

WRITING FROM THE HEART

*watch your thoughts, they become words
watch your words, they become actions
watch your actions, they become habits
watch your habits, they become your character
watch your character, it becomes your destiny.*

—Anonymous

WRITING *from the* HEART

YOUNG PEOPLE SHARE THEIR WISDOM

Edited by Peggy Veljkovic and Arthur J. Schwartz, Ed.D.

Foreword by Sir John Templeton

Best of the Laws of Life *Essay Contest*

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Contents

The order of the essays in this volume chronicles the growth of the Laws of Life Essay Contest from the first contest in Tennessee launched in 1987 to the most recent contest in Nebraska that began in 2000.

Foreword by Sir John Templeton	xi	On Honesty and Respect:	24
		<i>Teaching the Values that</i>	
		<i>Matter Most</i>	
On Helping Others:	3	Kwonneung (Stephen) Kim,	
<i>In Truth, Giving Is Receiving</i>		Brooklyn, NY	
Kacey Mason, Winchester, TN			
On Optimism:	6	On Living by Your Values:	27
<i>Standing High on the Peaks of Life</i>		<i>The Laws of Life Will Guide You</i>	
Arjay Velasco, Bronx, NY		<i>Through the roughest Times</i>	
On Love:	8	Ashley Cowan, Lima, OH	
<i>Sometimes to Love Means to Sacrifice</i>		On Kindness and	
Leah Webber, Crestline, OH		Believing in Yourself:	30
On Forgiving Others:	10	<i>To Thine Own Self Be True</i>	
<i>Nothing Should Keep Us</i>		William Barrie, Fairfield, CT	
<i>from Forgiving Each Other</i>		On Respect:	32
Ashlee Cook, Cleveland, TN		<i>What I Learned from Carl</i>	
On Honesty:	14	Nick Maney, West Palm Beach, FL	
<i>Is Honesty Still the Best Policy?</i>		On Redemption:	35
Peter Blair, Nassau, Bahamas		<i>The Epiphany</i>	
On Courage:	18	Arliss Feathergill, Winona, MN	
<i>Let Me Show Courage</i>		On Integrity:	39
<i>in Everything I Do</i>		<i>Keeping Your Word</i>	
Andrew Gilman, Troy, NC		Peter MacLean, Port Glasgow, UK	
On Helping Others:	21	On Living Life to the Fullest:	42
<i>Learning to Give</i>		<i>Last Day</i>	
Claire Nettles, Clinton, MS		Denise Signorelli, Plymouth, MN	

On Family, Honesty, and Believing in Yourself: <i>What I Learned from My Family</i> Tamara George, Alvin, TX	45	On Optimism: <i>The Only Person in Charge of My Attitude Is Me</i> Angela Ross, Philadelphia, PA	72
On Kindness: <i>Go Out and Do Something Kind Today</i> Joanisa Tenreiro, Naples, FL	47	On Believing in Yourself: <i>When You Look in the Mirror, Do You Like What You See?</i> Elizabeth Cherry, Hickory, NC	75
On Having Faith: <i>We Are Here by Grace</i> Andrew Wasuwongse, Media, PA	49	On The Importance of Learning, Faith, and Family: <i>Reaching My Goals</i> Anitra Raiford, Gainesville, FL	78
On Family: <i>Don't Take a Loved One for Granted</i> Chelsea Rose, Bryn Athyn, PA	53	On Helping Others: <i>I Can't Forget and I Won't Ignore</i> Tara Coughlin, Philadelphia, PA	80
On Optimism: <i>Positive Thinking Is Contagious</i> Julie Johnston, Kingwood, TX	56	On Optimism: <i>Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative!</i> D. Michael Reynolds, Jr., North Little Rock, AR	83
On Not Judging Others: <i>Look with Your Heart, Not with Your Eyes</i> Melissa Jackson, Rawlins, WY	58	On Love: <i>Don't Let the Chain of Love End with You</i> Alexandra Silverman, Clayton, MO	85
On Integrity: <i>We Must Strive to Live with Integrity</i> Emily Garrett, Sanford, NC	63	On Love: <i>Gone, Yet Not Forgotten</i> Melissa Young, Acton, Ontario, Canada	88
On Kindness: <i>The Simple Hand That I Have to Offer</i> Mollie Barnes, Spirit Lake, IA	67	On Compassion and the Pursuit of Excellence: <i>Having a Set of Rules to Live by Is a Great Tool for Success</i> Sherrie Crouch, Kingston Springs, TN	90
On Helping Others: <i>Learning a Valuable Lesson</i> Laia Mitchell, Tallahassee, FL	70		

