

IT IS ALWAYS THE
RIGHT TIME

TO DO THE
RIGHT
THING

WHAT IS YOUR
RIGHT THING?

FRANKLIN COUNTY VISITORS BUREAU
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

ESSAY CONTEST

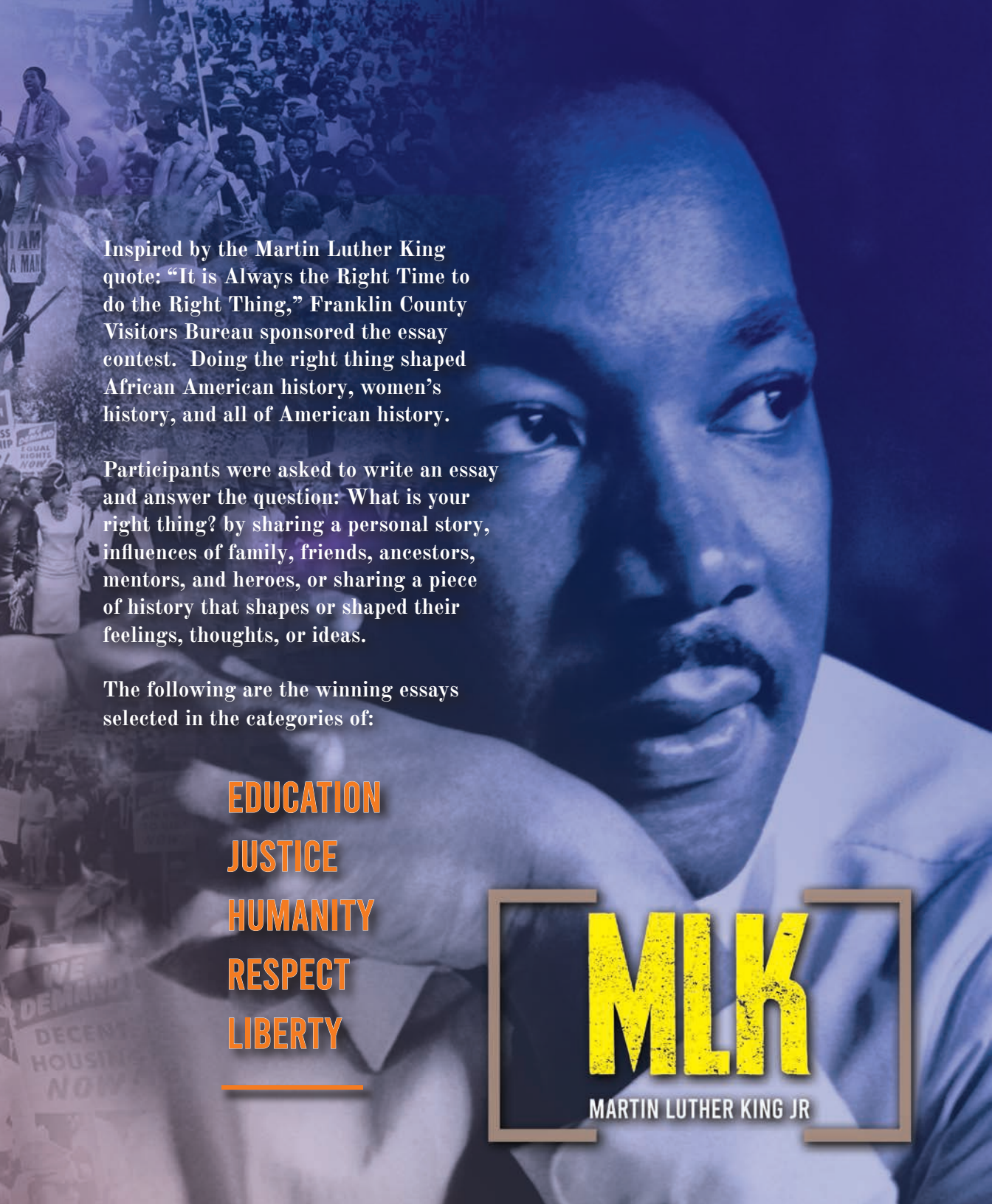


“IT IS ALWAYS
THE RIGHT TIME
TO DO THE
RIGHT THING”

“I HAVE THE AUDACITY TO BELIEVE THAT PEOPLES EVERYWHERE CAN HAVE THREE MEALS A DAY FOR THEIR BODIES, EDUCATION AND CULTURE FOR THEIR MINDS, AND DIGNITY, EQUALITY, AND FREEDOM FOR THEIR SPIRITS.”

-MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH, OSLO, NORWAY, 1964



Inspired by the Martin Luther King quote: “It is Always the Right Time to do the Right Thing,” Franklin County Visitors Bureau sponsored the essay contest. Doing the right thing shaped African American history, women’s history, and all of American history.

Participants were asked to write an essay and answer the question: What is your right thing? by sharing a personal story, influences of family, friends, ancestors, mentors, and heroes, or sharing a piece of history that shapes or shaped their feelings, thoughts, or ideas.

The following are the winning essays selected in the categories of:

EDUCATION

JUSTICE

HUMANITY

RESPECT

LIBERTY

MLK

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

YOUTH LEVEL 1
(GRADES 4 OR YOUNGER)
WINNER

EDUCATION

WRITTEN BY:

**LOGAN
(AGE 7)**

SOME MEN

THINK

*...girls can't do what men can do. Some men boss girls around. **I think girls should be respected because they are strong and brave.** I have been realizing that some men think they are better than girls. I want everybody to be peaceful. I will get all my mom's friends. I will ask them. I want to ask them because they are girls. I respect them. Maybe we can march in town with signs so people will know our idea matters. The men will probably change. They will listen to girls.*

I think girls deserve respect.

NOT EVERYBODY HAS A HOUSE...

Not everybody has the money to buy the things they need. Some people might die because they don't have a home. I want to help the people by giving them blankets to keep them warm and we are also giving them a care package. There might be some food in there that won't go bad with a blanket and gloves or a jacket to keep warm. Maybe some napkins to wipe their faces after they eat food.

Instead of putting more pollution to the earth and creating more trash, and the earth might die because there is too much trash, and also because there is too much trash, I upcycle stuff and I ask my family and friends if they have something they need to through away I can upcycle it to use it another time if its not toxic. It would be safe to use.

YOUTH LEVEL 1
(GRADES 4 OR YOUNGER)
WINNER

WRITERS
JUST

WRITTEN BY:

**DAGNY
(AGE 6)**

YOUTH LEVEL 1
(GRADES 4 OR YOUNGER)
WINNER

LIBERTY

WRITTEN BY:

RYAN
(AGE 8)



STOP ATOMIC BOMBS.

Stop atomic bombs so no one gets hurt. In my book about World World II, it said after two atomic bombs were dropped, the radiation lasted for 1,000 years. The radiation killed a lot of people. I could write a letter to the US President. I would write:

Dear President, Please get rid of atomic bombs. Thank you. I will stop atomic bombs by encouraging the president and the leaders of other countries to get rid of them.





**YOUTH LEVEL 1
(GRADES 4 OR YOUNGER)
WINNER**

My right thing is to clean up trash in nature. It matters because there is a whole lot trash, everywhere you look. other people are doing it while you are reading this. We need to help Earth. Earth needs us and we need Earth. Earth is our community. My plan is to invite people to clean up. It will be at the forest or at the park or at the ocean or at a town. We will save plants and animals. We will save pandas and African hippos platypuses and red pandas blue whales and green turtles and jelly fish. Cleaning up trash is going to help the Earth.

**YOUTH
LEVEL
1
WINNER**

**WRITTEN BY:
MAXTON
(AGE 8)**

YOUTH LEVEL 1
(GRADES 4 OR YOUNGER)
WINNER

RESPECT

WRITTEN BY:
KIARA
MUDANNAYAKE

ALWAYS THE RIGHT TIME TO DO THE RIGHT THING ESSAY

Once upon a time there was a boy named Eddie. He made the students sad by teasing them. Because Eddie was a bully, he felt ashamed. Every day after school he would come home crying. When Eddie was bullied, he had no one to help him, nor did he have anyone to talk to, for his parents were always working, they were heart surgeons and he was an only child. So, Eddie became meaner and angrier.

As time went on, Eddie remained a bully and he was hated by all students and teachers at Chicago Elementary. Then one day in Chicago Elementary, Mr. Bimols, Eddie's teacher said, "Find a partner and form a team." Nobody even looked at Eddie. All the others chose their partners while Eddie was left alone. He looked at everyone hoping to find a partner, but no one even looked back at him. He was embarrassed and sad. He was about to cry, but he tried to hold back his tears, but he could not.

