

Jon Brenner Wisconsin YMCA Scholarship

Jon Brenner spent nearly thirty years coaching YMCA swimming, the last eighteen seasons of his career at the LaCrosse Area Family YMCA in with the Wave (1991-2009). He was a soft spoken man who loved what he did, and accepted any and all who wanted to swim. His genuine interest in and appreciation of each swimmer, regardless of ability, made for a large and happy team known for their cheers and goofy songs. He stressed kindness, individual responsibility and team unity; and counted it a privilege to watch as his swimmers grew and improved both in and out of the pool. His career was cut short when he died of brain cancer in January 2010 at the age of 54, but his impact lives on in countless others.

In Jon's memory the Wisconsin YMCA Swim Coaches Association is awarding \$2100 in scholarships this year - \$500, \$400, \$300, \$300, \$300, + \$300. To be eligible a person must be graduating from HS in 2011, planning to attend a four year college or university in the fall, and be a current member of a YMCA. Scholarships will be awarded based on a short essay. Essays will be judged by a panel of YMCA supporters.

Adam Hagensick
La Crosse, Wisconsin YMCA

The YMCA has impacted my life in many ways. When I was six years old I joined the La Crosse, Wisconsin YMCA swim team. I live an hour away from the YMCA and I swim there nearly every day of the week in two seasons that run from September to April and May to August. At times, this dedication has not been easy; I have missed some social events and opportunities to spend time with my school friends. I am, however, proud and very happy with the opportunities that have been presented to me through the YMCA. One of these opportunities includes friendship. Although I say friendship, it is much more than that – it is family. The YMCA has always made me feel welcome. That is the greatest strength of the YMCA; its ability to make a person feel like there is always somewhere to go. This tight-knit family of which I am a part will always make me comfortable.

The YMCA has taught me many things. The most important things they taught me were their core values: honesty, respect, responsibility and caring. My coaches have stressed the importance of these values every day and they have become a part of my everyday life. I have strived to live a life of honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring. I have had a chance to develop these values not only as a member of the swim team but through church activities and community activities. These values overlap with the qualities expected of a citizen, specifically to be morally and ethically sound, responsible, and dedicated.

Being involved in the YMCA has provided me with plenty of opportunities to set goals, but as I have grown, I have found that all areas of my life need goals. The lessons that have been taught to me over the years will help me succeed in everything I do. I am proud to say that I have been part of the YMCA.

Adam Justinger,
Fox Cities YMCA

I have been involved in the YMCA almost my whole life and the impact it has had on my life has been huge. Not only have I had fun at the YMCA while meeting great people along the way, but I have also been able to shape my life and become the man I want to be. The YMCA is a great organization that has helped me lead a life based on the four community values of kindness, honesty, respect and responsibility. These four values have impacted me the most as a competitive swimmer for the Fox Cities team and also as a coach for the team.

One of the ways the YMCA has impacted my life was with swimming on the swim team. Originally my mom signed me up for the team so that I did not drown due to my love for the water. Little did we know the impact it would have on my life. First off when I joined the team the doctors told my mom and I that I was considered obese and my parents were going through a divorce. Due to my weight issue I was often made fun of at school and didn't have many friends. If that wasn't enough I also was having a hard time dealing with my parents getting a divorce and the new lifestyle I had to live. I joined the team when I was nine and didn't know what to expect. I started off very slow and the only people I knew on the team were my siblings. However within a year that all began to change and life began to take a complete 360. As my progress on the team increased the extra weight I had seemed to begin to disappear and my comfort level increased. This led to me meeting many new people and creating some long lasting friendships. With these new friendships I created I felt as if I had a second family around me to comfort me if the day wasn't going well. Even though this may have not worked all of the time normally just swimming a hard workout allowed me to forget about any issues I had that day. As time went on the weight kept falling off and the number of friends I had continued to grow. Now it's my senior year and I am one of the leaders on the team and have met

some of my best friends on the swim team. I also have beaten the issue of obesity which is very uncommon for kids who experience it at such a young age. With being on the team not only have my leadership skills increased but so has my respect for coaches and teammates, responsibility I had to swim on my relay, the kindness I received from teammates and the new friends I made.

The other huge impact the YMCA has had on my life started about a year ago when I began coaching. First it started off as something that could get me community service hours along with helping some of the younger swimmers succeed. After doing this several times I applied for a job and got it and became our lower level swim coach. This experience has truly changed my life and helped me find a job that I love to do. Not only was I helping out the next generation of swimmers, but I also had fun doing it. This experience has helped me realize that I want to try and become a swim coach when I am older. Along with helping me decide a career option it also allowed me to meet some great people. Whether it was the younger swimmers or their parents it was always great to talk to new people and learn their story. However one of the biggest impacts it has had on my life was witnessing the development of their swimming skills. The kids I coached came in and most faintly knew how to swim. Now as the end of the season is approaching every single kid knows all the strokes and I feel confident they could all do at least a 100 of each. Although this seems like such a minimal thing it means a lot to me because it shows me that I can do and become whatever I want as long as I put the time and effort in. All in all this has not only been a fun and rewarding experience but has taught me that my goals will always be in reach if I work hard.

The YMCA has truly impacted my life and has helped me in becoming a young man with good grades, good athletic ability and teaching me how to give back to my community. As I go off to North Dakota next year for college I will remember the things that I have learned at the YMCA and try to preach these lessons learned there to the best of my ability. Although many things have helped shape my life I truly could not have done it without the four YMCA values and the great people that work there who helped me achieve many of my goals and change my life.

Alex Bryson
Fox Cities YMCA

Since I was three years old, the YMCA has played a large role in my life. I have been involved in all sorts of YMCA programs growing up, such as youth sports classes, basketball teams, and swim lessons. But my largest involvement is with the YMCA swim team, which began at the age of six. These programs played heavily into the development of who I am today as well as into my social life. The time I spent in YMCA programs and, more specifically the swim team, has led to my success, allowed me to help others do their best, and given me the best family I could possibly ask for.

The opportunities presented to me through my involvement in YMCA swimming have led to me being successful in many ways. The YMCA taught me valuable skills such as goal setting, dedication, and confidence that have contributed to my success throughout swimming and life. Goal setting is a process that I have come to appreciate and understand through my time with the swim team. I have learned that setting an unrealistic goal is not going to yield positive results but setting a long term goal that is tough can have amazing results. I have utilized this with my swimming on several occasions, most recently being my success at the high school state meet. Another quality that the YMCA inspired was dedication. Attending every practice available to me required lots of dedication but being present at the practice is not enough. Dedication is more than being there, it is giving everything you have, all of your energy and focus, to what you are trying to accomplish. The YMCA swim team made me truly aware what dedication was and how crucial it is in the recipe for success. Another key ingredient is confidence. Keeping your chin up and telling yourself that you will succeed plays as big of a role in being successful as hard work does. YMCA swimming has given me confidence that I can be successful and encourages me to dream big and reach my full potential. In many ways the YMCA led to my success both in and out of the pool by instilling in me qualities and techniques that will continue to help me for the rest of my life.

In addition to helping me be the best that I possibly can, the YMCA has allowed me to have an impact in other peoples' lives. Through the YMCA I was able to obtain a coaching position where I get to help spread the joy of swimming to younger kids. This role as a coach, along with my role as a leader on my team, required me to be a responsible role model to those around me. I learned to take responsibility for myself through my involvement in YMCA programs. With two siblings also involved in the swim team I learned that I must be responsible for getting myself ready for both practices and meets. That responsibility continued to be important at practice as well. I learned from my coaches to be responsible and complete all the yards that I was asked to do and afterward to be well behaved in the locker room. These early lessons in responsibility allowed me to grow into a leader on the team. As a leader I am now involved in helping others see their potential. Encouraging good practice habits as well as being encouraging when my teammates are racing. These are ways that I am able to help others to be their best which I would not get the opportunity to do if I was not involved in the YMCA swimming program. Being a leader, both as a swimmer and a coach, has been a priceless opportunity that permitted me to impact those around me in a positive way.

