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Home to My Heart

At seventeen, the college process has prompted questions that stir exciting conversations about my future, but others have stifled me with great uncertainty. I often contemplate the answer to each question materializing from thin air, wrapped in paper, tied in a bow, placed right into my lap, with a card written in indelible ink. "To: Daniela From: The Answer." And I know, fictitious thinking is a waste of my time, and waiting for answers of any kind is a waste of time. And I've felt hopeless and unmotivated for my future when consuming thoughts riddled my capabilities and self-worth with doubt. That is until a few months ago in an unlikely conversation with friends, I was asked a question that would ultimately reveal the answer to all other questions. It wasn't too basic, and it wasn't too complex. My response was natural as it gently rolled off my tongue into words never spoken more confident and true.

I was simply asked: "Daniela, Where do you *want* to live?"

I have only lived in two places my entire life. Before moving to Rockville Centre to start elementary school, I lived in New York City. I *think* I loved it. But, what kid wouldn't? Giant sky-scrapers that reach heights enveloped in pillows of white. Passing cars on the highway, billboards emanating in the darkest night skies. Diverse cuisines, communities, and people, are distinctive and vibrant in colors and flavor. That was once the home that I had favored. But, after living in Rockville Centre for almost fourteen years, I realized I could not picture myself living in the biggest city in the world. I have grown to love my neighborhood, its quaintness and the quiet comfort it provides day and night. Nassau County, *home to my heart*, is the place I want to live for the rest of my life.

Without question, Nassau County is a beautiful location. Its historic architecture is gorgeous and inexpensive to explore and visit. I have visited Sagamore Hill and Old Westbury Gardens with family and friends. The Old Westbury Gardens has hosted the St. Agnes Girls' Choir to sing Christmas carols for visitors and family. I have been a part of the choir since I was a little girl, and the opportunity to perform has created lifelong memories for me, and for my mom and dad, who enjoyed the music and the mansion's magical charm. During the summer, I picnic with my cousins in the old garden green. It's become a tradition to eat finger sandwiches, dainty pastries, and fruit parfaits, and take pictures surrounded by the perfectly groomed landscapes. This special, private experience with my cousins has been a yearly highlight and is something we often look forward to. And it's only been possible through Nassau County's parks and recreation department, who have opened the garden doors for public enjoyment. And of

course, I simply cannot forget to mention Nassau County's stunning beaches. Our beaches are synonymous with cleanliness, safety, beauty, and abundant fun. I spend my summer days basking in sunshine and swimming in the water while appreciating the county's well-protected oceans.

Last summer, inspired for more, I searched for work opportunities my county provided to me. I requested working papers from my school to begin my first job. I obtained them, along with Nassau County Certification, and began lifeguarding at The Hempstead Golf & Country Club pool. Nassau County's lifeguard training program made it an easy transition for me to work as an effective life-saver, one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. My experience working in Nassau County has been defined by positive outcomes; I have felt truly helpful and contributing to my community's safety and wellness.

Nassau County quarters some of the world's finest museums, restaurants, and entertainment facilities. I am a foodie myself and appreciate the unique cuisine in our area. My family loves to go on drives and enjoy Nassau County's best bites. We often banter over where we'll dine because there are just so many great options! With friends, I tend to visit Roosevelt Field Mall, an icon of our bustling neighborhoods and social scene. I look forward to rainy free days when I can capitalize on our county's wealth of fun. My favorite site is Old Bethpage Village Restoration, where I remember singing for one of the Christmas events with a musical group of which I was a part. A younger version of myself was in awe at the attention to detail. Almost like time-traveling, I felt rich with a sense of what it was like to live as a 19th-century young maiden, ha!

With great success, Nassau County's focus on education manifests as district-wide achievement and personal growth. A pillar of Nassau County's greatness is its dedication to citizen safety. I value the ability to speak my mind and see my elected officials, who listen and respond to public needs and wants. It trickles into the school environment, where Nassau County has certainly succeeded in its mission: it's a place where all kids, of all different backgrounds, feel united in their interests and pursuits of greater knowledge. I certainly do: my teachers encourage healthy debate on topics that are important for young adults to develop an understanding of their personal beliefs and their societal implications. Nassau County's commitment to educating the state's finest students has provided me with opportunities that will define me forever. In school, I participate in my school's swimming team. We travel daily to the Nassau County Aquatic Center, one of the only Olympic-sized facilities of its kind, to swim daily strokes in the pool. My memories at the Aquatic Center are not rooted in its actual function, but rather the great people of Nassau County I have met and swam against in competition. Furthermore, as Vice President of my school's Mock Trial club, it has been a pleasure competing at the Nassau County Supreme Court House. It has been an extraordinary experience competing in a professional building, "walking the walk and talking the talk" as my English teacher likes to say, participating in NYS-modeled court competitions. More than ever, I appreciate Nassau

County's care for the community, its wealth of resources, and its engagement with its teenagers. Without the help of professional leadership, none of these opportunities would be possible for me, and I am so grateful.

Through the past few months, I have seen the effect of just one unlikely conversation with friends. Our conversation transformed my understanding of my goals and ambitions. It's promoted tremendous growth in my future planning, deep reflection, and immense gratitude. The answer to the question "Where do I *want* to live?" has answered all other questions. Today, I plan on studying to be a dentist. I look forward to establishing a female-empowered practice in Nassau County, close to what I know will be my antique colonial home. I relish the opportunity to make a difference in my community and raise children in a place where I feel apart and tethered. My heart gleams with pride to live in a place where everyone is treated with respect and deference. I treasure the people, the community, the experiences, and the vibrant character in this formidable county. There is truly no other place where I would rather live, work, *and* play. *Home to my heart*, Nassau County is the only one for me.