

AMERICAN VOICES NOMINEES

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7th Grade, St. Andrew's Episcopal School

Personal Essay/Memoir: My Challenge, My Gift

I remember it was a cold winter morning on the outskirts of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Snow blanketed the ground. Clouds covered the sky, but in a crack between them, I could see the faint shining of the sun, a sweet message that it would all turn out to be okay in the end. I really needed that. After all, who knew what lay ahead in this day?

We pulled up into the driveway of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Speciality Clinic. I was eight. To me, it was just another one of those dreaded visits to the doctor's office. All I knew was that a hearing test in school had detected a flaw in my hearing, and we were going to the doctor now. I, quite honestly, could not care less. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't think it would be bad. Not that bad, at least. I was way too busy playing with my five year old sister to notice the somber looks on my parents faces.

We walked into the hospital, my parents holding their breaths, and Vahita and I laughing loudly. As eight and five year olds, impatience bubbled in us as dread filled our hearts at the thoughts of waiting in a hospital waiting room until they called my name. Finally, after what seemed like forever and a day, a kind looking lady with glasses popped her head out of the door, and said, "Miss XXX XXX. It's time."

Vahita and I continued to tickle each other as we strolled merrily inside. The paint of the memory in my mind has faded, but I do remember entering a booth and going through several hearing tests. There is a gap between the memories, which I long from the bottom of my heart to be filled. However, the events that took place two months later are as fresh in my mind as they were the very day they took place. I walked into the room, eager to hear the doctor's diagnosis. It was just the opposite of what we had expected. Mild to severe hearing loss. Progressive. Progressive? What did that even mean? How in the world did that get detected just now, despite all the vigorous hearing testing I had undergone at birth?

I remember sobbing into my mother's sweater. A multitude of emotions drifted through my mind as my parents discussed the financial aspects of the situation with my audiologists. Though jumbled up, they were individually distinguishable. There was sadness that I had to wear hearing aids and how that would impact what I looked like, grimness over the fact that I might lose friends just because I wore hearing aids and jealousy of my original self who was "prettier just because she did not wear hearing aids."

Looking back, I cannot help but laugh at the stupidity of my worrying about looks and friendship issues, rather than the facts that my hearing loss was specifically progressive and I would be deaf one day!

Hearing loss has greatly impacted my personality in various ways. My mother always says that my diagnosis of hearing loss aged me mentally by a few years. I cannot help but agree with her. I was quieter after that, more mature. I reached the realization that many girls reach later in life; real life is not as easy as a Disney princess's life.....there are problems, but there is no prince to rescue you. You have to fight your own battles, walk by yourself in your darkest hours, and face the devious devils that life throws at you.

Yet, despite the storm I was walking through, life went on. My hearing aids evolved into becoming a part of me.

I do think that after my diagnosis, I lost hope that I was actually capable of achieving greatness in life. Retrospecting on my thought processes, I regret my pessimistic approach to life. It was simply hearing loss, not the inability to walk or talk. In the midst of the negativity, I failed to realize that there was a glimmer of light in the darkness. It was the sun rise after night, and the first tweet of a summer bird: my uniqueness. I always had the firm belief that hearing loss wasn't the only thing that made me unique. There had to be something else. However, I had not expected that I would find where I did. That day, that moment changed everything. The day that I discovered my uniqueness was so much more than my challenge, in fact, it was my talent.

It was right after lunch, and we all were tired and full and not at all excited for Writing Lab. I remember sitting on that blue desk in Mr. Vaccaro's room, bored out of my mind. He began to tell us about writing with focus, and how to introduce your point clearly in a story. He prompted us with the topic, "Write about a time where facing an adversity required courage."

My mind immediately veered towards the episode of my arm getting stuck under a porch, which I frequently used for such topics. That day, something held me back from spilling the same story on paper. No, there was another story that needed to be told. As the room plunged into silence, and pencils sped across pages, I sat there dumbfounded by one question: what in the world was I going to write? Then slowly, something seemingly magical happened. I wrote down one word. *The*. The second word. *Chilliness*. And soon the rest of the sentence flowed on its own. *Of the solemn night began to bite into my bones*.

