Essays that Worked

Here is a sampling of the terrific college essays written by Hamilton students in the Class of 2018 (reprinted with their permission).

1) Alexander Wear

Severna Park, Md.

Life from Seven Feet Up

Walking down a busy street, I see the quick glances and turned heads. The murmurs and giggles trickle toward me. I try to ignore the buzz, interspersed with, "Oh my God!" and the occasional, "Damn!" Then, a complete stranger asks for a picture, so I stand with people foreign to me and politely smile and laugh. After the click of the camera, they go on their way. Sometimes I wish I weren't so tall. Maybe then I could take a friend to a movie and just blend into the crowd.

Attention from strangers is nothing new to me. Questions about my height dominate almost every public interaction. My friends say my height is just a physical quality and not a personality trait. However, when I reflect on my life, I realize that my height has shaped my character in many ways and has helped to define the person I am.

I learned how to be comfortable in my own skin. If I had the introverted personality my older brother had in high school, I'd probably be overwhelmed by the constant public attention. Even as a young child, parents at the sidelines of my baseball games, as well as the umpire, would, in front of all my teammates, demand by birth certificate to prove my age. I grew acquainted early on with the fact that I am abnormally tall and stick out about the crowd. It's just the way it is. Being self-conscious about it would be paralyzing.

I learned how to be kind. When I was younger, some parents in my neighborhood deemed me a bully because I was so much larger than children my age. I had to be extra welcoming and gentle simply to play with other children. Of course, now my coaches wish I weren't quite so kind on the basketball court.

I learned humility. At 7 feet tall, everyone expects me to be an amazing basketball player. They come expecting to see Dirk Nowitzki, and instead they might see a performance more like Will Ferrell in *Semi-Pro*. I have learned to be humble and to work even harder than my peers to meet their (and my) expectations.

I developed a sense of lightheartedness. When people playfully make fun of my height, I laugh at myself too. On my first day of high school, a girl dropped her books in a busy hallway. I crouched down to her level and gathered some of her notebooks. As we both stood up, her eyes widened as I kept rising over her. Dumbfounded, she dropped her books again. Embarrassed, we both laughed and picked up the books a second time.

All of these lessons have defined me. People unfamiliar to me have always wanted to engage me in lengthy conversations, so I have had to become comfortable interacting with all kinds of people. Looking back, I realize that through years of such encounters, I have become a confident, articulate person. Being a 7-footer is both a blessing and a curse, but in the end, accepting who you are is the first step to happiness.

2) Tara Cicic

Brooklyn, N.Y.

I am here because my great-grandfather tied his shoelace. It was World War I, and he was a Montenegrin fighting in the American army in France. His fellow soldiers surged across the field, but he paused for the briefest of moments because his laces had come undone. Those ahead of him were blown to bits. Years later, as Montenegro was facing a civil war, the communists came to his home. His village was small, and he knew the men who knocked on his door. But this familiarity meant nothing, for when they saw him they thought of the word America, stamped across a land where the poor were stripped of their rights and where the fierce and volatile Balkan temper would not do.

As his neighbors ransacked his home, his wife had thrust his good pair of shoes at him.

"Take them," she had urged. "Wear them."

But he did not, for he knew that he could not run. I also cannot run, but I wear my new shoes with great ease and comfort. I wear the secret guilt, the belief in equality, the obsession with culture, and the worship of rational thinking and education that becomes the certain kind of American that I am. None of these things are costumes. I believe in and feel them all sincerely, but they are not who I am. They may be a part, but I can say with certainty that they are not all.

I was born in Belgrade and Serbian was my first language, but these things seem nearly inconsequential when compared to the number of years that I've spent in America and the fact that English is by far my superior tongue. We visit every two or three years or so. Everybody is there, my entire collection of cousins and aunts and grandparents neatly totted up in a scattering of villages and cities, arms open with the promise of a few sneaky sips of rakia and bites of kajmak. I love them, I truly do. I love the flat roof on my grandparents' home, the familiar sounds of the cicadas, the cows that they had when I was 7, and even the goats that I have not met yet. But they are not me, those things. They are something else.

Take a few bounds away from my immediate family, and I do not know anyone's names. Somebody is always falling ill, or drinking too much, or making trouble for themselves. We speak of them sometimes, or pity them, but we do not go to their weddings or funerals. And yet I feel worried, not for them, but for myself. The Serbs and Montenegrins are people of complicated histories, and as I watch the documentaries my father made during the civil war there, I am gripped with fear and fascination. Those strange people can be so hateful. They cry and beat their hearts at the thought of Serbian loss in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This kind of nationalism makes me cringe. I do not want to be that way. But is there not something beautiful in that kind of passion

and emotion? What does it say of me that I sometimes cannot help but romanticize something I know to be destructive and oppressive? This is why I worry.