My family would not be nearly as special as it is without the YMCA swim team. Our family has been involved in the swim team for as long as I can remember and not having it would have created a very different unity. Swimming has been something in which we have all been participating, in some form or another, and it has brought us closer. My sisters and I have

become closer when we trained together. As my older sister was finishing her last few years of YMCA swimming I was moved into her practice group. It was those long hours of training and countless car rides to and from practices that brought us closer together. Now that I am experiencing the same with my younger sister I fully appreciate the impact swimming has made in my family. In addition to my biological family coming closer together because of YMCA swimming, I have become involved in another whole family. My friends that I trained with for countless years on end have become siblings to me. They are the people that I can rely on in hard times. After the tragic accident that took the life of Natalie Bolin I relied heavily on my swimming family who also knew her, because they understood best what I was going through and how significant Natalie was in my life. Just as they supported me I will always be there to support them as well. These connections reach far past the limits of my own team. My family of swimmers is from all over Wisconsin. Even now that some of my former teammates have switched to another team, they are still family to me. The bonds that we have formed were because of the strong YMCA program we grew up in together. This helps me withstand the pressures from others on our team who see our opposing teams as just rivals. These connections will last far into the future with me.

YMCA swimming has been the biggest influence in my life. The lessons I experienced throughout my time in the program will continue to benefit me as I venture further into my future. The support I can provide to my family will continue to be important, just as their support of me will be important. I will continue to use the skills I have gained to help others be their best and will continue to strive to be my best using the attributes I have gained from participating in YMCA programs.

Amanda Tomten
La Crosse YMCA

How does one express all the ways a coach, a team, a family, and a community have impacted their life? It is impossible to express all the ways the YMCA has impacted my life. The most notable was being blessed with the opportunity to be coached by a man who embodied the four core values of the YMCA. Jon Brenner showed many people and me how to care, be honest, show respect, and be responsible. I am the woman I am today because of how Jon Brenner and the YMCA have shaped me.

To care for someone, is God's way of showing himself through his people. Jon Brenner cared so much for everyone. He shared his love with everyone around him. He used any opportunity to teach us. Whether it was through his many silly songs or his unique choice of wardrobe, there was always a hidden, loving message. To witness this expression of caring and love was a beautiful thing. I learned to love and care for others. When I went on a mission trip to New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina I helped with small children devastated by the hurricane. I thought of the way Jon treated people and began to understand why he did what he did. This feeling that Jon shared helped me in deciding my pre-medicine schooling path and career goal of being a pediatrician.

Along with caring the YMCA has taught me to be honest. Honesty is not just telling the truth, it is earning trust among those we are around. Being in a sport where honesty is everything help shape me to be a better person. "Constructive criticism" was a common word choice but this was honesty in action when it came to how a race went. This trait that I learned through the YMCA help me to be the kind of person I want to be. Trust is a hard thing to gain and an easy thing to lose but with the YMCA and an incredible team, it will never be lost.

Through out my time at the YMCA I have learned to have a great deal of respect for people. I observed this respect through my coaches. Jon Brenner and the rest of the coaches gave the youngest swimmers to the oldest swimmers the utmost respect. This carried into my life. Having this strong respect for my coaches made it easy to respect my teachers, friends and parents even when it was difficult to do so. My parents divorced in 2008 and although it upset me greatly I never disrespected them. It is because of the values of the YMCA that I handled this difficult challenge so well.

With that challenge I needed to be responsible. I learned to be responsible growing up in this sport. Swimmers are expected to be on deck at a certain time, have the equipment needed and follow what is going on around them. This responsibility carried over into my life outside of the swimming pool. Being the oldest of seven children, of whom I and four others are being raised by a single father, leaves a great deal to be responsible for. With this trait instilled in me by the YMCA, I was able to bring it into my changing world. There have been hard times but the team and my coaches have been there the entire time.

The most influential person to impact my life through the YMCA was Jon Brenner. We were all there when he struggled through his brain cancer. I said good-bye and I love you two days before he passed away on January 31, 2010. We all felt as if we lost a part of us. I felt as though I lost not only a coach and mentor, but also a friend and father figure. But with loss there is renewal. Jon touched the lives of so many people. He gave them the values he embodied and would want all of us to share them with the world. I have been impacted by an angel who lives in every person who knew him. Through Jon Brenner and the YMCA, I have and will continue to live the core values of the YMCA.

Benji Gordon
Racine Family YMCA

Being a part of the YMCA and the South Eastern Aquatics swim team has shaped and impacted me and my life in many ways. I have learned that if something is difficult, you never give up. You push yourself through so you can get to where ever it is you

want to go, or what it is you want to achieve. Nothing important in life is achieved without effort or hard work. I have severe ADHD/mild Asperger's syndrome, and before I started swimming, it was very difficult for me to focus. I had a lot of trouble in school. SEAY has helped me to recognize that all individuals, regardless of age, height, or disability, are equally capable of achieving great things. SEAY has helped me to set and work towards long term goals both in and out of the pool. We swim and train on a daily basis and are always working to improve our personal best, as well as do our best for the team. Being a part of a team with a common goal has been very beneficial to me and has helped me through the confusing time that high school can be. I as an individual greatly appreciate the opportunities the sport has presented to me both as an individual and as part of a team. Swimming has created a haven for me by making a safe place to train in a friendly environment, with good coaching and fellow athletes that are easy to get along with. This as a whole has influenced me to become a better athlete, and to train harder, and to set and achieve goals both in and out of the pool on a daily basis. I did not swim competitively until high school, but this year I was able to achieve my goal of breaking my school's record for the 100 Breaststroke. I was also able to achieve my goal of being accepted to UW-Whitewater, where I will study geography. I hope to be able to open new doors as a college level athlete and extend my swimming career on the collegiate level, because I hope to swim on the team there. Through my YMCA swim team I have learned perseverance and determination, and the power of working towards goals. It is hard to imagine what my life would be like if I had not been a part of SEAY. I know it has helped to make my life much, much better and has taught me how to reach my dreams.

Betsy Otten
Sheboygan County YMCA

I have been involved in the YMCA my whole life. I have participated in various activities at the YMCA from basketball and gymnastics to girls' night out and the annual pancake days. Though the most influential way I have been involved at the YMCA has been through swimming. I started my first swim lesson as a baby in the parent tot class. After that I moved up to the regular lessons, the pee-wee swim team, and finally the regular swim team which I have been a part of since I was six years old. Being a part of this swim team has been a great experience with many fun memories. Additionally, being on the swim team has equipped me with life skills that I can use outside of the pool. Going through hours of practice, swimming thousands and thousands of yards, and spending weekends at swim meets has taught me the value of dedication and hard work. My coaches over the years have pushed me to become a better swimmer, and a better person. They have encouraged me to put my full effort forward, not only at meets, but at every practice, so I can become a better swimmer. I have been able to use this mindset of dedication in my life outside of swimming also. Responsibilities in taking care of my health and time management in education have been great benefits besides getting a best time. I was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at the age of four, and swimming my whole life has helped me keep my blood sugar under control and my body healthy. The hard work ethic I learned in swimming has been essential in my school work. I have learned to manage my time so I could keep a 3.86 GPA throughout high school and still participate in swimming. The YMCA has also given me my first job. I have become a lifeguard and swim instructor at my YMCA. Having a job, and specifically being a lifeguard, has taught me a new kind of responsibility. Having a job, not only doing something I love but also being able to share it with others, has been a blessing in a time when jobs are hard to find. Being involved in the YMCA has been a wonderful experience that has prepared me with skills that will help me be successful as I move on to college and the rest of my life.

Brian Key
Oshkosh Community YMCA

Ever since I can remember, I've always been told that I can achieve any dream because I control my own destiny. Although I've been taught this standard virtue for many years, it never seemed tangible for me until I became heavily involved in athletics. As a competitive swimmer since the fourth grade, the most daunting obstacle that prevented me from achieving my highest potential for many years was my weight and my lugubriously poor physical shape, as I wasn't born with the raw talent and high metabolisms that facilitate the astounding success of many athletes. However, I would soon learn that I could take control of my situation and become the best I could be through my own desire. My arduous journey as an OSHY swimmer towards my first YMCA Summer Nationals qualifying cut would completely transform me physically and mentally, proving to me forever that through hard work and dedication, anything can be possible, in athletics or in life, despite the worst of challenge and circumstance.