I like to think I lost control of the pen after that. That the pen had a magic of its own, one which I personally could never come in contact with. My mom burst into tears reading the final story knowing that after facing a huge hurdle, my talent had finally been discovered. I was flooded with joy thinking about the fact that I would not wither away because of my disability but I had the capability to really do and achieve something in life. I kept on writing, and soon a passion was ignited in me for this work of art.

Someday, I hope that I can use my talent to inspire people across the world. To show people that an individual's true strength lies in their uniqueness and to spread the message to people that it is in the struggle of fighting your weakness that your strength is discovered. That's what made me and my journey unique.

Personally, I find it amazing that the talent that pulses in me relates to words when a disability prevents me from hearing those same words. We live in a world filled with beauty and wonder. We encounter things, feelings, and people every day that astonish and astound us. But sometimes, a person to vent our feelings out to is certainly not enough. We need to turn to ourselves, a paper, and a pen. From here, we enter a world that is completely ours. A world of our dreams, for as Albus Dumbledore once famously said, ".....for in dreams, we enter a world that is entirely our own." The trouble is, how do we put these things down on paper so they embody what we say? We write them as we say them so they are descriptive, vivid and thorough.

Many talented people have been asked how they do what they do. I don't know how, would be their most likely response. I just do! Some people are born with an artistic hand, or the gift of gab, while others, like myself, can form words that sound like magic. Each of us has a very unique a gift which we were given to go forth into the world and use. Whatever your gift is,

treasure it and use it for your benefit, for each one of us has one that makes us special in our very own way.

I would like to this dedicate these words to all those who suffer from disabilities and are shrouded with the illusion that they that they are unable to achieve their maximum potential. My fellow friends, that is not true at all. You can achieve all that people without disabilities can, if not more. There is something in there, I promise. If you can't find it, keep searching and if you are lucky enough to have found it, nourish it for there is someone out there that longs for your talent. Always remember that when God takes some from you, he always gives some too. Never ever quit on your dreams because you were made to shine like the sun, the moon and the twinkling stars too.

Amory Campbell (age 17)

11th grade, Mississippi School of the Arts

Poetry: Red All Over

Do not multiply
we have enough of you

Do not wear loose clothing
we don't want to believe you can hide something
Wear casual clothes
something plain
we don't want you to know you have creativity
Do not wear tight clothes
we see enough of your skin
Do not wear red -and black
or blue -and black
or black -and black
Do not wear black
you're already black

Do smile
Be polite
Do give the right of way
Do not braid your hair
Do not blast your music
Do not drive expensive cars
Do not tint your windows
We know your hiding something

Don't wear hoodies
Don't wear your natural hair
If you do
Let us touch it

Do not ball your fist up raising it to the sky as if a sign of respect
that is a threat
I can shoot you in your back and claim it was to protect

Do speak correct
we do not want to hear your slang
Do not reach for fame
Do get a job - medium wage
with an ending phrase
“Will that be all today?”
Do stand beneath me
Do not rise above
I do not want to see your talent
or your potential
or your dedication
Show your weakness
Fall and stay down
or get tied down, thrown down, beat down, shot down
Stay Down
You are beneath me

Unless you want ropes
constricting your airways
ripping your last breaths from your body
as you fly into the air
as your ancestors did
you are welcome above me in that case
however now I doubt you want to be

Do be afraid
For we are in average clothes
we are in uniform
we are in white
we are alive
and we are watching

Matthew Dilworth (age 17)
11th grade, Murrah High School
Poetry: Who Will Keep the Dream Alive Now?

