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The School for Ethical Education INC.

11th Annual

Character Celebration

Celebrating Ethics in Action

Wednesday May 3, 2017

Amarante's Sea Cliff
62 Cove Street, New Haven, CT 06512

"Ethics in action creates character."

Event Program

Welcoming Address..... Dr. David B. Wangaard
President of the School for Ethical Education

Giving Thanks..... Monsignor Ernie Esposito

Dinner Service

Laws of Life Awards..... Deni Nakonecni
Laws of Life Program Coordinator

Essay Reading..... Saimin Shamim
“A Ray of Sunshine on a Dark Day: Being Positive”

Academic Integrity PSA Awards..... Dana Ferrer
Integrity Works PSA Program Coordinator

Academic Integrity PSA Screenings..... University of New Haven
Wilbur Cross High School
Weston High School

John Winthrop Wright *Ethics in Action*

Award Introduction..... Peter Donovan
Director of Wright Investors' Service

Awardee Introduction..... Mickey Herbert
President & CEO of the Bridgeport
Regional Business Council

Ethics in Action Awardee

& Keynote Speaker..... Merle Berke-Schlessel
*President & CEO of United Way of
Coastal Fairfield County*

Closing Remarks..... Dr. David B. Wangaard

2016-2017 John Winthrop Wright *Ethics in Action* Award

Merle Berke-Schlessel

President & CEO of United Way of Coastal Fairfield County



The *Ethics in Action* Award recognizes a business or community leader who demonstrates a commitment to ethics and character in their leadership. Ms. Berke-Schlessel is widely respected for her commitment to ethics in her personal and professional life. She has worked to transform UWCFC into an organization that moves beyond programs to achieve major community transformation.

Merle Berke-Schlessel was nominated by Mickey Herbert, President and CEO of the Bridgeport Regional Business Council as this year's *Ethics in Action* award recipient because of her commitment to make a difference in the lives of all children and families in Coastal Fairfield County.

In his nomination statement Herbert noted, "One of my main responsibilities to the businesses of the city of Bridgeport is to find innovative ways to bring together resources and create alliances between those who may not see themselves as natural partners. No one performs that function better than Merle Berke-Schlessel. I have been an ardent fan of hers ever since she took over our United Way here in Bridgeport 16 years ago, and her work with Bridgeport Prospers has really been extraordinary."

Ms. Berke-Schlessel has been the recipient of community and state awards for her efforts in ending homelessness, and improving the lives of children and families. She is a frequent speaker and panelist on trends and issues shaping urban communities and philanthropy. A lifelong New Haven area resident, Ms. Berke-Schlessel currently resides in Branford with her husband Robert, a surgeon. She is the mother of two married children and proud grandmother of three.

2016-2017 Laws ofLife Essay Judges

**Christopher
Massa**
Republican American
Paper

Gilbert Gigliotti
Central CT State
University

**Ellen Jarus
Hanley**
Cheshire Herald

Cristi Alberino
CT Department of
Education

Douglas Ficek
University of New
Haven

Joe Amarante
New Haven Register

Andra Gumbus
Sacred Heart
Academy

Susan Campbell
Hartford Courant

Nancy Nicolescu
CT Board of Ethics

Enza Richards
Aetna Consultant

David Simon
Yale University

Travis Tucker
University of Hartford

Lee Howard
The Day

Alyssa Amick
Yale Daily News

Michael Flament

Sara Gerhold

Albert Perry III

2016-2017 Integrity Works! PSA Contest Judges

Frank Borres
American View
Productions

Lydia LaPlante
CV Productions

Dennis Blader
Communications
Professor

Steven Fowler
Filmographer

Michael Graziano
PVACT President

Brian Katsis
Digital Video Director

Matthew Hallock
The Voice Ad Agency

Richard Falco
Multimedia Journalist

Johnny Perez
Photographer

Courtney Price

Daniel Kiley

2016-2017 Celebration Donors

Bigelow Tea	Merle & Robert Berke-Schlessel
Big Y	Metro-Hartford Alliance
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Christopher Gallo CPA	People's United Bank
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David & Robin Wangaard	Sikorsky Aircraft
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Dworken, Hillman, LaMorte & Sterczala, P.C.	The Long Wharf Theater
Enza Richards	United Way of Coastal
Foxwoods Resort Casino	Fairfield County
Joe Mazzola	Webster Bank
John Santa	Yale New Haven Health

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The School for Ethical Education

Laurie Bernard

Flood Middle School

Persistence and the Privilege of Education

My grandfather was not a great dad. He never was really there for his kids or took care of them. My mum barely knew him, and I've only met him once myself. Ironically, my grandfather taught my mum an important lesson that would change her life and the lives of her children for the better. Do not let your present situation define where you could end up later in life. This is a lesson that my mother taught me, a lesson passed down by her father.

