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HARVARD
BUSINESS SCHOOL
APPLICATION
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SECOND EDITION

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With Analysis by the Staff of *The Harbus*,
the Harvard Business School Newspaper



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN  NEW YORK

65 SUCCESSFUL HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL APPLICATION ESSAYS, SECOND EDITION.
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in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175
Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

65 successful Harvard Business School application essays : with analysis by the
staff of *The Harbus*, the Harvard Business School newspaper / Lauren Sullivan
and the staff of *The Harbus*. —2nd ed.

p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-312-55007-3

1. Business schools—United States—Admission. 2. Exposition (Rhetoric)
3. Essay—Authorship. 4. Business writing. 5. Harvard Business School.
I. Sullivan, Lauren. II. *Harbus*. III. Title: Sixty-five successful Harvard
Business School application essays.
HF1131.A135 2009
808'.06665—dc22

2009012531

First Edition: August 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The motivation to create the second edition of *65 Successful Harvard Business School Application Essays* came from a recent rise in business school applications. With an abundance of qualified candidates to choose from, admissions officers can be more selective, making admission to top schools even more challenging for applicants. *The Harbus*, the Harvard Business School weekly student newspaper, recognizes that applicants require up-to-date materials and inspiration to match the current environment. While this book includes the latest application essays, which are updated regularly by the admissions committee, it retains several essays from the first edition of the book because of their uniqueness as well as to reflect typical question topics that may reappear in future admissions' applications.

It is worth noting that this book is created by The Harbus News Corporation, an independent nonprofit entity, not the Harvard Business School. The Harbus contributes profits to a grant-making foundation that supports community organizations and schools in the Boston area. The Foundation to date has awarded over \$850,000 in grants to forty organizations that pursue initiatives in education and literacy.

The views and opinions expressed in this book do not necessarily reflect those of Harvard Business School, and the references to the school throughout the book do not mean that the school endorses these views or opinions.

A huge credit is owed to five contributors from the Class of 2008 and Class of 2009 who helped source the content, select essays, and write critiques and chapter introductions: Aastha Gurbax and Uma Subramanian from the Class of 2008 and Will Boland, Linda Dempah, and Zachary Surak from the Class of 2009. We thank all the HBS students and alumni who kindly shared their personal essays. We would also like to thank the staff of the Harbus, including Lauren Sullivan, Marianne Bakula, and Christie Cuthbert, for their encouragement and support. Lastly, we would be remiss if we did not express our gratitude for assistance from our agent, Katie Boyle, and our editor at St. Martin's, Matthew Martz.

INTRODUCTION

You are inspired, hopeful, accomplished, and eager. You seek personal and professional advancement via an MBA that will prepare you for leadership challenges in any business field. You are aware, however, that Harvard Business School receives about ten thousand applications annually, and you are uncertain how to make your application stand out. We understand. We have been in your shoes.

This book seeks to demystify the admissions process for applicants by providing a selective but robust sample of HBS essays that have successfully survived the admissions committee in the past. We aspire to show you a variety of writing styles, essay responses, and applicant backgrounds that have been successful in the past, but there are no foolproof prescriptions, shortcuts, or magic formulas. There are probably as many perfect application essays as there are applicants.

The chosen essays highlight ordinary applicants who have demonstrated potential, vision, integrity, and leadership. While the MBA applicant pool can often swarm with people with business backgrounds, we are positive that this book will also inspire nontraditional applicants because they will realize that there is no such thing as a standard applicant at Harvard Business School. We encourage you to bear in mind that your profession is not what makes the essay special. What makes you special is how you make the big (or small) decisions in life and how they have led to your growth. The only common strain in the successful essays is that applicants have clearly described why each experience is challenging, educational, and transformational. We hope this book motivates you to write great essays by revealing who you really are. Be captivating. Be truthful. Be yourself.

When you sit down at a blank computer screen, you may be tempted to think that your experiences to date have been rather pedestrian. You are neither an Olympic gold medalist nor a Pulitzer Prize winner. We hope that the examples in this book will rescue you from this fear. Many of the essays contain simple anecdotes with routine settings that demonstrate the applicant's maturity, awareness, and potential. Use anecdotes from *your* life to offer an astute glimpse into your personality, sense of humor, values, thoughtfulness, and all other attributes that will contribute to your success in life and business. Even the most prestigious accomplishment will be deficient if you do not explain why it was important, what you learned from it, and how you have grown because of it.

