

Wisconsin YMCA Swimming Scholarship Program

The Wisconsin YMCA Swimming sponsors a scholarship program for graduating seniors who plan to attend college next year. The question asked is, "*How has being involved in the YMCA impacted your life?*" This year we had more essays, 22, than either of the first two years of this program. Thank you to all of our graduating seniors who submitted essays. The winners of the scholarships will be announced on Saturday at the YMCA State Meet.

Kayla McCormick La Crosse YMCA Wave Swim Team

By joining the Wave swim team ten years ago, my life has been positively influenced in uncountable ways. While being a part of the YMCA swim team, I have learned many morals and values that impact my life on a daily basis. The YMCA swim team is not like any other sports team I have been involved in. On the swim team, we work together as one for the same overall goal, to become the best athletes we can be. Some say the sport is purely individual talent, but I believe it is both, a team and individual effort. My team is like my second family. We all push each other to become better, and without each other, we would not work near as hard as we do. As for the coach, he is like our second father. He will express concern at necessary times if we are not giving our best effort, but he is always there with a goal to make us the best we can be. At the end of the day, he still loves us, whether or not we made that set of 100's, or split our fastest time.

During my time on the YMCA swim team, I have learned the true meaning of the word dedication. Dedication isn't just showing up every day for practice, it's showing up with a positive attitude and a willingness to work, no matter how bad your body hurts. Dedication is expressing love for the sport of swimming in both the morning and night. I have learned that real athletes have a teachable spirit which allows a correction from a coach to be taken as a thank you. Mental toughness is necessary because we have to love the process, not just the outcome. A positive attitude, self-discipline, an enthusiastic spirit, and confidence are essential. As a swimmer, I have been taught that I cannot let yesterday affect today. The YMCA stresses teamwork; this is when a person learns to go from thinking me to we. A great teammate will put the needs of the team ahead of his or her own needs in every decision. The YMCA mission of putting Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all is the heart of the atmosphere in the pool.

We respect each other on a daily basis because we have been taught this value since the first day we started the swim team. I have learned to take responsibility for my own actions, as has been instilled to all of the swimmers on the team. Caring for each other is a natural instinct. We have learned that honesty is always the best policy. We support each other when it is needed, and we help out whenever help is sought. My coach, Jon Brenner, has without a doubt been the greatest impact on my life so far. Without my coach Jon, I would not be the swimmer I am today, let alone even be a swimmer. His strength, love, and passion for the sport were easily recognized both in and out of the pool if you ever saw him. He was a living example of the YMCA's four core values. Jon once said that love is the most powerful force in the universe, and I believe he taught many swimmers not only to love one another, but to be loved.

Over all my time swimming with the YMCA swim team, I have learned to always give my best effort because to give anything less is to sacrifice the gifts I have been given. Competition with the YMCA team is surrounded with an amazing atmosphere. We swim with each other, not against each other in order to accomplish great things. Being a part of the YMCA has taught me how to set and reach goals for myself that I will use throughout the rest of my life.

Kirstin Teresa Klemp - La Crosse Area Family YMCA

How the YMCA has Impacted My Life

At the age of 10, I began swimming for the La Crosse Wave swim team. My mom wanted me to join so that I would be active and make friends. I was nervous to join the team because I did not know anyone on the swim team and

was not very good at swimming. At that time, I never imagined I would learn as much about life as I did just from being on the swim team.

The beginning of my swimming career was not about achieving fast times, but only about getting down the basics of the strokes and having fun. My coach's name was Jon Brenner, and he taught me not only how to swim breaststroke well, but also many values. Jon always encouraged us to be friendly to those around us and to never talk down to others. I look up to Jon because he is always so kind and considerate to others.

The older I got, the more intense swimming practice became as I moved up training levels. Practices for swimming are different from any other type of sports practice I have ever participated in. The practices are not only physically demanding, but also mentally demanding. Looking at an intense workout makes any swimmer want to turn around and go back home, but the presence of teammates somehow keeps us there. Although we all encourage each other verbally, it is also encouraging just to have close friends by when practices get tough. I have formed strong bonds with the swimmers on my team, and being with them is like being with family.

My hard training had paid off my sophomore year in high school when I qualified to swim in the National YMCA swim meet. I have never felt a sense of pride in myself as great as when I qualified for that meet. Pride is something that I associate with swimming for the YMCA because it taught me that my individual efforts will bring great things for me. My coach, Eric Wojta, also taught me to be responsible. He always encourages us to make the right decisions, even when we do not want to.

I believe that swimming is something that I will continue to do for the rest of my life, even when I am done competing because it has been such a positive influence in my life. I am very grateful today that my mom signed me up to swim for the La Crosse Wave swim team at a young age because I have met so many wonderful people and experienced several events that have molded me into the person I am today.

Hilary Woldt - Oshkosh Community YMCA

OUT OF TRAGEDY COMES HOPE!

I have been a YMCA and OHSY swim team member for eleven years. During this time I have been blessed with amazing friendships and caring coaches who have shaped me into the person I am today. Growing up, we were always told that we were not just a team, we are a family. To this day, there is not a doubt in my mind about the truth of that statement. With the recent death of one of our members and the serious injury of three others, the fact that we are one family has really hit home for me.

Natalie Bolin and I swam the same events, we practiced every day together and swam in the same lane. When I was tired, Natalie would lead the lane. When Natalie was tired, I would lead the lane. We were teammates, competitors, friends and sisters on the OSHY team. We shared a common hunger for competition, but that hunger never failed our friendship. We were living parallel lives. We would pick each other up, when ever needed. Whenever I needed someone to talk to, Natalie was always there to lend an ear. Who will I confide in now? How will I swim without her? There was something special between me and Natalie.

Our team has come together and has used our care for each other to overcome this very difficult time. Although we all have each other, I constantly wonder: How does one go on? One goes on through the strength and unconditional love of Family. The YMCA swim family. Yes, they are there during the ups and downs of swimming but that does not compare to the tears, hugs and love I have experience since Natalie's death. Without the YMCA swim team, I would not have had the opportunity to know and experience Natalie Bolin's love for life. Without the YMCA swim team, I could not have accepted her death. Through my parents, coaches, teammates and the swimming community, I have found the strength to move on and enjoy life again.

Everyone says that swimming is an individual sport. I thought that too. How hard can I push myself? When will I give into the pain? My time is a reflection of how hard I trained. Why have I seen the successes that I have

experienced in the pool? I have seen them because of my teammates. My teammates push me to the point where impossible is not an excuse. My teammates pick me up and help me through the pain that they too are experiencing and swimming through. Each of us pushes the other to be the best we can be. I would not be the swimmer I am today without my teammates. When one of us succeeds, we all succeed. When one fails, we all fail. Together our triumphs and defeats bring us closer. The experiences the YMCA has provided us with have helped us succeed together all across the country.

The support of my teammates does not end in the water. My teammates are my friends in and out of the pool. One core value that plays a vital role in my life is caring. Through the death of Natalie Bolin, we have found deep care for each other and our three teammates who were injured and hospitalized. I have learned this past week that I care for these girls more than I care for myself. When I found that they were recovering, my heart started to heal. The care I have for my teammates is never ending. I could not have made it through this last week without my teammates. We all felt the impact of this tragic accident. We have pulled together, shared our grief and worked through all the whys. This support has not stopped at the OSHY team. We have been lifted up by swimmers and coaches from across the state. I now realize how big our swim team support really is. There is a bond between swimmers unlike any other sport.

