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as the ones from CHAMPS.

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In November, I met my true best friend, Arshitha. She was a sophomore like me, and we met in biology class. Arshitha saw I was having difficulties adjusting to the new school and that I missed my old friends. She helped when I wasn't sure if it was worth dropping one of my honors classes and even an AP class to be on the tennis team. I really didn't want to, but she thought it was a great idea and that a sport on a transcript would show how much effort I put into extracurricular activities. As time passed, we became really good friends.

Arshitha would come over to my house whenever she got the chance, and like Jasmin, she loved my mom's food. We'd meet up on the weekends at El Torito to talk and during the week we would sit at Starbucks, drinking the vanilla frappuccinos that we both loved. Senior year we've both had pretty busy schedules, but even though time is limited, we still try to find time to hang out even if it is just for 10 minutes. Right before winter break we spent a whole day shopping together for friends' gifts and just hung out at the mall.

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I WAS READY TO BE A LEADER

There were several times when I was having problems with my parents about college. I wanted to apply to several four-year colleges, but they wanted me to attend a community college and then transfer. Arshitha helped me find a two-year school, Marymount College, which is affiliated with the transfer system at the private college I want to go to, Chapman University. When I talked to my parents about it, they seemed to be more open to my ideas about college. I feel less stressed now.

At the beginning of senior year, I decided to start my own club called Script Dialogue Club, where I would be able to meet people who had the same interests as I did. I was already in another club with Arshitha, California Scholarship Federation, but I didn't feel like I had a large role in it. To get people to join I had to put myself out there during club rush, which is a day when all the clubs set up tables at lunch with signs to recruit members. I was intimidated, but I thought, "I can do this." I had to push myself to speak loud enough. As I was holding a huge sign, I yelled, "Please come join Script Dialogue Club! Anyone interested in meeting people from the entertainment business?"

Twelve people ended up joining the club. It's been really interesting getting to know them and hearing their

opinions. During our meetings we're always laughing and making jokes as we come up with ideas. We write short scripts, film them and meet people from the entertainment business. We meet every week, and I have to stand up and give short speeches about what's going on with the club and what we have to do. Before I was too shy to stand up and express my point of view. Now, I'm not afraid. The club also improved my social life because I made new friends through the club and I started. I can finally say I'm proud of who I am. I've met people who love me for the way I am. I'm sad that I barely talk with my CHAMPS friends now, but they will always remain important to me. My friends at CHAMPS and Taft made me more confident. I'm no longer afraid to go up to people and share with them who I am. When I met my boyfriend for the first time at Fall Formal, I asked for his number and started up the conversation, after he asked me to dance. After becoming friends with such wonderful people, I realized that there was a vibrant personality inside me that just needed to come out.

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Finally friendship

I used to be shy, but making friends helped me become more confident and outgoing

By Camilla Rambaldi
16, Taft HS (Woodland Hills)

I always thought having friends would be the ultimate happiness in the world. In middle school, I'd see this group of friends and they were always smiling and laughing. I wanted that so badly. I had always been shy and I was never able to look anyone directly in the eye.

My problems began in elementary school. I was shy because I was always put down for the most absurd reasons. They said I was too short, that I was annoying, that my feet were too small and I didn't know how to

dress. (I never wore jeans because I hated denim and always wore skirts.) In middle school I was made fun of because I was too neat and I was labeled the school freak since I studied a lot. The insults piled up and I stopped speaking to people. I would try to tell a joke and no one would laugh. They would just stare at me and make me feel so stupid for even deciding to talk to them. I even had trouble reading an essay out loud in class unless I practiced it a million times. I would be wondering what people were thinking about me. I felt as if I was a girl who had nothing special to share with others. I was so insecure.

