

2.35.18

The girl who just finished her race gets out of the pool with a big grin as she had just beaten her time. I check the paper: 2.42.19. My palms start to perspire. *That is almost as fast as my time.*

I arch my back and swing my hands over my side, the cool air brushing my neck. This was it, the last meet of the season. I think back to all the meets that had happened before.

I had gotten into the pool with adrenaline pumping through my body as my face beamed with a grin. However, as I started to swim the water clawed me back, and pushed me away from the wall. I gritted my teeth and pulled as much as I could, but I could only do so much. The water was all too powerful for a measly creature like me. After an eternity, I touched the wall, checked the time, and shook my head. Meet after meet, my times were not changing one little bit. My hopes for the season diminished, replaced by agony and despair.

I shudder thinking back to that moment as I reach over my cap and pull my goggles over my eyes. *Good!* Now no one could see the tears that were starting to sprout out of my eyes. My heart rate starts to increase as my breaths became short. Sweat pours down my forehead. I have to clear my thoughts. I take deep breaths and focus my mind on just the clear, blue, gleaming pool.

“Step up,” the announcer declares.

As I step forward my leg slips, I grip the block to balance myself as I teach myself how to walk again. *Right foot up then down. Now take your left foot, lift it up and put it down.* I gradually step up on the block planting my feet on it. I draw my left foot behind my right one. I

bend my back and grip the end of the block with my hands. *Why worry when you are not going to beat your time?*

“Take your mark,” the announcer asserts. I tighten my muscles and point my head towards the water.

BEEP!

I hit the pool with a splash as the world around me crumbles. It was just me and the pool. I forget where I am and my arms whirl around me in different positions. Up, down, around.

On the last lap reality catches up with me and I look to try and see the people around me, except there were no people. *Had they already reached the wall? Am I even moving?* My head fills up with these thoughts as my hand collides into the wall. Pain surges through my body as I swerve my head to check the people around me. However, there was only one who had touched the wall, me. I came first.

I get out of the pool with short breaths. My heart pounds rapidly as I place my fingers to my pulse. *35 beats per 10 seconds.* I check the clock to see my time, 2.35.18. I smile as I walk to my coaches, who are gleaming with their hands stuck out eager to get a high five.

I throw down my arm as I chuckle softly.

“Nice job,” my coach exclaims. “Go rest.”

“Thanks,” I reply. I walk back to the gym and sit with my mouth stretched widely. I could not help but replay the moment in my head. Butterflies fill up my stomach, but they were not the ones that I had before my race.

Tatiana Lopez

La Storia del Comienzo de Mi Escritura

I knew I did something wrong when I saw Luz' s expression as she handed me my paper. I thought to myself, "De que me equivoqué esta vez?" but I have gotten used to it, I've asked myself this same question multiple times throughout my writing in life. I was never the best student in elementary school, I struggled like how any kid would if they got their language switched up completely. Little did I know that this was the moment that changed everything.

"Tatiana, vení ahora!" I had to learn how to write in Spanish since I had recently moved to Uruguay. But, I was not excited at all. "You have to practice your Spanish, you are starting school in a week and you haven't practiced at all!" exclaimed my mom. "Mamá, no quiero! Do I have to go?" I questioned. "Yes, now stop fussing and practice," she stated. She gave me a piece of paper and a pencil. We started with the basics like grammar, some words, and how the date is written, which by the way is different than how it is in the United States. I hated the idea of going to a new school with a WHOLE NEW LANGUAGE. I didn't know anyone and I didn't want to make new friends.

It was the first day into the new school and it was worse than I thought. The building itself wasn't the best and coming from Gregory Elementary School, it was very different. I was greeted by my teacher, "Bienvenido!" along with a kiss on the cheek. "Me llamo Luz," she stated. "Luz? Isn't that her first name?" I thought to myself. My mom could tell I was confused, she later explained that in Uruguay, teachers are called by their first names. I then proceeded to introduce myself. You could tell she was kind and caring just by having a conversation with her. My mom left and Luz showed me around the school. I didn't like being the new kid, I was the

only one with difficulties. I later made some friends that thought that speaking English was very fascinating which I found silly. But I still felt very stupid compared to the others.

After being there for a month, school got very difficult and it was so much more than I could comprehend, especially in Language Arts. We had started to learn how to write paragraphs, which I wasn't prepared for at all. How was I supposed to write a whole paragraph in Spanish when I could barely write a simple word like grandma? When I found out that we had to write everything down by pencil and paper, I was completely shocked. The school couldn't afford photocopies and definitely not computers. My whole life in school, we depended on photocopies or computers. Now all of a sudden in a couple of months, everything changed. On some days, I would come home crying because my hands were aching. We had to write down our notes, our homework, and even our paragraphs. Writing that large amount all the time in such little notice even caused one my fingers to form a bump, which after 5 years, I still have. It was too much stress for a 3rd grader. This was the worst writing experience I ever had and it made me hate writing, something I have grown to love over the past three years.

