How She Landed

By BFS Student, Class of 2017

My mother pulled me out of the public school system after one day of kindergarten. Since then, I’ve been in a wide range of educational environments. In one of my first homeschool groups, Samara, we based our learning around art and nature. We used to race down the big hill towards the creek where we played. We held colorful scarves above our heads as we ran, so they streamed out behind us. We were flashes of red and blue along the green slopes. I could outrun the boys, even though they were taller. My legs and lungs burned, my heart was pumping, I had the mental clarity and joy of a young girl running as fast as she could; I felt utterly free. I wrote my first song at Samara, called “Follow the Flag of Freedom,” and would recruit my classmates to sing it with me in the stairwell of our building. As the echos of the last line faded, I stood on the top step with my friends on both sides. In the moment of rich silence that followed, I was sure that I could do anything.

This type of learning continued at the Red Cedar Learning Cooperative, where my friends and I ran a non-profit coffee shop in the kitchen, and I helped build a play town with a self-sustaining economic system. There were other learning experiences: I took an art class and a chemistry class at a strictly Christian homeschool group, but after finding a pamphlet that equated Buddhism to communism, my mom decided that it was not the place for me. As a homeschooler, I spent hours working on my stories, and wrote multiple novellas. After nine years of homeschooling, I transitioned back into the public school system in Kentucky. It was there that I began to learn and internalize many of the paradigms I struggle with now—how girls
were supposed to act, how teachers spoke to students, how Students of Color were treated, how boys (especially white boys) were called on more (especially in math class), how I wasn’t supposed to mention I’m not Christian, how the amount of money a family has makes a big, big difference.

My family moved to New York City the summer between my freshman and sophomore years. Wildly unsatisfied with my schooling in Kentucky, I began attending the Brooklyn Friends School. While I was at Friends, I spent an average of four to five hours on homework every night. During the orientation for new students, the Dean told us, “This school is your life now.” I felt out of place, overwhelmed and afraid to mess up. Every morning, I woke with a nervous jolt. On my morning commute, the lights of the train were glaring, my head felt compressed and my limbs leaden. I counted the number of classes, tests, worksheets, and hours I had until I could come home again. The only art I created were assigned projects for a class. I stopped reading for pleasure. On Sunday nights, more often than not, I went to my mother in tears. Over that year, the constant academic pressure slowly deteriorated my mental health. The lowest point was an anxiety attack. Towards the end of the year, I had sustained a concussion from gym class. I went to the mental health coordinator’s office to speak to him about how I would handle ending the year. I sat in a chair across from him, trying to breath calmly, arms crossed tightly across my chest. At the end of our meeting, he looked at me and said, “Basically, you won’t end the year without taking your finals. Okay?”

“Oh. You’re...” He faltered.
“Yeah, crying.” I apologized. I really had not intend to cry, but my body usurped my attempt to maintain social graces. I knew there was no possibility of me being able to finish out the year, not the way it had been going. And I could not keep pretending to be okay. This is when my family and I knew we needed to make a change.

The first thing that shifted when I joined Brooklyn Free School was how I felt physically. I did not realize the importance of bodily autonomy until I was given it. You cannot tell a student you respect them if you don’t allow them to use the bathroom when they ask. Young people must be allowed to regulate their own bodies. BFS respects both physical and emotional bodily autonomy for all ages. This is respect at a fundamental level. BFS, in its mission for equity and equality, takes this to the next level in our Democratic Meetings. It is crucial, in all communities and institutions, that every person has the right to be heard. This is supposed to be true of our government, and it is true of our school. There is no person or concern too small to be heard at BFS. We are heard, and we are listened to. The community decides what action follows. This is the essence of democracy, taken a step forward—radicalized. It is democracy made real, and given freely to young people.

