

A+ Emerging Leader: Lauren Hutson

- Tell us about yourself: Your involvements, your passions, and your plans.

I run a lot! I've been a cross country runner at St. Pius X (SPX) High School for all four years and have run a couple half marathons in the last year. I'm also currently managing the SPX swim team, I'm president of the National Honor Society, and head our Lion Leader Program, which helps assimilate the freshman class into our school family.

I also work as a professional photographer! I have a sole proprietorship company (link: www.laurenhutson.com) specializing in family and senior portraits. The largest part of my work in photography is my foundation People Not Projects, which provides the refugee families of Clarkston, Georgia with complimentary family portraits. My passion in life is taking care of others and inspiring them to seek the best things for themselves, responding to others with empathy and compassion.

My current college plans are attending Georgia Tech with a major in neuroscience, although I'm still hearing back from schools!

- What is a long-term goal that you've set? If you've achieved it, what steps did you take to do so? If you haven't yet, what are your plans to?

I have set an unending goal of taking care of myself. I remain extremely conscientious about what I put in my body by eating very healthy, exercising six or more days per week, and maintaining a healthy mentality as a socially-, athletically-, and academically-applied high school student.

I tend to make my goals unattainable so that I can always work toward them and never become complacent with anything less, as it incentivizes me to continue my perpetual self-improvement.

But while I strive for this perfection, my other long-term goal is to accept the "good enough" rather than constantly beating down on myself for not being what no human ever really is.

- What are your current goals?

I have three main current goals:

1. To live my life such that if anyone were to say something negative about me, no one would believe it. (This is much more long-term.)
2. To finish high school with my sanity intact!
3. To learn how to relax. All of my New Year's resolutions last year pertained to developing a work ethic, and now that that's permanently ingrained in my being, I need to know how to dial it back so that I don't crash.

- Tell us about a time when you truly challenged yourself and what you learned from it.

I transferred from Greater Atlanta Christian School to SPX my freshman year, and I made this decision independent of my parents. In changing schools I took on the challenge of reinventing myself to ensure a very gratifying high school experience. SPX has given me the continual opportunity to evolve from my introverted, self-isolating middle school self into a personable and compassionate friend, as well as a vigorous and dedicated student.

I'm very proud of myself for deciding to take this leap of faith; it was the first time that I actively sought out positive change for myself rather than settling and remaining in a place in which I knew I was unhappy. This event was monumental in developing my personality; it was very difficult to enter a school in which I knew no one, which forced me to branch out and create my own positive change in an area of ambiguity. It set the precedent for how I would approach all of my problems in the future with an open mind and trust in the process.

- Tell us about a time when you went against the status quo or thought outside of the box. What were the results?

Many of my family friends are physicians who volunteer regularly at Grady Memorial Hospital, and in the spring of 2015, one doctor encountered a refugee mother who had just arrived from Eritrea and given birth to triplets. This doctor couldn't help but take this family under her wing and provide them with the assistance that they needed to assimilate into this new and unfamiliar country.

On the triplets' first birthday, this doctor, knowing my interest and developing skill in photography, asked if I would accompany her to Clarkston to take family portraits for the woman and her husband. I nervously obliged, but all of my doubts were cast away as soon as I met Simret and Samson. They're the kindest people I've ever met. When I eventually delivered framed versions of the photos I had taken for them, their gratitude overwhelmed my heart. It lit a fire within me that is yet to die.

The People Not Projects Foundation sprung from both my love of photography and my passion for improving and elevating the lives of others. Supported by local fundraising, I have taken, edited, printed, framed, and hand-delivered over 200 complimentary family portraits for the refugee communities in the outskirts of Atlanta who cannot afford professional photography of their growing children and families, a luxury that I quickly realized that I take for granted in my own life. I hadn't even considered the role that photography plays in identity.

Through gifting these pictures, I strive to help them develop a new sense of identity and belonging in an unfamiliar, daunting, and sometimes-unwelcoming country. It is my way of telling them that I honor their plight and flight and the horrors they have suffered that are unknown to me, and I welcome them with open arms into a country that is now as equally theirs as is mine.

