Kenneth Witz graduated from McHenry High School West, where he played varsity basketball and was a member of the Math Club. Kenneth is currently majoring in mechanical engineering in hopes of designing more efficient machines to improve the environment. His interview essay reflects his mechanical interests, and it also highlights his respect for teachers, who he says should be a top priority in our society because of the influence they can have on students.

Kenneth wrote this interview essay in Nicole Smith's English 103 course.
My freshman year of high school was quite the experience. Most everything I was taught seemed useless and irrelevant to my life. For me, school came easy, but I’m not saying that I enjoyed it. I always put up a struggle and argued that I would never use anything these teachers preached to me. My first week of school was like any other: homework, lectures, and the seemingly-endless ninth periods. One morning, while I secretly tried to sneak into school late, I heard the unmistakable rumble of a high-performance V8 engine roar through the air. Disregarding my class, I decided to wander off to try to find out where this heart-pounding sound was coming from. I came upon a group of students and a teacher who all had their heads buried under the hood of a 1988 Mustang.

“Give her gas,” was all I heard.

The sound ripped through the air; I could feel the motor scream all the way into my chest. My eyes were big, and my blood pumped relentlessly through my veins. I was hooked.

Second semester came along, and finally, I was able to get into that auto class that I had been dreaming about. It was amazing: motors laying everywhere, parts lining shelves, and curious young men like myself eagerly waiting to learn. Our teacher, Mr. Caruso, was awesome, too. He was tall with thick brown hair that occasionally got in the way of his view. His hands were permanently stained from countless hours spent underneath cars. He almost seemed as if he was one of us, a student. Besides the fact that Caruso knew pretty much everything there was to know about cars, he was just like us. He was a teacher you could really relate to, someone you could ask any type of question and expect to hear an honest opinion. I can’t even recall how many times Mr. Caruso and the rest of us would stay late just to finish the project we had started.

I was always amazed at how much he really cared about his class and his students. He frequently helped students fix their cars, regardless of the problem. One day, after baseball practice, I stumbled by the auto shop to find Mr. Caruso, along with one of my classmates, under a car. The
student’s car had a serious oil leak, and he was trapped at school until it was fixed. “What happened here?”

“Ah, nothing much. Just a blown head gasket,” Mr. Caruso chuckled.

It was around seven at night, and even though there was school in the morning, I decided to help. “Need a hand?”

“Always do,” he said, as he nudged his arms into the engine bay.

We worked until about 10 p.m., taking breaks to ask questions, talk about school, and pick Caruso’s brain. I loved being in his class for many reasons. One reason I liked it so much was that he was more than a teacher—he was a friend. I always wondered why he cared so much and why he was so different. His personality attracted many students. He was someone you knew you could ask for help, regardless of the situation. Despite what many would think, he knew more than just cars. When I spent my study hall in the shop, he would always ask me if I needed help on any type of homework. He asked, “So what do we have going on here?”

“Calculus derivatives,” I moaned. To my surprise, he noted a few errors that I had already made. Knowing that Caruso knew more than just cars, I sort of hired him as my new mentor for the rest of my high school career. His care continued up to my senior year, and when I was torn on a significant life decision, he helped me through it. I applied and was accepted to the University of Illinois in 2006. Though a big accomplishment, I pondered other possibilities for my future. For one, my family was kind of on the lower end of the financial totem pole. I knew neither my family nor I could possibly afford college, so I searched for other options. I decided to go to my local recruiting office and see what they had to offer. When I arrived at the building, a huge sign read, “U.S. Armed Forces Recruiting Center.” As soon as I read it, I felt as if I were in another world. I walked in, and to my surprise, an Army sergeant was waiting at the door. I wanted to see what each branch had to offer, and since this Army dude was waiting for me, I went into his office first.

“Take a look at all these benefits you’ll receive.” A fat stack of pamphlets and brochures littered his desk.

He told me all about how I could go to school for free and possibly travel around the world. It seemed like a good deal to me, so I took the paperwork and went off to explore the other branch offices. I poked my head into the US Marines office. “What do you want!” someone shouted.

“Uhhh, I was just…” I nervously uttered.

“Well, what!” the recruiter said.
Skeptical, I walked in. I saw a tall man with a fresh haircut and shave. The razor-sharp creases on his uniform were somewhat intimidating. This meeting was much different than the first: he didn't give me one good reason to join the Corps. “So, what makes you think you can be a Marine?” he asked.

I explained my financial situation and why I didn't want to go to college at the time. The meeting turned into a job interview, and I was trying to give him reasons why I would be worthy of the title “Marine.”

A few weeks passed, and I decided that I wanted to join the Marine Corps. I knew I had to break the news to my mom and dad sometime, so after school one day, I went directly home to let them know. As one would expect, my mom was outraged. Our family meeting ended with my mom yelling and me leaving. I went somewhere that made me feel comfortable: the shop. I wanted a second opinion, so I told Mr. Caruso, “I want to join the Marines.”

