

- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Hunched over the cast iron stockpot in a purple, white and black horizontal-striped housedress, she stirred the rich amber stew, unleashing notes of sugar, butter, vanilla and crunch. The scent gripped me. I dropped my backpack, ran to the stove and stood over the boiling mix, allowing a hot, wet, comforting cloud of sweet to engulf me. Ninety minutes of continuous stirring turned the sugary broth into a chunky, viscous goop, which she poured into a rectangular pan. Only half an hour until it was time to cut and enjoy our brittle, long-awaited treat.

I'll never forget when my mother showed me how to make pecan candy. I was seven. I felt mature, like I was in on a big secret only she and I knew about. The secret got juicier. With each batch she shared new details, highlighting an ingredient or step in the process, or cautioning me to avoid the pitfalls of past recipes. When I got promoted to stirrer, she taught me patience, persistence, and precision, not only forcing me to trudge through the agonizing boredom and wrist cramps of an hour and a half of uninterrupted mixing, but critiquing the technique and speed with which I did it. The wait always proved worth it when my concoction cooled and I tasted the heavenly pecan chunks.

I'll never forget when my mother suggested I sell our pecan candy at school. I was seven. My mother was working part-time as a casino cashier and otherwise selling hot dogs out of our house. My father had just lost his job as a construction worker and my parents were struggling immensely to provide for my four younger sisters and me. It was time for my second promotion, and at seven, my role within my family shifted forever from participant to provider. For nine years I was the absolute best (and only) pecan candy saleswoman at school, but my contribution would prove insufficient. My family's financial troubles worsened when my parents separated and my mother became the sole (adult) breadwinner. I had to step up. At sixteen, after a summer stint at Blue Bayou Amusement Park, I secured fulltime work on the "Film Crew" at our local AMC Theaters, my current workplace. But as the oldest of five, my contributions to my family could never be strictly financial.

Making money was never more important than caring for my sisters. With my mother overworked, my father often financially sidelined and my parents' marriage in constant emotional flux, I had to be a great big sister and role model. Since I was ten, this has meant getting my sisters ready for school in the mornings and making sure they have dinner and do their homework most nights. It has also meant helping them cope with my parents' dysfunctional relationship and my father's ignorance. Recently, my mother, sisters and I moved back in with my father for financial reasons, despite the fact that our parents are no longer married. I look forward to college and freeing myself from my family's dysfunction, but I am also terrified of what could happen in my absence.

My friends and family members tease me. They call me "grandma" or "auntie" because I'm always worrying or cooking or tired. I own these endearments with honor. My challenging upbringing caused me to become extremely hardworking, tough and responsible early on. I am very grateful, particularly to my mother, for having been pushed to become these things. But I am also slightly resentful. Hardworking, tough and responsible are not the only things I want to be. I imagine my mother feels similarly about herself. But I know something my mother doesn't. I can and will be a person who is far more than the woman I've had to become for my family. In college, I will look to find out just who that is.