

2012 Jon Brenner Scholarship Essays

Essay by James Votava, Oshkosh YMCA

1st place - \$500 scholarship

In the fall of 2003 I nervously wandered onto the pool deck of the Oshkosh YMCA for the first time; I feared that the other kids would laugh at my weight, or my swimming ability. But, to my surprise and absolute delight I found a family to grow strong with and improve my swimming ability along with my character. Every moment over the last eight and a half years has been a life changing experience that if given the chance, I would do all over again.

As an overweight nine year old that truly believed he would be a starting cornerback in the NFL, I was extremely reluctant to attend the Try-It program at the Oshkosh YMCA. After a few embarrassing attempts to kick and whine my way out of the YMCA, I trudged out to the pool deck. There I met an upbeat, joyous coach named Tracy and my first swim team friend, DJ. Tracy's enthusiasm and perpetual encouragement were one of the many reasons I fell in love with swimming, but the new friends were the biggest perk at first. DJ and I were both new to the swim team that fall and we stuck together like bees and honey. We experienced our first swim meet together, and what a joyous experience that was. I was immediately hooked by the nervous rush of adrenaline I got before a race, and after a few meets, the euphoria of getting a best time was greater than any feeling in the world. Even better than picking off a pass during a recess football game.

I soon set my football dream behind me and began my trek toward becoming the best swimmer I could be. At first the road was a rough one; I seemingly always got best times as many younger swimmers do, but the times were never deemed fast enough to qualify for state. That was until my second year on the team when I qualified for YMCA state in the 100 backstroke. I honestly cannot recall many memories from my first YMCA state, but I can remember that I thought it was the greatest thing ever and it seemed to be over in a flash. One second I heard the beep, and the next second I was in the car on my way home. I'm sure I grinned the whole way home knowing that I had finally broken my first swimming barrier.

For many years after that I continued to knock down barrier after barrier while learning that when you work your hardest anything is possible. My head coach for most of my career, Jay Coleman, was not only my swim coach but also a life coach. He taught me that I should give one hundred percent of my effort to everything I do, and that a little less sleep is a small price to pay for success as I began attending morning practice. His last and most important lesson was always being accountable for everything you do, which will stick with me for the rest of my life.

I can thoroughly remember my first morning because as I walked in Jay jokingly said to me, “Are you lost?” In that moment I stepped my training up to the highest level and met a whole new family of the swim team. In the next two years I reached the peak of my swimming career as I qualified for summer nationals, won an event at YMCA state, and squeaked into finals at the Oklahoma Pro-Am meet my team attended annually. I will remember these moments as some of the greatest of my life, but Jay’s life lessons were the most important things I took away from swimming.

The last few years have been a struggle mentally and physically as I have fought to reach peak form once again. As I near my last few months of swimming a few things have become very evident to me. Swimming was never about times and awards; but instead it was about Jay’s life lessons of dedication, and accountability which have led me to achieve my academic goals and coincidentally be the salutatorian of my graduating class.

Essay by John Bushman, Green Bay YMCA

2nd place - \$400 scholarship

Short, pudgy, and cute were words that were commonly used to describe my appearance as an eleven year old. Sadly these words did not describe a YMCA National Swimming Champion and yet that was my goal at the age of 11. So how did an eleven year old that has limited athletic attributes get to the level of elite swimming? The simple answer was swimming for the YMCA and great coaching. However, it was not quite that simple and as all good stories demonstrate there were twists and turns along the way.

As an eleven year old I was having difficulty reaching the swimming goals I had set for myself. I was frustrated and angry that all the work I was putting into the sport of swimming wasn’t yielding the expected result. So I decided to quit and try something else, but before I did

I went to speak to my head coach, Dave Korst. He told me to try other sports if I wanted to but to keep swimming if for no other reason than it would be great conditioning. Then he said something that has been a mantra for me throughout my eight years of swimming for the Greater Green Bay YMCA, that I would always be welcome and have a place on the team. The reason this was such a striking statement is that I had swum for club teams in the past where the primary goal was swimming success. If I had mentioned to one of the club coaches of my prior teams that I was not 100% committed to swimming I would have been told that this club was not for me. At the age of eleven I became aware that the YMCA wanted me as an individual, which was a starting point for me to understand what it meant to be not just a swimmer but a YMCA swimmer.

