

Clara Shapiro ('23) College Essay on SSFS Quiz Bowl

A Gift for Coach Eduardo Polón

With Permission to Pay it Forward as Inspiration for the Aspirational

“Convert to decimal form: nineteen over twenty-fi-” I buzzed, cutting Mr. Polón off. *“It’s 0.76.”* The other eight freshmen on my team stared at me blankly. *“Because you need to multiply the denominator by four to get a fraction over 100, so the numerator is 19×4 , which is like $(10 \times 4) + (9 \times 4)$, which is $40 + 36$, which is 76, all over 100, so 0.76... right?”*

They still looked back at me. With time ticking, I turned to Mr. Polón: *“0.76. Final answer.”* I felt my heart thud against my ribs as I started second-guessing, wondering if I’d just made a fool of myself in front of everyone there. The buzzer was heavy in my hand, uncomfortable, with ridges too big for my fingers. I didn’t know what I was doing. I looked at Mr. Polón, making eye contact with him and suddenly wishing I could disappear, hoping I hadn’t just embarrassed myself, painted the picture of this freshman who thought she knew math, who thought she knew anything, could be anything, like she-

Mr. Polón’s voice cut through the web spinning in my head: *“Correct.”*

Everything stopped for a moment. Adrenaline coursed through my veins in a way I’d never felt before. I’d been going to Quiz Bowl practices for a month at that point, but that buzz was the first one that stuck with me. It was the first time I felt like I truly deserved to be there, like I had worth as a player. The number 0.76 will always remind me that I can do new things, even if I think I’ll never be able to.

“This American author of such works as The Executioner’s Song and The Naked and the Dead...” I made eye contact with Moira across the room. We shared a smile before I turned to my team and said, *“It’s Norman Mailer.”* Coming in freshman year, I’d expected to find a room full of teenage boys yelling over each other to establish themselves as the alpha male. Instead, finding a room full of girls led by an all-girl varsity team, including my first female captain, Moira, I was completely enchanted. She became my biggest role model as I felt a mix of jealousy and desire burn in my chest: yearning to one day be where she was and simultaneously thinking I’d never get the chance.

But Moira noticed me. The week before the Mailer question, we had been sitting alone during a run of our high school’s show, playing some trivia app on our phones when she looked up at me and said, *“You could be great at this, you know. I see it in you.”* Those words meant more to me than Moira ever could have realized; hearing that encouragement from someone I admired so much lit a fire inside of me that’s never gone out.

The thing I barely let myself dream of when I first joined the team as a freshman came true, and I now have the incredible opportunity to serve as captain for my senior year. As the first question of our competitive season started, my heart thudded familiarly, yet more softly than it had three

years ago. *"This man who wrote The Executioner's..."* I smiled, thinking of those who came before me. Then I put them out of my mind and played my own best game.

Every time I walk into room 203, I pick up a buzzer, its weight now comfortable, ridges now familiar in my hand. I imagine a girl, counting her insecurities along with the numbers in her head: young, doubtful, yet hopeful that she will find refuge in this haven of mine. I hope that she will see me and know there's a place for her too. I watch the freshmen come through the door. I wonder who will be next.

