

Ava Lowry 2026 Essay

Most people primarily think of their local library as a place to borrow books for recreation or research, but for me, Lee Memorial Library in Allendale, New Jersey has been a safe haven over the years, offering me opportunities to gain independence, mature emotionally and academically as well as support my involvement in community service.

With two working parents, I walked to the library with my younger brother most days after elementary and middle school where we waited for our babysitter to arrive within the hour and deliver us home. Although it was a relatively easy walk from school, I proudly led the way down the street Monday through Friday, sometimes opting for a short cut on rainy or cold days, relieved when we turned the corner and saw the big white doors of the library. It wasn't home, but I felt safe and welcomed there after school for several years. The librarians would smile as we entered and usually looked the other way as we sneakily gobbled a snack of apples and goldfish crackers. I passed the time scouring the shelves for new books, falling into the world of characters like Harry Potter and Katniss Everdeen, practicing my gaming skills on the computers in the children's section, or simply decompressing after a long day of school in a quiet corner. In a way, the library became a home-away-from-home.

Not only did the library provide me with a safe and comforting place to explore independently, but it also supported me with educational and creative opportunities to thrive in elementary and middle school. I participated in events at the library including the annual summer reading program, a bracelet-making club, and various arts and crafts, all of which encouraged me to make new friends and try different things. I also met weekly with a high school tutor during 6th

grade to improve my math skills, not only securing an A in the class but perhaps more importantly, bolstering confidence in my ability to overcome an academic obstacle.

Confidence was something I lacked through middle school, but in yet another way, the library would unexpectedly provide me with comfort and strength in the form of a life-changing book. During the summer before 7th grade, I was a whopping 4.2 feet short, the smallest member of the friend group, and front row regular for school concerts, resulting in a serious case of height insecurity. I made my usual visit to Lee Memorial Library to collect new reading material, and propped open on one of the display shelves was a book titled *Short* by Holly Goldberg Sloan. I distinctly remember looking at the title, hesitant to pick it up because of how sensitive I felt about my height, but finally deciding to bring the book home. I had no idea that this book would change me.

The main character of *Short* is a middle-schooler named Julia who struggles to find self-worth and confidence in her acting abilities due to her short stature. I empathized with her pain, anger and sadness, and even felt as though the book was written with me in mind. Knowing how Julia persevered through similar situations gave me the courage to raise my hand in class, try a new sport, sit at a different lunch table, and join a new friend group with less fear of judgment. Slowly, I stopped worrying about my size and realized that everyone is meant to be unique. That confidence continued to blossom and has been a huge foundation for my personal and academic achievements in high school. Now I lead class discussions with ease, have been a school ambassador, and confidently walk through the halls saying hi to friends. I eventually hit 5.5 feet tall during my junior year, but by that time, it didn't matter because I had already learned that

what we look like on the outside doesn't define us... it's only packaging for the more important stuff inside. It's been an invaluable life lesson inspired by a library book.

The library has given so much to me through the years, so as a high schooler I am now pleased to return the favor wherever possible through community service. I am an active volunteer for National Honor Society and currently participate in Allendale Tech Time where I assist local community members with technology troubleshooting at the library. It has been a full circle moment for me to sit at the same tables I once sat at as a child, but now instead of drawing pictures with crayons and reading Magic Treehouse books, I am now a young adult helping others become more technologically savvy.

Additionally, as a Girl Scout Gold Award recipient, the library allowed me to host a bake sale with a goal of raising funds to construct and install 6 bat houses around town to encourage an increase in the bat population, subsequently decreasing the mosquito population and the use of unnatural, dangerous pesticide sprays by Allendale residents. I also used the library as a place to educate elementary and middle schoolers about the importance of bats in ecosystems, inspiring them to become future community leaders and changemakers, just like me.

Thanks to the support provided to me by Lee Memorial Library over these last 17 years, I have become a strong, independent, curious, and change-driven individual, prepared to take my findings and apply them to succeed in the future as a college student and even further as an aspiring business professional.