

April 1, 2007

For Girls, It's Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too

By [SARA RIMER](#)

NEWTON, Mass., March 31 — To anyone who knows 17-year-old Esther Mobley, one of the best students at one of the best public high schools in the country, it is absurd to think she doesn't measure up. But Esther herself is quick to set the record straight.

"First of all, I'm a terrible athlete," she said over lunch one day.

"I run, I do, but not very quickly, and always exhaustedly," she continued. "This is one of the things I'm most insecure about. You meet someone, especially on a college tour, adults ask you what you do. They say, 'What sports do you play?' I don't play any sports. It's awkward."

Esther, a willowy, effervescent senior, turned to her friend Colby Kennedy. Colby, 17, is also a great student, a classical pianist, fluent in Spanish, and a three-season varsity runner and track captain. Did Colby worry, Esther asked, that she fell short in some way?

"Or," said Esther, and now her tone was a touch sarcastic, "do you just have it all already?"

They both burst out laughing.

Esther and Colby are two of the amazing girls at Newton North High School here in this affluent suburb just outside Boston. "Amazing girls" translation: Girls by the dozen who are high achieving, ambitious and confident (if not immune to the usual adolescent insecurities and meltdowns). Girls who do everything: Varsity sports. Student government. Theater. Community service. Girls who have grown up learning they can do anything a boy can do, which is anything they want to do.

But being an amazing girl often doesn't feel like enough these days when you're competing with all the other amazing girls around the country who are applying to the same elite colleges that you have been encouraged to aspire to practically all your life.

An athlete, after all, is one of the few things Esther isn't. A few of the things she is: a standout in Advanced Placement Latin and honors philosophy/literature who can expound on the beauty of the subjunctive mood in Catullus and on Kierkegaard's existential choices. A writer whose junior thesis for Advanced Placement history won Newton North's top prize. An actress. President of her church youth group.

To spend several months in a pressure cooker like Newton North is to see what a girl can be — what any young person can be — when encouraged by committed teachers and by engaged parents who can give them wide-ranging opportunities.

It is also to see these girls struggle to navigate the conflicting messages they have been absorbing, if not from their parents then from the culture, since elementary school. The first message: Bring home A's. Do everything. Get into a top college — which doesn't have to be in the *Ivy League*, or one of the other elites like Williams, Tufts or Bowdoin, but should be a "name" school.

The second message: Be yourself. Have fun. Don't work too hard.

And, for all their accomplishments and ambitions, the amazing girls, as their teachers and classmates call them, are not immune to the third message: While it is now cool to be smart, it is not enough to be smart.

You still have to be pretty, thin and, as one of Esther's classmates, Kat Jiang, a go-to stage manager for student theater who has a perfect 2400 score on her SATs, wrote in an e-mail message, "It's out of style to admit it, but it is more important to be hot than smart."

"Effortlessly hot," Kat added.

If you are free to be everything, you are also expected to be everything. What it comes down to, in this place and time, is that the eternal adolescent search for self is going on at the same time as the quest for the perfect résumé. For Esther, as for high school seniors everywhere, this is a big weekend for finding out how your résumé measured up: The college acceptances, and rejections, are rolling in.

"You want to achieve," Esther said. "But how do you achieve and still be genuine?"

If it all seems overwhelming at times, then the multitasking adults in Newton have the answer: Balance. Strive for balance.

But balance is out the window when you're a high-achieving senior in the home stretch of the race for which all the years of achieving and the disciplined focusing on the future have been preparing you. These students are aware that because more girls apply to college than boys, amid concerns about gender balance, boys may have an edge at some small selective colleges.

"You're supposed to have all these extracurriculars, to play sports and do theater," said another of Esther's 17-year-old classmates, Julie Mhlaba, who aspires to medical school and juggles three Advanced Placement classes, gospel choir and a part-time job as a waitress. "You're supposed to do well in your classes and still have time to go out."

"You're supposed to do all these things," Julie said, "and not go insane."

Stress Trumps Relaxation

Newton, which has a population of almost 84,000, is known for a liberal sensibility and a high concentration of professionals like doctors, lawyers and academics. Six miles west of Boston, with its heavily settled neighborhoods, bustling downtowns and high numbers of immigrants, Newton is a suburb with an urban feel.

The main shopping area, in Newton Centre, is a concrete manifestation of the conflicting messages Esther and the other girls are constantly struggling to decode. In one five-block stretch are two Starbucks and one Peets Coffee & Tea, several psychotherapists' offices, three SAT test-prep services, two after-school math programs, and three yoga studios promising relaxation and inner peace.

