

The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experiences?

Note: Essays may contain deeply personal, sensitive, and potentially triggering content. All students have given permission for their essays to be shared.

Panic, Stage Left

I had a panic attack in Stage Left before our last night of *The Black Nativity*. I did something I never do: peek around the curtains at the full house. A spiral of insecurity took hold, and I fed it my doubt until it consumed me, like Audrey II from *Little Shop of Horrors* devouring a bloodsoaked snack. I jerked back, sunk down, and cried. My co-lead Justin checked on me, but I couldn't answer, only wipe my eyes and swallow my throat before the director's call. "Ten minutes!"

I've loved theater since six, when I'd pull relatives by their hands into Mawmaw's den for a one-woman show of *Cinderella*, or a *High School Musical* pre-game speech on a couch-cushion stage. Their applause made me feel like a star. In second grade I joined Talented Theater, and by fifth, I'd gotten into New Venture Theater, a professional production company. Whereas in school plays children are confined to strict "blocking" boxes, now I was acting with my whole body, nailing intricately choreographed dance numbers, and employing breathing exercises that made my voice burst. I felt Broadway-bound.

Not that night. My usual weightlessness was gone as Justin and I sang our duet, dread swirling painfully in my gut. I tried putting the determination in my voice the song required – summoning Mary's strength – but I *couldn't* become my character. Instead I dissociated into a nightmare: *I will never act again*. Afterwards I had to face my mentor, Ms. Angela, who introduced me to professional acting. She was everything I aspired to be as a performer, a person. My bones popped in her bearhug as she whispered: "That was your best performance." I kept up the act, smiling to humor her.

I continued performing throughout middle school, going through the motions: sign up, get the part, panic, pretend. The joy of acting left my house, too – no more shower showtunes or mirror monologues. I passed on auditions with weak excuses, hating myself for ruining what I'd loved. Telling my mom was the worst. She was my biggest cheerleader, who helped me select audition pieces, washed away doubts with praise, and comforted me when I didn't get roles, always pushing me to try again. This time was no different. We compromised: for our church's own upcoming nativity scene, I would join crew.

I spent weeks painting wooden boxes for a manger backdrop, painstaking work to appease my mom. Then something happened. Stroking singular strands of hay onto freshly sanded boards, my nose filling with Home Depot lumber, I felt it: the familiar joy of piecing together something bigger than myself. Opening night, I felt proud, but still doubted I could return to theater as I'd known it. It took a high

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school production of *Romeo and Juliet* to realize I didn't have to act to create a scene. I didn't land a role but gladly accepted the part of Crew Lead. I painted foam swords; operated soundboards that shot stars across the sky; warbled thin metal sheets to create thunder; and loved it all, especially costuming. I learned to dye fabrics, take body measurements, alter hems, and design new concepts. I saw the entirety of theater, channeling the same emotion, just in a new role I feel meant for.

Why did I panic that night? Honestly, my body ran out of love, and if that happens again, I'll honor the feeling, not berate myself for it. Indeed, my most important dialogue is with the inner me. Now I know to check in with her, to be kind to her, while I navigate uncertainty. I can't force passion, but I *can* stay open to reimagining it. That's just what happened. On crew, I rediscovered my imagination, that innocence from my living room roots. I carved out a new place in the theater community, no less an artist, no less connected to my audience.

I Was Once a Bully

I can humbly say that I, Kaydence Bradford, was once a bully.

The first step was transferring to a magnet elementary school my mom believed would eventually get me into one of our city's few high-quality high schools. It seemed like the only path to our dream of me "making it out." Though my mom honored our Baton Rouge roots, she pushed so I'd have options she didn't. She taught me advanced vocabulary and precise pronunciation, put me in etiquette classes, nurtured my love of reading, and basically made me a goody-goody. I didn't carry myself like my peers, making me a target in my new school.

That first day was a nightmare. I was bubbling with excitement, ready to make new friends, learn new things. I looked like a doll, clothes ironed, hair meticulously combed into twists with elaborate bows, light-up Skechers ready to activate with the smallest step. My teacher asked me to introduce myself. Pushing down nerves, I mustered a smile and began, but then: "Ewww! She talks like a white girl!" The class erupted laughing, the first of countless shamings that broke my bright spirit.