On Honesty:	93	On Happiness:	111
<i>Honesty Will Help Me Achieve My Goals</i>		<i>Life Has So Many Wonderful Things to Offer</i>	
Paulina Klinkosz, Mayfield Heights, OH		Elisha Reid, Victoria, Australia	
On Love, Justice, and Compassion:	95	On Living Life to the Fullest:	113
<i>Principles for True Freedom</i>		<i>Don't Toy with Time</i>	
Suzanne Schumann, Hixson, TN		Lisa Jennings, Delta Junction, AK	
On Compassion:	97	On Living by Your Values:	116
<i>Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged</i>		<i>The Laws of Life Will Continue to Influence My Life</i>	
Amanda Edwards, Cincinnati, OH		Vassily Polyvianny, Ivanovo, Russian Federation	
On Trying Your Hardest:	100	On Courage:	119
<i>Success Is a Journey, Not a Destination</i>		<i>Overcoming Fear</i>	
Tyler Brinkmann, Carlyle, IL		Amy Schnelle, Medford, WI	
On Living Life to the Fullest:	102	On Perseverance:	122
<i>Enjoy Every Second</i>		<i>The Greatest Law of Life</i>	
Wu Meng (Wendy Wu), Beijing, China		Jesse Gordon, Denham Springs, LA	
On Having Faith and Living Life Simply:	105	On Kindness:	125
<i>Life's Precious Gifts</i>		<i>Say a Kind Word to Someone Else at Least Once a Day</i>	
Genevieve Owusu Ansah, Kumasi, Ghana		Lindi Davis, Napa, CA	
On the Importance of Learning:	107	On Optimism and Living Life to the Fullest:	127
<i>Half Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing</i>		<i>If Nothing Else, These Will Build Character</i>	
V. Ganesh, Chennai, India		Katharine Boicourt, Trappe, MD	
On Believing in Yourself:	109	On Helping Others, Passion, and Integrity:	130
<i>The Perfect Life</i>		<i>Eight Birds, Two Mountains, and One Big Yellow Chevy Malibu</i>	
Anne Saab, Beirut, Lebanon		Lindsay Braman, Point Lookout, MO	

On Love:	135	On Living Life Simply:	159
<i>Nurturing Love in a Flower Pot</i>		<i>I Experienced Giving</i>	
Neil Diaz, Huntington Park, CA		<i>with the Hands of God</i>	
		Victoria Kintner, Shreveport, LA	
On Helping Others:	138	On Perseverance:	162
<i>Everyone Can Make a Difference</i>		<i>What I Learned</i>	
Jessica Atwell, Encinitas, CA		<i>from My Grandmother</i>	
		Anna Kopel, North Mankato, MN	
On Family:	141	On Patience:	165
<i>A Kind and Loving Family</i>		<i>Getting Past the Potholes of Life</i>	
Alexander Sorenson, Altadena, CA		Kevin Holloway, St. Louis, MO	
On Having Faith:	144	On Living by Your Values:	168
<i>Nothing Great Was Ever</i>		<i>A Recipe for Character</i>	
<i>Achieved Without Faith</i>		Margaret Therese (Terry) Bruns,	
Desiree Eroy-Reveles,		Greensboro, NC	
Oceanside, CA			
On Courage:	146	On Compassion:	171
<i>The Essential Life Quality</i>		<i>Taking the Time to Smile</i>	
Monique Jones, Oceanside, CA		Nicole Kuncl, Jensen Beach, FL	
On Living Life to the Fullest:	148	On Living Life to the Fullest:	174
<i>My Turning Point</i>		<i>The Most Important</i>	
Nadine Bastiampillai,		<i>Part of Life Is Life Itself</i>	
Toronto, Ontario, Canada		Lisa Avery, Omaha, NE	
On Respect:	151	<i>Indexes</i>	
<i>Respecting Other People</i>		Listing of Contest Locations	179
<i>Can Make a Difference</i>		Listing of Contest Sponsors	180
Malieka Overton, Albion, PA		Listing of Essay Themes	185
On Living by Your Values:	153	<i>About Sir John Templeton</i>	189
<i>The Train to Attain Character</i>			
Kati Lestmann, Dayton, TN			
On Love:	156		
<i>The Power of Love</i>			
Gloria Kung, Kennesaw, GA			

