

Group 1

FINAL DRAFT:

As I enter the massive auditorium, I am awestruck by the magnitude of what is about to take place. My cap is too tight and I feel as though I am swimming in my gown, but none of that matters now as I walk towards my seat, the all-too familiar Pomp and Circumstance resonating throughout the room. I look out the window of the auditorium, staring at my almost translucent reflection, barely recognizing the person in front of me. It is amazing to think that I had changed and developed so much in four years. I now see a young woman ready to take on the world, not a girl struggling to find her place in the complicated halls of a high school.

My long brown hair was shining under the bright lights of the auditorium and my diamond earrings were hanging motionless below my ears. My caramel skin, which I had been so often stereotyped for, complemented my tan high heels, poking out of the bottom of my gown. I looked myself in the eyes, my bright hazelnut eyes, and saw a girl determined to succeed. When other people look at me, some see a bookworm, some see an athlete, and some see a friend, but only my true friends see me for who I am, a well-rounded individual who can excel in whatever she puts her mind to. At one point, I may have been ashamed of being a nerd or being tall. But I have realized I need to embrace who I really am. That is why throughout my life, I have been trying to change people's perspectives, helping them realize who I truly am rather than judging me based solely on certain aspects of my life.

I look up into the crowd and find my parents excitedly searching for their seats. Before we arrived, the car ride was filled with my parents saying "I'm so proud of you," and reminiscing on my achievements. This moment is what I have spent the last four years of my

life working toward; it is finally here. I deliberately approach my seat and take a deep, invigorating breath as I think back on my time in high school and think of the various transformations that occurred— metamorphoses that shaped my being. It is scary to think that in three months time I will be leaving the friendly confines of Carroll High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and venturing off into the vast unknown that is West Lafayette. However, I am excited and confident in my abilities to take me far, from the multitude of knowledge I gained from schooling to the valuable relationships I had built. As I take my seat, I reflect on what brought me to this pivotal day, starting off at the very beginning of my high school career.

I found myself rushed into a reality check my freshman year. I was pelted with an onslaught of change: new people, AP courses, seven periods, and hours of work. I walked into the hallways of my high school, faced with the nuisance of cacophonous voices bellowing throughout the corridors. I was completely drained by such change. No longer stuck in my middle school ways, I yearned for some steadiness in this brave new world. My middle school friends dispersed themselves among the varying social cliques in the big school, while I was left alone, unwilling to completely conform myself in order to fit into a specific crowd. “I have to find someone,” I thought one day while wandering the halls after seventh period. I was inaudibly alone because of the wall of change that hit me like a truck. After a few weeks, the loneliness completely overtook me and I failed my first test in high school: Honors Pre-Calculus. I was devastated. I had a discussion with my parents and we created a plan to set aside an hour before school to study and do homework. I began meeting with other friends who were high-achieving in school to work together and this continuity lasted until my senior year. This hour before school was the consistency I needed in the fast-paced life of a high-school student. I found an

Eden in the hell that was my first weeks of high school. This bountiful garden was a bond among my group of bright, compassionate friends. This recluse was a seemingly exclusive one, however.

I remember going through high school and noticing the ‘normal’ students would not really interact with the smart kids as much as I would have hoped. They always separated themselves from us. It was like they were saying, “since you’re smart, you don’t like the same things we do.” This alienation did not sit well with me. It motivated me to do better in activities outside academics; I was well-rounded and could excel socially and athletically as well, no matter the fact that my school friends and sports friends did not spend time together. I wanted to prove to them that I could do more than just school and prove to them that it was possible for us to share interests. Just because I like school does not mean that we can not get along.

I was always put into the category of being a super smart, nerdy kid who just liked school and didn’t do anything else and I thought, “that’s wrong, I mean I like school but I wouldn’t say school is what defines me.” It isn’t all that I am. I couldn’t accept that social groups refused to intermingle just because of the activities they were in. I wanted to be the one to knock down the barriers that kept the people in my high school apart, but it was a seemingly insurmountable challenge given my quiet disposition. Even though I was quiet, I never let it stop me from getting involved in the activities I was interested in.