My mum was in her twenties after she finished college. She has a younger brother who was about 10 years younger than she. He was around 11 years old and he hated school. This greatly upset my grandfather. He sat my mum down for a conversation. My grandpa was very driven by education. To him it's of the utmost importance. He told my mother how lucky she was that in Canada they were offered free education. He felt that her brother was self-absorbed and didn't want to seize the opportunity. At this point, my mother was a bit confused because he had never shown interest in anything she or her siblings had done, so what was the big deal this time? He proceeded to tell her about his struggle to get into school.

My grandfather grew up in Haiti which is a small, poor island west of the Dominican Republic. When he grew up he didn't have the privilege of free schooling. His mother barely knew

how to read and since she didn't know how, she didn't understand how important literacy was. Her main concern was feeding my grandfather and the rest of her children. She knew that she would never make enough money for her children to go to school, so every time my grandfather asked she would discourage him. Yet, every day he would hear other kids coming back from school talking about what they learned and he longed to be like them. My grandfather was very persistent and attempted to find a way to go to school. He had an uncle who was slightly more open minded about him going to school, and eventually my grandfather successfully convinced his uncle to enroll him in school.

Although he was enrolled, he still didn't have the money to pay for transportation or school supplies. Every morning he would wake up two to three hours earlier than all the other kids to walk to school. By the time they were waking up, he was already halfway to school. He also didn't have money for school books so he asked a friend to borrow a textbook so he could copy every chapter down by hand. By the time the rest of the kids had only read chapter one, he was already on chapter six. His persistence paid off and he ended up at the top of the class.

One day the principal called him into the main office and told him to bring in a parent. He knew his mother would never come, so he invited his uncle instead. The principal arrived and told him there was no point in him being with the other kids. He suggested that he take the test to get into high school. He passed

the test and made it to high school. From there on he didn't stop. Eventually he went to college and became an accountant.

His persistence, dedication, and motivation allowed him to accomplish completing an education despite coming from humble beginnings. My mother also lives by practicing persistence. As a family we believe that there is no excuse to not succeed. My Law of Life is to persist and not let the obstacles of today define who I can be tomorrow.

Haliz Butkiewicz

Griswold Middle School

Maybe it's Goodbye: Love and Family

November 9, 2011, was the worst day of my life. The day I almost lost my favorite person, my best friend, my father. Sometimes the little things in life that you take for granted, like the lame dad jokes, or the home cooked lunches, can fall apart in front of your eyes in a matter of seconds. Within those few seconds, the horrible thoughts of loss and pain, that you push into the back of your mind, become prominent and take over your reality. Ever since that day, I haven't been able to tell this story, and I never quite came to terms with the event. By writing this story, I hope to not only make an impact on others, but to release my own thoughts and feelings on this event that I have not yet been able to express.

After years of battling addiction, my dad was only a shell of the man I'd always known him to be. Ever since his motorcycle accident when I was one, he was hooked on painkillers. This had

quickly evolved to the use of other drugs and alcohol abuse. Our entire family was impacted severely by his addiction. He used to fall a lot, sometimes down staircases or onto our gravel driveway. I, being only eight at the time, didn't understand what was wrong with him.

His asthma was triggered severely by his use of drugs, and he often had attacks requiring nebulizer treatments and doctor visits. Then something, one day, pushed his lungs and body over the edge.

That night I had begged my mom to stay up past my bedtime to watch a movie, and she finally agreed. I remember sitting upstairs on my couch, hearing the startlingly loud thunk, coming from the kitchen. I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, tripping over the dog, and a pair of ugg boots on the bottom step. As I turned the corner into the kitchen, I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't what I saw.