Foreword



Sir John Templeton congratulates high school senior Damion Forbes, who won Grand Prize in a Laws of Life Essay Contest held in Nassau, Bahamas.

Love. Forgiveness. Compassion. Honesty. Perseverance. These are universal values, timeless *laws of life* that transcend all cultures and religions. There are literally hundreds of these spiritual principles that guide us, whatever we do or wherever we go on our life's journey. But these "laws" can only guide us if we are aware of them, if we personalize and apply them to our own experience. In short, before we can live by the *laws of life*, we must discover them for ourselves.

How do we discover our own values, our own *laws of life*? I believe that each and every one of us can identify the set of principles we want to live by, if we reflect on the events we have passed through, the people we have known, and the lessons we have learned. By discovering and practicing these values, we have the power to transform our lives into more deeply useful and joyful experiences.

As a young boy growing up in Franklin County, Tennessee, I was privileged to receive abundant lessons on good character that were taught to me at home and school and were reinforced by example, through the behavior of my parents, my spiritual elders, and the members of my community. Very few doors were locked in my hometown. A person's word and handshake were sacred; and honesty was always the best policy. With so many models and examples of positive character, I was able to identify and practice the values by which I wanted to lead my life. I was given the freedom and the opportunity to discover my own *laws of life*.

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest offers young people the same opportunity. In 1987, when we started the essay contest in Franklin County, it had an amazing effect on the county. Two things made it work. The first was the prizes. They ranged from \$100 for honorable mention to \$2,000 for the grand prize. The Franklin County students got terribly excited about winning cash prizes, and the

idea swept the county. After a couple of years, three-quarters of the students were writing essays on their own values. The other principle of success was this: we did not tell the young people what to write about. We simply asked them to tell us in their own words! We all know that young people love to share their stories and reach their own conclusions. This is what the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is all about: offering young people an opportunity to reflect and write about their beliefs and principles, and then publicly recognizing them for affirming the values by which they want to live.

Writing from the Heart celebrates these timeless principles and the children who have written about them. And it chronicles the astonishing growth of the essay contest from my hometown in Franklin County, Tennessee to communities around the world.

celebrating our young people

First and foremost, *Writing from the Heart* is a tribute to our young people. The 62 essays featured in the pages of this book illustrate the innate capacity for goodness within all young people, especially when they are encouraged to reflect upon the treasures they hold inside. From Chattanooga to China, the essays you will find in this book are all extraordinary. Moreover, they have been honored by their individual communities for the breadth of their ideas and the life lessons they contain.

The 62 essays printed in this book not only celebrate the accomplishments of their writers. They also exemplify the more than 60,000 young people around the world who have participated in a *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. Every one of the 60,000 essays is remarkable, and the writers are all winners — each of them authors of their own destiny.

