

## **‘When Normal Life Stopped’: College Essays Reflect a Turbulent Year**

This year’s admissions essays became a platform for high school seniors to reflect on the pandemic, race and loss.



**By Anemona Hartocollis**

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This year perhaps more than ever before, the college essay has served as a canvas for high school seniors to reflect on a turbulent and, for many, sorrowful year. It has been a psychiatrist’s couch, a road map to a more hopeful future, a chance to pour out intimate feelings about loneliness and injustice.

In response to a request from The New York Times, more than 900 seniors submitted the personal essays they wrote for their college applications. Reading them is like a trip through two of the biggest news events of recent decades: the devastation wrought by the coronavirus, and the rise of a new civil rights movement.

In the wake of the high-profile deaths of Black people like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers, students shared how they had wrestled with racism in their own lives. Many dipped their feet into the politics of protest, finding themselves strengthened by their activism, yet sometimes conflicted.

### **More Inclusive Admissions**

The aftermath of the George Floyd protests and a decreased reliance on standardized tests have led to more diverse admissions at [elite universities](#).

And in the midst of the most far-reaching pandemic in a century, they described the isolation and loss that have pervaded every aspect of their lives since schools suddenly shut down a year ago. They sought to articulate how they have managed while cut off from friends and activities they had cultivated for years.

To some degree, the students were responding to prompts on the applications, with their essays taking on even more weight in a year when many colleges waived standardized test scores and when extracurricular activities were wiped out.

This year the Common App, the nation's most-used application, added a question inviting students to write about the impact of Covid-19 on their lives and educations. And universities like Notre Dame and Lehigh invited applicants to write about their reactions to the death of George Floyd, and how that inspired them to make the world a better place.

The coronavirus was the most common theme in the essays submitted to The Times, appearing in 393 essays, more than 40 percent. Next was the value of family, coming up in 351 essays, but often in the context of other issues, like the pandemic and race. Racial justice and protest figured in 342 essays.

“We find with underrepresented populations, we have lots of people coming to us with a legitimate interest in seeing social justice established, and they are looking to see their college as their training ground for that,” said David A. Burge, vice president for enrollment management at George Mason University.

Family was not the only eternal verity to appear. Love came up in 286 essays; science in 128; art in 110; music in 109; and honor in 32. Personal tragedy also loomed large, with 30 essays about cancer alone.

Some students resisted the lure of current events, and wrote quirky essays about captaining a fishing boat on Cape Cod or hosting dinner parties. A few wrote poetry. Perhaps surprisingly, politics and the 2020 election were not of great interest.

Most students expect to hear where they were admitted by the end of March or beginning of April. Here are excerpts from a few of the essays, edited for length.

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## Nandini Likki

Nandini, a senior at the Seven Hills School in Cincinnati, took care of her father after he was hospitalized with Covid-19. It was a “harrowing” but also rewarding time, she writes.

When he came home, my sister and I had to take care of him during the day while my mom went to work. We cooked his food, washed his dishes, and excessively cleaned the house to make sure we didn’t get the disease as well.



It was an especially harrowing time in my life and my mental health suffered due to the amount of stress I was under.

However, I think I grew emotionally and matured because of the experience. My sister and I became more responsible as we took on more adult roles in the family. I grew even closer to my dad and learned how to bond with him in different ways, like using Netflix Party to watch movies together. Although the experience isolated me from most of my friends who couldn’t relate to me, my dad’s illness taught me to treasure my family even more and cherish the time I spend with them.

Nandini has been accepted at Case Western and other schools.

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## Grace Sundstrom

NY Times article. *By Anemona Hartocollis*. April 2021.

Through her church in Des Moines, Grace, a senior at Roosevelt High School, began a correspondence with Alden, a man who was living in a nursing home and isolated by the pandemic.

As our letters flew back and forth, I decided to take a chance and share my disgust about the treatment of people of color at the hands of police officers. To my surprise, Alden responded with the same sentiments and shared his experience marching in the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

Here we were, two people generations apart, finding common ground around one of the most polarizing subjects in American history.

When I arrived at my first Black Lives Matter protest this summer, I was greeted by the voices of singing protesters. The singing made me think of a younger Alden, stepping off the train at Union Station in Washington, D.C., to attend the 1963 March on Washington.