With this sense of acceptance I felt free to explore other sports and activities, but as Coach Dave suggested I kept swimming 3-4 times a week. Coach Dave gave me an opportunity to get to know myself better by supporting me to freely choose to be involved in such an intense sport as swimming. During this period, my other family members continued to swim and I would join them for fundraisers, swim meets and YMCA family gatherings. In this process I started sorting out the difference between a YMCA athlete and athletes connected to other athletic communities. It became clear that the YMCA athlete was held to a higher standard: respect of others, honesty, care, responsibility, and supporting each other and I wanted to be held to a higher standard.

A major insight that was and is pivotal in my life is that swimming success is not the end point of being a YMCA swimmer. The major goal of being a YMCA swimmer is becoming a more virtuous person. Looking back, I can see that Coach Dave and the other staff of the Greater Green Bay YMCA were aware of this from the beginning, though it is something you cannot tell an eleven year old. It has to be discovered, and what Coach Dave did was buy me the time to make that discovery for myself.

Oh, and by the way, a short, pudgy kid can grow up to become a YMCA National Swimming Champion – with a lot help (not a little!) from his friends at the Greater Green Bay YMCA.

Essay by Kendall Van Sistine, Oshkosh YMCA

3rd place - \$300 scholarship

The trailhead indicates historical importance, but the experience is more physical than educational. With the waters of Lake Superior at our backs and the Pigeon River eight and a half miles ahead, we set off to follow the trail Native Americans and French *Voyageurs* created many decades ago. We, the swimmers of the Oshkosh YMCA swim team, almost resemble the fur traders lugging their goods with our backpacks packed full of water bottles and trail mix, though, our motives are quite different. Through my hike along the Grand Portage Trail, I realize that all of the lessons I have learned through swimming help me to complete the trek

As I start out this 17 mile journey, 8.5 miles down and 8.5 miles back, I focus on keeping a steady pace. My 13 years of competitive swimming has given me great endurance, but I have never attempted something this physically demanding. We have been hiking for an hour, covered three miles, and have 14 miles left to go. I become less talkative the longer we walk. My optimistic tendencies start to dwindle and pessimistic ones take over. Each step feels counterproductive, and I find myself stumbling on the rough terrain frequently. The situation is like a particularly hard swim practice, every athlete pushing themselves to their limit. One part of me wants to stop and rest, while the other yearns to go on. After much deliberation, I continue.

A rushing river welcomes us to a clearing where the French-Canadian fort used to stand. We are halfway done. My optimism instantly returns as my teammates and I replenish our bodies with much needed water and protein. Resting in the grass is just what we needed. No one wants to suggest leaving this refuge, but we all collectively stand to head back to the trailhead. Our training has taught us to persevere, never stopping until we reach our goals. Three hours have passed, and we are completely positive that we can finish.

I am the victim of a mental and physical battle during the second half of the hike. My legs no longer want to take a step, my shoulders ache from my backpack, and my ankles are sore from my constant stumbling. The experience is less than ideal at this point, and negative thoughts flood my mind. Will I ever finish? I see a mirage of the trailhead, and this inner turmoil has brought me close to tears. I am reminded of Commitment Week, when my body reaches complete exhaustion after hours of swimming. All I want is to be done. Unfortunately, in both cases, the only option is to persevere, to move on and improve the situation.

I can sense that we are approaching the trailhead. With the last burst of energy I have, I run around the last curve. My teammates and I sprawl out on the grass, grateful to be done after six long hours. I am exhausted and yet exhilarated. My teammates' cheers instantly bring a smile to my face. We overcame this great challenge together, as a team. We are forever connected by our shared challenges, failures, and victories.

The Grand Portage Trail is quite the experience. During this six hour hike, my will, leadership, perseverance, and patience were tested. The hours I have spent training with OSHY have enabled me to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, like hiking the Grand Portage Trail. When I started swimming at five years old, I swam because I loved the sport and the ribbons I won competing. Through the years, my love of the sport has remained, but I realized that the material reminders of swimming would never last as long as the lessons I learned along the way. It doesn't always matter who is the fastest swimmer; many times character determines an athlete's success more than any medals. Because of the struggles I have faced through swimming, I strive to work hard, achieve my goals, and remain optimistic. I am confident that I can take on the next stage of my life with these principles. I am forever grateful to the YMCA swimming community for the opportunities and lessons it has given me.

