

Personal Essay Prompt: Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Essay #1

My upbringing in Northern Ireland, a small corner of the world, has affected who I am in many fundamental ways. For a start, I've learnt that it's possible to catch pneumonia and get sunburnt in the course of one afternoon; so I always over pack. So too have I discovered that "I'll pop the kettle on" is a sufficient emotional response when confronted with most situations. Northern Ireland has had, as most know, a troubled history – so troubled, we simply call it 'The Troubles'. During this time, individually and collectively as a nation, we suffered. It was assumed that no lasting solution would ever be found and most gave up trying, with stalled talks becoming a perennial disappointment. Yet a renewed, focused and determined effort was made by the British, Irish and American Governments to bring about peace, which was finally achieved through the Good Friday Agreement. It was signed in 1997, a few months after my birth.

My generation is the first generation of peace – it's all we've known, and thankfully 'The Troubles' for us is merely a scarring reminder of what came before. We have so much to thank the tireless efforts of diplomats for, for without their commitment the change witnessed in the 18 years subsequent would be unimaginable. Twenty years ago, who could have foreseen Martin McGuinness paying tribute to the late Ian Paisley as "a friend?" While there are still sizeable problems in our political system, the distance we've come shows the good that diplomacy, politics, compromise and a will to succeed can do – and it is this, more than anything else, which has shaped the path I want to follow at College and my career beyond. There are so many places in the world in a similarly bad or worse condition that are consigned to the 'Can't Help Box' – a damning view of our pessimism about the capacity for change. I've grown up seeing the work it takes to heal places scarred by division and violence, but can personally attest that it's worth it. With that in mind, as I came to realise what it took for where I live to achieve peace it taught me always to persevere – that if people tell you something is "unachievable" it is only so by the standards they set for themselves, so I always tried to work harder and aim higher than everyone else. I don't want to be bound by what others determine to be "too difficult."

So I've thrown myself in. I've worked with MLAs and MPs on education reform, got involved with organisations and campaigns like the UK Youth Parliament that encourage activism and social progress, even founding my own to try and engage other young people in issues affecting them. My determination to do all of this, and my optimism that change can be brought about, is fuelled by my background in Northern Ireland. Life here has also taught me to value of friendship and cooperation. For years, the metaphorical and physical walls placed between Protestants and Catholics hindered understanding, friendship, and community. It is only when we understand each other that we can begin to overcome our problems together. I was blessed to grow up with the influence of my Granny, who always pushed me to meet people from "the other side", and I am proud to have been part of so many projects that promote the importance of tolerance, understanding and friendship across historic divisions.

It may seem foolish to be proud of a background in a place infamous for bomb scares and paramilitary violence, but I am. My experiences here have shown me what's important in life: determination, resilience, optimism, passion and having "a bit of 'craic'" (a uniquely Northern Irish type of fun). I wouldn't change my background for the world.

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CL Gary



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