

## Essay One

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All I can see is the lane before me. The white starting block sits proud in the midst of the roaring stadium as the ripples of the pool match the pounding of my heart. If I were to glance at my surroundings, I would see hundreds of faces staring at the same 25 yards I am standing just behind. But I don't. I continue to stare straight ahead, to gaze into all of my fears, worries, and dreams that await me in the pool. My muscles are tight with tension, humming with excitement. I remember that this is what I love; this is my life. The whistle blows, calling for my race. I adjust my goggles and cap for the last time and step up onto the block. I am ready.

I have been swimming with the YMCA for 12 years, and it is now a major part of my life. I started out at my local YMCA pool, taking swim lessons then swiftly moving up through each age group. By the time I was eight, I was swimming with the 12 and older age group each summer. That is when I decided to take swimming to the next level. Beginning at an elite club was terrifying and challenging, but after two weeks of fumbling through practice, I found my way. Practice at Schroeder went through highs and lows of difficulty, but I began to understand that I needed to push myself harder no matter the set. The wisdom of success became clear: it all depends solely on how hard I try and how much I want it. No one else can swim for me. Only I can lead myself to accomplish my goals. I kept this idea while swimming year round through middle school and then high school. The new experiences came flooding in, terrifying yet thrilling. I continued to face and overcome so many obstacles that seemed impossible at the time, but these acts led me to my greatest high school moments. I qualified for the Wisconsin Division 1 State Meet every year and set four new records at my high school. During all of these moments, I realized what every practice, drop of sweat, and beat of my heart was for. It was for me, and for these rare yet breathtaking moments of triumph.

My feet pound the wall, blasting my body off and into the final length of the race. Arms fly and lungs feel as though they will burst at any moment. I resist the urge to take the smallest breath as I stretch toward the finish. For one moment I almost give in to the possibility of quitting, but then I remember the 12 years of dedication. Strengthening my resolve, I push through the final strokes and slam my hand into the wall. Ripping my goggles off and clearing away the exhaustion, I pray it was enough and that I will see a time less than 24.79 seconds. I look up at the scoreboard. The time becomes clear, 24.77 seconds. I did it. I made it. I am going to Nationals.

## Essay Two

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I have walked into the same building almost every day for four years now. This building is the YMCA and it has grown to be my home. Six days a week, sometimes seven, I travel to this home away from home and every day I am taught something different. Each day brings upon a new challenge, a new lesson, and a new value. The YMCA institution stands for many positive core values and all of these values have become a part of my everyday life, and have become a part of who I am as an individual. I never knew that a single building could be one of my best life teachers.

The YMCA has taught me the definition of teamwork. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary teamwork is defined as “work done by several associates with each doing a part but all subordinating personal prominence to the efficiency of the whole”. Because of the YMCA, I know teamwork is much more than a simple definition. Teamwork is being a part of something bigger than yourself. Teamwork is the choice to do something for others, and not just yourself. Teamwork is relying on others to arrive at the YMCA at extremely early time periods to struggle through a tough practice together. Teamwork is building one another up during that tough practice so you as an individual will not only succeed, but your surrounding teammates will succeed as well. The YMCA has changed my definition of teamwork into all of these definitions. Because of *my* YMCA, I have been lucky enough to experience teamwork- being a part of something bigger than myself.

Leadership is also a core value brought to a member of the YMCA. I see leadership in the bosses, workers, coaches, members, and teammates. I have also gradually seen leadership grow in myself. Leadership can also be defined in many ways. To me, I believe a leader has to possess one specific quality. A leader has to have the ability to see view things from other people’s perspectives. I never would have tied this quality into leadership if it wasn’t for my experiences at the YMCA. A leader has to be willing to listen to and take in others opinions. A leader works to benefit others, not themselves. Leadership is not control over a group; leadership is applying your ideas and accepting other ideas to benefit the whole. If it wasn’t for the YMCA, I would not only know what leadership looks like, but I would also not know that I could possess leadership in myself.

Lastly, the YMCA has taught me the true definition of dedication. I will forever possess and understand the feeling of dedication. To be dedicated, one has to commit and not back down

when it gets tough. Every day, sometimes twice a day, I show up to the YMCA ready to work to the best of my ability. Without dedication, I would not be able to do what I do. I would not be able to participate in the sport I love so much. Dedication is also a quality that will help me down the road when I am applying for jobs, and committing myself to a family. The YMCA has taught me this lifelong quality, which will continue to help me succeed long after my swimming days are over.

To conclude my thoughts, I would like to thank the institution of the YMCA for teaching me to not only be a better swimmer, but to overall be a better individual. Thank you for the lessons YMCA, they will never be forgotten.

### **Essay Three**

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The YMCA has enabled me to form new and close relationships with coaches and my teammates in order to swim to the best of my ability, and has surrounded me with a healthy and overwhelmingly positive atmosphere. It has also helped me to cope with a series of stressful events that have taken place in my life, and has allowed me to be comfortable with expressing my faith at large championship meets when I find that I need strength.