As I look around at my fellow graduates, I realize how difficult it was to find introverted friends as the quiet ones regularly put on a façade to mask their natural state, so I usually found myself alone, fighting to contact someone, anyone. I felt I did not have a place in such a loud realm. Junior year arrived, and I saw Mr. Hill on my class schedule. Upon that discovery, I had

friends inform me of Mr. Hill's pleasant personality, so I instantly presumed that he was just like any other "fun" teacher: extroverted. That assumption was misguided, however, as I found out when I shyly walked into his class on the first day. The lights were dim, the walls were covered with books, and the occupant was tranquil, gentle, and quiet; he didn't fear silence like many do. It was refreshing to see someone like me: quiet and reserved, be successful in what he does. I was "labeled as a gifted introvert and it was hard to change socially and branch out" and break free of that label, but after seeing numerous loud, vocal celebrities, presidents, and CEO's, it was comforting to know that I, an introvert, do have a seat at the table that is society. Because Mr. Hill fostered a warm environment for the quiet ones like me, I found some of my closest friends in that class and was most at ease in that setting as my true self was allowed to blossom.

Looking around the auditorium, I spot some of my closest friends: Jodie, Taylor, and Lauren sitting next to each other since their last names all happen to be Johnson. The coincidence. Seeing them all next to each other reminds me of the times when they were incredibly supportive of me during one of my basketball games during my sophomore year. After breaking my index finger in the middle of October, I returned to the court a few weeks later. I was extremely cautious and reluctant to be on the court again, despite the fact that the doctor gave me an okay to play. I was nervous that I would not be able to perform well during my game, especially when my first game back was against our school's rival: the Homestead Spartans. Regardless, Jodie, Taylor, and Lauren all showed up to my game and cheered me on enthusiastically. Even though we lost the game, they were there for me, supporting me the whole time. They told me that the loss was not my fault and that as long as I tried my best I should not be down on myself. The three of them supported me everyday throughout my years of high

school, constantly there through my trials and triumphs no matter the subject. From sports to orchestra to grades, they were there through it all. I could not be more thankful for them.

I struggled in basketball in the first few years of high school because I was not a good free throw shooter. Basketball was the sport that piqued my interest when I used to play with friends in the driveway. As I fell in love with the game, my father convinced me to start playing on a real basketball court with an organized team. Basketball was a part of me for as long as I can remember, and I refused to not be on the team in high school. The first day of tryouts was one of the toughest days of my life. All of us lined up in the gymnasium and the coach told us to shoot 10 free throws one by one. Those who made less than 5 would not be able to make the team. As I watched everyone shooting free throws, and succeeding, I felt the nerves eating me up. When it was my turn, I concentrated as hard as I could, sensing the pressure of others looking at me, hoping that I would not beat their score. As I was on my last free throw, I had only made four. I took a deep breath, shutting my eyes, and closing everything out to completely focus. With my knees trembling, I shot the final free throw, remembering to “put my hand in the cookie jar,” as my father had always taught me. The ball flew through the air for what seemed like an eternity, but as soon as it left my hands, I knew it was in. *Swish*. I sighed with relief, realizing I could still make the team. The tryouts after that went smoothly, but every time my coach told me to shoot free throws, I became anxious. From then on, I started practicing my free throws every day after practice. Three years later, I made the varsity team. All that hard work landed me an opportunity to excel in basketball despite my initial struggles. And now, I am graduating with four years of basketball experience that taught me that success comes with hard work and effort, and one day, I will be able to achieve my personal and career goals due to the strong work ethic I

have acquired from basketball. Although this is something I could have learned through school, the fact that it came from something else almost made it mean more to me.

Sports really provided me with a lot of growth. I played tennis starting in the spring of my freshman year up until now and I made a lot of friends. Being on the team was sort of considered uncool so I think people always kind of categorized tennis kids as kind of weird and strange people but I know that's not true. If people didn't jump to conclusions, they could have gotten more out of their high school experience like I did. Ignoring those stereotypes allowed me to make some of the best memories on the team.

