

Sarah Stanciu - Application to Beloit College

Personal Statement (Excerpts)

These are excerpts from the personal statement that APTP ensemble member Sarah Stanciu wrote as part of Albany Park Theater Project's college preparation and counseling program. Sarah matriculated to Beloit College in the fall of 2007.

...In the summer before my freshman year of high school, I joined a theater company. But Albany Park Theater Project is more than just a theater company, and I have become more than just an actor. At APTP, I have become a social activist. APTP is a community-based theater company made up of teenagers and young adults. We create performances out of real-life stories that we collect from within the culturally diverse Albany Park neighborhood. Through our theater work, we create awareness of issues and people that are sometimes ignored in our society with the hope of inspiring our audiences to go out and work for social justice.



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In my four years with APTP, one of the most important projects I've done was *Saffron*. We based this show on a Persian restaurant located in the Albany Park neighborhood. I interviewed a young Persian waitress, named Sanaz, who emigrated from Iran to America in 2001. I went to her house and I sat on her couch as she offered me Persian tea. I spent five hours listening to her talk about her rigidly structured life back home as a rebellious adolescent with lenient parents, living in a country with a dictatorial religious government. I became interested in learning about the immigration opportunities that were available for people in Iran. Sanaz described her experience of winning the green card lottery and getting the opportunity to come to America. I took a risk and, with respect, asked challenging questions related to forbidden activities in which she participated in Iran. I also got her to open up about her mixed feelings towards living in America. As I listened to Sanaz share her story, it was clear to me that she became caught between the life and family she loved in Iran and the opportunities of her new life in America. Through her storytelling, she took me on the journey on which I would later take thousands of audience members. The process of becoming Sanaz made me become a better observer of our society. I listened to the way Iran was portrayed in the media as being a part of the "axis of evil," and I saw the way this inspired discrimination against Iranians in America. I paid attention to women wearing hijabs and manteaus and I became more aware of the prejudices our country holds against other cultures. When I became Sanaz on stage, I made her voice heard and made her visible to the world.

...My name is Sarah Stanciu. I am a student, an artist, an ethnographer, and an activist. Soon, I will be a college student. Through my research of liberal arts colleges, I have realized that college is not only a place you go to make a better life for yourself, but that college can be a place where you gain the skills and knowledge to work towards creating a better world for others. This is why I want to go to Beloit College. In Chicago, I grew up with incredible cultural diversity; I want to go to a college like Beloit where diversity comes not only from ethnicity, but from life experiences. When I visited Beloit, I stayed in 609 with a group of women who were interested in religious studies, international studies, and computer science. From my visit, my research, and my conversations with Beloit graduate and Albany Park Theater Project alumna Nancy Casas, I see that Beloit students are individuals with ambitious goals in all areas, from the determination to find cures to cancer and AIDS, to the exploration of their own artistry through theater, painting, and dance. I see myself fitting in with my ambition to end child abuse. In Beloit's Psychology department, I will study child development and how it is impacted by abuse; in Beloit's Sociology and Anthropology departments, I will study how other cultures protect the rights of children. I imagine myself traveling to Romania for the first time and exploring my own cultural heritage while studying Romania's foster care system and the legal rights of children. I imagine doing an ethnographic project where I will interview children in Romanian

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foster homes. I will return to Beloit with this information and use it as I study the child protection laws under two different governments and how they effect the mental development of children in foster homes. I picture myself continuing to develop my Spanish-speaking abilities while living in a Spanish-language house. I see myself reading and interpreting Spanish literature and then studying art in Spain. I want to immerse myself in different cultures by living with diverse people. I imagine myself staying up all night baking cookies with the young women in a house like 609, listening to them talk to me about life on a farm, in a suburb, or even under a different government in another country. Though I'm not very good at math, I still imagine taking a statistics course in a small classroom with a professor who takes the time to get to know me personally; we'll develop a relationship where the girl who used to be afraid to ask for help can do so and be able to succeed. I want to learn about the origins of religion in a classroom of religiously diverse students who are open-minded and with whom I can share my concerns about how religion has caused so much of the world's destruction. After all my work in original theater, I can't wait to explore different types of theater, from classical to contemporary, in Beloit's theater department. Though theater can be really fun for entertainment, I want to continue to be a part of creating interesting, meaningful theater that has the purpose of inspiring people to become leaders in the world.

