

# Neva Bentley – YMCA of Northwoods - Essay #1

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**When I was in fourth grade, my mother gave me an ultimatum: I could either join the local swim team or take swimming lessons. Although I could barely keep myself from drowning, I had the mindset that swim lessons were for babies. I chose to try out for the Barracuda Swim Team. To make it on to the team, I had to swim the length of the pool. I hardly made those twenty-five yards, but it was an incredible feeling when I reached the wall. The coaches and the older swimmers were all cheering and they celebrated with me. That was the beginning.**

**Now I am a senior in high school and there are so many positive things I have experienced by being a member of a YMCA swim team. I honestly cannot imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't chosen to try out for the team. My five closest friends are the same five people that I swim with all winter. However, when the swim season is over, we don't stop being friends. We still do everything together. We have all been swimming together for at least eight years. Swimming together has created a bond between us that cannot be broken. I know that we will stay close even when I am away at college. We're truly more of a team than a family.**

**It's not just the six of us "older kids" that are close. Our coaches are part of our family too. They're always there for us, whether it be to discuss the breaststroke kick or to talk about our day. They're always positive and encouraging, which makes me be more positive and encouraging. The younger kids on the swim team look up to us, and I want to set a good example. Being a member of the team has taught me how to be a leader and a role model.**

**Being on the Barracuda Swim Team has taught me to have the work ethic I have today. At practice, we don't quit even when quitting is the only thing we want to do. This same work ethic I learned at the pool has helped me excel at track and cross-**

**country. My teammates and I push each other at practice. At meets, we are at the ends of the lanes of all the swimmers, cheering them on.**

**In swimming, you must compete against yourself before you can compete against anyone else. This is one of my favorite aspects of the sport. If you don't work to your full potential, there is no-one to blame but yourself.**

**Swimming has been such a big part of my life for so long, that it is going to be hard to leave my team behind. I will always be able to look back at my proudest races, from trying the 1650 to finally getting my goal time on the 200 free. The YMCA Barracuda Swim Team has been a happy chapter of my life, and now I am ready to go to Michigan Tech and open a new chapter of my life.**

# Andrea Bryson – Fox Cities YMCA -

## Essay #2

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I have been going to the YMCA since a little girl. I started out playing soccer, basketball and taking swim lessons. Swimming became my favorite sport and I followed in my siblings' footsteps by joining the swim team. Through the swim team I have gained confidence and learned to overcome challenges, which then allowed me to apply the four YMCA core values to my life.

Every time I walk onto a pool deck I immediately feel at ease. It is a place where I am confident in my abilities, which allows me to be confident in myself. During practices and meets I open up, tell stories, dance and sing. I don't worry about being judged, but instead I feel welcomed. While having fun I also dedicated myself in the pool and generally raced well which further boosted my confidence. Swimming with the YMCA gave me the confidence I needed in order to succeed.

As I grew older, I learned that success did not always come when you wanted it to. When I was 12 years old I remember going into state with high expectations of getting multiple team records. When I didn't break the first record I was immediately disappointed and upset, which affected the rest of my races. I still vividly remember that meet, not because I was upset, but because of what I learned. I learned how to deal with disappointment; you have to accept what has happened, move on to the next event with a positive attitude and then work hard to achieve new goals in the future. I still face disappointments but I appreciate all the challenges I have overcome.

Swimming has taught me how to deal with many challenges, from hard sets when my face is red and my muscles ache, to balancing homework and practices, to getting the right nutrition and enough rest. One of the biggest challenges I have faced is helping rebuild my team when swimmers choose to leave or quit. Each time the transition started out painfully as I had lost good teammates and friends. It made going to practice and pushing myself more difficult. As time pasted I learned to

appreciate all the teammates I still have. Now as I am preparing to go down to YMCA state my senior year I am excited to see so many of my teammates getting their cuts so I can share the experience with them.

