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The next finish line

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Myrtle Telleen Collins “Spirit of Life” Award Winning Essay

The Next Finish Line

By Emily Burney

There are two great loves in my life: running and literature. Both allow me to embrace life to the fullest, and I believe both hold a power that helps me be a better person and connect with the generations of humanity who have walked this earth before us.

When I am running, I feel like I am part of something bigger than myself, that I have discovered a secret known to ancient peoples, which has been largely forgotten today. While my legs carry me away from civilization to woods and quiet paths, my mind is finally able to wander, detaching itself from the stress that occupies it at school and work. As the miles stretch out behind me, I gain a sense of accomplishment, and more importantly a sense of freedom.

Last summer I began training for my first half-marathon, and because my training carried over into the school year, I would have to get up early in the morning or run late in the evening to keep up with my busy schedule. Sometimes I wondered if it was worth it, but when I crossed the finish line in Des Moines on October 21 after two hours, three minutes, and forty-one seconds of running, I felt a wave of power and pride wash over me that made me appreciate the hours of training I had endured.

Running has taught me to push myself to the limit, and in so doing I am constantly reaching beyond it into new realms of possibility. Perseverance, commitment, hard work, and faith are all things I have learned from this sport. They permeate my

academic and personal life as well. Once I realized how much I could accomplish when I put my mind to it, I was able to strengthen my faith in myself and others.

I have had a passion for literature since before I could read. My mother and grandmother would read stories to me when I was very young, and once I learned to recognize the letters on the page, I never looked back. Through literature I have discovered people, places, and stories that have shaped my perceptions about the world and have given me the gift of imagination. I believe literature, like running, is how we can connect with people who have long since left this earth, and in so doing, we can better understand ourselves and our future.

I want to share my passion for the written word with others, which is why I want to be an English teacher. A desire to help people has been instilled in me since I was a small child, and I live by that principle. I would most like to teach in a setting with students from diverse socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, like the high school I attended in Des Moines, Iowa. Last semester I began tutoring at the Writing Center on campus, and it has reaffirmed my desire to help others in an academic setting. When I help a student improve their writing, I feel like I have helped them develop a skill that will be invaluable to them for the rest of their lives. I believe everyone has the ability to be a good writer, and I want to help my tutoring clients and future students find the confidence to write well. Anyone can be a good writer if they practice and believe in themselves.

I want to share my optimistic spirit with others because it has been my positive attitude that has gotten me through difficult times in the past, including the strain of living with a single parent constantly struggling to make ends meet. My mom taught my

sister and me that the most important thing in life is to help others in need, which is why I want to help make the world a better place, even if only a small corner of it, like a classroom. If it weren't for the constant support of friends and family, I would not be where I am today, and I want to offer that same encouragement to the students I work with, who are often frustrated and struggling with their writing, so that I can be better prepared to help students in my future classroom.

My optimism also enables me to be a stronger runner and to continually push myself to go farther and faster. Some day, I would even like to teach others the value of running by becoming a cross country or track coach. For now, I plan to channel my optimism and perseverance into my training so that next fall at the half-marathon, I can cross that finish line thirteen minutes faster. Beyond this, however, I want to continue to embrace my life to the fullest by connecting with others and continuing to learn and grow as a teacher and a runner—and as a person.