

Fall 2024 ACA Scholarship Winner Essays

Contents

Fall 2024 ACA Scholarship Winner Essays.....	1
Anna Alexander.....	1
Merisa Ari	2
Xenia Breisacher	3
John Daum	4
Jay Driver.....	6
Julia Huff	7
Jacquelyn Sumrell	8

Anna Alexander

Resilience while attending community college is necessary for success, and I have embraced being resilient. As a neurodivergent student with a writing disability, just thinking about writing an essay for this scholarship was stressful, but I am determined to face my fears. One way that I have shown resilience despite my challenges is through my continuous efforts to advocate for myself. To be academically successful, I use testing accommodations. During the transition from high school to college, I realized that it was essential to inform my teachers about my needs and set up accommodations for tests. This is something I need to personally prioritize now. It was difficult at first as it required me to navigate numerous contacts to ensure that I was able to schedule my assessments with accommodations. However, I have now been able to manage this without difficulty. Another example of my resilience is learning how to better organize myself and manage unexpected changes that can occur as a community college student. For example, I have realized that my method of studying from high school doesn't work with my courses at CPCC.

I have to review my class notes in a more structured method by chunking the content and annotating my notes. I also utilize digital note-taking to support my organization of homework and class tasks. When unexpected changes, like class cancellations or not being able to register for classes, occur I have needed to pivot my thinking and take time to calm my anxiety. Through communication with instructors, I have been able to realize that what I thought was cause for concern, really wasn't that big a deal. I feel more equipped to handle difficult conditions like these in the future outside of the community college setting. In conclusion, this first year as a full-time community college student has been a change from what I was used to in high school. However, I feel that I have been resilient and learned to adapt to the difficult conditions that I faced in the first semester. I am more comfortable navigating the rest of my time at CPCC and my continued education past CPCC. I am certainly looking forward to learning more.

Merisa Ari

When I think of resiliency the quote by author Langston Hughes comes to mind, "I learned that the only way to get a thing done is to start to do it, then keep on doing it, and finally you'll finish it, even if in the beginning you think you can't do it at all." Being raised by a teacher taught me the importance of education and the continuous strive toward self improvement, despite the challenges endured. I began my journey at Central Piedmont Community College right after my high school graduation in 2018. I had no idea of what I wanted to study at that time and I was extremely nervous about the transition into becoming a college student. I started out as an art major and took a few elective classes, alongside working a part time job as an after school program instructor. I felt like I wasn't in the right place. I had no idea of what career I wanted to pursue. In 2019 I decided to apply for the Year Up program that was being offered on Central Piedmont's campus. The program was offering several career pathway tracks and would cover my tuition and books during its duration. I found Project Management to be an interesting concept so that was the career pathway that I chose to pursue. I was accepted into the program that summer! I changed my major to Business, and began my journey as a full time student. During this time, I learned to equally allocate myself in order to stay on top of my assignments, personal life and outside responsibilities. I spent evenings with my classmates in the library until closing just to study and ensure that I was able to pass my more difficult courses. These courses began to interest me and I knew that I was moving in the right direction toward my career goals. Through this hard work, I earned an internship at Bank of America working in Strategy and Operations. This was such an exciting accomplishment that was

soon overshadowed by the 2020 Covid 19 pandemic. The pandemic turned my excitement into a lot of unknowns.

I didn't know anything about working remotely or anything about taking online classes. During this time of transition everyone had to adjust. It was hard for all of us. I had to work twice as hard to get to know my colleagues during internship as well as learn and grasp materials in my classes. In the face of this, I strived to be my very best and through my resilience my internship turned into a full time job offer at the age of 19 years old! Through my job I have had to remain steadfast in my values and what it is that I can offer such a large company. I have been discouraged to strive for more based on my age and gender, but I've never let that deter me from my goals. I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to bring my studies to life daily and work in a space where I am able to manage projects. Four years later, I woke up one morning and decided to finish what I started at Central Piedmont and returned as a part time student. I plan to obtain my Associates of Arts degree in Business, and transfer to a four year university to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration. Having been on a four year break from school I was initially intimidated by the transition, but as soon as I entered the classroom again my fears transmuted into pure excitement. I am now in my second semester with all A's since returning back to school. I am ecstatic to be working toward a goal that is very important to me and making my inner 17 year old self proud by making the sacrifices, and remaining resilient in order to obtain what she set out to do six years ago after high school.