“Then do it.” I was astonished at his calmness.

“You don't think it’s a bad idea?” I wondered.

“Not at all. If that’s what you want to do, then give it your best effort, and do it,” he said. I agreed with him.

I went on to explain how upset my mother was and her reaction when I told her.

“Time goes by too fast to have regrets. One day, you might be old like me and regret that you didn’t do it.” I took his words of wisdom and confirmed my decision at that point.

Satisfied with my decision and thankful for Caruso's thoughts, I spent the next four years happily serving my country. I decided to get back in touch with Caruso when my contract was over, and I was finally back in Illinois. After exchanging a few emails, we decided to meet up at the shop. I joyfully pulled up in my 2005 Mustang GT to find Caruso neck deep under a hood. “Wow, when did ya pick this up?” he asked. He admired my satin silver, five-hundred-horsepower, nitrous-fed car.

“I saved twenty grand when I was in Iraq, dropped half on a down payment.” He looked the same way I probably looked when I was in high school admiring his 1988 Mustang. So, we went off into the shop, and just as I remembered, it was full of goodies. It brought back a weird nostalgic feeling to be there: I felt as if I never left. He shoveled a bunch of car parts off of a table, and we began to talk. “So, what do you like about teaching?”

“I love interacting with students and love cars. I enjoy seeing progress and watching the students work together as a team. I see a lot of self-
confidence improve, and a lot of students come together as a team and complete a task: that's the most rewarding part. Whether they become doctors or mechanics, I hope that something I taught them benefits them for the rest of their lives.”

This made sense. He honestly cared about each and every one of his students. He always liked to hear about our future plans after school. Becoming a productive citizen was most important to him.

“Besides automotive skill, what else do you aspire to do for your students?”

“Like I said, I like to see students work as a team. Whether or not they use their automotive skills later in life, they will definitely use their team working skills.” I wasn't surprised by his first few answers to my questions. I knew from my experiences with him in school that he was a big fan of teamwork. I could tell that he valued teaching, rather than showing. Though it was tough to contact Caruso, he was quite interested in what I had to ask. “What made you become a teacher?” I asked.

“A long time ago, when I was twenty-one, my dad, Jim, passed away. When he was around, we were always working on cars together. He taught me everything I knew. I wanted to own my own shop one day. When he passed, I was clueless. I always knew that there would be something to fix or something to replace. Once he was gone, that feeling wasn't there anymore. I felt lost in life, and my earlier plan to be a mechanic got thrown out the window. My best memories were spent with my dad under a car, so I decided to give other people what he gave me. I went to Eastern Illinois University and got my degree and started teaching.” I was somewhat stricken by his response, and I couldn't really muster a response at that point. I couldn't imagine losing my father at such a young age.

I didn't want to sit on the subject, so I kept talking to him. “Tell me a special moment in your life that you'll never forget,” I requested.

“I’ll never forget when my wife's car broke down on our way home from a fireworks show a few years ago. It was dark outside, so we had it towed to the shop on Route 120. The next morning, when I showed up, I asked to speak to the manager about what happened. He walked out of his office, and as soon as I saw him, I was surprised. It was one of my students that graduated three years ago. He and his brother co-owned their own shop.” I admired the story, and I must say I was pretty surprised as well when he said that a former student of his was the manager.

“That's what teaching is all about, and that day gave me an awesome feeling and motivates me to keep doing what I do,” he explained. After
meeting with Caruso, I started pondering how his ethics and efforts as a teacher had rubbed off on me. I put down my papers, and we started walking around the shop looking at all of the projects he had going on. I really felt as if I were still in school, as I had years ago. We talked just as we did when I was a senior. He asked a bunch of questions about the military: what I liked and disliked about it and whether or not I was happy with my decision. I looked up at the clock and noticed that a few hours had passed. Time always seemed to slow down when I was hanging out with Caruso. “Well, thanks a lot for helping me out again,” I said.

“No problem—good luck on your assignment and feel free to stop by whenever.” We exchanged phone numbers and planned to go to the track a few times before it closed for the winter. I paid close attention to him when I started my car—the rumble got his attention, and I saw his head jolt up as soon as he heard the deep, muscular tone of my car. I’m sure he couldn’t see me watching through my tinted windows, but it was kind of funny.

I took a lot from my time with Mr. Caruso, and I feel that his actions have really shaped my entire life. Even while I was in the service, I planned on being a mechanic when my four years were over. I’ve been a car enthusiast ever since my freshman year in high school, and I owe it to Caruso. Rather than being a mechanic one day and possibly owning his own shop, he decided to carry on his father’s legacy and share the valuable ethics and moments that his father gave him. I could tell by speaking with him that he really did cherish his moments with his father. I feel his best memories are from his father and the passion that they shared. He valued those times so much that he spends his life sharing those moments with hundreds of students. I think his father would be very proud if he could see all the students who admire his son. Most of my favorite times in high school were spent in that shop. I definitely share that special feeling his father once shared with him.