When Andrea Esposito ’81 set out to leave Staten Island for college, she recalls, “my admission applications created tension at home….In those days and in my culture, only ‘bad girls’ left the family prior to matrimony.” Given her domestic responsibilities, “I felt guilty about abandoning my family who did need me.” Only years later could Esposito come to understand the intensity of her mother’s anger, emanating from the fear of losing me to a world she and the family did not understand. My mother in particular believed I did not belong among what she considered an elite socioeconomic class. The emotional turmoil was awful for me and my entire family….I believe it hampered my first year’s academic performance substantially at the College.

For families who have long prepared their children to pursue higher education, and invested to enhance their prospects for admission to an elite, selective institution, such experiences—and dual demands, and tensions—seem remote. As First Generation Harvard Alumni: Reflections vividly documents, they are anything but. The first “class report” prepared by the Harvard Alumni Association for an alumni shared interest group, in the familiar reunion “Red Book” format, the volume was unveiled in an alumni-student luncheon on November 4. It goes to the heart of what first-to-college students, and those from low-income households and under-resourced secondary schools, often encounter.

Long-time dean of admissions and financial aid William R. Fitzsimmons ’67 wrote in his preface, “As a first-gen student….I had never seen Harvard until my senior year in high school despite living 15 miles away.” His lived experience prepared him to understand the circumstances of the previous, and 1,000 or so current, first-gen undergraduates admitted on his watch.

Their stories still resonate. Daniel M. Lobo ’14, president of the First Generation Harvard Alumni (founded by Kevin Jennings ’85; see “Fully Part of the Harvard Family,” September-October 2012, page 72), observed of his decision to apply: “I came for two reasons: I knew it would be the most affordable option if I could get in, and I knew it would open the most doors after graduation. My decision was entirely economically motivated as I sought to maximize my income potential and upward social mobility. There was no consideration of student life, or academic experience, or dining hall food, or any of the other hallmarks of a residential undergraduate experience—my lived experience meant that I didn’t know to optimize for those things.

And as Paul J. Martin ’94 put it: [At college, there were parts of my life that I held back, ways that I couldn’t fully relate, and personas that I tried on but just weren’t me. At the same time, coming home to Hialeah, Florida] semester after semester was increasingly difficult, because I no longer felt fully understood by my family and hometown friends. My personal and intellectual growth was leading me beyond the boundaries of my community—and my family—and I struggled to stay connected while honoring my newly discovered circles, interests, and pursuits. My first reaction—and action—was to isolate from my past, seeing my new self as evolved and therefore the best self to embrace….I didn’t have the opportunity to discuss these feelings with others experiencing similar conflict, or to name that conflict and pain…There was no vocabulary, no community, no voice.

That community and vocabulary are now emerging. In his “special greeting” in the volume, Lawrence S. Bacow recounted a pre-orientation event for first-gen students early in his presidency. “Every person admitted to Harvard,” he wrote, “should feel free to take full advantage of everything our unparalleled institution has to offer. This extraordinarily moving collection of stories and voices is essential to conversations about the past, present, and future of the University, and it shines a light on where we must improve. I will do my utmost in the years to come to ensure that those who we welcome into our community are embraced and supported—and I hope you will join me in that effort.”