Smack in the middle of all of this is Esther's church, the 227-year-old First Baptist, which welcomes everyone regardless of race, sexual orientation or denomination, and where Esther puts in a lot of time.

The test-prep business is booming. Kaplan ("Be the ideal college applicant!") is practically around the corner from Chyten ("Our average SAT II score across all subjects is 720!"), which is three blocks from Princeton Review ("We're all about scoring more!"). My First Yoga (for children 3 and up), with its founder playing up her [Harvard](#) degree, is conveniently located above Chyten, which includes the SAT Cafe.

High-priced SAT prep has become almost routine at schools like Newton North. Not to hire the extra help is practically an act of rebellion.

"I think it's unfair," Esther said, explaining why she decided against an SAT tutor, though she worried about her score (ultimately getting, as she put it, "above 2000"). "Why do I deserve this leg up?"

Parents view Newton's expensive real estate — the median house price in 2006 was \$730,000 — and high taxes as the price of admission to the prized public schools. There are less affluent parents, small-business owners, carpenters, plumbers, social workers and high school guidance counselors, but many of these families arrived decades ago when it was possible to buy a nice two-story Colonial for \$150,000 or less.

Newton North, one of two outstanding public high schools here, is known for its academic rigor, but also its vocational education, reflecting the wide range of its 1,967 students. Nearly 73 percent of them are white, 7.3 percent black, nearly 12 percent Asian and 7.5 percent Hispanic. Many of the black and Hispanic students live in the Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston, and are bused in under a 35-year-old voluntary integration program.

Newton North has a student theater, winning athletic teams and dozens of after-school clubs (ultimate Frisbee, mock trial, black leadership, Hispanic culture, Israeli dance). There is an emphasis on nonconformity — even if it is often conformity dressed up as nonconformity — and an absence of such high school conventions as, say, homecoming queens, valedictorians and class rankings.

'Superhuman' Resistance

Jennifer Price, the Newton North principal, said she and her faculty emphasized to students that they could win admission to many excellent colleges without organizing their entire lives around résumé building. By age 14, Ms. Price said, the school's highest fliers are already worrying about marketing themselves to colleges: "You almost have to be superhuman to resist the pressure."

If more students aren't listening to the message that they can relax a bit, one reason may be that a lot of the people delivering the message went to the elite colleges. Ms. Price has an undergraduate degree from Princeton — she makes a point of saying that she got in because she was recruited to play varsity field hockey — and is a doctoral candidate at Harvard. Many of the teachers have degrees from the Ivy League and other elite schools.

But the message also tends to get drowned out when parents bump into each other at Whole Foods and share news about whose son or daughter just got accepted (or not) at Harvard, Yale, Brown, Penn or Stanford.

Or when the final edition of the award-winning student newspaper, the Newtonite, comes out every June, with its two-page spread listing all the seniors, and their colleges. For that entire week, Esther says, everyone pores over the names, obsessing about who is going where.

"In a lot of ways, it's all about that one week," she said.

There is something about the lives these girls lead — their jam-packed schedules, the amped-up multitasking, the focus on a narrow group of the nation's most selective colleges — that speaks of a profound anxiety in the young people, but perhaps even more so in their parents, about the ability of the next generation to afford to raise their families in a place like Newton.

Admission to a brand-name college is viewed by many parents, and their children, as holding the best promise of professional success and economic well-being in an increasingly competitive world.

"It's, like, a really big deal to go into a lucrative profession so that you can provide for your kids, and they can grow up in a place like the place where you grew up," Kat said.

Esther, however, is aiming for a decidedly nonlucrative profession. Inspired by her father, Greg Mobley, who is a Biblical scholar, she wants to be a theologian.

She says she is interested in "Scripture, the Bible, the development of organized religion, thinking about all this, writing about all this, teaching about all this." More than anything else, she wrote in an e-mail message, she wants to be a writer, "and religion is what I most like to write about."

"I have such a strong sense of being supported by my faith," she continued. "It gives me priorities. That's why I'm not concerned about making money, because I know that there is so much more to living a rich life than having money."

First Baptist Church counts on Esther. She organizes pancake suppers, tutors a young congregant and helps lead the youth group's outreach to the poor.

On a springlike Sunday afternoon toward the end of winter, Esther could be found with her father, her two brothers and members of her youth group handing out food to homeless people on Boston Common. She had spent the morning in church.

About 2 p.m., a text message flashed across her cellphone from Gabe Gladstone, a co-captain of mock trial: "Where are you?" Esther, a key member of the group, was needed at a meeting.

