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*Associate Director of Admissions Meghan Dangremond discusses why this CommonApp essay, by Daniel Bekai '20, was so successful. Here's the full text of the essay:*

People who have grown up with siblings might laugh at the idea that I consider being an only child an essential part of my identity. But just as a relationship with a brother or sister can be deeply formative, so can the absence of these relationships. For me, this absence has been a powerful stimulus to my imagination and my growth as a person.

When people discover I am an only child, they often react with some sympathy, as if growing up alone meant growing up lonely. It's certainly true that I spent a lot of time alone; even though I had close friends in elementary school, I hung out with them mostly on weekends. But I never felt lonely. As a young child, I loved to get lost in different projects of my own—whether it was building rudimentary circuits and illuminating LED lights with my “DeluxeElectronics Lab,” or improving my origami technique with my “Fold-a-Day” calendar. In these activities, I needed no conversation partner, no playmate, because the act of creation itself became my friend, challenging me to keep improving upon my skills. But I didn't always need wires and bulbs and paper to keep me interested; over time, I learned to find satisfaction in the simple act of daydreaming.

I treat such “daydreaming” very seriously. For me, daydreaming is a powerful tool for my creativity. Almost all of my ideas—whether they concern building a robot, writing a student council speech, or solving a problem—originate in my daydreams. One thing that perhaps sets me apart from the stereotypical “daydreamer” is that I have the ability to put my daydreams to use in real life. During my sophomore year of high school, I was watching two of my friends arm wrestle, and I began to daydream about arm wrestling. Arm wrestling is a peculiar sport, in that it's always one-on-one; there are no variations with more than two players. I began to wonder if there was a way to have two people arm wrestle against another two people. My daydream then underwent a critical metamorphosis, from the realm of ideas to the realm of execution. That summer, I built a model for a double arm wrestling machine on Google Sketchup, and then, with the help of a professional welder, turned the model into a reality. Later that year, I organized the first ever two-on-two arm wrestling tournament in my school's history (and probably the world's too). As an added bonus, all the money I raised from the double arm wrestling tournament was donated to the people of Nepal, who suffered an earthquake a few weeks prior to the tournament.

Growing up as an only child, learning to entertain myself with nothing but ideas, problems, and some rudimentary materials, has taught me the importance of listening to one's own thoughts. This is especially important nowadays, as we live in a world full of screens and sounds competing for our attention. As a result, it is all too easy to tune out the more subtle frequency of our imaginations, the inner frontier. Many people have what the writer Verlyn Klinkenborg called “a fear of the dark, cavernous place called the mind,” but there is nothing to fear there. In fact, there is much to learn. I am grateful, as an only child, to have had the chance to grow comfortable in that solitary space.