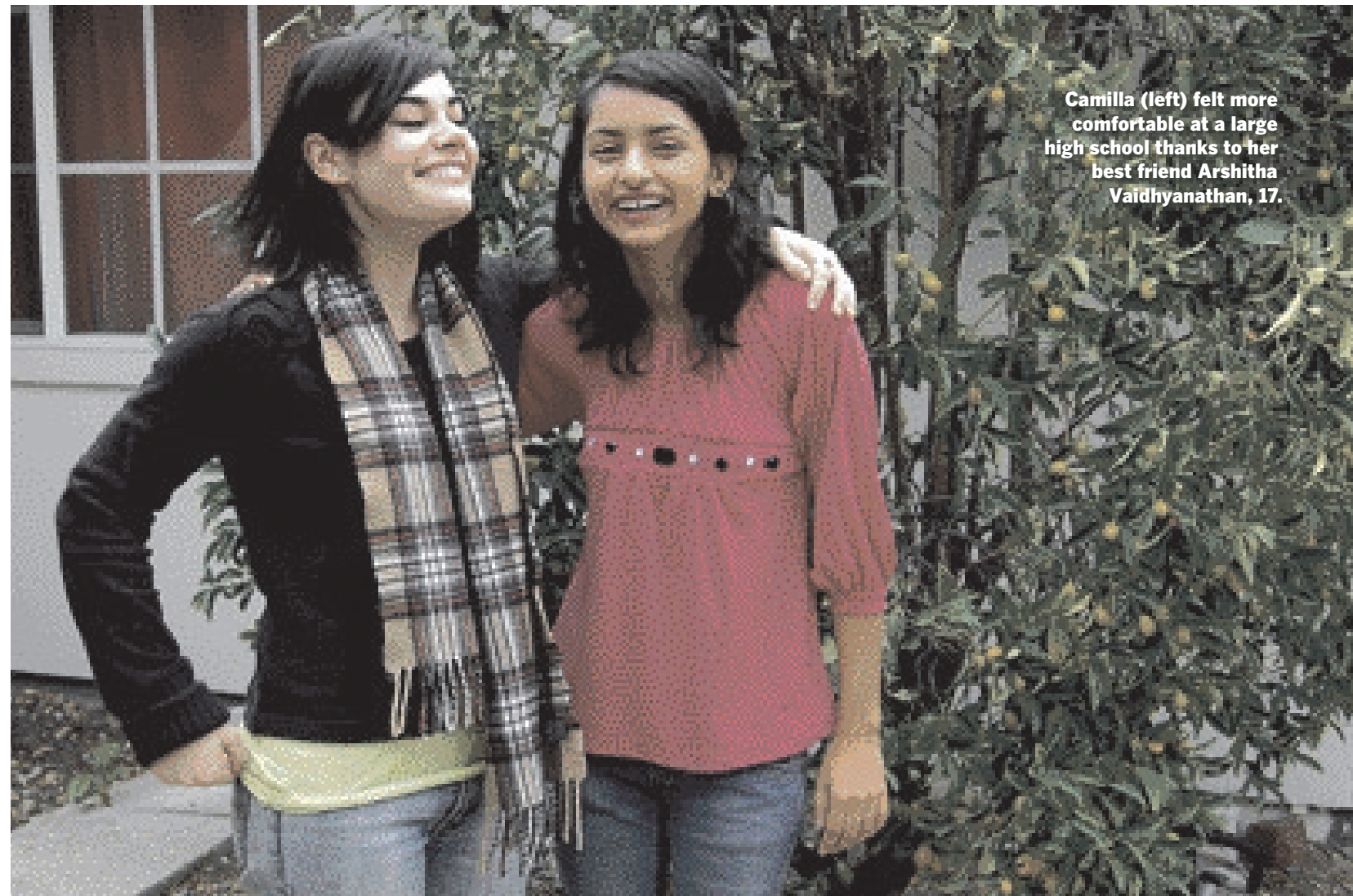
I desperately wanted a true best friend and a group

of friends that I could talk to about fashion, politics or just joke around with.