Esther messaged back: "I'm feeding the homeless, I'll come when God's work is done."

Fending Off 'Anorexia of the Soul'

On a Saturday afternoon in late November, Esther and her mother, Page Kelley, sat at the dining room table talking about the contradictions and complexities of life in Newton. Esther's father was with his sons, Gregory, 15, who plays varsity basketball for Newton North, and Tommy, 10, coaching Tommy's basketball team.

Ms. Kelley, 47, an assistant federal public defender, and Mr. Mobley, 49, a professor at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, grew up in Kentucky and came north for college. Ms. Kelley is a graduate of Smith College and Harvard Law School. Mr. Mobley has two graduate degrees from Harvard.

Amid all the competitiveness and consumerism, and the obsession with achievement in Newton, Ms. Kelley said, "You just hope your child doesn't have anorexia of the soul."

"It's the idea that you end up with this strange drive," she continued. "One of the great things about Esther is that she does have some kind of spiritual life. You just hope your kid has good priorities. We keep saying to her: 'The name of the college you go to doesn't matter. There are a lot of good colleges out there.'"

Esther said her mother is her role model. "I think the work she does is very noble," she said.

"She has these impressive degrees," Esther said, "and she chooses to do something where she's not making as much money as she could."

As close as mother and daughter are, there is one important generational divide. "My mother applied to one college," Esther said. "She got in, she went."

Back from basketball practice with his sons, Mr. Mobley joined the conversation. To Mr. Mobley, a formalized, competitive culture pervades everything from youth sports to getting into college. He pointed out to his wife that the lives of their three children were far more directed "than any of the aimless hours I spent in my youth daydreaming and meandering."

Ms. Kelley asked, "Is that because of us?"

"Yes — and no," he said. "It's because of 2006 in America, and the Northeast."

The bar for achievement keeps being raised for each generation, he said: "Our children start where we finished."

As the afternoon turned into early evening, Esther went out to meet her best friend, Aliza Edelstein. The family dog, a Jack Russell terrier named Bandit, was underfoot, trolling for affection.

"I'm not worried about Esther because I know her," Mr. Mobley said. "Esther's character is sealed in some fundamental way."

Ms. Kelley, however, wondered aloud: "Don't you worry that she never rebelled? When I was growing up, you were supposed to rebel."

But she acknowledged that she had sent her own mixed signals. "As I'm sitting here saying I don't care what kind of grades she gets, I'm thinking, she comes home with a B, and I say: 'What'd you get a B for? Who gave you a B? I'm going to talk to them.'

"You do want your child to do well."

Mr. Mobley nodded. "We're not above it," he said. "It's complicated."

On a Fierce Mission to Shine

To sit in on classes with Esther in her vibrant high school where, between classes, the central corridor, called Main Street, is a bustling social hub, is to see why these students are genuinely excited about school.

Their teachers are pushing them to wrestle with big questions: What is truth? What does Virgil's "Aeneid" tell us about destiny and individual happiness? How does DNA work? How is the global economy reshaping the world (subtext: you have to be fluid and highly educated to survive in the new economy)?

Esther's ethics teacher, Joel Greifinger, spent considerable time this winter on moral theories. An examination of John Rawls's theory of justice led to extensive discussions about American society and class inequality. Among the reading material Mr. Greifinger

presented was research showing the correlation between income and SAT scores.

The class strengthened Esther's earlier decision not to take private SAT prep.

In her honors philosophy/literature class, Esther has been reading Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, "Sophie's Choice" and Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning." Amid a discussion of the strangely unsettling emptiness Frankl encountered upon his release from a Nazi concentration camp, Esther quoted Sartre: "You are condemned to freedom."

Her honors teacher, Mike Fieleke, nodded. "That's the existential idea. If we don't awaken to that freedom, then we are slaves to our fate."

A few weeks earlier, Esther, taking stock of her own life, wrote in an e-mail message: "I feel like I'm on the verge. I feel like I'm just about to get out of high school, to enter into adulthood, to reach some kind of state of independence and peacefulness and enlightenment."

More immediately, she wrote, Mr. Fieleke had told her "he thought, from reading my papers and hearing me speak in class, that I was just on the verge of some really great idea."

"I asked him if he thought that idea would come by next Wednesday, when our big Hamlet paper was due. He said I might feel this way all year long."

The most intensely pressurized academic force field at school is the one surrounding the students on the Advanced Placement and honors track. About 145 of the 500 seniors are taking a combined total of three, four and five Advanced Placement and honors classes, with a few students even juggling six and seven.

