

Wellesley College

- Accepted College Essay -

"Hillcrest House"

After climbing a set of dull looking concrete stairs, I entered the kitchen/dining area, a small space complete with a television and curtained windows. Two tables were set for the guests. Down a hallway were two bathrooms, one marked "Men," the other, "Women." In the second room were two rows of freshly made twin beds, each topped with a neatly folded pair of pajamas, robe, and slippers. A partition separated each bed from the next, ensuring at least a bit of privacy. My parents and I began heating dinner as we waited for the guests to arrive.

And arrive they did, crammed into one lonely van. Many knew the routine, entering with a shy, almost whispered hello and then proceeding to the showers. One by one men and women took their seats at the dinner table, eagerly awaiting a home cooked meal. Each was extremely appreciative of our efforts as hosts and no one forgot to use their manners. From my conversations, the guests were cognizant of current affairs and television programs, wanting to watch a variety of different shows while they ate. Everyone was easy to engage in conversation and seemed to want to talk, need to talk.

In May of 2001, I became the Freedom Plains Presbyterian Church coordinator for the Dutchess County Coalition for the Homeless Overnight Shelter. The shelter provides temporary, emergency housing for adults who are homeless, based on the simple philosophy that no one should have to sleep on the street. Our church is responsible for the fourth Wednesday of each month. A group of volunteers cook a meal for fifteen people. Two additional volunteers bring the food to the shelter and spend the night, during which time they serve the meal, do laundry, make breakfast, and otherwise take care of the guests.

As coordinator, my most challenging responsibility until September of 2003 was finding volunteers to stay overnight at the shelter, since many adults work on Thursday mornings. I had been fortunate to find volunteers as I could not host overnight until I turned eighteen. I was, however, still able to make a difference in my community. I wrote letters, called church members, spoke about the program at church services, cooked meals, organized donations, wrote church Bulletin and Herald inserts, participated in a training program, and visited the shelter during the day. In September of 2003, the host hours changed from all night to eight to eleven p.m. but the other tasks remain. I have since hosted on three nights with my parents and have had a much easier time finding volunteers.

I have gained a great deal as a result of my involvement with the shelter. I am working to increase awareness of the needs of the men, women, and families who are homeless to our church members and also to my fellow high school students. Last November, I organized a very successful supply drive at my high school and on Thanksgiving eve delivered two van loads of towels, sheets, blankets, pajamas, slippers, and toiletries to the shelter. I hope that my next supply drive will be even more successful.

Many of the shelter guests are the working poor. I have learned that their problems go beyond not having a place to live and include substance abuse problems, mental illness, and past incarcerations. I have realized how sheltered my life has been and that I have taken so many things for granted. I like knowing that I can help people in my city and feel more grateful for the things that I am so lucky to have. I can prove to those older and to myself that I am responsible, can handle a challenge, and can help improve people's lives even though I am just one person, and a teenager at that. I have been raised with the idea that those who have received talents and benefits need to give back. I am lucky to have had and to continue to have experiences that enable me to gain new perspectives and to develop additional skills. I have received so much more than I have given in volunteering in my community.

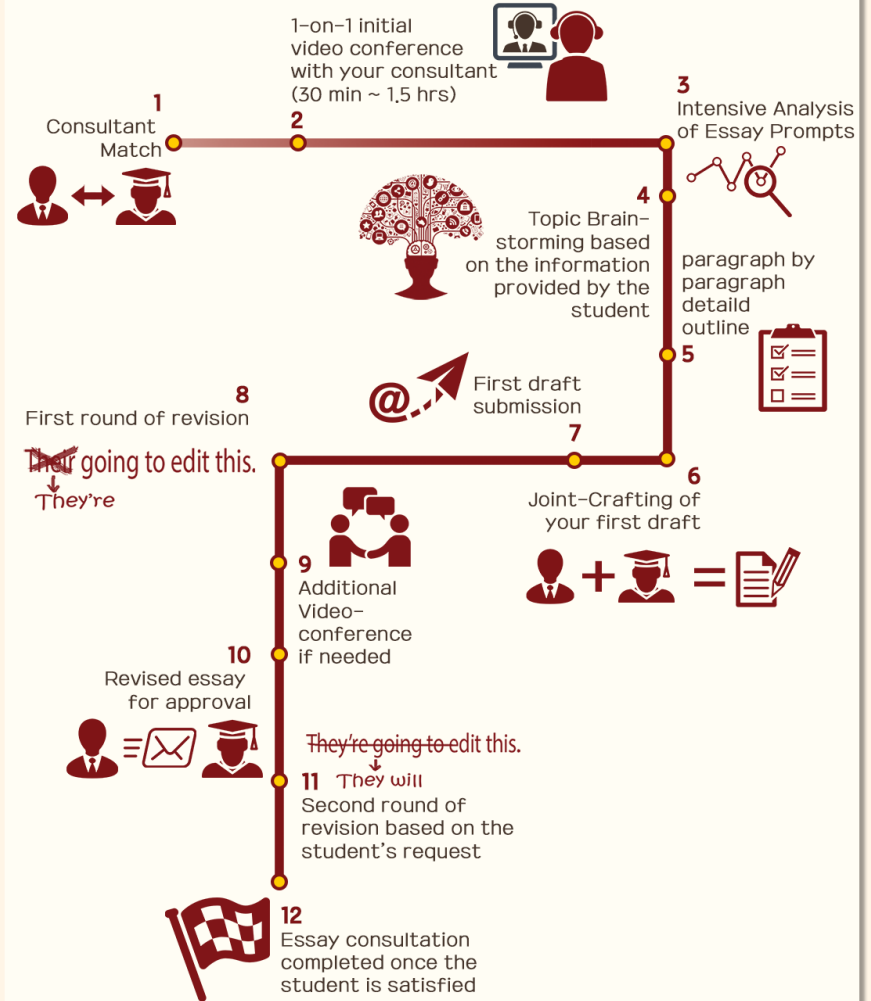
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