



## **CHARACTER EDUCATION ESSAY/SPEECH CONTEST**

Citizenship   Cooperation   Courage   Fairness  
Honesty   Kindness   Patriotism   Perseverance  
Respect   Responsibility   Self-Control   Tolerance

**2020~2021**

2020–2021

25th Annual

*Laws of Life* Essay/Speech Contest

Sponsored by:

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City of Naples

Collier County Sheriff's Office

Southwest Florida 49'ers

Rotary Club of Naples

Collier County Public Schools

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# **THE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA 49'ERS**

The Southwest Florida 49'ers is an organization of business leaders. Members are all former members of the Young Presidents' Organization. Their purpose is to establish a forum for idea exchange, education, and fellowship in order that members may continue to enrich their lives, expand their horizons, and provide leadership in their family, business, civic, and cultural life.

The YPO, Young Presidents' Organization, is a forum for education and idea exchange for 7700 Corporate Presidents in roughly 75 countries. YPO members meet certain minimum qualitative criteria, and must exhibit leadership qualities with a high degree of integrity in both personal and business affairs. The most important qualification of membership includes reaching an approved title (President; Chairman; CEO; Managing Director; Publisher; Head Partner) prior to his/her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Other qualifications are that the business must report \$6,000,000 in annual sales/turnover; \$120,000,000 in assets for financial institutions or \$4,000,000 in fees for agency-type businesses, and at least 50 full-time employees. All members graduate from YPO after their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The 49'ers is composed of these graduate members, who must be at least 49 years of age.

YPO VISION STATEMENT clarifies their mission:

YPO is committed to the development of "Better Presidents through Education and Idea Exchange" by providing a challenging environment, which promotes the exchange of ideas and shared experiences, facilitates the acquisition of knowledge, the development of wisdom and inspires and stimulates continual improvement of the individual.

YPO fosters continual improvement of members' business enterprises, in their personal and family lives, and in their community responsibilities.

YPO prepares members to lead and manage change in a multi-value, multi-cultural global environment, while integrating the strengths and traditions of the past with the challenges and opportunities of the future.

# *Laws of Life*

## Character Education Program

The *Laws of Life* Program is a character building activity that helps young people focus on and develop positive character traits that lead to successful citizenship and a successful life.

The 2020–2021 *Laws of Life* Program was offered to students in grades 4 through 12 throughout Collier County. More than 3,000 students contributed essays for judging. Forty semi-finalists presented their papers orally in front of the Blue Ribbon Panel of judges. From these, our four finalists in each division were selected. The four divisions are:

- ♦ Elementary School Division: Grades 4 and 5
- ♦ Middle School Division: Grades 6-8
- ♦ High School Grades 9-10 Division
- ♦ High School Grades 11-12 Division

The *Laws of Life* focus on twelve basic character traits:

CITIZENSHIP

PATRIOTISM

COOPERATION

PERSEVERANCE

COURAGE

RESPECT

FAIRNESS

RESPONSIBILITY

HONESTY

SELF-CONTROL

KINDNESS

TOLERANCE

# **WE THANK OUR DISTINGUISHED BLUE RIBBON PANEL OF SPEECH JUDGES**



Marlene Berman

Linda Greenwald

Harriet Heithaus

Lee Hollingsworth

Hazel Horsfield

Eve May

Dianne Mayberry-Hatt

Karen McNeil

Beth O'Brien

Rhona Saunders

Lois Selfon

Sally Tiffany



# *A Very Special Thank You*

Collier County School District  
Communications Department,  
Principals, Coordinators,  
Teachers, TSAs, Specialists,  
and Secretaries for all of their  
assistance to celebrate students  
and their successes!

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# **Elementary**

# **School**

# **Division**

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Essays are displayed in alphabetical order by last name.

## **Honesty**

Many centuries ago, Aesop famously stated "Honesty is the best policy." At times, people make dreadful choices and therefore suffer the consequences of their actions. This has recently been demonstrated by two famous actors, Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, who both conned the college admissions system and will pay the price for their deceit.

Lori Loughlin is a well-known actor and producer. Recently, she tried to bend the rules, which resulted in her being locked behind bars. She wanted to help her two daughters, Olivia and Isabella, gain entrance to USC. Because she did not believe in their ability to get into college on their own merit, she paid \$500,000 to have someone falsify that they were elite athletes. They made it on the USC crew team, without playing the sport a day in their lives.

Loughlin's corrupt actions led her to a sentencing of two months in prison plus a hefty fine. What was worse was that it also ruined her daughter's successful online business and her own future acting career. This goes to show that her misleading actions not only hurt her, but also her family. During her sentencing she wept, "While I wish I could go back and do things differently, I can only take responsibility and move forward."

Felicity Huffman was another actor that participated in the scandal, Operation Varsity Blues. She paid \$15,000 for someone to fraudulently change her daughter's answers on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). She was sent to jail for fourteen days, paid \$20,000 in fines, and her daughter was kicked out of college. She uttered, "There are no excuses or justifications for my actions. Period." There truly are no excuses for her unscrupulousness, especially because it resulted in a lost opportunity for a more deserving student who earned their college admission on their own merit.

Cheating and being dishonest can lead to major consequences in the future. As Aesop stated, "You can fool people sometimes, you can't fool them all of the time." Both Huffman and Loughlin learned this lesson the hard way and will now pay in more ways than one.