First, make a mental list of the most influential and meaningful events and experiences of your life and begin to map them into your essays, but avoid repetition. While you may want to weave a few over-arching themes in all your essays, use the essays to demonstrate different aspects of your intellectual, emotional, and moral fiber. For instance, if you choose to prove your ability as a competent project manager in one essay, you may wish to discuss a more personal issue like your relationship with your parents or partner in the next. Reach inside yourself for examples of strength, confidence, and accomplishment.

In the end, your fundamental objective is to prove that you are greater than the sum of your individual application parts such as your GMAT score, academic transcripts, or professional laurels. While those parts of the application are significant, your essays will allow you to bring your charisma and individuality to life. So, steer clear of cut-and-paste jobs from the resume.

Once you map out the essays, you will find the word limit excruciating. Although an obstacle, the word count can help you tell your story more selectively and succinctly. After all, does your employer want you to be unnecessarily long-winded and unfocused?

Probably not. The essays included in this book will convince you that you can be poignant in few words. We suggest that you create the first draft without a strict word limit. In the subsequent draft, ask yourself repeatedly: “What is my core message? Does this sentence improve upon or clarify that message?” By doing this, you will be able to distill the key anecdotes and interpretations from a pool of excessive descriptions and unnecessary details.

The essays in this book will help you to assess and celebrate your key experiences in a robust fashion. In the analyses, we consider each author’s motivations, accomplishments, and shortcomings and assess whether they communicate them compellingly and credibly through their choices of content, structure, and style. We have selected essays that deliver the author’s message in a way that stood out from the pack—your ultimate goal as an applicant. To do the same, concentrate on the frank analysis that follows each essay. The constructive suggestions, embedded in the analyses, will enable you to avoid common pitfalls and convert a good set of application essays into a remarkable one.

We believe that you will find the sixty-five essays that follow to be useful examples, but remember to treat them only as examples. Let your uniqueness shine through your own essays and not through imitation of the essays in this book. We cannot promise you that this book will get you into Harvard Business School. There are books, Web sites, and admission consultants that promise such things, falsely. We do not. With this book, however, you will have the tools to get the job done and truly own your business career, so good luck!

Aastha Gurbax

Publisher, Harbus News Corporation, Class of 2008

On behalf of Harbus News Corporation

I. DEFINING MOMENT

Discuss a defining experience in your leadership development. How did this experience highlight your strengths and weaknesses as a leader?

This question may appear quite daunting. By default many applicants first think about their most significant accomplishments. If you have led troops in battle or started a nonprofit, you may think you have this essay in the bag. That is the first trap of this subtle question. A “defining experience” is not necessarily one that results in achievement relative to peers. In fact, some of the strongest essays focus on monumental failures. Sometimes focusing on a failure actually allows you to answer the question more easily. Many people fail to reflect on their weaknesses and to delve deeply enough into the lessons they have learned. I assure you, you do not have to be Superman to get into business school. Reveal a little of your Clark Kent side. In doing so, you will not only address each component of the essay topic but you will also, and more importantly, become a more interesting applicant.

There is no particular calculus behind what type of anecdote to pick. Just dig deep. Be introspective. Find an anecdote that describes what makes you unique as a person and a leader. Find that story that talks about how you developed into who you are today. Then tell that story with passion. Explain both your actions and thought processes. Leave the reader with a deep understanding of your motivations, character, and goals. If you choose to focus on an accomplishment, this essay can be a great opportunity for you to add color to something that does not jump off your resume. Though while adding color, make sure you leaven it with humility. Arrogance is one trait that the admissions staff will not appreciate.

—Zachary Surak

STACIE HOGYA

A great leader aspires to do more than simply accomplish her objective. Until I offered to lead a team of skeptical engineers and accountants to develop a marketing department, and to actively participate in business development, I did not recognize how valuable the “more” could be.