Take your time as you read the essays in this book. You are being offered a rare opportunity to peer into the hearts of young people around the world. What you will learn about them will astound you. Each of the essays illustrates the personal journey taken by the writers as they reflect upon the experiences they have had and the people who have been most significant to them in their young lives. Many of the stories the writers share are uplifting. Some are very tragic. With openness and candor, the writers share their trials and triumphs, their everyday moments, their mistakes, and the lessons they have learned. Each of the essays bears witness to a transformation as the writers make sense of their values and beliefs, distilling them from the crucible of personal experience. As I read the essays I was greatly moved

by some of the hardships that today's young people have had to face. Despite those challenges, the essays brim with optimism, faith in the future, and belief in oneself. The essays offer us not only a window into our young people's thoughts and beliefs. They inspire us to make the most of our own lives as well.

Although the writers discuss a variety of "laws," the wisdom they impart most often follows one of three types: 1) positive character traits that we should all strive to live by; 2) advice for how to make the most out of life; and 3) how we should behave toward others. The table below highlights the many different themes that the 62 young people chose to write about. (Each of the essays is listed by themes on page 185.)

frequency of themes in student essays

Positive Character Traits	<i>Frequency</i>	Principles for Successful Living	<i>Frequency</i>	Conduct Toward Others	<i>Frequency</i>
Love	6	Living Life to the Fullest	7	Helping Others	6
Optimism	5	Having Faith	4	Compassion	4
Honesty	4	Importance of Family	4	Kindness	4
Courage	3	Believing in Yourself	4	Respect	3
Perseverance	3	Living by Your Values	4	Forgiving Others	1
Patience	1	Having Integrity	3	Not Judging Others	1
Happiness	1	Importance of Learning	2	Being Fair	1
Redemption	1	Living Life Simply	2		
		Trying Your Hardest	1		

Note: The number of themes exceeds the number of essays, because in a few essays students wrote about more than one law of life.

Not surprisingly, the essays in this book illustrate that young people all over the world hold similar values and beliefs. As I read these essays, I was amazed at how universal these lessons are and how much we can learn from our young people.

the essay selection process

The 62 essays that appear in this book were first written for one of the 54 *Laws of Life* Essay Contests launched in communities, schools, and programs all over the world. The John Templeton Foundation asked the sponsors of each contest to submit their first-place essay as well as two other top finalists from their most recent contest. From those three essays, the Foundation selected one essay to be featured in this book. With few exceptions, each of the essay contests is represented by its grand prizewinner.

Two programs deviated from the selection process. First, the Joseph Family Foundation sponsors individual contests in a number of southern California high schools. We chose to represent the scope of the Joseph Family Foundation contests by featuring five of their essays. Second, the I*EARN Essay Project involves 26 countries. In this program, students from all over the world participate in a cross-cultural dialogue as they share their essays on the Internet for everyone to enjoy. Prizes are not awarded to the writers, but in every other sense the five essays we featured from the I*EARN Essay Project are award-winning.

a celebration of community spirit

This book is a tribute to the business leaders, educators, community foundations, school districts, neighbors, parents, churches—all of the individuals and groups that have sponsored and organized essay contests in their communities and schools. The Listing of Contest Sponsors on page 180 illustrates the wide range of individuals and organizations that have launched essay contests around the world. To this day, as it was in my hometown, the contest remains a *local program*, financially sponsored and organized in the community in which it is held.

The order of the essays in this book chronicles the growth of the contest, beginning with the first contest in Franklin County, Tennessee on page 3 and pausing for now on page 174 with the newest contest launched in Omaha, Nebraska this past spring. The contest has spread mostly by word of mouth. Each one has been started by individuals who believe in the ideals and benefits of the program and that it will make a difference in the lives of children. To this date, 54 contests have

been launched, in 23 states throughout the United States and in 30 countries around the world, including Russia, China, India, South Africa, Canada, and the United Kingdom. You can find out if there is an essay contest in your area by referring to the Listing of Contest Locations on page 179, which catalogues the contests by community, state, and country. (And if there isn't currently a contest where you live, I invite you to start one!)