Esther's friend Colby takes four Advanced Placement and one honors class. "I'm living up to my own expectations," Colby said. "It's what I want to do. I want to do well for myself."

Another of Esther's friends, from student theater, Lee Gerstenhaber, 17, was juggling four Advanced Placement classes with intense late-night rehearsals for her starring role as Maggie, the seductive Southern belle in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." It was too much. About 4 a.m. one day last fall, she was still fighting her way through Advanced Placement physics homework. She dissolved in tears.

"I had always been able to do it before," Lee recalled later. "But I finally said to myself, 'O.K., I'm not Superwoman.'"

She dropped physics — and was incandescent as Maggie.

Esther's schedule includes two Advanced Placement and one honors class. Among certain of her classmates who are mindful that many elite colleges advise prospective applicants

to pursue the most rigorous possible course of study, taking two Advanced Placement classes is viewed as "only two A.P.'s." But Esther says she is simply taking the subjects she is most interested in.

She also shrugged off advice that it would look better on her résumé to take another science class instead of her passion, A.P. Latin. Like so many of her classmates, Esther started taking Latin in the seventh grade, when everyone was saying Latin would help them with the SAT. But now, except for Esther and a handful of other diehards who are devoted to Latin — and to their teacher, Robert Mitchell — everyone else has moved on.

"I like languages," said Esther, who also takes Advanced Placement Spanish. "And I really like Latin."

Who Needs a Boyfriend?

This year Esther has been trying life without a boyfriend. It was her mother's idea. "She'd say, 'I think it's time for you to take a break and discover who you are,'" Esther said over lunch with Colby. "She was right. I feel better."

Esther turned to Colby: she seems to pretty much always have a boyfriend.

"I never felt like having a boyfriend was a burden," Colby said. "I enjoy just being comfortable with someone, being able to spend time together. I don't think that means I wouldn't feel comfortable or confident without one."

Esther said: "I'm not trying to say that's a bad thing. I'm like you. I never thought, 'If I don't have a boyfriend I'll feel totally forlorn and lost.'"

But who needs a boyfriend? "My girlfriends have consistently been more important than my boyfriends," Esther wrote in an e-mail message. "I mean, girlfriends last longer."

Boyfriends or not, a deeper question for Esther and Colby is how they negotiate their identities as young women. They have grown up watching their mothers, and their friends' mothers, juggle family and career. They take it for granted that they will be able to carve out similar paths, even if it doesn't look easy from their vantage point.

They say they want to be both feminine and assertive, like their mothers. But Colby made the point at lunch that she would rather be considered too assertive and less conventionally feminine than "be totally passive and a bystander in my life."

Esther agreed. She said she admired Cristina, the spunky resident on "Grey's Anatomy," one of her favorite TV shows.

"She really stands up for herself and knows who she is, which I aspire to," Esther said.

Cristina is also "gorgeous," Esther laughed. "And when she's taking off her scrubs, she's

always wearing cute lingerie."

Speaking of lingerie, part of being feminine is feeling good about how you look. Esther is not trying to be one of Newton North's trendsetters, the girls who show up every day in Ugg boots, designer jeans — or equally cool jeans from the vintage store — and tight-fitting tank tops under the latest North Face jacket.

She never looks "scrubby," to use the slang for being a slob, but sometimes comes to school in sweats and moccasins.

"I think sometimes I might be trying a little too hard not to conform," Esther says.

She says she is one of the few girls in her circle who doesn't have a credit card. But she is hardly immune to the pressure to be a good consumer.

During the discussion around the dining room table, Esther's mother expressed her astonishment over her daughter's expertise in designer jeans. They had been people-watching at the mall. Esther, as it turned out, knew the brand of every pair of jeans that went by.

So what were the coolest jeans at Newton North?

"The coolest jeans are True Religions," Esther said.

"They look," she said, and here she smiled sheepishly as she stood up to reveal her denim-clad legs, "like these."

Aliza and several of Esther's other friends chipped in to buy them for her 17th birthday, in November.

Encouraged to Ease Up a Little

The amazing boys say they admire girls like Esther and Colby.

"I hate it when girls dumb themselves down," Gabe Gladstone, the co-captain of mock trial, was saying one morning to the other captain, Cameron Ferrey.

Cameron said he felt the same way.