## **Honesty**

Honesty is a virtue that every human being must have to live a happy, well-adjusted, and successful life. The definition of honest is "someone or something that is truthful, trustworthy or genuine." You could say that honesty is the most important character trait one should possess. Without honesty, there would be no trust and our world would be a cold place to live.

We need honesty now more than ever. The only way we can relate to one another is to be honest about our true feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. This allows us to have a conversation about how we are different and ultimately understand how we are more similar than we originally thought. Honesty can change one's perspective on life.

Beyond the global need for honesty, on a personal level honesty helps me grow. My teachers, soccer coach and church youth pastor all contribute to the person I am today and will continue to become. Their honesty helps me learn how I can become a better student, teammate, and spiritual follower. This will help me contribute more to my community and society in the future.

Honesty is not just about telling the truth, it's about being real to yourself and others around you. This is how it reflects a person's character. Abraham Lincoln was called "Honest Abe" because he was always honest with people. His nickname started when he worked as a store clerk. If he thought he short-changed a customer, he would close the shop and deliver the correct change to them no matter how far he had to walk. He once said, "Resolve to be honest at all events."

If there was more honesty in this world, it would be a different place. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom." We could use more honesty in many issues we are currently facing Coronavirus, racism, politics, and individuals in need. Until we understand that honesty is not only about being truthful, but also about being trustworthy and genuine, we will never be able to reach our full potential as a society.

## **Honesty**

As William Shakespeare once declared, "No legacy is so rich as honesty." Sometimes, the toughest road to take is the path to being truthful, especially when your desire is to win. Being a successful athlete requires consistent performance and a competitive spirit. Overlooked by many, success also requires good character, especially in challenging times. Bobby Jones, one of the greatest amateur golfers of his time, showed a tremendous amount of nobility during his playing career.

At just five years old, Bobby Jones began golfing and set his sights on being a success in the profession. Over his career, he won many golf tournaments and was dubbed the greatest. He was not only a skilled golfer, but also exemplified the principles of sportsmanship and fair play. One example of Jones' honesty took place at the eleventh hole of a tournament, when the head of his club accidentally brushed the grass, moving it slightly. He informed both the officials and his teammate, Walter Hagen, that he was calling a penalty on himself. Hagen saw it as a minor mistake that should be overlooked, but both he and the officials were unable to talk Jones out of admitting his penalty. When he proceeded to sign his scorecard, he insisted he should be penalized for a rule violation. Jones' act of honesty cost him the tournament, as he finished in second place by one stroke.

A similar event tested Jones' morality while playing in Ohio. As Jones was putting on the fifteenth green, a strong wind caused his golf ball to be blown off. Jones once again reported to the officials, calling a penalty on himself. When applauded for his integrity over his career, Jones famously pronounced, "You might as well praise a man for not robbing a bank."

After his death Jones was not only remembered for his skill, but also for his righteousness. Thomas Jefferson wisely stated, "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom." As Bobby Jones demonstrated throughout his life, it should not only be the first chapter, but it should also be the moral of the story.

## **Honesty**

My parents taught me that being honest is important. They helped me to understand that honesty is more than not lying. It is telling the truth. Telling the truth shows what kind of person you are. Honesty is staying true to your ideas and actions.

There is a young woman by the name of Malala Yousafzai who is known for fighting for the education of young women in her native country of Pakistan. Her father taught her, " ... value truth ... " Malala took what she learned and said, "Be straightforward and tell the truth." It is important to see how Malala's belief in honesty and truth became important. Malala was honest about what she believed and spoke out about it. She wanted the Taliban to end the ban on girls attending school. She was honest about her beliefs and was always truthful in telling people about them. Malala's honesty in speaking out the truth almost got her killed. The Taliban came on her school bus and shot her. However, she lived, and this made her stronger and more confident that speaking the truth was important.

I also display honesty. I was at Publix and I found \$50 on the floor. I told my mom, and we took the money to Customer Service. The woman at the desk seemed surprised that I turned it in. We left our number and name in case they needed to call. Later, Publix called and told us a man called to see if anyone had turned in the money. The man was so happy and told her to tell us how much he appreciated our honesty. It felt good knowing we did the right thing.

Malala and I both changed lives by being honest and truthful. In returning the money, I found, I was able to help the person who lost it. Malala, by speaking the honest truth about girls not being allowed to go to school, made people around the world aware of what the Taliban was doing. We both took what we learned about honesty and used it for good.

# **Elementary School Division**

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## **First Place Award**

Wyatt Raymer

## **Second Place Award**

Jade Malick-Beltran

## **Third Place Award**

Melina Parris

## **Fourth Place Award**

Madison Von Holtz

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# Middle

# School

# Division

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Essays are displayed in alphabetical order by last name.

## **Honesty**

Sometimes it seems like the world is out to get you. Like no matter what, things just won't go your way. In those times, one may be tempted to lie or cheat in order to right the wrong. But as so many before have learned, staying faithful and honest is the only way to right a wrong. It may feel like we are helping in the moment, but every time we lie, we trek deeper into the woods and put ourselves in a position that no one wants to be in. It may start off with a little spark, but it can quickly lead to a wildfire.

Research tells us that every time we lie, our amygdala shrinks. Our amygdala is the part of the brain that handles the emotions we experience and the appropriate way to respond to those emotions. The more we lie, the less guilt the amygdala tells us to experience each time. Over time, this gradual wearing down of our amygdala response causes us to question our moral identity. We no longer know who we are. We are just another speck of gray in a black and white painting.