The road toward Nationals began when I first joined the Oshkosh YMCA Swim Team in fourth grade. Like most other young children about that age, I decided to join the sport just because it was something to do. At that point, I didn't have any visions of swimming grandeur, and the highest levels of achievement were unknown to me. However, even at such a young age, I was already starting to become morbidly overweight compared to everybody else, and my parents made sure that I stayed on the team just to ensure that my weight wouldn't get out of control. Because of my immense frame, I was never able to swim very fast or stand out at meets in my age group, and by all accounts I probably was one of the worst swimmers on the OSHY team. The culminating point of my swimming mediocrity came when my coaches decided to have me swim my first 100 yard

butterfly in a meet. The butterfly is arguably the most physically demanding stroke, so when I dove in the water and began my race, I immediately knew that my weak, overweight body would not be able to complete the full 100 yards. Therefore, after completing 75 yards and approaching the last wall, I decided that I was too physically exhausted to continue with the race, and I got out of the pool. I simply quit the race. It was an incredibly shaming moment for me and an unfortunate memory I still keep to this day. This event, however, was a great learning experience that taught me the negative outcomes of abandoned perseverance, thus helping to provide a substantial amount of fuel towards my transformation into a self-motivated, successful person.

As the next few years passed, my swimming skills improved substantially. Although the butterfly unexpectedly began to emerge as my premier stroke in an ironic twist of fate, I was still nowhere near the level of the elite swimmers and my obesity only continued to increase. Through it all, my YMCA head coach Jay Coleman served as the mentor and guide of my quest, providing me with the bulk of my motivation to move forward. His regular speeches inspired me to begin to dream of glory and greatness, as he preached that continuous hard work in practice would help us achieve our goals when it was time to swim our meets. Essentially, he taught us all that success was in our hands and that we could control the outcomes of our lives through our dedication to perfection. At some point, Jay also began to mention to me the possibilities of qualifying for the YMCA Summer Nationals meet in College Park, Maryland, and how I could rise to be in the ranks of the most elite swimmers in the state and the country. At that point, those statements were far off and intangible fantasies. However, those “fantasies” would eventually help to drive me to greatness when the turning point of my quest arrived.

During the spring break of my seventh grade year, my journey towards my first YMCA Summer Nationals would be forever changed. Throughout that break from school, I ate excessively and was completely idle. By the end of the break, I topped out at a whopping 200 pounds, spread across an overburdened 68 inch frame. When I got back to the pool, everyone noticed that my weight was getting out of control, and I was ashamed of myself just by looking in the mirror as stretch marks began to accompany the expanding rolls of fat. However, Jay stepped in and suggested that I begin to work out a little bit extra on my own at the YMCA through a regular running routine. Although I was a terrible runner at the time, I completely bought into his advice because I was in desperate need of losing weight just to gain my self confidence back. Over the next few months, on the days that I didn't have swim practice, I began to run increasingly longer distances, from one, to two, and finally to three miles. Throughout this process, I lost a good 20 pounds, and as my self-confidence began to restore itself, I began to relive the visions of swimming glory that I had in the past. However, the majority of my metamorphosis came when the transformation itself was almost lost.

The most devastating moment of my quest came as a result of a football injury in the fall of my eighth grade year. I broke my middle finger and was forced to take six weeks out of the pool due to the metal pins that were surgically installed to correct the injury. Even though I could have exiled myself into my room and my pantry as I had in the past, Jay advised me that I should exile myself into the YMCA's weight room, giving me workouts so that I would run three to four miles while doing a full weight lifting routine every single day of the week. It was an extremely grueling six weeks, and as I saw my fellow teammates swimming in the pool I questioned if I would fall behind them. However, as the days passed, my fitness increased and my weight decreased. After the six weeks was up and I got back in the pool, I continued to do the dry-land routines that had paid off so well in my self-imposed exile. By the time winter came around, I was a completely transformed person. I couldn't even recognize myself anymore, and everyone else who had known me for so many years couldn't either. After only about nine months after I topped out in the spring break of my seventh grade year, I had lost 60 pounds to weigh a total of 140 pounds by the winter of my eighth grade year. I was now ready to live the dreams of swimming grandeur that I had envisioned for so long. By the time I began swimming meets again with OSHY, I was substantially faster than I ever was before, and people began to take notice of my great strides. As my times kept improving exponentially, Jay and I began to talk seriously for the first time about qualifying for Nationals. He suggested that I train more exclusively for the 200 yard butterfly, as the National cut for that event seemed to be the most within my grasp at the time. At first, I thought that his idea was utterly absurd since I was the boy infamous for not even being able to complete a 100 yard butterfly. However, I took his word for it, and as the weeks and months progressed, my butterfly stroke began to take its full form as I became increasingly stronger. I even began to swim several of the notorious morning practices at 5:15 AM almost every other day to help facilitate my improvement. Once the summer came, it was finally time for me to start swimming 200 butterflies in meets to attempt to qualify for Nationals. My teammates, knowing that I was on the verge of having my biggest breakthrough yet, made sure to encourage me throughout the way and to cheer for me during all my qualifying attempts. During the summer, I only had the opportunity of swimming the 200 butterfly a few times, and during the first few I did not make the cut, missing by only fractions of a second. At the time, it was very devastating for me. However, at the last chance possible during a seemingly insignificant and small meet in July, my entire team cheered me on as I mustered up the strength to finally qualify for Nationals in the 200 butterfly. Only a little over a year after I topped out at 200 pounds and decided to change the course of my life forever, I qualified for my first YMCA Summer Nationals meet in College Park, Maryland, cementing myself as an elite swimmer on a national level.

Through it all, the chief lesson that I learned from the experience of losing 60 pounds and qualifying for my first YMCA Summer Nationals meet was that we, as human beings, are completely in control of who we are, what we are, and what we can do when we decide to be dedicated to hard work, regardless of the circumstances. I wasn't given an easy card in life, as I wasn't blessed with many of the natural talents with which so many others are born. Nevertheless, I made a conscientious decision to

better myself and to rise above who I was in the past so that I could achieve my dreams and goals. Along the way, I had a lot of external help as well, especially through Jay and my OSHY teammates, that helped motivate me through the most treacherous segments of my quest to help me climb to the highest peaks of my career. However, through my decision and through the self-confidence I gained on my journey, I was able to transform into an individual passionate for excellence in all areas of life, not just exclusively in athletics and fitness, but also for other areas such as scholastics.

In regards to my academics, I believe that the transformation caused by my YMCA swimming career directly impacted my transformation into an eager student passionate about learning. Where I wasn't naturally gifted in the pool, I was blessed with academic talents, and from an early age I always got good grades and was placed in more advanced programs and classes than the rest of my class. However, school was just a chore for me, and I just didn't seem to enjoy the process of learning. After my transformation, I began to see academics in a new light. With my new commitment to excellence, I realized that success in the classroom was directly related to the amount of effort I put into my studies. Thus, as I began to put more effort into my studies, I became more passionate about my academic ventures. Soon I would become one of the most active and engaging students in my classes, always making sure to state my opinion in a certain topic to facilitate intellectual discussion. Through it all, school became more enjoyable to me as I continued to be increasingly passionate and open in my discussions, and as my passion for school increased, my grades would follow upwards as well. I can honestly say that just as I am excited to go work out at the YMCA every day to continue to improve fitness-wise and strive for my swimming goals, I am just as excited to go to school every day, eager to learn about new topics and new points of view, always ready to actively engage in class discussion and to voice my opinion.

Many years have passed since I made my first YMCA Summer Nationals cut, and since then I have qualified for even bigger meets, as I have improved leaps and bounds from where I was when I first qualified. This fall, I will be setting out on a completely different path when I move off to Claremont, California and completely renew my life as I journey towards a higher education at Claremont McKenna College. However, what I took from the experience will last me a lifetime. No matter what I do for the rest of my life, I will always know that despite the journey I may take, I will always be able to achieve whatever my heart desires through my dedication and hard work. Therefore, even if the most daunting obstacles stand before me, I know that I will be able to annihilate them through my own power. Life may be one gargantuan quest, and throughout the way we will undoubtedly be compelled to face daunting obstructions on our paths. However, because I have tread my own great journey, I know this simple fact with unquestionable certainty: the future is in our hands.

Brooke Reynolds
La Crosse YMCA

Respect, Responsibility, Caring, and Honesty: the YMCA core values have had a large impact on my life ever since I started YMCA swimming at age nine. My involvement at the YMCA has been an amazing learning experience, and I have met so many people and created lifelong memories. Everyone involved with the La Crosse YMCA swim team works so hard to reach a common goal while carrying out all of the core values.

One of the most influential people in my life was my YMCA swim coach, Jon Brenner. He was the definition of the core values stated above, the most amazing and selfless person I have ever known. His calm nature and quiet leadership inspired me to become more open and break out of my comfort zone. His strength and kind-hearted spirit were such an inspiration not just to me, but everyone on the swim team. Jon was the person that was always there supporting me and answering all of my questions during practice and meets. I loved seeing him running along the pool deck, talking to the little kids and doing what he loved.