Living and surviving school there for 3 years was exhausting. A month into 5th grade, my parents informed me with the news, "We're leaving in 4 months." Two months prior, we discussed it as a family, but I didn't expect it to be that soon. We eventually left. I was devastated because I'd be leaving most of my family, but I was excited for the journey ahead of me. A month into living in the United States again and it made me realize I had missed out on so much. Not long after, we had to start school again. I was going to go to 6th grade, I contacted my old friends and told them I was back, they were as thrilled as I was. A week before school started, my mom got a phone call from the district. They informed her that I wasn't going to start 6th grade anymore, they held me back instead. My blood was boiling. I had to start 5th grade

again, a younger grade that I didn't belong in and I had to start all over. I was tired of having to find new friends, but there was nothing I could do about it.

It began. I started 5th grade and it wasn't as bad as I thought. "Welcome, I am Mrs. Lombardi, your new teacher!" exclaimed my new, energetic, ELA teacher and homeroom teacher, which at the time, I didn't know what that was. I got used to the environment quicker than I thought, I found it easy. I was surprised because, in Uruguay, I would rip my head off when it came to school work and now all of a sudden, it became light work. My writing still wasn't the best, I had a lot of grammar issues. It made sense since the only time I would use my English was with my sister. Mrs. Lombardi understood my situation and helped me a lot. I caught up in no time, I was writing pieces that were even better than most of my classmates. This was when I realized my love for writing was now profound.

These situations defined my writing in life. In Uruguay, writing was my worst enemy. But, it taught me to be stronger. I learned how to deal with things I didn't like and still be able to accomplish them. It also taught me how to write in Spanish, which I know will serve me well in the future. Uruguay's advanced education prepared me. Without it, I wouldn't have passed elementary school the same way I did. When I returned to the United States, it just made writing easier. It made me love it. Half of my elementary years, I was working on things that in the United States, I wouldn't have worked on. It gave me an advantage compared to the other students and for that, I am grateful. Even though I faced multiple hardships throughout my life in school, I got through them and it made me become the writer I am today.

Jebriel Tantawi, Franklin Lakes

Singing in the shower.

Singing in the car.

Singing in the halls.

Singing until it becomes annoying.

Even after my lights are off and I'm in bed, I'm still singing. I've always loved to sing. Though, I didn't realize how much I loved singing *for* people until I got to middle school. This is the story of how singing became my *thing*.

Friday, February 16 was not an ordinary day. This minimum day marked the start of February break, so everyone was excited. Sure I was excited too but for a different reason. Friday, February 16 was the day of the FAMS talent show. It was the first massive performance I'd ever had. I'd never been in a talent show. Like most kids about to stand up in front of their entire school to sing a solo, I was sort of nervous.

Would people like me?

I've never done anything like this before.

Maybe I shouldn't do it.

No! Of course I'm doing this.

This is what I kept telling myself.

The kids piled into the performance room, and I felt less nervous. When it was my turn, I stepped onto the stage, walked up to the microphone, and began to sing Charlie Puth's *How Long*.

As I sang, I realized that people were enjoying the song! They were clapping along! I was overjoyed. When I got to the final climax of the song and belted out the note, everyone went

nuts! There were no words to describe how amazing I felt. They kept cheering so loud that I could barely hear the music to continue the rest of the song.

When the song finally ended the applause was incredible. There were people, kids, and adults that I've never talked to who were on their feet. They were chanting my name, and I felt like I was floating on a cloud where no negativity could reach me. It was the most rewarding feeling to finally be recognized for something I love to do.

As I walked through the halls later, people would tell me that I was amazing or incredible. There were kids who were telling me that I was a "legend." It was the most humbling feeling.

Through this experience, I was beginning to realize something. I realized that everyone has their "thing." It doesn't have to be "cool." As long as it makes you happy, you can believe that it is the coolest thing that anyone could possibly be doing because it probably is. No matter what you do, there will always be those kids and those people who are going to laugh at you. There'll always be kids who are going to try to cut you down. I learned that if you do what you love to do and you do it with confidence, even if only one single person genuinely claps for you, there is no one, not even one person, who will be able to ruin the happiness that you will feel.

I know that whatever path I decide to take in life, that the talent show from sixth grade will always be a moment I will never forget. This moment makes me happy every single time I think about it. It sparked my greater love for singing and wanting to pursue it in some way.

10 months later the chorus was singing the hit Christmas song *All I Want for Christmas is You* by Mariah Carey. The next chapter of my singing story began with me singing the iconic opening verse. "*Iiiiiii, don't want a lot foOOOoOOor.....*" WAIT WHAT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!???????

Kavya Venkatesan

Grade 8

Carl Sandburg Middle School

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“Lifelong Lessons”

Our cameras were stowed away, and all the exciting chatter had died down. It was pin-drop silent besides the rhythm of the churning waves crashing into the shore and the sound of the chirping birds gliding over the foamy, Australian waters. As the nimble wind played havoc with our hair, we all gazed at the beautiful sunset from the shoreline of Phillip Island, patiently waiting for some special guests: penguins.

