By Amy Elizabeth Singh  
Class of 2018

I was the first member of my family to graduate from high school, and will also be the first to attend university. For these and many more reasons, Adam Braun’s book *The Promise of a Pencil* really resonated with me. I identified with many of the characters and I felt as though I shared a bond with these individuals because, despite our many differences, we all share a common reverence for the empowerment that having an education affords.

As a child, my mother was unable to attend school regularly due to the costs. Then, when her family immigrated to Canada during her youth and she finally did rejoin the school system, her lack of an adequate educational foundation, coupled with the necessity of working three jobs, led to her inability to keep up. As a result, my mother has dedicated her entire life to making sure I get every opportunity that she missed out on. She has single handedly raised me and also instilled an awareness for how beneficial having an education can be. She has always told me “knowledge is power, and education will be [my] salvation.” Her dedication to ensuring I succeed where she has failed reminds me of Braun’s grandmother and Joel Puac. She sacrifices daily and puts my needs before her own because she knows the only way I can break out of the poverty in which we live is through education. This is why my primary motivation for getting a college education is to validate her sacrifices and make her proud. Braun’s sentiments about being able to live the life his ancestors never could, as a result of their sacrifices, served as a reminder that I should appreciate everything my mother has done to provide for me. I, too, would like the chance to honor my mother through my actions.
Reflection on “The Promise of a Pencil” by Adam Braun

Reading Braun’s story has helped reaffirm my decision to become an elementary school teacher. Like Braun, I had dreams of gaining the social definition of success through a monetary definition. From the time I was three years old, I’d always dreamt of becoming a lawyer. I filled every available elective slot in high school with law-related courses and was an avid member of my school’s highly competitive moot court team. When senior year began, I was on track to become a pre-law major the following year. However, after re-evaluating my ambitions, I realized that while this track would certainly lift me out of the cycle of poverty in which my family currently resided, it wouldn’t exactly offer much personal fulfillment. So, before I sent out my applications to various colleges across the country, I reflected on what things in my life gave me the kind of personal fulfillment I desired. The most prevalent answer I came up with was summer camp.

For many years I attended a summer camp in northern Ontario run by the Salvation Army church. Their philosophy is that every child, regardless of economic situation, deserves to enjoy summer and all the amenities of a summer camp environment at little to no cost. When I was old enough, I returned to the same camp as a cabin leader in training and then again as a full cabin leader. The time I spent with those children are some of my best memories and I am extremely thankful to have been given the opportunity to provide them with fond memories of their own. While reflecting on this, I also realized that, for me, there is no better feeling than knowing I helped foster a child’s imagination and indulged in their curiosities. I found joy in each revelation my campers made and I loved being able to teach them new skills. I knew then that if I became a teacher I would be able to make a positive impact in the lives of many more children. With this revelation I decided to forgo my previous dream of becoming a lawyer in order to pursue my new dream, teaching.
Reflection on “The Promise of a Pencil” by Adam Braun

By working with local educational departments, Pencils of Promise is helping communities gain skills that will lead to self-reliance rather than the dependence many other non-profit organizations unintentionally create. This form of aid encourages those in better economic positions to get involved because they see their contributions as investments rather than handouts. If more non-profit organizations adopted similar strategies and followed a “for-purpose” mindset, then issues such as poverty may eventually begin to dissipate due to the empowerment this form of help provides.

Pencils of Promise has also made an enormous contribution to the lives of many “ordinary” individuals. Braun’s ability to inspire those around him and his congeniality make every single contributor feel valued. Adam challenges readers to get involved, but his story of how even the smallest contributions made a difference is the real driving force. Personally, I’ve always been a little wary of non-profit organizations because it is usually difficult to see where the donation goes, but I appreciate the transparency PoP provides. I also like the thought of being able to donate time and skills if monetary donations are not possible. I have considered spending the year after I graduate from SBU teaching abroad in developing nations and reading this book has heightened my motivation to do so. I enjoyed reading about how a highly successful “for-purpose” organization began with a simple $25 deposit and I feel incredibly privileged to be able to provide that same empowerment to other children by being their teacher. I hope that by sharing the gift of education with my students, I inspire them to go forth and make their own changes in the world.