You know the color blue you see on drawings of the ocean? So bright and deep, it almost seems unreal? That was the color of my dad's skin, as he lay there, motionless, eyes rolled back, chest still. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to cry into my mother's arms and have it make everything okay. With my mom leaning over him on the floor giving CPR, I had to be strong on my own. I picked up the phone and dialed 911, a number I thought I'd never have to call. I handed the phone to my mom, who told the operator our address and emergency.

I've never been a highly religious person. Never went to church, never got baptized, never even prayed, but at that moment, I prayed. I prayed out loud in my kitchen, staring at the lifeless body on the floor. I asked God to not take him away, to give him a chance to recover and be the person I knew he could be. I prayed until the ambulance sirens roared in front of our house.

I came to the door to let them in, but was pushed out of the way by the EMTs coming into the house with a stretcher, and tubes, and machines. My neighbor Tim came over to see what was going on, and I saw him and buried my face into the old plaid shirt he always wore, breathing in the smell of stale cigarettes and baby powder. A familiar scent that somehow comforted me.

By the time my dad had been loaded into the ambulance, and my mom had hopped in with him, my grandparents had arrived to take me home with them. I leaned into the ambulance and gave my dad a gentle kiss on the forehead, and said "I love you" for what I thought would be the last time. Then I stepped down onto the pavement on shaky legs. I thought that would be the last time I'd get to see him. The last time I'd get to say goodbye.

After getting to my grandparents' house, I was too traumatized to even cry. I fell asleep thinking about the memories we had together. All the long drives to the lake to fish. All the nights spent watching the history channel, eating beef jerky. All the times I watched the smile spread across his face when he fixed a problem on his motorcycle. I didn't think we would ever be able to make any more memories.

By morning, my mom had called to say he was doing much better. On a ventilator, but full of color and brain activity. He was going to be okay. I felt a wave of relief wash over me. I'd get my dad back. I'd never felt more thankful. My prayers had been answered.

After all of the chaos and misery that came with that night, I was able to understand something about life that I never had before. The value of family. Not only does this mean that you should respect and care about your family, but also to appreciate the little things. Trips to the park, family dinner, or even a walk around the block together, because in hindsight, the little things are really the best memories. Supporting family members through their own personal struggles is important. Being there for each other is the foundation to a strong bond. You may think you value these things, but trust me, until you have a second chance to be with someone you love, you won't understand how much they really mean to you. You never know when their last breath will be. It could be ten years from now, or it could be tomorrow. Either way, treat each day like it's your last together, that way, you won't regret it if it is. Most importantly, always forgive people for their mistakes, for you should love them for who they are, not what their struggles made them become.

Tristin Dapsis

RHAM High School

The Silver Lining of Life: Optimism and Perseverance

There are some moments in life that one can remember so clearly. Even if years have passed, it feels like the event happened only minutes or seconds ago. Those moments are the ones that will stick with a person and become a part of who they are. In my life, I have made many memories but there has only been one day where every minute is remembered with clarity. That day shaped me and the rest of my life thus far. It also contributed to my morals and values that I still carry with me. But I was not the only one who instilled these ideas in myself. It was my mom who guided me through that day and the days after it. She was the one who taught me about being a strong person by being a strong person herself. I learned to persevere and see the silver lining in every obstacle or hardship.

The day my life changed forever, my brother had just finished his baseball game. It felt like one of those days when all was right in the world. My dad had ridden his bike to the game and decided it was the perfect weather to ride it back to the house. So we said goodbye to him and all jumped into the car. We got home and ate lunch while we waited for my dad to get home. But he did not come. My mom told us he had probably just taken a longer ride than he had imagined, but I was old enough to know that it should not take him half an hour to get home from the field, which was

only about five minutes away. I was old enough to see that she was scared too.

Then my mom got a phone call from my neighbor. She was told that there had been an accident and my dad was being taken to the hospital on a Life Star helicopter. The universe felt like it froze. It felt like I was standing in a photograph, looking at the world crumble around me. My brother and my mom cried, but I just stood. It wasn't long before tears fell down my face. It felt like hours in between then and when we reached the hospital. Dad was in critical condition but everyone still told me it was okay. Even if they said it was, I didn't feel like it was okay. I was terrified. My dad stayed in critical condition all of that day and I waited in a private room with my mom, brother, grandparents, and aunts and uncles. We waited for news.

