Essay #1

The beginning of my new "swim journey" creeps closer every day. I will be attending Kenyon College in the fall of 2015 with hopes of majoring in biochemistry and continuing my swimming career.  As I filter through old photos, I find myself reminiscing about fond memories and opportunities I have been blessed with throughout my first 18 years of life.  Photos from around various pool decks make me smile most and warm my heart in special ways.

            I started swimming for the Eau Claire YMCA Marlins at the age of five.  In the beginning, swimming involved lots of "25s", treats, and cheers.  Over time practice changed and became more focused - time on the clock held greater meaning, and real goals were established. Swimming enriched my life in more ways than I probably realize, and one of the greatest blessings God has given me is my YMCA swim family and community.

            In the most literal sense, swimming allowed me to bond with my two older brothers. It is rare that brothers and sisters can compete and train together for an athletic sport, but swimming made that possible. I believe my relationship with my brothers is stronger because of the time we spent in the pool together, both training and at swim meets.  We share an understanding of each other's lives that only comes from being teammates and that continues into our college swimming careers.

            In a broader sense, I have a second family, my YMCA Marlin Swim Team. I was recently asked, "What is your favorite thing about being a Marlin?"  My reply was, "The life-long friendships you make with your teammates and coaches."  Times, qualifications, and performance are all very important, but my greatest memories are moments I have shared with teammates and coaches. I would never have been able to accomplish half of the things I have in the pool if it weren't for a supportive team, coach, and family.  Swimming has pushed me to break limits I didn't think possible, which carries into all aspects of my life. I attribute much of my academic success to the discipline I have learned in the pool. I truly feel "at home" when I go to practice.  It's a time I look forward to, a time to work hard with a family that is always welcoming.

            In the grandest sense, YMCA swimming has given me a still larger family all around Wisconsin.  I love traveling to swim meets and seeing friends from throughout the state. Having competed in meets and gone to several swim camps all over the country, my favorite meet will forever be YMCA State at Schroeder.  Bigger, faster meets always offer exciting competition, but the swim community that surrounds YMCA meets in Wisconsin is unbeatable.

As graduation nears, I begin to realize how unsure the future really is. I do not know where I will be heading after four years of college or what I will be doing, but I do know one thing for sure. I know that I will always hold a special place in my heart for YMCA swimming. My memories will forever be dear to me, and the friendships forever in my life. I believe YMCA swimming in my life is a blessing from God. I look forward to embracing my last YMCA state in a few weeks, with the main goal of having fun and making lasting memories with very special people- my coaches, teammates, friends and family.

Essay #2

I have been swimming with a YMCA swim team since I was 7 years old. My first year swimming was at the Eastwood YMCA in Niles, Ohio. The team then folded one year later and I had to move to the Youngstown YMCA. Here is where my love of swimming really began. I swam for the Neptunes for five years and made many lifelong friends along the way. I also hit many milestones on this team, such as making my first Zones team, breaking my first team records, and breaking a minute in the 100 yard freestyle. When I was thirteen years old, my mother got a promotion that moved our family to Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. This was a very hard time in my life. I felt as though I was leaving everything I knew, like my friends, school, and hometown, behind. I did not think I was going to “fit in” in my new environment. However, I was proven wrong the very first day of practice with the YMCA of Pabst Farms Piranhas. I was immediately welcomed into a new family of swimmers and had a large group of friends before my first day of school. That time period was when I realized that no matter where my life takes me, swimmers (and especially YMCA swimmers) are a unique breed and I will always find friends and feel welcome among them.

I have been with the YMCA at Pabst Farms for 5 years now. It is with this team that I began training at an elite level and accomplished many more milestones. I’ve had the privilege of being named to the YMCA Nationals team every year since the 8th grade and was able to experience Nationals when it was still in Fort Lauderdale. It is also because of this team that I decided to continue swimming collegiately and have been fortunate enough to receive athletic scholarships from several schools. When I finally make my decision as to which college I will attend, I know that I will have the swimming and social skills that YMCA swimming has taught me.

I will miss my new Wisconsin swimming friends when I go to college, just as I missed my Ohio swimming friends 5 years ago. I know now that YMCA swimming has probably been the most important influence on my life so far, and is responsible for the opportunities I have today. Being a part of such a special organization has not only given me the skills and opportunities I have now, but it has also taught me so many life lessons that I will carry with me in the future. I am very thankful to the YMCA organization and YMCA swimming.

Essay #3

    When people are asked about life changing events, they usually respond with a study abroad program or a near death experience. My life changing experience is definitely not as glamorous, but nevertheless it did change many aspects of my life. Joining the Appleton YMCA Swim Team has significantly altered my life because it has given me great friends, allowed me to gain a sense of confidence, and given me uncontrollable passion for the sport of swimming.

    Through training with my team I have made many friends and learned a lot about myself. When I first started swimming, I didn’t have many friends. I was the shy girl at school sitting in the back of the classroom praying that the teacher would not call on me to answer a question. My teammates have completely altered me. Swimmers are by nature crazy, loud, and extremely friendly. So when I walked onto the pool deck for the first day of practice, I was hit with a wave of energy from these psychotic children. All of my barriers were broken down as I began to makes friends who were my new teammates. My teammates are the best people in world. They help me push through the hard practices, cheer for me at the end of my lane, and just make me laugh. My teammates lift me up every day and have become my best friends. I love them and consider them to be my family, or as our team calls it, our swamily.

Along with new friends came a new sense of confidence. This is not only because of the love and support I received, but also because of the mental training swimming requires. My coaches always tell me swimming is 99% mental and only 1% physical. I have come to live by this statement. A swimmer constantly has to talk to themselves when they are swimming because no one else is there, it’s just them and the water. Of course swimmers have teammates, coaches, and parents that support them, but you can not talk or hear them when you are swimming. Swimmers learn to support themselves and become their own cheerleaders. I constantly talk to myself during practice and races so I do not shut down. I tell myself “You are not tired,” “You are so strong, you can finish this,” “You can beat the person next to you,” and “You are a fast swimmer” on a daily basis. This type of positive mental training helps me immensely not only in the swimming world, but also the in the real world with tests, speeches, job interviews etc. I am extremely happy to say the shy girl I used to be no longer exists because of swimming.

One of the most important things the YMCA Swim Team has given me is a passion for the sport of swimming. I could talk until I am blue in the face about how much I love swimming, but to a non-swimmer, they wouldn’t understand. You really have to experience swimming for yourself to know how incredible the sport truly is. I have never loved and hated something so much. Swimming is the most difficult, scary, heartbreaking, fulfilling, and rewarding experience I have ever been a part of. Swimming is my entire life, I can not imagine living in a world where it doesn’t exist. Every day I sprint to practice to tell my friends about what happened at school. I look forward to my classmates saying “You smell like chlorine!” to which I reply “Thank you, it’s my natural scent.” I love stretching into those tiny knee suits that make me feel like Aqua man. I spend the majority of my days thinking about how to improve my swimming. I live to compete and strive to be the best. The YMCA Swim Team has not only given me a wonderful sport to participate in, but it has given me a lifestyle. I will never be able to repay the YMCA Swim Team for this, but I am eternally grateful and

thank God every day for being able to be a part of it.