One of my best friends right now is Georgina, my doubles partner. She was like a big sister to me throughout high school. Currently, she is at Ohio State but we still have kept in touch after she graduated. I know I will still be friends with the people I practiced with for four years, even after we leave for college and are miles apart. I think of my sports teams as family and I owe a lot of my success in school to being part of these teams. Sports were my way of de-stressing after a long day at school. I learned so many lessons at practice and in games yet I never felt like I was learning when I was there, it was just fun. Although I was one of the few teammates that spent their bus-ride home from away games doing homework, I still felt like they were my family. Overall, they accepted the fact that sports were not my whole life. They respected how I wouldn't always hang out with them on weekends as I was extremely busy with life. They gave me strength by not pressuring me to only be an athlete.

I look up from day-dreaming to see that they just called Gabby Dean up to the stage. Seeing her bright smile as she is handed her diploma reminds me of my tough time in AP Physics during Senior year. It was one of the few classes that I struggled with in High School. I

might even say that it was the hardest class I have taken thus far in my educational career. The concepts seemed too difficult, impossible even, and mind-bending to wrap my head around. I left the first exam devoid of confidence with my head swimming in a mixed mumbo-jumbo of vectors, momentum formulas, and free-body diagrams. The Chapter 9 test consumed my every waking thought as I studied for hours on end to prepare and constantly anticipated the results after I had taken it. The next day in fourth period the verdict was released: failure. I later met Gabby for lunch in the school commons. Gabby could clearly see my upset expression as I walked in, so she asked what was bothering me. I immediately broke into tears.

I exclaimed, "I can't do it. I just can't freaking do it!"

"Um, you're going to need to elaborate Sam," Gabby responded.

"Physics! I failed the damn test," I explained while shoving my face in my hands.

Gabby gave me a pat on the back which morphed into a good old side hug and told me, "Sam, you're one of the smartest people that I know. I honestly think you can do just about anything that you put your mind to, and high school physics sure as hell isn't the exception to the rule. Furthermore, you're not just a nerd. You're an amazing athlete and musician. Your future will be amazing regardless of this one test score."

Looking up, I wondered, "How can you be so confident in me?"

"Maybe it's because I know you. I care," Gabby looked at me with worried eyes.

"What if I'm giving my best and I still keep failing?!" I demanded exasperatedly.

"Look I got a 5 on that AP test last year. I can totally help you if you keep struggling. How about we go for a run later and talk things over?" Gabby expressed, giving me a big hug.

“Sure,” I resigned. I did not remember what happened afterward or if that run ever ended up happening or if she even ate any lunch that period, but Gabby, my blonde dynamo of a friend, had given me my hope and confidence back. I, partly with Gabby’s help, ended up with an A in Physics by the end of the year and even got a 4 on the AP test.

As the next line of students got onstage, I catch a glimpse of Beth Fogerty calmly walking up to receive her diploma. A small smile touches my face as I recall the years of friendly bickering and competition we had with each other over the last few years. Although my basketball teammates teased me by saying it was dorky, both of us craved the first chair position in orchestra, a highly coveted spot. Beth was the superior musician by far, and eventually got the chair she deserved, but the friendly competition taught me much over the years. She was humble, quick to admit she was not always the best, and taught me dedication and to always put forth the best effort whenever tryouts came along. I honestly do not know where I would be without Beth, we had gone through so much together, and pushed each other to succeed constantly.

Just as I start to nod off in the surprisingly comfortable seating, I can hear someone whisper my name, “Sam, Sam, Sam!” I turn my head over my right shoulder to see Shayla Jones’s beaming countenance floating behind me. We share a quick smile before I turn away again. I first met Shayla on the bus to school back in middle school, and she continued to be a fixture in my life until I stopped riding the bus my sophomore year. We would sit in the back of the bus curled into balls in the seats and joke about the annoying people on the bus while jamming out to Rage Against the Machine. Rage Against the Machine was Shayla’s idea; she was real angsty. Come to think of it, I am pretty sure Shayla is not planning to go to college. I try to think of the next time I might see her but nothing comes to mind, and I am suddenly saddened

by the thought that I may never see Shayla again after today. I realize that my friendship, or at least close acquaintanceship, with Shayla was completely coincidental. We were not in any of the same clubs or friend groups and she was not a nerd either. It dawned on me that “in my high school I was very well known for being like a part of the cool kid crowd but being like the one that was nice to everyone and the one that wasn’t like judgy and judgmental”. Another friend that came to mind was Bern Bledsoe. Bern was really into theater. For instance, Bern took a Broadway “pilgrimage” in New York every year. He always got the main part in school productions, and his showmanship and buoyant personality showed through in daily conversation with him. He was incredibly witty and I found his company enjoyable. I always wished that I could have interacted with him more, but now that he is going to Carnegie Mellon for theatre, I feel as though it is too late for me to start getting to know him more. “High school graduation is really the beginning and the end of everything”, I thought. I have many regrets all throughout high school, and not getting to know more people on a deeper level is one of them.