I wasn't always on Schroeder. My siblings and I started our swim careers on the Southwest Aquatic Team (SWAT) at very young ages. I didn't know of many other YMCA teams in the state, since many competed at different meets than what I competed at, such as YMCA State and YMCA Nationals. I did not see or even meet many YMCA swimmers until larger meets such as state, where I wondered who certain swimmers were from many of the Y-teams.

This all changed once I decided to switch to Schroeder YMCA my freshman year in high school, after a large team disagreement at SWAT. Many of my close friends decided to make the switch as well, and it was one of the best decisions I have ever made in my swim career. When I joined Schroeder, I was welcomed immediately, and felt as though I was a part of a new family. This eased some of my stress and anxiety I had then, since I was starting an extremely difficult freshman year. Not only was I switching to a new swim team, but I was going to a new school too. My parents had also unexpectedly filed for divorce that year, and I was devastated. Swimming allowed me to cope with some of the stress and anger I had, but my new coaches and teammates helped me throughout the process even more than I ever thought

they could. I had torn my ACL and cartilage that year, which was extremely difficult to handle as well. When I had finally completed my long recovery, my new friends, teammates, and coaches helped me to adjust and supported me through times when I failed. They were the ones that helped me to never give up, and kept pushing me to succeed at what I loved to do.

The YMCA has also affected my life, in that I feel as though I can freely express my religion in swimming, which I had always felt uncomfortable doing before switching teams. The first time I heard a prayer before a swim meet, was at YMCA Nationals my freshman year, and I was so shocked and pleasantly surprised all at once. The YMCA's Christian values has allowed me to explore how thankful and grateful I am for my talents and abilities in swimming.

YMCA Nationals was like no other meet I had ever competed in before. A parade of all the teams took place at the beginning of the meet, and it was an exciting way to meet other swimmers from many parts of the country. They introduced themselves, and were genuinely kind and sincere when saying, "Great job", or "Good luck". The amount of sportsmanship I witnessed was astounding and appeared to be present everywhere. Switching to Schroeder was a true blessing, where I was and still am able to form close bonds with swimmers and coaches. Not only do I have my Wisconsin and USA Swimming ties, but I have been able to form a strong bond with YMCA swimming, and for that, I am extremely grateful and proud.

#### **Essay Four**

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I have been a member of the La Crosse YMCA Wave for thirteen years. As the younger brother of two other swimmers on the team, I was often around the pool for practices and meets. The Wave has been my only team, and it has brought many great experiences and memories. I also had the privilege of swimming for Jon Brenner for the first seven years of my career. YMCA swimming has given me an experience few athletes know with a family-like team atmosphere and a sport I truly love.

Swimming as a member of the Wave has provided life-long friendships through a family atmosphere. I have always felt a strong sense of camaraderie with my teammates. My favorite parts of the season have always been team gatherings and the sectional meet because these events are one of the only times when everyone is together. Training long hours in the pool creates a strong bond between everyone. The team spirit and camaraderie make swim practice

something I looked forward to every day. Even after Jon passed away and a new generation of swimmers came, friendship and bonding remained a focus of the team. The swimmers hold each other accountable for individual effort throughout the season, but we swim as one unit. Without YMCA swimming, I would not have had this unique experience.

Swimming on a YMCA team gave me a sport to love and enjoy. While many swimmers consider going to practice a chore, training is a highlight of my day. I enjoy going to the pool to be around teammates and work hard. I played other sports during elementary and middle school, yet I always wanted to be at swim practice more than basketball, soccer, or baseball. I loved being in the water more than on a field. This passion for the sport would not have lasted without the Wave. The ideals YMCA swimming and the Wave stand for fostered my passion for swimming. Our team provided an atmosphere where swimmers could enjoy swimming as part of a team that felt like family instead of just focusing on getting faster and winning. Now in my thirteenth season, the same passion Jon created still fuels me in the grind of training. Without YMCA swimming and the Wave, I would not be the person I am today. Both the camaraderie and passion kept me in the pool.

Swimming has also greatly affected my life outside of the pool, creating a work ethic and diligence that has crossed over into other aspects of my life. The hard work and self-discipline swimming requires has positively affected my school work and community volunteering. Through high school I have kept a high GPA, and I have continually served in the community, including a mission trip to Ocean View, Delaware. YMCA swimming helped create these qualities that have transferred into other aspects of my life.

Swimming for the Wave gave me an experience only possible through YMCA sports. My YMCA team has been like a family to me, and has created life long friendships. My team also has provided an environment where enjoyment and passion for the sport are encouraged over winning or being the fastest. I look forward to swimming in college and bringing YMCA values to my future team. Both YMCA swimming and the Wave have greatly changed my life for the better.

