

SAMPLE #1 - PARKER

In seventh grade, I thought I had outgrown dressing up as a cowboy. My mom thought otherwise. Three weeks after Halloween, she handed me a cowboy costume complete with shiny silver cap guns and a bandana and said, "Put this on right now, our neighbor is coming to take pictures." Despite my protests, my mom forced me to get dressed. My two younger brothers and I were going to take pictures for our family's famous "WANTED poster" Christmas cards. These sepia posters included the disasters and daring deeds my brothers, and I had committed that year. For example, eating the corn feed at the petting zoo, swimming naked at the neighborhood pool, and throwing raw eggs at our own house.

As our neighbor aimed the camera, my mom stood behind him, waving to get us all to smile, but I refused. The whole world would see this picture of me, an outlawed cowboy, my face stone cold. Sure enough, when I walked into school after Christmas break, our WANTED poster was hanging on my teacher's bulletin board. My classmates began to notice it and laugh at me. I had a decision to make: I could either laugh along with my peers or be ashamed. I decided the damage had been done. I might as well laugh.

Looking back, I realize the annual family Christmas card was my parents' way of refusing to present a fake image of our family, and instead, turn the havoc my brothers and I reeked into a way that our family could laugh at ourselves. If I was going to survive middle school, I had to learn to laugh at myself along with my peers. Interestingly, that decision ended up opening doors for deep relationships when I entered high school. I introduced myself to the people I was assigned to sit next to in class, and as I struggled to keep up with names, I embraced the WANTED poster mentality, laughing rather than taking myself too seriously. I decided to be transparent and not change my personality or put on a "mask" when I met someone new. I learned that through laughing at myself, I could have deep relationships with a diverse group of people. This became part of my high school image and helped me stand firm in my faith.

I have found that by connecting with a variety of people through quality time and by plugging into different communities, I have made many deep and lasting friendships. In my seven-minutes between classes, I can walk through a campus of 3,600 people and say hello to a football player, a Young Life friend, a person in my scout troop, someone in my English class, and one of my younger brother's friends.

Friends love to stop by my house because they are greeted with warm smiles, homemade desserts, and college football playing on our screened-in porch. My house is a safe place for me and a safe place for my friends because there's no pressure on the weekends to join the partying scene. In a collegiate environment, I would want to extend the hospitality I have learned in my home, to my friends and dormmates. As I head to college where I will meet new people and get a chance to "start over," there will be the opportunity to present a fake image of myself. But, I have learned from my family that being genuine and laughing at yourself is all that you need to "start over." This opportunity invariably presents itself. In fact, I was recently on stage at Young Life in front of 200 people in a silly costume. I couldn't help but think about my outlaw days. That night, I swallowed a live goldfish as part of a skit and in that moment, I knew I'd hit my family's WANTED poster paydirt.

SAMPLE #2 - JACK

The fish of 10,000 casts. The musky is one of the most elusive and biggest fish to swim in freshwater. On a hot June day in southwest Virginia, I headed out to the New River. I was fishing alone for smallmouth bass, fish that are usually in the 12-15 inch range but put up a great fight on light gear. Unfortunately, the river was raging and muddy, I had little success all day, which was frustrating considering all the articles I had read the night before talking about the New River's "world-class smallmouth fishing."

About to set my rod down for a break, suddenly, I heard a massive swirl, and saw the unique tiger pattern of a musky tail thrash out of the water. Instinct took over. I knew the fish was tearing out into the middle of the river with my lure caught in its mouth. It felt like slow motion as the fish jumped clear out of the water. I realized I had the fish of 10,000 casts on my line, and then remembered I was totally outmatched fighting a 40+ inch fish on my light bass gear.

