Sample College Essays

Breaking Into Cars—Stephen

I had never broken into a car before.

We were in Laredo, having just finished our first day at a Habitat for Humanity work site. The Hotchkiss volunteers had already left, off to enjoy some Texas BBQ, leaving me behind with the college kids to clean up. Not until we were stranded did we realize we were locked out of the van.

Someone picked a coat hanger out of the dumpster, handed it to me, and took a few steps back.

“Can you do that thing with a coat hanger to unlock it?”

“Why me?” I thought.

More out of amusement than optimism, I gave it a try. I slid the hanger into the window’s seal like I’d seen on crime shows, and spent a few minutes jiggling the apparatus around the inside of the frame. Suddenly, two things simultaneously clicked. One was the lock on the door. (I actually succeeded in springing it.) The other was the realization that I’d been in this type of situation before. In fact, I’d been born into this type of situation.

My upbringing has numbed me to unpredictability and chaos. With a family of seven, my home was loud, messy, and spottily supervised. My siblings arguing, the dog barking, the phone ringing—all meant my house was functioning normally. My Dad, a retired Navy pilot, was away half the time. When he was home, he had a parenting style something like a drill sergeant. At the age of nine, I learned how to clear burning oil from the surface of water. My Dad considered this a critical life skill—you know, in case my aircraft carrier should ever get torpedoed. “The water’s on fire! Clear a hole!” he shouted, tossing me in the lake without warning. While I’m still unconvinced about that particular lesson’s practicality, my Dad’s overarching message is unequivocally true: much of life is unexpected, and you have to deal with the twists and turns.

Living in my family, days rarely unfolded as planned. A bit overlooked, a little pushed around, I learned to roll with reality, negotiate a quick deal, and give the improbable a try. I don’t sweat the small stuff, and I definitely don’t expect perfect fairness. So what if our dining room table only has six chairs for seven people? Someone learns the importance of punctuality every night.

But more than punctuality and a special affinity for musical chairs, my family life has taught me to thrive in situations over which I have no power. Growing up, I never controlled my older siblings, but I learned how to thwart their attempts to control me. I forged alliances, and realigned them as necessary. Sometimes, I was the poor, defenseless little brother; sometimes I was the omniscient elder. Different things to different people, as the situation demanded. I learned to adapt.

Back then, these techniques were merely reactions undertaken to ensure my survival. But one day this fall, Dr. Hicks, our Head of School, asked me a question that he hoped all seniors would reflect on throughout the year: “How can I participate in a thing I do not govern, in the company of people I did not choose?”

The question caught me off guard, much like the question posed to me in Laredo. Then, I realized I knew the answer. I knew why the coat hanger had been handed to me.

Growing up as the middle child in my family, I was a vital participant in a thing I did not govern, in the company of people I did not choose. It’s family. It’s society. And often, it’s chaos. You participate by letting go of the small stuff, not expecting order and perfection, and facing the unexpected with confidence, optimism, and preparedness. My family experience taught me to face a serendipitous world with confidence.

Anonymous Student

College Essay

When I first started working I could only imagine that it would give me business experience, I had no idea it would teach me the importance of compassion and time. My first job was at an intimate assisted living home known as Bridges by EPOCH for people with memory loss such as dementia and Alzheimer’s. I worked as a secretary, answering phones, checking in family members as well as nurses and organizing some paper work. Occasionally I would have the opportunity to go down to the residents households to drop off mail or pass along information from family members. The residents were always welcoming and just as excited to see you as you were to see them. There was always a something to share and a lot of love to go around, it did not matter if you spent five minutes with someone or an hour each time brought you closer to them and hopefully brightened their day. It was important to always have a smile on your face and make the most out of every situation because they would always mimic your emotions and would in turn without being aware of the cause feel the same way.

Working at Bridges also taught me the importance of family. Before working here it had not occurred to me that at some point I would have to choose whether or not to put my grandmother in an assisted living or nursing home. Although I have not had to and still thankfully do not have to soon I have learned that many people have to make and live with this decision that it is no longer safe for their family member to live at home on their own or with little supervision. The families involved with Bridges are exceptionally giving and thoughtful. Most take the time out of their day to come visit their relative every day.

Anonymous Student

Vermont

**[Address Omitted for Obvious Reasons]**, Vermont: the one place where I am perfectly content. The cool air, the sweet smell of horses and hay, the breathtaking foliage of autumn, it is impossible not to feel completely at peace in such an amazing place. My family purchased our house in Vermont when I was ten years old, and I’ve been in love with it ever since. However, I don’t think I really started to appreciate how calm and peaceful the atmosphere is there until I reached high school. High school came with a whole new set of responsibilities: more work, more studying, more pressure to do well. I needed somewhere to escape for a while, a place where I could leave all the pressures of school and work behind, and just relax. Vermont became this place for me.