Essay #4

While most kids’ school day consists of yellow buses, ringing bells, big classes, and scheduled periods, mine was filled with family, quiet, independence, and learning; I was a homeschooler. This commonly stereotyped and misunderstood form of education is often associated with social ineptitude, and whilst this label holds some level of accuracy, as my involvement in public programs was slightly more limited in comparison to the average public school student, it was thanks to the YMCA swim program that I managed to build my bridge to a community.

At every stage in my life I have been an outgoing, social child. However, there have been periods, mainly during my homeschooling, when I have had minimal opportunities to express myself socially. The YMCA swim team granted me a social outlet, consisting of a diverse group of people ranging in age, gender, and ethnicity, with varying gifts, both physically and personality-wise. Such a range of characters pushed me to further my social skills, and sometimes step outside my comfort level. The long-lasting relationships that I have created with my teammates, coaches, and parents are a direct result of the wonderful opportunity I have had on the YMCA swim team.

With my peers, I have built friendships. With my younger teammates, I have become a role model. And with my coaches, I have gained role models. I have watched my teammates grow as people, as well as swimmers. For example, through the connections the YMCA has given me, I was able to become a babysitter for one of my coaches, and had the amazing opportunity to witness and assist her daughter to grow and learn. Although they have moved, I will cherish the relationships I built for the rest of my life.

As well as being given the opportunity to connect with others, being a part of the YMCA swim team has shown me the value of belonging to and being a responsible member of a community. Inside such a community lies an intricate network of support for all members involved, developing the team into one of assistance, reliance, and love. I learned that one has to offer help, as well as ask for it. One example is seen in the relationships between the older and younger swimmers. There is a constant cycle of younger swimmers looking to the older ones to be role models, and then the young ones growing, and becoming role models themselves. I recall, during the beginning of my swimming career, talking to my teammates and my parents about how I wanted to be exactly like the oldest swimmers on the team. Once I became one of the older swimmers on the team, I have often received comments from parents telling me that their kids want to be just like me. Going through these phases of swimming, I have learned the value of teamwork, leadership, support, and belonging to a community.

Although homeschooling provided me with a flexible and easygoing learning style, the swimming routine and daily activity structured my day, and helped me to develop and maintain habits. As a result, I have learned the value of structure, discipline and commitment. The discipline and commitment the program taught me, has extended into other aspects of my life, and has been essential for my success as a well-rounded student, as well as a swimmer.

I imagine now just how much different my life would have been if it had not been for the YMCA swim program. I can picture now the gawky, awkward, nine-year-old version of myself, and it is amazing how much my life has been enhanced internally, mentally, and through the connections that I have made. I have proved to those who categorize and look down on homeschooling that it is not only possible to be socially capable while learning at home, but that one can succeed in becoming a tremendous friend, and being well loved in return. Thanks to the YMCA, I am confident in pursuing whatever life holds in my future, and crossing whatever bridges I choose to build.

Essay #5

Looking back on my Preschool Years, it seems that most of my memories are experiences that I had at the Schroeder YMCA. It began with my time in Y Kid’s Club. In this class, I learned all of the things kids traditionally learn in Preschool, but I also learned more important life lessons like how to share, how to be a good friend, and care for others.

Preschool was so much fun that I wanted to do more at the Y. This is how I discovered my love for the water.  My friend, Edward and I took swim classes with our favorite teacher, Dan. We played games and had fun, but we also learned a lot about swimming. This enthusiasm and love of swimming brought me to the swim team.

I've been a member of the Schroeder Swim Team for thirteen years. The best thing about swimming for a YMCA team is that the people you're swimming with aren't just your teammates; they're your family. I love being part of a team where I know that we all support each other. If I'm having a bad day, I can count on one of my friends or coaches to pull me aside and ask me what's wrong. I didn’t  realize this didn’t happen on all teams until my freshman year of High School. The girls on my team talked about how much they wanted to stay in high school season forever because they disliked the culture of their club teams.  They felt that the experience of swimming on their club teams was stressful. They did not feel as supported on their club teams as they did in High School.  My experience was the opposite; all I could think about how excited I was to get back to Schroeder in November. This year, a lot of those girls who are seniors on my High School team ended up quitting right after the season ended. They are too burned out to swim in college.  At Schroeder, most swimmers plan to continue in college. This speaks to the positive atmosphere created by the coaches and swimmers on the team.

The Y’s Four Core Values of Honesty, Respect, Responsibility, and Caring that I began learning during my Preschool career at the Y have been present throughout my entire time at Schroeder and can be seen each day at practice. My teammates and I Respect our coaches, teammates, and ourselves by always doing our best.  We show Caring by always supporting each other, even when it’s hard. Our coaches encourage us to always be Honest with them about how we are feeling. As we get older, we are encouraged to take Responsibility by helping out the younger swimmers. The Y lessons I learned way back in Preschool continue to grow everyday at practice.  They may seem basic and simple, but I don’t think these ideas are widely practiced in todays society. I believe that these values have taught me not only how to be a good swimmer and teammate, but also a good person.

Essay #6

Whether it is the youngest kids on the team or your fellow high school swimmers, everyone looks up to the top. Most of the time, the attitude of the whole pool is set by the oldest, fastest kids. If they complain about a set or begin the day with a poor attitude and a bad temper, it is reflected across the whole pool; however, if they start a practice excited to get in the pool and happy to be there, the change of attitude is astounding. When I first joined the team, I was very indifferent about swimming and didn’t understand this concept; I got in the pool and did what the coach said. It never occurred to me that I had really good days when the atmosphere was fun, and I had poor days when the older kids seemed unmotivated. I did know, however, that I was always thrilled to see and swim with the older kids and when they seemed excited to see me, I would work extremely hard to impress them. One of my biggest role models on the team when I first joined was four years older than me. I was constantly trying to live up to his standard so I could catch his eye and maybe even a compliment. This drive to do well and to impress others escalated my swimming to huge extremes. I never took the easy way out and I always was looking for a challenge so that I could fit in with the older kids. Extra practices were always welcome in my mind and I went to dryland practices even though most of kids there were at least a year older than me. As a young athlete, I didn’t realize that my drive to stand out to the older kids was the reason that I did so well.

Now, I can see the effect that being an older, experienced swimmer has on the team. If I ask a young swimmer how they are doing that day, their eyes light up as they tell me every detail of their day. If I wish a swimmer good luck before a race, they get a completely new look of determination on their face. After a race, if I say good job or congratulations, I can see a sense of accomplishment within them, even if it wasn’t their best race. I know now that to be noticed by the fast kids is the goal of every young athlete. This not only makes the young kids feel good about themselves, but it makes me feel good because I know that an action that I did encouraged someone else and made them more confident in their abilities. I realize now that an upbeat demeanor makes everyone else lively and can even change how I am feeling that particular day.

Once, I was at a meet down in Green Bay and two of the young boys on our team came up to me and commented on my tech suit that I was wearing. They told me that it was the coolest suit they have seen and they asked me all about it. Later that weekend, their mom came up to me and told me that she now had two sons asking her to buy them each $300+ fastskins so that they could look like me and swim as fast as me. Words cannot explain how flattered I was that these boys wanted to be so much like me. Whenever I see these guys and other young swimmers on the team, I make sure to give them a high five or even just to say hello. I remember how much that meant to me when I was their age and I want them to grow up to realize the same thing. The idea that I am now a role model to the members of the team makes me realize how big of an effect I have on everyone. I don’t think that I would understand the importance that a role model has on people if I had not joined the team. By understanding what my role model did for me, I hope to inspire future swimmers the same way.