Natalie would want us all to go on having fun, smiling, and enjoying life. Through this knowledge comes responsibility. I am responsible for carrying out her love for life and for all others. Feeling sad was not an option for Natalie. Making a difference in someone's life was Natalie's daily challenge. We will make her proud of us through our continuing efforts to do the right thing. The OSHY team has taken the responsibility for helping others through this horrific time. I know that I am a better person because of Natalie Bolin. I know that I am a better person because of the OSHY swim team. I know that I would not be having these life experiences without the YMCA. The YMCA has taught me how to love and be loved. The YMCA, by providing me with a wonderful program and facility, has given me an opportunity to make my dreams come true.

Lauren Van Loon - Rite-Hite YMCA (Schroeder YMCA)

"Lauren, it's okay. You know that what you just did was all that you could've done and you should be proud. All the work and effort you put into this will eventually pay-off, you're timing just isn't right. I'm sincerely sorry that what you've been working on for the past year didn't turn out as you had expected." This was the pep talk I was given by my coach, Dave, as I stood by the side of the pool, numbed by the outcome of the race. "We all thought that you were going to get the cut, and were rooting for you. When things like this happen, you aren't the only one who's upset. We all wanted you to be there too." Listening to this, all I could think was that no one was as devastated as I was.

From the beginning my goal was to make it to Nationals for swimming, although many thought that goal was rather unobtainable. Even Dave was telling me to aim for something more 'realistic'. One day I found a piece of paper with the quote, "Today's the day that something great begins." This was a sign for me to prove my ability to overcome challenges.

I used that desire as the spark to ignite a flame that pushed me further than I've ever gone before. With my improvement, Dave tried further encouraging me by saying, "Keep putting those rabbits in the hat." Confused by that statement, Dave described it as the more good practices you have, the more rabbits you accumulate. When you want to pull a rabbit from your hat, you now have a better chance. After months of hard practices and gathering rabbits, I felt as though I could not fail. I knew I was close to achieving my goal when I was met by Dave exclaiming, "These next three weeks are going to be amazing, I feel it."

At my final meet, while standing behind the blocks, I was in the fiercest state of mind; only concentrating on the race as I repeated to myself, "Today's the day something great begins." Even though I put in my all, I ended up being .11 seconds from achieving my goal. By then I realized that all my hard work and determination still wasn't enough to achieve the outcome I desired.

After seeing how upset I was Dave asked me if I had known the outcome of my season before starting, would I have done the same. This question helped me to realize that my determination has given me great success in my life so far, even if the outcome hasn't been what was expected in the beginning.

By being part of the YMCA organization, where the staff sees you as a person that can succeed, I have gained an understanding within myself knowing that I can virtually do anything if I set my mind to it. The YMCA's mission was to serve the whole person: mind, body and spirit, and for me that's exactly what it has done. Through my practices and my races my mind has been challenged, along with the physical aspect of my body working out, and finally the spirit that the YMCA carries in order to make me the determined swimmer that I am.

Elizabeth "Abbey" Tuchscherer - Oshkosh Community YMCA

For the coaches that have been around long enough on the Oshkosh YMCA Swim Team, most of them are likely to remember my first years because it's hard to miss a pudgy girl walking into practice every other day getting ready to go hop in a pool. As time progressed, the excess pounds began to fade away; along with the apathetic attitude I had towards the sport, allowing confidence and motivation to replace that unwanted weight. The Oshkosh YMCA has not only provided a beautiful facility for me to flourish as an individual physically, but has also blessed me with an amazing coaching staff that has most importantly allowed me to thrive mentally. Through the recent tragedy that struck our team, I have seen how those of us who have had our spirits bent, have found a way to have them rebuilt and uplifted through the strength of the family that I have found at the YMCA. Over the past ten years, I have also gained a great appreciation for the core values: Honesty, Respect, Caring, and Responsibility. I feel like I can take these values and truly translate them over into my journey of college and life.

Coming into this YMCA program, I don't think my parents were expecting swimming to have such a positive impact on my life. Now I can't imagine living without it. At the young age of eight, all I could care about was how I wanted to make friends with all the other girls. Being involved in the YMCA from then on has inevitably led me to form lifelong friendships; which have had a vast impact on who I am as an individual today. Working hard, inside and outside of the pool, laughing, smiling, sweating, crying, succeeding and failing together, there is an indescribable camaraderie that is ultimately created. All the hard work in the pool over the years has poured over into the way that I carry out my life. I am confident in saying that dedication and strong work ethic are traits that I have acquired through this YMCA program. With the work ethic I have attained, whether it's applied physically with swimming or academically, it has allowed me to reach my sought after goals. I have been fortunate enough to have been accepted into the University of Iowa where I know I will continue my passion for swimming and continue to prosper academically.

I believe that I began to discover who I wanted to be with the help of my coaches and teammates from this sport. My first Spring National meet in Fort Lauderdale in 2006 was the highest caliber meet I had qualified for in my swimming career. I was only competing in the relays that our girl's had qualified. I had tried to make my individual cuts that year, but that was just not my fate at the time. Dealing with the disappointment was simple because I had my teammates and coaches overwhelming me with encouragement and support. For our team, being on relays holds a special honor because we get the opportunity to represent our team and community in the best way possible, by doing what we do best; laying it out in the pool. I had the time of my life. So being a part of relays was even more rewarding.

My second trip to Spring Nationals I was just as excited because I was with all my best friends again traveling to Florida, along with some newcomers that had qualified for their first Spring Nationals. At that point I had become so accustomed to just assuming that I would be on relays. On the night of the 200 Free Relay, my head coach, Jay, said that another one of my teammate's who had been having a phenomenal meet would be competing on the relay in place of me. I had a mixture of emotions right then because I was hurt that I couldn't represent our relay with the girls that I had worked so hard with day in and day out. Although I was hurt, the experience was very humbling. This opportunity gave one of my teammates a chance to swim on a relay at a national meet. My coach then pulled me aside and told me a word that has stuck with me ever since. Empathy. Being part of our team means that sometimes

the key to success is about being a part of something bigger than oneself. I think this was the night that I truly understood that in order for me to be genuinely happy in life, I need to learn to truly appreciate and celebrate the success of others that I care about. If it had not been for the YMCA, I would have never been able to be blessed with these experiences that have ultimately shaped me into the individual that I am today and the individual I am yet to become.

Reflecting back on my time spent in a pool, every minute was worth it. Every brain cell lost due to lack of oxygen from holding my breath too long or to every single laugh shared with my eternal friends, the sacrifice was worth it. I may not have lived an average high school student's life, but I'm happy I didn't. With great gratitude to the YMCA I have been able to discover my second family and one of my greatest passions in life. I know that I won't always be able to swim, but the lessons that I can take away from my experiences on the YMCA Swim Team are everlasting. I never knew that becoming an active member of the YMCA would bring such fulfillment into my life. I can only hope that future generations are able to take away as much as I have from the time I spent with the Oshkosh YMCA Swim Team.

