

2008-2009
GEORGIA

ways of life 

ESSAY CONTEST

A Character Education Competition



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Laws of Life

ESSAY CONTEST

The Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest asks students to select a “Law of Life” (such as “Honesty is the best policy” or “To give is better than to receive”), and to explain how the character value contained in the maxim applies to the student’s life. The contest challenges students to examine values such as love, loyalty, generosity, courage, compassion and perseverance, and it rewards those students who take a stand for their beliefs.

The Georgia contest is modeled after the original *Laws of Life* contest started by Sir John Templeton in 1987. Templeton, who was a noted philanthropist and a pioneer in the development of globally diversified mutual funds, created the *Laws of Life* contest so as to encourage young people to reflect on what is truly important in life.

There are now hundreds of local and regional *Laws of Life* contests across the United States and internationally. The Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, which was founded by Amy Butler Smith, is now the largest such contest in the United States.

Celebrating its tenth anniversary, the Georgia contest is enormously grateful for the support of its sponsors. The contest is also indebted to the hundreds of teachers and educators who have enthusiastically embraced the contest, and to the Georgia students who have written over 242,000 *Laws of Life* essays since 1999.

Dear Friends,

Sir Winston Churchill once observed that without courage, all other virtues lose their meaning. It is certainly true that the essays presented here would not have been written if the essayists had not taken those first courageous steps to open their hearts, to reflect deeply on their own lives, and to share the lessons they learned.

This year, more than 44,000 Georgia students wrote a *Laws of Life* essay. After an arduous selection process, the Contest named 152 school level winners from the 50 participating schools across the state, and five state winners. The Contest presented more than \$17,000 in award money to the winning students, and an additional \$6,000 to the teachers who served as contest chairs.

Being selected as a *Laws of Life* contest winner is a great honor, and the recognition can truly make a difference in a student’s life.

Duane Carver, who won the 2006-2007 contest, recently wrote us to say, “*Not only monetarily, but mentally, the support that I have received from Laws of Life has blessed me tremendously. I will forever be at debt for the generosity that I have received, and I am thankful for all of the members of the association because of their willingness to reach back and help young adults find their way to accomplish the ‘American Dream.’*”

But it is not just the winning students who benefit from the contest. Every student who writes a *Laws of Life* essay benefits from reflecting on important character values. Parents and entire families benefit as well.

One student wrote his *Laws of Life* essay about his grandmother. Shortly after he wrote his essay, his grandmother passed away from a terminal illness. Her family was gathered around her as she died, and the student read his *Laws of Life* essay aloud to her. The essay spoke of the bravery, courage, and selflessness she had exhibited in her life, and how he had learned from her example. The student did not win a monetary award, but his mother has said that the essay eased his grandmother’s passing, and that the *Laws of Life* contest made a difference in the life of the entire family.

It is stories like this, along with the hundreds of heartfelt stories about students’ heroic voyages through life, that inspire us. We thank the contest winners – and indeed all the Georgia students who wrote a *Laws of Life* – for sharing their thoughts, and their hopes and dreams with us.

Sincerely,

Susan G. Mason

Susan G. Mason

Director, Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest
georgialawsoflife@gmail.com

STATE WINNER

Deena Linn

11th grade, The Walker School, Marietta, Georgia

A CHANGED LIFE

LAW OF LIFE:

"You don't know what you have until it's gone."

I have lived by the quote, "You don't know what you have until it's gone," every single day of my life since I was nine. September 21, 2001, was a date that changed me forever.

My mom, dad, brother and I were on a road trip to Virginia Beach when an 18-wheeler collided with the side of our Honda Odyssey, sending our car into an uncontrollable roll, eventually skidding to a stop 300 yards down the median. That day I lost both of my parents and every comfort I had from the life that I knew.

Before the accident, I had never known what it felt like to be sad, to feel alone, or truly confused. After, I promised myself that I would never take anything for granted and that if something or someone I care about is taken away from me again I will have done everything I could to enjoy and be thankful for it.

This quote exemplifies how I now look at life. Now that I know what it feels like to miss what I had, and to wish that I could go back and change things that I did, the phrase has become a way for me to ground and center myself. Now my life is completely different from the one I would have imagined for myself in 2001.

