Breaking Into Cars—Stephen

I had never broken into a car before.

We were in Laredo, having just finished our first day at a Habitat for Humanity work site. The Hotchkiss volunteers had already left, off to enjoy some Texas BBQ, leaving me behind with the college kids to clean up. Not until we were stranded did we realize we were locked out of the van.

Someone picked a coat hanger out of the dumpster, handed it to me, and took a few steps back.

"Can you do that thing with a coat hanger to unlock it?"

"Why me?" I thought.

More out of amusement than optimism, I gave it a try. I slid the hanger into the window's seal like I'd seen on crime shows, and spent a few minutes jiggling the apparatus around the inside of the frame. Suddenly, two things simultaneously clicked. One was the lock on the door. (I actually succeeded in springing it.) The other was the realization that I'd been in this type of situation before. In fact, I'd been born into this type of situation.

My upbringing has numbed me to unpredictability and chaos. With a family of seven, my home was loud, messy, and spottily supervised. My siblings arguing, the dog barking, the phone ringing—all meant my house was functioning normally. My Dad, a retired Navy pilot, was away half the time. When he was home, he had a parenting style something like a drill sergeant. At the age of nine, I learned how to clear burning oil from the surface of water. My Dad considered this a critical life skill—you know, in case my aircraft carrier should ever get torpedoed. "The water's on fire! Clear a hole!" he shouted, tossing me in the lake without warning. While I'm still unconvinced about that particular lesson's

practicality, my Dad's overarching message is unequivocally true: much of life is unexpected, and you have to deal with the twists and turns.

Living in my family, days rarely unfolded as planned. A bit overlooked, a little pushed around, I learned to roll with reality, negotiate a quick deal, and give the improbable a try. I don't sweat the small stuff, and I definitely don't expect perfect fairness. So what if our dining room table only has six chairs for seven people? Someone learns the importance of punctuality every night.

But more than punctuality and a special affinity for musical chairs, my family life has taught me to thrive in situations over which I have no power. Growing up, I never controlled my older siblings, but I learned how to thwart their attempts to control me. I forged alliances, and realigned them as necessary. Sometimes, I was the poor, defenseless little brother; sometimes I was the omniscient elder. Different things to different people, as the situation demanded. I learned to adapt.

Back then, these techniques were merely reactions undertaken to ensure my survival. But one day this fall, Dr. Hicks, our Head of School, asked me a question that he hoped all seniors would reflect on throughout the year: "How can I participate in a thing I do not govern, in the company of people I did not choose?"

The question caught me off guard, much like the question posed to me in Laredo. Then, I realized I knew the answer. I knew why the coat hanger had been handed to me.

Growing up as the middle child in my family, I was a vital participant in a thing I did not govern, in the company of people I did not choose. It's family. It's society. And often, it's chaos. You participate by letting go of the small stuff, not expecting order and perfection, and facing the unexpected with confidence, optimism, and preparedness. My family experience taught me to face a serendipitous world with confidence.

“We liked Stephen’s essay because it catches your attention right away and continues to demonstrate critical thinking, initiative, and problem solving. His personality comes through as he naturally conveys humor. Through his anecdotes from growing up, we got a sense of how he might approach his studies here at Hopkins.”
—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

How to Become an Adult—Michaela

In the US, legal adulthood comes at 18, but it is my understanding that adulthood comes through responsibility, tears, laughter, and most of all: parenthood. It is effortless to watch other people's children grow and flourish, but having my own was a terrifying new world for which I was ill-prepared. I was not ready for my first, Stanley, but now I cannot envision a world without him. Today, I am the proud parent of not one, but seven beautiful, boisterous, carnivorous plants. Within my small family I have four sundews, two Venus flytraps, and one tropical pitcher plant. Of course they have scientific names, but I only use them when I am angry and my inner-parent reveals itself. Many might ask, "How does a person become the parent of seven carnivorous plants?" and I can only answer that with a story, my story.

