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Pathways to Success: Texas Community College Essay Contest

03 March 2024

Identity in Education

From the moment we are born, we are seeds planted into the rich soils of opportunity and fate. I was born in a small but mighty community in Solwezi, Zambia of Bemba and Kaonde people. Among everyone, I always seemed different, like I had strayed away from my roots. I was Zambian but others seemed to say otherwise. I felt like a minority in a community where I was the majority. I did not belong.

A girl a little over 4 years old called me a “Kaburundi” (foreigner) but she wasn’t the first. A word I didn’t understand defined my identity as people perceived otherness about me out of nothing due to their unawareness of my parents' Congolese background. “Kaburundi” was the justification for my father being wrongfully accused of crimes that stemmed out of thin air, our electricity being cut off despite our financial stability, and getting singled out at school because I was “different” despite the absence of conscious differences. For a decade of my life, simply speaking Bemba and Kaonde, eating nshima and chikanda, and being born and raised in Zambia wasn’t enough to stop the prejudice. There was no home or comfort. Thus, we sought refuge and a home away from “home” by immigrating to the United States. America was my knight in shining armor against the stomach-churning word that defined my roots.

As an immigrant, I escaped the label (Kaburundi), which confined me, but I soon found myself in another cage. My missing identity as a Zambian clung on to me like a drowning man as the American melting pot of cultures drove me deeper into confusion while I soaked in the new customs and languages like a sponge in water. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people that didn’t look like me, and, this time, I was a true minority. As an immigrant and black person in America, I faced the same problems as those I faced in Zambia. Only this time, they were **bolded** and in **a different font**.

My parents struggled to adjust at work because the only employment they could get was at warehouse factories that offered no benefits or assurance that there would be work the next day. We were poor, hungry, and determined. We lived every day in fear, and my parents blamed their lack of higher education for the days of work that were filled with constant ignorance, discrimination, and unwarranted hatred. They instilled in me that in America, higher education was the way to blossom and escape the dismissive cultivated stereotypes.

I am an indecisive person by nature, I find comfort in having decisions made for me, as it alleviates the burden of choosing. However, as a first-generation immigrant making decisions became my forte. Being the first person in my family to live a somewhat American life, the choices I made as I provided translation, IT support, and answered customer service phone calls

defined what tomorrow looked like for my family. Being an immigrant made me a pioneer of choices.

In starting high school, I plunged myself into a cascade of choices filled with ‘what ifs’ and negations all in pursuit of realizing the American dream that my parents had set in motion. Before starting high school, I had an indifferent Zambian mindset where everything ended with high school.

My goal to work in my papa’s shop after high school was replaced by a much bigger dream — to go to college and make something out of myself. On the grounds of Dallas College, my wilting leaves began to show color and regardless of the soil I came from, I began to sprout.

In life, I’m not scared of the dark, clowns, or death, but rather, I have atelophobia. I fear not being enough for my parents who depend on me to manage bills, be their mouth and ear in conversations and calls, and carry on the American dream they started. My siblings need me to be their pillar of support as the American education system tramples over them like a stampede of elephants. When you are a first-generation immigrant, the world often feels like a lonely place. Experiencing firsts becomes a routine. You are expected to be an expert crusader as you venture into a world of foreign concepts, ideas, and principles. As a daughter, sister, and first-generation college student, Dallas College has helped me overcome my atelophobia as I work towards actualizing the American dream that brought my family to the United States 7 years ago. Dallas College became the soil and foundation that offered my roots a place to grow and call home.

From STEM League to Philosophy Club to the Career Center and Phi Theta Kappa, I have joined a close-knit community at Dallas College fostering a lifelong passion for growth and transformation in my pursuit of higher education. Moreover, as I continue to push for an end to period poverty and work to create a more diverse and inclusive world, being a Dallas College student has given me a community where I can continue to advocate for what matters to me and fight my atelophobia. From community to resources to taking college classes, Dallas College has helped me prepare for life after high school. As a first-generation college student, Dallas College has made navigating the American education jargon easier in my preparation to earn a bachelor's in computer science.

Aside from giving me a firm foundation as I take my first steps in higher education, Dallas College helped me shape a promising future as I tweak my resume at the career center and network with companies and professionals in my desired field through STEM League. As a soon-to-be software engineer, I invite pivoting into the unknown. Studying computer science as a black woman will be anything but easy, but I am up to the challenge. The computer science field already has so few women in the industry so I want to fight that disparity. I seek to inspire and

break stereotypical barriers that often follow women and minorities and create an inclusive community of programmers and scholars. I want to work towards enveloping what I learn through computer science into making programs that empower people and make their lives easier and better. I want to be a mentor to girls and minorities and form a sisterhood that creates solutions that truly serve the entire spectrum of humanity by embodying the technological legacy of connection, diversity, and inclusion. Being a Dallas college student has been a transformative experience of immeasurable support and resources as I navigate my academic and professional pursuits.

Years ago, if you were to ask me, "Who are you?" I would tell you that I am *Zambian*, my parents would tell you that I am *Congolese*, and my heart would tell you that your guess is as good as mine. My rootless beginnings instilled in me an insatiable appetite. A desire to be the anchor which propels my family to a better future. A future with prosperity and fortune in its branches. As of now, I would say the closest I have come to my identity is my education and drive to take root and grow wherever I am. My Dallas College education is my future and foundation for change as I fight my *atelophobia*. Thus, as I embark on my college journey and shed my old leaves to grow into new beginnings, I am determined to grow and expand my roots.