I began the project at a disadvantage; the owners had already spent three months and \$20,000 with an advertising agency, but developed no usable material. I wanted to inspire my team’s confidence as I led them into the unknown world of marketing, so I took several strong, decisive actions. I fired the agency and hired a more contemporary group whose personality was a closer match to what my firm wanted to broadcast. I established a marketing committee and presented them with a vivid vision of our goals and my plan to achieve them. While confidence-inspiring, these decisive actions had an undesired consequence: I discouraged my team from providing their input. My actions indicated that I had already made all of the decisions, and that the team’s suggestions would carry no weight.

I had to change my leadership approach to focus on facilitating collaboration rather than dictating a course of action. Because our consultants present information in a systematic and analytical fashion when communicating with our clients, I took this familiar approach in my communications with my team. Instead of presenting my strategy and looking for feedback, I coached the team through the process, and we developed strategies together.

As a result, the consulting team took ownership of the project and got more involved. We worked with the new agency to create an identity that highlighted our unique personality. Marketing committee meetings were well-attended, and members were active participants; they planned business development initiatives under the theme, “Growing the business is everybody’s business.” Most importantly, many of the consulting team members personally thanked me for making participation in business development so easy.

Through this experience, I matured as a leader and learned that leading is as much about accomplishing your objective as it is about holding your team together. I learned the value of guiding my team to define a shared vision in which we could all be stakeholders rather than simply presenting a strategy. I was most effective by leading strongly enough to inspire confidence but not so strongly that I prevented involvement.

ANALYSIS

Stacie’s experience may look very similar to your experience. Do not fret. Her essay is traditional in both its anecdote and style. Many applicants will discuss lessons learned when effecting change from a consultative role. More still will start their essay with a thesis statement, followed by an example, and end with more detailed reflection on the example. That being said, Stacie still manages to stand out in several ways.

When competing with thousands of essays on the same topic, grabbing the reader’s attention with a compelling opening paragraph can be a key differentiator. Beginning with a personal statement on leadership and a brief description of the management challenge Stacie faced stimulates the reader’s curiosity about the context and resolution.

Throughout the rest of the essay, Stacie reinforces the outcomes of her actions with strong logic. Despite her initial failure, she establishes herself as an effective leader who takes time to analyze the situation, reflects on her actions and mistakes, devises a tactical plan, and leads her team to achieve their desired outcome. Stacie exhibits

strong self-awareness and a willingness to recognize her mistakes and leaves no doubt as to her ability to build consensus and lead change.

What makes this essay come together is Stacie's nuanced, mature takeaway in the final paragraph: effective leadership is not as black and white as choosing whether to articulate a vision or coach others. There is a healthy balance that effective leaders must continually manage. In her conclusions about what traits contribute to management success, Stacie demonstrates her potential for leadership in business. Future applicants should strive to do the same.

ANONYMOUS

R. J. O’Leary, a retired Marine and three-war veteran who mentored my father, presented the offer: “Son, how ’bout I find you a real job next summer.” Fifteen years old, I had just completed two mind-numbing months of employment at a burger shack. I didn’t wait for an explanation; I accepted.

The Padlock Ranch stretches from the snow-capped Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming to the short-grass prairie of southern Montana. I arrived and joined the Forks crew: twelve men, fifty-six horses, and three thousand cattle. On my first day, the foreman, Tony, sat at the head of the dinner table. I walked in and he announced, “Here’s our cowboy from Rhode Island.” The room fell deathly silent.

It was branding season. I took the bruising job of wrestling calves. After branding season, I joined the fencing crew, five men led by the oldest hand, Morris. We worked ten-hour days planting railroad ties and anchoring fence braces. I admired Morris’s expertise and calm demeanor. But Morris never did any physical work, and he constantly aired his disdain for fencing.

After two weeks, Morris abruptly quit. Tony approached me. He said that I had earned his trust and wanted me to lead the crew. I replied that I would be honored but first wanted to consult Lon, now the oldest crew member (twice my age). Lon, a quiet man, was not interested in taking on more responsibility. I told Lon I respected him and asked for his support. “You’ve got it,” he replied.

