The celebrated poet Sylvia Plath committed suicide at the age of 30. Her two children, Nicholas and Frieda Hughes, were sleeping in the other room when she took her life. Nicholas Hughes was one year old when his mother died; he was never able to talk to her as an adult. Nicholas suffered from depression like his mother, and in 2009, he hung himself. He was 47 years old. I plan to write a two-person full-length play, in which Sylvia Plath convinces her son, Nicholas Hughes, to reconsider committing suicide. I will present a mother and son who never had an adult relationship. Because 1 in 12 people have made a suicide plan at one point, and depression is at an all-time high on college campuses, I will be putting onstage an open discussion of the issue of depression and suicide. An audience is inherently a community, and thusly the audience members will be able to find solace in each others’ presences: mental health issues will no longer be something to overcome alone.

This play will serve as a way to open up a dialogue about the taboo issue of depression and suicide. In 2011, Northwestern was ranked as the 9th most stressful school in the country taking into account five factors, one of which was competitiveness. Furthermore, in 2009, a study in Professional Psychology showed that 6 percent of undergraduates had seriously considered attempting suicide in the last year, and half of these people never told anyone. This competitive nature of students, or the ‘every man for himself’ mentality, leads to isolation among students, and a secretiveness or shame concerning mental health. Even more staggering are numbers provided by the American College Health Association: the suicide rate among people aged 15 to 24 has tripled since the 1950s. The problem of young adult suicide is becoming more prominent because we have not found an effective way to reverse these numbers. Twelve people aged 15-24 will commit suicide today. This statistic, though baffling, is an urgent sign that we need to bring to light mental illness in a relatable and conversation-provoking way. The same study found that the emotional health of freshmen has declined to the lowest it has been in 25 years. Thusly, writing this play is essential for our Northwestern community.

In my play, I will put the famous historical figure of Plath onstage. In 1982, Caryl Churchill wrote Top Girls, in which historical figures visit Marlene, the lead character, to discuss what they have sacrificed and what they have achieved. Churchill uses the historical figures to celebrate Marlene’s promotion and bond with her by sharing their struggles. I have a different mission: to put the historical figure of Plath onstage as the lead character, as opposed to making her a supporting character to catalyze another character’s action. By writing Plath as a lead, I will be able to explore her specific journey through depression and expose the difficulty of her real-life struggle. Marsha Norman’s ‘night, Mother is a play about a mother, Thelma, and her daughter, Jessie. The latter reveals at the start of the play that she plans to commit suicide by the end of the night, and the mother spends the play in denial before the suicide occurs in the last moment. Though my play also deals with a mother convincing her child to reconsider suicide, I am working with the added dimension of a mother who committed suicide herself. Thusly, the mother and son in my play are able to relate due to their struggle with depression and the two characters are able to communicate without judging the other’s mental state since they are also experiencing similar pain. This lack of judgment will allow my audience to feel safety, and to experience unity as opposed to alienation.

In terms of research, there will be three phases of research. The first phase is primary source reading by Plath herself and works by her family relating to Plath. More specifically, I will read Sylvia Plath’s poetry collections The Colossus and Other Poems, Ariel and Winter Trees. I will read her novel The Bell Jar, her collection of short stories Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and her collection of letters Letters Home. I will read Ted Hughes’ Birthday
Letters, a poem in response to Sylvia Plath’s suicide. I will read Frieda Hughes’ (Plath’s daughter’s) The Book of Mirror, which includes childhood and adolescence memories. The second research phase is to study the life of Sylvia Plath. I will travel to the University of Chicago Library to the Special Collections Research Center, and study not only the content of letters written to and from Plath, but also her penmanship and her writing process through the annotated proofs of her poems. The third research phase is studying the life of Nicholas Hughes. There will inevitably be information about Nicholas’ life that will surface during the first and second phases of research. Furthermore, because Hughes lived a private life in Alaska, the majority of the information about him was published posthumously, so I will turn to obituaries published in newspapers such as the New York Times and the Guardian to attain as much information as possible about his life.

I will take on suicide prevention research, by meeting with Wei-Jen Huang, the Assistant Director for Community Relations at Northwestern University’s Counseling and Psychological Services. Though my play will explore the dark issue of suicide, I will be able to thread through a positive message by learning what Doctor Huang considers to be the most effective ways to prevent the continuation of the mounting number of suicides.

I will write three hours a day in the morning, because that is when I generate my best material. I will spend the first fifteen minutes reading over what I’ve already generated, to get me back into the headspace of the play. Then, after those fifteen warm-up minutes, I will continue generating pages. Because research on Plath’s life will inspire me to write immediately, I will spend two hours in the afternoon reading her writings. I will engage with her writing in a way that brings me as closely to her as possible, which to me manifests in reading in outside locations, since Plath found the sun to be invigorating and Chicago provides a powerful sun in the summer. After the three week mark, I will have a reading of the pages I’ve wrote with a close group of people who are familiar with the new writing process and thusly will give me constructive feedback. Thusly, I will be able to move into the fourth week ready to generate the last sixty pages with energy and direction.

From a playwriting standpoint, I serve as Development Chair on the student theater board, Vertigo Productions, and I have helped select four plays to produce during the past two academic years, respectively. I am qualified to write this play because I have taken five quarter long playwriting classes: Introduction to Playwriting, Tiny Epic, Tiny Gothic, Ten Minute Play and Two Chairs and a Light bulb. Right now, I am in the Advanced Playwriting Sequence, a yearlong intensive playwriting course, which culminates in the completion of a full draft of my current play. I am finishing the Reading and Writing Poetry course this quarter, which has enabled my writing to grow since I’m learning the new form of poetry. L

Last year, I had a play produced in the 2014 Ten Minute Play Festival, and this quarter, I am teaching that course to students receiving full credit for it. Furthermore, I wrote a full-length play that was selected, cast and produced as a staged reading in Vertigo Productions’ Winter Reading Series.

I want to write and act as my career. I plan to do this for a living, and thusly me writing another full length play would allow me to practice the discipline that it takes to write without the structure of a class, to develop my writing skills by generating more material, and to continue to find my voice and style as a writer. The content of the play will also allow me to investigate a question that will apply to my career: how does an artist live a balanced life? Because I want to be an actor and a writer, I must investigate how to find joy in the arts, as that will be invaluable to me living a fulfilling life.
1 "Crisis on Campus: The Untold Story of Student Suicides - College Degree Search." College Degree Search.
4 "Crisis on Campus: The Untold Story of Student Suicides - College Degree Search." College Degree Search.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.