Complacent in our stations of hatred, feel like I'm facing this nation alone
Pacing through this matrix the moans, and the screams it seems
we can never rise up, getting tied up since before the screens on the tv,
the screens now is in our minds

opaque

cant see past our own two eyes, oh wait

seems like I can't see past mine, hypocrite, write about my people's failures to past the time
project fishes of knowledge in this pool of life, cast the line

Our government killed MLK , to stop the rise of a black messiah
a covenant put in place, to inhibit love from rising higher
they destroyed a pillar of fire, Assassinated the sire
Procrastinated bout equal rights in this nation, situation is dire

Who will keep the dream alive now?

They must of thought

But a bullet in his head wasn't a bullet in the heart of the movement,
you choose it, whether you love or you hate, don't care if you straight or you gay, whats that
matter anyway?

Who will keep the dream alive now? They must have chuckled in undertones:

"We killed the king the voice of the people Now they sheeple with no shepherd to guide them to
the cathedral"

Little did they know, the cathedral aint got no steeple

My church is me and my people, and best believe that we all equal

My body is my temple,

never complex its simple, kneading the thread through the thimble;

til the revolution is sewn within you

Who will keep the dream alive now? of black boys and white girls holding hands.

and equally distributed bands, but bands mean less than ya mans

love means more than money, a kind word is sweeter than honey

Only love can drive out hate, so to me racism is funny

Who will keep the dream alive now? Who will ring the freedom bell?

From Mississippi to hell

from my cells to the jail cell

get off of your handheld

maybe have your hand held

hold on to this hand-rail as we walk up this man trail

and if a mitochondria make energy

and we got 100 billion

then lets put all our synergy into freeing God's children

So

Who will keep the dream alive now? I know Martin Luther is in heaven smiling
Progress is being made my people stopping the wilding
as dragons are being slain
We're untouched by their flame
waking up to their evil ways ahead I see better days
I see us rising towards the sun as it beams down on our melanin
i been to the depths and back and I ain't going back to hell again
Bringing heaven down to earth until the angels are more than telamons
holding up this corrupted regimen
prayer and poetry is our medicine
water to heal souls and fill holes big enough to have been left by an elephant

So who will keep the dream alive now? As long as my soul is in my body still,
uplift love and spread knowledge I will.
I had a dream that Martin's dream was fulfilled,
So i'll continue to sew good seeds in this field until my people's flower of life sprouts and we're
healed.
and thats for real.

Lauren Ladner (age 18)
12th Grade, Ocean Springs High School
Personal Essay/Memoir: The Sound

I've lived blocks from the Mississippi Sound my whole life. It's not exactly the ocean, and it's more like the redheaded stepchild of the Gulf of Mexico instead of an extension of it. But it's got the little waves and the horizon that stretches to the end of the world and it's got high tides and low tides and seagulls that are more interested in your french fries than keeping their plumage intact. So it's enough.

Those of us who live on the Coast tend to avoid the beach itself. We love driving along it, we love looking at it, and we love having it around, but we don't actually enjoy going in the water. It was built by the Seabees, instead of by nature, so its a little bit different from the rest of the beaches lining the Gulf. There aren't any sand dollars or beautiful mollusk shells that poetically wash up on shore. There are oyster shells, rocks, and the occasional abandoned hermit crab shell. Grandma told me that when the beach was made, they pumped in sand from out beyond the islands and dumped it on shore. It was black. If you dig deep enough, sometimes you can still find black stripes buried by the shore. The water itself sloshes against the shore like ripples, instead of waves. If one stands where the earth meets the sand, their feet vanish as the waves wash over their toes – there's so much murk and mess in the water that it's opaque.

This muddy, rippling phenomenon occurs due to the barrier islands that guard the Mississippi Sound like sandy sentries. They keep all the mud and debris from flowing back out into the Gulf. One can stand on Cat Island (one of six or seven), look out towards Mississippi, see the Sound shifting across the earth, turn around, and see shimmering blue waves cresting onto glittering sand. The water in the real Gulf is clear as a summer sky.