Although Jon was diagnosed with brain cancer in August 2008, he continued to coach and inspire others for as long as he could. He created a family within the swim team and was such a positive influence for everyone. Jon was honored as the La Crosse Tribune Person of the Year in 2008 for his unlimited dedication to the La Crosse community and youth. His story was made national when "The Today Show" featured him in March, 2009. Jon made it a priority to attend his last national championships in April 2009, where the YMCA named him National Swim Coach of the Year. By having Jon as a coach, I have been able to grow as an athlete and a young woman. It is hard to put into words the impact Jon has made on my life and how much better of a person I am because of him. Jon passed away on January 31st, 2010; he is still my hero in so many ways and will forever be an inspiration to all who had known him.

As I finish my final year of my high school and YMCA swimming, I value all the time I've spent with this wonderful community. I have had overwhelming support from my family and friends, and I enjoy spending two hours almost everyday with people who are constantly striving to become the best they can be. My coaches' ability to relate to their athletes and constant encouragement helped me persevere through those rigorous practices and emotional times. I was always taught to strive to be my best and not focus on the competition around me; this concept has had a large impact on my constant improvement through the years. Swimming for the YMCA has been the only sport where everyone is treated equally no matter what abilities you have or what family you come from. Jon made it his focus for everyone to treat each other with caring and respect, and that is why YMCA swimming has become such an important part of my life. I'm confident that the lessons I have learned through the YMCA will carry through with me to college.

Cassie Matthys
YMCA of Delta County

The YMCA has been a part of my life since I can remember. I often joke that I practically live there because I spend all of my time at the YMCA, between swim practices and working as a lifeguard and swim lesson instructor. But most importantly the YMCA's fundamental values of honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility have influenced and shaped me into the person I am today.

The deep rooted values of the YMCA are exemplified by all the people I have met at the YMCA. The members, coaches, instructors and countless staff members have all set the examples of honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility for me as I was growing up. Through their example I learned how to be a better person, work with others, and have a positive attitude. The best example would be from the older swimmers on my team. From a young age I always looked up to the high school swimmers and it made me realize that one day I would be able to set the example for the younger children. The older swimmers had a passion for swimming, good sportsmanship, the YMCA values, and having fun that I wanted to emulate when I got older.

From their example I can only hope that my influence when working with the younger swimmers will be as encouraging and as influential as when I was younger. I never really realized until this year how infectious a positive attitude can be to younger swimmers whether it is while I am teaching swim lessons or working with the younger swimmers on my team. An optimistic attitude is contagious and my enthusiasm and love for swimming can be spread to them. They seem to feed off the positive energy and do their best when you give them encouragement. I realized that the YMCA has given me the skills and values to confidently influence the children that I work with. To me the YMCA stands for a place for children to try new things in a positive environment that encourages their growth as a person and their physical fitness. I am so glad that I was able to be in programs at the YMCA that lead me to be a well rounded person through developing my skills with honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility.

The opportunities to volunteer at the YMCA have ignited a passion to volunteer in my community, school and in other countries. I started volunteering at the YMCA when I was thirteen with swim lessons. At first it was just because my little brother was in lessons and I was there at the same time, but I grew to love working with the children. I realized that I could share my talents with kids and watch them develop into confident swimmers. I loved watching their excitement to get in the pool and swim, this excitement made it all worthwhile to volunteer. Through working with swim lessons I began to understand all the personal rewards of giving back to my community. This opportunity to volunteer influenced me to join service clubs in my school, community and to go on a mission trip to Honduras.

Through service groups I have been able to meet many new people that enjoy volunteering as much as I do. I have learned so much through all these projects and grown immensely as a person. I am very fortunate to have been able to have the opportunity to get involved with volunteering at the YMCA at a young age and discovering how great of an asset volunteerism is to me.

As I go on to study Biology and swim at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point I will bring along the values of honesty, caring, respect, and responsibility that have been instilled in me through the YMCA. The YMCA's strong impact on my life has influenced me beyond the YMCA to strive to be the best that I can be.

Connor Franta
La Crosse YMCA Wave Swim Team

Nine years ago I started swimming for the YMCA Wave Swim Team. At the time, I enjoyed swimming, but wasn't very good at it. My mom signed me and my friend up for the swim team thinking it would be a fun way to get active and meet new people. I didn't have many friends and wasn't the fittest person either at the time. The YMCA changed that. It has made me a better person. Even today as a senior in high school, I still learn new things at the YMCA and am better prepared for my future. Not a day goes by when I'm not thankful for all the YMCA has done for me.

Getting involved in swimming has completely changed my life. I've learned countless life lessons and made so many lasting friends and memories. My coaches teach me to work hard to achieve my goals. They use the YMCA's four core values – caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility – to teach us how to be productive, decent people in the world around us. They tell me to never give up and to keep trying until I succeed. During swim sets when I'm exhausted and want to quit, they never let me. They tell me that I can work harder. My coach Eric loves it when he gives us a very difficult swim set and we respond with, "is that all you've got?" Just voicing it makes me want to work harder to make him proud.

I've made numerous lifelong friends through swimming. We have fun in everything we do and are always there for each other. Even though we all go to different schools, I consider them to be my best and closest friends. None of that would be possible without the YMCA. It has brought all of us together, my coaches, my friends, and me. Swimming itself wouldn't be possible for me without the YMCA. I don't have a pool in or anywhere near my high school, but the YMCA provides an excellent one for me. I cherish it and am very grateful to have it.

Not only has the YMCA helped me in my past and present, but it has also helped with my future. I have learned to set goals for myself and to not let anything get in the way of me achieving them. I now use the YMCA's four core values in my everyday life. I also use my newfound knowledge of fitness and health in making decisions that will better my body for the future. The experiences I have had through the YMCA are life-changing and will forever be a part of who I am. I use them now and will continue to use them when I am older.

The YMCA has impacted my life in so many ways. It has brought me friendship, taught me to be caring, honest, respectful, and responsible, and kept me active and healthy. It has guided me through my adolescence and into my adulthood with its four core values in mind. The friends I have made are the best one could want and I am very thankful for them. The experiences I have had are amazing. The YMCA has made me a better person in my past and present and will continue to play a role in my future.

Douglas Olson
La Crosse YMCA

The YMCA has played a very significant role in my development of caring for others, responsibility, honesty and respect. I started swimming with the Y when I was ten years old. My cousin swam and told me how much fun she was having, so I joined the team too. Little did I know that that my decision to have some fun would lead me through a life time's worth of failures, achievements and most of all love. My coach, Jon Brenner, taught me that you should not just care for your best of friends, but to care for everyone no matter what. He also showed me through his own actions that everyone deserves kindness. Jon always brightened your day by asking you how your day had gone. Whether it had gone badly or well, he always gave you some well thought out advice. His caring character really showed me that everyone needs someone to care for them.

While on the WAVE swim team I also learned a lot about responsibility. Since I was just a ten year old on the team it was always my responsibility to make sure I turned in my entries for the meets into the drop box. Sometimes I would forget being the forgetful kid I was, and I would have to call my coaches and let them know that I would turn in my entries the next day I came to practice. Even today I sometimes forget to turn in my entries, so I call up my coach and let him know that I will email him my entries as soon as I can. I remember my first swim meet that I went to that they did not have a clerk of course. My mom kept reminding me to make sure I paid attention to what event they were swimming in the pool. Today, my mother no longer has to keep reminding me when I swim. Now it is me reminding her before I go behind the blocks that I am swimming soon. My participation in the YMCA has allowed me to become a responsible adult even with a few memory problems here and there.

Honesty is probably the most important trait anyone could have. The Y has taught me this. My first year on the swim team I learned this important fact. When it came down to the end of the season and my coach was putting together relays for the end of the year, I remember getting pulled out of the water to talk to Coach Jon about which relay I would be on. He told me that relays were not set in stone yet and that I had to keep working and not just rest on my laurels. Looking back I was glad that my coach was honest with me because it allowed me to stay focused on my goal of swimming as fast as I could when the time came. Even to this day I rely on my coaches to be completely honest with me on how well they think I am progressing with my technique and endurance.