Because the essay contest is locally sponsored and organized, each contest is unique, designed to fit the needs and spirit of its community and schools. In some cases, as for the West Philadelphia Catholic Contest on page 80, the program is adopted by one school. In others (e.g., the Mississippi Contest on page 21) the program is held statewide, with all schools invited to participate. Here are some other ways in which contests vary:

age – Many contests involve the participation of high school-aged students, but a large number of contests have also been started at the middle school level and in elementary schools. Indeed, the contest is intended for everyone: the young who each day are introduced to the values that will guide their lives, as well as the older and more experienced who seek confirmation and affirmation of their *laws of life*.

prizes – Most contests give cash prizes and certificates to their winners, from grand prize to honorable mention, and prize amounts vary greatly. In several contests, the winners receive a cash prize and a second cash award that they donate to the charity of their choice (see the Montgomery County Contest on page 18). Some contests award their winners cash prizes as well as partial college scholarships (see the Palm Beach County Contest on page 32).

form of expression – For most contests, participants are asked to express their *laws of life* in writing. However, in some communities, organizers have designed the contest so that students can illustrate their *laws of life* in other ways. For example, in the Guilford County Contest (see page 168), students are invited to express their *laws of life* using art, music, film, and photography, as well as writing.

Even the name of the contest can vary! “Write for Life,” “Turning Points,” “Values for Life”— these are all contests whose names have been chosen by their organizers to reflect the ideals and goals of the contest for their community.

starting a *LAWS OF LIFE* essay contest in your community

As you read the essays in this book, imagine for a moment that the student writers live in your town or city, and that you are listening to them as they read their essays to an audience of parents, neighbors, teachers, and community leaders who have come together to honor them at the awards ceremony—and that *your* support helped make the contest possible.

Perhaps this book will inspire you to launch a *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in your community. Wouldn't it be a joy to provide your young people with an opportunity to think about love, kindness, friendship, forgiveness, and gratitude? The John Templeton Foundation offers a wide variety of contest materials and technical assistance to individuals and organizations interested in launching an essay contest. I encourage you to contact the Foundation so that you can learn more about the contest and how you can give the gift of character education to your community.

acknowledgments

Without the commitment and hard work of the hundreds of contest sponsors, organizers, volunteers, and parents, and all of the principals and teachers who support and administer the contest, this book would not have been possible. The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest has spread from town to town, thanks to the unflagging enthusiasm of individuals who hear about the essay contest and know right away that the program will benefit young people. Each year these “Contest Champions” bring their community and schools together to celebrate the young people who have thought carefully about the values that will guide their life.

The following Contest Champions helped in assembling the 62 essays, student photos and biographies, and contest profiles contained in *Writing from the Heart: Young People Share Their Wisdom*: Charlie Abourjilie, Dick Allen, Elizabeth Peale Allen, Nancy Andrew, Cathy Barrett, Janis Bean, John Beard, Aggie Becker, Berkley Bedell, Sheldon Benardo, Jack Bovee, Alicia Brennan, Sr. Mary Bur, Barry Burleson, Amy Butler, Bruce Cambigue, Vince Cancro, Lorraine Chambers, Rick Chambers, Larry Cockrum, Brenda Collins, Leo Collins, Sr. Ellen Convey, Dana Cooper, Lori Cranson, Jack Currier, Jon Dalton, John Davies, Anita Davis, Bonnie Davis, John Dodd, John Donaldson, Oscar Donkor, Corky Dow, Diane Drennan, Kathy Fell, Fred Foss, Leslie Frazee, Harvey Friedman, Paula Gavin, Kenneth Giniger, Ed Gragert, Mena Griffiths, Leo Hawk, Thomas Hill, Kathy Holman,