The barrier islands *were* formed by nature, so their sand feels a little more authentic. The sand is coarse, and if you look close enough you can see what they used to be. Real broken seashells and shattered quartz and fish scales and everything in the ocean that sparkles and shines. The one time I was out on the barrier islands, I remember kneeling down to pick up the sand in my hand, and watching it fall in shimmering chunks back onto the ground. That was what sand was supposed to be. On the Mississippi shore, the sand sticks to your feet like talcum powder. Talcum powder pulled from the bottom of the Gulf and left to dry in the Mississippi heat.

I'm smart enough to realize that every place has its faults and its merits. But as I've travelled around the country, I've found that no other place quite compares to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. I've been to the golden sands in California, and the rocky shores in Massachusetts, and beautiful beaches in Gulf Shores, but none of them are quite the same as the Mississippi Sound. None of them are so endearingly terrible as mine.

Sentimentality aside, water has taught me some of the most important lessons of my life. Hurricane Gustav made landfall in the summer of 2008. It was just a category 2 – my mother weathered Hurricane Katrina in a house just a few miles off the beach, so she was unafraid of what was – to her – a “justified thunder storm.”

The rain fell for a full day and a half. We had to take all the plants inside because we feared that they would blow off the porch. At noon, we noticed our bikes tugging at the chain that kept them attached to the house so we took them inside, too. We had no power. We weren't allowed to open the refrigerator so that we could keep the cold inside it.

I think my mom got tired of not having air conditioning, because around noon she said: “Let's go for a drive,” and we all piled into the yellow X-Terra. Mom wanted to see the waves, so we made our way down slippery streets towards the beach.

Except we never got there. The Sound had swelled over the sand and the concrete barriers meant to keep water out, and then covered a block more. What was so strange was that the water looked like it *belonged* there; waves curled over the grass and pavement as if it had been doing the same thing for years.

It both enthralled and terrified me. I had never seen the ocean cover places where it did not belong. As I watched the grass bend under the weight of the water, it clicked: *this* was how hurricanes did so much damage. It wasn't the rain, it wasn't the wind. It was the water. The storm forced the Gulf to stretch out its heavy fingers and carry the world north with it. That's why the streets were paved with wood and picture frames and toilets and beds and televisions after a storm. Because when the Gulf went back to where it belonged, it left everything else behind.

Mom turned off the car and we watched the rain fall and the water churn. The waves were still rising; I watched them swallow the grass of a lawn, lap at the edge of an empty slab, and then inch their way onto the concrete.

“Mom,” I said. I reached forward and tugged on her sleeve. I was finally starting to understand that this water wasn’t the fun kind that you skipped around in the evening; it could drown us all. It could pull us and our yellow car out into the sea. “Mom, the water’s coming.” She pushed my hand aside. “It’s fine. If it gets too close, I’ll back up.” Annoyance tinged her words black on the edges.

A moment passed before my little brother, silent until now, voiced my own thoughts: “Will it get to our house?”

Mom pursed her lips and then responded, “No. It’s just a category 2. Nothing to be worried about.”

My brother was only seven. He looked back at our house, clearly visible across a few vacant lots, and glanced back at the water. “Can we go home now?”

There was a moment of dreadful silence, broken only by the rain pattering on the hood of the car. Mom’s fingers lingered on the ignition. “Yes, babe.” She started the car and slowly backed away from the water, still rising.

Mom hasn’t taken us out during a hurricane since then. Not that there have been many opportunities. There was Hurricane Isaac in 2012, but my parents had bought their “just in case” French presses for nothing – we didn’t even lose power.

The Sound truly showed me the power of nature. How it can build a storm surge capable of washing your house away. How it can pick up buildings and leave them sideways on the highway, or leave drink machines from the gas station in your living room.

But the Gulf, to me, wasn’t just a body to fear. Those baby powder shores have, at times, given me a sense of peace that no other place has before.

