

First-Generation
Harvard Alumni
Sample Essays



CAMBRIDGE

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Essays

CHRISTINE GENTRY EDM '05

I walked into my first year of teaching in a monstrous Boston Public high school with more confidence than I'd ever walked into anything. I had just graduated from *Harvard*. I had read all the books. I had rocked student teaching. I was ready to change lives, maybe inspire more first-gen kids like me to return to underserved communities and teach.

On my first day, I was handed a roster with thirty-six names and a room with only thirty-one desks. When I asked about it, I was told, "Oh, honey, don't worry. They'll *never* all be here." I was also told that unless a kid was puking or bleeding, I had to take care of it. The administration was so hands-off, the teachers had the power to suspend.

It didn't take long for me to realize the school was unsafe. Within the first week, my colleague next door (another first-year teacher from Harvard) had a fight involving ripped out earrings, a metal Swingline stapler, and broken glass. (She had had a drinking glass on her desk—a move I later overheard a veteran teacher call "a rookie mistake.") Students were getting jumped for their money and cell phones in the bathrooms, and an unscheduled fire alarm meant someone was getting ambushed.

I commonly refer to my first few months at this job as the winter of my life. That first Saturday, I sat down at my computer and made a six-page, single-spaced document where the left-hand column had all the crazy stuff that had happened in my classroom that week, and the right-hand column had all the rules, routines, and procedures I was going to put in place to make sure it wouldn't happen again. It didn't work.

For the first time in my life, I couldn't overachieve myself out of something. I was staying late, coming in early, coming in on the weekends. At one point, I'm embarrassed to tell you, I anointed the doorway of my classroom with oil. "Baby Jesus," I whispered, "if there are demons in this room, please *cleanse* this place." Nothing worked.

It finally dawned on me that my students had no investment in the class and felt no ownership over the space because I hadn't taken the time to build any community in my room. I took that 6-page document and whittled it down to a single poster that read, "MUTUAL RESPECT. NO HATE SPEECH." I started doing journal entries connected to the content, so we could get to know each other better.

On the day we launched *Lord of the Flies*, I asked them to write about what would happen if suddenly there were no rules. When it came time to share, Laura raised her hand. “No offense, Miss,” she said, “but if there were no rules, I don’t think a room full of black kids would be listening to a white lady tell them what to do.”

“Oooooohhhhh!” the room exploded.

“That’s actually an amazing answer, Laura,” I said. The room got quiet. “That’s exactly the kind of thinking I want you guys to be doing. Why don’t we pause for a second to talk about why you do listen to me?”

I ended up ditching the rest of my lesson plan that day to have a candid conversation with my students about race and power and how those things intersect in the urban public school classroom. It felt like the first time we were authentically engaged with each other about something that mattered.

And then a student’s phone went off . . . and she *answered* it. I walked over and said, “Shanece, you need to hang up the phone. Tell them you’re in class.”

“Hold on,” Shanece said loudly. “My teacher’s being a *bitch*.”

Laura shot up from her seat. “Oh no,” she said, pointing to the poster on the wall. “That’s hate speech, and we don’t do that in here.”

Shanece sucked her teeth, but she hung up the phone. Turns out, I wasn’t the only one trying to build something in there.

Over the last thirteen years, I’ve taught more than a thousand students in the public schools of Boston and New York City, but I’ve never forgotten that first crew. Not long ago, Laura found me on Facebook. Her profile photo was beautiful—she was with her boyfriend, holding a baby. She had just finished nursing school. The screen was getting blurry when I got a notification that she had posted on my wall. It was just three words: “Thank you, Miss.”

RO KING AB ’85

As I wheel my dad into the elevator, he says, “This is my daughter who went to Harvard!” Three white curly heads nod and smile at me. I’m fifty-five and it is thirty-seven years since my parents put me on the train to Harvard. Granted, my father has five daughters and he needs some shortcut to describe us to new friends at his retirement community. And, I am vain enough to prefer the Harvard label to “she’s my oldest!” Yet, I still sense a twinge of ambivalence when the Crimson H is waved in front of me.

Getting into Harvard was the ultimate stop on a family journey, and none of us thought to plan beyond simply getting into college. My grandfather finished third grade in Italy, before boarding a ship, alone, to emigrate to America. My father made it through a Philadelphia public high school. These two men constantly conveyed to me the importance of education, knowing that I would be the first to go to college. When I was admitted to Harvard, they were more than proud to tell everyone they met where I was headed.

And, so was I. I was the first graduate of my high school to get into Harvard, and none of my friends or relatives knew anyone who even knew of someone who had visited Cambridge, Massachusetts. This was the biggest news of my eighteen-year-old life and worth spreading around!

As a freshman, I started to downplay. Some of my classmates had anticipated going to Harvard; one roommate was the fifth generation from her family to attend! To those who “belonged” at Harvard—whether through family tradition or sheer intellectual firepower—it was not a big deal and they didn’t talk about it much. So by the time I graduated, I had fallen into responding, “Boston,” whenever I was asked where I went to college. How had I become reluctant to admit I graduated from Harvard?

I suppose I wanted to avoid the assumptions people make when they hear “Harvard.” Some assumed I was rich, when, in fact, my monthly student loan payments were far larger than my rent. Some assumed I was smart, when I was still reeling from my degeneration from straight-As in high school to, well, a barely respectable GPA. Others assumed I would be a snob, when, like most everyone, I was just trying to fit in.