Thom Houghton, Deborah & Stuart Irby, Joe Irby, Jeff Jaffe, Janis Jarvis, Mrs. Worthington Johnson, Lynn Joseph, William King, Bela Kletnick, Nina Kuznetsova, Chris Larsen, Margie Legg, Jack Letvinchuk, Sarah Lucas, Angela Macias, Terri May, Suzi McCreery, Linda McKay, Rev. Hal Milton, Pat Nugent, Rev. Stephen Orchard, Pat Panzeca, Eileen Perra, Robert Rabon, Warren Romaine, Rev. Don Rose, Cynthia Rowan, Eileen Rueth, S.B. “Skeet” Rymer, Kent Sampson, Virginia Sampson, Neil Sawyer, Carl Schoenstedt, Jane Schuck, Bill Schuler, Bren Simon, Regina Smith, Kevin Smith-Fagan, Stelle Snyder, Marie Souder, Nan Starling, Jackie Strick, Becky and Handly Templeton, Pina Templeton, Robert Vitalo, Ashley Ward, Carolin Whitaker, Frederic Wolfe, Mary Wynn, and Rhonda Zimmerman.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to each and every individual who has made this publication possible, so that others can read, enjoy, and learn from the wisdom found in its pages.

John Marks Templeton

WRITING FROM THE HEART



Kacey Mason
age 16

John Templeton *Laws of Life* Essay Contest
franklin county, tennessee

on HELPING OTHERS

“In truth, giving is receiving”

As I recall my childhood, I vividly remember my mother constantly trying to help others. She gave food and clothes and also collected furniture for several different families who were relocating and starting over in an effort to leave the devastation of an abusive life behind. She gave countless hours of her time lending an ear, as well as an open heart, when there seemed to be no one else who could or would help. Often Mom would come home and help us go through our toys, especially those we seemed to have outgrown, for her many “other” children she was working with who had so little. Sometimes, she would take my older sister and me with her to the shelter where she gave so much of herself. There were always displaced little kids running around, looking for some attention. My sister and I took care of some of the kids while my mother talked to their mothers. Mom tried to ensure that the children in our community had a good Christmas, just like us. Her positive example helped me to realize the importance of helping others, keeping a good reputation, and maintaining a strong relationship with God.

I feel that we should all share with each other, whether it be material possessions or time. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all have the heart of Mother Teresa: Her whole life was dedicated to helping others less fortunate; she spent all of her time in selfless sacrifice. A simple gift of time brings such joy to others. Just spending an hour of time with a lonely person will give him tremendous joy. Also, the sharing of money, even though this is not the most important kind of sharing, can help somebody who needs clothes, food, or maybe even shelter. Calvin

Coolidge aptly remarked; “No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave.”

There is only one thing you come into this world with that you also leave with—your name. I know that everything I do is a reflection of who I am. It is typical for others to remember the bad that we do more than they do the good. The positive contributions and helpful advice donated by my mother that I have not only seen for myself, but also heard about from others, have been a helpful influence in all I do. Seeing the faces of the many people she’s helped and the positive outcome of what first seemed impossible makes me strive to help others in any way possible. I always want my name to reflect my positive influence. Shakespeare also recognized the importance of a good reputation:

Good name in man and woman, dear my Lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls...
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed.

My decision to do right is also guided by my relationship with God through prayer and reading my Bible. By doing so, I have learned many valuable lessons. Luke 6:31 says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Through my reading I have learned the importance of kindness toward everyone. When I apply this to the way I live my life, I can see that people do profit from someone else’s kindness. When I am generous and go out of my way for other people, my day seems more pleasant. I believe that kindness has a very positive effect on both me and my peers. I think it is very important to read God’s word and keep a relationship with Him. I wake up every morning, knowing that whatever the day ahead of me holds, He will be with me. I will always have His unconditional love to guide me.

I have realized that it is not important what I do for myself, but instead what I do for others. I have achieved much through my Christian morals of giving, keeping a good reputation, and being kind to others. In truth, giving is receiving. However, if one is thinking of receiving while giving, the blessing is lost. In 1962, Martin Luther King stated, “The universe is so structured that things do not quite work out rightly if men are not diligent in their concern for others.... All life is interrelated.” I know that if I continue to live my life this way, I will be happy and accomplish my goals.