When I was young enough that my mom actually took us to the beach, instead of letting us walk there by ourselves, my brother and I used to hop from sandbar to sandbar as the tide let out at sundown. If the tide was really low, we could get fifty or sixty meters out from the shoreline. We’d look back, and our mother would be nothing more than a silent silhouette cut out by the setting sun.

My brother and I would find the farthest sandbar, wade to the very edge where the bar sloped off into the Sound, and look out at the water. It was all you could see. If you didn’t look behind you, you felt like you were all alone, standing on water with the waves sloshing around your feet and the wind blowing your hair back so you could see the sky light on fire.

The view was the same from the pier. It stuck out farther than the tiny harbor, so you could walk out to the end of it at night and look out into pure darkness, the murmuring of the waves and the weathered dock beneath your fingertips the only indication that there was something there besides your consciousness. You could almost forget that you existed, floating in blackness above the waves.

I used to take my friends out there with me. We would stand on the sand or the salt-scarred boards of the pier and look over the edge of the world. Sometimes it was noon, and the Gulf would sparkle like God spilled glitter onto it, and sometimes it was sunset and the water would swirl with shades of red, purple, orange, and yellow. Sometimes it was night, and the clouds covered the moon and the horizon blended into the sky to make a veil of solid black. The Sound takes from us Mississippians, without a doubt – it reaches out and snatches up our homes and our belongings and our lives, and pulls them back out into the muddy waters without an ounce of regret. And yet, I don't feel like it's evil. It gives back. It gives us seafood and spectacular sunsets and a place to take your lover when there's nowhere else to go. The Mississippi Coast even has a tourism business, but I've always felt like those people don't really appreciate the beach for what it is.

Our Seabee shore is what makes this area unique. What breaks it, what scars it, and then what builds it back up. My mother lost everything after Hurricane Katrina, except for the foundations that her house rested on, and she still chose to stay. So many people left that our neighborhoods look like empty concrete graveyards, and yet my mother chose to stay. I think it's mostly because the Sound has a sort of gravity to it. Those who began here, stay here. Those who were destroyed here, remain.

People like my mother are the ones who really deserve this place. Who appreciate this place for all that it is, who choose to stay knowing that any day, the Sound could swell up again and take everything from them.

I don't think that I could ever see myself living anywhere but here. I'll stay in other places, for sure – I've got college and a career and a family to look forward to – but I know, deep down in the pit of my heart, that I will inevitably return here by the twilight of my life. And then, I'll bury my feet in the baby powder sand, feel the wind weave through my clothes, and watch the sun set over low tide.

Camille Seymour (age 13)
8th Grade, Armstrong Middle School
Critical Essay: Whatever Happened To The 15th Amendment?

In 2016 alone, ex-felons in the US who couldn't vote due to their criminal records took up 6.1 million of the nation's otherwise eligible voter population[i]. If all these people could vote, election results would come out completely differently. Voter disenfranchisement is a solution that solves a problem that never existed. When we take away this high of a population's voting rights, we turn what is a citizen's right into a citizen's privilege.

Firstly, ex-felons are technically still citizens if they were born in the US, have earned citizenship, and/or have at least one biological parent that was a citizen at their time of birth. Last time I checked, US citizens can vote if they meet residency requirements (you can be homeless and still meet these), are 18 or older, and are registered to vote. The US Declaration of Independence states: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life,

Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.’ Wouldn’t these human rights include voting rights?

Next, I want to talk about how this practice is also unfair when it comes to the results of elections. It is unfair because much of prison population is composed of minorities. The Democratic Party is, too. As a result, the Democrats lose votes in an election. No matter what political party you consider yourself a part of, and whether you agree with me or not, you cannot deny that the Democratic party loses votes when so many people that would vote for their candidates if given a chance cannot vote. For example, Florida is one of the three states where voting rights are only restored if an application to the government is approved. As you probably know, Florida is an extremely important state to win in an election because if you win it, you get 29 electoral votes. Therefore, if felons could vote, election results everywhere, especially swing states, might have a different outcome. In the 2016 election, president-elect Donald Trump won Florida, giving him a huge advantage over Hillary Clinton, as much as I hate saying that. If a population that is so largely composed of minorities could vote in this state, the Democratic nominee would usually come out on top. No matter whom you support, you know that elections would better represent what the people actually want if the ex-felons in Florida and everywhere else could vote, especially with some being such important states.