That day was all about keeping my dad alive. The next were treating and assessing the numerous injuries he had suffered. One of those injuries was a traumatic brain injury. Nobody knew what had happened to him. Somebody had found him unconscious on the side of the road without a trace of what had caused the accident. I didn't care what had or hadn't happened to him. All I wanted was for him to recover, and he did. Although he did and always would suffer from a traumatic brain injury, he made it, and I was thankful. The road to recovery was a long and hard one. It took months and numerous rehabilitation centers for him to get in the best mental shape possible. Even with all of the progress he was making, he still had to be monitored by doctors, so he couldn't

come home. That meant my mom, brother, and I would have to adjust to living in the house without him.

After the accident, my mom showed me what it looked like to be strong. Even with all of the emotional battles she had to be going through, she stayed stable and continued to love and provide for my brother and me. She was able to raise us and run a business at the same time, which in itself is commendable. My mom even smiled through the pain of watching her family go through this tragedy. She may not have been aware of how great an effect this would have on me. Watching her persevere through the obstacles she was facing was inspirational and made me realize who I wanted to be. I continue to use her as a role model throughout my life and carry some of her laws of life with me. I can use the perseverance she has showed me when I go through a daunting hardship. Some of the challenges people face in life may seem impossible, but there is always a way to get through them. Perseverance can be used in everyday tasks, which can be as simple such as studying for a hard exam or in long term challenges. It is a key tool to carry through life and is what makes a person unwilling to give up easily. Going through this monstrous hardship has given me perspective on what is really a challenge and what is just a small bump in the road. It is important to stay strong and be able to get through big and small challenges in life. Knowing that I have gotten through this obstacle has made me aware of a person's undeniable ability to persevere. It is something that I have taken to heart and use day in and day out.

Another law of life I value is to be optimistic and see the silver lining in every difficulty or situation. After my dad's accident, it seemed there would be no light at the end of the tunnel. I thought nothing good would ever come of it and I did not believe anything would get better. But a silver lining covers even the darkest of clouds. I began to think about everything that had happened and everything that became of the accident. My family had grown closer as a unit and stronger as individuals because of this. The silver lining in situations can be difficult to find, and even a struggle to accept, but one just has to look for it. It is important to go through life with a positive outlook on everything. Optimism and believing that something favorable can be taken out of a seemingly unfavorable situation can be just what a person needs to get through their darkest days.

Perseverance, optimism and searching for a silver lining is a constant necessity in life. My dad's accident forced me to learn these laws of life quickly and my mom showed me how important they are in times of trouble. Throughout the rest of my life I intend to use these beliefs and ideas and to instill them in my own children one day. My mom has showed me how to be strong and even if life seems to be impossible to persevere with optimism. Nothing should blind a person from what truly matters. Life is all about searching for fulfillment and I plan to use what I have learned about persevering and optimism to get me there.

Alicia Erami

RHAM High School

The Lasting Scars of Discrimination: The Value of Respect

The law that I find most important in my life is to not discriminate against others. Muslims are seen by many as a threat and treated as terrorists. My grandfather on my dad's side is Iranian, therefore my dad is half Iranian. As a kid during the Iranian hostage situation, people spray painted the side of his house. This traumatized my father, and now he tries to hide that part of himself. He was born in America and was baptized in a Christian church, but he is afraid people will hate him for his nationality, which he has no choice in. Today, when people ask what he is, he tells them he is Italian because he is still daunted by his past experiences. This is how anyone who has been discriminated against could feel for the rest of his or her life. When I was learning about the Middle East in my global history class, he did not want me to tell anyone that I am part Iranian. My dad never tells people that he is Iranian, and does not want anyone outside of our family to know.

Not only has my father been affected by his ancestry, but also those who are closest to him. The father of one of my mother's students heard that she is married to an Iranian. The next day he called the school to demand that his son be removed from her class. This father has his assumptions about Iranians and did not want his son to be near someone who is married to one. By removing his son from her class, he is teaching his son to make

assumptions of others and judge them based on aspects that they cannot control. As long as parents raise their children to believe the same hateful and negative things that they do, we cannot move forward as a society.

Recently, I was affected by discrimination for the first time. I have heard about how people have treated my parents but have never seen it myself. Although my grandfather was Muslim, both of my parents and I are Christians and attend church on a regular basis. During one of my confirmation classes, a comment was made by one of the supervisors about the Muslim religion. When she was discussing how some religions differ from Christianity, she said that the difference between Muslims and Christians is that Muslims are radicals. I was shocked to hear this, but I did not say anything. And as I looked around the room, I found that this comment did not bother anybody else.

