

Trigger Warning: This document contains content on sexual assault.

Gates Essay #1: Describe a change you would like to make in the world. Tell us about how you would plan to make that change, and what obstacles you might encounter along the way. (400)

My father raped me from age nine to sixteen. When he left for prison, I was left to pick up the pieces, to confront emotions I had ignored. I started counseling and was diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, and depression. My first year in recovery felt hopeless. I blamed God and myself. Shame stung every nerve. I wanted to die.

I wouldn't wish my experience on an enemy, but I've chosen to find growth in struggle -- to survive and utilize my tragedy in service of vulnerable youth. The World Childhood Foundation estimates one in 10 children experiences sexual abuse before turning 18, and that in 93% of cases, like in mine, the child knows the abuser. I want to use technology to thwart child sexual abuse, a problem that affects all racial and socioeconomic groups yet remains largely unaddressed.

Through research, I've discovered applications, such as the "Stewards of Children Prevention Toolkit," that provide adults with resources to spot, prevent, and respond to child sexual abuse. I didn't, however, find any apps that empower children, who now have smartphones as early as elementary school. Child sexual abuse is so difficult to stop because it fills victims with shame, silencing them. Recently, in Hollywood, we saw that a handful of brave, vocal women inspired so many more to speak out. If we can get enough teenagers, like me, to share about our experiences, we could save children's lives.

My app, "Not Us," will connect children with teen mentors who have "come out" about child sexual abuse experiences. The hope is mentors' transparency will reduce shame, encouraging children to seek help if they even sense suspicious behavior. The app will also offer kid-friendly videos, games, and other resources that further educate children about predators' tendencies.

This project will be difficult. Creating an effective app with a broad reach is tough by itself. Then comes the challenge of recruiting enough teen mentors to speak out and participate, and rigorously screening them to ensure the safety of our child subscribers. But the greatest hurdle will be teaching children to engage with the app and motivating them to reach out for help when needed. Still, these obstacles pale in comparison to what we can achieve by terminating stigma and silence and breaking cycles of abuse once and for all. I wish I had felt empowered to speak up sooner. That wish could be someone else's reality.

Gates Essay #2: What does it mean to be a minority? What challenges has it brought and how have you overcome them? What are the benefits? (400)

African American history is the story of overcoming low expectations. It began in the early 1600s, when slave owners decided my ancestors were subhuman to justify owning, raping, and murdering them for two and a half centuries. Then, Reconstruction and Jim Crow made White supremacy and Black inferiority the law -- stripping Blacks of dignity and basic rights and authorizing White hostility. From the Civil Rights Era until now, we've seen the beautiful fruits of Black resistance to racism. Through unity and remarkable strength, we've reclaimed lost power and reset expectations for our race. But, hundreds of years of marginalization has put African Americans into a hole that's difficult to dig out of.

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Part of that hole is physical. Centuries of disenfranchisement prevented most Blacks from building wealth, becoming educated, and securing jobs, which are all critical to economic mobility. But another part of that hole is psychological -- Black self-hate caused by years of low expectations. I see this at Scotlandville Magnet, my nearly all-Black school where students don't consider college a legitimate option. Besides a handful of us, my peers don't take academics seriously because they do not see school success as connected to life success. My school drives this home. Most classes aren't rigorous, most teachers are disorganized, and there's no support for students who dream big about college. This must be why my counselor told me I likely won't earn a scholarship or be able to attend an out-of-state school, even though I'm ranked second in my class. Students, teachers, and administrators alike are stunted by low expectations, the legacy of our troubled history.

But Black history is also one of triumph and amazing resilience. I have honored this heritage by ignoring negativity, finding mentors and role models, seeking help beyond school, and educating myself through extracurricular activities and a passion for reading. Low expectations haven't left me unscathed, but they haven't gotten the best of me either. And that is the benefit of being a person of color: I have no choice but to be gritty, resourceful, creative, and to maintain a sense of humor. These trademarks of American minorities have led us to make game-changing contributions, establish vibrant cultures, and maintain faith despite desperate circumstances and countless attempts to stifle our brilliance. To me, being a minority is remaining hopeful, pushing forward, and above all, expecting a lot.