I moved from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to Atlanta, Georgia, to live with my aunt and uncle, whom I did not know very well. The adjusting period was difficult because obviously, I had never been in a situation like this one before. I tried as hard as I could to understand what was happening and to move forward. After the move, I reevaluated my life and noticed that there were many things that needed to change. I first needed to learn how to be positive. I came to the realization that my being negative was not going to help my situation. I also had to keep in mind the great sacrifice that my aunt and uncle were making to accommodate me and my brother into their lives. I had to remind myself that this was a new experience for them as well, and like me they were trying their hardest to adjust.

Part of this new life was a new school. I have learned more about myself in these three years of high school than in my entire life before then. Going to Walker is a blessing in itself, and the lessons that have come out of this school, I will never forget. Not only are the academics difficult but the social scene that Walker creates is equally if not more challenging. Each day I am surrounded by people who have no idea of how much they are being given. I wish that I could get them to step back and look at their lives through someone else's eyes.

Last year I went on a community service trip to Costa Rica. To see the amount of gratitude those kids have for every aspect of life was inspiring. They know what it is like to live on dirt, under a roof made from tin they got in the trash. They know what it is like for "Gringos" to spend their time just coloring or playing basketball. It was incredible to see how they realized that they relied on each other and their families to survive. They value the little things in life more than I will ever be able to, but I hope that by learning from them I will be able to live more successfully.

I feel like now I have a greater sense of the big picture. I try not to stress the small things, and just take in every moment as it comes. Like I promised myself in 2001, I will live my life in a way that not only makes me happy but those around me happy as well. I will be grateful for every good thing that I face, take the negative things in stride, and move forward in a positive way.

Kayla Johnson

12th grade, South Forsyth High School, Cumming, Georgia

BECOMING THE PERSON I DESIRE TO BE

My pursuit of becoming a leader within my school's band program was an arduous challenge, and I never expected its outcome to have such a profound impact on how I lived my life. From the start I had the stinging discouragement from the doubts of my peers, but the burning need to prove my worthiness was enough motivation to work hard. Although the reward of my hard work was not what I expected, it was much more worthwhile.

During the leadership meetings I would always try to participate ardently by asking questions and sharing my thoughts and ideas for improving the band program. After those meetings I would seek out library books on leadership by authors such as John C. Maxwell and Stephen Covey; while reading those books I would take notes on what I learned and how I could apply them in my life. During this process I not only grew closer to my goal of becoming a section leader, but I also learned how to improve my character. By articulating my values and embracing integrity in all my actions, I had come to improve how others saw me. It was so encouraging to have people compliment me on my ideas for improving the band program or even how positive I always was. Unfortunately, at the end of the extensive leadership camp, I was not chosen to be a section leader with the band program.

Although it was hard to swallow, this disappointment was only a prelude of what was to come. The family problems I had been enduring came to a climax. However, the lessons that I learned from the leadership camp and books began to take prevalence in how I dealt with all of the conflict. I had finally gained the strength to leave my abusive father and to encourage my mother to do the same. After being awarded a restraining order from the court, protecting me from my father, I moved with my mother into our own apartment. During the ensuing months, my mother and I had multiple disputes over her violations of the restraining order and how it affected the safety of me and my brothers. After many bitter arguments, I left my mother and declared myself as an independent.

Although it was undoubtedly the most painful decision that I have had to make, it was in the best interest of my safety and future. If it were not for my desire to uphold the values I gained from my pursuit of being a section leader, I would never have had the strength to escape the environment I was experiencing. A letter I received from a freshman in my section stated "even when you were having hard times with your family, you were always helping me... Though you may not know it, you have taught me a lot about life and I am thankful to you. I look up to you more than you could imagine." That letter has made me realize how proud of who I was despite all of the disappointments and conflicts. I am becoming the person I desire to be, and that has been worth all of the struggles.

LAW OF LIFE:

"By choosing to embrace and practice good values every day, you might not always get what you desire, but you will always be the person you desire to be."