Throughout my swimming career YMCA core values have been reinforced. I learned that if I respected other people they would respect me. I would respect my teammates' opinions and decisions even if I didn't always agree with them. In return I have found that my teammates respect me. I have also learned to respect all of my coaches in order to get the most out of each practice. I learned to be honest while completing sets. I did not want to cheat myself or lose an opportunity to improve. The volunteer opportunities the YMCA and the swim team have provided helped me develop the core value of caring. I would often help out at swim meets, help the younger swimmers and help make blankets for the local domestic abuse shelter. The swim team has also played the biggest role in instilling a sense of responsibility in me. I became responsible to manage my time between swimming, school, and extra-curricular activities. I also took on the responsibility of being a leader. I know as soon as I walk on deck or into public there is a chance that a younger swimmer is watching me. I am then responsible for displaying proper behavior and being a good role model. Each core value continues to play a role in my daily life as a swimmer and person.

As I think about my life I cannot imagine it without swimming. I have spent countless hours swimming and on deck and I enjoy going to practice every day. I love going to a place where I feel comfortable and confident, I can challenge myself and I can make myself a better person. Being on the YMCA swim team has no doubt made me a better person.

# Mary Jane Voss – Schroeder YMCA -

## Essay #3

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### Ready to Fly

They change their mind as quickly as a kaleidoscope. They overcome me like a tidal wave. I struggle against the rush of thoughts. Reaching deep, I begin to sense that I am stronger than my fears. I realize I must take responsibility for my thoughts. Diving in, I know that the decisions I have made every minute of every day will add up to this moment. The season's two hundred-fifty miles and endless hours of training, building up to this moment, do not matter. There is more to this experience. My swim times are only things of the present, but the YMCA Swim Team program has provided me with lessons that will last a life time.

The YMCA character pillar of responsibility was a lesson that was reinforced by numerous swimming experiences at Schroeder YMCA. Throughout my years swimming, I have overcome many battles with anxiety and fear. Each battle, though unique, taught me to take responsibility for my attitude, thoughts, and training. Racing has always been a mental hurdle for me, and the stress I would place on myself to perform dampened my abilities. By taking responsibility for my failures, I have learned to get back up, which makes the successes that much sweeter. These lessons in responsibility have carried over into my academics. With the rigorous schedule I carried in my high school years, I handled the responsibility of my academic performance. A heavy exam or a large project might mean being creative with practices to provide extra time into studying. Responsibility is a major lesson I take away from my time as a swimmer and will carry me far into my college experience and career.

As a member of a swim team, trustworthiness and caring for your team mates has provided me with another lifetime tool. At Schroeder YMCA, the coaches and swimmers invested time and energy into building a relationship of trust and communication. As a swimmer, I knew that my coach was there to support me with any

challenges I might have whether it be swimming, school, or personal related. Having such a supportive relationship with my coaches taught me the importance of strong, personal relationships built on trust. With my teammates, I have built a network of support. Whether it be myself or a team mate in need of a boost, there is always someone around to show compassion and care for another. Having witnessed such a strong community, I have grown to respect my team and its members and care for each of them. I hope to take this commitment with me to my college team.

Trustworthiness, responsibility, and caring have been instilled in me through my YMCA swim team experience. Taking responsibility for my own thoughts, actions, and words has assisted me in overcoming my mental hurdles. Placing trust in myself, my coaches, and my teammates has taught me how to build relationships and form a link of communication. Finally, a lifestyle of healthiness and caring for myself prepares me for life's next steps. This caring has allowed me to understand others struggles, and I have built a supportive team to fall back to. These character principles outline my YMCA experience and tie me to my team. These lessons ensure that I am ready to fly next year although leaving my teammates will be one of the hardest things I undergo.

# Meghan Casey – Schroeder YMCA - Essay #4

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My coach Dave Anderson often references Henry Ford's quote, "whether you think you can, or you think you can't-- you're right." I hardly took notice of these words until my short course season this year. Even while achieving best times and working hard my freshman through junior years, I consistently put unnecessary pressure on myself, ultimately stifling my swimming career. Until a few months ago, mindset and perspective had foreign meanings to me.