## Essay Five

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Throughout my swimming career, I have been on many teams, both YMCA and non-YMCA, totaling to over 20 coaches. Never have I ever though experienced the team spirit present on a YMCA team. The YMCA works on building healthy mind and body for all. No matter what team one is on though, one will be working on a healthy body. The mind part is the part that is different on a YMCA team. The mental part of the goal is easily accomplished in the form of team. The family spirit and bonding atmosphere is unlike anything I have ever experienced. Not only is it just in Wisconsin, but also all around the country. Although I have only been to Y-Nationals once, it was an unforgettable trip. The energy and enthusiasm present from all the teams and fans was amazing. After swimming at a lot of top meets, it is easy to see how much better YMCA teams host meets.

While swimming for YMCA teams, I have created relationships that will last a lifetime. When I moved to my YMCA team about 4 years ago, I met my best friend Taylor. I also met my best friend Kelly...and Carolyn...and Paige...and the whole rest of the team. On YMCA swim teams, unlike many others, there were no cliques, or groups. Everyone is a friend to everyone. With this came unmatched team support and team spirit. Everyone cheers on everyone at every single meet. I even came to know some of the little kids. Not only was it the swimmers though, but also the parents. Parents who I had never met before would come up to me after races saying “Hey Katie, great job in that race!” or “Hey Taylor, you looked great in that 200 back!” The whole YMCA community gets into the swimmers and their races creating a strong, unified support group there for everyone. The YMCA states, “We know that lasting personal and social change comes about when we all work together”. The teamwork present on my YMCA team has no doubt improved my personality.

Swimming is one of the hardest, yet most rewarding sports. In the peak of our training, tension is high and we are all tired, but we push through. Being on a YMCA team is what motivates us. While we are still working hard, the team spirit and the fun we have makes all the pain worth it. I’ve formed bonds like no other while on a YMCA team. Friends have gone off to college, but no matter the distance they are away from home, we still stay in touch. I even still talk to swimmers I met 10 years ago when I started my first YMCA team. Even the coaches are better on YMCA teams! While I’ve had many, my current YMCA coaches are my favorite for

they are fun, supportive and lighthearted, yet still know how to write an absolutely grueling practice when needed. It is because of the people on my YMCA team that I have as much dedication, teamwork and perseverance as I do, and I know that these values will transfer into not only my collegiate swimming, but also my career.

## **Essay Six**

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Twelve years old and starting swim team, it always seemed as if I was too late. Everyone was faster than me and they all had more experience. This is what pushed me to become better and what built my character to be the best I could be. Seven years on the MTRY swim team and I have learned more than I ever thought I would.

I had a fear of joining the swim team in sixth grade, and I knew that it would be a challenge for me. I had previously been swimming for the Manitowoc YMCA synchronized swim team starting in third grade and being involved with it for three years. I found out that the program wouldn't be returning the following year and that I would need to start something new. My mother made me join swim team, and of course I was hesitant about it.

As the year progressed I grew to love swimming. I made some great friends and I always enjoyed the team atmosphere. The team taught me how to become an ideal leader. I prevailed by being an older sister to many of the younger kids on my team. This gave me the responsibility and caring, two of the four core values that the YMCA aims to have each of their members portray. I became very manageable with my time as well. Balancing accelerated classes, work, and swim team at the same time assiduously kept my mind occupied. The many conflicts with having a busy schedule could occasionally get in the way of my personal goals in swimming.

Frustration really settled in when I found out about the various setbacks that you may encounter with a shoulder injury. It was hard to always be in pain during practice and to watch all of your friends enjoy something you couldn't. All of my coaches were extremely supportive throughout the whole process. I had so much respect for my coaches and I was so thankful that they could help me out. After all of the stretching and physical therapy I got back into the swing of things and changed a lot about my strokes techniques.

Returning to the swim team my senior year has been an amazing experience so far. Although I am the oldest girl on my team, I have become in tune with many others whom are far from my age. They treat me like family, and our YMCA as whole feels much more like a

community than it does a workout facility. Showing up to the YMCA everyday for practice feels almost as if I'm at my second home. The minute I walk in the locker room I become bombarded with hello's. We all have a wonderful connection and a great bond together and I am truly blessed to be able to be apart of this team.

I am thankful for the wonderful and optimistic experiences of the MTRY swim team. I have learned how to become a well-rounded adult and will help me make responsible decisions in my future. As well as helping me develop into a young woman with good morals and character values such as the YMCA's. I thank my family for getting me involved with this team, my coaches for pushing me to become the best I can be, and my friends for always being there when I needed them. I am so grateful that the Manitowoc YMCA has a great opportunity like the swim team to be apart of.

## **Essay Seven**

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Everything in my life relates to swimming. If a teacher asks me to write, research or read about something I always choose swimming. If I have a free moment during the day I'll Google videos of swimming on YouTube. No matter how much my little sister hates it, swimming always ends up being the discussion topic at our family dinners. Every day of my life is spent getting plenty of rest, eating proper foods, and training for swimming; and I wouldn't have it any other way. Because of the Stevens Point YMCA Swim Team program, I found my passion.