Xenia Breisacher

The word resilience makes me really sit back and think about all that I've faced and all that I have gracefully overcome. It has been crucial in my journey as a community college student. From struggling with motivation and time management at a young age to becoming a single mother without financial aid for years, my journey here has tested my determination, but it has also proven my resilience. While my journey and experiences have been challenging, it has shown me that no matter the obstacles, hard work and perseverance can lead to the results you are striving for. One of the most significant challenges I've had was maintaining motivation and managing my time effectively. Being a single mother at the age of 21, balancing schoolwork, work, and parenting felt so overwhelming. I wanted to be present for my son and had trouble with the reality of time being taken away from him because I had schoolwork to do. On top of this feeling, the pressure of being on academic probation from struggling in the years prior added stress making it harder to focus on my studies, but it also fueled my desire to do better. My son

became my number one driving force. I wanted to provide a better life for him, and that meant pushing myself to achieve more, no matter how slowly I had to go. How can I motivate him to do things I've never even put my own mind to? So I stayed up late, I created systems to help me stay organized and on top of my assignments, I studied, I put in the work and time and in that, was able to raise my grades and work my way off academic probation. I have been super blessed to have a strong support system behind me as well which has helped me tremendously. My boss, who truly saw my potential and ability, became one of my greatest sources of motivation. During my time on probation, she paid for three of my classes, allowing me to continue my education while I worked hard to raise my GPA. Her belief in me and her financial support gave me a sense of purpose and confidence that I didn't have prior. She believed in me, saw my work ethic, and wanted to help me reach new heights. My family has also played a crucial role in helping me balance school and parenting.

They took time out of their own schedules to help with my son, allowing me to attend courses in person that were required in order to pass. With the financial support being rewarded back to me along with the motivation and guidance I received from those around me, it solidified my belief in my ability to succeed. While my path has not been easy and took longer than I would have ever imagined, I learned that the pace doesn't matter as long as you stay determined and focused on your goal. Resilience has been at the heart of my success. My experience has taught me that hard work and being persistent can break through even the most intimidating challenges. It's also given me a confidence and belief in myself I've never had in regards to school and learning. I made the President's list this past year after years of not applying myself and failing courses, something I've never imagined myself being able to say. Not giving up has been so incredibly rewarding, in more ways than one. I hope my resilience inspires my son, my students, and the ones I encounter along my path in this life. I want my son to know that the obstacles we face in life are not barriers to our dreams but opportunities to gain and show our strength. By being resilient and working hard to never give up, we can do anything we put our minds to.

John Daum

A couple of years ago, my life changed. Sounds cliché, doesn't it? A worn out, overused turn-of- phrase? Probably. But in this case, is it an exaggeration? Not in the least. I was a rising manager for a local cancer institute and was finally becoming proud of my accomplishments after years of listlessness. I was even considering returning to school to pursue my bachelor's degree to climb the next rung on the ladder. I'd finally found

something that mattered to me. Putting smiles on the faces of patients who had every right to hate the world for what they were experiencing felt good, and advancing in my career by finally pursuing my degree would allow me to help more people. In fact, I often lost track of time, not realizing the number of hours I worked. Had I been cognizant of those hours, though, I likely wouldn't have cared. It just felt right. Little did I know, however, my hard work and long hours worked against me in ways I could not imagine. While leaving the building on Tuesday, April 4, 2022, at the tender age of 49, I had a heart attack. Nothing prepares you for learning that you are not immortal. I'd always harbored a tiny spark of narcissism in my soul that assured me I would live forever. That heart attack was the heeled boot that crushed that spark of narcissism to ash, snuffing its deceitful, comforting warmth forever. On April 12, 2022, eight days after I first entered the hospital, a very talented surgeon cracked open my chest, stopped my heart, and performed quadruple bypass surgery while my family waited anxiously in the lobby. Approximately eight hours later, when I'd fully awakened, my nurse informed me it was time to get up and walk. Never in my life had I hated someone as badly as I hated that sadistic nurse at that moment. I didn't want to move, let alone walk. I just wanted to give up. However, she was relentless – as all good nurses should be – and in short, painful order, I was standing and gripping a walker for dear life. I won't lie: those first steps were hell. Despite having enough morphine and other painkillers in my system to make a horse see purple elephants in tutus, every movement I made ripped gasps of pain from my parched throat.