In a sport like swimming, the temptation to compare yourself to your competitors and teammates is almost irresistible. It is hard not to look on as someone in the heat before you crushes their time and hope to perform similarly. Swimming, although based on competition, should be regarded as an individual sport. Even if your teammate is beating you in a sprint set or achieving best times, your own training and racing should never be hindered by extraneous factors. Although seemingly obvious, nine years of competitive swimming took place before I accepted and understood this concept.

Over the past few years, while not always achieving best times, I overcame a shoulder injury and can now train more effectively and compete in more events. It was not until this fall that this gradual improvement was finally put into perspective. How could I have been so frustrated with swimming when I was getting better? This realization transformed not only my own career, but also how my teammates viewed me.

Recently, Dave anonymously asked a younger Schroeder athlete who their role model was, and they replied that they look up to me. Now, hearing this I could only laugh, because why would I be someone's role model? But then, in a non-narcissistic kind of way, I started thinking about qualities that might inspire a person to look up to me, and even asked my coach about it. His response can be summed up with the words mindset and perspective.

**The alteration of my view on swimming changed someone else's, which instilled a sense of responsibility in me and inspired me to embrace this 'way of life' further. Since then, I have been even more committed to bettering myself rather than beating another swimmer and swim meets have become places for amusement and success rather than anxiety and disappointment.**

**Swimming for Schroeder the past nine years has provided me with a unique combination of USA and YMCA swimming. The ability to compete in both environments has not only offered many more opportunities to swim, but also showed me two very different approaches to the sport. While USA swim meets have perks like extreme intensity and high level athletes, none come with the YMCA camaraderie influenced by the four core values-- caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. These values encourage the amusement and success I described above, two qualities all swim meets should have. One swim meet in particular, YMCA Nationals, serves as the epitome of what a swim meet should be in my eyes. From the communal athlete village to the sportsmanship on deck, the YMCA Swimming organization has succeeded in creating an environment that fosters not only fast swimming but a positive community as well.**

**Although my revelation may have occurred regardless of being on a YMCA team, I believe that the unique sportsmanship of every team is really what inspired the change to a purposeful outlook. I am confident that I am not the only swimmer who holds these feelings, which speaks strongly about the success of the YMCA swimming nation.**

# Noah Cameron – LaCrosse Area Family YMCA - Essay #5

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“The journey has always been about reaching your own other shore, no matter what it is, and that dream continues.” I love this quote from Diana Nyad because it shows what swimming has always been to me. I started swimming 5 years ago, and I fell in love with the water. Many people are motivated by making a certain time, or beating another person. If that’s what makes them go faster, great, but that’s not me. Whenever I would try those, I would put too much pressure on myself and then end up not going as fast as I could. That’s how I ended up as a senior who never made a state time.

About 6 weeks ago, my coach pulled me out of practice one day and asked me what I wanted to accomplish this season. For me, it was simple; I wanted that elusive state cut. I was 17 years old, training with the top group on our team, very close to the cuts, and yet I still had never made a state time. To my surprise, my coach didn’t ask me what event I wanted to qualify in or tell me I had to start swimming faster. Instead he looked me in the eye and told me that I could have a great season and still not have an individual qualifying time. Needless to say, I was a little mad. But when I got back in the water and had a chance to think it over, it started to make sense. I was so caught up in making that one goal, that I was ready to call the last 5 years of my life a failure if I didn’t make it.