I have learned too many things from the YMCA while swimming to even count. Respect is one that lies near to my heart. Without having respect for my coaches and believing in what they tell me to be true I would be nowhere. I go to every practice and listen to the workouts my coaches give me with aptitude because I respect that they are only trying to make me a better swimmer. When I first joined the Senior Training Group I remember being a little intimidated by my coach. He was this tall bald guy that was pretty scary looking. His name is Coach Eric. Just kidding, he really was not that scary, but I still had the nervous jitters on my first day of practice with him. Now the "tall, bald, and scary" coach is like a second father to me. He respected me from the first day which allowed me to respect him too. Now, I see going to practice as a relief, knowing that he will be there to talk and listen. He really brings our entire senior group together as a family. Coach Eric taught us all to respect each other and because of this I am most grateful. Though the YMCA has taught me many things, the things that will stick with me the most are their own core values: caring, responsibility, honesty, and respect.

Emilie Klos
La Crosse YMCA

How has being a part of the YMCA impacted my life?

The prompt asks for a “short essay” explaining how being involved with the YMCA has impacted my life. To be completely honest, I could go on for days about all of the amazing things the YMCA has done for me. To attempt to put into words within a page or two will not do justice to how strongly I feel about the YMCA and everything it stands for. However, a very wise man, and old friend of mine once told me “I hope that you give 110% in everything that you do, because otherwise, it is simply not worth doing.” The man who brought these words of wisdom that I strive to live by into by life was Jon Brenner. So, here goes nothing.

I started swimming with the YMCA 10 years ago, when I was only 8 years old. As the chubby, tall girl, I never had much self confidence or sense of self worth; after trying virtually every other sport available to me and quitting, I never expected to stick with swimming. As a beginner I was anything but a natural, but Jon never made me feel like I was less than any of the other kids; to him I was an essential part to the success of the team. I can honestly say that if I had been swimming with any team other than the La Crosse YMCA Wave I would have thrown in the towel a long time ago, but Jon’s ability to teach us to be better athletes and people through the YMCA core values and love kept me coming back for more. For me, swimming with the Y was never about being the fastest person in the pool. I proved that the year all of my friends were moved up to the senior training group, and I was left behind to spend another year in Junior Elites. Although at the time it seemed like a major roadblock, in hindsight I can see that it was a huge turning point for me. It would have been so easy for me to quit that year, but I didn’t. It was the first time in my life that I really worked hard for something that I wanted. That year taught me how to perseverer, believe in myself, and also how to make new friends. The beginning of that year taught me how to fail, while the end of it taught me how to succeed, when I finally got moved up to the senior training group the summer before my freshman year of high school. I never imagined that during my first year as a senior I would have enough motivation to actually want to go to practice 5 days a week, or that I would be on a relay with my 3 best friends from the team that would qualify us to swim at nationals. I owe most of that success to my team, coaches, and the YMCA for creating an environment for me to thrive in, and for allowing me to grow into a self confident, and aware young woman.

Living in the moment, and appreciating what you have. It seems so simple, doesn’t it? For me, it wasn’t. When Jon got sick, it was impossible for me to imagine swimming without him; and at first all I could do was think “What if?” a question that has no answer, and leads to anger and frustration. During his last year I tried to take in as much of his grace, and positive outlook on life as I could, all the while being fully aware that soon there would come a time when he wouldn’t be physically with us. What I did not know at the time was that Jon left a little part of him with every person he encountered, and that he is indeed with me each and everyday. Jon still is and will continue to be a mentor to me. Sometimes after a particularly rough day I find myself literally thinking “WWJD?” what would Jon do? Jon created more than just a team at the La Crosse Y; he created a family. Above all, I respect my teammates, they are the greatest people that I know, and I am so grateful that the YMCA was able to bring us together from different schools and states. After coming to terms with the initial sadness that came from Jon’s death, I can now look back with a smile. It seems only natural for me to want to celebrate how fortunate I was to have someone like Jon in my life for so long, and I consider myself to be extraordinarily lucky. Now, a little more than a year after his death, there are still days when I can not help but wonder, “why?” What I have learned from this experience is that it is okay to be sad, but also that it is okay to be happy. There has not been a single day since January 31, 2010 that I didn’t think about Jon, and everything that he and the YMCA have taught me; every time I look at my wrist and see the blue “For Jon” band that I wear everyday I am reminded to strive to live my life a little better in and outside of the pool. Forty years from now I might not remember what my fastest split ever in the fifty free was, but I am positive that I will remember everything the YMCA has taught me about friendships, hard work, acceptance, and the core values. I try to live my life now in honor and remembrance of the greatest person I have ever known. I would like to thank the YMCA for bringing him into my life and for molding me into the young woman that I am proud to be today.

Jacob Thomas Hegge
La Crosse Area Family YMCA

Respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring; these are the four words by which I live my life by. I started swimming for the YMCA when I was nine years old. The only reason I started swimming for the YMCA was because I was very uncoordinated and couldn’t really do anything else. I still remember my first day at practice; I wore a pair of swim trunks and no goggles. I was really upset because I had to swim with the “little kids.” I was extremely embarrassed when I got in the water for the first time. I was being overlapped by kids who were two to three years younger than I. I couldn’t believe it! After my first practice was over, I decided I was never going to go back to that place. But let me tell you, I’m glad I did. Swimming for the YMCA has changed my life. The YMCA has taught me the importance of friendship, teamwork, and leadership. I owe all of this to the man who made it possible, Jon Brenner. I met Jon at my first day of practice. Because of Jon, I found my passion for competitive swimming. Not only did Jon show me my passion for swimming, but he showed me the importance of life. Most importantly, Jon taught me how to love: love my team, my family, my community, and my friends. He not only showed this to me, but to the whole Wave Swim Team. Jon lived by the core values of the YMCA. Competitively swimming for the YMCA has had a huge

impact on my life. It has taught to dream big and that anything is possible. Nine years ago, I never would have thought I would be the swimmer I am today. But because of the YMCA, I dreamt big; now this being my last YMCA state meet, I have the YMCA to thank for making me believe that possessing the qualities of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring, dreams do come true.

Jillian DeLong
Manitowoc/Two Rivers YMCA

Confidence

Stroking, kicking, splashing are all components of swimming. But what some people don't know is that there are other things that make up swimming also. Being on swim team has impacted my life in many ways. But the one thing that has impacted my life the most is confidence. Having confidence has really given me the ability to make choices in my life without fear. Some of the choices I have made without fear is being able to choose the longer distance events, what I want to do when I go to college, and being able to make decisions.

When I choose to swim the longer distances and when I finished them I said to myself you just did that without any fear. When my coach first put me in the 400 IM I cried. I'm not going to lie I did. I cried like a baby and I hadn't even swum the race yet. When I finished the race I was so astonished that I actually did it that I wanted to do it the very next meet because I like it. That race allowed me to expand to all sorts of other races. It gave me the confidence to go out and try events like the 200 fly and the 500 free without fear. Yes, it was a relief when I finished but it felt so good to accomplish something that I thought I couldn't do. And it gave other members on my team confidence to also try new events.

Another way confidence has impacted my life is that I was able to choose a college that I was comfortable with. When I first started looking at colleges I was fearful that I wouldn't make the right choice for me and I would go where all of my friends were going. Well that didn't happen. When it came to applying I didn't apply where all of my friends were applying too. I applied to where I wanted to go. I did what was right for me. Having that confidence that swim team gave me helped in my decision to just do what was right for me. Because that is all that a person can do. I have made my decision of where I want to go and I am perfectly happy with that decision because I know that I can that school can help me keep and expand the confidence swim team gave.

I have always had a hard time making decisions in my life. With being on swim team these past ten years I have been able to make more and more decisions about my life with each year passing and that is because swim team has given me that boost of confidence. When a person is younger their mom and dad make their decisions but as a person gets older their mom and dad keep pushing more and more of the decisions on them until they are the ones making all of the decisions. And it has all most come to that point in my life and I need all of the confidence I can get. I know that I am going to be okay because swim team has given me that. When I make a decision now I am using the confidence that it has given me. For example choosing my prom dress and whether or not I should skip practice and hang out with my friends. Which has never happened. I am using my confidence to its fullest potential when I am making decisions. And as I get older my decisions are just going to get harder and harder and I'm going to look back and say swim team got me through these tough times. If it hadn't been for swim team I don't know how my confidence level would be.

All in all swim team gave me the boost of confidence that my life needed. And I am thankful for that.

