

Financial Aid: My Story by Barbara Cameron

Description



We are excited to publish this piece by Barbara Cameron, who shares her honest thoughts and advice on what itâ€™s like to apply for and pay tuition at L.A. private schools with the help of financial aid. â€”Christina

In the past, if asked about applying for financial aid, my advice was: be humble. I just looked up *humility* in the dictionary; its definition surprised me: lack of pride, meek, servility.

I will take *servility*. To be of service.

However, I will not take debase, demean, a low estimate of oneâ€™s importance from that definition. No. You have a right to ask; the school has the power and the right to grant aid or not, depending on their needs and wants. You donâ€™t *deserve* it.

Always remember: It is a *gift*.

Be honest and be true. The *true* meaning, walk in with who you are, who your child is and a promise to honor yourself, your child and the school you say you want to become a part of. Why? The prestige? It should be far more than that. Find the school you can believe in and tell them why.

Remember, when applying you are *not* in the same position as someone paying full tuition. There is a specific amount of aid to distribute each year. These choices are being considered along with the factors involved in creating a new class each year. Also, I think it wise you never assume that because someone has plenty of money, dishing out that expensive tuition isn't noteworthy. In most cases, they have worked long and hard to earn it; you just have different circumstances, but work hard, too.

However, you are as valuable. You can be as valuable. You and your family enrich the school, money or no money.

Exhausting and tedious, filling out all that aid information, yes, it is hard and should be. Also, there are reasons they ask if you own a boat or have inherited money. People who don't need money will try to get money. Tell the truth and explain all your circumstances *honestly*. Age and earning power might play a role, even if there has been an inheritance. Details are important.

You are going to partner with this school in a financial bargain so always, always be honest. Your circumstances may change. Never assume you are not negotiating every year. However, never fear if your child isn't perfect you will lose the money. My son was not easy, diagnosed early on with ADHD/Anxiety, and The Willows Community School, as well as our current school, [Arête Preparatory Academy](#), supported, and continue to support us above and beyond. Did every teacher, every parent? No. Just because this is a private school does not mean you are in a magical land of understanding staff and parents abound. No. It's a school full of humans complete with complicated issues encountered in all schools. You, too, are complex and could be someone else's headache some days, some years.

However, did we receive support from teachers and other families? Yes! More than I could have hoped for.

Sacrifice. I sleep in the living room in a one bedroom apartment. I drove an eleven-year-old car and would have driven that Toyota Corolla into the ground had not someone hit it and totaled it. I put my son's education above all. Yes, you must make *sacrifices* to ask for free money. You are not begging, but you are asking for less tuition. They will call it your financial *award*. I have always taken it in my heart as a gift, grateful as any human who receives. I work long, long hours and am not always able to volunteer. However, when I can, I do.

Grateful: indebted; obliged, obligated, in someone's debt. Thankful.

Award: present to, bestow upon, *decorate* with.

You honor the school, they honor you. In the end, a wonderful partnership can be had.

A wealthy parent I knew at The Willows, although I did not know her well, offered early on to help out with childcare if I ever needed it. A few years later, knowing we were receiving aid (your choice but I never hid it and we were never treated any differently at The Willows or at Arête because of financial difference) approached me one day and said this to me. "You know, I admire you. I think it's great you're here. My sister and her husband don't have much money, and I tell them so much is possible, but she says, 'No, we'll never get it.' She doesn't even try. I think you are an amazing mom for fighting to get Jack what you feel is best for him."

And I felt proud; all the hard work, the filling out of paperwork, the worrying each year, would we would receive enough to stay, is worth everything if you end up where you want to be. If you cannot afford to do it with the award you receive, wherever you end up, the thing I always remembered throughout the years during this process, something my now best friend and former high school English teacher reminded me: “You are your child’s best and first teacher. He (she) will always bloom where planted because you are his mom.”

Barbara Cameron is the 2012 winner of the American Literary Review nonfiction contest, judged by Alice Elliot Dark, and her winning essay, “Hawk Blood,” was published in the journal. It was republished in the Colorado Review as an editor’s pick. Her essay, “In Avalon, She Fell,” was a finalist in a 2017 literary contest, judged by Abigail Thomas. She has studied with Mary Gaitskill and with Tom Jenks, founder and co-editor of Narrative. Barbara is a graduate of Barnard College, a former restaurant server and now manager, a single mom by choice and a resident of Los Angeles. You can read Barbara’s most recent essay in [Angels Flight Literary West](#).

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Author

admin