Essay by Rachel Thomas, SSTY-Schroeder

4th place - \$300 scholarship

“Success must be felt within before it can be seen on the outside” (Unknown). By being part of a YMCA swim team, I have found success not only in my swimming, but also in my school work and community involvement. The success that I have found within has enabled me to prepare for my future and to be confident in my ability to succeed at whatever I set my mind to. I moved to Wisconsin at the end of sixth grade and was immediately welcomed by the Schroeder swimming community. For the past six years, the Schroeder YMCA team has taught me life lessons that will help me live a bright future.

I have been fortunate to find many lifelong friends on the Schroeder swim team. These friends have taught me the meaning of trust, and being able to rely upon others from having your day brightened to overcoming obstacles. My friends and I understand the meaning of team work and apply it to daily practices in addition to competitions. Every day at practice, we encourage

each other during challenging sets and we help one another achieve our goals both in and out of the pool. The value of team work applies to my future in the medical field; having the skills to reach out and ask for help will prove vital to my success.

Not every day in the pool has been easy; I have been thrown some major curve balls when it comes to swimming. With my health and physical abilities faltering at times, my team has gathered around me and supported me, teaching me the value of dedication and commitment. Through the support of my team mates I have experienced firsthand the power of encouragement and support from others. I have been able to offer encouragement in return when they are struggling in practice or nervous about an upcoming event. The ability to support others has carried over into my academics when tutoring and working in group situations.

At the end of my freshman year I began experiencing great amounts of pain in both of my legs. It took over two and a half years to find the diagnosis of chronic compartment syndrome and undergo the two necessary surgeries to enable me to be pain free. Throughout the entire process of searching for an answer to my medical ailment, my coaches were supportive and gave me hope when my doctors were confounded by my condition. Many days I was unable to complete practice due to being in great amounts of pain, but I persevered and endured the months of recovery to be where I am now. The skill of perseverance I learned through my journey, will guide me in the future when I come across challenging situations. Having compartment syndrome was a major hurdle, but it opened the door to the medical community and I now wish to pursue a career in orthopedics. I can give people answers and solutions to their medical mysteries, and help others every day, by entering the medical field.

The past six years have been truly wonderful being part of the Schroeder YMCA team. I have learned many skills such as teamwork, value of friendship, dedication, commitment, and perseverance. These skills have guided me and shaped me into the individual I am today. I learn every day from my swim team and cannot imagine what my life would be like without the Schroeder YMCA. I learned that I have an obligation to the abilities that I do have, and should not let the disability define who I am and what I can do.

Essay by Chris Meyers, SSTY-Schroder

5th place tie - \$300 scholarship

Swimming for the Schroeder YMCA has meant more to me than just the opportunity to stay fit and train in a competitive environment. Dave Anderson and Matt Miller, through their coaching and mentoring, have made sure to instill the four core values of the YMCA into our swim program: caring, honesty, respect, responsibility.

Swimming, at its heart, is a team sport. Besides the obvious fact that relays require a team banding together to accomplish the goal of winning, without other supportive team members, swimming successfully is nearly impossible. Caring is an integral part to of this formula for success. At Schroeder, we have a team that cares for each other and shows compassion at all steps of the competitive swimming process. From the beginning, our coaches show us that they care about our well-being and successes in and out of the pool. As we move up through the different groups in Schroeder, each coach is just as compassionate as the previous. From training to competition, we all care for and support each other due to these values that Matt and Dave have instilled in us.

Another backbone of the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team is honesty. Truthfulness and sincerity are very important at the Walter Schroeder Aquatic Center. Whether it's missing practice for school or being truly sick when there's a tough day of training ahead of us, we all have learned that honesty is the best policy. In the life of a high schooler, this foundation based on honesty has helped to build relationships with other swimmers and friends, many of whom I will never forget.

Respect is one of the more central ideals that the YMCA has instilled into my life. Through showing respect to my coaches and the other swimmers I have swum with, I have learned that this value goes a long way in life. Whether it's respecting my parents, teachers or others I will meet in the future, Schroeder and the YMCA have taught us that acknowledging that other people may be faster or more powerful than we are ourselves may not always be a bad thing. Without feeling bitter or resentful, all the members on our team have learned to get along no matter what obstacles face us.

