

NSF Spring 2017 Scholarship Essay

Prompt: What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

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With every competition, only the moment of victory is broadcasted. The audience only sees the trophies, flashing cameras, and the acceptance speech. However, no one sees all the sweat, tears, and frustration that is poured out to get from the starting point to the point of triumph. It takes more than just time, hard work, and perseverance because during times of doubt and failure, what we also need is motivation to lift us out of the pit of self-doubt. As president of my speech and debate team, it weighed heavily on my heart when a member would quit because they felt like they were not succeeding at competitions. From the beginning of my freshman year, the team had less than thirty members and continued to dwindle down. With each passing year, we lost more members than we gained. When I became president my senior year of high school, I was determined to change this trend.

I noticed that members became discouraged at competitions when they did not advance to the next round. Although our team had practice every day, something was not clicking. Therefore, my first task was to meet with the members individually and speak with them about what they felt was hindering them. Through this, I discovered that each member was dealing with more than just not advancing at competitions. Before that point, the primary focus of the team was to do well. However, after the meeting, the focus shifted. I wanted to alleviate some of the burdens that the members were facing and help motivate them to keep battling the demons in their lives. Whether these demons took the form of abusive parents, depression, or self-doubt, we would fight them together.

For weeks, I met with the members individually any chance I could. I gave them advice and encouraged them to continue competing. Sometimes they may have felt like they were going to war alone, but that was not the case. I knew that with some compassion and encouragement, all battles would be easier to fight. Through this experience, I was able to see firsthand how difficult it is to be a leader and take the initiative to pinpoint and solve a problem that was overlooked. Eventually, I noticed an improvement in our team's performance. We went from not advancing to winning first place sweepstakes three competitions in a row, setting a record for our school. The team expanded to more than fifty members! However, the greatest accomplishment was not the victories that we acquired, but the battles won against the demons that we faced behind the curtains.

Even as I have graduated, I still continue to volunteer at my Alma Mater, a place where I could offer comfort and guidance to students who are in the position I was once in. Being a first generation child of immigrant parents, I wrestled with the constant pressure to excel and make something of myself. I kept my struggles caged in, just as

how I felt every single day. Eventually, I found an outlet, and this was my Speech and Debate team. Through the competitions and experiences we shared, I was able to change my perspective. Speech and Debate allowed me to escape my cage and I no longer felt confined. I wanted everyone to experience the type of liberation I felt. It was never about winning competitions; it was about being surrounded by people who could lift you up and pull you back on track when you start drifting away from your path.

By coaching the students and spending infinite hours with them at competitions on the weekends, I am able to tutor them on assignments, give them advice, help them make vital decisions, and ultimately get them through the war we call high school. Although it is not easy, and I still struggle with coping with some of the situations these students deal with, the payoff is indescribable. Being able to help students who are from low-income families like myself, who struggle to balance school while supporting their families, and deal with unending thoughts telling them they are not good enough, is the least that I could offer. I hope to someday be able to expand the program to reach more students in the community. These students are the leaders of the future, but above all, they are fighters. Without their cooperation and willpower to change their circumstances, I would not be able to ignite change by myself. Together, we combat the demons standing in our way.