Adrenaline filled my body as I knew that it could be years before I hooked another musky. I battled the fish for 20 minutes, feeling as if my line was bound to snap at any moment. I had finally tired out the fish. I slowly dragged the musky up onto the bank and jumped on it as soon as it was on land. The fish was stronger than any fish I had felt before, and it writhed back and forth, trying to free itself. The musky let out one final but powerful blow, and the slipperiness of the riverbank combined with the power of the fish caused it to slide down the bank and back into the water. I sat on the riverside for an hour, confused, heartbroken, and embarrassed. I struggled with reality. Part of me wondered if anyone would believe me? Had I really held it in my hands? The other half of me knew I'd been outmatched and was lucky to even get my hands on it. After thinking about that catch the whole night, I was able to find peace of mind. I realized that I'd had the fish in my hands, so I caught it no matter who believed me and who didn't.

Over a year later, I still consider the musky experience the turning point in what fishing means to me. I don't wish that the outcome had been any different because it taught me why I fish. It made me realize that fishing isn't always about the photo, but instead about the finicky process of getting the fish to fall for your lure, and then battling the fish until you can hold it in your hands. My initial struggle with reality taught me that deep down, we all want that picture with the one that got away, so we must find the balance between appreciating both the fight and the picture.

Being outmatched made me more ambitious, more savvy. I know that eventually and with more experiences, I will catch another musky. 10,000 casts from now, I will be the old, wise fisherman who has had a dozen monsters get away and truly understands that the reason we withstand the days of not catching anything is because of the feeling we have when a big fish is on the end of our line.

Although I have no picture of the one that got away, I learned something far more valuable. Catching the musky has taught me that fishing is not about the final picture, just as life is about how we grow, not where we end up.

SAMPLE #3 - CATE

Even as young as six, it was rare to find me anywhere without a book clasped in my hands. Whether at the family-owned restaurant near my neighborhood, or waiting in line at Disney, I smuggled stories to the extent that my reading became infamous in the family. Under the forceful eye of my parents, I would have to vow to leave my books at home on numerous occasions. In the second grade, I was gifted a pocket guide to insects as a part of my parents' endless cycle of finding new topics for me to explore through reading. With the unbounded enthusiasm of a child, my primary joy became flipping through the dog-eared pages of different types of dragonflies, bees, and beetles, yelling out to my parents that "I've seen one of these before!" I would sit in the itchy summer grass, focusing with fascination on the Widow Skimmers hovering above the plants in my front yard, or the wood bees bothering my sister on the swing set. Over time, the focus of my interest skewed more toward the small figments of nature around me than the book itself. I grew interested because of my own curiosities, rather than the prompted information that had sparked my excitement in the first place.

Looking back, I realize that my fascination with how the world works was developing even in the simplest form by watching the insects around my home. Once I latched onto a topic that truly interested me, I poured my time and focus into it, venturing into the world to learn more for myself. Though I grew up and was no longer that little girl, crouching in the grass and amusing myself with insects, this childish wonder remained within me, inspiring my need to explore any information that I could get my hands on. I distinctly recall trekking through my middle school hallway, nearly at a loss for breath while rambling on to a friend about what we had just learned in our science class, which had concerned space being infinite. Unfulfilled by the brief introduction that we had been given, I went home and tore through my tattered National Geographic almanac to find the section about space, and to hunt for additional details which had been so unjustly withheld. Even later, in my junior year biology class, I remember learning about the lytic and lysogenic cycles of bacteriophages and being told that scientists were unsure of the factors that caused certain viruses to come out of dormancy. Immediately engrossed, I pondered the possibilities of identifying and preventing these factors, stopping the symptoms of viruses from ever being activated. Searching the internet to fuel my interest, I became exposed to even more questions along the way, guiding my fascination to new heights.

Throughout my life, this curiosity and desire to understand the intricacies of the natural world have overwhelmingly inspired my summer activities, personal research topics, and interest in virology and neuroscience for my future study. As I seek answers to my boundless list of questions, I hope to use that research to bring change, ingenuity, and improvement to the world. Whether it be delving into the complexities of DNA at Summer Ventures or interrogating my teachers to find more information regarding what we covered in class, I live my life in a constant pursuit of knowledge, with an unfaltering desire to experience the world and its mysteries with my own two eyes. As I continue to ponder profound questions, explore my interests, and pursue my insatiable desire for knowledge, I will always try to embrace the perspective of my second-grade self, marching into the world around her, filled with amazement at the beauty of the tiny, innumerable creatures in her front yard.