Alice, a girl from his class, that had been bullied by Eddie, looked at him. She pointed at Eddie and said “hahaha ... look who doesn’t have a partner.” As she said it out loud, she felt sad. She remembered how she felt when Eddie bullied her. Alice remembered a story that her mom had told her about Martin Luther King and his famous saying, “it is always the right time to do the right thing.” It echoed in her mind, then Alice wanted to ask Eddie to be partners.

Alice was the one Eddie bullied the most so, Eddie was confused, “But, I don’t get it, I have been so mean to you, why are you doing this?” asked Eddie. “Because I know that deep down, there is good in everybody.” Alice said. Alice’s small act of kindness helped Eddie become a good person.

Eddie changed for good and all the students and teachers started to love Eddie.

Alice chose to do the right thing by asking Eddie to be her partner, when he was sad and down, which was the right time; in the wise words of Martin Luther King Jr., “it is always the right time to do the right thing”.

So, the lesson in this story is to be KIND, because you never know what someone is going through or what they went through. “It is always the right time to do the right thing!”



(RUNNER-UP)

YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)

HUMANITY

(TIE FOR CATEGORY)

WRITTEN BY:

RILEY
KERR

HE HAD A DREAM

Have you ever had a time when you helped someone out even if you had no idea who this person was? Well if so, you have come to the right place. My right thing is to be nice/help people even if you have no idea who this person is, was, or going to be.

I realized this was my right thing because everyone needs a little bit of love even if they don't know it. If you're just kind to them, such a little thing to do something so easy could make their day so much better. The reason I believe in this so much is because when I was born the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck and one of the nurses cut it before anything bad happened. She didn't know who I was and at the time I didn't know who I was either yet, but now I do and now I want to show the same love that that nurse showed me. There is so much hate in the world, so much injustice, so many people getting treated horribly,

so the smallest thing we can do is be kind even if we don't want to. My question to you is, is it hard to go out of your way and say "You look nice today" to someone you don't know? It's only 4 words, 4 seconds of your time, 4 seconds to make someone's day. Try it sometime and I bet you will feel good after saying it too.

Be kind to someone today and tomorrow and forever because you don't know what is going on in other people's lives, but you can make their day much better by complimenting them or just respecting them. I hope you go into the world with a smile on your face, and I hope you inspire someone else to do the same because if all do, we all will be so much more happy. Always remember to be kind/help to someone even if you don't know who they are, were, or going to be.

TREAT EVERYONE EQUALLY

"Not only must we treat one another as equals, but we must also truly view one another as equals." - Russell M. Nelson

My right thing is treating everyone equally. This means you should treat everyone the same no matter what race, hair color, body, personality, culture, or any other things you cannot change. Many historic people have inspired me about this topic such as Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr, Ronald Reagan, and many more.

I have seen and witnessed people getting treated differently because of the reasons I mentioned previously. I truly do not believe that there is any reason people should get bullied, treated harshly, or be discriminated against because they are different from someone else. God created us all equally in his own image and we need to take the time to remember that, and put our actions into play.

Since treating everyone equally is my right thing, I do my best to demonstrate it in my everyday life. Forexample, I had a friend that was made fun of and oftentimes picked on by others. I started to notice over time that he was truly hurt and felt helpless because everyone was going against him trying to make him feel bad just because he was different. So I had to do what God and the people I look up to would do, and I stood up for my friend. Every time I would see him get treated differently I would respectfully say to whoever was making fun of him to stop and try to explain why what they were doing wrong was bad, so they know to stop themselves when they try and do it again.

I tell myself and others that if you cannot change something in a few seconds do not point it out. You do not have the right to treat someone differently because they cannot change what you do not like about them. Not only should you treat people equally, you also need the ability to see everyone equally. I say this because if you cannot see everyone as equals you will not treat everyone as equals. If you notice that you have trouble seeing everyone equal, think about how God made us each in his own image and we may not all look the same but on the inside we are, and no matter how we look or act we are God's people and should all be respected for who we are.

In conclusion, if we all do our best to treat everyone in a fair and equal way there will be a noticeable difference in our environment and with people around us. People won't have to worry about changing themselves to be like someone else. We all need to acknowledge that the difference in each of us is not a negative thing, but truly a positive thing, and we need to appreciate everyone's body, personality, culture, gender, race, and so much more.