My vision swam, tears poured down my cheeks, and if eyewitness accounts are to be believed, I crafted vulgar, not-fit-for-mixed-company expletives that would have made a sailor blanch. But I put one foot in front of the other and walked. Speaking – or writing, in this case – about a few pitiful steps might seem silly to some. We walk every day and think nothing of it. But on that day, and in that moment, to my weary and broken body, those first steps were tantamount to summiting Mount Everest. Amazingly, after discovering I COULD in fact walk, and despite the pain – and the cross looks from the nurses as I cursed the Gods and all creation with my newly found colorful vocabulary – I discovered I didn't want to stop. Those first painful steps awakened inside me a desire to bounce back, to challenge myself, to plant my flag at the peak of not only that mountain but every mountain in front of me from that day forward. A year-and-a-half later, I discovered a desire to delve into the clinical realm. My heart attack didn't stop me from returning to school; it changed my course, opened my eyes, and pointed me toward a new goal. I stepped down from my management role at the beginning of the Fall semester and returned to college full-time to pursue a career in cardiac imaging. I write all of this to say that my heart attack and subsequent recovery awakened a resiliency of soul that I had no idea existed within me.

Without this resiliency, without discovering this ability to bounce back – and bounce back stronger than ever – after mortality came knocking, I would not have the strength or courage to pursue this new dream. This resiliency will sustain and inspire my journey across the mountains ahead, and ultimately fuel my success in any – and all – endeavors.

Jay Driver

Road to Resilience

The palate of our past experiences often, if not always, colors our experience of the present. It is up to us to choose how we then view the picture. Growing up in a single parent household meant that I missed out on a lot of the experiences that my peers were able to have. For example, balance of authority, motivation, access to necessities, attention, and fairness. Early in my school years I noticed a difference in motivation in my classmates who had two parents compared to my own. I was demotivated, my mother could not help me with my homework and help me find the confidence to pursue academic excellence. She was too busy trying to provide me with the necessities for living and was struggling to do so. That demotivation only increased as I moved through grade school and delayed my interest and belief in my own ability to pursue higher education. My understanding that I would never have access to that experience made me feel sad, inconvenient, worthless, blue. Throughout high school I began coming into certain peer experiences that forced me to evaluate my understanding of myself. My peers were getting involved in school activities, relationships, and fostering their own identities. I was black, trans, and queer in an all-white high school. The blues of my early school experiences made me retreat into myself for safety, and I could not find my footing, find community, find authentic friendships because I was busy constantly changing and hiding who I was to fit in. I found myself stuck in my shell, alone, and afraid to know who I was and then unapologetically be who I was. I was uncomfortable and afraid, yellow bellied. After graduating high school, I applied to Central Piedmont Community College and was accepted. While my peers were being accepted to four- year colleges: NYU, UGA, USC etc. I found myself disappointed in my lack of accomplishments. I felt that community college was not good enough, and I abandoned the pursuit of higher education after graduation. I worked a part-time job for three years until Covid shutdown. I found myself angry. Angry at myself and how my history developed into me feeling like I could not have what I wanted.

Angry that I did not have the provisions that everyone else had. Angry at being a victim to circumstance. I was red with rage and green with envy. During the two years of Covid shutdown I began reflecting. I came to discover beauty in my circumstances. My single

mother taught me how to survive on my own— independence. High school taught me the strength to stand out and to be proud to be one of one— individuality. My post high school years taught me the magic of divine timing and patience. Things can work out, and work out better when we don't rush, or try to accomplish things on someone else's timeline. Covid shutdown taught me to remain calm in the face of unsurety and chaos. I completed my first semester at Central Piedmont summer 2024 with a 4.0 GPA, and I am working to maintain that. I have a staunch dedication to my education, and a goal to aim for while I am in school. Central Piedmont has given me confidence in my knowledge, community, and purpose. I now know that I can turn any seemingly negative experience into a positive learning lesson, and that to me is the essence of resilience. My reds are now passion, power, and excitement. My greens are new beginnings, harmony, security, and self-reliance. My blues are calmness, responsibility, trust, and wisdom. The same colors paint my life in completely different ways.

Julia Huff

The transition from high school to college was a big leap from what I was used to and I was unsure of what I was getting myself into. However, I have learned the importance of being resilient since I have been in college. As a first year college student I have faced several challenges such as being stressed or overwhelmed about the amount of homework that I needed to complete each day, but I had resilience and never gave up even when I was tired. Being resilient as a college student has also taught me to be confident and take chances even if they are scary. I tend to hold back and not put myself out there because I am unsure of what the outcome could be. Being in college has allowed me to come out of my shell and to make new friends.

As I move forward throughout my college career it will be necessary for me to take risks, be brave, and have courage to approach new situations, because if I never come out of my comfort zone, I will miss out on good opportunities for me. Having resilience also will allow me to grow as a person. College is a journey of self-discovery, and it is the time to figure out what Julia is interested in. Independence is another important skill that I am gaining as I move through college. Knowing how to handle certain situations myself is an essential part of being a responsible adult. My parents aren't always going to tell me what to do, and I am getting better at managing my time and staying organized. I am also learning that it is okay to ask for help when I need it.