Being one of the smart kids that did not restrict themselves to only school was not easy at my high school as I wanted desperately to be a part of a school of like-minded students. That brought me back to when I tried to apply to a private school for the last two years of high school. During my sophomore year, my mother and I desperately fought to get me into a prestigious private school, Canterbury. I had to take the SAT’s, ACT’s, and other standardized tests a countless amount of times while trying to keep up with orchestra and basketball at the same time. I had to get my grades in order. I had to plan a trip to China later in the summer on top of that. I had *so* much to do with little time. I was a stressed-out mess. After the first stab at the SAT’s I got a call from Canterbury saying that I was short of the minimum requirements. I met every

requirement, surpassed them with flying colors in fact, but the SAT score. I took it again months later and desperately waited to be taken off the waiting list. The waiting list eventually closed and I did not get into Canterbury, my ideal, dream school. I got my scores back and found out that I was only 10 points shy of getting into the private school. I guess I was staying at Carroll High.

Everything happens for a reason. And there was a reason I was not supposed to leave Carroll High but I would not know why until my senior year of high school. When I got an internship my senior year of high school, I was the only woman there out of the seven others who were chosen for that position. My peers were continuously sexist to me the whole time. They thought it was a joke to point out that the glass ceiling was always going to be above me, never to be shattered. I took this as a challenge, a calling to defy their expectations. Their constant belittlement of my opportunities enraged me of course, but I always wanted to channel that into doing something better. I wanted to be a part of a wave that would change the glass ceiling; I did not want to be just another victim, and I believe my internship supervisor noticed my tenacity. I was constantly getting challenging work, and they always praised my performance when it came time for evaluations. If anything, the whole experience helped me prove to myself that I could do it. I could succeed in anything I did, regardless of my gender.

As I wait in line to be call up on the stage I see my teacher Mr. Williams, my Biology teacher and basketball coach my freshman year, towards the front of the line, enthusiastically shaking student's hands as they passed him. Nearly every day I would go to his room during my study hall and talk. We would talk about anything, from basketball to relationships to current events. He was a man that was wildly intelligent and always seemed to be doing something

interesting. One week we talked about his desire to run for senator while the next he talked to me about his brand new coaching strategy. I just loved listening to his life stories. He was always interested in how I was doing, and always had words of wisdom that I would, and still do implement in my daily life. I respected him so much simply because I could tell he was intelligent. He had gone through things I was going through in high school. When I did not know who my friends were he told me that he thought I was restraining myself to only hanging out with the basketball team. He encouraged me to expand my friendships, which is a main reason why I ended up meeting one of my best friends, Rachel, the cross-country runner. I would have never made any of my cross-country friends without him as I was not even part of the team. I was not afraid to be myself and try new things because of the wisdom he imparted to me. He told me the people that make a difference in life are the people that pursue their identity and desires rather than just molding themselves to fit in. I can see the pride in his eyes. He is an emotional guy, so I would not be too surprised if he cries. I near him as the line continues to shuffle forward, and as he shakes hands with everyone in front of me, I know what is coming for me. Finally, he sees me, gives me a wink and a huge hug, just like before every basketball game. He whispers in my ear, "Proud of you Sammy." We disengage and he pats me on the back with a huge smile on his face as I smile back. Eventually, I shuffle forward along with the others, but I know I am not like everyone around me. This relationship with Mr. Williams changed me, it made me okay with being myself, and unlike many people graduating with me today, I know I am ready to be different in college. I am proud of who I am, and love and respect the people that made me this way.

There are only seven people left in front of me but I can not seem to hear my teacher call the names. Sweat beads down my head and my heart is racing as I take my final walk in my high school. My final walk as a high school student and my first walk toward being a Boilermaker. My eyes look into the crowd now that there are only three people in front of me to the stage. I'm searching until I spot my parents in the fifth row, my mom sobbing on my father in proud triumph. I take a deep breath as I begin to tear up and how proud I am of myself and I take my stand on the stage.