Grace has been admitted to Trinity University in San Antonio and is waiting to hear from others.

## Ahmed AlMehri

Ahmed, who attends the American School of Kuwait, wrote of growing stronger through the death of his revered grandfather from Covid-19.

Fareed Al-Othman was a poet, journalist and, most importantly, my grandfather. Sept. 8, 2020, he fell victim to Covid-19. To many, he's just a statistic — one of the "inevitable" deaths. But to me, he was, and continues to be, an inspiration. I understand the frustration people have with the restrictions, curfews, lockdowns and all of the tertiary effects of these things.

But I, personally, would go through it all a hundred times over just to have my grandfather back.

For a long time, things felt as if they weren't going to get better. Balancing the grief of his death, school and the upcoming college applications was a struggle; and my stress started to accumulate. Covid-19 has taken a lot from me, but it has forced me to grow stronger and persevere. I know my grandfather would be disappointed if I had let myself use his death as an excuse to slack off.

Ahmed has been accepted by the University of California, Irvine, and the University of Miami and is waiting to hear from others.

## Mina Rowland

Mina, who lives in a shelter in San Joaquin County, Calif., wrote of becoming homeless in middle school.

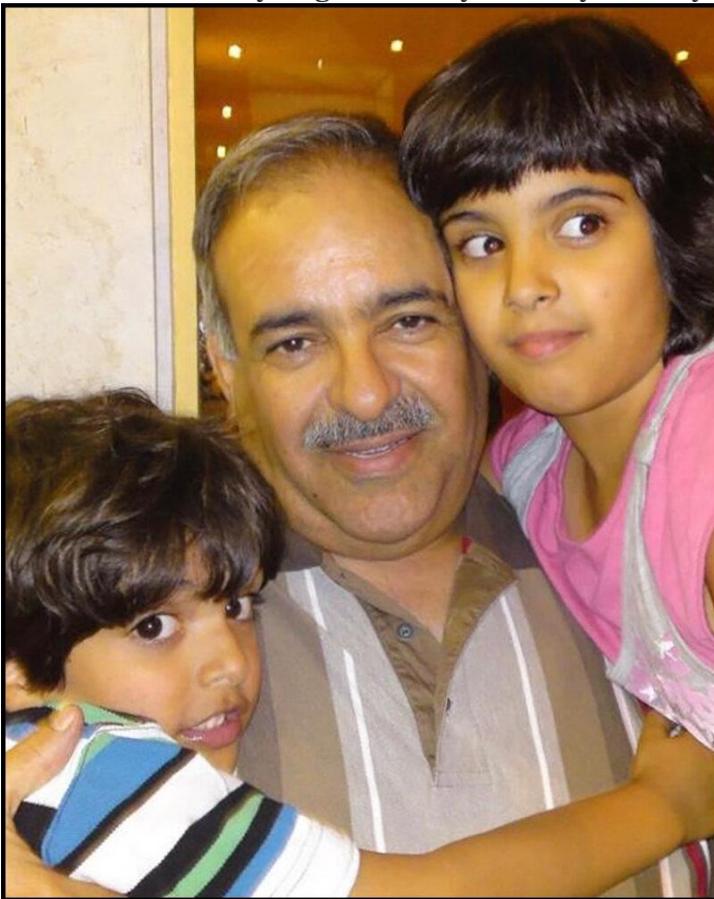
### ADVERTISEMENT

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Despite every day that I continue to face homelessness, I know that I have outlets for my pain and anguish.

Most things that I've had in life have been destroyed, stolen, lost, or taken, but art and poetry shall be with me forever.

The stars in "Starry Night" are my tenacity and my hope. Every time I am lucky enough to see the stars, I am reminded of how far I've come and how much farther I can go.



After taking a gap year, Mina and her twin sister, Mirabell, have been accepted at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and are waiting on others.

## Christine Faith Cabusay

Christine, a senior at Stuyvesant High School in New York, decided to break the isolation of the pandemic by writing letters to her friends.

How often would my friends receive something in the mail that

was not college mail, a bill, or something they ordered online? My goal was to make opening a letter an experience. I learned calligraphy and Spencerian script so it was as if an 18th-century maiden was writing to them from her parlor on a rainy day.