Andrew Mitchell - Delta County YMCA

I have been involved in YMCA swimming for 13 years and I have learned several life lessons through swimming. Swimming has taught me to be disciplined and efficient. I have been fortunate to be involved in competitive relays for my entire swimming career. Six or more boys were always competing for a spot on the fastest relay team. I had to work especially hard to be on the relay because of my size and age. The other boys were older and bigger, so I had to develop skill when my peers could rely more on strength. I worked on developing my skill and earned a spot on the relay team. I was just recently a part of my high school's swim team that participated in MHSAA U.P. Swim Finals. We broke the Upper Peninsula record in the 200 Medley relay and I broke a pool record and Upper Peninsula record in the 100 back. I am planning on attending YMCA nationals in Ft. Lauderdale this spring like I did last year. This year I have qualified in the 100 back and 200 Medley so far. All of my swimming achievements started with the YMCA. Without the Y I wouldn't have had the opportunity to be so successful in high school swimming and pursue varsity swimming at Calvin College as well.

Annie Maercklein - Schroeder YMCA Swim Team

Lap after lap, I feel burning in my shoulders as I try to move them just a bit faster. How I can participate in this sport day after day, year after year? It's simple- I love swimming. I remember my first practices, at the age of seven, as I struggled to get down to the other end of the pool. I can still feel the joy of winning my heat and later making state qualification times. It wasn't long before I knew "DQ" was not ice cream and pink was not the ribbon I coveted. At the time, I never imagined this sport would shape the person I would become, but it has. Success comes from dedication and determination; failure motivates me. Many teens set goals; but, few are so driven that they get up three hours before school for extra training. Summers, I am pale and broke. I forgo the beach and the lure of a paying job to train for six hours a day. For me, "trying hard" means putting forth my best effort, nothing less.

I am expert at time management. I practice for three hours every night; I don't have time to procrastinate on my homework. I have learned the importance of starting tasks days in advanced to alleviate pressure.

Lastly, swimming on the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team has taught me the importance of relationships. Whether it's the friends I lean on, the coaches I respect, or the teammates who teach me leadership and sportsmanship, I realize that how I present myself has an impact on every single person around me. Most people say I'm crazy to put so much into a single sport; but, to me, it is far much more than a sport. It's a lifestyle that has taught me lessons I will carry with me forever.

Avery L. Wallace - Madison West YMCA

Impact

Four years ago I made a decision that changed the direction of my life. I decided to swim with the YMCA. By choosing to join the Madison West YMCA swim team, I chose to adopt a new lifestyle. With this new lifestyle I improved my times, learned time management skills and created new friendships.

Joining the YMCA swim team has greatly impacted my swimming. I have grown significantly as a swimmer. When I first began, even the slowest intervals were challenging for me. Since I could not necessarily make the intervals, while I swam I focused on my stroke and turn technique instead. I used to dread kick sets since my kick was especially weak and I would always fall behind. However, four years later, I can now keep up. Also, it has been fun to try events not offered in high school swimming such as the thousand freestyle and the two hundred breaststroke. Something I am especially proud of is my five hundred freestyle time. Since I have joined the YMCA team I have dropped over thirty seconds in that event. Clearly with the training at the YMCA, I have become a stronger swimmer.

Besides impacting my swimming, being a member of the YMCA swim team has taught me excellent time management. Attending a swim practice takes about a three hour chunk out of my night, which cuts the amount of time for school work (and now college applications) in half. This has forced me to be mindful of my time. I map out how much time each subject or project needs and what homework I can delay until the next day. By managing my time, I have maintained a 4.0 GPA for seven semesters while continuing to swim.

In addition to learning time management, joining the YMCA swim team has also provided an opportunity to create new friendships and strengthen old ones. I met people I would not have otherwise encountered and formed new friendships. Also, joining has allowed me to become closer to my high school swim mates who I would not usually see otherwise. Chatting with friends at practice or being cheered on by them is the most enjoyable part of swim team. I have created strong connections swimming at the YMCA that continue beyond the water.

Thanks to the YMCA, I have come to love this sport which will keep me fit throughout life. It has provided me with opportunities to improve my swimming, develop time management skills and create new relationships. It is very difficult to imagine how drastically different my life would be if I had not decided to join the Madison West YMCA Waves.

Chris Jenkyns - Schroeder YMCA

Since becoming a member of the Schroeder YMCA, I have been presented with many opportunities as well as new experiences. When I first joined the YMCA, the major difference I saw was that everybody was kind, understanding and accepting. They were also very welcoming which made the transition from Lake Country Swim Team easier. The YMCA has impacted my life because I have learned about diversity, built lasting friendships, and learned that all the hard work and practices eventually pay off even if they are not in the form of best times.

A unique part of the Schroeder YMCA is that the athletes I have met hail from multiple school districts and are unique because of it. On my old swim team, every swimmer was from the same school district; on the other hand, the Schroeder Swim Team is made up of a group of diverse individuals that have friendships as strong as those I witnessed on Lake Country Swim Team. By being introduced to people from other backgrounds, I have learned to accept new ideas and customs. Although swimming is the only thing I have in common with some people on the Schroeder YMCA, the friendship and memories I have with this dynamic group of people will last for the rest of my life.

The friendships that I have created since joining the YMCA are worth all of the hours of pain in practice. By being able to join a YMCA team that is located farther away from home, I have made friends outside of Arrowhead High School. Spending countless hours in the pool, you grow a bond with other swimmers that is much stronger than school friends. If I had not joined the YMCA I would never have met some of my best friends and would never have had some of the same opportunities, such as going to Lake Michigan in between swim practices in the summer and going out to breakfast after morning practice. The relationships that I created with my coaches also impacted me a great deal. The coaches at the YMCA not only care about coaching but care about how your day was going

and events going on in your day to day life. This has created a great relationship of trust and respect between coaches and swimmers. The friendships that are created also help in getting through hard practices or when you are having a bad day.

All the countless yards and meters as well as waking up early on Saturday and Sunday mornings to swim has paid off not only in the form of success in the pool but also outside the pool in the form of confidence and work ethic. I feel like I have grown a lot since first joining the YMCA in many areas of my life. I feel like I have grown in self-confidence greatly because I used to be afraid of not doing good and messing up in my races. Now I have the confidence to say "why not me" or "I am going to do great". The boost in self confidence has shown in the pool with best times as well as the ability to not give up even if you are losing. The ability to race and know you gave your best effort is worth so much especially when the results are large time drops or new Sectional or National cuts. Also hard work in the pool can translate to hard work in the classroom because when you have the drive to succeed you never want to fail and you always want to put your best effort into your work and be proud of it.

Even though I have not been a part of the YMCA my entire swim career, there have been many moments that have impacted my life that I plan to take on to college and my future. I know I will be open to diversity as well as more accepting and understanding to new people I meet. I intend on using the success of hard work and determination to hopefully take me to a new and exciting level in college swimming. Joining the YMCA is one of the best decisions that I could have made for my swimming career. I have created many lasting friendships and countless memories of fun and exciting times with the YMCA swim team.

Eva Schulteis – Schroeder YMCA

Swimming: My Life

When people realize how many hours I spend in the pool every week and my academic workload, one question automatically pops into their heads: "Are you crazy?" If I were any other person, I would think that as well: 25 hours of swimming a week and a school course load that could make any student grimace. However, I think I would be crazy if it were not for the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team and what it has done for me.