I thought about it for a while, and I realized he was right. I had learned and accomplished so much from swimming. About 2 weeks ago we had a meet. At this point in the season, we were doing some pretty tough sets, and no one was really going fast. I had gained a lot of time on all the other events I had swam that weekend, and I really did not want to swim the 1000. I had already raced the 1650, 500, and a couple 50’s free, so I was pretty drained. A couple of my teammates were swimming it with me though, and we decided to just swim it together, not really expecting too much. Right

before I swam it, as I was behind the blocks, I realized that this was the last time I would ever have to swim this event, since I was focusing on sprinting for the end of the year. I decided that if this was going to be it, I might as well enjoy it, so I went out and swam for the fun of it. I had no expectations of anything spectacular happening, but about half-way through I started to race the girl next to me. I finished, completely exhausted, turned to look at the clock. I made the state cut, in the 1000, by less than half a second. My first thought was, "Yes! I made the time!", and my second was, "No, now I have to race this again."

It felt great to be able to individually make the state team, but not as life-shattering as I had pictured it was going to be. I did not suddenly feel like I was a "real swimmer". In that moment I realized that I was qualified not because of a single race, but through all the hard work I did over the last 5 years. I don't know what the end of the season will bring for me. Maybe I will drop time in all my events. Maybe I won't. My time swimming with the YMCA swim team has left me with so much more than a state cut. When I go to college next year, I will take with me hundreds of memories with my crazy teammates, the many words of wisdom from my coaches, and a passionate love for the water. Whether it's swimming a faster time, or finishing college, I'm going to keep fighting to reach my own other shore.

# Katie Hugo – OSHY - Essay #6

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When I was just eight years old, my neighbor and best friend, Cristina magically began disappearing during the normal times of our scheduled play dates. While eating lunch one afternoon at her house, the flustered third grade me simply could not take missing out on so much time with her best friend. So, with a mouth full of food, I demanded where she had been disappearing to the last couple of days. The answer I got was one that would change my life forever. She told me she had joined the local YMCA swim team, FCYST. As soon as lunch was over, I marched on home, burst through the door and shouted "Mom, I'm joining swim team!"

I stayed on FCYST until I was twelve and decided that it just wasn't the correct fit for me. Knowing that I wanted to stay in a YMCA program, I tried out OSHY and immediately fell in love. I met a handful of wonderful girls that accepted me and made me feel at home right away. Best of all, I met Jay Coleman and his wonderful daughter Quinn who became like a little sister to me. My years on the team were magical. I got to experience everything from team movie nights and my very first YMCA Nationals with a group of shining stars. The Oshkosh YMCA Swim team soon became my second family and home.

The YMCA has been so much more than just a work out facility to me. It has become my second home that has housed my second family. I have been so fortunate to meet such wonderful swimmers and parents throughout the entire US. The opportunities the YMCA has given me are endless. I have gotten to travel as well as learn about myself in an entire new light. I have experienced tragedy and recovery, learned time management, and most importantly expanded my leadership skills. This past year I decided to step away momentarily from swimming to experience some other aspects in the music department at my high school. Even though I was sad to take a break from everything I've always known, I found strange amounts of courage within myself to push beyond my comfort zone. I greatly attribute this to my 10 years of swimming where every single day my comfort zone was pushed and extended beyond

its limits. My life without the YMCA swimming program would be so incredibly different, I couldn't even imagine it. I'm so thankful for all of the time and effort I have put into a program that has more than doubled its return of blessings onto me.

As I jump forward into my college career, I feel more than prepared for my future endeavors. I plan to attend either Carthage College or the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and will be studying Marketing and Fitness Management. I will be continuing to swim for the entire four years of my college experience. Moving forward I feel equipped with the skills to be successful both in the classroom and the pool. The YMCA has taught me how to believe in myself and how to embrace the experiences I am given. I would like to extend a great thank you to my coaches, teammates, and their parents for becoming my second family. I would also like to thank my immediate family for all of the sacrifices they have made in order to give me such great opportunities through the YMCA swimming program. As a venture forward, I am full of excitement and sadness. Leaving my fellow dolphins is just enough to bring me to tears, but I know I am ready. I wish the future of this program, as well as all YMCA swimming programs, luck as they continue to release handfuls of wonderful people into the college/working world. May they feel as prepared and grateful as myself for such an amazing experience courtesy of the YMCA program.