Credit...via Christine Faith Cabusay

Washing lines in my yard held an ever-changing rainbow of hand-recycled paper.

With every letter came a painting of something that I knew they liked: fandoms, animals, music, etc. I sprayed my favorite perfume on my signature on every letter



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Senior Year, here you come. How about your SAT?  
I am as always very proud of you

because I read somewhere that women sprayed perfume on letters overseas to their partners in World War II; it made writing letters way more romantic (even if it was just to my close friends).

Christine is still waiting to hear from schools.

## Alexis Ihezue

Her father's death from complications of diabetes last year caused Alexis, a student at the Gwinnett School of Mathematics, Science and Technology in Lawrenceville, Ga., to consider the meaning of love.

And in the midst of my grief swallowing me from the inside out, I asked myself when I loved him most, and when I knew he loved me. It's nothing but brief flashes, like bits and pieces of a dream. I hear him singing "Fix You" by Coldplay on our way home, his hands across the table from me at our favorite wing spot that we went to weekly after school, him driving me home in the middle of a rainstorm, his last message to me congratulating me on making it to senior year.

Credit Alexis Ihezue

It's me finding a plastic spoon in the sink last week and remembering the obnoxious way he used to eat. I see him in bursts and flashes.

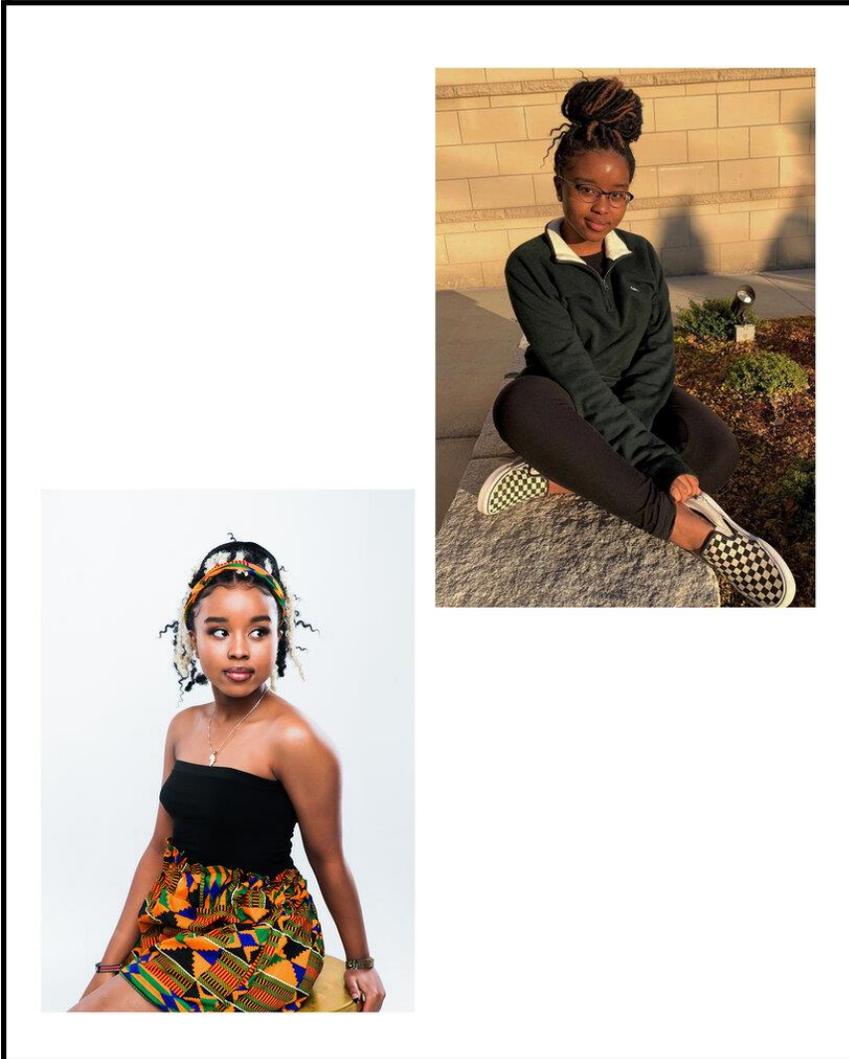
A myriad of colors and experiences. And I think to myself, 'That's what it is.' It's a second. It's a minute. That's what love is. It isn't measured in years, but moments.