Thomas Jefferson once said, "Honesty is the first chapter of the book of wisdom". In other words, if wisdom was a body, I believe that honesty would be the bones. Without the bones, our body would collapse and be formless. Without honesty, everything, from our community to our government, even our country, could fail. Honesty isn't just a decision you make once and never have to confront again. We have to continue to fight to be the most honest and genuine version of ourselves, so we can keep our communities strong and our relationships stronger.

There may be moments when one is tempted to be dishonest, but that moment does not define us. What makes us who we are is how we respond to others as we treat them with honesty. Every person swimming in the vast ocean of this life, making tiny decisions each day that add up to the big moments in life, should hear this: No matter what, the current that can so quickly pull us down cannot stop you from fighting. If you let it get a grip on you, it will pull you down until it seems impossible to reach the surface. While the brunt of the consequences may fall on you, the hurt it causes others can break even the strongest of relationships, crushing others even more than yourself. It causes you to turn away from friends and family and take the wrong path that leads only to a dead end.

Dishonesty feeds on fear, but truthfulness is live-giving. Alternating to this lifestyle

**Judah Bobrow**

eCollier Academy

Teacher: Ms. Kinti Conroy

may very well create a bloom of hope inside you that can grow, inspiring others to be honest as well. If we band together, we can create a better world without dishonesty where we treat others kindly and act truthfully.

## **Nigeria and Their Struggle with Honesty**

Honesty means to be truthful, trustworthy, and to display integrity. Honesty is what builds character, what determines who we can and cannot trust. It is valued highly in positions of power, such as in government and law enforcement. When honesty is not present, there is no trust. To function fairly and efficiently, society depends on honesty. Take SARS, Nigeria's police force, for example. Their impunity prevents them from being honest with Nigerians. And without honesty, they can't protect their people.

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad, also known as SARS, was formed in 1984 to tackle an outbreak of crime including theft, kidnapping, and carjacking. While achieving their purpose in their earlier years, SARS became a menace to the people of Nigeria. Since its formation, SARS officers have been accused of harassing and physically abusing thousands without repercussions. Recently, Amnesty International has reported 82 cases of ill treatment and extrajudicial executions by SARS officers.

Fast forward to October 3, 2020. A video surfaces online displaying the unprovoked killing of a man by SARS officers in Ughelli, a town in Delta state. The government claims the video is fake and proceeds to arrest the person who recorded it. In response to the repressive government, protests break out in Lagos, Nigeria, and soon reach places all around the world. Celebrities express their support, and the hashtag #EndSARS takes to social media and stirs up a storm. Eventually, the Nigerian government realizes the protesters are not going to stop until they see change. But instead of answering to their pleas for change, the government shuts down protests by enforcing curfews and instilling fear with military forces. The Nigerian people had given SARS officers and government officials the chance to be honest and own up to their mistakes, yet they turned their backs on Nigerian citizens, the very people they were supposed to protect.

On October 12, President Muhammadu Buhari announced the disbandment of SARS, calling his decision, "only the first step in our commitment to extensive police reform." Although most were elated and hopeful at the mention of this news, others were not. In most cases, actions speak louder than words, and unfortunately, the president's actions reflected the opposite of his promises. After his announcement, police brutality protests were banned in Lagos. Leaders of said protests fled the country amidst threats

from the government. Government officials called for social media censorship in the country. Once again, the Nigerian government did not hold their law enforcement liable for their transgressions.

Nigerians put their trust in the SARS police force, and they took advantage of that. Nigerian citizens can't live peacefully knowing they can be murdered at the hands of an officer and never receive justice. To fix this issue, SARS need to be honest with their inexcusable behavior and admit their wrongdoings. For citizens to live in peace and prosperity, honesty must be a founding principle. Because if the police cannot act with integrity, who are Nigerians supposed to put their trust in?

## **Truthfully Confronting the Holocaust**

Honesty. Honesty can be considered many things, but most importantly it is integrity, truthfulness, and sincerity. Genuine honesty is owning up to our mistakes and being accountable for our actions. We can all admit to being untruthful from time to time. Sometimes to hide the truth, others to only admit our strengths and not our faults. Even countries have to face and acknowledge their wrongdoings. In doing so, they validate and honor the people who may have suffered from their transgressions and set an example to all people to move forward in a responsible manner. After World War II, Germany exemplified this notion of honesty as they confronted the reality of their past offenses and atrocities.

The horrendous brutality that took place from 1941 to 1945, known as the Holocaust, consisted of a series of deliberate and inexcusable events. The Nazi soldier's terrorized, scared, and targeted people of various religions, sexual orientations, and those with disabilities. For the Jewish people in Germany and the German-occupied countries in Europe, these times would represent an all-out decimation. The eternal heartache, grief, trauma caused by the Nazis was immeasurable. Abruptly, it all came to an end on May 8, 1945. What would never change, however, is the misery the Jewish people endured and the six million lives that perished throughout those years in the monstrous hands of the Nazi soldiers.

Germany apologizes time and time again for the immoral, ignorant, and unethical decisions they made. Fortunately enough, people's views change, and Germany voices their mistakes although it brings great shame. As I previously explained, honesty can be a multitude of things, but accountability is the foundation of this principle. Germany demonstrated courage to admit the fact that they committed such heinous actions. Germany does not choose to ignore the past, or hide the truth of what they did, or put the blame on another country. Instead, they step up as a nation and hold themselves accountable and confront their hideous actions. Germany has even taken old concentration camps and made them into memorials for people to visit and this continues to exemplify how aware Germany is of the crimes they committed. By confronting their past and holding themselves responsible, they are being honest not only to themselves, but collectively as a country to the whole world.