If I hadn't made the spontaneous decision to join the local YMCA swim team ten years ago, my life would be completely different. Through the swim program, I have been a part of a family. The coaches that I've had have acted as second parents to me and the teammates that I have swum with are like siblings to me. This family is like no other; they encourage each other, believe in each other and push each other to their fullest potential. There hasn't been a day that I don't go to practice and come home happier than I was before because of the great people that surround me during that time. Whether it be reminding each other that, "it's all mental," laughing at a joke another teammate said or trusting each other with our deepest secrets, I know I can always count on the people I have met through the YMCA swim program to be there for me.

The sport of swimming has many ups and downs. Some of the toughest experiences of my life have been when I trained harder than imaginable and did not get the results I was hoping

for. Through the tough times I have learned that the best way to ensure success is by putting in 100 percent effort every day. That way, even if the results aren't what was expected, there is no way to be disappointed.

Swimming has been the biggest part of my life thus far. This fall I will be attending St. Cloud State University and swimming on their swim team. Because of the Stevens Point YMCA, I cannot imagine my life without a pool, killer workouts, weekly swim meets and amazing swim friends. My biggest goal throughout my life has been to swim in college and it wouldn't have been possible without the YMCA swim program, the people I have met and lessons I have learned from it.

## **Essay Eight**

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During my 12 years on a YMCA swim team I have learned many valuable life lessons. Swimming for the YMCA has helped enhance my understanding of the Y's core values: honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility.

My personal journey with YMCA swimming has included coaching changes, the death of a teammate, and overcoming an injury. These teachable moments have allowed me to grown into the person I am today.

When my family and I moved from the Upper Peninsula to Oshkosh I was presented with a new opportunity to meet people and take on personal responsibility for my swimming. This also meant my first coaching change, which brought a new perspective to my swimming. I had to learn to respect a different style of coaching as well as adapt to the new surroundings.

A few years later the team and I went through another coaching change, forcing us to learn similar lessons together. The adaptations we made helped us grow and strive in our swimming.

When we experienced the tragic death of a teammate, it brought our team closer together. The YMCA swimming community showed the value of caring during the aftermath of this tragedy. I personally learned greater respect for other teams and life itself. The death united not only our team, but teams across the area.

Several years ago I was faced with the challenge of overcoming an injury that still challenges me today. Throughout this personal hardship I have learned the importance of honesty and personal responsibility. Although many people helped, it was my responsibility for doing my

rehab and returning to the team. I had to be honest with coaches, doctors, and myself about the levels of pain I was in and what my body could handle. Even though at times my honesty took me out of the water, it only made me strive for achieving my goals more, which helped build the work ethic I am proud to have today.

YMCA swimming has been a part of my day to day life for the past 12 years and the experiences it has brought me molded me into the person I am today. I have learned not only to respect my fellow swimmers but also new coaches and their philosophies. The Y swimming community has become like family with a constant source of caring and support. Swimming is a sport which requires constant participation and dedication. I have taken the personal responsibility for my swimming by maintaining the dedication to practices, team activities, and meets.

The core value of honesty is one that has impacted my life significantly. I have always been a swimmer who has been driven to work hard and participate at the highest level possible. The lesson of honesty helped me to work through the injuries I've faced and it showed me the value of being honest with myself as well as being given honest direction from my parents, coaches, and teammates. Although sometimes the honesty of those decisions were difficult to face it has made me a stronger swimmer today. My personal journey of YMCA swimming has made a positive impact on my life and helped become the person and swimmer I am today. I have learned the importance of the Y core values and believe that the core values can be the cornerstone to living a positive life.

## **Essay Nine**

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Schroeder is not just a name and it's not just a team. Schroeder is a lot more than that. Schroeder is my family. Just like any other family, Schroeder has affected my life by molding me into the person I am today. Schroeder has made me into a team player as well as a hard-working and respectful person.

There is no "I" in team. Before I joined Schroeder I was only swimming for me and my own results. I never really swam for my team. Today however, with the help of Schroeder, I have been transformed into a team player. When I switched teams, I came to realize Schroeder has many team goals, and in order to achieve these goals the team needs to work together like a well-oiled machine. We can't have any drama, we need to motivate our teammates in practice, we

need to cheer our teammates on at meets, and, most importantly, we need to be a family. Schroeder has taught me so many things such as, what the word “team” really means and how to be a good team player. Schroeder has also changed my motivation for the better. Before, *my* goals were the only thing motivating me to perform well. Now, my motivation originates from wanting to achieve not only *my* goals, but my *team’s* goals as well.

Hard work is another important thing to Schroeder. The coaches and my teammates have encouraged and pushed me during hard sets, and they hold me accountable for my work ethic. Schroeder has made me into a hard working athlete. My work ethic is at the highest it’s ever been and as a result, I have been dropping time left and right. Because of these time drops I was able to sign with Valparaiso University, a Division I School this past November fulfilling my dream to swim collegiately. I have come so far as a swimmer, and I have no else to thank but Schroeder.