Alexis has been accepted by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is waiting on others.

## Ivy Wanjiku

She and her mother came to America “with nothing but each other and \$100,” writes Ivy, who was born in Kenya and attends North Cobb High School in Kennesaw, Ga.

I am a triple threat. Foreign, black, female. From the dirt roads and dust that covered the attire of my ancestors who worshiped the soil, I have sprouted new beginnings for generations.



Credit...CADY; via Ivy Wanjiku

But the question arises; will that generation live to see its day?

Melanin mistaken as a felon, my existence is now a hashtag that trends as often as my rights, a facade at best, a lie in truth. I now know more names of dead blacks than I do the amendments of the Constitution.

Ivy is going to Emory University in Atlanta on full scholarship and credits her essay with helping her get in.

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## Mary Clare Marshall

The isolation of the pandemic became worse when Mary Clare, a student at Sacred Heart Greenwich in Connecticut, realized that her mother had cancer.

My parents acted like everything was normal, but there were constant reminders of her diagnosis. After her first chemo appointment, I didn't acknowledge the change. It became real when she came downstairs one day without hair.



Credit...Melissa McCann

No one said anything about the change. It just happened. And it hit me all over again. My mom has cancer.

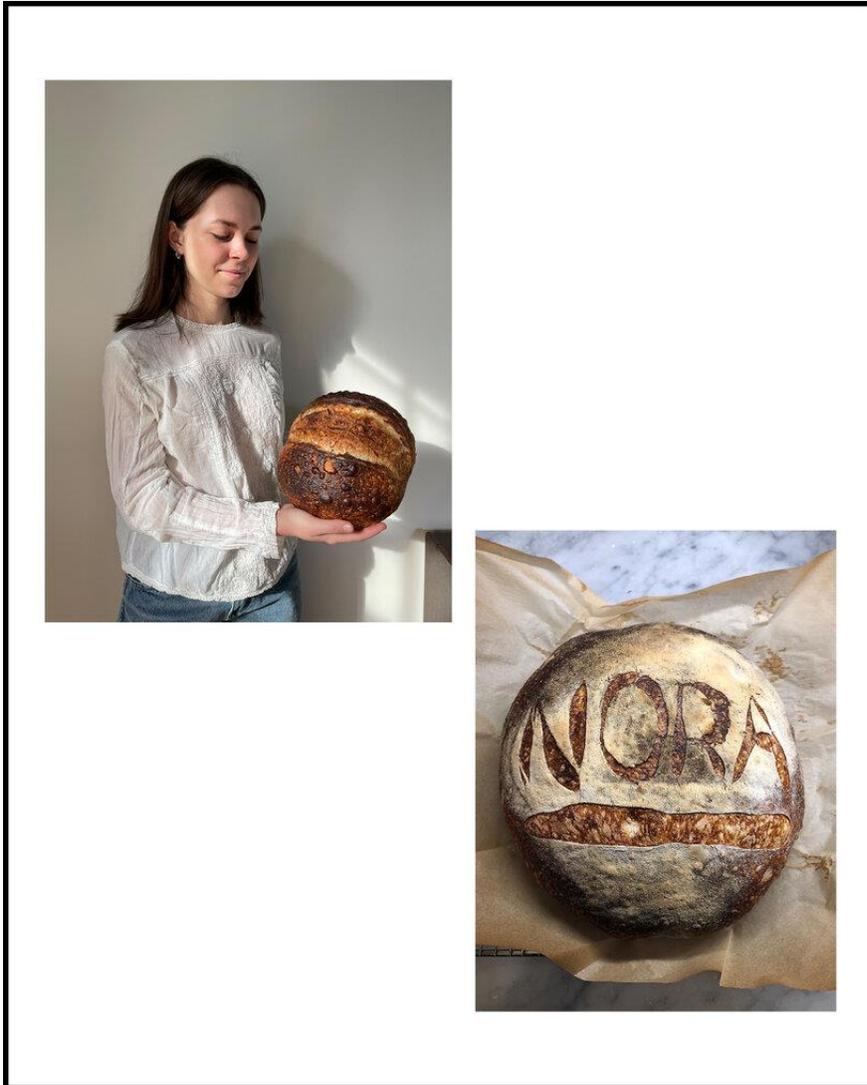
Even after going to Catholic school for my whole life, I couldn't help but be angry at God. I felt myself experiencing immense doubt in everything I believe in. Unable to escape my house for any small respite, I felt as though I faced the reality of my mom's cancer totally alone.