Responsibility, especially for our actions, goes hand-in-hand with all three of the other YMCA core values. This idea is one of the main focuses on our team through training for state

and YMCA Nationals. As our group of swimmers goes through a set, we make sure that we are all taking responsibility for our training. For example, if we notice that one person isn't trying their hardest or is slacking during a set, we make sure to remind the person that without the proper preparation, our team won't be able to accomplish what we have set out to do. This accountability has caused us to all realize that we hold the power of our own futures in our hands.

The YMCA has instilled in me a philosophy that takes into account all of these principles. The compassion that comes with caring, the truthfulness that goes along with honesty, the admiration that originates from respect, and the accountability that one must take with responsibility have all guided my life thanks to this amazing program. The Schroeder YMCA Swim Team has helped to guide me and build me into the person I am today, and I cannot thank everyone at Schroeder enough for all the support I have received these past eight years.

Essay by Jacob Ottelien, YMCA Dane County

5th place tie - \$300 scholarship

For 11 years I have been a dedicated member of the East YMCA Swim Team. I was seven years old when I joined the YMCA Swim Team. Looking back it was of the most important decisions that I made and the swim team has been a big part of my life. Each day at practice I met people from the entire Madison area that I eventually became my good friends. Swimming continued to influence me in high school especially as a member of the Madison East High School Men's Swim team. Being a swimmer helped me as I am currently a lifeguard for the Madison East YMCA and last summer was a Junior Coach for the eight and unders at the Monona Swim and Dive Team. I would not have received either of these jobs if I had not first joined the YMCA swim team.

One of the reasons I came back to the swim team year after year was the people that were a part of it. Some of my closest friends are part of the swim team, these are people that have influenced me and helped me become a better person. One of these people who influenced me greatly was YMCA Coach Lynn Stickels. As you may know, Lynn was killed in an accident while driving to a swim meet just over a year ago. Lynn was the coach that taught me how to swim, but more importantly she taught me how to work with my teammates and to get along

with them. Lynn helped me develop the relationships that kept me coming to swim practice every day no matter how tired I was. One of my favorite memories was when I had a swim meet in Thunder Bay Canada. Coach Lynn enjoyed taking about 10 members of the team to Canada every other year. Lynn always made a point to stop at a Minnesota state park on the drive up. We then would stop at a former Canadian trading post. For Lynn it was important to make the trip more than just a swim meet, but a life experience. This meet was my first time swimming in a 50 meter pool and I was scared. Lynn helped comfort me and encourage me to work through the fear. I would later bring this knowledge to other parts of my life such as school work and other high school sports. Lynn's accident happened during the middle of my junior year of high school swimming. Her funeral brought together members of all different high school teams in Madison and Dane County. Lynn had taught us all how to swim and become better people. I never would have met Lynn had I not swam on the YMCA Swim Team.

As a young adult, being a part of the YMCA swim team has really pushed me to participate in the YMCA lifeguard training that I used to lifeguard at triathlons and receive a guarding job at the East YMCA. Without joining the YMCA swim team, I would never have been able to get the job of Junior Coach at the Monona Swim and Dive Team that I enjoy so much. Both of these jobs have helped finance a part of my college education and in a way help me get into the colleges of my choice.

Since I started the YMCA Swim Team it has been a major part of my life. I cannot imagine the difference that it has made on my life as a whole. The people that I have met have changed my life and my personality. I have applied the hard work and dedication that comes with swimming to my schoolwork and other athletic activities. I am truly thankful that I made the decision to join the YMCA Swim Team.

Essay by Kelsie Olson, La Crosse YMCA

Being a part of the YMCA Wave swim team has been the longest and most important commitment of my life. Joining at the age of six years old, I've continued to swim for the last twelve years. This team has taught me multiple lifelong lessons that have helped develop me into the young adult that I am today. Respect, responsibility, caring, and honesty are the four core values of the Y that I have learned through my journey with this incredible swim team.