Julie Oates
La Crosse YMCA

As a child I was what lifeguards at the Aquatic Center I work at now call a 'pool rat'. To earn this title is not a hard task. All you had to do is be at the pool, from the time the gates opened and the first whistle was blown, signaling that it's ok for you to jump in, until the time they kicked you out at closing time. During the summer, that's where you could always find me. Eventually I was forced to hang up my suit as the cool air of fall rolled around. Seeing my disappointment, my mother started searching for things to occupy my time in the winter months. It wasn't long until she found something, the La Crosse YMCA Swim Team. The year I joined I was only 9 years old, and I was excited to join something as awesome and big as the La Crosse YMCA Swim team. I was also very nervous. The first day I was as nervous as ever, but soon the smiles of my new team mates and the overwhelming positive attitudes of the coaches put my nerves to rest. I then made countless friends that I still swim with to this day, and still share many laughs during our long and grueling practices.

After swimming for a couple years on the swim team, I decided to look into other things that the Y had to offer. My parents and I decided that Log Rolling would be a blast for me, and it was! I had the greatest time, and I soon found even more friends. A couple years after that, I decided to look into the possibility of becoming a lifeguard. I was nervous of the thought of having to be the one to watch over numerous kids while they laugh and splash around, knowing at any moment they could go under, and I would be the one to grab them. But, I did it anyways, and now have no regrets. This will be my third year life guarding at the Aquatic Center in Whitehall, and the pride and sense of accomplishment is overwhelming when you know you've helped someone. This also encouraged me to get my WSI certification to try and encourage younger kids to swim and keep swimming.

This past summer I took on the challenge of the Girl Scout Gold Award, this is the highest achievement a Girl Scout can receive. It entails a service project that is done and organized by you. It also requires a minimum of 65 hours that has to be logged during your project and also the supervision of a non family member. As I looked into options, I finally picked one that I thought would be beneficial to both myself and the kids I would be working with. My project was a summer program instigating exercise while still having fun. While preparing my project I was nervous about having the responsibility of having to instruct kids, and also to try and be a role model for them. While thinking about this I looked back at some of the role models I had. The biggest ones that came to mind, besides my family, were my swim coaches. I then thought to myself about how much I respected them, and how their teambuilding and leadership skills all revolved around the core values of the YMCA. In coming to this conclusion, I decided to incorporate the core values of the YMCA as much as I could into my Gold Award project.

As with the many things I've done in my life and what I hope to accomplish, I have two families to call home. My family of parents and siblings is my first home, but also my second family that I acquired at the age of nine, the La Crosse YMCA to thank for my accomplishments. I thank everyone who has impacted my life through the Y, and everyone else who impacts the lives of others through the YMCA.

Kelly McCommons

Marquette County Killer Whales Swim Team

The cold winter wind blows. I'm on my way to the pool. "Why I am doing this?" I wonder. Having to do 4,000 to 7,000 yards a day, determination is a must. Every day over and over again, back and forth only to drop fractions of a second at a time.

When the cold water hits my face, I am reminded how swimming has impacted me. I must focus my effort and energy for success. This focus will help me with other things in life. Keeping away from constant negative influences has put my life on the right track. Whether it's in a classroom or in a pool, I have the determination to fully reach my goals and to excel in whatever I do. I'm guided by our coaches and the core values of the YMCA. Being the oldest member on the Y team others look up to me. One person on team who looks up to me is younger brother. He has high functioning autism. Before joining the Y team, he didn't have a strong social group to interact with. I was impressed with how quickly his teammates accepted him as a swimmer instead of a special needs kid. Through the Y team he has flourished beyond my expectations and wishes for him. Now, with us both being swimmers, we talk and speak the same swimming language. It has brought us closer together. He now has a positive group of friends who always say hi to him and respect him for being a swimmer. He has fun with his friends during practice or between events at a meet.

My brother has encouraged me to do my best in the sport. When I'm having a bad meet, he makes sure I am okay. When I'm swimming well, he usually swims well too. When we are doing a hard set in practice, I am the first one to complain and fudge my way out of the set. But then I glance over to my brother who is doing the same workout looking at me as if saying, "Why are you not doing this?" This makes me feel guilty. I then ask myself, "Is this honestly the best I can do?" It reminds me that I must be a role model not just for him, but for all the swimmers around. And of course he always likes to point out when he's swimming better than me.

As a high school freshman, I barely knew the basic strokes. I nearly quit after the first practice. But after a few months I improved and realized that swimming could be a lifelong sport. The difference between high school and the Y are the younger swimmers. I like the younger kids, they keep me on my toes because I know they are watching and looking for me to lead and teach. I always give positive encouragement. They will be the ones who will eventually surpass me. It's a great feeling inside when a parent or grandparent comes up and thanks me for interacting with their child.

Swimming for the Y has shaped me as a person. Whether it is helping motivate someone to do better on an off day, or inviting them to ride with my family to a meet, I know that helping others is a good way to show respect. It is my responsibility to help. The Y team is like a second family.

The other half of our team is located in Houghton MI, just about 100 miles north. And even though the distance is great, we have a bond. It is great seeing the Houghton members at meets and catching up with them in the team area where all the families wait between events. It is nice to sit and chat with each other without political or social boundaries. This may not always happen outside the pool. This interaction is true with team members and their families. Age doesn't matter, neither do their abilities. We are part of one team. The YMCAs core values as taught by our coaches is the bond that we all share.

Melissa Hileman
Marshfield Area YMCA

Since moving to Marshfield, WI, my life has revolved around the local YMCA. The summer I turned eight I became a part of the Sharks Swim Team, learning from a young age the importance of teamwork, respect for the coach and teammates, and dedication towards the sport to achieve goals. At age sixteen I became a lifeguard, and I learned about responsibility and work ethic. A year later I was also employed at the same YMCA as a swim instructor, gaining the opportunity of passing on the four core values, honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring, to children. The YMCA has impacted my life by ingraining in me all the values I have today, and allowing me to pass those values on to younger children.

Swimming became my passion at the age of eight, and taught me the values of teamwork, respect, and dedication. Often, swimming is viewed as an individual sport, but anyone in swimming knows that is far from the truth. Swimming involves spending hours training with the team as well as attending meets with the team almost every weekend. The people on the swim team become your closest friends and your fiercest competitors, forming a second family. And through this teamwork everyone comes to respect one another and the coach becomes like a second father or mother, encouraging hard work, applauding a new best time, feeling the disappointment from a disqualified swim, and cheers on all the swimmers no matter what their skill level is. The coach provides an opportunity for the swimmers to become dedicated to the sport, continually pushing the swimmers limit, and allowing them to learn how to achieve their goals. Through being part of the YMCA and the swim team, I have been able to learn teamwork, respect, and the dedication that eventually leads to achieving goals.

As a lifeguard, responsibility and respect have become two important principles in my life. Lifeguards are responsible for the lives of the patrons in the pool, including the chemical levels of the pool as well as to be constantly aware in case someone begins to struggle while swimming. Part of the responsibility of being a lifeguard includes keeping up to date with your certifications, as well as attending staff meetings once a month, teaching me the importance of organization as being a part of responsibility. Through lifeguarding I have also learned the significance of respect because if you do not respect others, they will not respect you. Without respect, rules cannot be enforced and followed, and patrons' lives become endangered. Lifeguarding instilled in me responsibility, and further enforced the importance of respect in any situation, and will assist me with adjusting to college life as well as in my future profession, impacting me for the rest of my life.

When I became a swim instructor, I was able to pass on my passion for swimming, as well as the four core values of the YMCA, respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring, to children. Swim instructing impacted my life by being given the chance to share with children the joy of swimming, and the ecstasy of learning a new stroke. Also, I had the opportunity of sharing all that I had learned from being a part of the YMCA with the children, ingraining in them honesty, respect for their classmates and their teacher, responsibility to themselves to try their hardest, and caring towards others. Teaching swim lessons gave me the chance to impact other peoples' lives by passing on everything that the YMCA had taught me.

Being involved in the YMCA has impacted my life by instilling in me all the values that are important to me now, as well as important values for college as well as in any career. I learned about teamwork, respect, responsibility, dedication, and was able to pass on my knowledge to children. The values will follow me throughout my life, impacting my decisions so that I will do the best I can in any situation.

Michelle Schindel
Oshkosh YMCA

I joined the YMCA at seven years old when I became a member of the Oshkosh YMCA Swim Team. The YMCA has made a tremendous impact on my life, but in a way I did not foresee when I was younger.