Swimming is on a whole different level than any other form of athletics: all sports give the athlete a challenge to overcome, but only swimming forbids breathing. As stressful and physically abusive as this may sound, I would rather spend the majority of my vacations, weekends, mornings and afternoons with the group of friends I have made through this sport. In truth, I love nothing more than swim practice: the people, the jokes, and the smell of chlorine that clings to my body no matter how many times I shower; in short, the escape swimming gives me from my daily life is what really keeps me coming back to the painful practices that await me at the Walter Schroeder Aquatic Center. For three hours of every day, no one cares about my grades or my homework, and I can focus on the sport, my friends and myself. My only responsibilities for this allotted time are to deal with the challenging set created by my wonderful Coach Dave, to focus on myself, and to inspire my peers through compliments and motivational phrases. These are the only three things demanded of me at swim practice, but I constantly realize that I can always do better; I could go through practice day after day at the same speed, but I would find the hours I spend with my head submerged undoubtedly more fulfilling by swimming faster, improving weaknesses, and being a better friend. The extra effort brings faster times, but, more importantly, it brings respect and admiration from my coach, my teammates, and me. In and out of the pool, my swimming world causes me to live my life in a constant state of *carpe diem*: to seize every second for all of its worth. The Schroeder YMCA Swim Team has taught me the value of hard work, great friends, compassion, and belief in people and myself.

Even though I will never be Michael Phelps, swimming has shaped the way I live and my aspirations in life. Through swimming, I have learned that I should always push my limits and that I should always challenge myself mentally and physically. Whether it is an especially arduous morning practice or AP Physics, I know that hard work will bring about success. In some ways I may be on the verge of insanity, but I could not imagine my life without swimming because of what it has done for me and what it has made me realize I can achieve. The Schroeder YMCA has taught

me to always challenge myself in and out of the pool, and the club has inspired me to dream and strive for my most ambitious goal to date: attending the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Hannah Fitton - Fox Cities YMCA

The first time I walked into the Appleton YMCA, I was a small three year old girl getting ready for her first swim lesson in the USA. Now, I am sixteen years old, and I still walk through the same main entrance doors on the way to swim team practice. The YMCA is like a home away from home for me. Outside of my house and high school, this is where I spend most of my time. It is time well invested because I have grown to be part of what the YMCA stands for - a place where a "healthy spirit, mind, and body" is built and nurtured.

Within a month of arriving in the USA, thirteen years ago, my mother bought a family membership at the Appleton YMCA. It was a lifeline for her because we did not know many people in the community, and it seemed like a good place to spend the long winter months and make friends. I started swimming lessons as a "Tadpole" and slowly, but surely, progressed through the levels. At first, I was terrified to even put my head in the water, and if it wasn't for the caring swim instructors, I would have given up. During the first six years at the YMCA, I met many interesting people who have touched my life in one way or another. I became friends with the ladies who work at the membership desk, locker rooms and downstairs lobby, and I befriended the former CEO of the Fox Cities YMCA, who still jokes that he can swim faster than me! Even though it sounds cliché, being part of the YMCA is like being part of "one big happy family". We all share the same core values, and we all respect and support one another.

I joined the YMCA swim team when I was nine years old. I had attended several YMCA pre-school youth sports from soccer to gymnastics, but swimming seemed like the perfect sport for my endless energy. When I chose a sport that excludes the use of hearing aids, my parents and I knew that I was taking on a huge responsibility. I became in charge of communicating with my coaches and letting them know when I was struggling to understand them. I was able to create close relationships with my coaches and teammates because of my openness and positive attitude. Being part of such a large YMCA community and swim team, I learnt the value of honesty. It is important to show good sportsmanship, and even when I make mistakes, I know that it is important to be accountable for my actions and play fair. If I can be honest, then I will gain respect from my friends, family, team members, and coaches.

My involvement in the YMCA over the last thirteen years has impacted me to be the person I am today; someone who tries very hard to be a good person to others and in doing so, I hope I can bring out the good qualities of those around me. The YMCA has a special place in my heart because it is where staff knows me by my name and it is a safe place where my friends and I can have fun. The YMCA has contributed to my confidence and self-esteem. It has taught me that exercise builds healthy bodies, strengthens the mind, and fosters a happy spirit within us. Now, it is my turn to spread that message to others in whatever capacity I can. The YMCA has also given me the ability to interact with people from all walks of life and has broadened my outlook on life.

Heidi Klein - Oshkosh YMCA

The YMCA has made a large impact on my life and has helped shape me into the person I am today. At a young age I became involved in multiple programs at the YMCA: I participated in soccer, rock climbing classes, the lifetime center where I made multiple friends while being in a safe environment while my parents were at work. The one other activity I attended at the YMCA was the swim team when I was 8 years old and this team and sport has become a family to me. The swim team throughout the past 10 years has taught me the importance of commitment and dedication. It has shown me how you need support from your teammates in order to get through the hard times and that this struggle helps you learn that to succeed you need to lean on someone else at times. The swim team has helped me learn about courage and how regardless of how frightening something new may seem if you do not try it you will never know the outcome and how amazing it may be. When a swim didn't turn out so well I learned not to feel down or bad about myself but to use this as motivation to work harder in practices and eventually give that swim another shot to try and prove myself once again. The swim team has also helped me grow as a person

thanks to the wonderful coaching staff and the other swimmers. The coaching staff helped me through the rough times when it came to swimming and to life. The coaches always seemed to put their swimmers as people first and competitors next. I remember having multiple talks with Jay Coleman, head coach, when I had a problem and he would always find a story that would leave me inspired and feeling 100% better. The swimmers to me have become a family, when you spend hour's everyday going through challenges you gain respect and love for each other. The swimmers have become the people that I spend the majority of my time with in the pool and out and because of this I have been able to stray away from the temptations of high school such as alcohol and drugs. Members of the swim team and the YMCA all around carry with them throughout their lives the principles of the YMCA. I can honestly say that because of the other YMCA swim team members that I have met while on the swim team. The swim team has allowed us to meet and spend time with other local teams such as Appleton and Green bay programs as well as programs from other states but no matter how far or close you are one thing about swimmers I have found true they all are some of the nicest people you will ever meet and they all are a family and carry the greatest respect and pride. Through the YMCA offering the swim team I have become the person I am and the person I wish to continue to be I hope that one day everyone will be able to have even half the experience I got through the YMCA because this is something I will never forget.

Lindsey Mikrut - Lake Geneva YMCA

Driving into to Lake Geneva, you see the population sign of about 7,500. I have been involved in activities with the YMCA since I was 5 years old with participating in tumbling. My mom is an employee of the Y and since I was little I have been that Lake Geneva is very fortunate to have a Y in the area, since it is such a small town compared to where Ys are normally found. The Y has introduced me to many sports and activities. If it wasn't for them, I probably would of never participated in softball, basketball, and especially swimming. It even employees me now as a lifeguard and swim instructor. Swimming has by far been the biggest impact on my life. My mom signed me up for swim team 11 years ago because tumbling at our Y moved somewhere else and my mom wanted to keep me active. It started out as a team that practiced at the local high school and then got its own home at the Lake Geneva Y. If Lake Geneva didn't have this swim team through the Y, I probably would have never realized my potential in swimming. Swimming through the Y has taken me to many state and national meets. Next year, because of this program, has earned me a spot on a division 2 swim team.