Essay #7

There is something unique about a YMCA swim team. No matter what team you swim for your cap will have Y-M-C-A printed on it. Y-M-C-A is more than four letters; it symbolizes a connection of people across the country. Being a member of a YMCA swim team has affected my life by helping me to overcome challenges, establish friendships and learn the importance of teamwork.

I was introduced to the water as soon as I could walk. Immediately, I fell in love with it. For years I took swimming lessons through our local YMCA but my love for swimming grew when I joined the YMCA competitive swim team at the age of eight. From the start, I knew I didn’t have the natural talent other swimmers had. However, I had something that many didn’t have, a drive to succeed. No matter how many times I touched the wall in eighth place or how many times I missed the qualifying cuts for championship meets, I never lost sight of my goal; attending YMCA Nationals. A time I recall having to “dig deep” was when I missed my National cut in the 500 free by a few tenths of a second. I didn’t let this define me. I knew that the next season I would work harder than I ever before. I took this great upset and used it to better myself. My persistence and determination continued and the following year I made my first Y-National cut. Overcoming challenges such as that made me the swimmer I am today.

Swimming on a YMCA team has allowed me to build friendships that will last a lifetime. One of the most memorable moments of my life was attending the YMCA’s Natalie Bolin Swim Camp. The purpose of the camp is to connect YMCA swimmers. Although the duration of the camp was only a week, it impacted me greatly. I found myself being introduced to competitors that I had passed the on the deck but never had the chance to get to know personally. I knew that we shared a passion for a demanding sport but also learned that we had common values and interests. This new understanding opened the doors for me to be able to provide greater support to those sharing the blocks with me at meets. Unlike a club team, an association with a YMCA team makes each swimmer a part of a greater family. Now, when I see YMCA printed on a swim cap, I feel confident that I am no longer alone on the blocks but among lifelong friends and family!

Last, but certainly not least, being part of a YMCA swim team has taught me the importance of teamwork. I once considered swimming to be an individual sport but over time have learned that although it does have an individual component, a swimmer is better able to reach goals when one functions as a teammate. Although I am ultimately responsible for the effort I put into my training, my YMCA teammates influence my success and vice versa. My teammates and coaches have shown me how my individual effort and attitude can affect the team as a whole. If a person walks into practice with a smile on their face, everyone will be positively affected by it. Having teammates who are positive helps to create an environment where everyone can strive for success. There is nothing better than going to a practice where the atmosphere is enjoyable, supportive and where everyone is focused on helping each other to improve. That is what I have in my YMCA swim team!

I have been a part of the YMCA family for as long as I can remember and it has had a profound effect on my development as a swimmer and as a person! It has helped me to overcome challenges, establish friendships and to learn the importance of teamwork. I am grateful for the years I have spent on a YMCA team and for all that it has done for me!

Essay #8

After nearly nine years of competitive swimming through the YMCA one thing has become abundantly clear to me, most of what I have learned through swimming has very little to do with what my times are at the end of the season. The enduring life lessons of hard work, integrity, and friendship coupled with the YMCA core values of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring are what I will take away from my years as an OSHY Dolphin. Through this program, I have grown from a goofy little nine year old who had no idea how to put on her swim cap into a strong and independent individual with big dreams in life; who I am today would not have been possible without YMCA swimming.

I joined the swim team as a bright-eyed and energetic kid eager to meet new people and make friends. Little did I know that the teammates that I had in those early years of swimming, and would continue to gain throughout my career, would become my best friends and second family. As my coach likes to say, there is special bond created among people who go through difficult things together; my teammates and I have endured hours upon hours of grueling workouts, draining meets, and all of the emotional ups and downs of growing up together. As a result, we have been able to share and enjoy each other’s successes and lean on one another through times of tragedy and hardship. Last year I even had the amazing opportunity to serve as a coach to the younger swimmers on my team. Through coaching I have been able to form strong relationships with my swimmers, help them improve their strokes and endurance, and help to build their character by focusing not only on becoming a good swimmer but a good teammate and person as well. Coaching has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life and has personally impacted me tremendously. There is no better feeling than motivating kids to try harder, swim faster, hit their goals, and watch them begin to realize that they can do more than they ever thought possible. It is amazing to watch them become more confident and grow as people, and to know that by being their coach I was able to help point them in the right direction.

My extended YMCA swimming family even goes beyond my own team; through the YMCA swimming program I have had some amazing opportunities to go beyond Oshkosh and meet people from all over. I have attended YMCA National Meets, the YMCA Swimming Leadership Development Camp, and the Natalie Bolin Swim Camp in Ely, Minnesota, all of which have brought me some amazing new friends and have taught me a lot about myself. These experiences have made me not only a better swimmer and teammate but have taught me leadership skills that will serve me well for the rest of my life.

YMCA swimming has given me the invaluable gift of being part of something bigger than myself. I cannot think of what my life would be without the influence of this tremendous program, and I am deeply grateful for everything the YMCA has done for me as a swimmer and as a well-rounded person. As I prepare to head off for college in the coming months, I know that ahead of me I have years of fun, excitement, and new experiences and opportunities to take advantage of. While I am excited to start this new chapter in life, I am sad that I will not have swimming be a daily part of my life anymore. But I also know that I will not be saying goodbye, and that I will take the work ethic, lessons, and unwavering spirit of my YMCA swimming family with me wherever I go. I wish this program nothing but the best in the future as it continues to impact lives for the better just as it has impacted mine.

Essay #9

My journey to the YMCA swim team began a little differently than most. I had been taking swimming lessons at the Y for many years, when the instructor of one of my classes had us treading water for an impractical amount of time. Soon enough, ten-year old me thought she was drowning. I left that class traumatized and decided I had had enough of swim lessons. After a year off, I came to my senses and gave swim lessons another shot. Each week I found myself anxiously awaiting my next class. I realized that I was not satisfied in swimming only once a week and decided to join the swim team. Little did I know the impact that this seemingly small decision would have on the rest of my life.

My teammates have played a vital role in various aspects of my life. Imagining my life without them is impossible. They have taken me in like a member of the family, showing sincere kindness and acceptance. Having always been a quiet person, this environment allowed me to leave my normal comfort zone and not only be myself, but discover who that really was. None of this would have been possible if it were not for my involvement on my local swim team.

As much as I love the sport of swimming, it has not been all fun and games. I have come across many hardships throughout my swimming career. I had been used to things, like school, coming easily to me. Swimming, however, was the exception. At first, this frustrated me. Who wants to be good at school? I would much rather be good at something I enjoyed, like swimming. My coach worked to teach me that swimming is mostly mental and that in order to be successful, I needed to believe in myself. It was a long process, but I could always count on my coach and teammates to be there for me no matter what. They became very good at taking my mind off of my races and instead focusing on having fun. Throughout this time, I finally learned to relax. I was reminded of why I joined swimming in the first place: the love of the sport.