...I am prepared to be a visible Beloit student, raising my hand to express my frustrations with the amount of poverty in this country and how it's being ignored, running a conversation on TalkBeloit about the lack of intervention in Darfur and what we need to do about it, or sitting in the student lounge having coffee with a study group of friends as we dream of the steps we'll take after graduating from Beloit to give children greater legal rights to choose their foster homes and secure a better world for themselves.

Elizabeth Cobacho

Personal Statement

(This is the personal statement that APTP ensemble member Elizabeth Cobacho wrote as part of the Albany Park Theater Project's college preparation and counseling program. Elizabeth was admitted to the following colleges: Bard, Beloit, Grinnell, Hampshire, Pomona, Reed, Smith, and University of Illinois. She graduated from Pomona College in May, 2007.)



As I saw Miami's skyline get smaller and smaller from the window of the U-Haul my mother was driving, I wondered how long it would be before she realized she had made a mistake and started heading towards home again. I grew up in Miami, going on trips with my single hard-working mom to my grandparents' apartment for *arroz con pollo* and to watch our favorite Spanish soap operas. On our way home my mom would drive down "Calle Ocho"—past all the Cuban *panaderias*, bookstores, shops, and *fruterias*, all with Cuban flags hanging from the front windows—and I'd grin. Being a Cuban-American in such a homogenous environment felt comfortable. I had so many things in common with everyone around me—origins, language, culture, physicality. I took my simple life for granted until the end of the eighth grade, when my mother was about to lose her job and packed all of our belongings into a U-Haul and started driving northwest—to Chicago.

The first few months in Chicago were a nightmare for me. Albany Park, the neighborhood I moved into, was full of people who looked completely different than I did. There were no Cuban flags hanging from windows. No one spoke in the Cuban accent I was so accustomed to hearing. The neighbors above us were from the Philippines, those under us were Indian, and those next to us were Mexican. As I walked down Kedzie and Lawrence Avenues, two of the busiest commercial streets in the neighborhood, I was so confused: I couldn't read the calligraphy on the signs outside the stores. To the left there were Korean beauty shops and Thai restaurants, and to the right were Persian bakeries and Indian-owned dollar stores. I was scared of the neighborhood as well. I heard of its bad reputation for drug dealing, gang activity, and violence. At night I would wake to the sound of tires screeching and police sirens wailing past my bedroom window, or be unable to sleep because of the screams of the married couple fighting above us. I never felt safe walking alone at night—there were too many crevices and dark corners where a crook could be lurking, waiting to attack.

Starting Roosevelt High School was also a nightmare. My first day, the entire freshman class, all 600 of us, were gathered in the auditorium. Our counselor asked us to look around at the class of 2003. She said that, by the time we entered our senior year, half of the class would be gone. In middle school in Miami, it was a rarity for someone to fail a class, much less flunk the entire year. The high school building didn't foreshadow a positive future either, since there were armed police officers roaming the premises, surveillance cameras in every corridor, and walk-through metal detectors at every entrance. I was so discouraged that I wondered if I would be one of the class of 2003's 300 drop-outs.