**Kelly Quintana**

Manatee Middle School

Teacher: Ms. Elizabeth Garcia

At the end of the day, we are all one small part of the world, and even smaller part of the universe. Yet, we all contribute to the world one way or another. As humans we are all bound to mess up, and as a society can collectively make even larger mistakes. However, whether or not we confront them head on reflects our character, especially our honesty. By Germany owning up to their offenses, they validate their citizens and set the example for other nations.

## **Honesty**

Why is it that we lie? Is it because we are afraid? Is it because we will gain something out of it? According to a recent study, 60 percent of people lie in a 10-minute conversation 2-3 times. We are raised to be good and kind people, but we still disobey these expectations. It may seem telling a fib occasionally will benefit us, though showing honesty can sometimes save lives and impact change.

When political leaders from 1919-1989 wanted control over the people in Hungary, life was difficult. Communism was successfully established, and many hardships came into the country of kind hardworking people. Father of two young children, Post Office driver, and Hungarian citizen Lajos Raduly experienced a dramatic depression in his beloved country. Many citizens were told what they could do, what they must believe, and how they must do certain things. If one did not live on a farm where food is able to be grown, the only food that was given was a loaf of bread to most families. It was challenging for Lajos and his family to be honest about their values and what they think. Punishments were cruel and harsh from prison to death. Another obstacle was when Hungary was conquered by Romania. Hungarian people were forced to follow instructions implying Romanians were most important. Not only did the government require Hungarian names to be changed to Romanian, but also, they did not allow the Hungarian language to be spoken.

Even in these great difficulties, Lajos Raduly was honest about his beliefs. He proudly spoke Hungarian even if he would be disliked. He named his children pure Hungarian names that may not be changed to Romanian. This proud Hungarian citizen encouraged patriotism for Hungary while still following laws. It was hard for him because of the hunger, poverty, and fear he had to face, but he still showed honesty for the common good.

By being honest, he was able to encourage others and political leaders that human-right principles must not be abandoned, and that fairness is essential to leading people. Because he spoke the truth and with the help of other community members in Hungary, communism ended. People were treated under justice principles that were originally founded in the Hungarian Constitution, and many lives were saved.

Even though we do not truly know the reason why the population lies, honesty can

**Dorottya Sinka**

Gulfview Middle School

Teacher: Mr. Chris Cashion

influence a better future. My grandfather taught many people lessons that state being honest to others and oneself spreads happiness and can even solve problems. Even if it is just simply a child telling her mother she broke the lamp, to speaking the truth on election night, honesty can show you care about others and it can even end a Civil War. Although Mr. Raduly died in September 2020, his message of honesty is remembered forever.

# **Middle School Division**

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## **First Place Award**

Shamara Bornelus

## **Second Place Award**

Judah Bobrow

## **Third Place Award**

Dorottya Sinka

## **Fourth Place Award**

Kelly Quintana

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# **High School**

## **Grades 9-10**

### **Division**

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Essays are displayed in alphabetical order by last name.

## **Respect**

Her blue eyes, full of regret and loneliness, stare at me: stare at me with disappointment, stare at me with judgement, stare at me with hatred. Her skin was speckled with freckles: freckles that resemble the acne that dots her chin. Her hair hints of the blonde that used to run through the loose curls of her hair. When she turns, I turn; when I sit, she sits. She is gone once I look away from the mirror's reflection, and I'm once again reminded of my own hatred for myself. I, like many, am met with her stare when looking in the mirror. It is a stare that lacks respect, a stare that emotionally breaks one down, a stare that doesn't look away until you do.

From a young age, I loathed everything that made me, me. I hated the way that my thighs rubbed together when I walked, so I cut calories and became an exercise addict, all at the prime age of 10. I hated the way that my hair was curly, not straight like the other girls, so I flat ironed my hair nearly everyday for 3 years in middle school. I hated the way that my braces stuck out when I talked, so I kept silent. I wanted to blend in; I wanted to be someone I wasn't, and, in the process, I lost the little respect I had for myself. After 16 years of living, I am finally learning the importance of self respect because at the end of the day your opinion is the most important one. Respect for one's self, among other principles, are key to both the improvement of society and bettering of one's character development.

I turned over, facing my nightstand, to grab my phone that was plugged into the outlet. I immediately clicked on the Instagram icon and began to scroll through pictures of my friends and celebrities. In every post, I was met with the eyes of someone who was smiling perfectly, with their hair tamed and skin glowing. I turned off the phone to only see my reflection; the phone mirrored my tired eyes and disheveled hair. At that moment, I realized this is who I am: someone with wild hair, a person with acne, and, most importantly, a normal human being that isn't perfect. I began to respect what made me different; I put away the flat iron and ate what I wanted in order to treat myself with worthiness. I saw myself in a different light: one that wasn't clouded with disrespectful opinions of myself. Respect has always been engraved into my mind; I should respect parents, respect teachers, respect elders. Respect, when taught, is directed towards everyone but one's self; however, I would later find out that in order to truly embody the

**Allyson Horst**

Barron Collier High School

Teacher: Mr. Kurt Schumacher

character trait of respect, you had to start with the most important person in your life: you.