“LILY, LIKE THE FLOWER”

Influence? Webster’s dictionary defines influence as “the power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways.” Many assume that people by whom we are constantly surrounded influence us the most. My parents’ aggravation towards my schoolwork influenced my work ethics. My sister’s blaring stereo influenced my choice of music. My best friend’s teen magazines influenced my sense of style. But what about a passing stranger? A few fleeting moments with a random stranger may not be enough to cause a drastic life-altering change in a person, but a few minutes with the right stranger can be of paramount importance, as it was for me.

It was late and nippy, and I was still nervous about my first solitary flight returning from a trip to see my family in London. Restless after five hours of turbulence and remaining stationary, I got up to stretch and wash my face in the restroom. On my return, the little girl next to me, who had previously been sleeping, was awake and furiously coloring a picture of Barney Rubble from the Flinstones. She looked up and gave me a big toothy smile, her startling pink hair and her contrastingly subtle blue eyes standing out.

“Hey. My name is Lily, like the flower,” she spoke with a gorgeous British accent. This odd but very innocent introduction melted away any awkwardness normally shared between two strangers. Offering me a page of Pebble and Bam-Bam, we fell into comfortable silence, broken by her giggles and proud presentation of a non color-coordinated picture. She exuded innocence and her jovial and carefree attitude was contagious. I found myself falling into a fit of laughter, forgetting all my fears about my first flight alone.

“I like your hair,” I commented while wondering why a ten-year-old would have pink hair. “Did you dye it?”

“No, uh...it’s a wig,” she replied.

“A wig...” I muttered almost inaudibly.

“Yeah, I used to have dark blonde hair, but it fell out. Mom says it was the chemotherapy, but it will grow back,” she stated matter-of-factly.

I was at a loss for words, staring dumbly. “Chemotherapy?” Again, it came out as a hoarse whisper.

“Yeah, I have something with an L... I don’t know what it is exactly.” She looked at my worried face and gave a comforting smile. “Don’t worry, I get to wear cool hair. You should see my rainbow wig!” She brushed the whole thing off with a smile and her infectious giggle.

That was my moment. It was not a moment that drastically shaped my personality, but rather an omnipresent memory. Her candid optimism taught me so many lessons that manifested themselves into my memory. From the way she diffused a moment of tension for my sake, to her individual approach to her illness, that enigmatic pink-haired blue-eyed girl influenced me. With a simple shrug and a giggle, she conquers her problems, emanating thousands of virtues that inadvertently inspired me.

She was a stranger a half decade younger than me, not someone most would consider a person of influence, but just as Scott Adams said, influence does not need to come from a “person of influence.” I carry that short conversation during every decision I make and with everyone I meet, for despite the brevity of our exchange, “Lily, like the flower” influenced me in many ways and she will never know the significance of the impact of her optimistic attitude. Scott Adams described it head-on that influence can come from the unexpected. Lily may never know the influence she had on me, but her effect on me is neither tangible nor quantifiable.

LAW OF LIFE:

“You don’t have to be a ‘person of influence’ to be influential. In fact, the most influential people in my life are probably not even aware of the things they’ve taught me.”

- Scott Adams, cartoonist and creator of Dilbert

Robert Boggs

10th Grade, Columbus High School, Columbus, Georgia

TO BRIGHTEN THE DARKNESS

LAW OF LIFE:

*“It is better to
light a candle
than to curse
the darkness.”*

Around July of 2004, I received the unbearable news: my mother had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Even though I saw it coming (she was a heavy smoker), I was overwhelmed. Holding back tears, looking strong for her, I said, shaking, “We’ll fight it. It will be O.K.” My mom listened, her eyes glistening at my faux bravery.

Over the next few months, I came home every day, greeting my mom and telling her how my day went as she lay on a hospital bed. Everything seemed hopeful and bright through my 11-year-old eyes. I knew that she would recover easily. It was becoming no big deal; I grew used to having an incapacitated mom.

