

Option #5: The Transition to Adulthood: Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

FIRST DRAFT

When I was young, my family and I would regularly visit my grandfather in the Cape. He loved hosting dinner parties, inviting all his friends and family. One person, who was always present, was my grandfather's best friend John Presley. JP was like a second grandfather to me and he was without a doubt one of the best people I have ever had the privilege of knowing. JP served in the second world war where he flew (in the process of getting more specific information from my grandfather about JP's unit) I remember sitting in the living room with John, enthralled by his unfathomable war stories, when he began talking about how meaningful it was to receive letters while overseas. Although packages were nice, letters were much more personable to him and the rest of the troops, making an awful day seem bearable. The uplifting messages provided them with a reason to keep fighting, reminding them that everything they were doing was worth it. That memory has always stayed with me and lead me to take action in years to come.

On September 11th, 2011 we had an in school assembly, remembering everyone who lost their lives on that day nine years prior. I am fortunate enough to not have known anybody hurt in the attacks. But, listening to so many of my classmates, teachers, and friends speaking individually about the ones they lost really hit home. When I got home from school that day, still thinking about all the things I had heard, I turned on the television to see a man speaking to the camera. It was a troop, talking about the 10-year anniversary of the attacks and how he was willing to fight everyday until he died to protect our country so that nothing like 9/11 would ever happen again. It really just hit home and made me want to do something, anything, to let them know we appreciated their efforts.

I was young and didn't have my license so I knew it would be really difficult to do anything involving travel such as volunteering at a wounded soldiers clinic or talking to vets, etc. I knew I had to do something that involved no need for transportation. My mind flashed to my distant conversation with John Presley and I immediately knew that my plan of action would be to get people actively involved in writing positive and uplifting letters to our soldiers, thanking them for all they have done and still do. I got on the computer and tried to figure out where to begin. I learned of a website called Operation Gratitude that specializes in relations with our troops. I originally just planned on sending in the letters myself, not working with any organization, but after a bit of research I realized I would have a much better chance of my letters actually making it to the soldiers if I worked through a big company. I made sure Operation Gratitude was a credible source and then decided to work with them.

I structured a paragraph entailing all of the requirements necessary to send in a letter. I talked about the cause and how much it would mean for everyone to contribute. I send the passage out online so that everybody in my school and neighboring towns would be able to see it and participate. I also talked about it publicly and ushered people to write. I set the deadline dates for after the holidays since people are the most sincere and efficient about writing around 9/11, Thanksgiving, and Christmas as those are times when everyone really wants to be around the people they love and its easy to imagine how lonely it would be serving. So many soldiers don't have children or wives to send them letters every week or call them. Imagine New Years rolling around and being in some desert in Afghanistan.

I organization the program within my school and tried to get kids writing and although I am sure many other students have done it in other towns, I initiated it at Weston High School. I publicized more with the students than I did with the actual principle and faculty. They school let me keep my bin in the front office but other than that they don't really partake in the process. Students came to me directly with questions and the Facebook group I had running kept everybody informed with dates and requirements. Once I had all my letters collected, I send them in a mass package to Operation Gratitude's main address where they then take the initiative to send them to currently deployed servicemen.

Reading the letters really drove me to keep it up and continue with the program. Some of the letters I read made me want to cry and I've never even been in another state alone, let alone another continent. I feel like if I were alone in such horrific conditions all I would want if for somebody to talk to me, to tell me they were thankful and to give me some sort of outlet to the real world. It was amazing to see how much other students cared and I was glad I provided them with a way to share those feelings.

If I had never done letters to soldiers I would have felt unaccomplished. I feel like you need more than just grades to make you a good student, you need to do something more, something that actually matters in the real world, more so than how to identify the gallbladder in a cow. I have done other volunteer work but it was all things I signed up for, not things I started on my own. I'm not the most athletic in the world or musically talented and I definitely can't act so it is hard to find a place outside of the academic fields that I really excel. But, with Letters to Soldiers I feel like I am making just as large of an impact on the community as the towns quarterback.

I think working on Letters to Soldiers changed me in the sense that I now know how to really work for something I want. Up until Letters to Soldiers, everything was really just handed to me. If I wanted to get a good grade on a test I was given the textbook and study guide to ensure I would. Ultimately we were set up for success. But, with Letters to

Soldiers I really had to go out and get people writing, I had to push them and bother them to write. Success definitely wasn't handed to me; I had to work for it.

