

## **My Essay:**

High and alone on a ridge in the Dolomites of Italy, surrounded by jagged rocks, the wind bit at my hands. My legs shook as I looked down the narrow chute beneath me, 60 degrees in pitch. I loved the complete feeling of self direction, just me and the mountain, in the process of creating one of the lines that I would be most proud of to this day. It's a line that has stayed with me as I worked through the inevitable battles of teenagehood.

Scanning for a path I saw a line of rocks dividing the chute into two branches, each only a ski length wide. What lay beyond disappeared into a blur. The slightest technical mistake could be life-threatening. The left branch looked harder. So I chose it, and pushed off the ridge. The wind slapped my face as my sharp steel edges cut into the ice. The adrenaline rush, my reprieve from daily humiliations at school.

Growing up in the mountains of Vermont, I skied before I could walk. I regularly went hiking and canoeing. Skiing and the outdoors were critical for me and my happiness. My small freshman school had become my Colosseum. I'd been a lively boy, excelling at schoolwork, but relentless bullying made me sullen and withdrawn.

That long year finished and I moved to a much bigger school, hoping for a fresh start. But school felt like the Fields of Asphodel, crowded yet unfathomably lonely. Skiing became more than an escape, it was my lifeline. I tried to incorporate it into every aspect of my life. In this time I began to reach out to the Flyin' Ryan foundation in hopes of finding a meaningful way to be involved with skiing and the ski community off the slopes. The foundation helped me identify my core values, to try to live by them and to make good decisions on the slopes, but I was still a 16 year old susceptible to social pressures.

One dark, cloudy March day, I stood above a jump with 40 freeskiers. "Oscar, Oscar, do a backflip!". Feeling pressured, I took off. Screaming with pain as I landed on my back, I wondered if I would ever ski again. Doctors wondered too – for months.

Unable to ski, with coaches disappointed in my decision making, I'd lug myself out of bed, force down breakfast, sit through classes alone, feign companionship at lunch, and listlessly repeat the cycle. It seemed that the thing that was going well was what I was doing with the Flyin' Ryan foundation. I was preparing to present to a group of students at an independent learning summit at UVM. My presentation consisted of a slideshow where I would explain the purpose and history of the foundation along with my core values. I would then get everyone in the room to take the core values challenge and make their own values. But the day I presented, almost nobody showed up, as there was someone in the next door

room, teaching a course on kickboxing, which was unfortunately more exciting for a lot of kids. I was gutted. It felt like all of the work that I had done in preparation for this summit had been wasted. I had expected to make an impact on 20-30 people but it ended up being 3. Despite this I didn't give up. I relentlessly lobbied all four health teachers at CVU, until one of them finally agreed to give me a block, and let me introduce the idea of core values to 20 students at CVU. I presented the same presentation to the CVU students with great success. Almost all of the students cared and ended up appreciating and getting a lot out of the core values challenge. Some even chose to stay in the classroom during lunch in order to finish crafting their list of values.

In late April that year an incredible specialist diagnosis came for my back injury: I had a spinal stress fracture with minimal disc slippage. It would heal!

When that barren winter turned to fields of green, I took a job as a hiking counsellor in the Adirondak Mountains. I camped out in the mountains for a month, waking by a rushing river, breathing fresh Adirondack air. I would guide city kids from New Jersey into the mountains every day, lead them to peaks and teaching them the love of the outdoors. Though it came with its challenges, we ended up getting everyone to the summits, and back down with smiles on their faces, through thunderstorms, rain, the dark, and regardless of their age, athleticism, friends or interests. I easily made friends with my co-workers. They cared about me, and me them. We all loved the mountains. I burst into the kitchen back home at summer's end with a huge smile. I'd found community and happiness.

I was growing in many ways. By now - in my 5th year of freeride- my skiing was echoing this. It had become powerful and balanced. Finally my lifelong dream - the Junior World Championships - was within reach.

But my trials weren't over. Launching off a 15 foot cliff in the qualifier my bases swirled sickeningly as rotten snow spiraled me into a crash. My dream was dead. I cried hot tears in the bathroom. Bleakness loomed again.

But this time, I did not give up. I had learned resilience. The mountains had taught me about community. Instead I became a volunteer firefighter, worked in a restaurant, and tutored a sixth grader.

Now I know the man I want to become. I want to be honest, work hard, hold myself accountable, ask for help only when I need it, complain less, and raise my standards for myself more often, follow my passions and be the best family member/friend I can be.

I am going off to college this year, and due to the expenses of college for my family, the financial responsibility for any future Freeride now lies with me. This scholarship would help me continue to follow my passion. In particular it would help me compete in Freeride as an adult, and push my limits in skiing. I hope to start a Freeride club at my college, Bates, and bring the Flyin' Ryan principles to that club.

I didn't realize at the time when I was standing at the top of that Italian chute that I was charting my path in life on a much deeper level. This wasn't just a sharp narrow mountain chute. Breathing heavily, I entered the narrow section with tight hop turns. My worn edges slid on the shaky snow pack. My stomach caved. The only way through this was straight. Inhaling deeply, I accelerated to a speed I'd never reached before. The chute disappeared - and opened out into a wide area. I banked my skis sideways with immense force. Then, gently popping off the last snow wall I skied comfortably over to my family, hands and poles in the air.

Life, like skiing, is about meeting your challenges head on, sticking to your values; it's about being there for your community and them being there for you. I hope through granting me a scholarship that the Flyin' Ryan Foundation can help me continue to live my passion and bring it, and its full meaning, to others for the betterment of all - and of course to honor Ryan, for whom I have gigantic personal respect.