SAMPLE #4 - SARAH

On the first day of practice, I walked up to the field, tripping on the heels of my mom. I surveyed the field, and as my eyes swept from one kid to the next, I noticed that no other eight-year-old had hair as long as mine. My heart rate spiked as I made the sudden realization that I would be the only girl on an all-boys baseball team, an important piece of information that my parents had conveniently left out.

A month earlier my parents had planted the idea of baseball. We had just moved into a new neighborhood, and I was struggling to acclimate. They had enrolled me in soccer, hockey, dance and a litany of other sports, but I would always choose reading a good book over participating in physical exertion. When asked my opinion on possibly playing baseball, I gave an indifferent shoulder shrug and went back to reading my book on insects.

I can still vividly recall the nauseating feeling I felt in the pit of my stomach before each baseball game. I would nervously wait for my mom to braid my hair and match my hair ties to my purple uniform. During each game, I felt the pressure to not disappoint my parents, to not embarrass my teammates, and to prove that having a girl on the team was an advantage rather than a detriment. Even though my failures from that season are burned in my mind, they were the tools that taught me the most. From missing easy pop flies, to hesitantly staying instead of stealing second, I slowly became a better player. I soaked up every piece of advice and criticism. I worked hard to learn from my mistakes, and winning our championship game proved that it had paid off.

I have never in my life felt a greater relief to complete anything, but when that season ended, I recognized how capable I am of stepping up the plate. I proudly wore my braids and unwrinkled uniform as we posed for a final team photo. I laughed comfortably with my new friends and felt a sense of pride reflecting on how much I had grown since that first day of practice.

I now realize that playing on that all-boys team demonstrated to me the pressure that many women in male-dominated industries face. I noticed a need to prove myself every game and although I would dread those two hours in the beating sun, I felt proud to have impressed those who thought I was incapable of playing with the boys. I have even seen the way it is even reflected in my own life. My mom has been successful as the only woman COO in minor league hockey, a predominantly male sport. She has always given maximum effort to grow as a leader and to show others the capability that women have. I now have a greater respect for any woman who has made conscious efforts to level representation in their profession and a personal desire to someday do the same.

I have discovered a comfortable confidence in myself as I face new and unknown challenges head-on, viewing them as opportunities to grow. Through striking out quite a few times, I unearthed a desire to show the potential and drive that I have in everything that I do. I know that putting myself in certain situations, even if they are uncomfortable at first, is the only way to grow as a person and as a learner. Choosing the IB route rather than less rigorous courses was another instance that taught me the value of discomfort and hard work. The challenges I faced in IB and on the field have made me a more driven person. Little league ignited a fire and a confidence that I had felt very few times in my life, but that is unceasingly prevalent today.

SAMPLE #5 - HARRISON

Here we go again...I thought maybe by leaving the country, things would be different. My family took a trip to Turks & Caicos, where I hoped to relax and enjoy myself without being singled out by complete strangers. It didn't matter if we were on the beach, shopping in the market, or on a boat enjoying the turquoise waters, it happened time and time again. I can still recall the island dialect of the locals' words ringing in my head..."Hey man, how tall are you?" I simply couldn't escape it.

It's not that being tall is some sort of awful affliction. I suppose most people would think it's a positive characteristic and I'd probably agree, but I haven't always thought that way. Today, I am approaching 6'6" and I just turned 17. For as long as I can remember, people would tell me that I was tall. Doctors always informed me and my parents that I was way above average for my age. Being tall may not be highly unusual, but growing up it affected me both psychologically and physically. It defined me, whether I wanted it or not.