People should not have to hide who they are out of fear of discrimination. This is very hard to do because after the Iranian hostage situation and 9/11, America has become a country that is afraid of people from the Middle East and views them all as terrorists. Instead of America becoming a place where everybody is equal, America is moving backwards. We have gone from a country with a black president, to one with a president who wants to build a wall to keep Mexican people out and prohibit Muslims from coming to America. This forces people like my dad to hide a part of themselves for fear of judgment.

It is because of the experiences of my parents and myself that I have learned an important lesson. Discrimination can cause lasting scars. My law that I hold dearly is that I will do my best to respect others and never to judge or discriminate against others. If my father's community had gotten to know his family before casting judgment, they wouldn't have vandalized his house. If the father of the student in my mother's class would have spoken to my mother, he would have realized that he made the wrong decision. Instead of blindly judging each other, the world would be a better place if we took the time to get to know and respect the people around us.

Stella Formato

Great Oak Middle School

The Stars are Your Goals and the Sky is the Limit if You
Don't Quit

Every day when we wake up, we have no way of knowing what challenges we may face. Bad things happen, and they can be very hard to accept. If you can pull through a difficult situation, you will be rewarded. As Albert Einstein once said, "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new."

I thought I had finally found a sport I liked. My good friend was going to try it too, and her dad was willing to be a volunteer coach. I was ecstatic that we were going to be on a basketball team together. After all of our practice came our first game and it was now my turn to take the ball out. I dribbled the

basketball onto the cool gym floor. I glanced around and panic filled my mind. Overwhelmed and unsure of what I should be doing, I passed the ball to the other team by accident. After we lost the game, I was so embarrassed and I never wanted to play basketball ever again, but stayed on to finish the season.

When the next season came around, my grandfather encouraged me to try again, because the only way to get better was to keep practicing. With some convincing, I did. Soon enough, it was our first game as a team. I was in the perfect position to shoot, and as soon as I heard the *swoosh* of the ball going through the net, I realized something. The hoop I scored in was not my own, but the other team's! My teammates patted me on the back and said to keep on trying. Our opponents reached out to high five me and I plastered on a fake smile. The truth was that I dreaded the next day of school because I knew that somehow, my classmates would find out. Just as I guessed, I was the joke of the week. I wasn't willing to give up yet, though. I knew I was better than people took me for.

Since then, I have learned something. Even though some people seem perfect, the truth is that everyone, including my teammates, makes mistakes. That concept was proven true when we played a very tough team. We were pushed around a myriad amount of times, and even our vital shooters could not score easily against them. Even though our team knew that despite our efforts, we would lose, the fun part of the game was trying to outsmart our opponents. We stuck together and just kept getting up each time we fell.

All of these negative basketball experiences taught me what I should fix and enabled me to improve. Basketball is just one example. There is so much more out in the world that we have yet to explore, and when you fail, don't quit and give yourself another chance. Think of each mistake as a step toward your success and finding a way to reach your goals that is unique to you. If you dedicate your life to your true passions, you can ensure the pursuit of happiness. And who knows, maybe you will go down in history for doing just that.

Orrin Pierce

Clark Lane Middle School

The Importance of the First Book: The Value of Reading and
Learning

When I was 9 years old in my third grade class it was story time and we had just finished reading the book *Coraline*. It was now time to move on to a new book. My teacher had returned from turning off the lights and getting the new book from his desk. As he walked over to his large puffy chair he hid the new story under his suit jacket. The light bleeding in from the curtains shed a grey blue color on the room. The air was thick with anticipation and I watched with excitement as the teacher, class boss and crime lord of kids sat down and revealed a book called *Harry Potter*.

I had heard of this book before but I wasn't really into reading "adult books". You know, the kind without pictures, so I groaned and decided I would just have to wait my way through this

strange and tedious punishment. As my teacher began to read I started to get enthralled in the sudden twists, turns and surprising outcomes of the story. I couldn't believe how exciting a book without pictures could be.