Teammates were not the only people that swimming has brought into my life. The common interest of swimming has connected me with people from all over the state and even a few out of the state. I owe a large part of this to the two summers that I had the opportunity to attend the Natalie Bolin swim camp. Each year was a unique and indescribable experience. The camp brought swimmers together from all over. It was amazing to witness how a group of people could arrive to camp as strangers, but in the completion of just a week, form friendships that felt as though we had known each other for so much longer. Even to this day, when we see each other around at swim meets, we talk and wish one another good luck. Again, without swimming, this was an experience that I would have never had.

One of my biggest regrets has always been not joining the swim team sooner. Any additional time with my team would mean so much to me as I am not ready to leave them this coming summer. Each and every teammate has given me endless support and provided memories to last a lifetime. I owe them so much for all they have done for me. Without my teammates and all of the wonderful experiences that being a part of my YMCA swim team has provided me, I would not be the person I am today.

Essay #10

Parading around the Greensboro Aquatic Center during the commencement ceremonies of the 2013 YMCA National Championships, my preoccupations that I did not belong there quickly subsided thanks to the inimitable atmosphere and being surrounded by some of my closest friends and teammates. Prior to arriving at the meet, I worried that I did not even deserve to be there, with swimmers of such excellent caliber, because I was seeded dead last in the only event I had qualified for, the 200 backstroke. However, despite my perceived inadequacy, the YMCA environment – brimming with spirit and camaraderie – drowned out my feelings of self-doubt and replaced those with feelings of profound appreciation for the sport of swimming. At this moment, I realized the entirety of the impact YMCA swimming had had on my life – most notably through the building of my character and developing of deep friendships.

Since I joined the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team nearly eight years ago, my life has been drastically altered for the better. In my experience, the coaching staff always emphasized the fact that the only way to genuinely improve as a swimmer was through legitimate hard work and intense intrinsic motivation. And, while I found that possessing both of these qualities simultaneously involved a considerable amount of mental fortitude, I developed the attitude that my successes and failures were wholly dependent on my own behaviors and attitudes in the practice environment. Even beyond my individual goals, though, remained the emphasis on team, which served as my driving force for so many years. Recently I was reminded of my ability, as a senior leader on the team, to have a substantial impact on the performance and attitude of the team. In my opinion, I believe such a lesson holds true in all circumstances, whether they be in the pool or the real world, because a team relies on every individual – especially those viewed as leaders. The extreme time commitment to swimming drove me to become more organized academically and more adept to managing my relationships beyond the pool. Undeniably, in this sense swimming has actually highlighted the priorities in my life and forced me to focus on that which I am sincerely passionate about.

Perhaps the most invaluable gift YMCA swimming has given me is that of friendship. Without hesitation, I can say that the relationships and friendships I have forged on Schroeder YMCA Swim Team surpass anything I could ever have hoped for. The people I have had the blessing to become friends with will irrefutably endure as some of the foremost characters in my life, hopefully for a very long time. These are the people who have kept me motivated even when I felt I had nothing left to give to the sport of swimming; these are the people who have stood by me even through the turbulence of life; these are the people who have become family to me. And I proudly admit that each of these individuals has bettered me and shaped my character into what it is today. For that, I could not possibly be more grateful for the Schroeder YMCA Swim and the organization of YMCA swimming.

Ultimately, even after I've hung up my goggles and towel for the final time, I won't remember my personal bests or the awards I received; however, I *will* remember the people I encountered, the friendships I made, and the effects the sport of swimming had on my life. YMCA swimming has provided me with an outstanding community and even more outstanding relationships over the past eight years, which have certainly become permanently instilled into the character I am today. The influence of YMCA swimming on my life will not soon be forgotten.

Essay #11

           As I take my place behind the block, I am watching the other swimmer in the heat before me.  I am analyzing her technique and how tired she looks at the end of the race, thinking why am I voluntarily putting myself through this pain?  Then, I hear the whistle indicating to step on to block, and the starter say “take your mark”.  I take my position on the block; I can feel the adrenaline starting running through my veins and then the beep to start to race.  I explode off the block into the water; any nerves I had disappear.  I am focused on swimming.   At the end of the pool, my teammates are screaming my name, just as I would be for them, but I can’t hear anything.  I am in my zone; I am racing.

           Many times I would come to practice and not want to practice, thinking about everything else I had to complete that night.  I would get preoccupied with other tasks that I couldn’t focus.  When I get into the water, all of that disappears.  I am solely focusing on swimming.  I have used swimming as a way to relieve stress.  I turn something negative into something positive.   If I had a bad day, I can always take it out into the pool.  This way, I am improving my technique and becoming a better swimmer.  My drive to want to succeed in swimming is evident by my practice habits and hard work at practice.  My hard work pays off at meets, when I get a best time or state cut.  At some meets I don’t perform my best.  I have learned many of my races will not be the best race, and I have to accept that and move onto the next race. I have to be a good teammate, cheer others on, focus on my next race and do my best swimming that race.

Swimming has taught me to be patient; the time will come if I continue to work hard and not give up.  I also have learned the importance of dedication.  Being a swimmer, you have to push yourself.  Others are there to help you, but in the end, you are the one racing and no one else can do that for you.

Throughout my many years of swimming, I have forged friendships that will last a lifetime.  My teammates have become my best friends and push me to perform my best.   When I am having a bad day, my team is always there to cheer me up and help me get through it.  Over the years, I have learned how valuable my team is and how important they are to me.  I have also grown to be a leader on the team.  Showing other teammates that I will not let one race get me down is important because they will follow what I do.  I show them that it doesn’t affect the rest of my races and that I am strong.  Also, I have learned to be a leader by pushing myself at practice and telling others to do the same, and it creates a domino effect.  The more swimmers push each other, the better practice will be, and we will have better races.  Finally, I have learned leadership is being proud of my team and my races.  No matter what happens in a race, I always go up to my teammates and congratulate them or help them feel better after a bad race.  I take initiative and show them I care about their races.

           When I step up to the block, I always think of the quote, “Believe in yourself and everything else will fall into place.  Have faith in your abilities, work hard and there is nothing you cannot accomplish.”  Through swimming I have modeled this quote.  Swimming has taught me many things about myself and there is no where I would rather be than in to pool.  The swimming pool has become my home.

Essay #12

When I joined swim team at 7 years old, I had no idea that the people around me would become an extension of my family. I had the privilege of being coached by Jon Brenner for the first 6 years of my swimming career and even made it to State twice. Coach Jon set the foundation on which our team stood, “With a team behind you, so much more is possible.” While blessed to have him as a coach, we were burdened by grief from his early departure. Through that trial, though, we continued to rest in his words and be there for each other. We learned that change is a necessary part of life. Head coaches came and went, with the team being introduced to a new one almost every year. It was tough, but the young people swimming next to me stayed, becoming a part of my family with the pool turning into my second home.

Somewhere in the midst of all of this, my little sister, my only teammate related to me by blood and not just chlorine, started to become faster than me. That’s right, my little sister… by 3 years! As you might guess, this didn’t sit well with me at first. Who knew that a couple of seconds would bring me to a crossroads in my life? One afternoon, I figured I had two options. One, I could quit swimming because, let’s face it, who wants to get beat by her little sister? Two, I could continue swimming, but resent my sister forever. When I looked closely at Option 1, I started thinking about how much I would miss my team, the swim meets, joking around with my teammates every day, and how much, dare I say it, I would miss those long, hard sets and the satisfaction that comes with completing them (don’t tell my coach I said that…). Overall, how much I would miss my “pool-family”. So, after tossing Option 1 out the window, I examined Option 2 and spotted the error in my logic. Just because I’m slower than my little sister, it isn’t her fault. Thinking it through, I came to the conclusion that whether I had a sister or not, I would still be this speed; she had nothing to do with it. I saw how our coaches and teammates supported everyone on the team- whether they’re so-called “fast” or “not”. So, following their example, I decided to be her biggest cheerleader and support system.