I can't even express how much the Y impacted my life in this short essay. I honesty can say that besides having a family at home that I have also found a family at the Y and I'm proud to be a part of it.

Luke Harrison- Oshkosh YMCA

My involvement with the YMCA has opened countless doors and has helped forge many incredible, lasting bonds that I will cherish forever. From my time spent as a toddler, mischievously roaming the Y daycare play ground and refusing to take naps, all the way to my senior year in high school, a member of the OSHY Dolphin swim team who now wishes he could take more naps, the Y has always been a safe environment that has nurtured my development, both as an athlete and as a human being. Most notably, the aquatics program has shaped my life in an unprecedented fashion, granting me the opportunity to progress from taking swim lessons to competing on the swim team, and even providing me with my first job as a lifeguard.

As I sit down to write this essay in the waning months of my YMCA swim career, it's rather difficult to put into words what being involved with the Y has meant to me. Instead, a slightly grainy roll of sights, sounds, smells, and memories flashes through my mind, almost as if I were watching a crackly old home video. Sifting through this pile of stories, adventures, triumphs and disappointments, some thoughts are incredibly vivid and crisp; while others are simply vague feelings of the warmth and inclusion I've always felt as a member of the Y. I believe that this is the way to best measure what type of impact a life spent under the caring roof of the YMCA has had upon me; not with ambiguous concepts like Caring, Honesty, Respect, and Responsibility, or with races won, hours worked, or even time spent in the time out corner. Not that I haven't had my fair share of experiences with these aspects of Y life, but to me the YMCA is about doing. What I've learned is that the truth of an issue, whether it be as profound as who

you really are as a person, or simply how the day will play out, is found through action and exploration, through taking risks and trying new things, and most importantly making mistakes. Thinking back over the course of my eight years spent as a member of the OSHY swim team, I should be coming pretty close to earning an honorary degree in screwing up. One such debacle encapsulates every thing I've learned and everything I love about being a part of OSHY and belonging to the YMCA.

The swim team is often compared to extended family, a group of people you're forced to spend time with, day in and day out, and eventually grow to love, despite how annoying or frustrating they may be. This holds especially true for me. An only child, I grew up lacking the experience necessary to understand that the ideas of my "big bothers" on the team were for the most part, stupid. Upon arriving at a particularly distasteful Saturday morning practice, a swimmer, who will remain nameless, asked the fateful, "Who wants to just skip practice and go to IHOP?" At first met with trepidation and skepticism, the suggestion quickly gathered steam and soon mutated into full-fledged escape plot. Being young and impressionable, I was easily seduced by the allure of warm pancakes and the absence of cold water and grinding yardage. In retrospect, the two hours of intense practice that I skipped was greatly out shadowed by the endless lecturing that was to follow, but yet I continued. Crouching down and crawling past the expansive pool windows, as to avoid detection, we made our way to the parking lot, where we triumphantly sped off to greet the smells of freedom and maple syrup that lingered in the air. Half way through our victory feast, the inconvenient fact that our coach might not appreciate our unauthorized liaison with the delicious French toast and Belgium waffles suddenly hit. Utilizing the self-reliance and resourcefulness we had gained through enduring endless hours of sets (which necessitate a crafty imagination in order to remain sane) we quickly formulated what we thought to be a fool proof plan to earn our coach's forgiveness. We set our sights on the nearest pet shop and left in search of a new team mascot. Along with Dolphin, the bug-eyed gold fish that could only swim in small circles to its left, similar to the human swimmers it was supposed to represent, an apology card bearing a man in a bright orange Speedo was purchased in hopes of bolstering our appeal for mercy. The situation appeared to be within our grasp and under control until, upon arriving back in the YMCA parking lot, my father's truck was conveniently pulled up along side the curb in front of the doors. Sensing that my luck had run out, I reluctantly surrendered, accepted my fate, and dejectedly undertook the death march towards my father who stood arms crossed and foot tapping, the embodiment of paternal anger. Bracing myself for a torrent of fiery chastisement on my lack of the four core YMCA values, I was instead met with a seethingly short explanation that my grandmother, who was visiting from Virginia for the week, had wanted to stop by to see me practice, but after much searching of the pool, finally realized I was nowhere to be found. This news proved rather shocking and only added another layer of dread onto my already heaping plate of trouble. After a stern lecture from my coach on the importance of dedication and accountability and the promise of an equally challenging work out the next day for those who had skipped out, I went home to face my grandmother. Fearing tears and disappointment I was surprised by the laughter and hugs that I came home to. Despite the slight annoyance of a trip to the pool made in vain, she found the whole situation to be rather comical and was simply glad I was safely back home. Waking up the next morning I wasn't looking forward to the punishment that awaited me at the pool, nor was I particularly happy while completing the punishment, or even afterwards for the next few days. Looking back on that experience now fills me a slight sense of embarrassment, but also pride and thankfulness for the lessons that it helped teach me.

That make up practice, although challenging was made infinitely better by my partners in crime, who despite gasping for air between intervals, delighted in recounting the details of the previous day's adventure. We all acknowledged that what we had done probably wasn't the best decision, but we took responsibility for our actions, made up the work we had missed, and learned from our mistakes and finished the practice in high spirits, optimistic for the rest of the season. Being involved with the YMCA has forced me to make many choices, some as small as whether or not to sprint the last 50 of a difficult set, and others much larger and more substantial, with long lasting consequences. Regardless of how I chose, I've always been held accountable for the decisions I've made and have been taught to accept the ramifications with poise and dignity. Thankfully, the choice I made that Saturday morning proved to be rather benign in the long run, eventually becoming the subject of many jokes, but it has, however, stuck with me for a long while. It wasn't the yards we had skipped, the pancakes we had eaten, or the number of lectures we had received, it was the common bond we all shared that made that morning so special. The same holds true for my time spent at the YMCA, like my grandmother who was simply happy to see me and have me back home in on piece, even

after I had made so many mistakes, OSHY has supported me not just during my successes, when it was easiest, but during my failures and screws ups. Even if I might not have deserved it, the team stuck by my side and offered a helping hand to pick me back up. Life can often be unfair and full of trials and hardship, but I've learned that in the end, if I have the love and respect of my family, and friends at home and at the YMCA, I can persevere and overcome any obstacle.

Marissa Graff - YMCA of Marquette County

Being involved in the YMCA has impacted my entire life. It has given me many opportunities, jobs and volunteer experience throughout the years. I do not have an official YMCA close to my area but was still able to join the YMCA community through the YMCA of Marquette County swim team program at my local high schools' pool. I would visit the YMCA in Marquette in the summer when my sister was at skating competitions, where the YMCA happens to be connected to the ice arena so I would spend many hours there swimming and playing.

I joined this Y affiliated swim team when I was nine years old after I had taken Red Cross swim lessons at the local university pool. I started competing competitively also when I was nine. When I was eleven I had a goal to make the state cut, so that would mean to make a choice between the other sports I was involved in so I can put all of my energy into one sport and goals. I ended up missing the cut by three seconds that year and it made me even more determined to make it the next season, which I did. This has taught me how to set goals, work hard and know how to cope with disappointments. As I went to more and more meets around the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin I made many friends all over and still friends with since then. I have made even more friends on my team and love the feeling of everyone being a family.

