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AP Language and Composition

24 January 2014

Period: 3

Creative Non-Fiction Essay

Cotton: The Fabric of My Life

 People always say that our wardrobes are supposed to represent who we are as individuals: our person style, our quirks, our personalities; however, it goes a whole lot deeper than that. For me, my closets contain not just a bunch of brands all strung out on hangers and folded neatly onto shelves and into drawers. They contain my memories. The shirt I wore on my first date. The dress I wore when I won that award and my parents weren’t there to see it. The shoes that walked miles with me through hiking trails and European streets. The shorts now tinted with mud from my research adventures through the salt marsh. Each thread contains a smile, a tear, or a photograph that are all woven together to create a memory. It is my collection of 66 t-shirts that contain some of my best and sometimes hardest memories that best represent who I am. They each represent a different part of me: who I was, who I am, and who I strive to be. They know me better than anyone else, maybe even better than I know myself.

 Take me out to the ball game and the taste of a hot dog on Hatfield Dollar Dog Night flood my mind when I take out my three Phillies t-shirts. One the tradition bright red, white, and blue with the name OSWALT written across the back in bold white letters. The second a more vintage approach of light blue with maroon script that looks like the lettering on an actual baseball jersey spelling HALLADAY across my upper back. The third a heather grey with the words WORLD SERIES CHAMPIONS 2008 printed on to the front. I used to spend those warm Pennsylvania summer nights at Citizens Bank Park with my pink Phillies Hat on and some kind of baseball treat in hand: hot dog, cheesesteak, popcorn, ice cream, cotton candy, the list could go on and on. While these shirts are meant to express my love for my home team, they also represent a different, more personal part of my younger self that few of my friends now know: I played baseball with all the boys instead of conforming to the request of my friends’ dads who coached softball to play with only the girls. While batting was not my greatest athletic strength, it was the love of the game that kept bringing me back. The love of being part of the team. The love of having control of my own actions. The love of the favorite American pastime.

 When most people think of girl scouts they think of those cute little girls standing out in front of the local supermarket selling the thin mints that help you put on your “winter blubber”. But for me girl scouts was my five summers with the purple Camp Tweedale t-shirt. Camp Tweedale was not a girly camp where we learned manners and how to sew. No, it was a place established in the Middle of Nowhere, Pennsylvania with latrines, spiders, swim caps, and one building with air conditioning. We lived in areas called Hill, Forest, Conestoga, Ridge, and Deep Woods in everything from a-frames and platform tents to wooden cabins with green tarps for window coverings and even refurbished Conestoga wagons that were painted blue. We spent our days trying to stuff our long pony tails into horrible, cheap swim caps, searching for “dragons’ teeth” along the shoreline of the lake at a place called the point, singing camp songs, yelling at each other directions for how to get our canoe back to shore, and eating shipwreck dinners of frito pies using egg beaters, spatulas, and ladles. It was the place where girls from different counties and even different countries all stood together around the flag pole reciting “on my honor I will try to serve God and my country, to help people at all times, and to live by the girl scout law”. It was the place my mom visited when she was young. It was the place that taught me to love my independence starting from the young age of eight. It was the place where after I saw a girl intentionally trip another down the stairs, I knew that I should always treat others with respect. It was the place I spent my last days in my home state before moving on to a new adventure. It is now the place that after the summer of 2013 closed to residence camps forever. It is the place that will officially be closed in 2015 so that girl scouts at other camps can have the “luxuries” of indoor plumbing and air conditioning. It is the place I will stand one last time the day it is finally put to rest. One last goodbye.

 The seawater of the Pacific Ocean sprays my face as we travel up and down the turquoise waters of Kauai’s Napali Coast. The sketch of a catamaran in a blue ocean on the back of the Capt. Andy’s Sailing Adventures shirt does these views no justice. The isolated white sand beaches that occasionally encounter daring sea kayakers and sunbathing monk seals seem to stretch all the way to the horizon where the cloudless sky meets the sea. The deep valleys with their bright greens and earthy browns lay in between the cliffs that jet deep into the water. The baby Hawaiian Spinner Dolphins the size of footballs catch the wake of the boat as we continue to travel through the waves. It’s serene and exciting all at the same time. The island of Kauai has been like my second home for over fifteen years with more memories than I can ever possibly remember. Trips to Lappert’s for ice cream in a freshly made waffle cone, the sunsets at fancy restaurants, nachos at Brennecke’s with my dad as we relax after a hike and take in the view of Poipu Beach through the open windows, and the drives to the North Shore to snorkel with sea turtles and tropical fish for hours at Tunnels Beach. Some like those weeks with my grandfather are only found in photographs now but every week even if not in my memory are in my heart. Kauai is not just beaches and fresh fish but family. There is no memory there that doesn’t include my mom, dad, younger brother, grandmother, or grandfather. In the mix of Hawaiian shirts and tourist attempts of “aloha” and “mahalo” I found my “ohana”.