When I made this decision, it affected the way I looked at the whole world and my approach to everything around me. Without swim team, I wouldn’t have had that revelation and who knows what kind of person I could have turned out to be? I became so supportive of my sister- offering advice on how to improve her strokes, etc.- that my mom teased that I was like a coach to her. That made me think, ‘Hey, I really enjoy this side of swimming too’, and I started coaching the youngest group on our team and teaching swimming lessons 2 years ago. I love encouraging and helping our young swimmers through some of the typical “swimmer struggles” just like my coaches did for me.

Swim team has become my family and they are the reason I go to practice every day, wake up at 5am in the summer, the reason I’m okay with smelling like chlorine all the time, and losing my voice after a swim meet weekend because I’m cheering so loudly. The reason that I’m okay with not getting best times every swim because I know I’ll still get a smile and a high five from my coaches and teammates. I can’t thank them enough for providing a positive environment for the past 11 years of my life to learn and grow into the positive person I am today. Being a part of the Y swim team has taught me that life isn’t always about the clock, but about the relationships you make along the way.

Essay #13

When I attended my first swim practice in second grade, I swam 50 yards, and the next thing I knew I was sitting on the pool deck in tears. Since then I have come a long way, but the team I am a part of is still a positive influence on me. My involvement on the Fox Cities YMCA Swim Team has helped me grow into a better person, allowing team bonds to build into the YMCA’s core values. The coaches that have helped me become a better swimmer were more than coaches on the pool deck. My coaches have taught me, through the use of hard practices, self-discipline and responsibility. If I did not want to work hard in practice and push myself, then it wouldn’t pay off during races. While much of practice is spent with our heads under water, the time spent above has let me hear some of the most inspirational quotes from my coaches. During one particularly difficult practice, I heard my coach Ben say, “The worst thing that can happen is you’ll get tired.” This message has stuck with me and helped me through a variety of struggles, whether they are in the pool or in other areas of my life. The compassion that my coaches have shown towards their swimmers, from young to old, earns them respect from all.

Without the team mates that I have swam with, I would have only lasted a few years swimming. Some of the friends I have met on FCYST have become my competitors during the high school swimming, and push me to work harder during the high school and YMCA swimming season. When I joined the oldest practice group my freshman year, there were a few older swimmers who I looked up to as role models. Then, I looked up to them as good swimmers, who I had a hard time keeping up with. Now that I am a senior on the team, I focus less on how they swam, and more on how they conducted themselves. This has helped me to be a more caring person, and similar to my coaches’ motivations, to be a responsible team mate. Swimming on FCYST has molded me into a better person in all ways. The people around me in this sport have provided many moments of joy, knowledge of success, and a means to spread the YMCA’s core values.

Essay #14

I have been a member of the Chippewa Valley YMCA (CVY) Swim Team for twelve years which, in reality, is most of my life. In fact, I cannot imagine what my life would be like without the swim team. What I know for sure is that being a part of this organization has impacted my life immensely. My time on the CVY Swim Team has rewarded me with a sense of pride, confidence, and work ethic that I would not have obtained anywhere else; also, my time on the CVY Swim Team fostered my competitive drive and nurtured an inner “spark” that I didn’t know existed. For the past twelve years, the CVY Swim Team has shown me nothing but love. While my teammates and coaches often showered me with the traditional “touchy-feely” love, more often than not, I received the other kind of love - “tough love” - which was the exact kind of love I needed most.

In the beginning of my swimming career, I was always one step behind the rest of my teammates. I was never at the top of the pack; in fact, I was hidden in the shadows, and my confidence was low. Because of that, although I loved the sport, I thought that I would never beat the clock, my opponents, my teammates, or myself. That left me trailing behind, unknown and not proud of myself or what I was doing. I was just going through the motions. Then came the tough love that I so desperately needed. In my sixth year of swimming, I met my coach and personal hero, Patrick Finley. He pushed me to a point that I didn’t even know existed. Five evening practices per week - required. Three dry-land practices per week - required. Three morning practices per week - required. That year was one I will never forget. It was the most brutal, painful, physically draining, yet absolutely revealing year of my swimming career. It was the year that Patrick and tough love showed me what I was made of. That year, I made it to state for the first time ever. It was in the 200 fly, an event that I never even knew I could swim, let alone love.

Patrick was my coach for only one short year, but that year and those that followed helped me become the person I am today. I became a dreamer. I became a fighter. I became a leader. I am no longer the girl hidden in the shadows, but the captain of her high school swim team. I learned to accept the fact that success and failure walk hand-in-hand, to embrace each and every one of them with open arms, and to take pride in both equally. I learned that working hard and pushing through the pain, in any situation, can only make you stronger. I learned to value the input of my coaches and teammates. I learned the importance of tough love and the CVY Swim Team. I learned to believe in myself.

Twelve years of swimming has definitely made me a better person, and as my last YMCA state meet quickly approaches, the reality that it is all coming to an end is hitting me hard. I have been to every state meet since I swam that first 200 fly six years ago, but this will be my last. It will be the last time I step up to those blocks and swim in that pool and the last time I will be with my teammates and coaches. In fact, the 200 fly will be my last race ever as a member of the CVY Swim Team. While I am a little sad, I know this will be the perfect ending to my hard-fought and amazing YMCA swimming career. On that day, I will race my heart out; and no matter the outcome, I will hold my head high and embrace the fact that my 12 years as a part of the CVY Swim Team is boiling down to that one moment. I am blessed and will be forever grateful for those years. To quote Patrick, “I have faith in you and your abilities. No challenge is too great. Fight through.”

Essay #15

I have been on the swim team at the Manitowoc-Two Rivers YMCA since I was 8 years old. Being a member of the Manta Rays swim team has had a positive impact on my life. At the YMCA, we have four core values: honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring. Being on swim team has helped me grow in each of these areas. At our team banquet at the end of each season, the coaches present an award for each of these four categories. In 2010, I won the Honesty Core Value award which has motivated me to live up to that award every day.

Swim team has taught me to respect my coaches and teammates. My coaches are there to help me, and I appreciate all the help I get so I can become a better swimmer and a well-rounded person. I have also learned the value of responsibility. If I want to improve my times, it’s up to me to work hard at practice. When I don’t achieve a goal, I take responsibility and try to look for how I can do better next time. Caring is another core value that I have learned. I not only care about my times, but I also help my teammates reach their goal and improve on their skills.

Being a part of a team is like having a second family. I have made so many close friends over my 10 years on the team. I have formed strong, close relationships with many teammates and my coaches. It is very reassuring knowing that I can count on them to have my back, and I have theirs. I have also grown to be a role model to younger swimmers. Just like I looked up to the older swimmers when I was young, the younger swimmers on the team look up to me. I have learned how to be a leader by being a part of the swim team.