I needed to learn how to swim at a very young age because my house is on the water. My parents could then be more comfortable leaving me outside and not have a fear of me drowning. Learning how to swim and swimming on the swim team gave me the tools to be able to become a lifeguard and swim instructor later on in the beginning of high school. Lifeguarding gave me many jobs for community groups and at the local university. When I became a lifeguard at the university I was asked to become a swim instructor during the summer. I knew all the strokes but now I was learning how to teach young kids to get comfortable with the water. I am now teaching the kids that used to be me when I took those same lessons there, maybe someday those kids will go on to become part of the YMCA of Marquette County swim team, like I did. I love lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons, it has me coming back every summer and I have even taught swim lesson in the fall and spring. I also lifeguard all year round. I plan to get my Water Safety Instructor certification before this coming summer.

Having this volunteer and job experience in lifeguarding and teaching swim lessons has given me many opportunities. Being on the swim team has given me goals in my swimming but also carried on to having goals in school which lead to good grades. I was accepted into my high schools National Honor Society. With my volunteer hours I lifeguarded and helped out a swim session for older people to help with their swimming also. There are core values in the National Honor Society but also core values in the YMCA. I believe I possess all these qualities as respect for others, responsibility for my actions, caring to others needs and honesty to everyone. As a captain on my high school swim team and veteran on my YMCA swim team I have leadership skills and hope to pass on this to other swimmers when I leave. After high school this year I plan to attend the University of Wisconsin- Oshkosh with a major in Nursing and swimming for the Division III swim team.

Nathan Winkler – YMCA of Delta County

The YMCA has been a very important part of my life even from my earliest days as a member. I have been swimming for around 8 years off and on, and it all started with my early years at the YMCA. It is doubtful that I would be the same person I am now if it hadn't been for my experiences in the YMCA. In fact, I have to admit that I met all but one of my very best friends in my early years of swimming. We bonded because of our common interest of swimming and our relationships have spread immensely from that day on. The environment presented by the "Y" is perfect for meeting new friends, especially when you get to spend entire days chatting with new people. The "Y"

gives me the feeling of having a home away from home. It gives me a family that I can always turn to in the times of need. The family that is formed has a really tight bond that I wouldn't give up for anything. I have noticed that when a member quits its like I'm losing a brother or a sister and I really start to miss them. There was a girl I used to swim with when I was really young that I became great friends with. Then when she left, we parted ways and I never really saw her again until she joined swimming again this year. I get excited every time I see her because the memories of swimming as an 8 year old come flooding back to me. It's like I get to relive those years, and see how much the YMCA has changed my life in the years since then.

The coaches and teammates are always there for me, when I have questions or concerns. Or maybe if I get stuck (strictly hypothetically, of course) in a snow bank. I find myself smiling just thinking about it. Each day I go into swim two-a-days I look forward to talking to my coach and friends. The relationships I have from the "Y" carry into the outside world, where I love spending time my teammates. The "Y" just brings me together with them so much, and it makes me feel included and involved. I don't know what I would be doing if I wasnt swimming everyday, but I can guarantee that it wouldn't be nearly as beneficial as a workout. I also value the fact that the time spent at the "Y" prevents me from taking part in unhealthy practices. I have never even wanted to do drugs or anything related to that, and I feel like the "Y" has been an essential factor in my decision to refrain from such activities.

In addition, the "Y" has given me a perspective of what it is like to be a good citizen and better person all around. It really helps to have a parent or coach watching me all the time, making sure I perform my very best and that I represent myself as well as I can. Every moment at the "Y" is a learning experience that I can draw from in the future. I know what it is to be a teammate, a companion, and most importantly, a role model. Certainly I love going to practice everyday to talk with my friends and have a good time. The moments I enjoy the most are when the younger members look at me and just stare; When they look and hope that they will be like me when they grow up, swimming all the time and loving every moment of it. I know exactly what they are thinking, because I was just like that when I was younger. Sure I thought I was pretty good for my age, but when I finished my race and got out to see one of the kids a few years older than me, I just couldnt help but stare. They were always so strong and independent. When they jumped into the pool, I gaped in amazement at their speed, wondering if I could ever get that good.

When you see one of your older teammates swim a 22 in the freestyle, you can't help but dream that it was you doing the swimming. It brings such a competitive nature to the sport; something I strive for. Swimming is not always about winning, although its always a perk to bring home some nice gold; It's about improving. When I take off time in a race, I know that it's the result of all my hard work at practice. It makes all those hours in the pool worth it. When I jump into the pool in the morning I know its going to hurt. I know I'm going to push myself as hard as I can. My inspiration is always to take off that one little tenth or even hundreth. Setting personal goals can lead to impossible results. Each time I set a new personal record I am forced, compelled if you will, to set a new, more difficult goal.

A prime example comes from my experience with the National meet last year. A bulk of my swimming career has been driven by the passion to beat my teammate that is one year older than me. He always had the upper edge because he was older and stronger, and just more developed overall. He pushed me so much without even knowing it. In the end he made the National time in the breaststroke and inspired me to do the same. The year before I never would have dreampt of qualifying, not in my wildest dream. I pushed it so hard though, and it ended up paying off, which I found out as soon as I walked around the busy streets of Ft. Lauderdale in 90 degree weather.

While I was at the National swim meet I noticed another quality that the "Y" had given me throughout the years. As I was walking to the practice pool to get warmed up for my race, I was surprised to find a large amount of money blowing across the deck. Naturally I scrambled to pick it up just as any other person would, but as soon as I did the values that the "Y" had imprinted on my concious kicked in and I did something out of the norm. Without hesitation I handed the money to the closest official and told him what had happened. The money, upwards of \$100, turned out to belong to one of his fellow officials who was very grateful.

The fact that I did it without hesitation, without the thought of taking it ever occurring me is the reason I'm grateful to the "Y."

Through the years I have found that my life would be completely different had I not joined the local YMCA. I owe much of my life experience and the majority of my achievements to the "Y." Also, it's nice to have a desk drawer full of medals and ribbons to brighten the worst of days. I find that my time at the YMCA will be essential in the future and that it has prepared me for the challenges of college life and life beyond college. It has given me a competitive nature to strive and be the best I can be at everything. There are also the obvious advantages like the increased swimming abilities that I will take with me on my quest to swim at the collegiate level. I am very appreciative to the "Y" for all the great coaching and life lessons that I have gained which make me the person I am today, and the person I strive to be in the future.

Samantha Kosmer - Oshkosh YMCA

I have been a part of at least one YMCA program at a time since I was six months old. I started out in the YMCA child care and once I hit preschool age I started playing sports at the Y. I was involved in the basketball program and swim lessons. I was also involved in the different summer camps offered by the YMCA. I always loved going to the Y but none of these programs felt like a family until I started on the swim team. This team has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me. It has taught me life lessons about being respectful, acting responsible, caring about others, and being honest.