Her hands met my throat, and the coldness of the hands didn't mask the pain of my airways slowly closing. Black dots began to speckle my vision, just as her skin was dotted with freckles. I saw the anger in her eyes beyond the deep blue color, and I saw the pain, the frustration, and the agony. Her eyes met mine until the dots blinded my vision. The picture of who I strived to be suffocated who I really was. The disrespect clouded my perception of who I am: a person, just a person who isn't perfect, yet perfect in their own way. I look at the mirror today; I see her curly hair, the hair that was inherited from my grandmother; I look into her eyes, the eyes that resembles my father's; I look at her body, the body that curves the same ways of my mother's, and I see her: I see her as a person that deserves respect, just as everyone else does.

## **Perseverance**

I believe in the power of perseverance - that what we go through makes us stronger. My story is one of being thrown into the fire and smithing a sword far more powerful than the one I had before. I was finally a damsel NOT in distress that did not need a knight in shining armor to save me. I was able to pick myself back up after being pushed down. I respected myself enough to get back up and persevere. This is a story of a girl who was once broken but became a strong young woman. The innate force inside, forged over time, made me persevere and become who I am today.

When I was a child, I loved to read stories about the hero defeating the merciless villain and saving everyone, including the damsel in distress. I thought that villains only existed in the realm of fairytales. I believed that villains could not step out of books, yet here I was, on my 11th birthday, faced with foes who I thought were my friends. They did not have daggers or knives in their hands, but these foes used the power of my love and harmful words to disarm me. They faked a friend's accident so that I would respond in empathy and concern. Then they laughed. The accident was fake. On a day of celebration, I fell into a pit of hopelessness. On that day, I turned a year older, but lost myself as I lost my self-worth. My friends had become foes. Every year, on my birthday, I am reminded of the day I became broken. Although, there was no physical damage, they chose to beat and batter my heart. They bewitched my mind into believing that I was not strong – I was weak and helpless. A joke that turned into me going down a long, dark rabbit hole had become my legacy. However, the thing about going down this rabbit hole is there is always a way up. I yearned for light and put all my energy into climbing and pulling myself up so I could see the sun.

Even in the light, it is silence again. Everything is fined up by silence. Punctuated by silence. Silence is nothing, but it is everything; I hunt for words in silence. I think in silence. My mind works hard in silence. And yet it is awful. It is empty. It is lonely. This necessary nothingness, this silence was all I knew for a while. I was consumed with being silent because people cannot hurt you if you are silent. The very real thing about silence, though, is it must break at some point. For me that silence broke once I deserved better. One day I decided I was choosing me.

I have not looked back once. I fought every day to become better. I did not like the

specter of my destiny, so I refused to accept it. Instead I found the courage to change it to what I wanted it to be. I did not run; I did not let the silence overpower me. I fought day in and day out. I became my own knight in shining armor fighting for my fiefdom because if I did not fight, a villain would destroy it.

Persevering by fighting to continue is what kept me going. I fought for myself because no one else could. The want to survive enriched my soul with courage. When a problem arises, it gradually gets better and then without having much time to breathe, life throws another curveball. What I must do is live it, feel it, and experience it. Try to figure out what life is trying to teach me. I may have once been a damsel in distress, but I am not broken. I am my own knight in shining armor. I turned my pain into a burning fire because in the end this was all a test of willpower. I had persevered and smithed the pain so it could grow and become my sword. For I walked through fire and let it burn me; scorching my soul with deep marks that became apart of me. Yet, when the fire was extinguished, there I stood holding my new sword fiercely and with determination to fight any battle that may come my way. I became the hero in my own story of perseverance. And it was NO fairy tale.

## **Unification Through Cooperation**

Growing up, I had never been a team player. I always dreaded the idea of group projects or assignments that required me to depend on others besides myself. When it came to in-class debates or discussions, the only people I would cooperate with were those on my side while trying to convince others as to why my point was right. As a very independent and self-motivated person, I had difficulty putting all differences aside and working towards one common goal with others. Eventually, I did gain these cooperation skills, though not through some school project or team sport. It was through a family tragedy that I don't think anyone, including myself, was ready for.

It was the year 2016. My mother received a phone call that my grandmother had just had a stroke which left half of her body paralyzed. Not being sure of my grandmother's condition, my mother flew to Mexico for a week to help take care of her. At that point, I was unaware of how substantial the impacts of this would be on my personal growth.

Upon my mother's return, she informed my sisters and me how that summer was going to be different. Our yearly summer trip to Mexico for fun and frolic, would now be spent taking care of my grandma. While we finished the school year, my mom's side of the family that lived in Mexico, mostly my grandfather, aunt, and uncle, physically took care of my grandmother while my mother and an uncle that lived in the United States helped financially.

Three months later, when the school year ended, it was our turn to take care of her. During the first few days, tasks were divided among my sisters, mother, and I. My sister and I tended to do the laundry, washed dishes, and took care of our youngest sister while she made conversation with our grandmother, told her stories, or showed her the house cats. My mom handled the important and heavier tasks of making sure my grandmother had everything that she needed and took all of her medications on time. My mother also helped her walk around the neighborhood to help bring back strength into her muscles hoping one day, she would be able to walk again independently.