I originally thought the YMCA would help make me a great swimmer, and I would reap all the accolades that would go with achieving swimming glory. This was the path I was on until my freshman year in high school. Then things did not go as planned. First my swimming results hit a plateau. What came to me easily before became a struggle. Next I started to see my swim results go on a downward spiral. It was frustrating and demoralizing to me. I saw the younger swimmers surpass me. It was extremely difficult to continue coming to the YMCA to swim.

I thought often about just giving up and quitting the YMCA and the swim team. I had a lot on my plate. I had a part time job. I volunteered at a hospital. I had a pile of school work every night. Then I started really thinking what the YMCA was all about.

The YMCA taught me perseverance; I should not quit just because the going gets tough. The YMCA taught me to be the best I could be; all I can do is put forth my best effort. The YMCA gave me a sense of history and belonging. As I swam my last 100 X 100 challenge this year, I relished the sense of accomplishment when I finished. As I swim my last swim meet this month, I am not going to worry about my times but rather celebrate my 11 years of competitive swimming and the fact that I never gave up. I credit the YMCA with giving me this perspective, and I am thankful for the lessons learned at the YMCA. This learning that will guide me for the rest of my life.

Michelle Straub
Woodson YMCA

The YMCA has had a huge impact on my life and has made me who I am today. The YMCA has basically been my second home my whole life. I have participated in many activities that are offered there and I absolutely love being at the YMCA almost every day. When I was little I went to child care at the YMCA during the school year when my parents were at work. During the summer I went to Chicken Little Summer Camp in the mornings. I also participated in swimming lessons and gymnastics when I was younger. In first grade I joined the Green Dolphins Swim Team which is where I have spent most of my time, and the part of the Y that has had the most impact in my life.

As I got older I volunteered at the YMCA at many events which has been a great experience for me. In seventh, eighth and ninth grade I volunteered at the Chicken Little Summer Camp as a Junior Counselor. This opportunity really helped me decide that I wanted to work with kids in my future job and it was so much fun playing with the kids. I also have volunteered for the past three years at the annual Father-Daughter Dance in February. I always look forward to seeing all the cute girls in their beautiful dresses and their hair done. It reminds me of what a special day it was for my dad and me for so many years. I couldn't wait to go out to eat and to the Father Daughter Dance with my dad. Volunteering is a great thing for everyone to do and I'm very glad the YMCA gave me the opportunity to give back to my community and donate my time by helping at these events.

When I turned 16 I got a job as a lifeguard and swim instructor at the YMCA. Currently I teach lessons three days a week. It is so great to watch the kids learn and grow as a swimmer and share my joy of swimming with them. I teach lessons for all ages from the Pike class of four year olds, up to the Shark class where they are swimming laps. It is an amazing job to have and I love going to work every day. This swim season I also started coaching for the swim team orange squad which is the youngest squad on the team. Just like swimming lessons, I love seeing them get so excited about swimming and want to keep swimming just like I did. I hope they all stick with it through high school like I did.

The one thing that has had the most impact on my life was swimming with the Green Dolphin Swim Team at the YMCA. I went through all the squads on swim team from Green squad to Gold. Swimming is where I learned most about who I am and how to be a better person. Swimming is what I have loved to do all my life and it will continue to be a hobby for me and stay with me forever. The Green Dolphins is where I am able to be myself through the respect everyone has for each other and the common bond of the love of swimming. I have had so many great coaches that I will always remember that kept me loving swimming all this time. These coaches have helped me come out of my shell and be who I am as a person and a swimmer. I always looked up to the coaches with great respect and took any advice they gave me about swimming or anything in life. Swimming has taught me numerous things about life such as dedication, time management and of course the four core values of the YMCA, respect, honesty, responsibility and caring. As I grew older and I got more homework I had to learn how to budget my time and be responsible with my school work as well as be at practice and show my dedication to the team. I used any time I had at school to finish homework so I had less to do after swim practice. School was obviously my first priority, but I managed my time very well so I would easily have time for both school and swimming. Being on a team got me the social skills I have today and the way I respect other people I am working with. I have learned that to have a successful group of people, everyone deserves respect and it's very important to work as a team. During swimming we worked together during practice to get through tough sets. At swim meets we always cheered each other on and supported everyone if they had their best race or worst race. After spending so much time at swimming, the swim team became my second family. My friends on the team were all from different high schools around the area, but those people became my closest friends. We all bonded in a special way and those are people I will for sure keep in touch with for many years to come. I have also learned hard work and dedication. Swimming is not an easy sport and I fought through a lot of hard workouts because I knew that was going to make me faster and stronger. I also knew it was important to come to practice every day even if I wasn't really feeling like going that day. I made a commitment to the team and I always planned on keeping that. And usually after I left swim practice I was in a much better mood and swimming allowed me to relive any stress I had from the day. I am going to be sad to leave the Green Dolphin swim team, but I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to be part of something so great that has made me who I am today. The YMCA is an amazing organization that I am so happy to have been a part of for all my life. I absolutely love to swim and having not been part of the YMCA swim team, I probably would not have stuck with it for so long. The YMCA as a whole has made me who I am today and I will always remember that as I start college and begin my future. Thank you YMCA!

Nathan Cox

Rite Hite YMCA in Brown Deer

YMCA and Me

The YMCA has impacted my life in so many different ways. Starting from when I was a little kid and going to daycare at the Y or getting a little older and going to summer camp. I basically grew up at the Y because of my dad working there. The YMCA has given me the opportunity to meet so many great people, and also meet some of my really good friends. The YMCA has also given me all the tools to better myself and improve my way of life.

The YMCA has affected my life in the largest way with my diving. I have been training at the YMCA for 4 years now even though I've been around the pool my whole life. Before I started training at the YMCA I never knew how far I could go with diving; training there has made me realize the potential I have with it. While I have been training there I have been able to win the WIAA state diving championship twice. Also in my time training there I have won YMCA national titles on the 1 meter and 3 meter springboards. Without the YMCA I don't think I would have ever realized my potential or been able to take my diving to the collegiate level. Through my diving I have also met some of my best friends in the world and pretty much became part of a family with my team.

I know that I will be a lifelong member of the YMCA because of all the tools that it has to make me better in every way. The YMCA has already given me so much and this scholarship would just add to the long list of ways the YMCA has benefited my life. I know as long as the YMCA is here I will be using it to improve my way of life.

Ross Wise

La Crosse YMCA

Being on The Wave Swim Team has benefited my life in numerous ways. It has taught me how to live my life according to the YMCA core values. It has also taught me how to accomplish my goals with hard work and dedication. I also have friends I will keep for a long time that I met while swimming. I can honestly say I would not be the person I am today if it wasn't for the YMCA.

Honesty, caring, responsibility, and respect are values I try and live my life by. I try to incorporate them in everything I do. I know if I live by these values I can go far in life because they will help me succeed. Being honest and caring are important because they show that if I am truthful and compassionate for other people, they will care for me when I need their help or advice. Responsibility is one thing I value the most. I have things I need to do in life and if I don't do them, people will not trust me to do them in the future. By respecting the people and the things around me I will get respect back.

My First Coach, Jon, always wanted us to live with these values in mind. I remember when I was new on the team, Jon giving the team meetings at the meets. The meeting was not just him saying "do your best today and swim fast", but he also told us to have fun and meet new people. He wanted us to make swimming a team sport and that is why I love swimming. Sure, in a race it can be just you but everything else about swimming is a team sport. I get to be with my friends every night as I work out, and we can push each other to work towards our goals.

Swimming has taught me how to set goals and work towards them. From swimming, I know where hard work and dedication can take you. This has also transferred to school and I am now challenging myself in school by taking several AP classes. I will take these skills on with me to college where I hope to get a degree in a science related field.

The YMCA has impacted my life in many ways from the people I have met to the things I have learned. I will carry everything from my experiences with the YMCA with me for the rest of my life. With the life skills I have gotten from being with the YMCA I know I am going to succeed in the future.