At the beginning of September, my mother was checked back in the hospital. Her health was steadily deteriorating, though I had no idea. I remember going down twice to see her. Only later would I realize that she had purposefully kept me from her; she knew of her upcoming fate, and did not want me to see her looking so weak. I received a casual phone call from her, one day, asking to talk to my dad. I said, “I love you. Bye,” as I turned over the phone to my father. That would be the last time I talked to her. On September 9, 2004, I lost my mother to lung cancer. I was devastated. I attempted to put on a good show to the outside world, smiling, joking and socializing with those who paid me the general greetings and statements that accompany such situations. I drowned myself in schoolwork to distract me from the horrible truth: I would never hear my mother’s voice again. I was a hollow shell. I became withdrawn, secluded, crying myself to sleep at night and working myself to exhaustion all day.

A month went by and my mental status was still unchanged until one day outside of Peachtree Mall. Nothing special was occurring; my friends were taking me out in an attempt to reinvigorate me. There, standing on a corner was a woman, red-headed like my mother, smoking a cigarette. I turned towards her and said, unthinking, “Please, don’t do that.” The woman glanced my way. “What?” I asked her to put out the cigarette. “Why?” she replied, perturbed, likely, at yet another preachy little boy that had learned about “the evils of smoking” during health class. I felt emotion welling within me and I began, unconsciously, telling my story. A tear came to my eye as I spoke. The woman stood speechless, riveted, and listened to the whole thing. As I finished, the woman plucked the cigarette from her lips and stepped on it. I mumbled, “Thanks,” embarrassedly, and walked away.

I don’t know what became of that woman. I don’t know if she stopped smoking or if she also succumbed to lung cancer later in life. However, I like to think that I helped to change her life. At the very least, she knows my story and knows what can happen if she continues her actions. Upon reflection, I began to realize what was really wrong with my life at that point. It was not my mother’s death. I had been sulking, complaining about the proverbial darkness that was my emptiness. I needed to stop. I needed to help those around me, to do something with the terrible situation I had been placed in. Since then, I have tried to tell my story. I only ask that those who hear it listen and absorb the impact that they can have on the world around them. I know that this is what my mother would have me do, not sulk over unchangeable circumstances. I have attempted to change lives in this way. I have tried to light a candle to brighten the darkness around me. And that is all any of us can do.

*Shiyi Zhang*10th Grade, McIntosh High School, Peachtree City, Georgia**PAPER CRANES**

She had eyes like onyx and hair like dusk.

She had the east wind's grace and skin as white as the wings of paper cranes.

Such is the way my mother laments when she gazes upon the pictures, the blurred reflections of her youth.

I am confused. Mama sees springtime in the old photo album, but I look at the yellowed pages and see only little people. They are strangers, even the one with the dusky hair and the white, white skin. She is not my mother.

My mother is kindness. My mother is a sharp tongue and even sharper eyes. *"Tai kuai le!"* she cried, and watched in horror as I sheered around the corner on nothing more than three wheels and a metal frame. The wheels were too quick and the frame too awkward. I stumbled back home, my knee afire and the road trembling with my tears. *"What did I tell you?"* she scolded in Chinese. *"Too fast!"*

But later, it was Mama who ran cold water over my boo-boo and patched it with a pink Band-Aid. It was Mama who carried me to bed and planted a kiss on my forehead. *"Next time be careful,"* she said.

I knew without looking that my knee was already better.

My mother is spirit. My mother can hit a tennis spin-ball with the speed of a snake and the ferocity of a tiger. I sweated for summers on end to perfect that skill and Mama threw it back at me in the bewildered blink of an eye. *"Dong nao jin!"*

"How do I use my nao jin?" I wailed. They all soared past my arm. *"It's tennis! I don't need my brain for tennis!"*

"Concentration. Aim. Quick learning." And Mama sent me running with another ring of her racket.

My mother is wisdom. One cold winter's morning, my mother showed me how to fold paper cranes.

"But I already know how to fold paper cranes," I said. *"My teacher taught us at school."*

Mama sniffed. *"The paper cranes you learned at school – they're dopey, like ducks in water. I'll teach you how to make better ones. Cranes that fly."*

As Mama's deft hands guided my clumsy fingers, I felt emboldened, enlightened, as though I were privy to some long-lost secret. At last when we pressed down the last crease, I saw what she meant. My bird was delicate and beautiful. I could grip its arched head and its long, plumed tail between my fingers and make it flap. I cradled it in my palm and imagined it flapping out the window and into the dawn, where it would stretch its slender neck and soar until it vanished, a white snowflake, against the whiter sky.