Mary Clare has been admitted to the University of Virginia and is waiting on other schools.

## Nora Frances Kohnhorst

Nora, a student at the High School of American Studies at Lehman College in New York, was always "a serial dabbler," but found commitment in a common pandemic hobby.

In March, when normal life stopped, I took up breadmaking. This served a practical purpose. The pandemic hit my neighborhood in Queens especially hard, and my parents were afraid to go to the store. This forced my family to come up with ways to avoid shopping. I decided I would learn to make sourdough using recipes I found online. Initially, some loaves fell flat, others were too soft inside, and still more spread into strange blobs.



Credit...via Nora Frances Kohnhorst

I reminded myself that the bread didn't need to be perfect, just edible.

It didn't matter what it looked like; there was no one to see or eat it besides my brother and parents. They depended on my new activity, and that dependency prevented me from repeating the cycle of trying a hobby, losing steam, and moving on to something new.

Nora has been admitted to SUNY Binghamton and the University of Vermont and is waiting to hear from others.

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## Gracie Yong Ying Silides

Gracie, a student at Greensboro Day School in North Carolina, recalls the "red thread" of a Chinese proverb and wonders where it will take her next.

Destiny has led me into a mysterious place these last nine months: isolation. At a time in my life when I am supposed to be branching out, the Covid pandemic seems to have trimmed those branches back to nubs. I have had to research colleges without setting foot on them. I've introduced myself to strangers through essays, videos, and test scores.  
Credit...via Gracie Yong Ying Silides

I would have fallen apart over this if it weren't for my faith.



In Hebrews 11:1, Paul says that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” My life has shown me that the red thread of destiny guides me where I need to go. Though it might sound crazy, I trust that the red thread is guiding me to the next phase of my journey.

Gracie has been accepted to St. Olaf College, Ithaca College and others.

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## Levi Burks

Levi, a student at Westerville Central High School in Ohio, wrestles with the conflict between her admiration for her

father, a police officer, and the negative image of the police.

Since I was a small child I have watched my father put on his dark blue uniform to go to work protecting and serving others. He has always been my hero. As the African-American daughter of a police officer, I believe in what my father stands for, and I am so proud of him because he is not only my protector, but the protector of those I will likely never know. When I was young, I imagined him always being a hero to others, just as he was to me. How could anyone dislike him??? However, as I have gotten older and watched television and social media depict the brutalization of African-Americans, at the hands of police, I have come to a space that is uncomfortable.



Credit...Kate Menke

I am certain there are others like me — African-Americans who love their police officer family members, yet who despise what the police are doing to African-Americans.