# Shannon Rose – SEA YMCA - Essay #7

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My name is Shannon Rose and I am a member of the YMCA swim team. Being a member of the YMCA swim team has affected my life in so many ways. I have swam on the South Eastern Aquatics YMCA Swim Team (SEAY) for the past 6 years and I have not only had my swimming skills develop, but my character has developed too. I joined the team because I wanted to try a new sport and make some new friends. I have received so much more than that through my experience on the SEAY swim team. This new sport I wanted to give a try has become my and my family's whole life and those new friends I wanted to make have become family to me. Almost every weekend and weeknight is dedicated to my sport. Sport is an understatement for what the "sport" of swimming is to me, it is truly more of a lifestyle that consumes you and everyone around you in a way you can't explain through words. I often find myself day dreaming about swimming, and like the famous quote "If you want to know where your heart is, look at where your mind goes when it wanders," my heart truly belongs in the pool and I have my swim team to thank for that. I can't go one day without sharing a story about my swim team or thinking about swimming, my teammates or coaches.

My SEAY family has taught me the core values of what a YMCA swim team is caring, honesty, respect and responsibility. When I enter the pool deck, the overwhelming warmth of love and care automatically embraces me. I know all of my coaches and teammates care for me and respect me for who I am. Swimming has taught me responsibility. With long days at school and long practices at night, I have very little free time to complete my homework or do other things. I have learned to be very task oriented and goal focused. Swimming has also taught me never to give up. You can go years without seeing improvement in your swimming and SEAY has been so supportive in keeping me motivated to strive towards the next goal.

Being on the South Eastern Aquatics YMCA Swim Team has offered me many opportunities. Every year there are two travel meets offered, one in the summer and one in the winter. I have gone on numerous of these and have had the opportunity to

**visit many different cities in the United States. I have been to Notre Dame, Appleton, Green Bay and several other cities. I was fortunate enough to go on the summer travel training trip my sophomore year. We spent a week in Panama City, Florida training and having a great time. We drove down to Florida and I experienced many different cities along the way. The group of swimmers I went with has become some of my best friends because of how close we became on the training trip.**

**I will forever remember SEAY Swim Team. I am planning on trying out for the swim team at the university I attend in the fall and I have SEAY to thank for that. Swimming has provided me with so many gifts I will take with me for the rest of my life.**

# Alexandra Meyers – Schroeder YMCA -

## Essay #8

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**Ever since my first practice at the Schroeder YMCA, I have been amazed by the sense of community that we share. The feeling of being accepted and a part of something special is what makes Y swimmers a truly strong and close team.**

**As a 6 year old, I began swimming on a club team where I had a few friends, but didn't have people my age with whom to swim. I competed in swim meets but it was really just another sport I was "doing" along with soccer and gymnastics. It wasn't until I switched to the Schroeder YMCA that I realized my true love and need for the sport of swimming and, more importantly, my team. Even though I was terrified at first, joining Schroeder YMCA Swim Team was one of the best decisions I have ever made.**

**As a shy eight year old, I was scared to meet new people. I stood by my older brother, refusing to leave his side. After about ten minutes of talking to my new coaches and teammates, I realized that I had nothing to be afraid of—there were so many girls my age, and after my first practice I already had a new best friend. Schroeder gave me my first sense of what "team" really meant. From that point on, I went to Schroeder YMCA directly from school every day, even when practices started at 5:15, so that I could spend time with my teammates. Whether it was talking to coaches or playing together in the gym, Schroeder gave me a second home where I was always comfortable with everyone and everything.**

**To most people, swimming is not a team sport. This, in fact, has been the opposite of my experience. My teammates and coaches are the only things that gets me through practice. When I have a bad day at practice, I can always count on Dave to cheer me up and help me realize that there is more to life than swimming. I can always look to my teammates struggling with me during a practice and know that we will make it through the set and be better for it after we have completed it.**