For a few years, this established care system rooted in cooperation worked well. However, it had to change after the death of my grandfather in 2018. The cooperation

**Alejandra Ramos**

Lely High School

Teacher: Ms. Whitney Gaskell

between my mom's family needed to be stronger than ever. This was when I truly witnessed and was a part of the genuine spirit and persistence of cooperation. This experience helped pivot the development of my views on cooperation. I was able to witness first-hand the effort that is needed to work together to reach a common goal. My mother and uncle began to work more to assist more financially. My aunt, who runs a business and has a family of her own, brought my grandmother to live in her home for nine months. In the summer months, my mother, my sisters, and I cared for my grandma in her home.

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much," as stated by Helen Keller is something that I, after observing all of the work my family has accomplished over the last four years, believe. Cooperation is simply defined as "to recognize mutual interdependence with others resulting in polite treatment and respect for each other"; however, through witnessing and participating in a united effort to care for my grandma, I have a stronger understanding of this law of life. It means so much more than this simple definition because, without cooperation, society would fall. It is the law of life that allows members of a community to contribute to its well-being, welfare, and security in order to keep it safe and to ensure its prosperity.

## **Tolerance**

Ni\*ger. Towelhead. Fa\*got. Chink. Retard. Tranny. All of these words are widely recognized as racist, homophobic, and ableist slurs. However, I cannot count the number of times I hear or read them daily. Americans have become entirely too comfortable with ignorance and bigotry in our society. Racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and other prejudices are normalized and receive a concerning amount of justification and support. As a result of this, the racial and political climate in our nation has caused a great schism among its citizens. During a time where people are threatening violence and spewing pure hatred over our differences, we must look within ourselves and find a way to foster tolerance. Increasing our tolerance means decreasing personal bias. In doing so, individual relationships will improve, as will our social unification. This will, in turn, cause people to undergo character development and help de-escalate societal tensions. Although this may sound simple, becoming more aware is not easy.

Understanding that transforming biases to neutrality may be arduous, we must approach the process with perseverance. I think it is important to acknowledge the source of prejudices. Bias is in no way innate: we are not born with hatred nor the propensity to be hateful. This means that all of our prejudices are taught and learned, whether from family, the media, or social norms. The first step in becoming more tolerant is learning self-control. By having the discipline to hold back thoughts and comments that are a direct result of conscious bias, and instead just observing our thoughts, we avoid conflicts.

Secondly, self-reflection is crucial. To see ourselves and our behaviors clearly, education is required. Russian philosopher Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said, "It's a universal law- intolerance is the first sign of an inadequate education. An ill-educated person behaves with arrogant impatience, whereas truly profound education breeds humility." Still, this is no easy mission, especially when these biases have been ingrained in us. Speaking from personal experience, I have just recently started to become more aware of my own intolerance. Since I was younger, I grew up around mainly White people who were very different from me, a young Black girl. They came from different backgrounds, behaved differently, and looked different. There were many times where I was the only Black person in my entire class, or at least the only Black girl. Since I was so outnumbered, my White peers tried to make me feel less than and would ask trivial and

offensive questions. Yet, they'd get offended when I would tell them how their actions made me uncomfortable. Since I've dealt with that since the age of 6, I am beginning to recognize how that disparity in perception has affected me. As much as I hate to admit it, I have a bias against White people. And although that may seem bad, it is the first step I need to take to reverse my bias and, ultimately be free of it.

Lastly, we must educate ourselves. After recognizing these biases, I made it a priority to try and understand why my White peers treated me as they did, and I quickly found out that most of it wasn't on purpose. Many of their comments and questions came from places of genuine ignorance. Like me, they were as devoid of malice as they were of awareness. Having these conversations elevated our understanding of, and respect for, one another. I think if everyone tried to undergo the same process, young or old, Black or White, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, we could heighten our respect and empathy for others.

It is important to keep in mind that this process could take a while, as awareness is a lifelong pursuit. However, social evolution needs to happen. It is imperative for us to not only move forward, but for every person to feel respected and safe, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation. Just as political activist Angela Davis said, "Sometimes we have to do the work even though we don't yet see a glimmer on the horizon that it's actually going to be possible." The time is now to put in the work to create a more accepting society for everyone. Blame can no longer be displaced, change can no longer be suppressed, marginalized groups should no longer carry the burden of prejudice and injustice.

# **High School Grades 9-10 Division**

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## **First Place Award**

Alejandra Ramos

## **Second Place Award**

Gabriella Nagy

## **Third Place Award**

Allyson Horst

## **Fourth Place Award**

Brianna Woodard

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# **High School**

## **Grades 11-12**

### **Division**

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Essays are displayed in alphabetical order by last name.

## Perseverance

My life is pretty perfect. I am middle class, have two houses, and a loving family. On top of that, throughout my entire life I have been spoiled. Whenever I was asked what supported my character development, my answer would be math and how I had to work hard to succeed. My difficulties in math was the only real struggle I had, so when I was asked to write about a time where I had to struggle, I had always envied those who had actual good stories to tell. Little did I know right around the corner was a seemingly never-ending story about the beast and me.

For almost a year and a half now I have been very sick. I have been in pain and exhausted every single day for over a year. I constantly have a headache, I never feel rested, and I cannot remember anything. In June 2019 I got bit, by a tick, and I was diagnosed with Lyme disease. That is when I first met the invisible beast that has resided within me ever since.

When going through your day-to-day life in pain 24/7, never knowing when it is going to end is horrible. Getting blood-draws upon blood-draws only to end up nowhere is maddening. Never knowing when he will leave; when the beast will leave is beyond frustrating. I would prefer to be told he will always be there, over not knowing when it is going to end. I have cried so many times over being in pain and never knowing when it is going to stop.