I have been on the Oshkosh Swim Team for the past seven and a half years. In these years I have learned some of the most important life lessons. One of the bigger lessons has been being respectful. Our head coach, Jay Coleman has always been very persistent about getting the point across that we should all be respectable to anyone and everyone that we come in contact with. When we were at a home meet, several years ago, some of the older girls were caught making fun of a kid because of his appearance. Jay was furious when he found out. That next Monday at practice he made all of us sit out of practice and read a letter he had written about the incident. We were all told that we would not be allowed to practice until we had read the letter, signed it, and went home and discussed the issue with our parents. We then had to bring the sheet back signed by both us and our parents. This is a lesson that I will take with me for the rest of my life.

Another thing Jay has always stressed was being responsible. He always wanted us to be 100% accountable. If we weren't going to be at practice we were supposed to tell him before hand and let him know the reason. To me this is a trait that I will continue to practice and can do nothing but help me in the long run.

The Oshy swim team has been like a family to me. All of these swimmers are my brothers and sisters and the coaches are like parents to us. We all care about each other so much. This past February one of our swimmers, Natalie Bolin, passed away. It felt like all of us had lost a sister. We all came together as a family and were there for each other. I don't know of any other program that cares about each other more than this one. Growing up in this environment has been one of the best things for me.

For every swimmer there comes a time during practice when they think "Oh I can just coast through this" or "This is supposed to be all out but I can back off a little." After a while of doing this you figure out that if you cut corners you won't get any closer to accomplishing your goals. After a bad race you have to be honest with yourself about how much work you had actually put in during practice.

All of these traits combined have molded me into the young adult I am today. This program has meant so much to me. I grew up on this team. I came onto the team as a pudgy little nine year old and have come out as a mature young adult that is ready to face whatever college life brings at her.

Sam Morgen - Madison West YMCA

There once was a little boy who played video games all day. In the spring he played video games. In the fall he played video games. In the winter, he played the most video games of any season. Finally, in the summer, his parents decided the boy would never play video games again. So they signed him up for summer swimming. They boy was tossed kicking and swimming into the pool, swimming reluctantly, and playing video games whenever he was dry.

As a freshman, swimming suddenly became important, and the boy wanted to swim faster, so he joined the local YMCA team. Because of this, he had even less time to play video games, and he grumbled. When he was swimming, he said, "I wish I was playing Legend of Zelda." His coach told him to try harder in practice, but the boy was too busy goofing around to listen.

When the freshman became a sophomore, he swam with the YMCA in the summer, because he wanted to go fast. The coach was pleased that the boy was swimming more, but he still told the boy to try harder in practice. The boy didn't listen.

At the end of junior year, the boy did not improve as much as he wanted to, and he was distraught. "What did I do wrong", he thought. Then he heard a small voice in the back of his head. Suddenly the boy had an epiphany, "At this point on", the boy shouted, "I will try hard in practice!"

Senior year, the boy practiced as often, and as hard as he could. He gave up video games, and only ate healthy food. Lo and behold, at the end of the season, the boy was faster than he had ever been. He walked up to his YMCA coach, and said, "Thank you coach. Thank you for showing me that hard work does pay off."

Terrin Seaver - Geneva Lakes YMCA

Being involved with the Y has impacted my life greatly over the past few years. The Y is not just a workplace or a place to practice for me, it is another home. I switched swim teams and first discovered the Geneva Lakes YMCA when I was 14. The first few years of involvement with the Y, it was just another place to hang out. I would go there after school everyday, and my parents would never have to worry about me being unsafe or getting into trouble. When I turned 16, I not only swam and hung out at the Y, I then became an employee. Ever since I was 16, I have always felt like I never leave the Y. In the summer, I am at the Y all day. I swim in the morning, work throughout the afternoon, and then swim again at night. I lifeguard, teach swim lessons, and help coach the Geneva Y Swim Team. The YMCA has taught me so many life lessons. I have learned what real hard work is, how to take responsibility, how to meet new people, how to keep patience with someone learning a new task, and many other important life lessons. Because of the YMCA I have met so many people that I will never forget. My swim coach, Frank Scott, has taught me more than any other coach has ever taught me. Not only has he taught me all the great secrets of fast swimming, but many secrets that I will never forget and will use frequently throughout my life. I have met great friends that I will never forget, and I have had the privilege to meet and teach the future swimmers of our area. Sadly, I will be leaving the Geneva Lakes YMCA in August to attend and swim for New Mexico State University. The Y has prepared me greatly for my new step in life as a New Mexico State Aggie, and my thanks for the last few years will never be enough. The YMCA, the memories, all the life lessons, and the people I have met there may be left behind; however all the experiences encountered will never be forgotten, or what I have learned from being involved within the Geneva Lakes YMCA.

Justin Buhrow - Chippewa Valley Family YMCA

The YMCA has been impacting my life in a significant way since I was in first grade. Granted I had taken swimming lessons before this point, but in first grade I joined the swim team at the YMCA.

Now, as a senior getting ready to graduate I can look back and see the YMCA and swim team have always been there for me. I am now in my twelfth year of swimming and eleventh on the YMCA swim team. When I say they have been there for me I don't just mean as something to do. It was there for me when my parents separated

as a positive thing in my life and kept me going and doing well. That actually turned out to be my best year ever swimming for the YMCA team.

Once I reached high school and joined the high school team as well, I wasn't at the YMCA as much, but it still found its way into my life. I found the need to lift weights to get better for high school swimming, and thought there was no better place to do so than the YMCA since that is where I had gone for so many years when in the younger age groups of swimming. It is just a place where I feel comfortable being and have come to enjoy going there even more as a high school student. During my senior year I have also tried to help the younger swimmers on the team, by coming back to coach them on a volunteer basis, when they first start swimming.

The YMCA has been a part of my life for my known memory. It has taught me to respect the authority of my coaches and work hard, but still have fun when you do something. Sports aren't worth it unless you are willing to step back and enjoy it. I am glad I have been a member of the YMCA all of these years and hope it can keep influencing my life for years to come, since it has been so great so far.

Marshall Lund – Tri County YMCA

For as long as I can remember, I've been a part of the YMCA. As a child, I took swim lessons. Now I was a shy kid, but having swim lessons every week with kids I had never seen before in my life taught me to be more outgoing and interact better with others.

Even after I completed the swimming lessons, I competed in the Senior Olympics. Being able to compete in a sporting event with your grandparents is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I got to see where the roots of my competitive edge really came from.

After a year in the fast food industry I decided it wasn't for me so I went on a job search; little did I know that it would lead me back to the Y. Out of curiosity, I asked my friend, who had been working at the Y as a lifeguard for some time now, how he liked it. He said it was a great job so naturally I had to apply. After going through a rigorous class that required numerous hours of time not to mention the CPR and First Aid classes, I got the job. Now, once again, I am a part of the YMCA aquatic family and I couldn't be happier with the job. I continue to work out every day at the Y and I am also required to swim 500 meters of swimming every month. The YMCA is, and will continue to be, a part of my healthy lifestyle.

Sadie Nennig – Schroeder YMCA

In the fifth grade, my life had quickly changed. It was at this time that my first and only swim team had fallen apart, proposed to be combined with yet another crumbling team in the area. At the time this seemed like the end of the world to an eager, passion-filled ten year old. This, though, is the exact opposite of what came out of the situation. In no time, I had joined the local powerhouse YMCA swim team that I only heard awe-filled comments about. Although it may have been sad saying goodbye to my old team, I would not trade anything in the world for the core values I have learned and the memories I have made on the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team.