The Bible tells Christians to respect authority, so being the strong Christian that I am I try hard to show respect to my parents, teachers, and coaches. As soon as I switched to Schroeder, I realized that the coaches hold respect to a pretty high standard as well. In fact, they take it to a whole new level. Before I joined Schroeder, I showed respect by listening and not yelling at my coaches. Today however, I show respect to my coaches by listening, not yelling, telling them “Thank you” after practice, and by cleaning up the pool deck before I go shower off.

I am the person I am today because of Schroeder. Schroeder has molded me into a team player as well as a hard-working and respectful person. I love my team, and I would do anything for them because they have done more than enough for me.

## **Essay Ten**

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Self confidence: a feeling of trust in one’s abilities, qualities and judgement. This is a characteristic some people are born with, while others, like me, have to work at. All though I never used to have the characteristic of being self confident, I have learned through many experiences to truly believe in myself and what I can accomplish.

It was in July 2012 when I gained the self confidence that I always desired to obtain. I made my first YMCA summer national cut in the 100 breaststroke by 3 one hundredths of a second. Even though I just barely made it, it didn’t matter because I was a national qualifier. Just

making a cut by 3 one hundredths of a second meant that I was probably going to be seeded last at the national meet. That thought still didn't knock down the self confidence that I just got because I finally made a national cut.

Becoming a team member of a YMCA national team was always a goal of mine as a competitive swimmer. When you're a member of a YMCA swim team, the main goal for every swimmer is getting to be a member on the national team. What swimmer doesn't want to see their name written on the OSHY National Team Wall of Fame? Then the selfconfidence that I just got became obsolete because the spring season came around, and I didn't make spring nationals. Not getting my cut for spring nationals left me feeling devastated. I felt that because I made summer nationals I had to make spring as well. The selfconfidence that I once had was just taken away from me in a matter of 6 months.

After a long year passes by, experiences that I went through allowed me to find the confidence in myself that I once had before. Natalie Camp helped me in realizing that I can do anything that I set my mind to. Before I went to camp, I was considering to quit swimming all together. At camp we participated in many activities that helped me in finding confidence in myself again, and made the thought of quitting swimming disappear. We wrote letters to ourselves that we would receive a year later. I wrote about how I wished I had confidence again, and how by having confidence it would help not just in swimming, but in my everyday life. Natalie's spirit helped me into believing in myself when I didn't believe in myself at all.

After my great experience at camp that helped me find some of my confidence again, I got my spring national cut for the first time. Throughout those 6 months after camp, before I got my cut, I pushed myself in practice to the best of my ability. I believed in myself before I raced and I let confidence drive me through the race. Continuing to make nationals and having Natalie's spirit with me everyday at the pool allows me to keep having selfconfidence.

Swimming has taught me that you need to believe in yourself in order to succeed. Seeing Natalie's poster at the Y everyday on the wall reminds me of camp, and how camp essentially saved my swimming career and myself. I have learned that selfconfidence can not be gained by anyone but yourself. Being a member of a YMCA swim team has allowed me to obtain the characteristic of selfconfidence. I have obtained this characteristic through experiences on a YMCA swim team that have taught me to believe in myself and being able to know that I can accomplish anything.

## Essay Eleven

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Arms aching from another hard set, I pull off my goggles and look around. All the other swimmers on the team are pulling themselves out, racing to get spots in the showers. Despite my exhaustion, I hoist my body from the pool. I shake some water from my chlorinated hair before following my teammates, satisfied from another challenging workout. But even when I leave the pool, I take so many intangibles with me.

Of all the lessons I have learned while being on a YMCA swim team, there is one that sticks out to me: supporting roles can be the most important roles a person can have. The Walter Schroeder swim team has always had a number of stars on their team. These “star swimmers” are the ones who are at every state meet, are chasing down regional times, and are talking with our coach about Nationals. Unfortunately, I was never one of these athletes. Although I did the same sets with them and trained for a similar amount of yardage each day, but I was never on their level. When I first joined Schroeder, this frustrated me. I always strived to keep up with them. It was not until my high school years that my coach, David Anderson, showed me what a valuable asset I and swimmers like me were to the team. If there was no support from friends, in meets and in practice, the star swimmers may not be where they are today. David Anderson taught me to accept who I was as a swimmer and set achievable goals for myself. As I have matured and moved into the working world, I have found this to be a vital lesson to have learned. In addition to the importance of being a supportive teammate, being able to set realistic goals and make measurable progress are additional lessons I have learned from my experience on a YMCA swim team.

The people I have encountered while on a YMCA swim team also have had a formidable impact on me. Naturally, I have gotten close with my teammates, but I have met other influential individuals. One of these individuals is a former Schroeder swim coach, Tom Michaelson, affectionately called “Grandpa Thunder” by the swim team. He is present at every swim Schroeder swim meet, taking pictures of the athletes and unofficially coaching us. I have gotten to really know his fascinating life over the time I have been at Schroeder. The two of us love to discuss just about anything together, ranging from swimming techniques to politics. Talking with him is one of the highlights of any swim meet and, from our discussions, I have become a more informed individual. Tom has given me advice on more than my swimming technique. He has

also provided advice which has helped me in my academic and personal development. The people at the YMCA I have met, like Tom, are all people who have helped me to become who I am today.