Yet through all of this, I have persevered. Through all of this, I am still doing all my schoolwork. A little over a year ago I went into the hospital, then I spent the rest of that week laying flat on my back because whenever I tried to sit up at all I would get a splitting headache. At the end of the week, I went back into the hospital again. During that time, I had to do college work so, I laid in the hospital bed with my laptop at a 90-degree angle typing occasionally messing up my IV from the typing. I could have easily emailed my professors saying I was in the hospital and I needed an extension on the due date however I did not. I could have sat there and done nothing giving into the beast, but I fought I persevered, and I still am. Some nights the beast gets the best of me and in order to finish my school work I have to cancel plans I had the next day so I will have the time to finish my work. I could email my professors giving them a sob story on why I could not do the work, but I do not.

It has been over a year, and I am still battling the beast. I went from taking one pill a day to eight-nine, to stop all the havoc the beast has caused. Yet through all of this, I have powered through and persevered. My memory started to go, and I got extended time. My joints would ache to where I would be limping, so I carried an ice-cold water bottle around to numb the pain. I could barely walk on my feet, so I walked on the sides or got a wheelchair. I am still fighting him, but I am getting the upper hand most of the time now. I will never go back to what I used to call normal, but I will get better. When the dust settles, and I come out the other side Lyme-free, I will be more understanding, compassionate, and resilient. I will be wiser and stronger on the other side. If it were not for the beast, I would not have learned what it is truly to struggle and persevere. In the beginning, I had no tools or knowledge on how to fight the beast, but now I know all his tricks and moves. I know what makes him tick, and I know what hurts him. Lyme may have started it, but I will end it. I will persevere, and I will win the war.

My name is Seamus Gill. I am 17, I am homeless and live with my partner, I am allergic to cats and I really like Monster energy. Now you know me, but do you really? You do not really know someone until you really ask them questions about themselves, and that is what this essay is about. What makes you ask questions about people? Helpful, because you care for your fellow human. Of course, everyone does, but with my past, I have learned that being helpful only goes so far. It takes a different type of person to go farther and always do what is right.

You may be caught up on the homeless part. How am I writing this or going to school as a teen if I am homeless? Well, homeless does not always mean living on the street. Homelessness, as I have learned, is more of the lack of having a designated home. The lack of having a place that is yours to sleep and not be afraid to lose. My father has not been in my life since I was a baby, and my mother has been in and out of it for a very long time. I moved down here to Naples six years ago, living with my stepsister's dad. Without a parent taking care of me or a legal guardian, that made me legally homeless. Of course, I do not look like I am homeless. I wear okay clothes and have a phone and some nice things like apple earbuds, my own computer, and my own pale pink hoodie my partner got for me.

My lesson to teach is that helpfulness is limited. If someone were on the street asking for change, you'd give them a buck, right? But would you give him \$5? Or \$10? Or pick them up and bring them to the homeless shelter? Or to your home? As a teen I am lucky that people are willing to look out for me and take me in, that helpfulness is the only reason I am here. After realizing that the rural home out in the Estates of Naples would not let me get a head-start in life, I moved in with a friend in the city. Isabella is a good friend, and we would stay up and talk for a long time about just anything we want to. Friendship like that is what made me feel safe there. But getting kicked out is what made me realize that helpfulness does not always run in the family. Her parents did not want me there anymore, so they waited for me to go out for the weekend with my partner, and Isabella told me they wouldn't let me in the car after school. I did not feel homeless before then. Before then homeless meant I just don't have anyone who needs to take care of me. In that moment when Isabella stopped me to tell me her parents wouldn't take me home after school, I was angry. Rage filled me, to think I had a home and had convinced

myself I was loved. I started walking away from the school, nowhere to go. They drove past me as I walked down the sidewalk, and I stopped as they turned the road and disappeared. Helpfulness lasts if it is not a burden, my lesson that day. But that night I learned a different lesson.

Luckily, my partner has a mom and stepfather who are truly helpful. When I needed a place to stay until I could get my stuff, they let me stay. They did not ask me how long or what I can do for them. They would not let a teen go in a homeless shelter, and that is what I think the definition of helpful is. They just knew that I had nowhere else to go and took me in, that is what it means to be helpful. People like me do not ask for help. Because we always must be given help, our ego gets in the way. Helpful people know when others need help and will take on extra work and responsibility to help others. It is not something you can measure in people or assume; it is not political or partisan, it is not a certain personality, it is not a question of morality even. Helpfulness is measured by what you do when someone needs the most help, and that is what I have learned being homeless.

## **The Pillars: Perseverance and Courage**

"It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop." (Confucius). This motto guides my thoughts before every journey onto that endless runway. Perseverance led me to the steps of this stage, now, courage must accompany me across it. I feel the adrenaline racing through my body as I set my eyes towards the impatient audience. When the applause ceases, I feel my muscles untense, almost as a signal of approval. I position myself, and with ease, the words come out. I strike another pose and flash a smile at the pageant judges.

If you asked this doubtful, easily discouraged girl if she would ever participate in a pageant, (let alone develop her own platform which carried her to New York City), she would have looked at you like a deer gawking at headlights. This former version of myself, embodied through a character that lacked a strong foundation, lacked two important attributes. Without these two essential attributes, my confidence suffered, which impacted my ability to demonstrate my true self in all aspects. I fooled myself into believing it was impossible to pinpoint my lack of confidence and drive, which ultimately led to a series of failed pageants, self-doubt in piano and violin competitions, and participation in cross country meets. However, the internal drive from within transformed my views on my capabilities. Once I had unleashed the Courage and Perseverance that lived inside of me, I realized how much my character yearned for these attributes.

