March 1, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

There is an art to making hard work look easy. The prose in *The Great Gatsby*, seems effortless, but we know it took F. Scott Fitzgerald five years of tedious, methodical effort to make his writing seem so casual. Gillian Gaynor makes her accomplishments at school seem like it all comes to her easily. However, if you look beyond that calm demeanor that seems never to need to draw attention to herself, that suggests she has it all under control, you find someone who works tirelessly and cares deeply about learning. I am writing this letter of recommendation because Gillian is nearly the perfect student. She works hard and she excels in our most demanding classes. She never asks for extra favors. She never needs to draw attention to herself in class. She is not a mercenary student whose every action is driven by the thought of admission to an elite school. Gillian actually wants to learn, to know and to understand. So, day after day, Gillian comes to class and provides, smart, thoughtful, informed answers to hard questions about hard texts. She writes smart and lovely essays. Her tests are always excellent. She does make it all seem easy. But I know how hard she works, I know the stresses and pressures she copes with and that is why I recommend her. She will work very hard, she will do very well and she will care very much about what she learns. For me, Gillian is exactly what any school or teacher or professor could possibly want in a student. I recommend Gillian, because I promise, if you accept her, you will never, ever have a second thought about that decision.

I think I can say with confidence that Gillian was my best student in AP Language and Composition last year. Not only was her work excellent, it was always excellent. She never turned in an assignment that was just very good. Her contributions to class discussion were always, sharp, smart and thoughtful. She was one of the few AP students who would ask questions about something she saw in the text. Too many of my AP students regard asking questions as revealing some insufficiency in their understanding. Gillian was willing to take risks and throw out an idea that she wasn’t sure about. But it is through the risk takers like Gillian that classes can really explore the rich, complex, and layered meanings in a text. Gillian always seems to be calm and confident in class and it is that calmness coupled with her consistent excellence that can lead a teacher to thinking it is all too easy for her. However, I have seen her in Chem Labs hours after school. I have seen her sitting in the Calculus teacher’s room going over problems at 4:00pm. I have watched as she toiled to write another one of her carefully crafted essays. I know, it is not easy. Her grades are a product of intensely focused hard work. Her grades are the result of paying attention to details so she can understand all the subtleties in a text. Her grades are a consequence of her wanting to learn as much as she possibly can in the time she has. This all explains why Gillian has taken our most rigorous classes and excelled in all of them. She works so hard, because she wants to learn so much. What I also admire about Gillian is she does not need to impress. She is not in competition with others students. Though she is in competition with herself which is a much more demanding competition. Gillian does not need to show how smart she is. She never sneers at another student’s ideas which may not be on the level with hers. While she may respectfully disagree with another student, she never implies their ideas are inferior to hers or suggest they come from some malign intent. In fact, Gillian is always warm, gracious and supportive of her peers. Students want to partner with her, because she seems to have an innate knack for bringing out the best in them. In short, it was more than a pleasure to have Gillian in class because my classroom was a better learning environment because of her presence in it.

Gillian’s calm and quietly confident demeanor explains why she is not only a great student, but an accomplished athlete and musician. Gillian plays on our Soccer, Cross Country and Track Teams. More than that, she is a captain on all three teams, which is particularly remarkable as the Cross Country Team and the Soccer team compete during the same season. She has to figure out how to juggle practice and competition in both sports while serving as a captain. I don’t know if I have ever seen anything like it before. We have had students compete in two sports in the same season, but to be a captain in both, that I have never seen. In Cross Country she has been a two time state qualifier and in Track she led the team to a section title last spring. Gillian is also our first violin (what else) in the Orchestra. We may be a small school but we have a large and thunderous Orchestra that is renowned in much of Western Pennsylvania and as first violin, Gillian is a large part of that success. Again, unless you watch Gillian closely, you are inclined to think this all comes naturally, and no doubt, natural talent is part of the equation. But her calm nature allows her to organize her time in a way that lets her practice in a very focused way so that she can be so accomplished in so many areas. Gillian also is a member of our very active History Club, Vice-President of the National Honor Society, and President of our French Club. On top of all this, she volunteers at the Presbyterian Senior Home (she has been doing this for a decade), as well as helped out with the Pittsburgh Marathon and the Oakmont 5K Race. Last summer Gillian participated in a three week program at Brown University where she studied viral pathogens looking at the immunology of viral infections and genetic engineering of viral infections. Most high school juniors spend their summer working part time and hanging out. Gillian used it to learn about one of the pressing health issues of our time, how do we manage increasingly powerful viruses when they are getting more and more resistant to traditional methods of controlling them? I know Gillian well enough that she would have loved to spend her summer relaxing from all the hard work of the school year. However, she loves learning even more than relaxing and when given a chance to take part in something that not only fascinated her, but allowed her to get involved with work that could eventually lead to saving hundreds of thousands of lives, how could she pass it up? So, weary, but determined and talented, she headed up to Providence to learn and make a difference.

Okay, this is the part of the letter where I tell you how wonderful and talented she is and you would be well advised to accept her as a student. However, that all seems obvious. She is clearly all of that. She is kind, funny, talented, hardworking, compassionate and conscientious. She is in fact everything we want the best of our next generation to be. She is the kind of talent who will see a problems and find solutions that we could never have imagined today. She is the kind of compassionate young leader who will take the mess our generation has left theirs and lead us to better ways of living and help create a better world than the one they inherited. So, I am going to say something slightly different. I think you would be absolutely crazy not to take Gillian Gaynor. You may have applicants from more prestigious, private schools, but you will have none who are better. None who care more. None who are more accomplished. None who will work harder and none who will have the calm and equanimity to find ways to organize her life to get things done and done beautifully. Gillian may appear on the surface to be calm and relaxed, but underneath she is fierce, and I promise, you will never do better than with Gillian Gaynor. So, my advice, don’t ask questions and don’t waste time, just admit her, you will never regret that decision.

Sincerely,

Mark Carlin

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