When I was little, I showed a great love for the water. My mother tells me every time I walked past the Wave swim team picture on the way to my swim lesson, I would tell her I wanted to “do that”. She signed me up for the two-week trial of summer swim team. I went to one practice, and I impressed the coaches, but when my mom asked me to go the second day, I said I didn’t want to. It was strange, since I was good at it, but I changed my mind when the fall season started. This was the foreshadowing of a long battle with the love-hate relationship I’ve had with this unique sport. I know every swimmer has had their moments where they feel like they want to give up the sport, as have I. Sometimes getting up off the couch and going to practice is tough, but I’ve learned that it’s worth it to go. The feeling after accomplishing a tough practice is one of the best feelings in the world. The Wave has taught me how to work hard and how working hard pays off. Learning to succeed at whatever I’m doing is a skill that the Y has taught me, and it will last with me through the rest of my life.

In my opinion, (and I think most swimmers would agree) swimming is the most difficult sport out there. Along with its physical toughness, the mental strength an athlete needs to gain is a great challenge. Last year, we were given a set of 70x100s on 1:20. I was very scared to start this set, knowing that it would be tough, but my coach, Eric Wojta, encouraged us by asking “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” Even though this is a silly expression, it makes a lot of sense. We needed to take the set one 100 at a time, and set little goals for ourselves along the way. After I finished the set, I was so proud of myself for completing something that I never thought I could. Being mentally strong is a skill I have learned through swimming with the Wave. This skill has helped me accomplish many things throughout my life, and it will continue to do so.

Building relationships is a focus that the YMCA has. The Wave has taught me this, especially one specific person, Coach Jon Brenner. His dedication to the team was greatly respected by every person who was a part of the Wave, and he has influenced every single swimmer who had him for a coach. He taught me about the importance of loving and caring for one another. A quote, in memory of Jon, was mounted above our pool this year. It states: “With a team behind you, so much more is possible”. I’ve learned how true this statement is by being on the Wave for so long. I have made lifelong friends and have built strong relationships with my coaches. Reaching and working hard to achieve a goal can be difficult to do, but with the support from friends, coaches, and family, one will have the encouragement to succeed. Jon left his

spirit with his family and The Wave swim team. He has taught all of us that loving one another is the most important thing in life. Coach Eric frequently tells the senior group, “Remember what Jon said, ‘Love is the most powerful force in the universe’”.

It is hard to explain how much my swim team has taught me and how important it is to me, but I hope I succeeded with this essay. In my closet, there are boxes of ribbons, metals, and trophies that I have collected over the years. These awards cannot represent what I have accomplished while being on this team, and I don’t believe they should. The Wave has taught me that it is not about what place or how fast I went; it’s about working hard, loving one another, making memories, learning from each other, and, of course, being happy and having fun. This is what I believe I accomplished with this team, and it doesn’t matter if I won or lost a race. Now, hopefully I have explained my love for the La Crosse YMCA Wave swim team. By being on this team, I believe I have grown to be a better person, and learned important lessons that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Essay by Connor Ray Wernecke, La Crosse YMCA

Although I began swimming with the YMCA only three years ago, it has still had a significant influence on my life and development. I swam on my local summer swim team for seven years before I decided to join the YMCA team. After entering high school, I realized that I enjoyed swimming immensely and wanted to participate in it more seriously. Because my high school does not have a swim team, I was steered toward the local YMCA team. Several of my friends also swam for the YMCA, so I joined the team. I was involved in other sports – cross country and track – before joining the YMCA swim team. These sports impacted my life significantly, but swimming for the YMCA has had a much more unique and interesting effect on my growth as a person. Being a member of the YMCA swim team has helped me develop my core values, gain lifelong friends and memories, and learn the importance of love in life.

The YMCA fosters four core values: respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring. My coaches strive to help my teammates and I understand the importance of these four simple words. This is one of the many things that make the YMCA unique. As a participant in other sports not affiliated with the YMCA, I have noticed that there is less emphasis put on values such as these. Competition or winning are stressed much more heavily. In my opinion, these are only truly

important when combined with positive values such as those championed by the YMCA. This is what makes YMCA swimming so unique and fun for me. I enjoy the balanced approach, and it has made me a much more positive and poised individual.

I have gained many great friends and memories through my participation in YMCA swimming. When I joined the team, I was unsure of myself and very nervous. The coaches and team members, however, welcomed me with open arms and helped me to easily adjust. I quickly bonded with the team, and looked forward to practice every day. Although I have known them for only about three years, it seems to me that my team and I are very close. I have raced, practiced, laughed, cried, succeeded, and failed with them, and I would not trade a minute of my experiences for the world.

