

ON EDUCATION / Elise Epner

# Harry, Samantha and Me

I could hear the mom's blood boiling, despite the spotty cell phone service as she drove through Westport's dead zone. She told me about her agonizing Thanksgiving, watching her son stare blankly at the computer for four days without accomplishing the supplemental college application essay. "Didn't you hear his father's screaming all the way to Fairfield?" she asked.

Knowing that I was meeting with the student that afternoon, the parent begged me to "work my magic."

"Sorry," I said quickly, making clear there was no Potteresque sorcery up my sleeve, no sorting hat in my office.

Yet later that day, somehow as the boy chatted about the improbable interception sealing his football team's victory and giggled about his sister's college gossip, he sketched out the essay at my desk. Before my tea had even cooled, he realized he could add an anecdote to part of his Bucknell answer. And then, tweaking it a bit, he'd have the lovely Tufts self-identity essay that had been eluding him.

"Magic?" I smirked, as I reviewed the draft he emailed that evening.

When the mom called offering thanks, I followed up on her earlier comments. "Like the Wizard of Oz, you think?" "Or, Samantha in Bewitched?" — a

kinder, blonder image for this old woman than the enfeebled, bald charlatan behind the curtain.

"Magic?" I asked, practicing a bit of lip-twitching while I waited for her thoughts. Maybe, she speculated, it was my courtroom cross-examination skills, honed in a previous life as a lawyer, that were powerful enough to break down the wall of silence around her closed-mouth teenager. I laughed. More to the point could be the years of legal brief writing — developing persuasive writing skills and detail-oriented proofreading — the reality of big-firm corporate litigation. Or perhaps, the classroom teaching experience, the

time keeping kids on task and their assignments on deadline, she suggested.

So I wondered: Why are independent educational consultants specializing in college admissions so in demand these days? Why are so many applicants, about 20 percent nationwide, using consultants?

Sure, we study admission statistics from our students' high schools, more than 10 public and private high schools for me this year alone. Yes, we read up on colleges, tour campuses, and speak to lots of admissions officers. Perusing everything from college newspapers to admission officer blogs to education periodicals we keep current on national trends and issues.

Nah, we were fooling ourselves. There is magic. It's the independence. Not a parent. Not

family. No history. No baggage.

Simply put, independent educational consultants specializing in college admissions remove parents from the firing line of this incendiary process.

So, as we ended our conversation, this mother promised to call when her daughter, a Staples junior, received her PSAT scores this month. I'm in their speed dial now, just ahead of the cardiologist. She'll call me first when her blood starts bubbling, confident that I'll magically get the kid to study SAT vocabulary and plan for college.

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