Being a member of the swim team has taught me how much hard work pays off. When I look back on my swimming technique over the years, I see how much I have progressed. I have become successful with the help of my coaches, teammates, and family members. My dives, starts, endurance, and strokes have all improved, and my times have gotten faster each year. Being on the swim team has opened my eyes to how complex the sport of swimming is. The technique for each stroke, turn, and start can vary between each person. You have to find what works best for you. Nothing beats the feeling that I get when I am having a good day moving smoothly through the water. That feeling is something that all swimmers should look for and remember.

Swimming is a beneficial exercise and has influenced me to pursue a career in Kinesiology. In my future, I also would like to coach a swim team. However, swimming is more than just a sport to me. It has helped make me who I am today. On Saturday, February 28th, 2015, I swam my last meet in the pool at the Manitowoc-Two Rivers YMCA as a Manta Ray. That day was filled with so much emotion both happy and sad. I am so thankful for all the memories I have made being a part of the swim team for 10 years. Being a Manta Ray has affected my life in so many ways and I thank everyone who has supported me throughout the years.

Essay #16

On OSHY, our team motto is “Stronger Together”. Through my 10 years of swimming for the Oshkosh YMCA, I have come to learn that this motto is 100% true. Without my family, team, coaches, and community, I would not be who I am today. Swimming for the YMCA has given me the opportunity to see the benefits of teamwork, respect, and dedication, and apply these lessons to everyday life.

At a young age, I learned the importance of having a strong team bond. Even as an 8 year old, we would have the occasional all-team practices so that we younger kids could learn from the older kids. These practices developed a sense of family amongst the team, in which we could rely on the teenage swimmers to guide us just as older siblings would. My whole life, I knew I could look up to the older kids to give me advice and encourage me. For me, the national level older swimmers were amazing role models, and I aspired to be like them. Now that I am an older, national level swimmer, I want to be a role model for the younger kids. YMCA swimming has allowed me to work with the younger kids and be that inspiration I always aspired to be. Through the comradery developed in a YMCA community, I grew up seeing the positive affects teamwork had on everyone involved, and I continue to strive to use those teamwork skills in the classroom setting and in the real world.

In order to work well as a team, everyone involved needs to respect each other, and YMCA swimming has given me the opportunity to learn how to do so. Just as seeing the older kids work together showed me how to act, growing up seeing them be respectful young adults taught me how to make progress in the world. I have come to learn that when my teammates and I respect each other, we build a sense of trust and we all perform better. Respecting my competitors is equally as important as respecting teammates. We are able to form bonds with other swimmers around the state and country, so it is important to respect this opportunity. For example, at YMCA Nationals we are able to meet swimmers from all over the country, dress up silly with them for opening ceremonies, and even dance together to the YMCA song. We can only enjoy this time with our competitors if we respect them. Respecting coaches is also important; I have travelled to many meets in which my own coach could not be there, so respecting other coaches around the state has helped me set up connections to have people to rely on at these meets. If you respect others, they will respect you, and this helps everyone be their best both in and out of the pool.

The final lesson that the YMCA has taught me is the power of dedication. Dedication to your sport, family, community, teammates, and goals is the key to reaching your full potential. Through swimming, I have learned that whatever I do, I should do it to the best of my ability. As a young swimmer, dropping time was easy, but as I made the transition to 13-14 year old swimming, I learned that in order to get better I would have to work harder. Through not accomplishing goals when I wanted to, I learned that even though a goal is not guaranteed to be reached, the best way to reach it is through continual dedication. Swimming for the YMCA not only taught me to be dedicated to my goals, but also to be dedicated to my family, community, and teammates. If I give my relationships with these people my dedication, they will return the favor and we will be able to work together as an efficient unit.

Swimming for the Oshkosh YMCA has taught me how to be a better person and apply many virtues to all aspects of my life. OSHY is a second family and our pool is a second home. We fall down together and we get back up together. On OSHY, we are “Stronger Together”.

Essay #17

It all started when I, Rosalyn Stoa, turned eight and my father asked me if I would be interested in joining a swim team. This was not completely random, for he had swam in his youth and I had taken swim lessons since I was three. Being a naïve child, I agreed to go out for the Green Bay YMCA swim team. I remember looking up to the older swimmers and thinking, wow, I hope one day to be just like them, breaking records and competing at the YMCA National level. Never would I have known at that age the dedication it requires.

Through eighth grade, I was basically the recreational swimmer on the swim team. I went to practice only about two or three times a week because swimming for me was about the friends I made, not about getting better. I valued the friends I made on GBY and to this day, my closest friends are the ones I met on the YMCA team. However, my eighth grade swim team friends were beginning to move on in life and I was not sure I wanted to keep swimming without them. Then high school began.

High school swimming reinvigorated my love to swim. I came back after my first season excited to see what I could do swimming for Dave, my YMCA coach. I began swimming four to five or even six times a week. Swimming was no longer just about my friends, but had become a source of intrinsic motivation. I suddenly wanted to know how good I could be, not only in swimming, but in other aspects of my life, too. I challenged myself to take advanced and AP classes in school and worked on being a more outgoing person. I think my team helped me become that as I made new friends and my old swim friends moved away. Most of my new friends were on the National team and this was a bit scary for me. They seemed so much faster and way cooler than me. However, Dave helped me with this transition by moving me up to a faster lane when I tried to sneak back down. He helped me realize that I can be a competitive swimmer if I decided to be. And I decided. I was ready to become a competitive swimmer.

I will not lie; the transition from recreational swimmer to competitive swimmer was tough. There were days I wanted to quit swimming because of how hard it was, both mentally and physically. However, I had set my goals high and was not ready to give in to the sore muscles and everlasting hunger. I learned dedication and perseverance are just as valuable, if not more so, than raw talent. My sophomore year of high school, I finally achieved the goals I set when I was eight. With the help of my relay mates, I made it to YMCA Nationals and broke two team records. I did not stop there. Junior year I went on to compete in individual events at both short course and long course YMCA Nationals.

Next year, I will be attending the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and am proud to announce my commitment to swim there. Without Dave and the rest of my team, I would not have this amazing opportunity. I was taught to be dedicated to practice every day, persevere through injuries and illness, and take on the responsibility of balancing school, work, and swimming. Swimming on the GBY swim team has made me the confident person I am today.

Essay #18

I was introduced to swimming at the tender age of six with some coaxing from my swim lessons instructor and encouragement from my parents. That being said swimming has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. At first it was like the background music to a movie, slowly playing as the rest of life went by unnoticed. But as I grew older, swimming grew into more than just a simple day to day operation. It became a goal, something that I could always rely on to drive me to work harder and become better. Eventually, drive turned into passion, passion that can only be felt by those lucky enough to experience the thrill of competing and the almost primal urge to be the best. But passion has two sides, the other is darker and less forgiving. This is the side that tells you that if you fail, you will forever be a failure, and kicks you down when you want to stand tall.