It could be argued that it was not be my biggest accomplishment in High School, but it is the one I am most proud of. Letters to Soldiers is a central part of my identity because it shows who I am as a person and what I can achieve when I am passionate about something. I am also a really personal person, meaning I care about things far more than I should. I'm the girl who asks their friend 9000 times if they're alright when they're just having a bad day. I choose the scrawny kids to be on my team in gym class because I don't want them to always feel like they are picked last.

Letters to Soldiers has helped me mature as a person universally. I have an even greater respect and sense admiration for those who serve. I think typically people block out what people in combat are really facing because it is such a horrific topic. But, it's something that needs to be addressed to fully understand and appreciate what they are doing for us, giving their lives. Operation Gratitude had me pre read all the letters before sending them out to make sure they met all requirements. It was a big responsibility in a sense because the letters were going to be being read by people who are desperate for positive words from home, it was up to me to make sure these letters would cheer them up.

I have used letters other students have written to see what really hits home. I mean reading the letters; I got emotions out of some and absolutely nothing out of others. I learned to focus on writing similarly to the really emotional letters because I know that is what I would want to receive if I was serving. They all seemed really genuine. When I write, I wanted to write things that I knew would really mean a lot to the people reading them and that requires a lot of emotion. Originally my letters were more structured like "Hi my names blank, I play blank, I'm in blank grade, I like blank" but, as I continued writing and reading letters I started making them more personal. Telling the soldiers specific stories about my life and just being playful and open.

My parents were really proud to see me standing up for something so important, especially because I had no direct relationship with the topic. They've said they gained a greater respect for me as a person because of the sincerity I had and because of how much I worked towards getting the most letters I possibly could. Letters to Soldiers also heightened my sense of responsibility in my parent's eyes. They learned what I was truly capable of although they were proud, they also began pushing me to work to my fullest potential in all aspects of my work. I have an older sister and two younger brothers, one of whom is a freshman this year and he is hoping to take over as the Letters to Soldiers head when I leave for college. They all think it's an awesome idea. My parents are both also

huge supporters of the troops in general, constantly donating and trying to provide any sort of condolence such as attending veteran parades and such. They have been behind me through the entire process.

FINAL DRAFT

I was eight when I first heard my grandfather's best friend recount his experiences fighting in WWII. As JP described losing friends, spending the holidays alone, and missing the birth of his child, the sharp features that gave him the face of a warrior softened. JP explained how letters from home had helped him cope while deployed. Although packages were nice, letters were more personal; they made the most awful moments bearable and provided him with a reason to keep fighting.

At the beginning of my sophomore year, I heard more stories of loss at a school assembly on 9/11. That evening, I watched a soldier on television talk about how he was willing to fight every day in order to protect our country. In that moment, I realized I wanted to do something to let the troops know that Americans appreciated their efforts. As I had no license, I could not volunteer at a wounded soldiers clinic or visit vets. I remembered JP and immediately knew that I wanted to get people to write letters to our troops.

I knew LTS (Letters to Soldiers) would have an effect on the recipients but did not expect how much the program would help me to mature into the person I am today. Three years of running LTS have given me a feeling of accomplishment in the Weston High School community. I'm not athletic or musically talented, and I definitely can't act, so it was hard to find a place to excel outside of academics. Today, I feel I make just as much of an impact on the community as my town's quarterback.

Until LTS, someone had always handed me the tools I needed to do well in life. If I wanted to get a good grade on a test, I was given the textbook and study guide to ensure that I would succeed. I had done other volunteer work, but starting LTS on my own taught me what I could achieve when I am passionate about something. I am proud that each year my organization has collected an increasing amount of letters, including some from neighboring towns who got wind of my program.

Each letter holds weight as the men and women reading them are desperate to hear from home. Before I can send letters to the military base, I am required to pre-read each one. I check that the letters will cheer up the readers, that they contain limited talk of battle and that they include no swearing, hate messages, or violent imagery. Sometimes it is hard to know where to draw the line; what may be perceived as offensive to one soldier could be a

form of comic relief to another. Ultimately though, it is a responsibility I am glad to take on because the feeling I get is well worth the work.

My parents are proud to see me standing up for something so important and for presenting myself in a mature and responsible manner. They have gained greater respect for me because of my sincerity and determination to send off the most letters I possibly can. My younger brother has also been closely following my work with LTS and is hoping to take over the program when I graduate.

Last year, a boy whose father is deployed in Iraq told me that he had written a letter to his father about LTS. He explained how much it meant to his father to know that somebody with no direct relation to the military appreciated what he was doing overseas. It reassured him that the soldiers were not forgotten. Knowing that I can provide hope to the people who risk their lives for our country is an amazing feeling. I believe that if JP were still alive, he would be proud of what I was doing and glad to know that I had taken his experience to heart.