Phillip Island was one of the highlights of my family’s trip to Australia last year. We had gone there to see the famous penguin parade, which was when the penguins would arrive in the evening at their burrows after a long journey at sea. At around 6:30, the guide made an announcement to get ready for the arrival of these little creatures that could occur any minute. Excitement bubbled inside of me like the chemical reaction of baking soda fizzing in vinegar. I leaned onto the rails, sticking my head out.

Slowly, masses of navy colored penguins emerged from the swirling waves and waddled towards the burrows.

“The female penguins wake up every day at 4:00 in the morning to hunt in the sea and return to their homes during the sunset. This is a daily routine for them,” our guide whispered.

As I breathlessly eyed the swarms of penguins, the guide’s words echoed in my mind. I know I wouldn’t be happy if I had to wake up early in the morning and swim in the freezing sea! I was surprised by the fact that the penguins woke up every single day and uncomplainingly

ventured into the sea, knowing they had a responsibility to fulfill. These creatures were so committed to a purpose in life!

For some time, I watched the penguins enter their burrows, which all looked identical. How did they remember where it was located? Curious, I asked the guide my question.

“It’s not really about memory. I want you to carefully observe them. You’ll find the answer,” she told me with a smile on her face.

Heeding her advice, I mentally noted down a penguin’s movements. The penguin waddled, stopped, and produced a distinct, complicated series of sounds. Similar noises came from the distance, and its ears perked up. The penguin resumed its trek along the pathway and continued repeating these movements till they located their burrows.

That’s when I realized that these complex penguin calls were how they identified and communicated with each other. *Wow! The penguins are so connected to each other!* I thought to myself, once again left astounded by nature.

Before I knew it, the last few penguins were still locating their families. I remembered what the guide had explained earlier about the penguins’ arduous journey involving predators like sharks and whales. Hearing about all this just made me realize how audacious and confident the penguins were. After all, journeying in the sea for 30 miles without a GPS does take a lot of self-belief and courage!

Overall, the entire experience was exhilarating, and a memory I will forever cherish. But, besides witnessing this event, I also learned a lot from these wonders of nature. To lead my life successfully and effectively, I have to commit to a purpose, stay connected with others, and be confident and courageous despite the circumstances. Ever since the trip, I have kept these lifelong lessons in my mind for every decision I make and challenge I face. Even the smallest things in the world can be the biggest sources of inspiration!

Angelina Xu
Grade 8
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Tourette's Syndrome is part of a spectrum of hereditary, childhood-onset, neurodevelopmental conditions referred to as Tic Disorders. These conditions affect both children and adults, causing them to make sudden, uncontrollable movements and/or sounds called tics. TS and tics can be emotionally, physically, and socially debilitating.

Motor Tics: involuntary movements

Vocal Tics: involuntary sounds

It was July 2018. I was on vacation in Shanghai, China. It started with the increase in motor tics.

When I was younger, I would occasionally jump involuntarily as if startled. This did not happen frequently enough to be concerning.

However, that July, I noticed that the amount of times I jumped per day was increasing. I didn't know why, but I wasn't too concerned. The frequency of those increased rapidly, and I started making noises. My mom did not know how to react but managed to book an appointment with a neurologist at a nearby hospital.

The neurologist diagnosed me with Tourette's Syndrome, but he only spoke Mandarin since I was in China. Therefore, I figured this out after I mentally translated the symptoms that

he had described into English, then realized that the symptoms lined up with the symptoms of Tourette's. He also told me that the movements and sounds were called tics.

Holding in my tics at school last year was physically and mentally exhausting. I was scared of being stared at and being treated like I had the mental capacity of a preschooler, both of which had happened to me in the summer of 2018. I would also hold in all my tics at church and chinese school, since the whole church thought that I had been possessed, and many chinese adults talked about me or called me "retarded" behind my back. I learned to hold in my tics in front of my parents so my mom wouldn't point out my tics, which is something that you should not do to someone with a tic disorder. This means I also don't tell her when I'm struggling with my tics in school.

Like hiccups, holding in tics is hard if not impossible. However, the fear of getting stared at by my classmates led me to hold in my tics until I was exhausted. Looking back, I think that I was too scared of judgement by my classmates. I was, and still am, shy, and I hate drawing attention to myself.

Facing the sudden-onset of any lifelong disorder will be challenging. I had to learn to accept my diagnosis, how to cope, and how to face friends and family who kept asking questions. It was not easy, but with the help of the internet, I learned how other people dealt with tics and the ignorant people in their lives, and then was able to implement some of the things that they did in my life.

After living with a diagnosis of Tourette's Syndrome for over a year, I have learned to advocate for myself and for my rights. I have found friends who are supportive of me and the fact that I have Tourette's Syndrome. I usually don't hold in motor tics anymore because I don't think that many kids care, but I usually try to hold in all the loud vocal tics. I have become friends with some people who also have Tourette's, and we can text each other for advice, or just to complain about a new tic. Life with Tourette's can still be challenging, but now I am able to cope better.

If you see me ticcing, please ignore it, as I will feel uncomfortable if you stare.