My story starts at six, I was still new to the competitive swimming experience and like a lot of young swimmers back in the day I could be caught swimming at meets in a baggy beach short like swim suit. My goals were fairly simple and consisted mostly of making sure I did not sink. Back during this time to get to states all a swimmer needed to do was to take first or second at sectionals. Well, turns out the other 25 flyer out of three didn’t show, so I ended up being able to go to states at the young age of six where I successfully took dead last by over sixteen seconds. But, the opportunity left a fire within me which I nurtured and tended to. This passion lead to winning my first ever events at states when I was eight, then on to top three finishes when I was ten. But, fire is hard to keep light when surrounded by so much water. When I in my early teens I suffered from feeling of deficiency because I was unable to accept the fact that I wasn’t always going to be the winner. And, through those years I walked in a shadow of my former self unfazed by coaches coaxing and my parent’s pleas to not give up. I wanted to give up, I was unable to hit the times I wanted, I was miles out of reach from any of my goals, and I wanted to quit. So when I brought this up to my parents they did something that surprised me, they said it was my choice.

And so the lesson I best learned from Y swimming was that if you really love something it shouldn’t be about winning or losing. It’s about enjoying what you’ve accomplished and cherishing the time while it lasts. And because I was given the choice to quit, I realized how much swimming really meant to me and it allowed me to see past more than the outcome at the end of a race.

Essay #19

Driving down the old dirt road that swerved in and out of the heavily forested area just outside of the small woodland town of Ely, Minnesota, a sense of general unease began to form in the pit of my stomach. Never before had I traveled anywhere without my family, nor had I ever gone on a trip without knowing anyone. Yet, for the next week, I would be hundreds of miles away from home with complete strangers in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

It was the summer of 2011 and I was attending the Natalie Bolin Memorial Swim Camp with high school YMCA swimmers from across Wisconsin to celebrate the spirit and life of Natalie Bolin, a 17-year-old swimmer who died in a tragic car accident returning home from a state swim meet. Yearly, swimmers from different YMCA swim teams gather to honor Natalie with the intent of forging bonds to create one statewide YMCA swimming family. The camp is extremely challenging but is often a defining moment in the lives of those that attend.

The first task required of us when we arrived was a quarter mile swim across Cedar Lake where we were told to reflect about why we had chosen to attend the camp. At first I ignored the question, and instead focused on going fast so I could exit the frigid water and continue with unpacking. However, as I made my way across the lake, I began to relax and decided to at least give the question a little thought. The longer I swam, the more I thought and the more I realized that I was there to experience something I never had before. Though I didn’t know what it was yet, I was hopeful it would change my life.

Over the next few days I got to know the other swimmers through various challenges. Many of these challenges were physical in nature. We were asked to run an unethical amount of miles, swim for as long as the counselors deemed necessary, and hike a grueling seventeen-mile trail through the Boundary Waters into Canada and back. It was on these challenges, through the pain, anger, and exhaustion where everyone really bonded, where everyone really got to understand and appreciate each other.

Even harder than the physical challenges, were the emotional ones. Every night we would gather at the Natalie Bolin Memorial, a small clearing in the woods, and share with each other anything and everything that was bothering us. It was there in the Memorial where people who were complete strangers days before, were sharing their happiest memories, their most tightly kept secrets, and their most painful feelings. Together we listened, and together we shared in each other’s pain, and sadness. It was at this time that we all truly came to accept and celebrate each other.

When the day came to pack up and leave, everyone jumped into Cedar Lake once more. This time while swimming I was perfectly content and in no rush to jump out of the frigid water. I realized this camp had significantly changed my life. I gained a sense of confidence, both physically and emotionally. Before this camp, I was never willing to push myself beyond reasonable physical limits whereas now I proved to myself I could. Emotionally, I had never completely opened up to others before whereas now I felt like a brand new person ready to share my deepest emotions. And finally, I had arrived as a stranger along with the other strangers from different swim teams across Wisconsin and together we were leaving as one YMCA Wisconsin swim team family.

As I drove back down the old dirt road swerving in and out of the heavily forested area this past summer, after attending my third Natalie Bolin Memorial Camp, I reflected back on how much YMCA swimming has impacted my life. I started YMCA swimming as a 6 year old boy and am leaving as a young man. I know that because of YMCA swimming I am well prepared to take on the challenges that will face me in adult life. (I just hope they don’t involve 17 mile hikes or swimming across frigid lakes!)

Essay #20

Caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility; these are all traits I believe I have attained throughout my life, in and out of the pool. However, I didn’t realize the importance of these characteristics until a few years ago, when I joined South Eastern Aquatics, of the YMCA (SEAY). It was through SEAY, that my coaches and teammates began to instill in me pride in what I accomplish, and compassion for those around me. These changes in my view of the world around me took a great deal of time, but finally, here I am, a responsible young adult prepared for what my future holds. I believe that joining SEAY ten years ago was one of the most influential decisions I’ve ever made in my life, and also one of the best.

When I first joined SEAY, I had a lackadaisical attitude and little respect towards my peers. At this time, my coaches made us all fill out a ‘goal sheet’ regarding what we would like to accomplish in upcoming years. Last year, my coach, Neil Wright, handed these goal sheets back to us, for us to see what goals we actually accomplished, and what we placed value on nearly ten years ago. Reading over the sheet, I was in disbelief. It really made me realize how much I changed and grew as a person over the past decade. I never used to take much of anything seriously, even my future.

I was not the only one who didn’t take life very seriously at my young age, however. I think I drew a lot of my mischievous inspiration from the friends I made early on in my swim career. Although we started out as troublemakers, my good friends Will Mattison, Will Buhler, Charles Julius and I grew together to become independent and respectful. To this day, I still consider these guys some of my closest friends. Being a part of the SEAY team instilled a confidence in me that I never had before, and I carry it with me in all aspects of life.

I’m not sure what the real game-changer was for me. Maybe it was the inspiring SEAY coaches pushing me to my limits every single practice, or the motivating swimmers challenging me to work harder, but whatever it was, it changed something in me. Suddenly I was determined, I had goals, and I had become a hard working, caring kid. I gained a new respect for swimming, my coaches, and my teammates. This change didn’t just affect me in the pool alone. My grades drastically improved, and I began taking on more and more responsibilities. I started volunteering more, became involved with my school, and took on a part time job. My time management skills, along with my social skills, flourished. Today, I am ranked third in my class with an un-weighted GPA of 3.89, captain of the Case high school swim team, and involved with many community and school organizations such as Racine Urban Garden Network, Model United Nations, and Senior Advisory Committee. Looking back on everything I have been able to accomplish and how much I changed as a person, I know that being a part of the South Eastern Aquatics team sparked something in me that helped me grow into who I am today.

Essay #21

“Okay, everyone line up! Swim to the other end as best as you can.” *Oh no, I have never swum a length all by myself. I hope I can do it.* “ Don’t touch the lane lines!” Crowding, the group of energetic swimmers were difficult to control as coaches of the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team tried to figure out how to assess our swimming abilities.  Until that day, I had never swum competitively-only in lessons. *Ok, here I go.*  I took a deep breath, attempting braveness, nerves prevailed as I clumsily dove into the huge, frigid pool. *Okay, I’m swimming, I am really swimming. Oh no, I’m tired. They said not to grab the laneline. Oh no! What is happening?!*

    The lifeguard didn’t notice, but a coach realized that I was plunging below the surface and quickly jumped in- fully clothed- to save me. I was a strict rule follower and since they told me not to grab the laneline, I wouldn’t. When I got out, shivering from my attempt, I was more than just rattled by the fact that I couldn’t swim and everyone else could; I was frustrated that I couldn’t, and that this selfless stranger, who hardly knew me, was forced to jump in after me. Despite the life threatening experience, practicing individually with the coach for the rest of the session was calming, I began to gain confidence. I had never swum very far by myself. I worked hard, only swimming a portion of the 25 yard pool. Coaches, that believed in me from the start, made me swim only half of each length for the duration of every practice for three months, twice a week for 75 minutes. Sometimes I became discouraged and wanted to try to go the whole 25 yards, but they would not let me. Although coaches assured me that poor swimmers did come to the team, I have yet to see a beginner that struggled as much as I did.

