



Four Stand-Out College Essays About Money

MAY 9, 2014

Your Money

By **RON LIEBER**

Talking about money is hard. Writing well about yourself may be harder still. So trying to do both at once, as a teenager, while addressing complete strangers who control your future, would seem to be foolhardy.

But each year, plenty of high school seniors who are applying to college give it a go. Many skip the story of the sports team triumph or the grandparent's death and write essays about weighty social issues like work, class and wealth, or lack thereof. Perhaps that's what affects them most. Or maybe those are the subjects that they think will attract an admissions officer's eye.

In any case, for the second year, we put out a nationwide call for the best college application essays about these topics. With the help of Jennifer Delahunty, the dean of admissions and financial aid at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, and an accomplished essayist and editor herself, we picked four to share here.

They are a diverse lot, touching on topics ranging from work at McDonald's and thrift store shopping to homelessness and reckoning with a parent's job loss. What they share, however, is a quality that admissions officers crave but don't see as often as they'd like: The applicant's brain, laid bare on the page, wrapping itself around a topic that most people don't write enough about or don't write about in a deep or moving way.

"It's the one part of the application where they completely control the voice, and that makes it a really valuable document for us," said Jeremiah Quinlan, Yale's dean of undergraduate admissions. "When you're applying to an institution with thousands of students who have the same general academic and testing

credentials, those things only get you in the door. The rest of the application will separate you out.”

Mr. Quinlan accepted Viviana Andazola Marquez, who lives in Thornton, Colo., into the class of 2018. Her short, matter-of-fact essay about the logistics of homelessness was the most powerful one we read.

“There it sits, sullen in the passenger’s seat like a child in time out,” she wrote of her frequent attempts to get her homework done using borrowed computers. “Here we go again — someone else’s laptop to navigate, another Wi-Fi network to hack, another stubborn connection to overcome. After a frustrating drive through the neighborhood and careful identification of a network, success is stated simply: connected.”

Ms. Delahunty was struck by two things in this essay. The first was the language. “This is almost like a poem, it’s so laconic and compressed,” she said. “ ‘I fill the cracks in the road to success made by forces beyond myself.’ What a beautiful line.”

The second was the lack of bitterness, which Mr. Quinlan picked up on as well. “She uses the story to her advantage but she doesn’t lament it,” he said. “Lots of people write about obstacles, but there is a forward-looking nature to this. It’s a look at what she’s overcome without her steeping in it.”

Clare Connaughton steeps readers in her financial struggles a bit in her essay, noting how hard her mother has worked cleaning houses to keep them in a middle-class neighborhood. But much of it is about the joy she eventually found in shopping at thrift stores with her mother near their home in Mineola, N.Y. “We woke up early and are now waiting on a long line behind Brooklyn hipsters,” she wrote. “Our beloved thrift store is now trendy and popular. My mom and I laugh about it all the time during dinner.”

Ms. Connaughton will attend the University of Pennsylvania in the fall. “There is a real sense of enlightened awareness in this one,” Ms. Delahunty said. “The idea that necessity became trendy is such an interesting perspective on how she lived her life.”

If there was an underdog in this group, it was Griffin Karpeck. The Darien, Ill., resident did a fair bit of telling and not quite enough showing in his essay about working at McDonald’s and what he learned from his colleagues. A job at McDonald’s is an ordinary thing, and teenagers tend to not make it a goal, let

alone build a college application around it. So perhaps that's why Ms. Delahunty, who has read over 15,000 application essays during her career, had never seen one about working under the golden arches before.

Neither had Laura Schutt, the assistant director of admission at Butler University, where Mr. Karpeck will matriculate this fall. She was thrilled to see it, however, given how often she tells prospective students that they shouldn't be afraid to discuss their part-time jobs. "When I got this I thought 'Oh my gosh, somebody finally wrote about something I talk about!'" she said. "It jumped out at me."

I asked her whether this might be too big a risk, and said that a snooty admissions officer would wonder why an ambitious teenager would choose to write about selling hamburgers instead of literature. "No, it's opening us up to him," she said. "Him getting beyond that bubble of the suburbs and seeing how a job at McDonald's is so important to various individuals and the meanings it has to them — he's already dealing with the topics that you can carry forward onto a campus that was founded on liberal arts principles."

Mr. Karpeck might have missed one big opportunity because of timing. One of the children of the chief executive of McDonald's happens to be in one of his high school classes this school year. That would have made for a zinger of an opening line had it happened sooner, but he sent his application in before he realized who was sharing a class with him.

Andy Duehren, who will attend Harvard, took a different kind of risk, writing about his father's job loss and depression and his own uncaring response to it.

"I became more critical, more attentive to his flaws and shortcomings," he wrote of his father. "He lost his glasses, got linguini when we asked for rigatoni at the grocery store, and forgot my friends' names. At family dinner he sat largely silent until he interrupted with a non sequitur or unrelated question. I promised myself, with all of my naïve bravado, that I would never make myself vulnerable like he did, that I would never wallow in past regrets or failures."

In the essay, however, he makes himself plenty vulnerable. "I do love that, when a writer self-implicates," Ms. Delahunty said. "And then comes this point of redemption. It's a loving, honest portrait of a breadwinner that was operating on so many different levels."

One thing that we've never seen in our two years of soliciting these essays is a great one about what it means to be rich. Bad ones abound at Kenyon, alas. "We see a lot of essays about students who have studied abroad and they recognize either their own privilege or that the poor brown people are happier than I," she said. "That's always the ending. I absolutely hate those essays, though I sound like a cynic."

Ms. Delahunty allows, however, that it is hard for teenagers to write about privilege without sounding like they're bragging. And it's complicated, given how seldom affluent children are encouraged to acknowledge their class status and how few of them ever dislike the comfort and experiences that wealth can bring. Mr. Quinlan adds that given how hard many top colleges are working to attract the best lower-income students, applicants may be getting an implicit message that it's better to write about struggling financially.

Still, plenty of parents are paying full freight at \$60,000 a year or more. Here's hoping that one of their children sends in an essay about an underexplored aspect of that life next year. We'll be looking for them again in the mailbox at moneypass@nytimes.com starting next winter, and we'll publish a new batch in the spring.

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Daniel Victor contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on May 10, 2014, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Four Standout College Essays About Money.