After taking college trips and visiting my brother at school, it is obvious that Y swimming brings people together. His friends are sure to say, "Hey I'm a Y swimmer too!" or "Wow, Y Nats was so fast last year!" We can talk about the parades, the outfits, the times, or even the Harlem Shake, and we bond over the closeness and unity we feel at the Y National meet. It instantly puts me at ease knowing that these people share the same background in swimming that I have. While taking college visits and visiting the swim team, Y swimmers were always the first to reach out and talk to me. My teammate next year, a former Y swimmer, was sure to give me her number in case I had any questions. This small act of kindness was so significant that I will be sure to help next year's recruits feel a similar sense of ease.

As I head to college next year, I know that the college swimming atmosphere will be a lot different than the one I have experienced ever since I was eight years old. With this comes a lot of uncertainty and unfamiliarity. Even though I am unsure of what the upcoming years will bring me, I do know some things. I know that my teammates and Schroeder YMCA have prepared me for these new experiences and challenges, and I know that I will do my best to support and contribute to my team and teammates the way my Y team has done for me.

# Khia Kurtenbach – Schroeder YMCA -

## Essay #9

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When I was nine years old, my mom took me to visit what seemed like so giant of a pool, it almost couldn't be real. We met with Coach Matt whose booming voice informed me that being part of the Schroeder YMCA swim team would be unlike participating in any other sport. Shocker, he was right. But, not for the reasons he thought. Matt had meant that I would be pushed to dedicate myself to new levels. However, I think what sets my YMCA team apart goes beyond hard work and passion. There are several guiding principles that I have noticed govern YMCA coaches', athletes', and volunteers' interactions. The support and respect shown by my YMCA family makes them a special group and gave me the self-respect and confidence to grow as an athlete, student, and teammate.

Looking around the deck at meets, you can learn a lot about different teams. Some groups are all on their phones, others chat happily, and a few more have their heads buried in video games. My teammates can often be found cheering, standing up, counting for each other, and giving words of encouragement. I cannot count the number of times I've heard the phrase, "One, two, three! Let's Go Schroeder". I never went through a tough race without my teammates around to build me up afterwards. The backing my teammates share extends into our academic lives as well. Thanks to several of my friend's guidance, I challenged myself to suffer through a summer ACT prep class. Without my friends by my side in that class, or hitting the books with me at various travel meets, I may not have reached as high academically.

Responsibility generates self-respect. My YMCA coaches were mentors who helped me and my teammates to be accountable and think for ourselves. Coach Dave highly recommends his athletes keep training logs: notebooks where we record our sleep, yardage, and thoughts on practice. Not only does this allow us to better communicate with our coach, but forces us to think about the quality of our training.

Writing your opinion on a set, really forces you to think if you were giving maximum effort on those last couple of hundreds. If we have a tough meet, we can look in our logs and discuss with our coaches what we need to change to start improving again. Along with managing our training, Coach Dave listens to our input on what events we want to race and how we would like to prepare for races. Coaches who trusted me enough to decide I wouldn't take the easier way out and allowed me to create my own taper schedule, taught me pride and self-reliance.

The YMCA atmosphere my team provided encourages us to grow into well-rounded individuals. Yes, we were at practice to swim, and yes, our coaches certainly gave us a talk if we missed practice. Yet, no one around me lost sight of the bigger picture. I learned lessons that do not directly relate to swimming. Several of my teammates taught me the importance of giving back when they organized swimathons and blanket making parties for The Linus Project. I was inspired by friends who managed their time wisely and were able to play multiple sports or be involved in clubs. I am fortunate to have coaches who wanted us to prioritize swimming but also allowed us to pursue other interests.

The pool no longer seems gigantic; nonetheless my experience with the Schroeder YMCA has prepared me to dive into the much larger pool of adult life. Although I am looking forward to collegiate swimming, I'm not sure it is possible for another group to be as caring, supportive, and conducive to growth in confidence as my current coaches and teammates. Next year, I am going to miss my YMCA family, but I plan to carry the lessons they taught me through their examples into the next phase of my life.