Things changed after middle school when I started going to CHAMPS (Charter High School of the Arts—Multi-media and Performing). On my first day everyone was so nice to me. They all came up to me and asked me where I was from. I started to feel that I could relate to them and that we had a lot in common. I felt like I was in an environment where I could find my group of friends.

SHE DIDN'T JUDGE ME

I met Jasmin on my first day. We were talking about an assignment, then she asked me what I liked to do for



Camilla (left) felt more comfortable at a large high school thanks to her best friend Arshitha Vaidhyanathan, 17.

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fun, what my interests were and how I found out about CHAMPS. I asked her the same. Jasmin would use the f-word a lot, which bothered me a little bit since I didn't really cuss back then and wasn't used to hearing it. I'd say, "Please don't say that." She didn't say, "This girl is crazy," as I thought she would. Instead, she laughed about it. She was so nice that I felt comfortable opening up to her. I even took out my planner in front of her. I told her that it was probably the most important thing I had. People at my old school made fun of me for being so organized, but Jasmin loved it and even asked me to help her get organized.

We started to hang out at school. We walked to class together, or just sat around the lunch area talking. Spending time with Jasmin made me feel good about myself. I would always make her laugh because of my neatness and all my jokes. Jasmin listened to everything I had to say and always wanted to know my opinion about certain things, like if her hair looked better up or down. I was happy that somebody wanted my opinion. CHAMPS made me feel like I was free to express myself without the fear of being made fun of. It was the opposite of middle school.

Soon Jasmin and I became friends with Robert and Ben. Every day during lunch, we would joke around, and usually the reason why we were laughing was because of me. Either I needed to get my hand sanitizer or I couldn't walk around in the heels I was wearing because of the bumpy concrete. It might sound like they were making fun of me, but not at all. For once in my life, I started to feel like part of something.

The four of us became best friends. We started calling each other "the four amigos." I would invite the three of them over to my house for dinners. We had some really fun nights. We were always laughing. Robert always had something funny to say, Ben was the perfect person to debate politics with and Jasmin loved watching my mom make pizza. I never felt happier. I was finally part of my own group! I would come home and talk about my friends every second. I told my mom about all the things we laughed about and all the good times we had in physics class. I told her how Jasmin was so smart and helped me with all the formulas.

NEW CLOTHES, NEW ME

I felt like it was time for me to stop dressing in my usual plain skirts and dresses. One of the biggest changes was when I started wearing jeans. After days of persuading me, Jasmin brought me to the mall. I went to Rampage by myself because Jasmin wanted me to surprise her. I remember being there for about an hour and a half deciding which ones to buy. I finally picked a



Camilla says her friends helped her realize the positive aspects of herself, like her sense of humor.

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I couldn't wait to wear the jeans at school the next day. I spent the night curling my hair and picking out the perfect top to match them. When I got to school Jasmin went crazy about how much she loved my jeans. Other people said they looked good as well. It made me happy. I felt accepted and confident, but I was still the same person. The person I wanted to be had been stuck inside—jeans helped let her out.

I felt a lot more secure about myself. I felt like I had something to share with others. My shyness was not as bad. Most of all now I had friends to rely on. I was proud of how much I'd changed and no one could bring me back to the person I used to be.

When the year ended, I decided to switch schools because CHAMPS didn't have the academics that I needed. As I hugged my friend's goodbye, tears dripped down my cheeks. Even though I didn't want to leave, I felt strong enough to confront my future because of the new person I had become.