Beyond the freedom of our bodies, we are also given the freedom of our minds and educations. I decided I wanted to learn about the effects of hydration on the human body, so I set up an independent study. I was interested in marine biology, so I got an internship at the aquarium. I wanted to share my ethnic and political identity with my peers, so I made a crash course presentation on Tibet. There were resources, teachers and staff who were always willing to meet with me or point me in the direction of the right person, book, or website—whatever it took to keep me moving forward. BFS allowed for me to have self-determination. I’ve learned
how to ask for help, and how to look for resources. I am able to balance my strengths and interests with areas I need to develop. I experienced the joys and responsibilities of that, much like real adult people in the real world. This education model taught me to have confidence in my ability to create things, and put them into practice. And when there is a young Woman of Color with that kind of confidence, anything can happen.

I learned a new definition for social justice while at BFS. It shifted from being just a good thing to my constant mental state, to a necessity. The staff and students at BFS, particularly in Social Justice Seminar, widened my understanding of identity and privilege. My definition of social justice expanded from “Sexism and racism are bad,” to an acknowledgement of how nuanced and difficult understanding oppression can be. I developed an understanding of intersectionality. I began to examine the privileges I hold: I am cisgender; I am a documented citizen who was born in the US; my first language is English; my family has a stable income and place to live; I have health care; I have access to healthy food; I live in a major city; I go to a progressive private school; I am able-bodied; I have been able to travel internationally; I have never struggled with chronic illness; I have a supportive family and circle of friends; the list goes on. This being said, I also delved deeper into the ways that oppression does affect me. I learned that my race and my gender shape many, many aspects of my life, in ways that often go unseen without a deep awareness of oppression. The adults in the community encouraged and supported me in this growth, and I watched my peers grow alongside me. I was able to connect to others who shared my struggles, and share with those who don’t. Social justice at Brooklyn Free School connected me to a passion, and at the core of that passion was my desire to connect with and care for others. The community of BFS puts tremendous effort and attention to detail in creating a
safe space. This safety is what allowed me to shed some of my internalized oppression, my fear and pride. Allowing vulnerability is powerful. I’ve allowed myself to be vulnerable at BFS many times.

When I encountered this new environment, one that I felt valued and supported by, I felt much more comfortable using my voice and advocating for myself. Speaking up at BFS taught me that 1) my voice is valued and 2) that value, because of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy I exist in, will be challenged. Most importantly, I learned that 3) I’m good for the challenge. This process is ongoing, and as I discover the depths of oppression, I also discover the depths of my power to oppose it. Students and staff at BFS often validated my choice to speak up, and the worth of what I had to say.

Even though I am dedicated and passionate about speaking up and working hard, I also spent time at BFS examining my tendency to overwork. I believe that capitalism, the model minority myth, and sexism contribute to this compulsion. Once in Sophomore year, my mother asked me, “Why don’t you just get a B?” I told her, as honestly as I could, “I can’t.” It was just not possible for me in that environment. I would always give in to the pressures of a system that demanded as much, and sometimes more, than I could give. At BFS, with grades, tests, and curriculum-bound teachers no longer daunting me, I was able to re-evaluate. I had to let go of some of the fixation I had on being a “perfect” student, and let myself unfold and grow beyond just academics. In high-pressure learning environments, it was very rare that I had space to get excited about an idea or project. Before I was able to tune into creativity, I was already worrying about the deadlines and grades I would be working towards. While highly structured learning does work for some, it doused my creativity and heightened my anxiety. Like many people, I
have an intrinsic love of learning. At BFS, there were many times I experienced learning as natural, exciting, and even joyful. I found myself making connections between subjects I was studying. In my English class, I wrote a science-fiction story about aspects of gentrification, climate change and Asian-American identity—all things I had examined outside of that class. Learning without pressure allows me to retain more information. As a concept becomes rooted in my brain, the things I create will naturally relate to it. I learn things I care about, and they stick with me. And when a subject is difficult, I choose it of my own volition. Even though math is a challenge for me, I made the conscious decision to pursue it because I know it is important and useful. There was no one to resent because the work was hard. I just returned to my own dedication.