"Samantha Janae Smith", my teacher calls. I walk down the stage and shake some of my teachers' hands. I grab my diploma and begin walking back to my seat.

While walking back to my seat, I saw my French teacher, Mr. Bains, from freshman year. I stop to shake his hand trying to hold back tears, finally realizing that high school was coming to an end and the fact that I would not see Mr. Bains everyday like I used to. Teary-eyed Mr. Bains told me, "Congrats Samantha, I knew you had it in you. I can't believe it has already been four years. Time really flies. Never stop dreaming and don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something. The sky's the limit." Those few sentences are what broke me. I broke down, hugged Mr. Bains, sobbing into his gown. It seemed like just yesterday that I met Mr. Bains.

I will never forget the day that Mr. Bains changed my life forever, inspiring me to succeed in school and to ignore the insults and criticisms that arose from the fact that I was always considered a "nerd". It was an ordinary Wednesday during my freshman year, and I was leaving French class to go to Pre-Calculus. I was never great at French. I did not participate in

class and I struggled with French articles. Also, I was a very quiet person and because of this I would always lose points for participation because I refused to talk during class. To my surprise, during math class, Mr. Bains walked into the room, and asked if he could talk to me. Obviously, I said yes and I left class to go talk to him.

Originally, I thought I was in trouble, but it turned out to be quite the opposite. Mr. Bains sat down and started talking to me. He told me, "Samantha, you realize that you have an 88% in my class, 2% below an A. I really want you to get an A. What are you doing? I know you are a good student. The only thing that is holding you back in getting an A in my class is participating. I know you are shy and are probably embarrassed speaking French in front of others, but it shouldn't matter if people are laughing at you because you'll probably have a better grade than them in the end. So, you need to think about yourself and your grade because I know you can do better than that." These few sentences really resonated with me, and made me reconsider my life. After this, I was finally able to realize that what other people thought does not matter in the long run. From this point on, I was able to free myself from others' judgements and do what I wanted to do, even if it was not the popular choice. I do not know why it took so long for me to realize this, but because of this encounter, I am forever grateful for Mr. Bains.

I continued to cry with Mr. Bains for what seemed like an eternity. All I could think about was how much life was going to change in the next few months, and how excited, yet nervous I was for the next chapter of my life. I held on tight to my diploma. I did it. I graduated High School. After four long years of hard work, I finally finished my high school, and off to college I go. I can not wait to join other like-minded learners at Purdue University this upcoming fall. I can not wait to step foot in West Lafayette to pursue my degree of pre-veterinary. With

that degree, I have a sense of purpose because I will be saving the lives of many animals. On top of that, I was lucky enough to be a part of the Honors Program. The program was very hard to get into and I feel very accomplished and lucky to have received an offer to join the program. The Honors College is filled with amazing faculty and hosts events that can help me grow to achieve bigger and better things. To make my life easier, I also got a full ride from the university with the help of the Emerging Leaders Scholarship; thus, I do not have to worry about paying my loans back four years from now. I am very thankful to have that opportunity, since not many people will have that chance. I sighed as I sit back in my seat on the stage. I cannot wait to have the college experience that I have dreamt of since I was a young girl.

I look down at the diploma in my hand, and I feel ready to conquer my dreams at Purdue University and wherever else life takes me. I am forever grateful for the people that influenced my life and shaped me into the person I am today. In a couple of months, I will be able to begin my pre-veterinary studies to eventually achieve my dream of helping animals be the healthy pets they deserve to be. Luckily, if I decide to stay at Purdue University to complete my veterinarian training, the university has a sizable animal hospital where I can do so.

I know that my experiences at Carroll have prepared me to lead a wonderful life. Throughout my four years in high school I have developed a greater sense of self, a conception of my inner being forged through these personal episodes of my life, from my relationships with others to my triumphs and failures. I am much more than a high achieving learner. I am a multi-dimensional person with many different interests and skills. I am a friend, a daughter, a student, an aspiring veterinarian, a tennis player, a basketball player, and a violinist. I am Samantha Janae Smith, and I am much more than a singular label.