So by the next day I had gone to the school library and squabbled with a student over a copy of *Harry Potter* and lucky prevailed in the race to the checkout. I found the place where we had left off in class and began to read. I would sit in the same spot for hours staring into the black and white abyss of literature.

This new universe continued to pull me in deeper into Harry Potter's close brushes with death, wit and heroic actions. I wanted to be him. This world seemed so impossible that I had to experience it. The next day I continued to rocket ahead of the class in this story and I soon realized that I was not alone, many of the other kids in my class began to read the series at their own speed. Now most of these kids including myself are the kids who try their best and give school their all. I see them today and they continue to excel in their own adventures and studies.

I believe that when a child gets their hands on their first book and can enjoy it at their own pace without the requirement or encouragement of teachers and parents, that this is when a child can be free to excel in everything they do. Before I got hooked into my first book I didn't have much interest in reading for fun. However as soon as I found my first book enjoyable, I then found the value of reading and learning. I also began to get better grades and find school work easier and more enjoyable. When a child can

be introduced to their first book that's real to them, they will enjoy reading and that book becomes a key to many more academic doors.

Bianca Plachi
Flood Middle School
Living Life Gratefully

“When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed.” These inspiring words were spoken by American poet Maya Angelou. This quote induces memories that have led me to live by my Law of Life which is to be grateful for all that you have, even if it seems of little importance. I’ve been fortunate to travel outside of this country and experience the way others view the world while also interacting with those living in poverty and wealth. These encounters have helped me funnel my life towards a path that gives all that I do a meaningful purpose.

My family and I visit relatives in Brazil almost every summer. Depending on who we’re visiting, we could be hiking in the country or sunbathing on a sandy beach in Rio. On one of those summer days, my grandfather took our family out to lunch. As we were waiting for a table to open, a little six-year-old boy approached our table and offered to sell us kitchen towels. I was only nine at the time, so I was confused at first. Then, I looked closer and saw the little boy was all dirty and wore clothing too big for him with a pair of tattered sandals. Instantly, my heart broke. As I picked at my food, I couldn’t get the image of that little boy

out of my head until I was outside again with a full take-out container of food in my hands, placing it in his. I'd never seen someone smile so wide as he ran over to the edge of the sidewalk where his mother sat with a baby in her arms, encircled by two other siblings. He handed her the container and the food was divided among the children. The mother ate nothing, but the container was quickly empty. It was then that I noticed how that one container meant the world to them. In contrast, I never put much thought into eating a warm meal at a restaurant or my home.

My parents always tell me how lucky I am to live in America, the "land of opportunities." But, it wasn't until I came face to face with the rest of the world that I realized yes, they're absolutely right. It was as if my eyes had been closed this whole time! I would get upset over the smallest things and think it was the end of the world. It's been four years and I still haven't forgotten the day I witnessed a six-year-old child selling kitchen towels to buy food for his family. That one day has inspired me to be grateful for everything and everyone that comes into my life.

I've expanded my Law of Life as I grew, remembering that there's always something to be grateful for to keep me going through the day, even when there's nothing in sight. As the Dalai Lama once said, "When you practice gratefulness, there is a sense of respect toward others". Always keep in mind the hardships of those such as the little boy, for what separates you from them is all you should be grateful for.

Saimin Shamim

Ansonia High School

A Ray of Sunshine on a Dark Day: Being Positive

The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus' was noted to say, "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters," and this has inspired the way I live my life. This quote resonates with me because I learned if one has a positive attitude, then one will have a positive life. Instead of reacting negatively if something terrible happens, being optimistic and finding the silver lining in any situation is what matters most. My father's life and early death is a testament to this very idea.

My dad is a person that I greatly admire for the way he lived his life. My dad, at age 44, was diagnosed with adrenal gland cancer in May 2011. Extremely rare, this cancer only happens to about one in a million persons, so it was obviously very shocking when my family heard the news. Some days, my dad was unbelievably heartbroken and angry. Often, he stayed in bed all day crying and mourning his fate. His thoughts were consumed with passing away and not being able to wholly experience life, like attending my high school and college graduations, giving my sisters and me away on our wedding days, and holding his first grandchild close to his chest. However, he soon realized that being negative was a complete waste of time. Instead of being pessimistic, my dad chose to live. Despite his pain, weakness, and suffering, he chose to fulfill the requirements of *Hajj*, an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest city for Muslims. This

journey is a mandatory obligation for Muslims to do at least once in their lifetime, so my dad was delighted to successfully complete this one-week journey with my mother by his side. During Hajj, he fought through fatigue, and each step was painful for him. He had to lean on my mother and clutch her hand tightly for support as he walked around the Ka'aba seven times. The pilgrimage helped him to come to peace with his illness. He felt a sense of renewed spirit and calmness upon completing one of the five pillars of the Islamic religion.