Mama shuts the photo album with a thud and a sigh.

"I'm getting fat," she says.

I shake my head.

"Old, too. Look at these wrinkles."

I look at her in helpless frustration. How do I tell her? How do I make her see? *You are my mother. You bandaged my boo-boos and taught me to think and revealed to me my wings. You showed me how to live.*

Eyes like onyx. Hair like dusk.

Grace of the east wind and skin of paper cranes.

She is my mother. In my eyes, she will always be beautiful.

LAW OF LIFE:

"Beauty endures only for as long as it can be seen; goodness, beautiful today, will remain so tomorrow."

– Sappho

Jehyun Park

9th Grade, Northview High School, Duluth, Georgia

THE GREATEST GIFT

“It is during our hard times when we learn the utmost truths about life and find the greatest gifts in the universe.” This is what I came to acknowledge and believe when I first encountered struggles to overcome problems in my life. This experience, which I now consider to have made the greatest impact in my life, began in 2004 when I was just an innocent kid in elementary school.

It was a time when I, just like other younger kids, used to think that the world was flawless with everyone always being content with his or her life. This changed when my father, a prominent manager for a company in Korea, gave up his profession to move to the United States with his family. He was willing to sacrifice himself and resign from his highly respected position during his prime just to provide his children more opportunities and happiness. Thus, my family eventually moved here to Georgia and began a new life.

My family’s lifestyle drastically changed, as we were not very familiar with the life of an ordinary American citizen. Therefore, with no one else to depend on but each other, my family had to go through many unexpected obstacles. For example, my younger brother and I had a difficult time adjusting to our new surroundings. It seemed as if our unfamiliarity with the American culture and the language created an invisible barrier, separating us from our peers. I gradually lost my confidence and thought that I might forever remain an alien to the country.

While I was struggling to adapt to my new environment, my parents were encountering a different kind of problem. Not only did they feel cut off from society, but they also had to deal with the aftermath of abandoning everything, such as their valued possessions and fame. The mere thought of starting anew in a foreign country just frightened my parents.

One night, while I was in bed preparing to go to sleep, my dad entered the room, thinking I had already gone to sleep. My dad cautiously sat next to me on my bed and did something which I never anticipated witnessing. Although the room was very dark and I could not see anything, I was sure that I heard my dad weeping for the first time. I was very surprised to see my father, who had always been like a superman to me, crying, showing a sign of weakness. Not knowing what to do, I just pretended to be asleep. After a while, my dad left the room, and I tried to comprehend what had happened before closing my eyes and slowly falling asleep. The next morning, I found out that I had been crying in my sleep, as I woke up with my face streaked with tears.

When I found out why my father had been crying the night before, I realized the sacrifice which my parents boldly made for us. Then, I began to appreciate my parents in a new way. Consequently, my family created a stronger bond, bringing us happiness. It was the happiness which we were not able to enjoy during our life in Korea. With each other’s support and love, my family quickly began to thrive. My brother and I were able to fit in with our peers and become outstanding students in school. This was only possible because of our parents’ love and selflessness. As for my parents, they are now comfortable with their new life and seem to be enjoying every moment of their life.

My family learned that true happiness does not stem from material things such as money, fame and other possessions. Most important, we learned that the greatest gift one could receive is the love from beloved ones. Without my supportive family’s love, I certainly would not have been able to overcome the plethora of obstacles that I did and become the person that I am right now.

LAW OF LIFE:

“It is during our hard times when we learn the utmost truths about life and find the greatest gifts in the universe.”

