

My name is Brittany Carroll-Watts and I am a senior at University Prep High School. I love singing, embracing challenges, and defying stereotypes. It seems that my life has been all about proving people wrong, and Rainier Scholars has helped me achieve my goals. Because of Rainier Scholars, I believe in the power of opportunity.

I have been presented with some of the greatest opportunities imaginable. The summer before my junior year, Rainier Scholars provided me with an internship in a law firm that specializes in intellectual property. For two and a half months, I learned about and grew to appreciate the immense difficulty that comes in trying to legally protect an intangible thing – an *idea*. It was fascinating.

This time last year, I was beginning work at a clinical research organization, handling the lab results of patients in clinical trials. My first week of work was a challenge because I was jet-lagged from a two week home stay in Kobe, Japan and practicing with our Mock Trial team for an approaching national competition. I lasted about five days with this schedule... and then the jet lag caught up with me and I took a few days off.

Just a month ago, I was able to speak with former prisoners at a rehabilitation center about their experience behind bars as part of research for my senior thesis on the criminal justice system. Most recently, I found myself sitting at a table, having a conversation with Bill Gates, Sr., hearing about the inspirational people he has met and taking in the words of wisdom he had to offer. With opportunities like these available to me, it is very hard to turn them down and very easy to deal with a busy schedule and a shortage of sleep.

Over the past several years my family and friends have asked me repeatedly: “why?” Why would I sacrifice my sleep and occasionally my social life to pursue things I know little about? Why would I choose to study Japanese when my whole family has taken Spanish? Why would I take some of the hardest classes my school offers when it could mean I don’t get straight A’s? Why would I apply to an Ivy League school when obtaining a college degree is not normal for my family?

Whenever I get into a conversation with anyone who asks me these questions, I give them a confused look and respond “why not?” Why *wouldn’t* I take an opportunity to do something meaningful and possibly life changing? Why *wouldn’t* I break the mold and study Japanese? Why *wouldn’t* I take a class that challenges me as a student? Why *wouldn’t* I apply to my favorite college?

Sometimes, at this point in the conversation, the person might give me a patronizing look and say, “Well, maybe it won’t go your way.” In response, I shrug and say, “Well, maybe it will.”

My love of a good challenge was the main driving force behind my college search. Like I always do, I set my sights high and applied, Early Decision, to Columbia University in New York City. I knew that I didn’t have the typical background of an Ivy League student. I knew that only 8.9% of students who applied were accepted. I knew that my doubters were watching me with bated breath, waiting for me – expecting me – to fail. Before I submitted my application, that same conversation played in my mind. “Why do this? Why choose Columbia when you have a 90% chance of being told no?” In response, that simple, child-like question echoed in my mind: “Why not?”

A month later, I received notification that I had been accepted into Columbia University's Class of 2014, and that moment will always stand in my memory.

I know that anything is possible, not just because my mom told me that when I was little, but because Rainier Scholars has shown me how to do anything. Because of Rainier Scholars, I have a set of skills that I can bring to any classroom, any job, and any challenge. I know that, if I look hard enough, I can find the answer to any question I have. I know that hard work, tenacity, and determination will lead me to success. Most importantly, I know I can be as successful as I want without sacrificing who I am.

So even though I sometimes pull all-nighters because I'm really busy, even though my passion for things causes my classmates to question my priorities, and even though my future isn't carved in stone, it's okay. Every opportunity, every challenge and every struggle paves the way to the next step, and it doesn't matter that I don't see the end of the path. Because of Rainier Scholars, I understand the power of possibility.