One of the biggest challenges I have endured in my academic journey has been Attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and having a math processing learning disability. I

have had to fight really hard to receive certain accommodations such as extra time to complete tests and assignments. In high school, anytime I took a test and I had a hard time focusing because the classroom was too loud I would be placed in the hallway to work. This was extremely frustrating for me because the hallway is no quieter than a classroom. However, I was resilient and continued fighting for my academic needs. When I started taking classes at CPCC I began working with all of my teachers to make sure my accommodations were properly implemented. During the first half of my semester at CPCC I took a public speaking class and I was unsure of what the class would be like at first, but I ended up enjoying the class. Anytime I have to get up and speak in front of an audience I tend to get really nervous that I might forget what I am supposed to say, but I remember to keep calm and realize that everyone is nervous when they have to give a speech.

Taking a public speaking class has helped me come out of my comfort zone. I also learned the importance of why public speaking is an essential skill to have in today's world. Part of being a responsible adult is learning how to take public transportation on a regular basis. For most of my life I depended on my mom to take me to school or the school bus. But since I started college I have had to find other ways to get myself to school. Taking the city bus and train to school everyday has taught me the importance of being independent. My college journey is full of excitement and uncertainty, but with the right tools and guidance I will be successful in my future career. The skills I am gaining in college such as resiliency, independence, and responsibility will be necessary as I move throughout my life. Attending college has helped me become more independent because I have to learn how to figure things out on my own and ask for help when I need it. As I grow up I realize that I won't be able to depend on my mom to do everything for me all of the time because I am an adult. Resiliency has allowed me to come out of my comfort zone because I am willing to take on any challenge that comes my way.

Jacquelyn Sumrell

A few bumps along the way

Naturally, like many of the students who have come before me seeking higher education, I've had my share of ill luck and disconcerting experiences which at times seemed insurmountable. A few hardships that I have encountered along the way have been food insecurity, inability to service vehicles or pay for gas, loss of health insurance, starting therapy with Veterans Affairs (VA), having utilities shut off, and Emergency Room visits between myself and members of my immediate family. Yet here I am; still attending with full-time status and a GPA that I am proud of. I do not say this as a boast or from a place of

self-importance, rather I attribute my continued progression as the product of steadfast resilience in the face of adversity and the support I've found along the way. One story I would like to focus on is my ongoing struggle with depression and how it affects my day-to-day life as a student as well as a person. Depression is a mental health disorder that is a cycle which can be triggered by any number of things in a person's life, some examples being fear, compounded stress, loss, etcetera. When my depression sets in, I sometimes begin to question if returning to school was even worth my time and sacrifice. I will think to myself, "I am making a mistake." and then I begin to feel guilty for all the things I gave up in pursuit of my dream. Things like a steady income and a career with health benefits or quality time with my kids and my husband. All these things I let go to start my life over from scratch. I disrupted the security of my family to become something I wasn't even sure I could do. For all those things and more I have felt the pain of regret and uncertainty while navigating this uncharted course in my life as a student. On many occasions the idea of dropping out to go back to work full time has crossed my mind but that is something I could not live with again. Since my previous attempt at college, I have found within me the strength to saddle the burdens I have lain upon myself. I now know that it is better to suffer in the short term in order to achieve my goals and live up to my own expectation. When I was in school before I was only trying to find a career that could make me a lot of money and in doing so, I made myself miserable and I ended up dropping out entirely.

After my disgraceful exit from college, I continued to work in a job that sapped the joy from my life, and I really began to ponder my future. It was then that I rallied all the willpower and courage I had, and I considered what I wanted and how much more fulfilling a career involving plants and teaching could be regardless of pay. I have always wanted to teach, and plants are my passion so when it became evident that I could do both, I became determined to succeed. My goal is to graduate from CPCC with my AAS in Horticulture and transfer to North Carolina A&T to pursue my Bachelors in Agricultural Education. Once I complete my degrees, I will be able to teach agriculture anywhere in the State of North Carolina. With these specific goals to fortify my resolve, I have learned to focus my mind and overcome my emotions. Yes, I will probably always suffer with depression, and it will inevitably make my path more difficult to tread; but what it will not do is hinder me on my path to a better future. Through therapy and support from my family I have learned the value of myself as well as my dreams and I will not stop until they are realized. My sacrifices will not have been made in vain. I am looking forward to the day when I will look back on this time in college and I can say, "There were a few bumps along the way but in the end, it was all worthwhile".