I didn't tell my mom, too scared she'd unenroll me, which felt like death to my future. I couldn't be her sweet girl and survive the relentless ridicule. So I became a problem child to divert attention. I disrespected teachers, picked fights, and made it my mission to torment one boy, the *new new* kid. My actions on Halloween still upset me. I dressed as Abbey Bominable from "Monster High," a Mattel series all about being yourself. When my classmates mocked my costume, I pointed at

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him: “Look! He has the icky touch!”, showing bumps on my arm as “proof.” It worked, and I switched seats for extra emphasis. I didn’t realize that my wonderful classmates would turn this joke into a daily excuse to exclude him. My behavior was despicable. I was this boy, but rather than help, I gave him my pain.

My true nature is to care for others, but this experience traumatized me, so by middle school I completely distanced myself. Dance became an outlet because I felt comfortable with my teacher. She missed many days from pancreatitis, but every day she was there, I’d check in and share encouraging words. It made me feel...like myself. She noticed I wasn’t really this withdrawn person, so she jolted me from my fog with a nickname: Grandma. “Kaydence, you are loving and caring,” she said. “Be yourself; follow your instincts.” This was my turning point. Gradually, I rediscovered who my mom raised, just in time for my newfound confidence to be tested.

Freshman-year volleyball was like elementary school, seniors constantly insulting us, being especially cruel to one socially awkward rookie. Other freshmen joined in, bullying to avoid being bullied. Not me, never again. I stood up for her and began hanging out with her outside volleyball. But the seniors went too far one day, when they refused to let us eat the pre-game food our parents had arranged for everyone. Enough was enough. I went to Coach, reporting everything that had happened since the beginning of the season. She respected my honesty, but didn’t warn me about the crossfire she’d throw me into. The next day, she held practice in a classroom and shared my concerns publicly. The seniors painted me as a dramatic freshman, but I stood my ground, even as my heart pounded like feet stomping in the bleachers. I spoke from my heart, conveying what all freshmen felt but were scared to say, and it was eternally liberating.

Now a senior, I’m our team’s defensive anchor – the libero, which means “free” in Italian. I’ve never called myself a “leader,” but if a leader is someone who follows their instincts, looks out for others, and stays true to who they are, then I proudly am one.

Black Masculinity

Where I’m from, expectations of black boys are low and specific. My biological father Segmund outlined them early: play football, like girls, wear expensive clothing - preferably Jordan brand. My older brother Jordan, better than me in every black boy way, was a model for Segmund’s holy trinity of toxic black masculinity.

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The earliest memories I can muster are of Segmund, who wasn't Jordan's father, comparing me to Jordan unfavorably. His was a manly strut and mine a ginger gait; his voice had "bass" while mine was soft; his muscular frame eclipsed my slender one. My mother made me go wherever Jordan went, but he kept me at arm's length. Indeed my earliest conscious thought was I was a mistake of a black boy. This was Segmund's and Jordan's thesis, which my mother reinforced through silence.

Then change came. My mother and Segmund split, and we moved five times, sometimes living on our own, sometimes with family. Our nomadic days were a rejection tour, a chance for others to ridicule me and my mother to condone it. As I was making sense of what a black boy should look like, Lenn, my barber-turned-stepfather, came on the scene. I was excited. Lenn's being a singer and drummer permitted me to admit I liked Talented Music, my only tolerable class. Yes, school mirrored home. My peers weren't stingy noting mismatches between their conceptions of black masculinity and my effeminate tendencies. In third grade I escaped through saxophone, one of five instruments I'd become proficient in. I fell in love with music and felt valuable for the first time in my life.

The feeling was short-lived. My mother and Lenn's marriage, the consequence of two unplanned pregnancies, landed us all under one roof. Turned out he was mean. Turned out our shared passion for music was bait, superficial common ground on which to criticize my girliness, to pick up where Segmund left off. No worries: Segmund was still pulling his weight in that department. I spent middle school between their homes, enduring a witch hunt, a coordinated effort to make me a black man if it meant breaking my spirit. At school bullying persisted, but I found my niche with other creative misfits and reclaimed dignity in choir, dance, and band. Segmund and Lenn kept at it, beating the queer out of me, their refrains strikingly similar, like they were conspiring to lobotomize me - to stop me from wearing bright colors; reading and writing fantasy; exploring the forbidden mysteries of nature rather than a gridiron; living in a shred of my truth. And with plenty of girl friends but never a girlfriend, there was the unavoidable question of my sexuality. It wasn't a question: I was a black boy who liked boys.

