

## Personal Essay Eyuel Seyoum

I am from Ethiopia and came to the US for my college education at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania. I have enjoyed outdoor adventures since my childhood and value the lively experiences and challenges that they offer. Before graduate school, I hope to see more of the US while undertaking a new physical challenge. I plan to accomplish this by biking across the country on the TransAmerica bike route that goes from Yorktown, Virginia to Astoria, Oregon.

I was born and lived the better part of my life in a small Ethiopian city called Mojo, located near the capital. I also spent a lot of my childhood in the eastern region of Ethiopia in a city called Harar, where the rest of my family still resides. In Harar I enjoyed going on day trips to the local lakes, rivers, hills, and mountains with my friends. The region is well known for its hospitality; the people are kind and have a way of life that is easy and stress free. It is referred to by many as the city of love. I spent most of my summers in Harar. There I explored the beautiful scenes of the east, visited local farms, went on long runs, and played soccer with friends.

When I was six, my school started a tradition of yearly trips, a not so unusual concept here in the US but somewhat new and exciting at the time. I remember going on daylong trips, during which we were required to document anything notable in our travel journals. I loved these trips and quickly joined the Boy Scouts, realizing that I could explore more places with this club. My Boy Scouts club took exciting trips with certain missions in mind. For example, we took part in the planting a million trees initiative, a trip during which we planted trees in a dwindling forest. We were honored by the presence of the country's president, who partook in the effort. These trips made me realize early on how much I enjoyed the outdoors, and they played a key role in shaping how I experience the world and spend my leisure time.

Besides using bikes to get to and from school every day, one of my favorite pastimes in middle school was going on bike rides and attempting do tricks. I rode a hybrid bicycle that belonged to my father and was too big for me until I saved enough money to buy a mountain bike. In middle school, I also produced and recorded a short film that showcased all the fun places around my little city for an English project. I wrote and directed scripts for the team to present the places they were introducing and describing. I got to highlight some of the adventures people could explore at local brooks, rivers, waterfalls, caves, and historical buildings. I had the movie professionally edited and presented the work to my school. This was when I began to learn technical skills in video editing and presentation, which I hope to use to document my trip.

When I was seventeen, I got a scholarship opportunity to study at the United World Colleges (UWC) branch in Swaziland (now called eSwatini). My boarding school was located in the highlands of the capital Mbabane, and it was near a small mountain that I frequently climbed with friends. In Swaziland, I got involved with the school's rock-climbing team and took part in trips to Nelspruit, South Africa. These trips made me appreciate the technicality of rock climbing and formally introduced me to backpacking. In addition, I was a member of my high school's table tennis and martial arts teams.

One of the most memorable adventures during my stay in Swaziland was a trip to the Hlane Royal National Park. My biology class travelled there for five days to study the vegetation of the national park and monitor wildlife activities. Home to various animals and an array of poisonous snake species, the park offered a lot of opportunities to see the amazing wildlife of southern Africa. This trip helped me learn to be fully present in the moment, as paying attention to details was necessary to stay safe. It also helped me face my fears of the unknown as we

trudged through tall grasses where deadly snakes like the black mamba could have been present. In fact, we were treated to an encounter with the Mozambique spitting cobra, with its hood spread in a threatening posture, as we were taking down the night motion sensor cameras we had put the previous evening. Luckily, we were able to back out of it slowly, as we had been trained.

I graduated from UWC in 2013. After returning to Ethiopia for nine months, I began my college education at Bucknell University, supported by the UWC & Bucknell Freemont scholarship. I studied Biochemistry and Computer Science. As my interest shifted towards genetics, I started working in a research lab that was interested in the long-term effects of stress on genetic expression in seabirds. I wrote a proposal to collect and analyze data on the role of stress hormones in programming life trajectories of kittiwakes.

In my second year of college, my research took me to Middleton Island, Alaska - home to puffins, kittiwakes, eagles, peregrine falcons, murrelets, and other seabirds. This remote island is only accessible by a small air strip and is uninhabited, except for a few members of the Federal Aviation Administration. On an abandoned World War II watchtower, renovated as a study site, there are hundreds of seabird nests. Researchers can view and access the nests through one-way glass to study different life aspects of seabirds in relation to their changing environment. Alongside seven other researchers from around the world, I lived in a tent for 3½ months and worked as a field assistant. In addition to conducting my own research, I was part of a team that studied the long-term effects of climate change on seabird productivity and food availability. We tracked nesting pairs, recorded eggs and chick growth, identified food sources, and tracked birds' movement using GPS locators. We also periodically walked the entire beach of the island to record dead seabirds washed up on the shore.