I have realized that love is an extremely important part of my life and my swimming experiences. This came to my attention most prominently at a recent meet, where my coach mentioned it during the team meeting. He asked my teammates and I simply to love. Love each other, love to swim, love the competition, and love yourself. It struck me that this is the key to success. Even if one does not win a race or does not swim a best time, one succeeds if he or she can love the situation. A person might even have a race, practice, or experience that is poor, but if he or she loves anything about the event, it is a success. Essentially, I believe it is about finding the positive aspects of any and every situation one encounters.

YMCA swimming has become an extremely important aspect of my life. It has helped me develop by teaching me the benefits of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring, as well as hard work and integrity. Because of my involvement with the YMCA, I have learned that success means much more than simply winning a race or achieving a qualifying standard. Success means improving yourself and your teammates, in the pool and out of it. Swimming on the YMCA swim team has molded me into a person who can approach situations in a mature and well-balanced manner.

Essay by Sierra Sachtjen, YMCA Dane County

I have been a member of the Madison West Waves YMCA/ YDC swim team for four years, and have also coached for the past three years. These past four years with the YMCA have had a huge impact on my life in many different ways. For starters, I have learned what hard

work truly is and how the time you put in, can get you closer and closer to your dreams, between going to many practices, meets and pushing yourself beyond the limits that I didn't even know I could reach. This has allowed me to gain confidence, set higher goals, really enjoy the sport of swimming in a whole new way, and to me take me to the next step in my swimming career.

Many people have helped me increase my confidence and take the next step including many of my coaches from the YMCA, my parents, and many other swimmers who have pushed me to be my best. Through the many swimmers that I have met, I have had the chance to become teammates with many of them through the YMCA and have made many new friends all over the state of Wisconsin. I have really enjoyed being able to have friendly relationships with my opponents and teammates, which makes all the hard work and competition much more fun and less stressful. Another aspect of competing that I have had many positive experiences through the YMCA Swim Team is sportsmanship. Sportsmanship is one of the most important things in sports, or anything for that matter. I wouldn't be where I am today without sportsmanship, it has taught me so many life lessons that can be carried over to everything that I do; for example, it's not always about winning or losing, it is all about the unique people you get to meet while competing, the things you learn when you compete and treating your teammates and opponents with respect. Being a part of YMCA swimming has also taught me the greatness of giving back to the community and others: Through the YMCA Swim Team, I have participated in the swim-a-thon and other fundraisers in which the money raised goes towards families who are in need and can't afford memberships, so they can be involved. Being involved with YMCA swimming and all it gives back to others has made me realize how truly amazing it is to help others and has made me decide to continue to do many other volunteer opportunities throughout our community. Overall, participating and coaching for the YMCA swim team was the best idea that my parents and I had. From this opportunity I have grown to be a much stronger person, from everything that I have learned and have accomplished with the YMCA and from the opportunities the YMCA has presented me with. I am so honored to say that I have been and am a part of a YMCA swim team.

Essay by Ilsa Hoenke, Marquette County YMCA

Being a member of the YMCA swim team has changed my life in a variety of ways, helping to shape the person I am today. Besides providing me with many lifelong friends, it has taught me the value of hard work, patience, and discipline. It has also had an impact on my life in regards to my health, passions, and even work experience.

When I first joined the YMCA swim team I was in seventh grade and had not been very serious about any sport previously. I soon became occupied by the daily practices and frequent competitions. I learned to apply myself to something in a way that I had not been familiar with in the past. Knowing that I had to be accountable to my teammates and coaches every day pushed me and motivated me to do my very best every time I got in the pool. This carried over into other aspects of my life, teaching me the importance of a good work ethic and the discipline required to improve and reach goals.

In addition to teaching me these important life characteristics, it has had a life changing impact on my health. At the age of two I was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. It has been a constant battle to maintain control over the disease and remain a normal active child and teenager. However, swimming helped me achieve that goal. The daily exercise contributed to helping maintain that desired control while also placing me in an environment to carry out the normal activities of any other child. Swimming helped to achieve not only control over my diabetes, but it also merged with my passion to raise diabetes awareness. I had the opportunity a couple summers ago to participate in the Teal Lake Swim, a fundraiser for Camp UPeninsulin, a camp that I grew up going to and now attend as a junior counselor. It was very special for me to participate in the swim as a diabetic raising awareness and funds for something very close to my heart.