My poor mother finally broke her silence when, in ninth grade, Lenn accused me of stealing her liquor. "He lied about being gay, so why wouldn't he lie about this?" he asked, slurring. My mother snapped and put him out for good. Soon she will be remarried - to a black man who supports the kind I am. My mother's pretty good these days, too.

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In high school I have rebuilt myself into a rainbow of a black man - singer, musician, dancer, performer - a blend of colors that eliminates oppressive black archetypes. Now I'm someone to consider - a leader in the marching band, serious academic, passionate reader and writer, and the first male in my family who will graduate from college. I pity the black men in my life so oppressed they sought to break me too, and I thank them for their anti-guidance. I was a black boy disowned by my own. Now I am an open mind, a fact foiling the fictions that are race and gender. I forgive those who have hurt me but am unapologetically the black boy who never could and did.

Winding Road

The hotel room smelled like sweat and mothballs. Tar and nicotine stained its once-white ceiling yellow, the legacy of smokers who'd seen the faded red bed cover as a suitable ashtray. The carpet was a damp health hazard. This was home.

We'd been at the Budget Inn six months – my little brother Nathan, my mama, and her friend who had two kids. For dinner? Potatoes. On weekends I'd take the kids to swim in the Amite River. On weekdays I'd lie and tell friends our house had burned down. My bus driver knew the truth; my transfer sheet read "homeless."

One day Nathan and I found her at the foot of our bed crying. She rarely did. "Come here," she said. I was scared; I'd never seen her so spiritless. "When y'all grow up, y'all can't live like this, you hear me?" She sobbed. "There's a hill, and right now we're at the very bottom. When y'all grow up, I want y'all to be at the top."

It's hard realizing a parent isn't perfect, that your superwoman is human, that her questionable choices, especially with men, led to our life of instability. In this uncommon moment of vulnerability, my mama's fallibility was in focus. So was her victimhood. I was, all at the same time, angry at and sad for her.

She had me at 19. Looking back, I think of our life in chapters of men who disrupted it. First was Micky, but he left when I was three. Clarence was next, around from ages six to ten. I witnessed his regular abuse. A belt was his weapon of choice, but he once made use of a portable pull-up bar, causing my mama to miscarry. She kept going back to him despite always promising she wouldn't.

Then came Devin, a 19-year-old my mama met working at Albertson's. I was in sixth grade, old enough to place his jealous rage. He'd search our house for evidence of other men, punching my mama no matter what he didn't find. When she called

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the battered women's shelter, he responded by wrapping his legs around her like a bone-crunching boa constrictor. I watched, paralyzed, thinking she'd die that day. Devin took our money and dignity. We moved eight times in two years, staying in rundown apartments, others' houses, and finally, a hotel.

I'd spent most of my life as a witness to and casualty of hostility I was expected to stay silent about. In the process, my relationship with my mama grew toxic. I needed her to be a parent; but she needed a best friend more, so I was her confidant. I needed her to stand up to these men; instead she displaced her anger at them on me. So I became a bully, too. I acted out, started fights, neglected my schoolwork, and cried at school since I couldn't at home. I had been powerless so long and reclaimed control in ways I'm not proud of.

My acceptance in ninth grade to our city's top public school coincided with our hardest times, culminating in fall 2016 with the "Great Flood." Three days of continuous rain put five feet of water in the home we'd moved into after the Budget Inn. We lost almost everything. I gained a fresh start, though. My mama and I temporarily lived separately, which did us good. Eventually we moved to Port Allen, and I switched to a school which, though less prestigious, was more emotionally supportive. I've grown academically, motivated by my mama's vision for me at the top of the hill, and socially, because I was never the agitator I pretended to be to survive. My mama's doing better, too. Her current partner, my stepfather, is the sort of good man she deserves. Wherever the top of my hill is, I'm well on my way, no matter how winding the route.