From the lessons I have learned to the relationships I have formed, being a member of a YMCA swim team has affected my life, which is why, after every hard practice, I always come back the next day.

## **Essay Twelve**

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On January 7, 2014, I made the decision to swim at Schroeder YMCA. I was coming from a non-Y team and wasn't really sure how my experience would be different. I remember my last practice on my previous team, especially what I felt afterwards. My sisters had switched to Schroeder many months earlier, but I hadn't had the reason to switch at the time. But as time went on, I could feel myself drifting away from swimming as I no longer looked forward to going to practice. Everyone was swimming for themselves and the negative attitude at practices was quickly escalating. I had started debating switching teams, and then that final practice pushed me over the edge. I remember my dad picking me up from practice that day, and the first thing I said to him when I got in the car was, "when can I switch to Schroeder?"

The next day, January 7, I attended my first Schroeder practice. I was in awe of the whole team atmosphere. I had never experienced a more team-centered, positive, hard-working group of people at practice. Immediately after I walked onto the pool deck, I had three girls come up to me and introduce themselves and invite me to be in their lane. I can't even imagine how this practice would have gone if I hadn't met these girls. Those girls continued to introduce me to others in our lane as well as many of the other people on the team. Within the first week, I knew almost everyone's names and felt more a part of that team than I could have ever thought.

I started to look forward to coming to practice again. Every practice was a different and new practice. My coach was so individualized with each one of us, and we were focusing on things I had never really thought about. Our practices started with a team meeting where we discussed what we should be focusing on both physically and mentally, which was new to me. Mental preparation had never been a part of my daily routine, and now I was surrounded by

positive, open-minded people who knew the importance of every aspect of swimming. Practices consisted of contests for which lane could be the most encouraging and work the hardest. Each set was made up of “come on guys”, “you can do it”, and “only one more!” It was such an uplifting atmosphere, and I haven’t regretted my decision since my first day at Schroeder.

The most important aspect of being on Schroeder to me is a saying from our team’s race strategy. This consists of five steps, the first four of which are still important enough that they need to be done, but the fifth one is what makes us a team. It’s almost like our team slogan. “We Are Schroeder.” Three simple words that unite us as a team. It’s amazing at meets to see huge groups of Schroeder swimmers behind their teammates’ lanes or running along the side of the pool cheering. That’s what makes us Schroeder, and that’s what’s made a difference for me.

Schroeder YMCA has completely changed my view on swimming. It has made me more positive and encouraging at practice. It has made me really feel a part of a team. And it has made me a better person overall. I feel like what I have on my Y team is something that not many people get to experience, and it’s something so difficult to find, but I have been lucky enough to find it and benefit from it.

### **Essay Thirteen**

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There are many obvious opportunities to being a member of a YMCA swim team. I’ve enjoyed the camaraderie of teammates, the excitement of swim meets and the lessons that teach dedication and perseverance are needed to succeed. I’ve also enjoyed the simple fact of developing and improving a lifelong skill such as swimming. But becoming a YMCA swimmer has also led me down a difference path, a path I did not consider as a 10-year-old swimmer, a path that has affected my life and the way I view the world. Swimming gave me the skills to become a lifeguard and the YMCA became my first place of employment.

With employment comes the requisite responsibilities we all must learn such as being on time, working when sick if you cannot find a substitute, helping other employees who need a shift covered. Those, of course are important skills. But my time as a YMCA lifeguard has also taught me empathy and introduced me to many people I would never cross paths with in the normal course of high school life.

Long after the playing children and their parents leave the YMCA pool, the remaining patrons in the later evening and on weekends, at least in our local YMCA, are the elderly and those who have no place to go in the evening. They make their rounds between the hot tub, sauna, and poolside benches. It's often a quiet time and I have the chance to talk to these people and listen to their individual stories. Many fought in wars, or came from larger metropolitan areas before retiring to our community. Many have life stories that are fascinating and eye-opening and help me realize the importance of family and community and friends and loyalty.

I hope that by listening and showing interest, I sometimes make someone's day. I know that these folks have made a lasting impression on me. This opportunity and the experience that came out of it would not have been possible without the help of my YMCA swim team. It's a path I didn't foresee when I started this journey, but one I'm glad I found.

## **Essay Fourteen**

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My name is Jayden West, and I am currently in my sixth year as a member of the Fox Cities YMCA swim team. I never suspected, when I joined the team, how great an impact it would have on my life. I was a quiet, “stay out of everyone’s way”, twelve-year-old kid. How could I have known that by the time I was 17, swimming on this team would result in some of the best friends I have ever had, and bring me everywhere from the Walter Schroeder Aquatic Center to city hall meetings discussing the future of our local pool (my favorite practice pool as well as my place of work).