They are not me, I tell myself, and I am right. But can they not be just a part? Can they not be a tiny sliver, or maybe even a sizeable chunk, comparable even to the American in me? Must I relegate them to nothing at all? For if those shoes, the ones my grandfather bent to tie in the middle of that blazing battlefield in France, are not mine, then why do I think of them so often?

3) Tommy Bowden

Porter Corners, N.Y.

My head was spinning, my hands were bleeding, and my lungs desperately needed more air. The air was filled with the shouts of men dying and steel clashing with steel. To my left were two young men, no more than 18 years old, at each other's throats. To my right an old man lay dead, missing an arm. My men were pouring out of the breach in full retreat. Death surrounded me as I summoned every ounce of my courage and shouted out that desperate ultimatum to my dying brethren, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, or close the wall up with our English dead!"

Then reality came crashing down. "No, no you're doing it all wrong." I blinked, and instead of a bloody battlefield in front of me there was nothing more than a nearly empty auditorium. The sole occupant of the auditorium was a tall, bald, British man with a terrifyingly condescending demeanor. He was my Shakespeare coach. The most minuscule mistake never escaped his notice. "There's no chance in hell I would ever fight for you," he said. "Do it again." I went offstage and tried to repaint the picture.

I emerged inflamed with the drive for victory. Every word I uttered was a strike against the French. Every heartfelt delivery of that carefully choreographed routine was ground gained at Harfluer. I fought passionately with that ancient text, but my coach cut me off again. "OK, better, maybe I would fight for you, but I wouldn't die for you. C'mon pump me up, show me you care. Do it again." I tried again. I put forth all my effort, but again he stopped me. I performed it countless times over, but with each rendition the quality exponentially worsened. Finally, he told me to stop. We had done all we could for today.

I stepped off stage and collapsed into a chair, angry and defeated. Reaching into my pocket, I found the small rectangular magnet that had been given to me by the head of the theatre department for "motivational purposes." On the right side of the memento there was an ornate picture of The Bard in all his glory, and on the left there were six simple words: "To thine own self be true." I knew why I was here. I was here to prove to myself that I could accomplish something momentous.

I was born with two speech impediments. I was a shy kid, with a crooked smile, who couldn't pronounce any words correctly. Participating in theatre was the last thing anyone expected of me. Yet I wanted to sway crowds with my voice, make them cry, laugh and shout for joy. I was a terrified 10-year-old the first time I stepped on stage, and equally frightened moments before I finally performed at Lincoln Center. I walked slowly to my position full of fear, but when the

spotlight hit my face, there was no trepidation, only a calmness and quiet determination. In that moment all the long hours of struggle fell into place. I had already accomplished what I had set out to do before my final performance. Just being there, having worked as hard as I had, made all the worry dissipate. It was just me and the light.

In that earlier moment of failure, I couldn't see that light, or even imagine it. My brain was in a fog; I couldn't think. As I sat there and the lights in the theatre clicked off one by one, the setting sun cast a beam of orange sunlight directly center stage. I pretended to watch myself perform in that light, pacing to and fro, shouting heroically to my men and charging headlong into battle, into victory. I looked back down at the memento. Then something clicked. Henry V never lost hope and neither would I. So I went once more to the stage.

4) Nathaniel Colburn

Aliso Viejo, Calif.

Keeping my head down and avoiding eye contact, I tried not to attract attention. Drunken shrieks and moans reverberated through the darkening light of the bus stop, while silhouettes and shadows danced about. My heart pounding, I hoped I would survive the next 40 minutes. I had never seen the homeless at the stop act so deranged. But I had never been there so late.

It was well past sundown. A man passed out on the next bench awoke only to shout and drink. One screamed racial slurs and curses at another while they both staggered around. Another lacked an arm and had the most baleful gaze I had ever seen. As much as I tried to empathize and feel compassion, I couldn't stymie a feeling of terror and revulsion.

After a few long minutes, a shadow detached itself from the opposite benches, came over and sat down next to me. Squinting, I took in her kind, wrinkled face. Ah, thank god, a kindred soul enduring the same thing.

"Missed the bus?" she asked.

"Y-yeah," I mumbled.

"You certainly chose the wrong time to do that. Where're you headed?" Her voice was scratchy, like a smoker's, but she spoke well.