It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon when I came home from school only to find a charming plant that resembled a leafless, dew-splattered fern perched on the counter. With the eloquence that only a teenager could muster, I asked my mother, "What's that?" She carefully explained that he was our new carnivorous plant and he was going to be on fruit fly kitchen duty. Over the next couple of weeks my fascination with him grew, and eventually I adopted him as one of my own. In all sincerity, I did not begin as the ideal parent. I would give Stanley water to drink if he looked drier than usual and that was the extent of my nurturing efforts. However, my complacency did not last. Come winter, around his half birthday, Stanley became afflicted with a mysterious ailment. His stems curled and his one delicate green frond dried up. After carefully examining him, I concluded that not only was the lake water I had been using contaminated with some sort of root-eating larva, but my mother's African violets had given him aphids. It was then that I was faced with the harsh reality of the situation: I had a plant that I was absolutely obsessed with, but knew nothing about.

In my desperation to keep my sundew alive, I began to contact other plant enthusiasts in an increasingly desperate attempt to help my poor Stanley. To my great surprise, a close friend was also a carnivorous plant caregiver and was well

versed in childhood care. His advice, coupled with some new dirt and the stocked shelves of the nearby library's horticulture section, allowed me to nurse Stanley back to health. Stanley regained his strength and shortly after the winter incident, I adopted Simone, another sundew. Then came Diana, my first Venus flytrap. Consequently, the carnivorous plant aficionado was so impressed with Stanley's care that he entrusted me with the care of his carnivorous plants when he left for college. This brought my family's size to the current seven.

My true reward of having Stanley is that he opened the door to the world of botany. I would never have invested so much time learning about the molecular structure or chemical balance of plants if not for taking care of him. I have loved learning for his benefit, whether it be discovering the best fluoride-free water, finding the ideal amount of sunlight, or reading that he uses a form of electrical signaling to improve digestion. I also love the rarity of being Stanley's parent. People have their judgments, but I have also found that most people are genuinely curious and I am always open to questions. Ultimately, I love how Stanley has forced me to be adaptive. That first winter I did not have a "Gardener's Guide to Carnivorous Plants," I simply had my own observations. This was the most significant lesson that Stanley and friends taught me: the universe lacks a guide to the galaxy, and life is all about discovering your own way.

"Michaela showed her innate curiosity through a unique topic. The beginning of her essay is intriguing and makes you want to learn more. More importantly, she elaborates on an interesting aspect of her life outside of academics, yet still demonstrates the depth of her desire to be perpetually learning. It also gave us insight into how she responds when she is passionate about something."
—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee

Building a Twenty Story Apartment Building—Kyle

“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others.”

As an intern at a construction engineering firm this past summer, I learned first-hand about the challenges of building a twenty story apartment building: not just the structural or mechanical challenges, but also the intricate ways in which groups of people interact to complete a project properly. While I am primarily interested in core structural and civil engineering subjects, I have learned that engineering needs to be approached in a holistic manner that incorporates economic, environmental, and interpersonal systems. I want to be taught engineering in a way that encompasses all of these different frontiers. I hope to one day build technologically innovative and environmentally friendly skyscrapers designed for a rapidly urbanizing world.

Hopkins’ professors are change agents whose research connects structural engineering challenges to economic and environmental considerations. I am fascinated by Professor James Guest’s work in modeling the ways in which production costs can be incorporated into designing the optimal structure of a building. This work illustrates the power of combining fundamental engineering concepts with economic considerations. Studying AP Physics, I can already see the practical utility of applying fundamental science concepts such as Archimedes’ principle of leverage to engineering, and I look forward to building my core knowledge through Hopkins’ two-year sequence of math and science courses while putting it to work through research opportunities in labs such as the Center for Advanced Metallic and Ceramic Systems. Under the guidance of the engineering department’s professors, I will be able to develop both my theoretical knowledge and practical engineering skills to their full extent.

Hopkins attracts students from across the world, creating a global forum. Every student brings a different perspective and unique insights that can enrich, challenge, and improve the academic community as a whole. As I traveled

through Africa, I heard a proverb that has stayed with me: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others.” During my blood cancer research at Northwestern University, I saw that our team was able to tackle more advanced issues than any individual would have been able to accomplish on his or her own. An essential component of engineering is complex problem-solving, and with a varied group this process becomes far more effective. Student groups—such as Hopkins Baja and Design, Build, Fly—provide powerful examples of teams coming together to make something bigger than themselves. These groups give me the opportunity to combine applied engineering with hands-on learning while helping me develop an international viewpoint. I hope to further extend this perspective through study abroad opportunities in Madrid, Santiago, or Rome, learning about the growing needs of an interconnected global community.

