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Classification: Freshman

MSU Honor Code: *“As a Mississippi State University student, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”*

Making a Statement with *Three Little Words*

Three Little Words: A Memoir by Ashley Rhodes-Courter draws readers closer to the realities of American foster care, highlighting the unattended systematic cracks and the victimized children who fall through them. The book describes Ashley's separation from her mother at an early age, the horrors and disappointments of being shuffled through numerous foster homes, and the new life she experiences with her adoptive family. Ashley's story is one that is composed of many heart-wrenching details, but she has managed to sum it up in three rather small, complacent words: "I guess so" (page 223).

These three little words are announced on Ashley's adoption day, when her wonderful and patient adoptive parents, Phil and Gay Courter, are awarded custody. At this point in the book, Ashley does not feel as if she fully belongs with the Courters, yet she still fears the possibility of being launched back into foster care. When the adoption judge asks, "Do you want me to sign the papers and make it official, Ashley?" all she can do is mutter the three hesitant words, "I guess so" (page 223). It is plain to see that Ashley is unhappy about the adoption and has given up on the idea of a home, especially when she writes, "It was only a matter of time before this happy-family farce would be over" (page 223). It seems the outer portion of Ashley's problems have been solved; she is taken into a loving family who is committed to raising her. However, her inner struggles run far too deep for a simple solution. Ashley's mixed feelings complicate the situation, causing the realization that foster care has hurt her too many times for her to believe in something so good. It is a monumental moment of the story, where foster care's goal has been reached, yet the child has still suffered considerably, proving that happy endings are rarely black and white. At first glance, the reader believes the three little words will be powerful and awe-evoking by themselves, no explanation needed. It turns out, these three little

words are common words that have been given greater, thought-provoking meaning. It is horrifying to think that the foster care system could neglect a child to the point of nearly turning their nose up at a wonderful family, but this is the statement Ashley is trying to make. The way the author has built the entire book around her doubt, hesitation, and disbelief emphasizes how even though adopted children reach a “happy” place, the years of foster care have caused underlying damage that can only be repaired by love and time.

Although my own life experiences are extremely different from Ashley’s, I can also encompass my life story in three little words: education is key. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have a normal, happy childhood created by two parents who loved me. The real turning points of my life began when I started high school and decided to see how far I could push my limits. I had always had a knack for working with animals and aspired to become a veterinarian someday. Little do most people know, veterinary school is more competitive to gain acceptance into than medical school, all the while being just as expensive. At the time that I decided to work towards becoming a veterinarian, I had no idea exactly what it would entail, but I knew grades had to come first if I wanted a shot at going to veterinary school. Therefore, my first day of freshman year I vowed to try and graduate valedictorian of my class and earn an academic scholarship that would make my overall cost of college less daunting. The promise I made to myself was all-consuming of my life but completely worth it in the end. I remember many late nights spent hunched over a physics textbook instead of watching the latest episode of “Grey’s Anatomy” or going out with friends. The entire time I told myself “education is key” because I had to believe that my efforts would turn from trials to triumphs. In the end, I was more than victorious. I graduated top of my class, with nearly full scholarship for my undergraduate education. This, however, was not the only benefit derived from my perseverance.

I applied to Mississippi State University's Early Entry veterinary program, which takes twenty-five applicants a year and reserves a spot for each student in their veterinary program once the students' prerequisites for veterinary school have been met. In other words, the Early Entry Program allows students to bypass the applications, the interviews, the stress, and often the rejection that comes along with applying to veterinary school. I was beyond blessed to be accepted into this program, and I now consider this to be the greatest proof that my educational endeavors have paid off.

My story has a satisfactory ending, like that of Ashley Rhodes-Courter. One thing we both share is our belief in higher education, as seen when Ashley writes about her opportunities and "full-ride merit scholarship" at Eckerd University during the epilogue of the book (page 315). She says, "My major expanded from Communications to include Theatre, and I added minors in Political Science and Psychology" (page 315). Growing up, Ashley had little control over anything, but she could take charge of her performance in the classroom. To her, education was a light that shined in the darkness of her life. Learning was a tool that could be used to battle her circumstances, and it was her love for school that likely laid the foundation for her later successes. Ashley is an example to all students, regardless of background, that education is not only powerful; it is liberating.