like me didn't have any idea what it is like to walk in their shoes. After my experiences there, I would have to agree. I had no idea about the commitment, dedication and perseverance it takes to show up for factory work everyday.

By the end of the summer I learned what welding was all about. It is not about “gluing” metal together, it is about the pride and the bonds you form with your partners. It’s about being able to look at your partner, not saying a word, and knowing what they’re going through. Its about the pride we take knowing that without us ships would sink, pipes wouldn’t fit, and bridges would crumble. One summer of welding changed my life. I experienced something most people never will. I went from being the outsider to one of the guys. The intangible lessons welding has taught me couldn’t possibly be matched by any high school, and for these reasons and because of these experiences, I am proud to call myself a certified welder.