Kacey plans to graduate from college with a degree in physical therapy or athletic training. "Before the contest I never really thought about my morals and goals," she explains. "This opportunity has helped me understand and relay to others how important it is to think about our values."



JOHN TEMPLETON *LAWS OF LIFE* ESSAY CONTEST

In 1986, Sir John Templeton received the key to Franklin County, Tennessee in a ceremony attended by the Governor and other distinguished officials. To thank the county for bestowing him with such an honor, he gave to the citizens of Franklin County a promise: he would sponsor a bi-annual essay contest to encourage young people to write about their own *laws of life*. The essay contest has been a major highlight of the county's school year ever since. Since its inception in 1987, the contest has been administered by Becky and Handy Templeton, Sir John's niece and nephew. Combining the fall and spring contests, over 1,500 young people in Franklin County write a *laws of life* essay each year. Franklin County is proud that over the years winners have emerged from all levels of academic abilities. This encourages all students to participate and to have confidence that they may win a major prize.

Over 20 cash prizes are given out annually. The grand prizewinners in both the fall and spring contests receive \$2,000. In addition, the teacher of the grand prizewinner receives \$300. Five county schools participate in the contest: Franklin County High School, Huntland High School, H. Louis Scott Junior High School, J.D. Jackson Junior High School, and St. Andrews-Sewanee School.

In 1997, the essay contest expanded to eight elementary schools in Franklin County. Teachers at the schools select character traits that are important to both students and the community as a whole. Every six weeks, students discuss one of these qualities in their individual classrooms. At the end of each six-week period, a student is selected who best exemplifies the character trait. The student receives a certificate, a *laws of life* pencil, and a free pizza and coke from the local Domino's Pizza.

"Those of us in Franklin County," says Becky Templeton, "know that one of Sir John's greatest legacies will be his concern for character education in our county, his hometown of Winchester, Tennessee." ✱



Arjay Velasco
age 13

The Giniger Award
for Excellence in Writing
bronx, new york

on OPTIMISM

“Standing high on the peaks of life”

Numerous people have positive attitudes that help them in many ways. They can help them get through life’s many difficulties or life’s many decisions. In this essay, I will share the positive attitudes I take with me everywhere I go.

A positive attitude I always take with me is the attitude of knowing I can succeed in anything. This gives me the strength and power I need. It helps me to overcome the days when I feel so stressed out about school. It helps me to go on to do my work and is the main key to my motivation. It is very important that we show an attitude that is both positive and appropriate — an attitude that speaks for who we are and something that gives us character and personality.

The attitude that I can succeed in anything has helped me in life too. It gives me the courage that any decisions I make will take me through life. It has also given to me the most uplifting respect for myself. I have learned that failure is not a defeat but an inspiration to do better.

Another positive attitude I take with me is the attitude of knowing that tomorrow is another day — a whole new day of adventure and surprises. This attitude helps me in times of difficulties and the times when everything in my world goes wrong. This attitude helps me overcome those obstacles. It has given me all the confidence in the world. It has given me the opportunity to never look back at yesterday. I now view yesterday as the past, and know that a brighter tomorrow and future will come my way.

Before we can stand up high on the peaks of life, we should have the attitude of loving ourselves for who we are. Having this positive attitude indicates the starting

line of our future, a future that will reveal itself. One must remember never to give up on life since it has so much to offer.

In having this positive attitude you will be successful in life and in all the decisions you make in life.

Arjay is a Summerbridge Scholar and will attend the Summerbridge Program for the next two years. His goal is to study at an Ivy League university and become a doctor. Arjay shares that "Writing an essay based on a law of life is something everyone should do. I truly believe in what I wrote."



THE GINIGER AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN WRITING

Renee Giniger Feingold, Evelyn Giniger Hoffman and Kenneth Giniger, former graduates of P.S.86 in the Bronx, NY, decided that they would make a lasting contribution to the elementary school that had provided them with so many happy memories. In the spring of 1995, they began sponsoring the first Grade 6 Giniger Award for Excellence in Writing, which has since become an annual event.

