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Undergraduate Writing---Second Place

“How Experiences in the Outdoors Have Influenced My Life”

by Sarah Keithley

My breath hangs heavy in the air and then dissipates, deeply stinging my lungs. The beads of sweat that gather on my forehead are icy, and the muscles in my legs pump against the cold to stay limber. My eyes stay steady on the snow dusted path ahead of me, but my senses are keen to the sound of winter branches swaying, and the scent of a distant fire. With every quickened beat of my heart, the clarity of my mind grows. I think back through the many seasons I have trudged the same path, and to the many seasons of my life running has been a saving grace.

As a young child, playing outside was my life. I treasured my bicycle, and the hours spent lugging around branches to build up my fort in the woods. In the summer, I played dodge-ball in my neighbor's yard, and in the fall, I loved to jump through the huge piles of leaves I had just raked. When I was nine, however, a tumor in my leg immobilized me for months. Because of its location on the growth plate, doctors feared that one leg's growth would be stunted, or that I would always walk with a limp. During my time in a wheelchair, though, my mother would take me for walks in the park instead of letting me play video games or watch television. I continued to hope and pray that life would eventually be normal again. After a difficult year, and several years of follow up exams,

I could walk and play normally, and it seemed my prayers had been answered. Even so, I would never have guessed then that my legs would be such an important part of who I am.

In high school, I started to become very interested in hiking, and took trips with my family to the Shenandoah trails every year. I also liked getting fresh air and exercise, and a friend of mine suggested that I try out for the school cross country team. I went to the first practice on a whim, and it was in the next few weeks that I found my passion. It was ironic to me that at one point I thought I would never walk the same again, and now I was running competitively. I attended running camps at Appalachian State University every summer from then on, went on to win competitions in my area, and even made it to the regional and state meets with my team. To me, there was nothing better than running outside and feeling all of the elements around me. I learned to push myself to new levels, but most importantly, I learned in those years that running gave me the time to think and plan for my life. Whenever I was sad, or needed time to myself, I would pull out those familiar training shoes and take off. If the weather was beautiful and I wanted to feel like I was a part of it, I would go running and think about my life—

where would I be in the next few years after graduation?

Now, I am a senior at Virginia Tech, and running is still a huge part of my life. I did not join the team here, because although I love competing, it is the times I can roam free at my own pace that I cherish the most. Running as career choice would clearly not be an option for me, but I began to contemplate how I could incorporate my love of nature into my future. Agriculture is huge at Virginia Tech, but I love to interact with people as well. I decided to major in Hospitality and Tourism Management, and through that, I hope to see the world. I would love to see the many panoramas nature has to offer, and I hope my career leads me to run in places like New Zealand and even China. I feel that I would make a fantastic travel agent, because I am adventurous, love the outdoors, and want to pass my excitement on to others.

Blacksburg in itself is filled with a variety of sights and sounds. Running on campus is wonderful for “people watching”, and the trails surrounding the town are peaceful and scenic. When the stress of classes starts to build, I find running to be a positive release. After the shootings on April 16, 2006, everyone had there own ways of dealing with the pain. I admit I experienced many

phases of mourning, but as crazy as it may sound, running was therapeutic to me. As I tracked through the many places in Blacksburg that I love, I realized all of the wonderful memories that had been had for generations here. My parents even met at Virginia Tech many years ago. I did not want my experience in college to be tainted by the event, but rather to feel honored to have left footprints here, and to honor those who passed.



Nature being the lure, running has taken me on an epic journey through the years. I think of the outdoors as an old friend who listens without judging and offers peace in all things. It has given me such clarity about my career and who I am, and I know that it will be a part of my life for many years to come. With every footstep of the future, though, I will remember where I came from—the breeze, the forts of my youth, the competitions, and even the redemption from sadness.

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For information on the VOWA Undergraduate Writing Contest and the author of this second place article contact VOWA President:

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