Always at work and busy with his numerous responsibilities, I did not spend that much time with my dad before he was diagnosed with cancer. Eventually, he had to stop working because his sickness was progressing very quickly. Since he was at home more, I was able to spend time with my dad. I learned more about his goofy sense of humor and his extraordinary personality. Our father-daughter bond became stronger, as his body became weaker and his time became shorter. We would sit for hours and just talk about life and my interests. He often told me jokes to make us both laugh until it hurt. I cherished every moment that I spent with him, even if he was sleeping. I craved more time with him because our time together never felt like enough. He truly became a best friend to me. When he was originally diagnosed, his doctor did not expect him to live for more than six months, but he lived for more than two years. I would not trade that time for anything. Although my family and I had to deal with the undeniably sorrowful thoughts of our dad soon passing, those two

years genuinely made my family grow closer and stronger, a silver lining amid the turbulent storm of his cancer. My dad's law of life was definitely to take advantage of every moment in life, especially with loved ones, and to live with a positive attitude despite being faced with an untimely death. Rather than paying too much attention to what happened to him, he focused on having a positive attitude and taking advantage of the time he had left with us. His unwavering strength during that tough time was immeasurable. His courage will always inspire me to be brave and to fully understand that one can make the best of any situation.

I have learned that there will always be obstacles in life. If one reacts negatively, then nothing good will come from it. However, I now know there is always a silver lining, and with a little effort, and remaining positive one will find it. By following this law of life, I am able to live a more fulfilling life.

My dad lived a meaningful life. Rather than spending his final time immersed in sadness, he left his family with many beautiful memories of his bright and cheerful soul. Even on the saddest of days, the memory of his smile reminds me of his warmth much as the sun's rays penetrating through the clouds on dark days warm the Earth. My dad's law of life is ingrained in my everyday thoughts and actions. I currently volunteer at Griffin Hospital and deliver freshly baked cookies to patients. Sometimes, I walk by Room 236 where my father passed away, but I push aside my sad memories and replace them with happier ones. I whisper a silent prayer for the current patient in that room and

another prayer for my dad. Even though my dad has passed, his illness and his life taught me the important lesson of positive focus that has changed my life much like he did and continues to do.

Kiyona Turner

Waltersville School

Stay Poppin' with Perseverance

I have learned to live my life by following my dreams and not letting any encumbrance get in my way. Growing up in a family with two brothers and two parents who never went to college, I am always told to do great things with my life and go to college, get a degree and get a well-paying job. Some people may think these things are easy to accomplish; however, looking at my community it is clear that numerous obstacles try to dissuade young people from pursuing these goals. My mother helped me by making sure that I never had time to get in trouble or hang around kids that weren't good for me. Ever since I was little, I have been involved in various extra-curricular activities like ballet, hip-hop, jazz and etc, but my main passion was singing and acting. I wasn't aware of the struggles and stereotypes I would face and why the ability to persevere was incredibly valuable.

Singing and acting made me feel at home. I felt like I could cheer anyone up with my voice and my character. I could make a difference! Unfortunately, I did what many people do throughout their lives-I doubted my talent. I said to myself, maybe this isn't realistic, what if I could never succeed as a singer or actress, what

if nobody likes my voice? I allowed these negative thoughts to creep into my head because of others' laughs and mean comments. Then, when I was in the third grade I saw a poster to join my school's play "The Little Mermaid" and I knew this was my moment to show everyone my talent. I couldn't let my self-doubt and nerves get to me. I ignored the jeers when I stood up as my name was called. I was one of the youngest auditioning and no one expected me to get a part. I auditioned and earned the role of a background fish. I was so excited to be a part of something that related to what I wanted to be, I didn't care if anyone noticed the little girl in back singing under the sea.