There was no need to avoid my memories of Harvard. Although it had its challenges, my experience was truly positive. My academic difficulties were balanced by the expansion of my mind and the realization that there is much to learn about the world and that I will learn as long as I remain curious. Social concerns were far outweighed by warm friends and long evenings hanging out and learning about each other. While our life experiences differed a great deal, we shared common youthful energy and teenaged angst.

My financial worries never completely overwhelmed, and they steered me to a string of jobs—from cleaning to research, bartending to film projection—from which I learned lessons I use to this day. An even more important takeaway than life lessons is my life partner, Martin, my husband of thirty-two years and a fellow projectionist at Harvard Audio Visual Services.

Still, it took time to come to terms with Harvard. I got an MBA from Darden and found the case study method more conducive to my successful academic performance. I rapidly climbed the corporate ladder at a retail bank, then left banking for consulting, and consulting to join the dot-com boom. Some colleagues and I started a marketing technology company, riding out the start-up storm of ups and downs. During those days, connecting with another Harvard alum could sometimes open a door.

Martin's job took us to Asia, where the Harvard aura had varying effects. In China, I was invited to give a lecture on consumer credit and, in a conflation of my resume, the audience was told I had written about this topic at Harvard. I don't think we covered consumers or credit within my history concentration. When I headed a nonprofit in Indonesia, I visited a remote island on a cultural mission. In a meeting with tribal elders, the translator mentioned my affiliation with Harvard, and the chief asked if I could invoke my Harvard connections to get some UN help with a local conflict. Given the location, I was surprised he knew of Harvard or the UN.

Today, I enjoy returning to the Yard and I love working with First Generation Harvard Alumni and our mentorship program. Sometimes a freshman and I will roll our eyes simultaneously when I tell them my dad still tells everyone he meets that his daughter went to Harvard.

DANIEL MIRANDA LOBO AB '14

"The best way to test your passion is to try something else." It's one of the best pieces of advice I've received from a mentor.

And it came at a time that I needed it. I was working as a strategy consultant in Parthenon-EY's K-12 education practice. Heading into the experience, I thought it was my dream job. I had spent most of undergrad studying issues of educational equity, which led me to the Undergraduate Teacher Education Program. I only made it to Harvard because my eighth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Brauneis, helped me get out of a poor-performing public school and into a small Catholic high school on a scholarship. I knew that a single caring teacher could change the entire trajectory of a student's life because that's what happened to me. And I wanted to do that for other students like me who weren't lucky enough to land in the quality public schools that they deserved.

But, as a first-generation, low-income student, it wasn't easy to follow my passions. My head often got in the way of my heart. You see, I didn't

make the most informed decision to come to Harvard. I came for two reasons: I knew it would be the most affordable option if I could get in and I knew it would open the most doors after graduation. My decision was entirely economically motivated as I sought to maximize my income potential and upward social mobility. There was no consideration of student life, or academic experience, or dining hall food, or any of the other hallmarks of a residential undergraduate experience—my lived experience meant that I didn't know to optimize for those things. "You got to Harvard and you're going to be a public school teacher? How are you going to explain that to mami and dada," I thought. A seemingly selfish passion was weighed down by a vast indebtedness to the people who sacrificed to get me to this point.

Parthenon was the resolution to my dilemma. After a successful summer internship, I had solidified my place in the firm's renowned K-12 education practice. At twenty-three, I was working with some of the most prominent foundations in the country and advising state-level public education decision-makers. In my first job out of undergrad, I was making more money than both of my parents combined. But, a year and a half in, it dawned on me: I wasn't happy because I wasn't inspired by the work I was doing. I was technically working in education, but I was never around students or teachers or schools. I was mostly in a bougie consulting firm crunching numbers and thinking through how to apply business frameworks to education. Meanwhile, I was the only member of my teams with any personal connection to the kinds of communities that we sought to improve, which was personally very challenging.

I don't regret my time at Parthenon. It taught me a lot about business and the education sector and exposed me to how decision-makers think about impact and scale. It also taught me that mission is more important to me than money. That isn't something that anyone could tell me; it was something I had to learn on my own.

That lesson is what compelled me to stop and listen when the universe presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime to join an early-stage startup in L.A. as COO. It was a beauty startup focused on the black beauty market—quite the departure from my education work. But the equity-focused mission spoke to me, as did the leadership opportunity and SoCal sunshine. My mentor's advice—"The best way to test your passion is to try something else."—is what enabled me to take the leap. I took the biggest risk of my life, quit my stable consulting job, and headed west.

Even though it failed a year later, I don't regret my startup experience either. This experience ushered me from the role of analyst to that of executive. Again, I found myself surrounded by influential decision-makers from Silicon Valley to Hong Kong and Singapore. More personally, I got to live across the hall from one of my best friends from undergrad and formed an amazing, diverse community of creatives and queer people of color. I learned to smile at people on the street and to make friends at a bar. I became a more relaxed and positive person. I will forever be grateful for the growth and good times that came from my first West Coast chapter. Coming from Boston, it was certainly something else.

And now, after continued serendipity, I find myself back at Harvard serving as a proctor. My passion for teaching and education has remained, and I've gotten much better at listening to and following my heart thanks to thirty amazing students (and more!) who inspire me every day. My life may no longer be full of money, but it is full of mission and purpose. And I couldn't be happier.