I realized that panicking about my work in comparison to others serves only to hinder me, and that many people struggle with standardized measures of intelligence. Excellence and success do not only correlate to an ACT score. These results have little to do with a student’s actual intelligence or potential, and everything to do with their resources, time, and money. It is rooted in how much energy a person puts into their academics, and I no longer choose to use my energy on one sole pursuit. The mistakes and shortcomings I have, both academically and personally, are part of who got accepted into college. They see me and think “she seems like a competent young woman,” not “I wonder how quickly she can do long division.” My sister told me a saying, and it sticks with me: My worth is not my work. Once I removed external pressures, I was able to find a calmer, truer and happier self. The Sunday night tears of Sophomore year came less and less frequently, and were replaced with so much more than homework: Yoga, dinner with my family, journaling, walks in the park, reading silly teenage novels, phone calls
with old friends. Mindfulness and spirituality became important to me. I had space for them in my life. I had space for life.

It can be extremely difficult to consistently give myself time for the rest and care that I need. Our society idolizes overwork, and it creates a culture of overcaffeinated, unsatisfied people. Above being famous or celebrated, I want to be happy. I do want moments of excellence and achievement, but I cannot bear a life where my internal dialogue is always “More. Try harder. Not enough.” The most difficult part is often noticing the problem in the first place, and then stopping. Every time I choose to do a yoga practice, to take a break, to turn off the website that is making me anxious, to stop and breathe and listen to myself, I am developing a practice. Because self-care is tending to the parts of myself that need the most attention; it both takes strength and makes me stronger. My yoga teacher said that discipline is awareness. As long as I am intentional, the world’s external craziness will not affect me as much. Life is never perfectly organized; it’s never perfect. It is a perpetual learning process. In my practice, I came to realize that the only things I really have are my family, my own body, and my happiness. I also realized that on a fundamental level, this is all I need and all I could ever ask for. This realization is a key part of what I took from my time at BFS, and a reason I am ready to move forward.

The future for me looks like college, and beyond that, life. I see benefits and drawbacks to each of the twelve schools I applied to. Two of them are women’s colleges—I really like the idea of removing the male gaze from my learning and living environment. Patriarchy seeps into every aspect of my life, and I believe that existing in an all-female space for these formative years of my life would let me blossom, even beyond what a mixed-gender college could. Either way, I’m ready to graduate because I now expect to be respected, even by authority figures. I
learned at BFS how to build a mutually accountable and mutually respectful relationship with my educators. For me, part of respect is seeing people as more than just their role in your life. The adults at BFS cared about me beyond their traditional roles, as I cared about them. I plan to carry this into my future relationships with professors, regardless of which college I choose. I am undecided in my area of concentration—my interests vary widely and I am not yet ready to narrow them down. This is okay. Many of the schools I applied to are open-curriculum, or encourage learning across disciplines. At BFS, I have struggled to find the right balance of academic work and other aspects of life. For me, getting things done and managing time is a complex mental dance. With the increased workload that college entails, I do have some apprehension. But I can appreciate that this is not something I can find an answer to just once. I will continuously be balancing, managing, and choosing how I spend my time. Some days, I will work hard and it will come easily. Others, I will drag myself out of bed and do a quarter of the work I need to get done. I have confidence that ultimately, I will work hard, and that I will care about my work.

The Brooklyn Free School has played a crucial role in my life. I truly believe that without this community, I would be more sad, hesitant, and negligent to both myself and others. If I had not transferred, I would have developed my academic self alone. My two years has helped me develop as a whole human being. The self respect and communication ability that this community nurtured in me made me strong enough to face the world. I will continue to be disciplined in my awareness, to mark my own wellbeing worth the time. I will continue to be vocal about my opinions and wants and needs. I will decide that what I have to say is worth being heard, that my voice matters. In my future communities, I will integrate the crucial
principles I learned at BFS: Bodily autonomy. Each individual voice matters. Freedom of choice fosters learning. Social justice is nuanced and important. My work is not my worth. Self care is crucial. Discipline is awareness. Equity and then equality. When I leave here, it will be to build community somewhere new. I will seek excellence in my connections to others. I will redefine excellence in terms of my own development and life. My ultimate goal is balance.

I can build my own education; I can care for myself; I can work hard. I am passionate about activism and art and learning and people. Through this, I can agree with what my mother always tells me: Wherever I go next, I will be happy. I will have a good life.

Thank you, Brooklyn Free School, for the role that you played in it.