My time on the swim team has had a huge effect on my personal health. When I was younger, I discovered, as many swimmers do, that “coordination” was not one of my strengths. As a result, I did not find much enjoyment in the other sports that I participated in. Had I not fallen in love with swimming, I know I would live a much more sedentary lifestyle. I spend most of my time at home studying for some class or another, so having the opportunity to swim for a few hours each day is truly a blessing, and has done wonders for my personal health. In striving to be the best I can be, I have learned to make many good nutritional choices that I may not otherwise have had the motivation and discipline to make.

The most profound impact on my life, however, has not been the things that have been done for me, but the things I have been able to do to help others. The leadership skills I learned

on the team allowed me to successfully captain my high school team. The in-depth technical knowledge I have gained about swimming has allowed me to be a far better swim lesson instructor to children than I could ever have been otherwise. The endurance that comes from spending twelve hours or more per week swimming have been of great benefit to my competency as a lifeguard.

On a smaller scale, I have also had the opportunity to help out my fellow swimmers during what may be one of the most difficult times of their lives: high school. I think my greatest impact may be serving as a role model for those teammates who are only a few years younger than myself, though neither of us may realize it at the time. Though I have a tendency to joke and laugh with all my teammates, I try my very best to be someone to whom they can talk openly, whether it's just as a form of catharsis, or to seek some bit of advice. Many older swimmers served as *my* guides and role models, so I try my best to be ready to help my younger friends, for matters ranging from study tips on the ACT to consolation or advice on issues with their friends from school.

It will be hard to leave my team this fall as I head off to college, but I take comfort in the fact that the lessons I have learned, and the connections I have made are strong enough to guide my life long past my last season.

## **Essay Fifteen**

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As a member of the Y swim team, I have come to see my swim team team as my family. Everyday I practice the Y values that were taught by my coaches and other swimmers. I gained confidence in myself, both in and out of the water, which has led to success in swimming, high school academics and other extracurricular activities. Best of all, I discovered my passion for exercise, mental health and medicine through my YMCA swimming career. I feel truly blessed that I swim for the YMCA because of the caring swim families, determined-skilled coaches and the on-going competitive environment that challenges me to do my best in practice and at swim meets.

I have been swimming at the Y since I was 10 years old and learned several life lessons about honesty, respect and caring. My lessons in honesty taught me that hard work cannot be passed on to another swimmer and leaving the wall early does not mean a faster time. My

lessons in respect taught me that everyone, from coaches to swimmers, should be treated with kindness because words can hurt and impact a swimmer's competitive performance. Encouragement from my teammates kept my attitude positive as I worked my way back from knee surgery to compete at the same condition that I left the pool to heal. And finally, my lessons in caring taught me that both body and soul are important. If I eat healthy and hydrate my body but my mental state is negative, I won't perform my best in competition. Practice makes perfect and this applied to my everyday swimming practices, competition and school studying habits. During the last year of high school, I taught Swim Team 101 and swim lessons at the YMCA. The Y values are ingrained so it was easy for me to teach and encourage new swimmers no matter the difficulty with a flip turn.

What I will miss most is the daily connect and interaction with my swim family - the coaches, group swimmers and my sisters who also swim for the Y. I know my swim family as well as my sisters. The team's environment is positive, focused, and challenging. It took everything I had to get back in the water after my knee surgery straining me both physically and mentally but it was my swim family that got me back on top. Best of all, I have had an amazing time swimming for the YMCA and its values will carry me through the rest of my life.

## **Essay Sixteen**

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Being on a YMCA swim team has brought only positive changes into my life. After my first year of high school swimming, I wanted to continue pursuing swimming. I decided to join the local club team. The local club happened to be South Eastern Aquatics, or SEA, with the Sealed Air YMCA branch. When I showed up for my first practice with the team, I was very nervous because there were so many new people and they all seemed to know each other very well. The coaches helped me get over this. They were all welcoming and kind. After a while I started to get to know the other people on my team, and they were all very kind. I started to go to weights over the summer, in order to get myself stronger in the water. This was a smaller and tighter group, that I really enjoyed being a part of.

As my time with SEA continued, I was continually improving, dropping time, and getting faster. Another thing I enjoyed about SEA was the meets. They were always very crowded, but the best part about them was being able to spend time with my teammates and coaches, outside of the normal practice. Even though they were long, I was able to keep entertained talking with

my friends on the team. One of my favorite meets was the Bird Bath invitational. That meet was probably the most fun of them all. It was over a couple days and the whole team stayed in the same hotel with their families. It was fun going down into the hotel pool, play in the pool, and to be able to take a break from actual swimming.

Without SEA, I never would have been able to go to high school state as a Junior and Senior. The off season training that I got from SEA was second to none. Three long seasons of SEA whipped me into shape, refined my stroke, and made me an overall better swimmer. Without SEA, I would have spent all of my summers sitting around, not doing much of anything. Belonging to the swim team forced me to get up every morning and work at something. It also caused me to look into lifeguard certification classes with the YMCA. I have gotten both my lifeguard certification and my instructor certification at this point. I regularly work as a lifeguard and instructor now. SEA led me in this direction and gave me a strong work ethic which I am thankful for. It will server me well as I continue on in my life and career.