    Through my hard work, I am now far from the worst swimmer on our team and closer to the top than my eight year old self ever imagined possible. Now I swim for many hours each week and even though it’s exhausting, it is my stress reliever. The water of the Walter Schroeder Aquatic Center is as clear as my mind when I jump in- relaxed and stress free. Every night, I get home from swimming and have a lot to do: from practicing my violin to doing homework to relaxing a little, but I have learned time management, an essential skill, so I am able to go to bed at a reasonable time with my assignments done. Practices allow my mind to escape and so when it’s time to do homework, I am able to focus.

Practices are not only a combination of serenity under the water, allowing for reflection and a clear head, but also intense with the expectations of swimming fast. Furthermore, Schroeder is like a home to me because of the friendships that I have made by spending all my free time with my team, whether it is going for dinner after a meet, or bonding over the newest movie. Having been together for ten years, I can remember the “screaming contests” we had in the locker room while we spent hours in the showers after practice. We solve problems together and care about each other. It is a relief after a long day at school to participate in a grueling practice with my best friends.

I started swimming for safety, and to make friends, but the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team has proven to give me much more than that: I can vent my anger, reflect on the day, and celebrate individual as well as team success that has only come from my dedication to the sport of swimming. This once intimidating place has become my stress reliever.

Essay #22

I moved from Connecticut to Green Bay, Wisconsin my seventh grade year in school. I was entering middle school feeling like a total outsider; I didn’t have a football team; I didn’t have a basketball team; I didn’t have a soccer team. I didn’t feel like I belonged. After a few weeks, I made the decision to join the Green Bay YMCA swim team because I had previously participated on a team in Connecticut and enjoyed the camaraderie and competition that arose from it. However, the level of competition was nothing of that compared to my new team. The new teammates included me into their circle of friends right away and it was very easy to form a tight bond with them.

The swim team gave me a sense of belonging in a new area. Before I had even made friends at my new school, I had friends on my swim team. Because I was with these same people every day for hours at practice we formed a great team bond over the years. This bond grows through helping each other meet our individual potential to make our over-all swim team successful. Many people think that swimming is an individual sport; however, swimming promotes individuals working to their greatest potential to become a winning team. I will take that life lesson to college and throughout my professional career.

Through swimming with the Green Bay YMCA I have developed important life skills such as setting and working towards long-term goals. At the beginning of each season I would challenge myself to attain a time that seemed out of my reach but with hard work and dedication I was usually able to achieve this goal. The importance of achieving a personal best swim time and working as hard as you can each swim was a lesson that I learned over the course of 6 years on the team and countless races. The fact that everyone on the team is working to swim his or her best time helped me become all-inclusive and non-judgmental. In any given race, a 1:30:00 and a 50:00 are both great swims as long as it is a swimmer’s personal best time. My coach, Dave Korst, was very demanding in his practices. I spent countless hours pushing myself past my physical comfort level. Because of that, I have surpassed all my expectations. I am so proud of myself for qualifying for state championships in the 500Free, the 1000 Free, and the Mile last year. Swimming has helped me develop a great work ethic and an understanding that anything is achievable with hard work.

The people that I have met on the swim team come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, schools and religions but the pool is a great equalizer where we all strive for the same goal: a personal best time. The YMCA swim team has also taught me to be an active member of my neighborhood and community. Our team worked together to help the community through projects like the YMCA strong kids calling campaign, and the strong kids swim-a-thon. We also helped the community each year by volunteering collectively at the Cellcom marathon and the Turkey Trot. This helped me get in touch with the Green Bay community even though I was new to the area. This has created a desire to be a prideful member of my community as I have completed over 150 hours of community service.

When I joined the Green Bay YMCA swim team, I was the outsider new to the area with no friends. Joining the team was the best decision because I quickly found a home among people who shared the love of swimming. I have developed life long friendships and a support system that I will value forever. After six years on this team, I can finally say that I am the one helping the new kids on the team make friends and have a home among great people.

Essay #23

If you would look at any child the day that they started swimming on a YMCA swim team and looked at that same child their senior year, would you even recognize them? Anyone who had grown up with that child would be able to recognize them, but if you were a random stranger and didn’t get to see how that swim team affected that child’s life, you probably wouldn’t recognize that child.

My name is Kimberly Frisque; I have been swimming on the M&M Stingrays Swim Team since I was eight years old. I am now seventeen and about to graduate high school and I honestly believe that I would be a completely different person if I had never joined my team.

When I first started swimming I got decent attention from my first coach, but I wasn’t all that good so I didn’t get as much coaching as the good kids on the team. Looking back on that I am thankful that that old coach is gone and that my coach today, Lenny Sipple, actually pushes me to do my very best.

When Lenny started coaching my team about six years, I received more corrective criticism in one month than I got in the four years previously being on the team. In the months that followed, I came to the conclusion that I wasn’t ever going to let the younger swimmers feel forgotten. I didn’t want any of the kids to feel left out from a group or feel like they had to be more than what they were to get attention.

There were two girls that were in high school, Kelsey Sipple and Sammy Cope, when I was younger and they were always so nice to me and I wanted to be like them. They were State and National swimmers for our YMCA team and Kelsey went on to swim for the Northern Michigan University Wild Cats. So that first month that we had Lenny as a coach I decided that I was going to be nice and a great leader for the team, just like how Kelsey, my coaches daughter, and Sammy had been.

Because of that initiative that I had, I started to volunteer coach the Bronze, or entry level, swimmers for our team. Instead of only paying attention to the fast kids on the team, I paid attention to what every single swimmer was doing. Sometimes I’d only see small things that they could improve on, but I still told them, regardless of what it is, because I wanted them to do their best.

Since I started volunteer coaching, I have found that I enjoy going to practice more. I have a smile on my face the entire time that I am there and the rest of the kids have smiles, and I couldn’t count how many kids yell out my name when they see me walk through the doors into the pool area before my practice starts. Knowing that those kids love seeing me, has kept me in swimming, even when I wanted to quit after a particularly horrible season.

My sophomore year of swimming, I took time off at least one event at every meet, and I took off a large amount of time in every event. But, last year, I couldn’t take time off of anything and I was ready to call it quits, when I found out I had an iron deficiency. If it hadn’t been for the support of my coach and teammates I probably would have quit. But Lenny and I tried signing me up for events that were different from what I normally swam and that helped a little. The main thing that kept me going was how many kids look up to me, and I didn’t want them to see me as a girl who quits when things got a little tough.

Swimming competitively takes a lot of hard work and dedication, and isn’t something that you can just laugh about. If I hadn’t joined swimming nine years ago I would be a completely different person and wouldn’t be able to tell all the amazing stories that I have from being a part of the M&M Stingrays.