"Home."

"Ah, homes. When I was a bit older than you, my home was a car. Can you believe that my car, an old Toyota, got 50 miles to the gallon? I could drive from here to San Francisco in one sitting."

No, I couldn't. The more we talked, the more I enjoyed her company and forgot about the craziness around me. She grew up in San Francisco and loved to travel. She loved helping people and went to church. Before I could learn more, a homeless man staggered up to me and asked me for money. I was so uncomfortable I relented.

My friend turned to me and advised, “Don’t ever give a homeless person money. Give them food. The stereotype is true — they buy drugs and alcohol. Look around you.”

Stunned and feeling naïve, I promised to do so. We talked more until my stomach rumbled and I remarked that I hadn’t eaten since lunch. Just then a bus arrived — apparently hers. She procured two hardboiled eggs from her pocket and offered them to me. I politely declined, and she went to get her stuff. But wait, why was she carrying eggs in her pocket? When the woman emerged from the other side of the stop, she boarded the bus with a sleeping bag and backpack. She was homeless! She smiled down at me, the bus left, and I sat there in quiet shock.

I explored the stop anew. Drugs, alcohol, missing limbs were no longer terrifying. Now, I saw the symptoms of sickness, a sad lifestyle that did no harm except to those who lived it.

The homeless lady probably has no idea what an effect she had on me. Because of her, I swore to look through the top layers of every situation. Now that I have a car, I never go to the bus stop, but I know its lesson, at least, will continue to take me places. I hope my expanded empathy and open-mindedness will allow me to feel at home in any foreign situation and connect with all people. Next time I might even accept a hardboiled egg straight out of a stranger’s coat pocket.

Joe Pucci

New York, N.Y.

Tunnel Vision

Attempting to juke people like an NFL running back, I slithered my way through the tunnel to the A-Train on 42nd Street during rush hour. I often try to block out the hectic surroundings by isolating myself in music, but I can never seem to get out of the real life time-lapse. In photography, a time-lapse is a technique at which the frame rate is lower than that used to view the sequence, thus, when the sequence is played at normal speed, it gives the effect that time is moving faster, or lapsing. In a Manhattan subway tunnel, a real life time-lapse gives the illusion that thousands are moving around you in one single moment. Luckily, that afternoon, the frame rate was higher than the actual visual sequence.

The crowd shoved their way toward the platform as the screeching train echoed through the underpass. The doors opened and I pushed my way toward the already full train. After five seconds, I began to worry, fearing that the door would close and I would be stuck longer in the blistering, underground cave. The tall, brunette girl in front of me inched her way over the gap between the rusted train and the yellow platform, but one misstep turned my time-lapse upside down.

In slow motion, one vertebra at a time, she fell through the gap toward the tracks as the train doors closed. I slipped my hands out of my skinny jeans and reached under her arms as her head neared the platform. I hoisted her up and the sensor doors reopened as we entered the train. I threw my headphones around my shoulders, clumsily turned down my embarrassing music, and asked if she was okay. My pause had lasted for all of about two seconds. No one on the train noticed, not even her mom.

This isn't a heroic tale or a love story, although I felt like it was at the moment. I felt like I had done something much bigger than me, and I also felt like this beautiful girl and I would naturally connect over what just happened. But this wasn't the case. Instead, I checked on her, smiled, and around 10 seconds after my "lifesaving" moment, immediately isolated myself back into the music. I couldn't bring out my inner-confidence. I simply stood there thinking of something to say, only to be left mute.

It's easy to say what you want to do, but nearly impossible to bring yourself to do all those things. Life is about taking risks, not about conforming and hiding behind invisible walls. I tend not to struggle with personal adventure; I've jumped off 50-foot cliffs and rode the biggest roller coaster dozens of times; however, I do fear being judged and messing up when stepping toward the plate. Life's too short to live with regret though. My life wasn't dramatically transposed during this incident, but the things I didn't do are a constant reminder to stomp on the shortlist of opportunities I'm given. For that girl, she was a vertebra away from not having another chance. When that moment comes for me, I don't want to have any regrets. I look back at this brief moment with such rue because I feel that my time-lapse was flipped for a reason, yet I couldn't grasp the opportunity.

The music was a place to buy myself more time, a place to quickly think about the next move. But the top-half of the sandglass was empty and the girl got off at the next stop, roughly 30 seconds later. My eyes were fixed on her as she left the train and headed for the stairs. The train began to move when she glanced through the window and mouthed the words, "Thank you."