

Rheannon: College Essay

Mike was coming in for his daily dose: one large iced coffee with 5 pumps of caramel and 5 creamers, with that beaming smile that never failed to brighten my mornings. I was working behind the counter in my Dunkin Donuts uniform. He had barely made it past the welcome mat when the doors burst open and four fully-armed state troopers rushed in and tackled him to the ground.

I had known Mike for five months and seen him nearly every day. I never saw him again. I knew he'd been trying to make ends meet for his girlfriend and their family. I never imagined such a warm and bright person would be spending the next few years of his life in prison. I had always thought people on the run would be deserving of just what they got. I realized now that good people trying to support their families may feel they need to break some rules—like selling drugs—to succeed.

Growing up in the rural town of Leverett, Massachusetts, I was bussed to a regional high school in the more privileged town of Amherst, where the culture was different. I am grateful for the pressure there to succeed in academics, sports, and arts, for I now have a range of skills and aspirations. I was a varsity soccer captain and a member of an all-female singing ensemble. These opportunities have changed my life. I found a motivation and leadership role I never saw within myself. But my high school self is not all of who I am.

My job was near my rural home. My coworkers, unlike my classmates, were rural people like myself. Like many rural communities, this area struggles with poverty and addiction, and this challenge was true for many of my coworkers. However, these were also *my people*. With similar upbringings and surroundings, I could relate to them in ways I could not relate to my Amherst classmates.

My manager was an energetic middle-aged woman with a daughter my age. While her job was stressful and her employees often gave her a hard time, she never missed a day of work. She inspired me to improve my own work ethic and to work harder so I could make her job easier. I was oblivious to her addiction problems until one day, when I found heroin remains in the restroom. I wasn't disgusted or scared, but I was saddened for her and for her daughter.

My experience at work made clear to me the privilege I have had to be able to see a direct route to college. None of my coworkers had the option of college: some were stuck at home supporting their families; others never received a proper elementary or secondary education. If I want to turn around the cycles of poverty, addiction, and legal

issues in communities such as my own, a college degree will be essential. I've been motivated by my coworkers to finish college so I can make a difference in my community and the broader world.

When Mike was arrested, I began to question our justice system. Why are good people forced into positions where they must break the law to survive? My hope for the future is to major in psychology and minor in criminal justice, so I can prepare to contribute to the lives of people like those with whom I worked and served at my job. I feel excited and fortunate for what the future has in store for me. The opportunity to go to college and to be able to change lives with a college degree is a gift I never want to take for granted. I hope to use my education the best way I know how: to ensure that less fortunate and equally deserving people will experience real justice.