Training in the YMCA setting everyday has taught me many important lessons that I strive to incorporate into my life every single day. The first value I have learned from the YMCA is to genuinely care about others, their well-being, and their feelings. Being a very chatty person by nature, I cannot make it through a whole two hour practice without talking up a storm. This creates the perfect opportunity to my friends about what is going on in their lives and try my shot at giving them advice to solve their daily problems. Not only do I care about the people I personally know, but I also care about those unfamiliar to me. This is demonstrated in many ways, for example holding a door open for a women pushing a stroller or saying a cheerful hello accompanied with a smile to a passerby in the hallway. I try to make a small difference in someone's day as many times as I can. In the summer, my swim team goes to various country clubs to teach swim clinics to the young children, and we have also taught water safety to inner-city children. It is activities like these that I am proud to show off my passion and love for the sport of swimming, while inspiring others to real their goals within the pool. Swimming in the YMCA and the

bighearted people I am surrounded by have taught me to care about the interests of others to the greatest degree possible.

Swimming at the YMCA has also taught me to be as honest of a person as I can. True friendships root from a combination of honesty and trust; I have learned throughout the years as my relationships with my teammates have strengthened. Honesty is an incredibly crucial element of life, necessary for healthy relationships and to grow maturely as people. Giving teammates advice about how they can fix their stroke, better their start, or telling them they are doing a great job during a difficult set are examples of how honesty can be displayed in the pool. All of these small but meaningful actions can yield better results in the pool and show that we, as a team, all have advice we can give each other in order to better the team as a whole. Honesty does not mean telling a novel of why something a person does is wrong or right, but YMCA swimming has taught me to give true, significant advice to those around you so you can both flourish in the pool and in life.

Respect is yet another value the YMCA environment has incorporated into my life. Respect of myself, respect of teammates, respect of coaches, the list goes on and on. Swimming in such a special environment has taught me to really focus on the good of people, and that each and every person deserves some degree of respect. Whether it be a teacher at school or a new parent I meet, I try to show what I have learned at the YMCA as much as I can. I feel that collectively the YMCA swimmers and coaches are very polite towards each other and towards those new people they meet. This respectful, kind nature is contagious, and because of this many YMCA swimmers from various teams have friendships that they will never forget.

The final, but certainly not least important lesson I have learned from the YMCA is responsibility. Being at the YMCA for practice two sometimes three hours a night (not to mention the 30 minute drive each way) leaves very little free time at night to do important daily tasks such as homework. Surprisingly though, many swimmers throughout the different YMCA teams are great students and attend great universities after graduating. I have learned how to manage my time, devoting time and focus to the pool and also to school with just a few valuable hours to work with. After getting into a schedule, it did not take me long to adjust to the life of a student-athlete. It is very evident that swimming is a necessity in my daily life, though, when I do not go to swim practice and end up doing everything but my homework until eight-o'clock at night. Out of the school and pool settings, I feel as though many YMCA swimmers are very responsible within their teams. I strive off of feeling like a leader, and I love being one of the oldest on the team now. I can say with certainty that the seniors on our team, and throughout other YMCA teams, are wonderful leaders the younger swimmers to look up to. I want to inspire those younger than me to stick with swimming even through the tough times, because though the best times are important, the lessons learned over the years are irreplaceable. Swimming not only allows me to lead a group of swimmers who love the sport just as much as I do, but also gives me just the right time slot to focus on other important aspects of life.

Many of lessons learned have made an impact on how I strive to live my life, but the memories I have made and the relationships I have made will stay with me forever. The YMCA swimming community has many strong and close relationships, as we see each other many times throughout the year. This made its strongest appearance in times of tragedy, as the YMCA swim teams came together and were (and still are), there to support each other through the difficult times. I am so thankful I have met not only my own teammates, but also swimmers from other YMCA teams, because I know they are always there for me, cheering me on and we will be friends for a long, long time. I cherish the friendships I have made and the memories shared throughout the past seven years. Those most vivid are memories from YMCA nationals, where all the YMCA teams are with each other in the beautiful state of Florida. Our bonds are evident when you see members from three, four, sometimes even five YMCA teams behind a Wisconsin swimmer's lane, cheering them on during finals of their big event. Yes, the sport does have its competitiveness, but the swimming community here in Wisconsin flourishes off this drive, creating the best of friendships. I will take all that I have learned on my next adventure in life, attending college at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Although I am going to school hundreds of miles away from Wisconsin, I know my swimming friends and I will remain close despite the distance, because that is simply what true friends do. I am immensely grateful for the YMCA swimming community, how it has shaped me into the person I am today, and for all the people I have become such close friends with ever since I walked into those red doors in the 5th grade.

Paige Weslaski - Racine YMCA Swim Scholarship

Swimming has been a major component of my life since age ten. I've swum hundreds of races and attended thousands of practices. Luckily, I have not grown to dislike the sport nor have I experienced any sort of burnout like other peers around me. Improving my times, achieving state and national qualifying times, and even attaining a state record or two are all wonderful features of the sport. But, once one looks past the times and records, swimming can have a much deeper meaning. Working hard with new friends, cultivating a bond with a coach, and staying out of trouble can have long-term effects on young athletes.

I am fortunate enough to be a part of a YMCA Swim Team. Respect, responsibility, caring, and honesty are portrayed by the organization as important characteristics its members must portray. Being a member of a YMCA team as opposed to a USS team has an abundant amount of benefits. Instead of swimming for their personal benefit, one swims representing each of the 2,686 YMCA's in the world. The YMCA Swim Teams are banded together, and swimming for one of these teams makes the swimmers know that they belong. Everyone is welcome into these clubs, and no one's turned away. Personally, competing in a YMCA meet is much more enjoyable than another meet; the atmosphere is friendlier, and there seems to be an aura of teamwork with every single swimmer. Having a little fun seems to be on each YMCA meet's agenda, whether it's singing the YMCA theme song in unison or a parade around the pool. YMCA meets are much more enjoyable for all ages, strengthening the pact of friendship even tighter.

Swimming for the YMCA has an incredible amount of benefits that have impacted me greatly. I have attended the National Meet for the past two years, and it is hands down one of the most pleasurable experiences of my life. Being rewarded with a meet seconds from the beach is extremely satisfying. I had a particular good meet at the last National meet, and I was contacted by the YMCA to join some other swimmers at the Olympic Training Center for an all-paid swim camp in August. The YMCA paid for my lodging, meals, pool time, and gifts, and I made some great friends that I am still in contact with today. Being given an experience like this, I am completely indebted to the YMCA and would recommend it to anyone.

The YMCA is one of the largest nonprofit community service organizations in the United States. Making money is not a priority; their priority is to give its members lasting memories. The YMCA has gone far beyond what I would have expected any one organization to do for one swimmer. I love to swim, and that is enough for me. Being given the opportunity to swim at the National level and being taken on an all-expenses paid trip to Colorado are just the icing on the cake. Representing the YMCA is one of the best things a young swimmer can choose to do; practicing peace, breathtaking opportunities, and team oriented camaraderie among the team make swimming for this organization so rewarding.