SEA has given me many friends and an experience that I won't ever forget. I will always remember talking to everyone during the dry land workout while we were working our butts off. I will remember bonding in the water as we discussed how many yards we had to swim or that the interval was too fast. Swimming for the YMCA SEA swim team has made a very positive impact in my life and I am very thankful for the experiences and friends that I have from joining the YMCA South Eastern Aquatics Swim Team.

## **Essay Seventeen**

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When I was 15 years old, I joined the Marshfield YMCA swim team. Up until that point, I had enjoyed swimming and was even a member of a very small club swim team but I never knew the excitement of really excelling in a sport and feeling like a valuable member of a team until I joined the Marshfield YMCA Swim Team. The high school in my own hometown did not offer sports like swimming and because I am legally blind in one eye, I struggled to find a sport where I didn't have to figure out ways to compensate for my lack of depth perception much less excel. When I walked into that first YMCA practice, the first thing I saw was all the swimming records posted in the pool area and at that moment, I knew I found my passion. I was not a great swimmer at that point but with a such a good and encouraging coaching staff at the YMCA, I got much better. In my very first season, I reached a huge milestone for me personally as a swimmer

when I got my 100 yard freestyle under a minute. Along with reaching that goal, I gained confidence and an understanding of true teamwork and sportsmanship. At all the YMCA meets I've gone to, whenever a teammate is racing, the whole team is always cheering them on and when they're done, whether they won or lost, all of our teammates congratulate them on their race. Not only have I witnessed this about my own team but I've also had swim coaches from other YMCAs step in to coach our team when our coach has been unavailable. The Marshfield YMCA swim team has become like a second family to me, but it is also clear that I can count on any YMCA swim team member or coach to treat me just as well. While I will cherish all the friendships and memories I have made over the years forever, I am most grateful for how being part of this team has shaped me as a person. Four years ago, I would have never imagined that I would have the confidence to be able to take on the responsibility of being a lifeguard at the YMCA but I got my lifeguard certification about a year ago and have been working at the YMCA as a lifeguard ever since. More recently, I started shadowing some of the swimming lesson coaches and have assisted with both adult and child lessons. Again, I would have not seen myself as having the patience for it several years ago, but just last week I filled in for a regular swim coach with a group of seven year olds and I can honestly say it was fun! While I'm looking forward to college and what that will bring, I will miss being part of this team. The Marshfield YMCA swim team has given me many great opportunities to grow into the person I am today and for that I will forever be thankful.

## **Essay Eighteen**

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I am the person I today because of my YMCA Swim Team. I have: had the honor of being part of a TEAM, grown into a LEADER, and learned to PERSEVERE when faced with obstacles. For this, I am truly blessed.

I started swimming with my local USA club team at the age of 7, but I didn't really feel a sense of camaraderie or that I was part of a TEAM until I transferred to the local YMCA Swim Team at the age of 12, and I credit that team mentality to my coach. From the minute I joined the YMCA Swim Team, he stressed the importance of working together, respect, and a strong work ethic. I looked up to my teammates who were 4-6 years my senior. They were so talented and giving, and I wanted to be just like them! This was an incredible experience

and I learned so much. But, one by one they graduated, and I found myself in the incredible position of leader.

Looking back, I see that my coach was grooming me and my teammates to be team leaders from the beginning. From my coach's inspirational talks about leadership, numerous skill building experiences, volunteering with our younger swimmers and attending the Natalie Kate Bolin Swim Camp, I learned that being a LEADER was a role I was destined to fulfill.

However, the most important lesson that I learned as a YMCA Swim Team member is PERSEVERANCE. Romans 5: 3-4 reads "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, hope." At the beginning of my junior year, swimming was going really well. I started to see my times drop considerably. By the time of YMCA Spring Nationals, something was just not right with me and my dream of swimming at the Division 1 level was in jeopardy. My training was up and down, my times were up and down, and my improvement wasn't where we thought it would be. I was diagnosed with severe anemia. This was devastating. While being anemic is treatable, it would take time...months, for me to feel better. My family and coach supported me during this time, and I gradually became healthier – making my first two YMCA National Finals last summer. However, the "what if I didn't get sick?" and "why did I have to get sick?" kept playing over and over in my mind. Through the encouragement of my family, my coach and two former teammates who participated at the Division 1 level, I came to the realization that everything happens for a reason. I had to persevere through this illness and all the "why me?" and "what if's?" Suffering does produce perseverance and I am blessed to say that I am fulfilling my dream of swimming at the Division 1 level next year.

Being on my YMCA Swim Team didn't just impact me in one way. It taught me about being on a TEAM, being a LEADER and PERSERVERING though the tough times. I am now a stronger swimmer and a stronger person because of it.