Courage and Perseverance are the most fundamental aspects of character, in regard to both my personal life, and the development of society. Courage is the most prominent reason as to why I have continued my journey of musical performance throughout high school. My early years of violin performance were hindered by a cloud of fear. Prior to my burst of courage, I refused to play my violin for church. I was convinced that the congregation was silently judging my inability to produce a mature tone and polished vibrato. On any occasion the music director would inquire about my violin abilities, I would shy away from the idea. Now, I seize any opportunity to present myself in front of an audience, even if it means temporary discomfort before I find my internal rhythm. Courage does not mean performing successfully in every aspect, but rather, courage is having the drive to perform.

Courage has been described as working through real or imagined fear. I can

**Cayley McCloskey**

Lely High School

Teacher: Mrs. Annette Hall

personally attest to the importance of this attribute. Courage has allowed me to find my voice, whether this is done through music, runway walks, or through words. The aspects of music that require performance and expression are only possible through courage. Courage has allowed my pageantry mission, (to spread confidence among the younger generation), to truly form. In gaining courage, I am able to speak to others about the importance of breaking the chains of self-doubt and unlocking one's true personality.

Likewise, Perseverance has touched my internal character and allow my true drive and self-discipline to emerge. One important occasion in the formation of my character was an opportunity to further my platform by receiving a pageant title. My internal dialogue, however, was my pitfall. I overheard others at the competition speaking highly of the competition, describing the details of their intricate missions and run-way abilities. Perseverance had left my side, which resulted in defeat before the competition had even commenced. However, after my loss I was determined to persevere and re-compete in the preceding competition. Perseverance developed my confidence on stage, my poise and even my interpersonal relationships with other girls in the pageant. My Perseverance resulted in an international title and the opportunity to develop my own voice, and advocate for girls around the world.

Society often relies on a generation of compassionate individuals whom of which can advocate for their own values. Society progresses through the ideals of both Perseverance and Courage, which pave the way for self-expression and the formation of unique ideas. Without these fundamental attributes, every-day inventions such as electricity, automobiles, technology and infrastructure would exist. Perseverance is the foundation of every lens of society, which is strengthened by individuals who continue to exhibit courage. It does not matter how little Perseverance and Courage one has, if they possess these attributes, progress in society and within themselves will never cease.

## **The Girl and Her Orchids**

It was strange packing up all my belongings and leaving behind my room, which once was my safe space. Tears rolled down my face as I said goodbye to my grandparents, or as I liked to call them, Mama and Papa. I wasn't sure when I was going to see them again.

When I was four years old, my parents decided that leaving Puerto Rico would give my brother and me endless opportunities. Years have passed, and they were mostly correct. Everything seems to have gotten better. The Earth continues to spin, the sun continues to shine, but one thing is wrong: Mama, who stayed in Puerto Rico, is beginning to forget things. She no longer knows my name; I am now "Girl." While she once used to talk to her orchids, she now sits and waits for the days to pass.

Although Mama no longer remembers me, I vividly remember my earliest days with her. She taught me kindness. Not just to people, but to all of God's green earth. I remember helping her plant orchids. She taught me how to treat these delicate flowers. While she made us fresh lemonade, I'd run to the garden and gather everything we needed. Everyday I'd pick a new orchid to care for, to groom and re-pot if necessary. To repot them, we'd gently remove the orchid from its container, which wasn't allowing the orchid to blossom. We'd then trim roots and remove the bad potting mix before we placed it into its new pot. Like my move from Puerto Rico, this freed the orchid from a toxic growing environment and offered it a new, healthier home. Grooming was my favorite part; we'd cut off the dead blossoms, in hopes that new ones would grow. They are like us. Sometimes you need to cut away the bad so the new, good blossoms have room to flourish. Sipping on our ice cold lemonade, we'd sit next to the orchids and shower them with compliments.

Mama taught me that just like people, the greatest act of kindness we could offer the orchids was talking to them. "Hablando con las orquideas, hacen que crezcan feliz," she'd say. "Talking to orchids makes them grow happy." So everyday we'd go out to her beautiful garden, sit next to the orchids, and talk kindly to them. Much later I realized we were there to talk to each other and enjoy each other's company. At the time I didn't I didn't understand the importance of this, until I realized the orchids resemble my grandma.

**Heidy Melendez-Torres**

Seacrest Country Day School

Teacher: Dr. MaryZoe Bowden

Like them, her beautiful life is fragile and won't be around forever. Although she may not remember who I am, I want her to know that her Girl has learned from her and has always tried to be kind. Every good thing must come to an end. Unfortunately that means the lives of our loved ones too. She once was the woman who lit up the room with her smile; she's now a stranger.

I will always keep orchids in my garden, to remind me to treat others with kindness. Like Mama, I hope to plant seeds of gentle beauty all around me. I want to help the people around me grow and keep my home and school full of bright blossoms. My grandma has taught me to treat anyone in my path with as much kindness as we did our flowers, and to always do everything in my power to strengthen and keep their roots vibrant.

# **High School Grades 11-12 Division**

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## **First Place Award**

Heidy Melendez-Torres

## **Second Place Award**

Cayley McCloskey

## **Third Place Award**

Alexis Barr

## **Fourth Place Award**

Seamus Gill

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