Besides teaching me these values, helping to achieve goals, and contributing to raising awareness for something special to me, swimming has also affected my work experience. I am a certified lifeguard and have worked as a swim instructor for children for the past few years. This experience strengthened traits in me such as patience, understanding, and an upbeat attitude.

Without the YMCA swim team to start me on a path toward all these experiences, I would never have achieved any of them and become the person I am today.

Essay by Anna Linzmeyer, La Crosse YMCA

Over the years I have spent swimming I have met many exceptional and compassionate people who helped to make my swimming experience so valuable to me. I had been swimming for a few years on another local team when I made the decision to join the La Crosse YMCA Wave. At that point I had no idea how much more a team could be than just some people who happen to be in the pool at the same time. Many of the most lasting lessons I learned on The Wave were from Coach Jon, who influenced me an unimaginable amount. From the day I joined The Wave at age ten, he made me feel like an important part of the team which would quickly become a major part of my life.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned through swimming has been keeping things in perspective. My first few years with The Wave were about having fun. Sure, it was important to work hard, but at that time it was not what drove me to go to practice. Coach Jon kept that spirit alive in everyone on the team through his goofy hats, silly songs, and cheery grins. Even once I started to get older and began to care more about times and as practices got significantly harder Jon was able to keep practice fun by offering endless encouragement and by telling jokes between sets. Other coaches too have been quick to give advice on strokes, but they have never allowed the drive to succeed to overtake the love of the sport. I believe that putting in ones best effort is central to succeeding in a sport, or any activity, but if one loses the joy, then the experience loses its value. Jon helped all of us keep that in mind with his signature motto, "Have fun and do your best!" Being a swimmer has taught me to put my heart into everything I attempt.

I started out on The Wave swimming three or four days a week. Within a year I was coming to practice five days a week and before I knew it swimming had become a daily activity that I could not live without. This dedication to one sport so entirely has taught me not to give up on my dreams. Maybe I won't get a best time at this meet or the next one; however, eventually I will. Being around a group of people who have similar goals is motivating and without my teammates behind me I would not be as driven a person as I am, not only in swimming, but also in school and other activities. All of the coaches I have worked with, and many of my teammates, helped to show me the worth in devoting myself to something so completely. Another big component of The Wave atmosphere that causes me to stay motivated

even when I am not competing at my best is the way my coaches care about everyone on the team, no matter their age or speed.

During my time on The Wave swim team I have come to realize that although doing well is certainly nice, and I will always strive to do my best, the relationships that come from being a part of a team are the most valuable things which I can take from my experience. The swim team taught me to be a responsible, respectful, caring, and honest person; surprisingly enough, the YMCA core values. As cliché as it may sound, I truly believe that without having had the opportunity to be a part of The Wave I would not be who I am today.

Essay by Megan Sisson, La Crosse YMCA

Many teams are just about the sport and competition, but swimming for a YMCA swim team is so much more. Over the years, being a member of the WAVE swim team has shaped me into who I am today. While swimming for the WAVE I learned core values, the importance of having fun, and the joy of achieving goals I never believed were possible.

It is not the countless laps that have an impact on swimmers lives; it is the people that surround them. I have been blessed to have known some incredible people on the WAVE. One of those people was Jon Brenner. He was the most amazing, talented, and fun loving coach I have ever known, and he taught me so much, not just about swimming, but about life as well. He was one of the many coaches that taught me the core values of the YMCA: caring, respect, honesty, and responsibility. These are the values that I apply to all aspects of my life.

Through swimming I learned to have fun in everything I do. Having fun has always been an important part of our team. Even while we are working hard at practice there is always a feeling of fun. I knew from the first year I started swimming that it is much better to go into something with a positive and fun attitude rather than a negative one. It is easy to pick up these traits when you are surrounded by so many amazing people on this team.