The world-class faculty, cutting-edge labs, global student community, and innumerable research opportunities provided by Johns Hopkins will help me achieve my goal of designing and building structures that meet the economic, technological, social, and environmental needs of the twenty-first century.

“We liked this essay because it provides a clear and coherent explanation for Kyle’s interests in civil engineering, and how he plans to pursue that here at Hopkins. Throughout the essay, he uses specific examples of how he would take advantage of all Hopkins has to offer—programs, research positions, and professors. The real strength of the essay lies in how the writer talks about his engineering passions in relation to other

fields like economics and environmental studies. He makes a good argument for interdisciplinary studies and why studying these things at Hopkins will aid his experience."
—*Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee*

Community Service Isn't For Me—Kyla

I've recently come to the realization that community service just isn't for me. Now before you start making assumptions, keep reading.

In September of my sophomore year I joined a club called buildOn that focuses on breaking the cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and low expectations through service and education. Little did I know, just twenty-two months and $57,794 of fundraising later, I'd be headed on a plane to the Kasungu District of Malawi to break ground on the construction site of a second village's first school!

The experiences of immersing myself in the Malawian communities—of sharing the same straw-thatched, mud-brick homes of host families, of learning bits and pieces of the Chichewa language, of exploring the dynamics of multi-chief, polygamous villages—have been the most enriching aspects of my education to date. I may have traveled a world away, but by the time I left, I was no longer an outsider. To see my eight-year-old host sister, Esther, thirst for knowledge as she meticulously traced letters of the alphabet into the sandy floor of her Standard-Two schoolroom, makes me wonder what stories she'll tell when she finally gets the chance to put pen to paper. To know my host mother, my amai, will no longer have to tie strips of fabric onto public buses to know which ones to take home from the market because she'll be able to read their destinations herself, reassures me the adult literacy program is empowering women to be self-sufficient. These memories, though seemingly not monumental, drive me to go the extra mile now that I'm home. They fuel my passion for the case I'm investing in, legitimizing the work that I do.

On trek, I have the ability to directly impact the communities in which we build. I strive relentlessly to confront the stereotypes of gender roles and female inferiority, volunteering to work beside men in the trenches of the foundation,

though it's traditionally seen as a male-only job. Furthermore, buildOn's arrival places a spotlight on the village, giving impetus for the people to highlight their needs in front of an audience of district legislators and international agencies. Our presence speaks to the idea that the people have a voice, and more importantly, their voice is being heard. This attention is a catalyst for change, inspiring the villagers to become assertive in their quest for aid in a way that giving a check never could.

That being said, as well-intentioned as I may have been in committing to Trek, I also acknowledge that every one of the aforementioned factors is a priority of my own doing. The people of Malawi asked for a school, not a student. I'm not a professional architect or builder. I don't profess to being a "superior" individual. As charming of a companion as I can be, it isn't my presence in these villages that changes the peoples' lives. *So why,* I ask myself, *did I incur the expenses to fly myself to Malawi for this endeavor instead of donating that money to hire skilled laborers in my place?*

It seems there comes a time, in all our lives, when we find ourselves stopped at the crossroads. Sublimation meets moral obligation, and taunted are we as we weight them head-to-head. For two years now, the NCHS chapter of buildOn has accomplished many great things. But did we do the *right* thing? I think about it in the context of philanthropy overall: when is giving money better than giving time? Who benefits when I arrive as an unskilled laborer in a village? How do you measure positive contributions, and from whose perspective? I'm still wrestling with these questions as I strive to strike the right balance between making a contribution and raising awareness while maximizing the ultimate benefit to the recipients. Truly, community service isn't for me, it's for Esther and Amai and all the others I seek to serve.

"Kyla's essay highlights her ability to think critically and conveys her true passion for service. As she wrestles with philosophical questions about how to make the greatest impact through service, it became clear to us she is a person who wants to make a meaningful impact in an area

that really matters to her—an excellent quality of our student body here at Hopkins. Rather than simply stating that building schoolrooms in Malawi was something she did, she deeply considers her role in this service experience."
—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee