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Grade 11

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What Drives Me?

When I was fourteen, I lost a friend to suicide. I was devastated by her death and overwhelmed by the rippling effects it had on my community. I realized that she was one of so many teenagers who felt worthless and alone. Unfortunately, the existing stigma around mental illness has kept kids from reaching out for help. In the face of such widespread distress, I felt helpless against the damage caused by mental illness and stigma in teens. After that experience, I resolved to never feel helpless again. I have become determined to do whatever I can to address and reduce mental illness, especially anxiety and depression, in teenagers.

I knew that mental illness in teenagers was a colossal problem that wouldn't be solved overnight, or even during my lifetime. Still, I was determined to do what I could, and that started by trying to better understand the problem. Using the internet, I began researching the brain and how it worked. I read every neuroscience textbook I could get my hands on and supplemented my efforts through chemistry and AP Psychology classes at school.

My understanding of the structures and functions of the brain led me to take first place in the 2021 Utah Brain Bee, a state-wide neuroscience competition for high schoolers. That summer, I worked as an intern in a real neuroscience research laboratory at the University of Utah and fell in love with laboratory science. Soon after, I founded the Titan Brain Club, a neuroscience and psychology club at my school that meets twice monthly to learn about the brain through hands on experiments and guest speakers. Then, at the beginning of 2022, I taught an eight-week Introduction to Neuroscience course meant to prepare this year's Brain Bee participants.

My passion for brain science has led me to many wonderful experiences during the past three years, but at the heart of all this learning and growth, my drive has remained constant. I'm determined to fight the ongoing crisis of suicide and mental illness stigma in my peers, the teenagers of Utah.

I am fighting the stigma around mental illness by teaching others about neuroscience. When we talk about depression and anxiety in terms of neurotransmitters and synaptic connections, they can be treated as medical problems instead of personal failings to hide or ignore. I want my peers to understand that it is okay to ask for help and seek treatment, the same way they would if they were physically injured or sick.

I have decided to pursue neuroscience as a career. I hope that by contributing to humanity's understanding of depression and anxiety at a chemical level through laboratory research, I can help us prevent teen mental illness. I plan on majoring in neuroscience and eventually pursuing a PhD so that I am best equipped to conduct this essential research. I look forward to continuing the battle against mental illness in teenagers.