One of Esther's close friends is Dan Catomeris, a school theater star. "One of the most attractive things about Esther is how smart she is," said Dan, whose mother is a professor at Harvard Business School. "There's always been this intellectual tension between us. I see why she likes Kierkegaard — he's existential, but still Christian. She really likes Descartes. I was not so into Descartes. I really like Hume, Nietzsche, the existentialist authors. The musician we're most collectively into is Bob Dylan."

Sometimes, though, everybody wants some of these hard-charging girls to chill out. Tom DePeter, an Advanced Placement English teacher, wants his students to loosen up so they can write original sentences. The theater director, Adam Brown, wants the girls to "let go" in auditions.

Peter Martin, the girls' cross-country coach, says girls try so hard to please everyone — coaches, teachers, parents — that he bends over backward not to criticize them. "I tell them, 'Just go out and run.' " His team wins consistently.

But how do you chill out and still get into a highly selective college?

One of Esther's favorite rituals is to hang out at her house with Aliza, eating Ben and Jerry's and watching a DVD of a favorite program like "The Office." Their friendship helped Esther and Aliza keep going last fall, when there was hardly time to hang out. Esther recalled in an e-mail message how one night she had telephoned Aliza, who is also a top student, and a cross-country team captain, to say she was feeling overwhelmed.

"I said, 'Aliza, this is crazy, I have so much homework to do, and I won't be able to relax until I do it all. I haven't gone out in weeks!' And Aliza (who had also been staying in on Fridays and Saturdays to do homework) pointed out: 'I'd rather get into college.' "

By Dec. 15, Newton North was in a frenzy over early admissions answers. Esther's friend Phoebe Gardener had been accepted to Dartmouth. Her friend Dan Lurie was in at Brown. Harvard wanted Dan Catomeris.

Esther was in calculus class, the last period of the day when her cellphone rang. It was her father. The letter from Williams College — her ideal of the small, liberal arts school — had arrived.

Her father would be at her brother's basketball game when she got home. Her mother would still be at the office. Esther did not want to be alone when she opened the letter.

"Dad, can you bring it to school?" she asked.

Ten minutes later, when her father arrived, Esther realized that he had somehow not registered the devastating thinness of the envelope. The admissions office was sorry. Williams had had a record number of highly qualified applicants for early admission this year. Esther had been rejected. Not deferred. Rejected.

Her father hugged her as she cried outside her classroom, and then he drove her home.

Esther said several days later: "Maybe it hurt me that I wasn't an athlete."

But she was already moving on. "I chose Williams," she said, with a shrug. "They didn't choose me back."

About that thin envelope: Mr. Mobley, unschooled in such intricacies, said he hadn't paid much attention to it. He had wanted so much for his daughter to get into Williams, he said, and believed so strongly in her, that it was as if he had wished the letter into being an acceptance.

"It was a setback," Mr. Mobley said weeks later. "But it's not a failure."

And Then One Day, a Letter Arrives

Has this all been a temporary insanity?

Esther's friend Colby learned in February that she had been accepted at the [University of Southern California](#). Soon, more letters of acceptance rolled in: from the [University of Miami](#), the [University of Texas at Austin](#), Tulane. With the college-application pressure behind her, she can go back to being the pragmatic romantic who opened her journal last August and wrote her "life list," with 35 goals and dreams, in pink ink.

She wants: To write a novel. Own a (red) Jeep Wrangler. Get into college. Name her firstborn daughter Carmen. Go to carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Learn to surf. Live in a Spanish-speaking country. Learn to play the doppio movimento of Chopin's Sonata in B Flat. Own a dog. Be a bridesmaid. Vote for president. Write a really good poem. Never get divorced.

In mid-January Esther was thrilled to receive an acceptance letter from Centre College, one of her fallback schools, in Kentucky. But she was still dreaming about her remaining top choices: Amherst, Middlebury, Davidson and Smith, her mother's alma mater.

Esther's application to Smith included a letter from her father. He wrote about how, when Esther was a baby, they had gone to his wife's 10th college reunion. He described the alumni parade as an "angelic procession of women in white, decade by decade, at every stage in the course of human life."

He wrote about seeing the young women, the middle-aged graduates and, finally, "the elderly women, some with the assistance of canes and wheelchairs, but with no diminution of the confidence that a great education brings."

"I still remember holding Esther as we watched those saints go marching into the central campus for the commencement ceremony," he wrote.

"Lord," he concluded, and he could have been talking about any of the schools his daughter still has her heart set on, "I want Esther to be in that number."

Epilogue: Esther learned last week that she had gotten into Smith. She learned on Saturday that she had been rejected by Amherst and Middlebury. She is still hoping for Davidson.