 A hodgepodge of colorful t-shirts from days gone by lies in the storage area of my closet with titles like “New Hope Solebury MS Physical Education”, “More or Less ‘10”, “What’ll Ya Have”, “Milton Athletics”, and “NMS Orchestra”. They are thrown into that pile for a while until they are commissioned for a new and more important role in their duties as cotton fabric. They become the shirts that are covered in paint, sheetrock mud, installation, sweat, dirt, and Christian love once a summer. The mission trip experience has been one that has taught me the lessons that no teacher in any school will ever be able to teach. The lessons you can only learn from people who are willing to share their stories. From Savannah, Georgia to Inez, Kentucky and Cocke County, Tennessee I have met people who have forever changed how I view my role in the world. They are an older couple that adopted their grandson after his mom became a drug addict and live in a trailer on “Redneck Boulevard” with the smell of cigarette smoke that permeates from the walls. They are an older woman and her fifty-year old daughter who rode giraffes at the Knoxville Zoo and who were tied up while their home was invaded by a man who had given them a ride to the Walmart once since they do not have a car of their own. They are a man who had never held a Bible and went to the corner store three times a day to buy cigarettes. They are the old lady who’s curb we sat on as we watched the police with their hands on their guns and tasers almost arrest someone who had been sitting on the front porch of a house we were soon informed was a crack house. While they appreciate their new walls, decks, and ceilings, I have learned that it is the love that they are the most excited to received and give. It does not matter that the ceiling is not completely straight or that we messed up on the siding multiple times. What matters is that we look for the moments of joy and humility that make the world a meaningful place to live in.

 Contrary to popular belief, a cello rock band is not an oxymoron. Just because Mozart and Beethoven wrote boring classical music does not mean that every orchestra piece is dull and depressing. If you think I am lying, you have never met my super soft black cello fist t-shirt from Break of Reality. Heavy metal covers and original rock compositions fill my music library and study playlists that everyday remind me of the fun I had performing on stage with the band as bow hairs broke and music filled every corner of the Milton High School Auditorium. The shirt however has come to represent something that has no association with the t-shirt logo other than that they both involve orchestra. Anyone who has ever looked through my Germany and Austria Orchestra Trip photos will realize that this shirt represents so much more. It can be seen at the front gates of Dachau, looking over the vistas from the top of Neuschwanstein Castle, and sitting on the windowsill after playing a violin and viola duet of Ashokan Farewell as people from the street below applaud us. Those days bring back the memories of Bobby’s laugh, looking at millions of stars while lying in the Alps, eating Austrian Chinese food, and riding on roller coasters at an amusement park that would not fit the American safety requirements. It was the time when orchestra became more than wood and strings fashioned to make a violin and notes printed on a page written by a whole bunch of famous dead guys. It became a passion that was exciting and a lifestyle that was fun.

 As the Carolina blue epidemic sweeps over my shelves, there is one shirt that stands out from the pack. It is the same blue with the same navy blue lettering as all the rest, but it stands for more than just my two years at Cambridge High School. It stands for almost eleven years and counting of my life. What else could this be but my orchestra t-shirt? It has been a long time since I began my career as a violinist at the age of six where playing sounded like a dying cat that left my parents running to the cabinet to fight over the last pair of ear plugs. Half size violins turned to full size violins, and simple melodies were replaced with complex symphonies with high seventh position notes and more flats in key signatures than should ever be allowed. Candy rewards for practicing have become 100’s in the grade book. Rules like “don’t let you wrist go flat” and “no touching any one else’s instrument” have been learned and replaced with “no taking your pants off during orchestra class” (Don’t ask. That is a story for another essay). Teachers have come and gone. Houses have become home and then sold again. Schools have changed. States have changed. Friends have stuck around and others have vanished down a different path. But orchestra has never left me. It has been there for me anytime I’ve needed it. Through anger, happiness, and sadness my violin has brought me through it. Orchestra is my lifetime friend who will never leave me unless I choose to let it go. The choice is finally mine, and I am in charge of the outcome.

 Being a Northerner I never thought that I would take “Sweet Home Alabama” literally. It is full of a bunch of beer drinking, country music listening, SEC crazy rednecks, or at least that was my image of the state until this past summer. Now, only two words come to mind about Alabama when I pull at my five t-shirts from that summer: Dauphin Island. There is the white manatee sighting shirt, the grey Institute for Marine Mammal Studies shirt with the green turtle shell printed on the back, the red one with the print of the R.V. Alabama Discovery, the Panama City Beach airbrushed shirt from the snorkeling trip, and the dark teal shirt with the anchor surrounded by the names of every student, educator, counselor, and intern of the Discovery Hall Program High School Marine Science Course 2013 at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab. It was the place where “sand smurfs” and “that’s booty” became common phrases. It was the place where I learned about oceanography, marine chemistry, plankton, marine botany, vertebrates, invertebrates, and barrier islands. It was place where I became intrigued by the photosynthetic capabilities of salt marsh grasses and oyster aquaculture (I guess my Pennsylvania farmer roots have taken a tropical twist). It was the place I meet some of the most amazing friends I have ever had. It was the place where I took my first step from the present into the future. This was my future: research vessels, conservation projects, presentations, and lab experiments. Fortunately, I realized that this was not just a childish dream but a possible reality. I guess my fifth grade self had been right all along. I just wasn’t ready to understand it all yet.

 Just like how over time our t-shirts fade and fall apart, our memories become lost to some distant place never to be recovered. Others become pushed to the corners of closets to be uncovered later on in life or in the hopes of one day finally being forgotten. Our lives are as unique as our t-shirt collections. While someone else may own an identical shirt, the memories and associations will never be identical. They are symbols for our triumphs, flaws, laughs, and tears that make each one of us our own person. As our lives go on, we collect more and more memories that are piled upon shelves and stuffed in to drawers to be worn when we need them the most. Sometimes, we all need a little reminder of whom deep down in our hearts we know we truly are.