Achieving a huge goal is something that every kid should get to experience sometime in their childhood. When I was younger, I wasn't the best swimmer in the world, and I never dreamed that one day I would go to the national swim meet. Then last year, I set the goal of making it to nationals. After a season of hard work, battling injury, and encouragement from teammates and coaches I made it. It was the greatest feeling in the world to see all my hard work pay off and help me accomplish such a big goal. It made me realize that no matter how difficult

something seems, with a lot of hard work you can accomplish anything. The WAVE always encourages its swimmers to chase their dreams

Swimming for the WAVE has been an incredible experience. It has taught me so many things and inspired me to be the best that I can be. I will always cherish the memories I have of my years on the WAVE. I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

Essay by Aaron Scheets, Marshfield Area YMCA

I found great difficulty in determining how being a member of a YMCA swim team has affected my life. This difficulty arose from the fact that, what I can remember of my life, is of swimming, and to imagine my life without it, I would have to create a different life entirely. I joined the Marshfield Area YMCA swim team when I was six years old, and I have swam every season since. In reflection, it seems absurd, even to me, why I have spent so much time swimming. Was it worth it? Did spending all of those afternoons in the pool for the last twelve years benefit me? The pure enjoyment from swimming, and the life skills I have taken from being a member of a YMCA swim team, have fulfilled my life thus far, and will continue to enrich my life in the future.

The moments I spent, either at practice or meets, with the YMCA swim team, were always full of enjoyment and passion. It was the inside jokes at practice, the cupcake 100's, and the sense of achievement from completing the Katie Hoff set that I thoroughly enjoyed. The pleasure I found in achieving my goals drove my passion for swimming. To me these experiences are unforgettable, and had I never joined the swim team, I would have missed out on all of them. What is a life, if it does not bring contentment? The next most important aspect of the experience of swimming, after self gratification, is growing to understand oneself and the development of life skills from the experiences.

Swimming on a YMCA swim team has guided my development into a socially responsible person, and has given me dedication, discipline, and self control, that will lead me to success in the future. The motivated swimmer basically swims five or more days a week for one to three hours, almost year round. I am not the fastest swimmer in the world; however, I still dedicate myself to the sport. The sense of accomplishment I felt by meeting my own goals or the disappointment of missing them gave me understanding. These experiences made me understand that no matter what happens in the pool, I have to shake the hand of each swimmer next to me,

talk to my coach, and prepare for the next race, and to do all of that requires great self-control, and respect for the people around me. The work ethic I developed by swimming will help me to do my best in college, to excel in the career I choose to pursue, and to function as a leader amongst my peers. The self-control and respect I gained from swimming will help me with future social interactions such as job interviews or difficult work situations. These virtues are held in high regards by society today, and I would not have them without being on the YMCA swim team.

My life would not be the same had I never joined the Marshfield YMCA swim team. The team has been a part of my life for the past twelve years and is a vital part of who I am today. Through the experiences of swim team, I picked up the virtues that will help me lead a successful life in the future. These experiences brought me more happiness than I could achieve anywhere else, because the swimming experience is unique and irreplaceable. Without swimming I would not be the same person I am happy to be today.

Essay by Lisa Lang, Green County Golden Gators

As I enter the pool I see my home. It is the place that has brought me up and allowed me to have friends that share a common goal. Swimming has the ability to make competitors become friends and teams become families, which is the reason why I love swimming so much. But that is not the only reason. I love swimming and being a part of a YMCA swim team, because swimming has saved my life.

I grew up in the small town of Orangeville, IL with a class size no bigger than 40. Through second till sixth grade I was verbally bullied by the majority of my classmates. I was alienated and school was no longer a safe place for me. Not only was I made fun of for my appearance, but also for being in competitive swimming. My classmates had no idea what competitive swimming was and constantly reminded me that swimming was not a sport. They did not understand all the hours we dedicate our time and body to just take a second off in a swim event, or all the hours spent at a swim meet for only four to six events. All the discouraging words towards my swimming had little effect on my love for swimming, for I knew they would not be able to understand the commitment and sacrifice that went into my sport. They also did not realize that once I entered the pool for practice their words meant nothing to me, because instead of being alone, I was surrounded by my teammates. I was loved and cared

for by my coach, my team, and my swim family. I was no longer judged, but rather looked up to and was in a place where I belonged.

My team has been there for me through every failure, success, or problem that I have faced. With them I have cried from joy for all the triumphs that we have had as a team, whether it be time off of a swim or a time getting us to Nationals. We all have worked together to obtain the ultimate goals of swimming and without them I would not be the person I am today. They have helped me become strong. And what they do not know is that they each had a part in saving my life, because I could have easily have taken a different path. Instead I am proud to say that I am a competitive swimmer and I have learned that I have the ability to accomplish anything.

END