Due to ex-felons not being able to vote, polls are not exactly random samples of everyone. It is a well-known fact that many of today’s election polls are biased and aren’t as random as they claim to be. Obviously there are other reasons that these polls may not be accurate, such as silent majorities or polls not being unexpected and random but rather geared toward whoever your following may be. For example, if a very vocal Trump supporter tweets a poll asking who his following is going to vote for, obviously the majority of his followers will say Trump because we tend to follow and support people that we agree with, and there are many different examples of this same type of situation. Therefore, when ex-felons cannot vote, our polls don’t represent all people to show a clear, non-biased result whose outcome is most likely to occur when election day rolls around. You may think: “Well, why would we need someone’s opinion if they can’t vote anyway?” If nothing else, I want to see accurate polls that represent everyone because polls say something about the type of people who vote for whatever candidate or are part of whatever political party and why they feel the way that they do about these things. These polls that represent *everyone* show the biggest issues that affect any group in America and how we should fix these issues, and quite a few of them affect anyone with any sort of criminal record.

People with criminal records are much more exposed to homelessness and poverty. Since more are people of color, they have even more to fight for and against than a white ex-felon. They should be able to vote for someone who will fight against the issues that affect them most. 1 in 13 black people will have voting rights taken away from them as opposed to 1 in every 56 non-black voters^[ii], making a black person in the US’s struggle even more difficult when they cannot fight for themselves or their children’s rights as people of color. Poverty already affects many people of color for reasons that they are not guilty of, and it gets even worse if they happen to be ex-felons. When a white person gets released from prison, they may struggle with poverty, but their children will most likely be able to get on their feet eventually. However, when a black or Hispanic person gets released from prison, their children will sadly most likely struggle with the outcomes from the rest of their lives. 81% of black offenders went back to prison, while only

73% of white offenders did the same^[iii]. Since a high amount of people of color are in these prisons and this is what keeps the prison system going, when they get released, they are deprived of the rights they deserve in order to vote for someone who will fight for not only rights for ex-felons and people living in poverty, but also racial equality.

Some people may say in argument, “What if they commit another crime?” I will say that it is true that in Washington, 68% of released prisoners ended up committing another crime^[iv]. Maybe this is because we do not give them an opportunity to fight for their own rights and to get back on their feet, so they feel that they have no other option but to conform once again to selling drugs or shooting and killing people on the streets. I say in response: What about the other 32%? What are they supposed to do, or rather: What do *you* want them to do? 82% of the people that got back behind bars were property offenders^[v]. This is the majority. Not rapists, not murderers. Property offenders. If you are informed of these statistics and still reply in this way, you’re basically saying that taking someone’s TV is more serious than taking someone’s life. The “worry” of voter fraud occurring is a worry that stems from nothing, because it is evident that such situations hardly ever occur.

Maybe these people steal again because they cannot afford food for their children, or new shoes for their 14-year-old son who is bullied because his mom cannot afford clothes that are Nike or Adidas, or Christmas presents for their 5-year-old daughter who only really wants the dark circles and stress under her father’s face to disappear. These children must wear cheap clothes like their parents wear distress on their faces. They must live in low-income, poverty-stricken neighborhoods like their parents live in a constant state of worry. They cannot afford these things because the people we elect do not care to fight for them or the right to make their own decision in a country that claims to be a democracy giving “power to the people”.

[i] Source: The Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org)

[ii] Source: The Sentencing Project (www.sentencingproject.org)

[iii] Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (www.bjs.gov)

[iv] Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (www.bjs.gov)

[v] Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics (www.bjs.gov)