# Kelly Howell – Schroeder YMCA - Essay

## #10

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**Family: the reason why we all stand up after we fall, our personal community who loves us even if we struggle and fail, our support system to keep us reaching and setting new goals, and the people who have our backs no matter what. This is what family is to me. I was once a part of a club swim team that I thought I would never leave, however when my coach left to coach at Schroeder YMCA I decided to follow him and leave behind my friends. Apprehensive, I changed teams and of course this change was scary and nerve racking, but my nerves were soon settled when I met everyone on my new team. My teammates welcomed me in and I soon found myself a part of a new, yet larger family. I am still a part of my old team through my friendships I made, yet through the new team I have joined a much larger family than I could have ever imagined. Through swimming on the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team I have had many opportunities opened up to me to allow me to chase my dreams, goals, and aspirations. Through these opportunities I have been able to achieve some of these goals, such as reaching and surpassing my goal times and best times, traveling around the nation, and receiving exposure to colleges. The team atmosphere that is present at every practice has allowed me to practice and work even harder towards achieving best and goal times. The positive atmosphere that is provided not only by my coach, but also my teammates allows me to push myself each and every day. This YMCA team has always kept me in a positive mood when I have not met my goals or have had a bad meet. Therefore, through their strength and support, I have always been inspired to strive further to not let them down. This support that they have given me to stay positive has allowed me to attain the times that are needed to swim at YMCA Nationals in North Carolina. I have always wanted to travel all over the country to see new places and meet new people and the YMCA has allowed me to do that. Last year was my first year at YMCA Nationals and I would not trade that experience for the world. I was able to**

meet new people from all over the nation and create friendships that will last forever. The experience of meeting new people accompanied by traveling to new places also allowed my swimming to be exposed to college recruiters and coaches. This exposure at YMCA Nationals is one of the reasons why I was able to receive a scholarship to swim at the Division 1 University of South Dakota. Without some of this exposure that the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team has given me, I believe it would have been a lot harder to find the perfect college for me. Not only did the Schroeder YMCA Swim Team give me exposure, it also helped me be able to be accepted into college. I attended ACT Prep classes that were offered through my YMCA. These prep classes helped me better my ACT score from a good score to a great score. This class helped me so much so that my English score raised 4 points and allowed me to apply for and receive greater scholarships with this higher ACT score. Also, these scholarships would not have been possible to receive or apply for without my coaches who lead this family in everything that they do. My coaches, Coach Robert White and Coach Dave Anderson, were always guiding me in the direction that I needed in order to choose the perfect college for me. They were always there to answer any questions I may have had and give me all of their advice. They also would keep my spirits up by their encouraging words and fun, yet tough rewarding practices. Without my Schroeder YMCA Swim Team family backing me and giving me their support, I know that I would not be where I am today.

# Caleb Miller – LaCrosse Area Family YMCA - Essay #11

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The YMCA stands for youth development, healthy living and social responsibility. These are the pillars of the Y; and, they also were the pillars of Jon Brenner. If it wasn't for Jon Brenner, I would not be who I am today – a member of the YMCA WAVE Swim Team reflecting the importance of each of these pillars.

Jon shaped who I am today. Like any kid I always wanted to partake in the three American past times: football, baseball, and basketball. For years I dreamed of throwing touchdowns like Brett Favre. But sometimes dreams change. My parents knew this and wanted me to try something new. Apparently from a young age they said I loved the water because it calmed and relaxed me. After hearing about Jon Brenner and that he was an outstanding coach, they decided to sign me up for swimming.

Too be honest, I was not a big fan of swimming. Since I had joined at the age of nine, I was placed in the youngest group. Nobody wants to be nine and swimming with a group of six year olds. I asked my parents every day if I could quit swimming or skip practice just one more time. They said I could after completing one season.