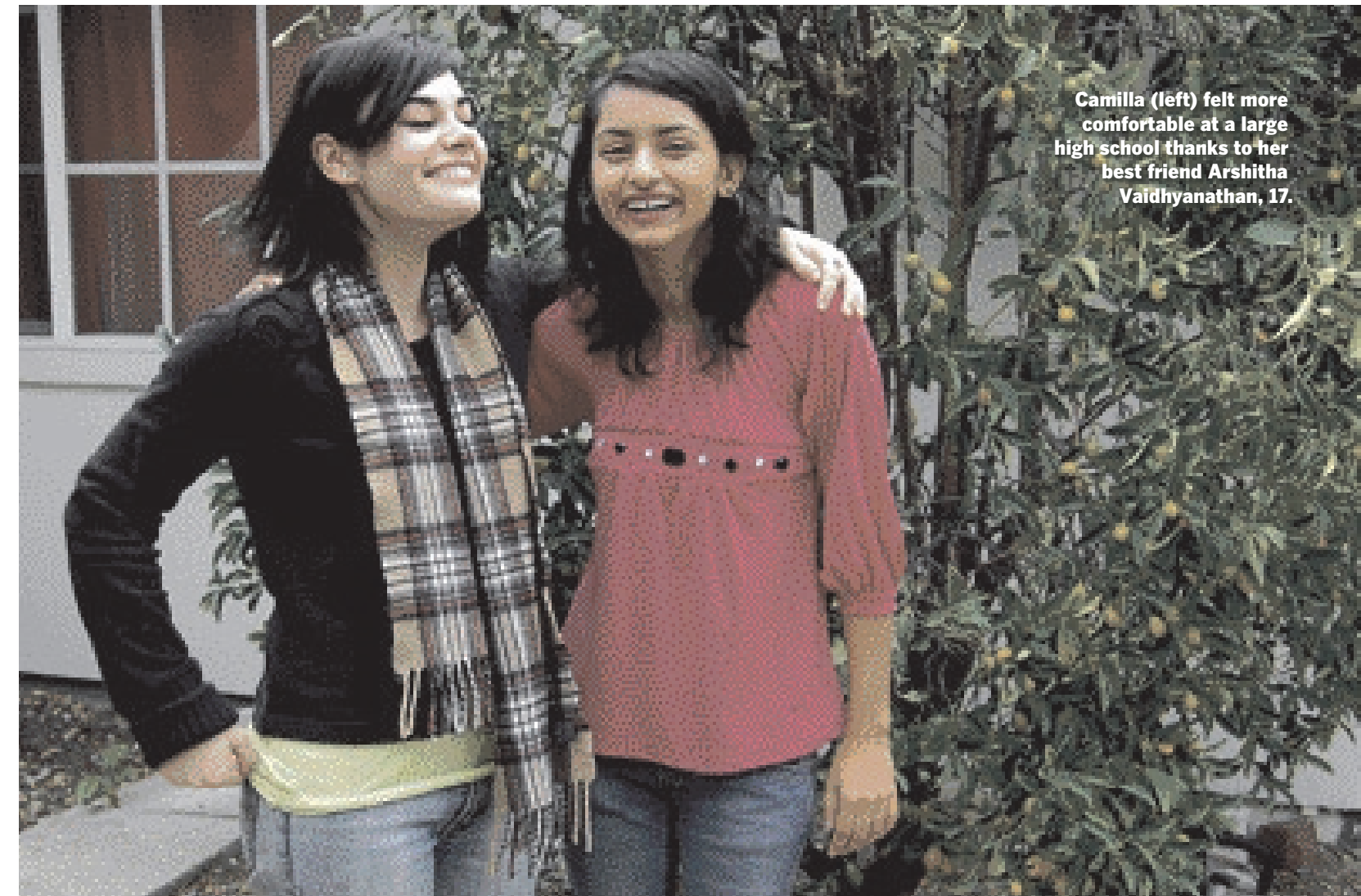
In 10th grade, I ended up at Taft High School. My mom wanted to send me there my freshman year, but she knew I wasn't ready to be at a school with more than 3,000 students. Even though I felt more confident about myself, I wondered if I'd find similar friendships as the ones from CHAMPS.

At first I felt scared walking down the halls with so many people. I had trouble finding the right rooms for class. I had so much more homework every night and I really needed more than just my parents to help me figure out what classes to take and how to prepare for college. I felt alone at times, and wished I had a friend to talk to.

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