My favorite activity to do in Vermont is riding horses. Horseback riding has been a passion of mine since seventh grade, and it is the thing I look forward to the most when making the three and a half hour trek up to our house in Londonderry. From our house, my dad and I often make the forty-five minute drive to Mountain View Ranch, where we go on an incredible trail ride up Dorset Peak. After checking in, the guide, who remembers us from the countless times we have visited her ranch, shows us to the horses that have been chosen for us to ride that day. We tack up, mount our horses, and start, with incredible excitement, on our two-hour ride up the mountain. There is something about being on a horse, hearing the leaves crunch under his giant hooves, and breathing in the sweet Vermont air, that puts me completely at ease. As the three of us climb up the mountain one after another, through a narrow path surrounded by trees, the pressures of school and life at home seem to fade away. I am able to focus on the beauty of the Vermont trees, their leaves turned yellow, red, and orange by the coming of autumn. I can think about the things that matter the most to me: my family, my friends, my passions. My every thought isn’t consumed by “when is this paper due?” or “did I study enough for this test?” I don’t feel nervous, or anxious, or stressed, I am just happy. The view from the top of Dorset Peak is absolutely breathtaking. We can see everything, from the clear blue sky, to the beautiful ranch at the base of the mountain. After taking it all in, we begin on our ride back down. When we return to the ranch and hop off our horses, the guide gives us some carrots to feed our horses, to reward them for their good behavior on the ride. During the car ride back to our house in Londonderry, I replay the ride in my mind, reliving the exciting, but peaceful feeling of a Vermont ride.

For me, high school has been an extremely stressful, but also extremely rewarding time in my life. I have worked so hard to receive the grades that I have, and I am really proud of them. Throughout my years of high school, I have always been able to use Vermont as a place to escape, and relieve myself of the pressure and stress of school. After spending a weekend in Vermont I feel revived, and ready to get back to my demanding, but amazing high school life.

### How to Become an Adult—Michaela

In the US, legal adulthood comes at 18, but it is my understanding that adulthood comes through responsibility, tears, laughter, and most of all: parenthood. It is effortless to watch other people’s children grow and flourish, but having my own was a terrifying new world for which I was ill-prepared. I was not ready for my first, Stanley, but now I cannot envision a world without him. Today, I am the proud parent of not one, but seven beautiful, boisterous, carnivorous plants. Within my small family I have four sundews, two Venus flytraps, and one tropical pitcher plant. Of course they have scientific names, but I only use them when I am angry and my inner-parent reveals itself. Many might ask, “How does a person become the parent of seven carnivorous plants?” and I can only answer that with a story, my story.

It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon when I came home from school only to find a charming plant that resembled a leafless, dew-splattered fern perched on the counter. With the eloquence that only a teenager could muster, I asked my mother, “What’s that?” She carefully explained that he was our new carnivorous plant and he was going to be on fruit fly kitchen duty. Over the next couple of weeks my fascination with him grew, and eventually I adopted him as one of my own. In all sincerity, I did not begin as the ideal parent. I would give Stanley water to drink if he looked drier than usual and that was the extent of my nurturing efforts. However, my complacency did not last. Come winter, around his half birthday, Stanley became afflicted with a mysterious ailment. His stems curled and his one delicate green frond dried up. After carefully examining him, I concluded that not only was the lake water I had been using contaminated with some sort of root-eating larva, but my mother’s African violets had given him aphids. It was then that I was faced with the harsh reality of the situation: I had a plant that I was absolutely obsessed with, but knew nothing about.

In my desperation to keep my sundew alive, I began to contact other plant enthusiasts in an increasingly desperate attempt to help my poor Stanley. To my great surprise, a close friend was also a carnivorous plant caregiver and was well versed in childhood care. His advice, coupled with some new dirt and the stocked shelves of the nearby library’s horticulture section, allowed me to nurse Stanley back to health. Stanley regained his strength and shortly after the winter incident, I adopted Simone, another sundew. Then came Diana, my first Venus flytrap. Consequently, the carnivorous plant aficionado was so impressed with Stanley’s care that he entrusted me with the care of his carnivorous plants when he left for college. This brought my family’s size to the current seven.

My true reward of having Stanley is that he opened the door to the world of botany. I would never have invested so much time learning about the molecular structure or chemical balance of plants if not for taking care of him. I have loved learning for his benefit, whether it be discovering the best fluoride-free water, finding the ideal amount of sunlight, or reading that he uses a form of electrical signaling to improve digestion. I also love the rarity of being Stanley’s parent. People have their judgments, but I have also found that most people are genuinely curious and I am always open to questions. Ultimately, I love how Stanley has forced me to be adaptive. That first winter I did not have a “Gardener’s Guide to Carnivorous Plants,” I simply had my own observations. This was the most significant lesson that Stanley and friends taught me: the universe lacks a guide to the galaxy, and life is all about discovering your own way.