After doing our research duties during the day, we had the evenings to ourselves. We also had days off. During these times, I would take long walks to explore the island, sometimes alone and sometimes with my current partner (with whom I am planning to bike across the country). We explored a large shipwreck from the 1940s and walked along the island's extensive cliffs and salt marshes. During salmonberry season, we searched for salmonberry bushes for the berries that we quite enjoyed. One of my favorite adventures was a day-long solo hike around the perimeter of the island on one of my days off, when I nearly got lost. An all-night hike along the beach on summer solstice was one of the best as well.

I graduated in May 2018 from Bucknell University. After graduation, I moved to Arlington, Virginia, where I helped some local business with web development and did some tutoring. Before the start of the pandemic, I was part of an Arlington Sunday league soccer team. This provided me with a way to connect with different people who had the same passion for soccer. It allowed for me to be physically active while maintaining a caring relationship with those with whom I played.

At the beginning of August, I left Virginia to meet up with my partner for a two-week camping and hiking trip in Maine. Since then, I have been living in Westfield, Vermont with her family. In the summer and fall, I helped with gardening and firewood. I then undertook a project remodeling a storage shed. Since I came to Vermont, I have gone on numerous weekend camping trips, both hiking and kayaking, in the Adirondacks, White Mountains, and Bigelow Mountains. I have also gone on numerous day hikes within Vermont. All of these experiences contributed to my interest in undertaking a much longer camping adventure.

The idea of overcoming challenges and extracting joy out of it is what inspired my proposed adventure to bike across the entire United States. I plan to do the Transamerica route with my partner, Adele Woodmansee, who is a past recipient of your generous scholarship

program. We will start in early March and finish in late June of 2021. We will take Amtrak from Vermont, where we currently are living, to Yorktown. From Yorktown, we will be off on our journey which will take us approximately 4200 miles. We will be going through the full ranges of this beautiful country; this will give me a chance to see the mountains of the east, the flat farm states of the Midwest, and finally the highlands of the west.

This adventure means a lot to me. It is not an exaggeration to say it will be one of the most challenging things I have ever done, both physically and mentally. However, I can't help thinking just how much I will enjoy it every day of the trip, alongside all the troubles and bliss that will come our way. Using an iPad, I will keep a blog to document and share the trip. I plan to write about highlights and challenges, in addition to including video highlights. Coming from a background where camping and long-distance biking are not normal activities, I hope to contribute to a greater diversity of individuals who feel they can undertake such a trip.

I am currently on a student visa and plan to apply to graduate programs in the next year for genomic studies. Therefore, I am unable to work full time to fully finance my trip. I am learning how to whittle so that I can sell items while on the trip; this will help me cover the cost of food. If I am awarded a scholarship, I will use the funds to purchase the personal gear that I need. The items that I hope to purchase are listed below:

- Fuji Disc Touring Bike, \$1200  
<https://www.fujibikes.com/usa/bikes/road/adventure-and-touring/touring/touring-disc-19>
- Ortlieb Classic Panniers, \$260  
[https://www.amazon.com/Ortlieb-Back-Roller-Classic-Rear-Panniers/dp/B000KAYU9C/ref=as\\_li\\_ss\\_tl?ie=UTF8&qid=1539932131&sr=8-7&keywords=ortlieb+back+roller&linkCode=sl1&tag=davstrapag-20&linkId=87c52cb2a663144f1cc807c24974bd94&language=en\\_US](https://www.amazon.com/Ortlieb-Back-Roller-Classic-Rear-Panniers/dp/B000KAYU9C/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&qid=1539932131&sr=8-7&keywords=ortlieb+back+roller&linkCode=sl1&tag=davstrapag-20&linkId=87c52cb2a663144f1cc807c24974bd94&language=en_US)
- REI Magma sleeping bag, \$330  
<https://www.rei.com/product/148246/rei-co-op-magma-30-sleeping-bag-mens?CAWELAID=120217890006169230>
- Bontrager Starvos Helmet, \$100  
<https://www.rei.com/product/171282/bontrager-starvos-wavecel-cycling-helmet>

TOTAL: \$1890

To prepare for this trip, my partner and I have done many day-long bike rides around the Northeast Kingdom. We plan to continue our physical preparation by nordic skiing, working out indoors, hiking, and running through the winter. Financially, I have been picking up some short jobs around me as assistant carpenter. To plan our route, we have been investigating online resources, such as those available through the Adventure Cycling Association, and we have been reaching out to people who have done the same route.

Receiving a Flyin Ryan scholarship would make it possible for me to purchase lightweight, high quality gear that I need to successfully finish this journey. I would be honored become part of the Flyin Ryan Foundation and help honor the legacy of Ryan Hawks. I am hopeful that the experience will test and strengthen my core principles and promote the growth of my mind and physical fitness. I look forward to this adventure with each passing day as I prepare myself in every way necessary.