When I was younger I was not sure how to take the comments. For example, people often asked if they could "borrow a few inches" or the classic, "How's the weather up there?" I wasn't sure whether to laugh or be annoyed at these remarks. Also, I always hated encountering people I had not seen in awhile. Once before a family reunion, I asked my parents if I could get a shirt that said "Yes, I know I'm tall." After hearing the same comments over and over, it really got under my skin. The other thing that literally got "under my skin" was the pain of my bones growing so rapidly. Seemingly every night, I'd wake up in excruciating pain. It was as if my body was strapped to the bed and my legs were being pulled apart from my torso. If not for my mother stroking my shins nightly, I'm not sure the "growth-daggers" would have ever subsided.

Over time, I realized that the comments weren't necessarily negative. They helped me to understand that I am just unique. I went from being self-conscious about my height to using it to try to be more self-confident. It is still sometimes tough because with height, there are assumptions and certain expectations. For example, "I have to play basketball" because I am tall (I don't) or I have to be elite in whatever sport I play. The reality is when you are constantly growing, it is very difficult to feel coordinated, which is hard for many people to understand.

Today, I've come to embrace the opportunities that my height has given me to connect with people. Some of the best interactions I have are with small kids, who seem to be mesmerized by me. They think I'm an actual giant! With adults, it's a great icebreaker that allows me to make the most out of our conversations.

17 years and thousands of quips later, I now love my height and use it as an advantage whenever possible. One last thing...the weather "up here" is the same as it is "down there."

SAMPLE #6 - CLARA

Why do I swim? I have often asked myself this question over the past ten years, after coaching changes, being told I'm not fast enough, just missing an important cut, or having to turn down invitations with friends because I have a meet or practice the next morning.

Having second thoughts, I nervously tread water with about 50 other girls in the middle of a cold lake in September. But regardless of my doubts, I take a deep breath and anxiously wait for my first open water race to begin. I am terrified of putting my face into the murky greenish-brown water and not being able to see the bottom. I recall when I was 8 years old and used to cry every time we had to race in the pool that was 15 feet deep because I was scared that I would sink to the bottom. I shake this memory from my head as I hear the dreaded beep and see the red light flash. It's go time. I put my head down into the water and feel a rush of adrenaline. Before the race, one of my teammates and I made a pact that we would stick together, but we are immediately separated as a swarm of girls claws its way to the front. I begin to gain some confidence as I get into my rhythm: three strokes with my head down, one stroke to breathe, spot the buoy that seems miles away. But the race is hard and the course is longer than anything I have ever done before. As I take each breath, I scan the lake for the silhouette of my friend. But it is impossible in the sea of pink caps that surrounds me. The hope of potentially catching up to anyone familiar is the only thing that keeps me going. Over time my fear melts away and is replaced with fatigue. The stretch towards the final buoy is exhausting. I frantically swing my arms trying to muster up what little is left of my strength. I reach the point where I can touch the ground and I stumble to the finish line at the shore of the lake. My throat is burning and my muscles ache. But, after 45 minutes of pure exhaustion, I am finished.

As I collapse onto the ground where the rest of my teammates are waiting, I remember why I swim. I swim because it constantly pushes me to become a better person in the water and out. "Nothing grows in the comfort zone," my coach used to often say. I've learned that it doesn't matter whether I am the slowest or the fastest on the team because with persistence and determination, I can succeed. Success is personal and my success may look different than others' successes. I have been through so many grueling practices that I know I have the endurance to get through whatever is thrown at me. Swimming is a daily reminder of how to persevere through life. Whether it's a test that was harder than I expected or a meet where I didn't perform as well as I would have liked, I don't get discouraged. Swimming has taught me to get up, try again, and be ready for the next time.

I am going to bring this same mentality with me to college. I know that with my determination I will work as hard as I can to succeed for myself and no one else. As I ride back home after the meet squished in the team van between my two best friends listening to our "Open Water Meet" playlist, I feel so accomplished. I definitely didn't win the race, or even enjoy doing it, but I finished it. In the end, swimming has made me the strongest and most resilient version of myself.