

Elizabeth Cobacho
Personal Statement

(This is the personal statement that APTP alumna Elizabeth Cobacho wrote as part of the Albany Park Theater Project's college preparation and counseling program. When Elizabeth graduated from Pomona College in 2007 with a double major in Sociology and Women's Studies, she became the first in her family to earn a college diploma.)

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 felt like I was in a prison, not a learning institution. I hated my "ghetto" school.

My classes at Roosevelt were brain-draining; with the exception of a few students, everyone around me was completely unmotivated. The majority of the teachers that I got stuck with plopped down at their desks and read straight from their textbooks. A class discussion would meander from last night's basketball game to what was served at lunch. I love writing but I never had one decent writing experience. I would get "A+" papers from my teachers with a handful of corrections on the introductory paragraph. There were never any comments on the content, just grammatical corrections. When I'd reread a paper, I'd find more mistakes my teacher would have caught if she had read past the first paragraph. I was so discouraged by my academic experience 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. APTP became my home and the place where I got the education I couldn't find at school. Here 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 here 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, felt the emotional pain inflicted by a drunkard husband, and sang war songs with my revolutionary Sandinista *compañeros*. 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; raised over \$5,000 as a member of the Board of Directors; and performed for more than 10,000 people at venues such as the Storefront Theater, the Chicago Humanities Festival, the College of Wooster, and Northwestern University. Instead of Roosevelt, where my needs and opinions are overlooked, APTP has been my primary creative outlet and source for knowledge throughout my high school years.

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.

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. For the first time I saw that my poor high school education was due to my position on the social hierarchy. 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 at Roosevelt can't even dream of. I realized that I, along with thousands of other students who attend schools like Roosevelt, have been cheated of a decent education simply because of our social class and skin color.

Because I did not want to remain in the cycle of failure created by the oppression of the working-class, I decided to scrounge up the best possible education at Roosevelt. I have challenged myself by seeking out the 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, this summer I studied at the Young Writers Workshop at Simon's Rock College of Bard, where I got a taste of the kind of the learning experience I was missing out on at school. 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 met a Muslim, 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 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.