

## Don't Think, Just Do It

“What a bright child!” they told my parents. “She’s the best in her class!” they said.

When I first started school, I glowed with pride whenever I received praise from teachers. However, it became old news after a few years. Growing up in a small neighborhood, I was used to being the best. Back then, the expectations and competition were nonexistent. I used to set high goals for myself in every aspect of life. I thought that I could make great achievements without working as hard as other people. However, what I thought of as the world was only a tiny fraction of it.

My view of the world first expanded when, like many other kids, I picked up a load of extracurriculars. During these years, I began to see increasingly more of the competition that I had been veiled from. A mild shock came when I saw how much harder it became to get to the top spot. As opportunities in school began to come, so did the failures. Again and again, I did not continue to the final round in the Geography Bee. Despite being one of only two candidates, I did not get elected onto the student council executive board. Each failure felt like a stab in the chest. I began to put pressure on myself to succeed. Finally, during the summer leading up to sixth grade, I went to a camp called the Center for Talented Youth. Predictably, those three weeks became a very humbling experience for me. I saw how talented and smart kids from all over the country were. I began to lose hope for myself.

Meanwhile, I had settled at fencing as my favorite extracurricular activity. I was excited to come to practice every time, and while there, I felt like I truly belonged. The only problem was, I was nowhere close to good at it. During my first year, I had still been juggling extracurriculars, leaving less time for fencing. Every tournament I went to, I placed in the lower half. Every time, the pressure to do well built up more and more. It was extremely discouraging

to come home afterwards, feeling like a failure. Despite this, I pushed through. After dropping the other extracurriculars, I started making more time for fencing, practicing up to five times a week. Finally, there came fast progress.

However, until the beginning of eighth grade, I did not know just how much I had improved. I had also made an abrupt mental change. I had always been told that having low expectations only lead to failure. Despite this, I tried something new. I told myself that I did not care how well I did, as long as I fenced my best and had fun. Just like that, the pressure disappeared.

I went to my third national tournament, having placed poorly the first two times, and did amazingly well. I finished fifteenth out of 185 people. The taste of success, though foreign, felt fresh and exhilarating. To other people, this experience might just seem like a good day. However, to me, it felt like my life had just changed course. Through hard work, not talent, I had finally found something I loved that I was good at.

Even as I am steadily improving at fencing, I know that I am nowhere near perfect. At least now, I can know this fact without desperately trying to turn it around. I have come to accept that nobody can be the best at everything. I have worked hard to get where I am today, being a more confident, successful person.