Samantha Bahr

Racine YMCA

I have been involved with my local YMCA in Racine, Wisconsin for five years now. I became involved when I began competitive swimming with my local club team SEA-Y. I was thirteen years old, and completely new to competitive swimming. Swimming on the SEA-Y team completely changed my attitude toward swimming. I learned that hard work and dedication is what makes a good swimmer. I wanted to be the best swimmer I could possibly be. However, when I was a freshman in high school, my father lost his job. It became financially impossible to swim on SEA-Y during that summer. This devastated me. Swimming is a sport which in order to perform well; you need to swim a lot. I was determined to do well my sophomore year in high school, so I tried to find a way to continue swimming without having it be horribly expensive. The YMCA made this possible. My local club swim team SEA-Y is affiliated with our local YMCA. All team members of SEA-Y are also members of the YMCA. This membership allowed me access to their aquatic facility, which would allow me to swim during the summer and keep me in shape. Everyday my sister would drive me to the YMCA. I would swim laps and work out just as if I were on a club team. I was able to begin my high school sophomore season in shape. My sophomore year of swimming was probably the best year of high school swimming. I was one of the team's most improved and was All County Honorable Mention. The YMCA made all this possible.

Sierra Townsend
Door County YMCA

What is confidence? Is it the daring required to accomplish a bold deed? Or is it the stubbornness attached to arrogance? In my opinion, confidence is neither of these things. Confidence is defined by the courage it takes to walk up to a stranger and strike up a conversation, or to try something new without knowing what the result may be. Being involved in the YMCA swimming program has given me confidence.

Entering into the team atmosphere that the Doorfins swim team possesses has made it easy for me to break out of the shell I was once in. The team's daily use of the YMCA's core values – honesty, caring, responsibility, and respect – have been channeled into the way I live my life. With these values, I have also gained confidence; the confidence to meet new people, to try new events, and to be myself.

In the fall, I will be starting college at UW Milwaukee, where I will be faced with new responsibilities and situations, which I will meet with the confidence I have gained from being involved in the YMCA. In addition to using this confidence to benefit my own life, I will use it to influence others to follow the YMCA's core values. I am grateful to the YMCA for enabling me to obtain confidence and I hope others can be positively influenced by their programs, just as I have.

Siri Smits
Oshkosh Community YMCA Swim Team

I have always loved to swim so when I was eight years old, I persuaded my parents to let me join the local swim team. There, I was taught the basic strokes and was introduced to the world of competitive swimming, known as swim meets. By the age of twelve, my swimming skills had vastly improved but I was extremely unhappy on my previous team. Therefore, my parents and I made the decision that I would join the YMCA and become a member of the OSHY swim team. I still recall the anxiety I felt as I walked out onto the YMCA pool deck to meet my new coaches and teammates. At that time, I didn't realize the importance of this life changing event of leaving one team to join another and how the YMCA would continue to affect me. Since then, the YMCA has become my second home and my coaches and OSHY teammates are now an extension of my family and will remain my lifelong friends.

Considering I belonged to two very different swim clubs, I quickly acquired a deep sense of appreciation for my new team. My first team was not affiliated with a YMCA nor did it teach the core values that are of importance to the Y. Had I not joined the YMCA when I did, I believe I would not be the person who I am today nor would I still be swimming. My new coach, Jay, would often say "it's better to be part of something bigger than oneself." To me, this was first fulfilled by joining the YMCA as so many doors started to open to what seemed like endless opportunities. These opportunities have helped me to grow as a person. When I first joined the YMCA, I have to admit that I was a "clingy child" because I often sought out the comfort of my parents sitting in the bleachers at swim meets. I soon learned to become more independent when I took my first trip to Ely, Minnesota to experience swim camp with my teammates. Even though I was reluctant to go and I cried as I looked back through the rear view window, it was part of growing up as I learned to do things for myself. My sense of independence and self-reliance continued to grow as I qualified for my first National LC YMCA Championship meet. At first, I was terrified at the thought of traveling with my peers, who were a lot older than me. However, my senior teammates welcomed me to the National Team with open arms and were there to cheer me on as my biggest supporters. In reflection, my first experience at YMCA Nationals can simply be summed up as "inspiring". As I watched the excitement of the competition and camaraderie amongst the teams, it fed my desire to work hard to excel in the sport I loved so much. The work ethic I learned will remain with me for a lifetime.

Being part of the YMCA has shaped my world. It has been defined by my swim teammates, my coaches, my commitment and dedication to swimming and by the four YMCA core values, honesty, respect, caring and responsibility. I have learned many valuable lessons at the Y, such as, it's not always important if you win. Rather, it's more important to demonstrate good sportsmanship and to be gracious, whether you win or lose, out of respect and compassion for your teammates and other swimmers. These lessons helped me develop into a team leader and mentor to younger swimmers. They have also helped to prepare me for life as a young adult and for what lies ahead as a collegiate swimmer.

I've been fortunate to have great coaches and wonderful teammates at the YMCA. Together, we accomplished things that seemed almost impossible. We have participated in challenges such as Commitment Week, the dreaded 100 Times Challenge at Christmas time and we have trekked what seemed like a hundred (seventeen) miles on a journey known as the "Grand Portage". Not only have these challenges taught me perseverance but they have also empowered me to believe in myself. If I set realistic goals, I can attain them if I set my mind to it. The challenges, meets and camps have also helped me to form strong bonds with my teammates and to understand what it's truly like to be part of a team. Everything we experience, we experience together. One of the things I have particularly enjoyed with my teammates is being on relays. It is the utmost high. Imagine

the adrenaline rush of four swimmers yelling chants at the top of their lungs as a pre-race ritual! As a team, there have been many celebrations of joyful times. However, as a team, we have also endured the "hard times", including the tragic loss of a beloved teammate, whose spirit continues to inspire and motivate us each and every day. Also, soon, we will bid goodbye to our Head Coach, who will begin a new chapter of his life in Oregon. However difficult things may seem, I know that my team will persevere because being part of OSHY and the YMCA is about caring for one another, giving support and offering encouragement.

Through the many tears of joy and sadness that I have experienced as a member of the YMCA, I have become a much stronger and confident individual. This strength and confidence, which I have gained has helped me to succeed in life, whether it's in the pool or attaining academic achievements. Also, I have embraced the YMCA values, such as caring. My future plans are to become an elementary teacher and swim coach because I love working with children. The YMCA has given me the opportunity to pursue my passion and to "give back" by allowing me to teach swim lessons to young and disabled children.

I will soon be leaving to attend college at North Carolina State University, where I will be a member of the Wolfpack Swim Team. When I go, I will take with me the core values that have been instilled within me and will remember the valuable lessons learned at the YMCA, which have helped me to become the individual that I am today. Looking back, my decision to join the YMCA was one of the most important decisions that I have ever made. It has encompassed so much of my life beginning with that day as a twelve year old, when I first walked out onto the pool deck. To the YMCA, thank you for the huge impact you have had on my world as I walked through one door of opportunity after another. I will be forever grateful for everything you have done for me.

Stephanie Bowman
La Crosse YMCA

The YMCA is a place where people can come to live a healthier lifestyle, as well as to live with the four core values that the YMCA embodies: respect, responsibility, caring, and honesty. Being part of a team at the YMCA has bettered my life in many ways, and has an effect on me that can not be explained. Throughout my life, being a productive member of the YMCA is something that has never changed, nor do I see it changing in the future.

Being in a sport that is coined "an individual sport" the concept of team is ever present even with a title that is very misleading. The work that every swimmer puts in every day can not be replicated alone. Behind each swim, are many hours of practice that are made possible with the help of teammates who become best friends. The person who showed me the real meaning behind the word "team" was Jon Brenner. I know that the effect that Jon had on me will be impossible to explain in a few paragraphs, but everyone who has ever had the experience of knowing him knows that no one put more of an emphasis on the true meaning of "team" than Jon. The faith that Jon helped instill in people was put to the test in August of 2008 when the community learned that Jon had stage four brain cancer. Through his battle, Jon never seemed to lose sight of what mattered, and never stopped doing what he loved.

The YMCA has provided a second home for me; I can not remember a week where I have not been in a Y. At a young age I was enrolled in swim lessons. From there I dabbled in many other sports, but found a love for swimming. As a young adult, I am still a swimmer, as well as an employee of the La Crosse Area YMCA. I have seen developments not only in the swimming aspect of my life, but in the person whom I believe I have become. Confidence is something that I used to struggle with, but with the support of the YMCA community; especially a coach of mine; Eric Wojta, as well as my best friends who are also my teammates, and have continually stood by me and have always supported me, I have become a much more confident individual. By being a part of this team I have learned the value of hard work and the true meanings of the words respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring. I know that I am a better person because of the impact that the YMCA has had on my life. I have been fortunate enough to have known Jon Brenner and I have been lucky enough to have been on a team like the La Crosse WAVE.