2008 – 2009

Georgia *LAWS OF LIFE*

School Winners

Bainbridge High School

Ashley Ellison

Berkmar High School

Maximillian Dichtl

Bremen High School

Bailey Gee

Brookwood High School

Virginia Caldwell

Brunswick High School

Joshua Taylor Hinson

Carver High School (Columbus)

Celenne Valdez

Cass High School

Ashley Sims

Central High School (Carrollton)

Keely Jones

Central Gwinnett High School

Lubna Momin

Chamblee Charter High School

Leah Gose

Cherokee High School

Johnny Ivansthenko

Collins Hill High School

Chris Holbrooks

Columbus High School

Robert Boggs

Cross Keys High School

Kevin Mascada

Dacula High School

Mary Moore

Dawson County High School

Emily Beusse

Dunwoody High School

Jacob Hipp

Eagle's Landing High School

Jennifer Powell

Flowery Branch High School

Gaby Batista

Forsyth Central High School

Dustin Krish

Grayson High School

Jessica Self

Greenville High School

Marquez Adams

Griffin High School

Ashley Lewis

Hardaway High School

Amanda Brantley

Heritage High School

Aliza Nolden

Lassiter High School

Katherine Arnold

Lumpkin County High School

Chase L. Grizzle

Marietta High School

Kara Kassoff

McEachern High School

Levor Bryan

McIntosh High School

Shiyi Zhang

Norcross High School

Ricardo de La Torre

North Forsyth High School

Emmie Lancaster

North Gwinnett High School

Nicolas Lamar Crawford

Northside High School

Cylina Velazquez

Northview High School

Jehyun Park

Peachtree Ridge High School

Parmi Shah

Rome High School

Tereon Roden

Roswell High School

Olivia Stewart

Shaw High School

Miranda Oliver

Shiloh High School

Magribe Hida

**South Atlanta School of Health
and Medical Sciences**

Corey Adam Green

South Forsyth High School

Kayla Johnson

South Gwinnett High School

Dominique Henry

Sprayberry High School

Jordan Newton

Thomson High School

Kiana E. Anderson

Union Grove High School

Tyrige Williams

The Walker School

Deena Linn

**White County Ninth Grade
Academy**

Jolie Cutchshaw

BE A FRIEND ...

HONOR A FRIEND

Do you know someone who exemplifies the *Laws of Life*? Someone who demonstrates courage, compassion, kindness, perseverance or integrity? Someone whose generosity, diligence, forgiveness or love has made a difference in your life?

You can honor that special person in a tangible way by making him or her a Friend of the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. All you need to do is fill out the form below and mail it with your financial contribution of between \$20 to \$200. The Contest will mail a card to the person honored, letting him or her know that you have generously made a contribution in their name.

You may also choose to become a Friend yourself, by making a contribution in your own name. All donors and honorees will be listed in the 2009-2010 Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Brochure.

The Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest 2009-2010 "FRIEND FORM"

Your Name : _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: (optional) _____

Person being honored (optional): _____

Address for honoree card (optional): _____

Please check one:

Enclosed is my contribution of \$20 \$30 \$50 \$75 \$100 \$200 \$_____ (other)

*Individual donors must sign up before March 1, 2010, to have their names included in the annual *Laws of Life* essay publication printed in April.

Payment: Please write check to "The Emory Center for Ethics," earmarked "Georgia *Laws of Life*," and mail with a completed copy of this form to: Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, 840 Woodley Drive, Atlanta, GA 30318.

The Center for Ethics at Emory University is the fiscal agent for the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest.
Donations to the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest are tax-deductible.

Questions? Call the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest (404-367-9453) or email georgialawsoflife@gmail.com

For information about sponsorship opportunities for corporations, businesses, Rotary Clubs, individuals or organizations at the \$250 level and up, please contact the Director of the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest at 404-367-9453, or email georgialawsoflife@gmail.com.

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“For you see, the character that takes command in moments of crucial choices has already been determined. *It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all those ‘little’ choices of years past – by all those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation – whispering that ‘it really doesn’t matter.’ It has been determined by all the day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy and crises seemed far away – the decisions that piece by piece, bit by bit, developed habits of discipline or laziness; habits of self-sacrifice or of self-indulgence; habits of duty, honor, and integrity – or dishonor and shame.”*

- Ronald Reagan,
40th President of the United States

Georgia

LAWS OF LIFE

Essay Contest

The mission of the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is to challenge students to examine and reflect upon core values such as generosity, courage, compassion and perseverance, and to honor those students who have taken a public stand for their values.

www.georgialawsoflife.org