Instead of becoming a dropout, I became a passionate writer, a determined social activist, a multi-disciplined theater artist, and a leader at the Albany Park Theater Project. APTP is an ensemble of teenagers who work collaboratively to create and perform complex plays based on real-life stories from our community. At APTP, I developed the listening, writing, researching, and critical thinking skills which are necessary to create our unique work. I joined APTP as a freshman and during my three years there I have created eleven complex characters and helped transform more than thirty stories into plays. On stage, I overcame alcoholism in order to raise two daughters, climbed mango trees in a refugee camp in the Philippines, attempted suicide while suffering from schizophrenia, and migrated from Bogotá to Chicago to give my son a better life. I've facilitated post-show conversations; spent hours at a diner discussing world politics, social inequality, and education reform with my fellow artists; participated in writing, dance, puppet, improv, and music workshops; led day-long theater workshops for my peers;

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raised thousands of dollars as a member of the Board of Directors; and performed for more than 15,000 people at venues such as the Storefront Theater, the Chicago Humanities Festival, the College of Wooster, and Northwestern University.

It wasn't until my second show with APTP that I realized the kind of impact our work has on our community and beyond. I assistant directed a bilingual piece entitled "What If?" about a Latina girl coming out to her homophobic mother. I was entrusted to stage the introduction to the piece: a parody Spanish soap opera mocking a similar situation. During our opening night performance, we got a hysterical response from our audience at the end of the soap opera. Once the play started, however, and the actress onstage was declaring her character's identity, the reaction from the audience was mixed. Many were shedding tears but some gasped with disgust. After the performance a peer came up to me and told me how he would laugh at "gays" on TV but how watching the two contrasting pieces made him challenge his stereotypes about "coming out" and homosexuality. This was a breakthrough for me because I understood that the work I do with APTP isn't just entertainment—it is a medium for social change. By honestly and artistically performing life stories, we give others an opportunity to challenge their views and influence them to understand and accept differences between themselves and the larger community.



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I am constantly engaging in conversation at APTP about issues regarding social divides and social change. During the summer, we formed a book discussion group where I read Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace*. I expressed my outrage about the way people are forced to live in the South Bronx: the ill wait days in a filthy emergency room in order to get medical care, while students attend class in janitor closets and bathrooms. I then saw the connection between the South Bronx and Albany Park. Poor minority communities are segregated and robbed of equal treatment and resources. This became all the more real to me after performing with APTP at a high school in an upper-middle-class area. The school has great resources like a state-of-the-art theater, a weight room that looks over the football field, and laptops for every student—resources that students and teachers at Roosevelt can't even dream of.

Inspired by my experience at APTP, I have challenged myself by seeking out Roosevelt's top teachers and taking as many honors and Advanced Placement courses as I can. With the guidance of an exceptional history teacher whose classes I have taken since sophomore year, I advanced to the national level of History Fair in Washington D.C. for two years in a row. Now I take advantage of the finest educational resources Roosevelt has to offer—my classmates—to hear their immigration stories, understand their cultures, find out what ethnic food or music they like, and learn about the kinds of lives they lived in Cambodia, or Guatemala, or Serbia, or wherever they are from. I have even sought out opportunities outside of school where I can pursue my interests. For example, APTP's directors recommended me for a scholarship at the Young Writers Summer Workshop at Simon's Rock College of Bard. I engaged in intense conferences with my instructor about a short story tracking my mother's immigration to America; I listened intently to the passionate voices of my classmates as they read their literary works aloud; and I felt the thrill of discovering my instructor's half-page of feedback stapled behind a poem I wrote celebrating the neighborhood I once hated. I experienced what it's like living and learning on a college campus, something more than half of my graduating class at Roosevelt will never experience.

I have come a long way since I packed my belongings into that U-Haul four years ago. I came to Albany Park as a fourteen year-old girl who had never heard the phrase "social inequality," or knew she could change people's lives. Today, I am a proficient writer, an accomplished theater artist, a curious and critical thinker, and a social activist on a mission. I am about to be the first in my family to go to college. In college, I imagine taking a class about Diego Rivera's murals, co-writing a book with a professor tracing the roots of racism in the media, and creating a college counseling program for inner-city school students. I will share the experiences of living in Albany Park with my fellow

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classmates in an effort to create a network of cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. I can't wait to be packing that U-Haul again with all my belongings and heading off on another four-year adventure where I will become the adult I need to be to make a change in the world.