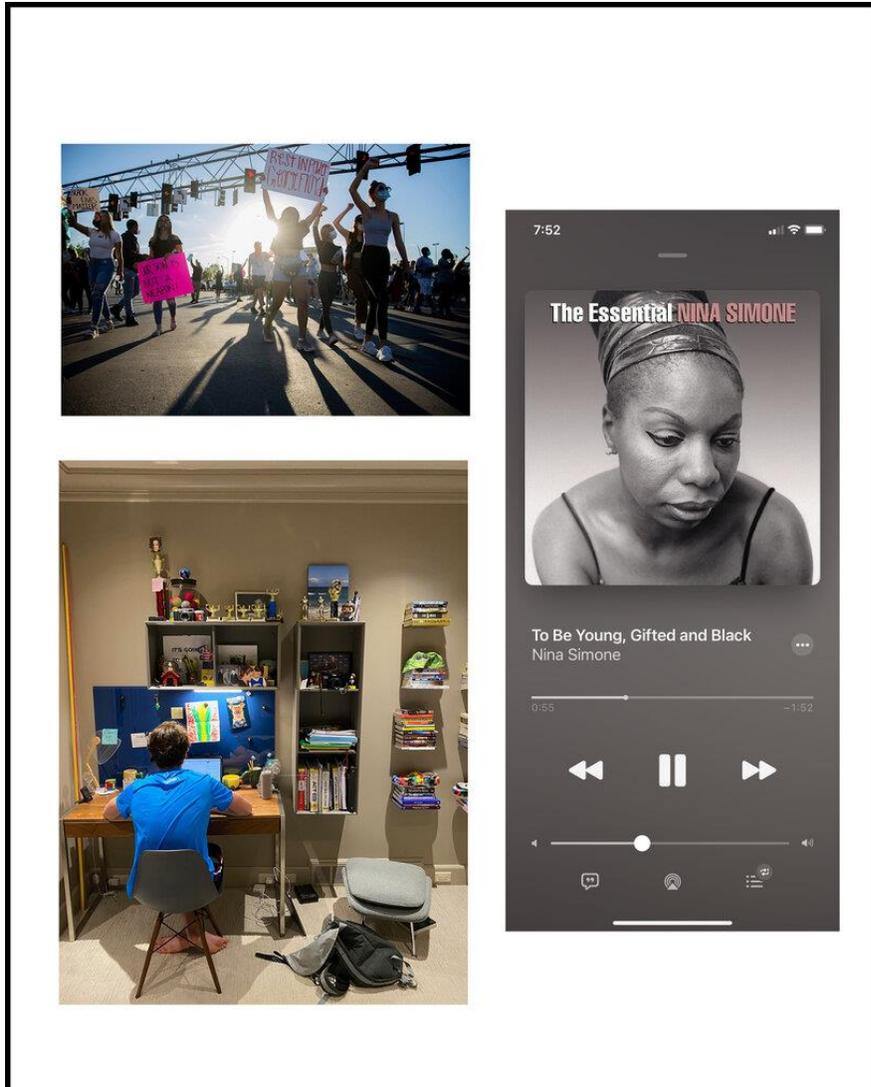
I know that I will not be able to rectify this problem alone, but I want to be a part of the solution where my paradox no longer exists.

Levi has been accepted to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and is waiting to hear from others.

## Henry Thomas Egan

When Henry, a student at Creighton Preparatory School in Omaha, attended a protest after the death of George Floyd, it was the words of a Nina Simone song that stayed with him.

I had never been to a protest before; neither my school, nor my family, nor my city are known for being outspoken. Thousands lined the intersection in all four directions, chanting, “He couldn’t breathe! George Floyd couldn’t breathe!”



Credit...Anna Reed/Omaha World-Herald, via Associated Press; via Henry Thomas Egan

In my head, thoughts of hunger, injustice, and silence swirled around.

In my ears, I heard lyrics playing on a speaker nearby, a song by Nina Simone: “To be young, gifted, and Black!” The experience was exceptionally sad and affirming and disorienting at the same time, and when the police arrived and started firing tear gas, I left. A lot has happened in my life over these last four years. I am left not knowing how to sort all of this out and what paths I should follow.

Henry has not yet heard

back from colleges.

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## Anna Valades

Anna, a student at Coronado High School in California, pondered how children learned racism from their parents.

“She said I wasn’t invited to her birthday party because I was black,” my sister had told my mom, devastated, after coming home from third grade as the only classmate who had not been invited to the party. Although my sister is not black, she is a dark-skinned Mexican, and brown-skinned people in Mexico are thought of as being a lower class and commonly referred to as “negros.” When my mom found out who had been



discriminating against my sister, she later informed me that the girl's mother had also bullied my mom about her skin tone when she was in elementary school in Mexico City.  
Credit...Anna Valades

Through this situation, I learned the impact people's upbringing and the values they are taught at home have on their beliefs and, therefore, their actions.

Anna has been accepted at Northeastern University and is waiting to hear from others.

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Research was contributed by Asmaa Elkeurti, Aidan Gardiner, Pierre-Antoine Louis and Jake Frankenfield.

*Anemona Hartocollis is a national correspondent, covering higher education. She is also the author of the book, "Seven Days of Possibilities: One Teacher, 24 Kids, and the Music That Changed Their Lives Forever." @anemonanyc*