Our team struggled at first. I remained focused and took on the unglamorous jobs, such as pounding the rocky soil to set fence posts into the ground. I spoke for the team and represented all members favorably to Tony, even when some performed poorly. This promoted loyalty within our group. I went to Lon for advice. Not only did he offer useful feedback, but he became more invested in the team. After two weeks, our performance improved. Soon, each member of the team pushed the others to work harder. This was my first true glimpse at leadership. It inspired me. Just like at the Forks, I now lead small teams of men who are older, more experienced, and generally more technically proficient than I am. The Forks taught me to take chances, lead from the front, promote a team mentality and loyalty, and work with the strongest members to improve the weakest.

ANALYSIS

Despite using atypical elements like quotes, this essay comes across as incredibly thoughtful and well-organized with enough originality to make the applicant memorable. The essay exudes maturity. The author discusses a challenge that many young professionals face—trying to lead a group with members who possess more experience than the leader. Rather than use his own voice to describe the situation at the Padlock Ranch, the author brings in voices from three different characters in the story. His unique form of narrative effectively uses these voices to drive home key points and takeaways that might come across less powerfully if he paraphrased them. His use of quotes also saves him space in a word-constrained essay, allowing him to redeploy his words to describe the situation more deeply and emphasize his conclusion. Even though the conclusion is relatively

brief in its explicit discussion of takeaways, the author coyly embeds his lessons learned throughout in places like Morris’s leadership strengths and interactions with Lon.

The author also comes across as a very humble and insightful leader. He provides evidence that he is willing to take direction from the people he is leading and “represent all team members favorably” to the boss. These traits will translate well to a business

school environment where as much learning occurs on a peer-to-peer basis outside the classroom as from professors in the classroom.

Most importantly, the author directly connects this decade-old ranching experience to his current job where he leads “older, more experienced, and generally more technically proficient” employees. In doing so, he clearly demonstrates how this experience has had a meaningful impact on how he chooses to lead. Be sure to remember that what you’ve learned from the experience is much more important than the experience itself.

ANONYMOUS

In my senior year of college, I was selected from a pool of more than fifty applicants to serve as one of ten student directors for the Big Siblings Program. Shortly into my tenure, school guidance counselors reported that a number of volunteers had failed to establish contact with their little siblings. Refusing to accept this unfortunate but recurring problem, I resolved to change it. My initial reaction was to launch a supplemental recruiting effort to replace the inactive volunteers. The other directors, however, believed that a concerted attempt to engage dormant volunteers would be more effective. To that end, we contacted our inactive volunteers to understand their circumstances and discovered that many lacked ideas to engage their little siblings or felt uncomfortable interacting outside the university community.

In response to these concerns, I developed a plan to organize and advertise various on-campus group social activities. I excitedly outlined the project's various benefits and offered to coordinate the group's efforts, thereby overcoming the directors' initial skepticism regarding the time commitment required. I organized the directors into pairs to brainstorm and implement one unique group activity, creating personal ownership in the project and an open forum for exchanging ideas. Recognizing that a compelling example could drive the plan forward, I took the initiative to plan the first event. Despite my personal embarrassment of donning a full Santa suit, the inaugural Holiday Party was successful, attracting more than fifty volunteers. Furthermore, three events implemented by the directors later that year resulted in 75 percent of the inactive volunteers ultimately contacting their little siblings. I was extremely proud that our efforts had enhanced the program's impact, and I felt for the first time that I had meaningfully connected with my community.

This experience helped me realize that my drive to implement solutions quickly can cause me to overlook certain details when analyzing problems. Had I replaced inactive volunteers based on my original assumption that they were lazy and unconcerned, I would have missed the opportunity to devise the plan that jump-started their involvement. This experience also highlighted leadership strengths that balance this weakness. Most important, I am a good listener. Openness to others' input allows me a broader perspective for analyzing problems and leads to more thorough solutions. Furthermore, I pour my heart into everything I do. My enthusiasm enables me to work well in teams, motivate others, and create a fun and supportive team environment.

ANALYSIS

This essay is evidence that the right choice of anecdote will set you up for success. The author chooses a situation with a clearly defined problem, and then points to measurable impact as a direct result of his actions. The reader is left having to connect very few dots, ensuring that the author's intended message gets conveyed. The more unconnected dots in your essay, the more room there is for the reader to arrive at the wrong or at least a less powerful conclusion.