Pushing myself to do small things that may seem scary at the time, like a school play, really showed me that perseverance was key to success. Giving up on dreams that may be tough to achieve make a person weaker because giving up is easy and will become a habit; however, fighting through a challenge no matter how big or small, makes the next challenge easier because you have had practice persevering. I still hear the comments, "she's too young, isn't she from Bridgeport, or girls can't do that", but now I know not to limit myself and to encourage others to persevere even when people say it can't be done. Dreams make life thrilling and worth living. The famous author and poet, Langston Hughes, wrote, "When dreams go, life is a barren field frozen with snow." Don't let your life be empty and lonely. Take risks, overcome your barriers and never give up because with perseverance you can accomplish anything!

Isabella Warren
Christian Heritage School
Generosity

Being generous is a habit that has been implanted in my head so long it's become instinctive. I've learned it from my grandmother, who hand-sewed my Halloween costumes until I was twelve years old, and my mother, who has spent so much time working to raise and nurture me. My grandfather expresses his generosity in a different way. He goes to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every week no matter where he is travelling, with leftover cake in hand to share. He goes to these meetings so vigilantly because he believes that there is always someone who needs his help, someone who would suffer if he didn't take the time to go and share his experiences. One year, while in Ohio helping my injured mother, he visited a Spanish-speaking meeting group in Cincinnati on the verge of collapse. He became their leader in the short time he was in Ohio, helping them build their group to be strong enough to survive without him. He has helped so many people, some of whom told him they could have started drinking again if he hadn't come to their group. My whole family has always been one unified role model, showing me the power of a generous hand. Generosity is the key value for happiness and success as a person, because to help others in need is to help yourself.

For myself, to ignore the needs of others is to deny yourself of an opportunity. I learned this one day in the third grade; an annual Thanksgiving food drive was taking place in my elementary school. To encourage donations, my school gave out a free chocolate-chip cookie to each student who brought in a can of goods. However, if no can was brought in you could always purchase a cookie for a quarter in the cafeteria. My mother was in the process of helping me pack food items in a plastic bag when I began to get bored of looking in the pantry for spare cans. I decided that I didn't want to take a heavy bag to school and lug it to the front office.

“Mom?” I said, “I think I'll just take a quarter to school.”

My mother looked at me sternly, and at once my stomach crumpled with guilt. She told me then: “Don't ever not help somebody when you can, just because it's not easy.”

I nodded, and I took the heavy plastic bag on the school bus. I thought about what my mother had told me on the bus ride. To someone hungry, the bag I was holding wasn't worth a single quarter to buy a cookie, it was worth a meal for their family. When I brought the bags to the front office, the woman working the food drive praised my heavy plastic bag. She handed me two slips of paper, each worth a cafeteria cookie.

“A load this big deserves two,” she said with a wink. I felt special all that day, holding my two slips of paper, smiling at everyone I saw. In the end, I gave my extra cookie coupon to a boy

who had left his can at home, and didn't have a quarter. His grin of gratitude was worth the extra treat, and I ate my cookie joyfully.

Even giving time, rather than material things, to other people gives a sense of fulfillment. When I started tutoring a first grader struggling in math, I wanted to instill in her the confidence she would need to eventually stop needing extra help. My father has always been freely giving of praise, which helped me tremendously when I was a young girl having trouble with schoolwork. The girl I help was so shy the first time I met her that she wouldn't look me in the eye. I tell this first grade girl every time I meet with her how smart she is. She has been improving greatly, and every time she shows me a problem she's done correctly, her face bursting with pride, I feel incredibly happy. Meeting with her, and having the patience to guide her, gives me great delight that can only be felt by being giving.

Even though I love donating to organizations and volunteering to help children at my school, there is nothing that compares to being generous to my two little sisters. I help the younger one, still in preschool, with brushing her teeth and combing her hair. I play with her during the day, and I read her bedtime stories at night. I have to be a role model to her, and it feels wonderful to be looked up to and admired. My other little sister, in fourth grade, needs help with her homework and wants me to play and talk with her. I would drop whatever task I'm doing to help them, because I love both of them deeply. Being a big sister

gives me a fulfillment of generosity that no other relationship gives me.

Generosity and kindness, as well as sharing experiences and values with others, is a way of expressing the connection that all people share. One day, I hope to help people as profoundly as my grandfather has, or as deeply as my mother has for me. Helping others helps yourself, and with generosity fueling your compassion, your life is given meaning.