Bela Kletnick, Writing Staff Developer, coordinates the yearlong writing program with the enthusiastic support of Principal Sheldon Benardo. Assigned topics focus on personal values and goal setting, and the essays are written using the writing process strategies of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publication. Approximately 300 students participate in the program. A spring awards ceremony honors the nine finalists, and the three top winners receive a \$50 savings bond. The Giniger family presents every finalist with a book, and teachers are also acknowledged with a gift of appreciation. This annual writing assembly has become a memorable event significant to the entire school community.

"My sisters and I sponsor the writing awards program," shares Kenneth Giniger, "in thanks for the education we received at P.S. 86, and to encourage today's students to become interested in writing." ✨



Leah Webber
age 9

Guideposts for Kids Magazine
Laws of Life Essay Contest
carmel, new york

on LOVE

“Sometimes to love means to sacrifice”

That is something I have heard my mom say from time to time, but I never really understood what it meant until a couple of years ago. It all began one cold January night...

I woke up to crying! I ran into my sister Caley's room... she said her head hurt really badly. I ran downstairs to get my parents. Caley was taken to a nearby hospital. She was delirious! The doctor sent her in a helicopter quick! To a hospital two hours away! There my parents learned Caley had a brain aneurysm—kind of like bleeding inside the brain. That was very serious! For three weeks Mom stayed at the hospital with Caley. I had to sacrifice my time with Mom.... I had to sacrifice a lot! I love my sister; and I kept reminding myself that Caley needed Mom more than I did. Sometimes to love means to sacrifice.

When Caley and Mom came home from the hospital, I was so glad to see them. Then, my parents asked me if I would share my bedroom with Caley (my room is closest to my parents' room) so they could hear her at night. Truthfully, I really wanted a room of my own, but I love my sister, so I said, “Sure.” Sometimes to love means to sacrifice.

During the past two and a half years, since Caley's brain aneurysm, she has had a lot of physical restrictions... she can't do anything that might increase her blood pressure or jolt her, causing her another brain bleed. (Things such as running, jumping, going upside down, and holding her breath, Caley cannot do.) Many times when I was playing with Caley, I chose not to do those things so Caley

wouldn't feel bad. I wanted to play like an ordinary kid, but I love my sister and... sometimes to love means to sacrifice.

Our family hasn't even gone to any amusement parks during these past two and a half years because Caley isn't allowed to ride any rides. Sure, I'd like to go, but I love my sister. Sometimes to love means to sacrifice.

But guess what? My sister is getting better! Soon we will be able to do lots of fun activities again. Through the past two and a half years, my sister Caley (who is two years older than me) and I have grown closer and closer. I love my sister. Sometimes to love means to sacrifice. And she is worth it. Now it actually feels like it was no sacrifice at all.

Leah likes being home-schooled because her mom makes learning fun. She shares that "Writing a laws of life essay has been a life changing experience for me. More than anything, I am thankful to share with the readers of my essay the wonderful miracle God performed in my sister's life. Hopefully readers will see how important it is for families to stick together through hard times."



GUIDEPOSTS FOR KIDS MAGAZINE LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST

The idea to feature the essay contest in the *Guideposts for Kids* magazine grew out of an old friendship between Sir John Templeton and Norman and Ruth Peale.

Since 1995, the contest has been held once a year for the magazine's readers and is open to all children between the ages of seven and twelve. Thousands of kids have written a *Laws of Life* essay and submitted it to the *Guideposts for Kids* Essay Contest, and close to one thousand children participated in the contest this past year. Each year, the grand prizewinner receives \$5,000.

"Sir John and my parents shared the same goal, of bringing a better and fuller life to as many people as possible," says Elizabeth Peale Allen. "I hope that everyone who enters the contest or reads the winning essays in *Guideposts* is moving toward a more rewarding life." ✱