This essay's greatest strength, however, lies in the author's subtle framing of his strengths and his weaknesses. He clearly answers that part of the question by pointing to a bias for action as something that would have made him arrive at a less "thorough" solution. But does this weakness sound like a deep-seated character flaw? No. In fact, many readers can probably point to circumstances where this trait could be perceived as a strength. Consider this outcome a strategic victory for the author. He leaves the audience believing his weakness will actually help him lead on occasion. Framing the weakness in this way helps mitigate this essay's greatest cause

of angst: leaving oneself defenseless against criticism. It is human nature to cringe at the thought of having to discuss our mistakes and flaws (which may be why some people fail to even answer that part of the prompt), but don't run away from the challenge. Tackle it head-on, but like this author, be selective in your choice of topic. Do not use the essay to confess your greatest professional sins (that might preclude you from getting into business school), but rather use it as an opportunity to show how you have grown.

DAVID LA FIURA

I dreaded Mondays during the winter of 2004–2005. I dealt with problems: we ran into the wrong silo, ruining 150,000 pounds of material (a \$75,000 mistake), Line 4's motor blew, and the 1600 jammed. We just moved to the seven-day schedule, which meant running sixty hours without management on-site. I *hated* Mondays.

As the new production manager at Ultra-Poly's main plant, I managed the company's largest department through the biggest expansion of its thirty-year history. That fall we doubled capacity by transitioning to a twenty-four-hour, seven-day schedule and installing a fifth production line. The department's workforce grew from thirty to sixty-five-plus in two months.

My first challenge was devising a strategy to facilitate the schedule change. Initially employees, unhappy with prospects of working twelve-hour shifts, threatened to quit. I realized employees' anger stemmed from their perceived powerlessness. My proposal, designed to win support for change through communication and employee involvement, included interviewing every employee. In meetings, I explained the company's need for change and presented scheduling options. Importantly, employees determined the adopted schedule via companywide vote. Thus, they controlled part of the process that fostered support. I built consensus and, amazingly, no employees left after the change.

Despite higher capacity, output dropped after we started running seven days. Restructuring meant experienced employees were spread thin. Mistakes caused downtime and quality problems. As pressure mounted, increasing production became critical. We needed to train the thirty-plus new employees fast. I initiated and oversaw development of an extruder-operator training course, complete with custom videos, tests, and certification criteria. The program delivered results: since early 2005, fifteen operators have been certified and daily production has increased by 25 percent. Facilitating change highlighted my strong communication skills and grasp of organizational theory. Leading through the ensuing adversity required vision and confidence. At times however, my lack of management experience caused problems. Accurately setting expectations was difficult initially, and learning was a process of trial and error: low expectations meant underperformance, but unreasonably high expectations caused confusion and animosity. My solution was to gain expertise in the process. Understanding the equipment's capabilities provided an important guide for setting expectations. Though I still need experience, I understand the value of the perspective it provides. Since the transition, the workforce has solidified and production exceeds forecasts. Successfully leading the department through this dramatic growth stage was the most challenging and rewarding experience of my career.

ANALYSIS

From the outset, David establishes a very human connection with the reader. How many of us, after all, have felt some anxiety about returning to work at the beginning of the week? He draws us in further

with his detailed description of the troubles he encounters, seemingly pulling the reader onto the plant floor alongside him with vivid imagery.

Beyond this compelling introduction, much of this essay's strength lies in its organization. Notice how naturally and cogently the story progresses. David quickly moves from setting the stage in the first two paragraphs, to defining a problem, describing his role in crafting a solution, and discussing the outcome. Throughout, the focus remains on the results—"no employees left after the change." He adds further depth, complexity, and credibility to his story by discussing some unintended

consequences of his actions as well as the efforts he led to mitigate them, again focusing on the tangible results of his leadership.

The essay's only faults lie in David's last paragraph where he addresses the second part of the essay prompt: *How did this experience highlight your strengths and weaknesses as a leader?* His lack of managerial experience does not differentiate him from the rest of the young managers and analysts in the applicant pool where such failings are common. That's a given. The pitfall is that the essay allows an admissions officer to wonder why David needs business school instead of more work experience. Applicants should not shy away from using a real weakness (i.e., not a disguised strength or a simple lack of experience), and use it as an opportunity to show their honesty, self-awareness, and their personal development as a leader.