- What is one of your weaknesses, and what is a situation in which you've overcome this to achieve a desired result?

I put everyone else first (which is definitely not wrong in and of itself,) but in doing so I have taught others that I come second. My forgiveness and kindness is free to all people, and because of such, I appear very easy to take advantage of. I'm very quick to disregard my own

needs for those of others, to an unhealthy extent. To counter this, I had to work to transform my kindness from the draining activity that it once was. I no longer expect gratification for it and it no longer undermines my coping with my own problems. I'm working hard to command respect from others now.

- What are three words that best describe you?

Mindful, self-driven, and kind.

- How do you think your attitude has impacted your goals and accomplishments?

I know that it sounds slightly neurotypical to say that "happiness is a choice," but my positive attitude toward everything I work for in life has affected more positive change than I ever thought possible. I used to be an adamant pessimist, and I didn't realize the degree to which one's mentality impacts performance. I got faster in cross country when I put my head into it, reinforcing myself with positive statements rather than bombarding my self-esteem with the "You will never reach your goals."

I'm very, VERY hard on myself, but no longer to the degree in which this self-criticism holds me back from my potential achievements. I maintain a healthy level of scrutinizing myself to propel myself forward.

- Tell us about a time when your communication skills were truly tested.

After I applied to Yale University, I was emailed with a request to interview for the school. I was to meet with an alumnus currently living in Atlanta who worked in admissions four days after receiving this email. I have never thought of myself as a good speaker, especially on the spot, and I see myself as a terrible arguer. I had absolutely no idea about what this interview was going to be like.

I showed up to the coffee shop and met one of the most intimidating men I've ever encountered in my life; he was disarmingly smart and quick in his speech, and started asking me questions immediately. He inquired about my use of particular words and challenged all of my opinions, even when I could tell he was playing devil's advocate.

I was so determined to make a good impression to increase my visibility to this prestigious school that words just started coming to me. I'd been taking a debate class at SPX that had made me very aware of my inadequacies in speech, but I mustered up all of the skill I had observed and held what was probably the best conversation of my life. This man was a Pulitzer Prize winner for books exposing the racial injustices of this country, and we had VERY different life experiences that I worked very hard to bridge and come to mutual understanding.

- How do you define "Leadership"? What does it take to be a leader in your eyes, and how does this impact your leadership style?

Leadership can be challenging because most of us lack faith in our ability to take charge over others, but rare is the leader who hasn't experienced self-doubt. It's especially paralyzing

for those whose image of leader is the cultural myth of a calm, confident power figure who knows and tells his followers exactly what to do.

In my own leadership, I don't want to perpetuate any societal taboos that paint indecision in a leader as a sign of weakness and further breed this apprehension. Your uncertainty is in fact your catalyst of growth, and your capacity to grow determines your capacity to lead.

Leadership is not the magnitude of your intellectual prowess, it's not your ability to delegate work among subordinates, and it's not the decibel measure of your demanding voice. You don't have to know how to surmount every obstacle in order for people to look up to you.

Leadership is your capacity to inspire others. To try to unlock people's potential for greatness and make them actively work toward realizing it. To lead from the back, letting others succeed in front. As their leader, your responsibility is not to strive to put greatness into them. Their greatness already exists deep within their multitude of efforts, talents, insights, and enthusiasm. Your task is to evoke it.

The best leader doesn't claim to know everything and doesn't tell you every decision you need to make. She doesn't even necessarily take charge over others, but rather enables and empowers them to make decisions independent of her. The best leader is one that the people barely know exists, and when her work is done and her plan fulfilled, the people will say: we did it ourselves.

This is what I try to put into place in my own leadership roles. I think that a leader should be first and foremost understanding and willing to become a beginner every day.

- What are the three most important values to you?

Work ethic, Integrity, and – most of all – Humility.

- What is your MBTI Type?

INFJ