

Ryan Hayden

Hello, my name is Ryan Hayden, and I have lived in Manhattan since I was born. I would like to start this letter by taking you through my life growing up as a kid. To start, when I was just four years old, my parents signed me up for the Manhattan Mavericks soccer team where I played my first of many soccer games on Smith Road. Once I finally figured out which goal to score on, I was hooked from then on. Of course, I tried other sports – football with the Manhattan Patriots and basketball at the Manhattan Junior High – but none of which held my attention like soccer did. I continued to play soccer with hopes of playing for Lincoln-Way West with my life-long friends I met through the same Mavericks team. Unfortunately for me, life has a way of shaking things up when you least expect it, which I finally learned when an MRI showed I had two fractures in my back during off-season workouts for the high school team. Obviously at the time I was devastated – my future in the sport I had spent my whole life playing was now uncertain - but now that I'm sitting here at my desk, reflecting on how my life has changed because of my injury, I now realize that my back injury instilled a defiant resilience in me that makes me strive for success. Eventually, after I recovered from my back injury, I went on to make the soccer team the next year as a sophomore. I went on to snow ski on the highest lift in the entire North American continent (12,840 feet). I went on to complete several hikes within the Rocky Mountains including Grand Teton National Park – all with my ten-year-old Boston Terrier harnessed on my back. Although these accomplishments may not seem valuable to others, the months of work I went through just to be able to attempt these feats is ultimately what makes them feel that much better. Although my resilience provided me with these breath-taking views and an improbable return to the sport I love, I do not want my best years to be limited to just high school. I have always been told high school will contain some of, if not the best years of my life, but I refuse to accept that it will only get worse after high school. I am determined to change that narrative and for that reason, I intend to enroll at an SEC school (either LSU or Alabama) with a major in chemistry where I can spend my weekdays studying in a T-shirt and shorts soaking in the warm weather; followed by weekends of screaming and cheering for my school's football team against our conference rivals. After my undergraduate, I plan to enter med school to fulfill my lifelong goal of becoming an oncologist. I have always had a fascination with science which influenced me to join science club, along with other clubs such as Student Council, Environmental Action Club, NHS, Math Honors Society, and Spanish Honors Society. Throughout the duration of each club that I have participated in, I have achieved numerous accomplishments, for example earning the seal of biliteracy in Spanish. This accomplishment further demonstrates my commitment to academics and helps my communication across different cultures. Also, a skill like this directly supports my future goal of attending medical school by enabling me to communicate clearly with patients and coworkers of Hispanic descent. This year I have had the privilege to shadow a variety of nurses and doctors throughout various units at Saint Joseph Hospital so I could get a taste of what I will be getting involved in for the future. During my time shadowing and volunteering at Saint Joseph Hospital I was inspired by the connections and relationships that the doctors and nurses built with their patients in the little time they had together. Ultimately, I learned that being a doctor is not just diagnosing and treating a patient to relieve them of the pain or discomfort they feel; but rather, acting as a pillar of support and comfort for people at their lowest and walking them through their illness on a path to recovery one step at a time. I, as we know, am very aware of the toll a health struggle can have on both the body and mind, and that is one of the many reasons why I want to be that beacon of hope for those who need it.

SILLEN Zheng

I'm excited to share my journey as a first-gen college student planning to double major in chemical engineering and materials science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Coming from a family that didn't have access to higher education, I've witnessed firsthand how educational disparity limited opportunities. Despite these barriers, my parents persisted and sacrificed tirelessly to provide for me and my sister. Their efforts compel me to make the most of every opportunity that I've been given.

Throughout high school, I've been heavily involved in serving the community through the family restaurant. Although it is not volunteering, it is still an integral part of my identity that I would like to include. From the years of 30-hour work weeks spent behind the counters and serving the customers, I've developed discipline, responsibility, and perseverance. These skills, coupled with my passion to learn, will allow me to succeed, and they are reflected in my high honor roll recognition for 4 years alongside being recognized as an AP Scholar with Distinction.

Beyond school and work, I sought out academic opportunities that enriched my perspectives. Out of the many programs I've attended, the most notable is the Women in Engineering Summer Program at UIC, a three-week intensive engineering program where a cohort of girls worked alongside mentors to learn about the different engineering disciplines. Through the various activities we did, I started to understand that engineering is not only technological innovation but also understanding the impact on the community and environment. This propelled me to pursue a path that focuses on contributing back to the community through my work in research & development. Many communities are afflicted negatively by environmental hazards, and I wish to mitigate that by finding sustainable alternatives that are better for the environment and thus the people affected by such environmental concerns. Another program I had been admitted into was Engineering Preview at Columbia. We got flown out to tour the campus, and from that experience, I truly understood their motto: engineering for humanity. This further developed my passion for the intersection of civic duty and engineering.

I was heavily involved in my high school's Air Force JROTC. Being a part of this program made me further realize my role in contributing to the community and the importance of serving the community. I helped unbox wreaths at the Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery to honor those that served our nation and attended the Christmas Tree Ship to help transport trees to give them to those in need. I've also sought out several volunteering events around the community, one fond memory being delivering and packing food at local pantries with friends. Beyond volunteering, I was involved in various clubs. As a result of the environmental action club, I had the opportunity to support my local community through the environment, such as learning about the invasive species that proliferate in our area. Another club is Girls Who Code. These virtual programs allowed me to connect to the greater STEM community of women and empowered me to advocate for myself throughout my high school career.