Second, the essay clearly demonstrates how his strengths and experiences as a leader will make him a strong contributor to the school community, but in leading the project, he applied leadership skills he had already learned, e.g., consensus-building and communicating a vision. Writing about a reinforcing moment rather than a defining moment doesn't make for a flawed essay. These moments can very clearly get their points across as David's essay did, but they normally have less impact because the change isn't striking or significant.

ANONYMOUS

During a course field visit to Benin, I toured a hospital where doctors substituted plastic baggies for sterile latex gloves. Patients had no hospital gowns, sheets, or mattresses. Supply shortages resulted in the reuse of needles. Before leaving, I made a promise to doctors and villagers to help improve their health conditions. To fulfill this pledge, I cofounded a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Project Bokonon, which addresses acute medical conditions in Benin and spreads awareness of West African poverty in the United States.

To insure its sustainability, I designed an institutional infrastructure and composed bylaws. I recruited young professionals and students to a nineteen-member board of directors and organized a kickoff event to formally introduce the organization to the community. Raising over \$25,000, cultivating donors, and recruiting volunteers, I visited over fifteen schools and universities and thirty conferences and civic organizations. On one educational visit, I traveled to a Harlem middle school. Though I worried that the audience, some of the poorest children in America, might not understand why we were sending resources elsewhere, the question-and-answer session concluded with a student asking, "How can we help?" This same young boy waited until the auditorium cleared to open his wallet and to hand me a lone dollar. His request: "Please spend this for me in Africa."

My experience managing the inaugural board illuminated my lack of experience. I depended too heavily on e-mail correspondence and learned when a phone call or face-to-face meeting might be a more appropriate medium. I further assumed everyone shared equal levels of commitment. I also underestimated the difficulty of managing the expectations of those whom we intended to serve. Nevertheless, I learned about a leadership style I strive to adopt: servant leadership, which focuses on leading by serving first.

While good organizational skills and strategic thinking might make a good manager, effective servant leaders help others not only identify how they can contribute to a process but also inspire their hearts to connect an idea to action. My Project Bokonon experience defined for me the significance of enabling others, like the Harlem student, to act. In only a few years, Project Bokonon has built a clinic, established formal partnerships with other nonprofits and the United States Peace Corps, and serves ten health sites because of the lesson learned in the utility of sharing the ownership of a promise with others.

ANALYSIS

The author is not your average applicant. Not everyone at business school has founded a nonprofit organization. For those that have, or have experiences that are not directly tied to traditional business school professions, this is an opportunity to stand out. It is important to note, however, that leadership comes in many different forms and does not require a grandiose project or setting. Merely starting a nonprofit does not explain what makes this a defining experience in one's leadership development. A successful applicant needs to diligently answer the question at hand while telling a story that provides

insight into the applicant's life, character, and goals. The author's accomplishment certainly stands on its own, but she also directly answers the question in the context of this exceptional life experience. She shares that she deeply values empowering others to act but recognizes that sometimes, to her detriment, she overestimates others' commitment to their shared vision. She understands that she must adapt her style to

her context to connect the hearts and minds of those she leads. Through this color, the reader develops a well-rounded picture of the author's personality, beyond simply her accomplishments, as well as her personal definition of leadership as service—another point that sets her apart from the broader applicant pool.

That being said, the author could have improved her essay by shedding more light on her emotional reaction to the conditions in Benin. An unfiltered statement like, "I found the conditions appalling" would have given the reader even more context to understand her actions. Similarly, she could have gone into more detail regarding her motivations for such drastic action. Starting a not-for-profit is not necessarily the most obvious answer to the problems she discovered.

The author not only has the substance that makes her memorable, she also tells the story in a manner that resonates. The imagery and voice of the young boy from Harlem who asked that his dollar be spent in Africa is indelibly etched on the reader's memory long after completing the essay. These essays are opportunities to voice a message, and this author clearly captures the hearts and minds of her readers.