Gates Essay #3: Tell us three things that are important to you. How did you arrive at this list? Will these things be important to you in ten years? Why?

Through our experiences, we learn what we can't live without. Through my worst one, I learned that purpose, mental health, and freedom are vital to my success.

Starting high school, I aspired to be an engineer because they make a lot of money. However, I discovered I lacked passion for engineering and no financial reward could outweigh my emotional disconnection. I found my purpose in the unlikely place: the darkness that followed my father leaving for prison after sexually abusing me for most of a decade. That purpose is to be a mental health specialist for vulnerable children. When I began researching counseling and psychology my junior year, I was filled not just with motivation but relief, a sense that I could respond positively to my misfortune. Now, I believe I have a calling and can't wait to fulfill it.

My struggles also highlighted the importance of mental health. After being raped for seven years, I was in emotional distress. Filled with shame and hopelessness, I became unmotivated, antisocial, depressed, and even suicidal. Through a mental health regimen -- including therapy and medication -- I slowly got back on track. I learned that, whether you've experienced tragedy or are just managing daily life's challenges, everything starts between your ears. I had to find emotional balance before rebuilding. Once I did, other improvements followed: new friendships, better grades, and increased energy. Mental health is a never-ending process I'll never sacrifice.

Above all, I know how it feels not being free. A child groomer, my father monitored every aspect of my life. He dictated how I dressed and behaved and who I associated with. Under his control, I

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had no identity. When he left, I felt lost because no one was telling me who I was anymore. Being free felt terrifying, but soon, I learned that one's ability to act independently is the essence of living. I could finally speak my mind, take risks, learn from mistakes, plan my future. I thank my father for inadvertently teaching me I must answer to myself before anyone else.

The best things in life are free, but I paid a price for them. That's how I know they're invaluable. Purpose, mental health, and freedom won't just be important for the next ten years. They'll be vital for eternity -- for my children, theirs, and so on -- as we work to make society a better, safer place to live.

Gates Essay #4: Tell us about a time where you failed at something. What were the circumstances? How did you respond to failure? What lessons did you learn?

I've loved to run for as long as I can remember. Everyone said I was fast, and as I entered middle school, I actually started to believe it. I could run long or short distances and never get enough. At every track meet I earned either first or second place. All of the girls on the track team looked up to and depended on me.

My sophomore year, our team qualified for district finals. Competing against all the teams in our district was tough, and we ended up scoring neck-and-neck with a couple of other squads. Entering the last event, the 400-meter dash, I had to finish first or second for my team to advance to regionals. The 400-meter dash was my favorite, so I felt confident I could win handily. The starting-gun sounded, and I exerted maximum effort, but I ended up third. I became utterly despondent. I felt it was completely my fault that the team didn't advance to regionals. They depended on me, and with everything on the line, I choked.

For the next two weeks, I ostracized myself from the team. I convinced myself they hated me and actively avoided seeing them at school. I would go home each day and time my runs over and again, trying to prove to myself I could be faster. When our coach required us to attend regionals and cheer on the boys team, I was terrified. I would have to face my team. I prepared my apologies and excuses.

The team was sitting in the stands when I arrived. When they saw me, they all jumped up to give me hugs and handshakes. Many of them jubilantly asked, "Where have you been?!" Not one teammate even mentioned the 400-meter dash. In fact, they didn't seem to even remember it. My teammates helped me see that winning wasn't the only reason I ran. There were many reasons. Running brought me joy, a sense of purpose, and strong friendships. There were also other reasons that my teammates cared about me. They didn't depend on me for my speed. They loved me because I was encouraging, caring, and there for them unconditionally -- just as they were for me. In the end, I got a prize far more enduring than a trip to regionals. I became a better person and developed a much stronger sense of what it means to be a teammate.