At the start of my second season, my parents signed me up for my first swim meet. To ease my nerves, they did not tell me until the day of the meet. After the race, there was a ritual of talking with Jon, the head coach. I feared he was going to tell me what I did wrong so I slipped into the boy's locker room. Someone shared this information with Jon; so, he told me he wanted to see me after my next race. To my disbelief, Jon did not critique me nor tell me what I did wrong. He ever so gently placed his hand on my head and looked me straight into my eyes telling me that I did a good job. I felt as if I was the only swimmer in the pool.

That formative experience inspired me to keep swimming for the YMCA. I signed up for more swim meets because I not only grew to love swimming; but, I looked forward to having my "one-on-one" time with Jon. After a few years it became too

taxing participating in two sports. I struggled with this decision, so I asked Jon for advice knowing he was filled with wisdom. He listened to my conflicted heart. Then, like so many other times, he put his hand on my head. Showing me that I was the center of his world at that moment, Jon said, "Caleb, no matter what you choose we will always be here if you want to come back." It hit me right there! I knew that I wanted to swim and be part of the Y team Jon was leading.

Once I reached high school I had the opportunity to swim for the Y in addition to my high school. It was a thrilling time. Media publicity, breaking school records and competing at a state level provided the attention needed to elevate the sport of swimming and recruit additional swimmers. It would have been very natural to swim my senior year on the high school team. However, that also meant I would have lost priceless hours not competing for the Y swim team. You see, Jon gave me more than the sport of swimming. He gave me a community I wanted to belong to for an entire season. He gave me building blocks that an awkward nine-year-old needed to grow into a man. And he gave me a sense of responsibility and pride that I want to pass along to the next generation of swimmers at the La Crosse Area Family YMCA.

# Rachel Zenisek - Essay #12

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**Sometimes the Best Lesson is found in the Pool**

**School can only teach you so many lessons to help prepare you for the real world. I think what school did not teach me I learned from swimming. Swimming is more than just a sport to do in your spare time, or a feel-good sport. Swimming has become a part of my life, and I have been blessed to have coaches who teach us lessons in the context of swimming, but apply to our everyday lives as well.**

**Coach Neil, SEA-Y's head coach, has always taught his swimmers about the multiple voices in our heads that tell us to stop because it hurts too bad, but we need to find that one voice that carries us forward because in the end that is what betters us as swimmers.**

**Coach Neil has really driven this philosophy of you deciding what your best is. Listening to these philosophies have helped me realize that whether I am doing a rough set, or having a hard time studying for a test I hear Coach Neil's words in my head and I am reminded that just like swimming you can not walk away from your problems. You need to find the one voice that says you can do this, listen to that voice, and then you will know victory.**

**Most people say swimming has taught them how to win and win with grace, but my times are not at the state level. My times don't discourage me, and I am content doing the best I can do, but sometimes human nature comes in and you start comparing yourself to others. One practice I was doing extremely well with the interval my coach--Coach Mike--assigned me, I even started to lead a lane full of kids faster than me. One girl was mad because she was not leading the lane and her times were faster than mine. I was hurt that she thought I couldn't be faster than her, so after practice Coach Mike pulled me aside and told me the words I will never forget. He told me not to let her get to my head because, "the one with the biggest heart has no limits." Wow, those words completely changed my philosophy on life. Instead of trying to have the best technique, the fastest times, or the best suits I can focus on having the best heart, which will win**

**the most in life. I have applied this advice to other aspects of my life such as school, or tough social situations with my friends.**

**To be completely honest these are only two examples of how my team has changed me into who I am today, but they have influenced my life in so many little ways that I cannot imagine my life without them. The most important lesson I've learned from SEA-Y is the value of hard work. If I put hard work into every set Coach Neil, or anyone else puts before me and I know I will get good results in the next meet. As I prepare to leave for college these three lessons are what I will take with me to college along with the wonderful memories.**