(RUNNER-UP)
YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)

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(TIE FOR CATEGORY)

WRITTEN BY:
**EMILY
ADAMSON**

YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)
WINNER

HUMANITY

WRITTEN BY:

VI
NYUGEN

ENCOURAGEMENT IS KEY

Everyone has their own moments when they feel unmotivated and nervous. During those times, encouragement can mean a lot. What you can do is support others with kind words, and it can help them face challenges with more confidence. The "right thing" means making a good and honest choice, even when it is hard. It's also about doing what is fair and kind to others. When anyone is doing the right thing it shows good character and helps make the world a better place. This is why encouraging others is my personal right thing.

I came to realize that encouraging others was my right thing because I know how it feels to be discouraged. There were many times when I was feeling nervous about making new peers at school, worried about failing my classes in school, and even scared about taking my tests. When someone told me I could do it or believed in me, I started feeling more confident in myself. That showed me how powerful words can be in life. It made me want to be that person for someone else.

There have been moments when I encouraged my friends when they felt stressed or sad. I always tell my friends that if they are nervous about a test or upset about something, I try to remind them that they are capable of anything and not to give up. But sometimes just saying, "You're smart, and you're intelligent." helps them calm down. When I see my friends or anyone happy it makes me feel like I did the right thing.

I try to live my life by encouraging others everyday as much as I can. I also give compliments when people try their best on something even if it's something small or big, and I also stand up for others if they are being treated unfairly or badly.

Even small actions, like listening to someone or sending a nice message toward others can help them feel a lot better.

Encouraging others is my right thing because it helps people feel supported and valued. I believe if more people encouraged each other more in the world, there would be less negativity and more kindness toward others. Doing the right thing does not always mean doing something big, sometimes it just means being kind.



MY RIGHT THING ...

YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)
WINNER

Why don't I talk much or have many true friends? That's a great question. Well, it started when I was 9. Not having many friends has been my thing since forever, but racist jokes and actions have always been there for my whole life. It feels like I have no break, room or space to move. But that is why I'm making this essay to make this world a better place from the hate and mean words.

I realized this is what I always wanted but never committed/met the goal. Let me tell you how I knew it. When I saw it happening to others and to me when I was only 9 I stayed quiet. Instead of being

an upstander, I let it happen until I hit my breaking point. I was tired of being called ridiculous names like "brownie" or something that's brown. But now that I have been doing it and standing up for people I don't even know, I don't even get bullied or called names anymore. And I feel free for once in a lifetime.

I hope you learned a little about my story and are inspired to start yours too. I wish my best luck to you. And I hope you understood where I was coming from. For anyone that is being mean, racist, or just teasing, you can be a problem and need to be dealt with.



WRITTEN BY:
**IYANA
MILLSAPS**



YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)
WINNER

LIBERTY

WRITTEN BY:
**SASHA
BUHRMEN**

"It is always the right time
to do the right thing"

- **Martin Luther King Jr.**

...That explains how I think there should be no slaves in the world. This essay will explain how my right thing is about everyone's freedom and liberty.

In the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s there was a slave escape route called the Underground Railroad which was for slaves to escape from their owners. I think this is terrible because they might have to run away for days, weeks, or months until they could find someone to help them. That explains how my right thing is also about equality for everyone because if I was in this time period I would try my best to put a stop to this. But after they would find someone from the Underground Railroad the slaves would go house to house trying to hide from their owners. They would hide in secret rooms. will show this with two different things, but mainly the Underground Railroad.

This is my right thing because I'm all about equal rights for everyone. Also it is absolutely terrible that slaves had to go through the Underground Railroad just to get out of unpaid labor. Another thing is that slaves were sold like items at an auction. Which in my opinion is ridiculous.

Remember how my right thing is about everyone's freedom and liberty. I was talking about my right thing, but what is yours?

MY RIGHT THING

My right thing is to be kind to all people from newborn to elderly. Do you treat people unfairly? Do you know someone who is being treated unfairly? Do you know that almost half of the world's population is being treated unfairly?. Many people are treated unfairly because of their skin color, and that is bad.

My right thing is to be kind. I don't want people to hate me because I'm mean. I want people to think I'm kind and will want to be kind too. I learned that being kind to others is the right thing to do. I want people to know that you should not judge a book by its cover.
-George Eliot

Now you know that you should not judge a book by its cover ,but I know that some people aren't going to do this so here is my second reason. You don't know who the person is; they might be the president's daughter. If you are kind to people they might be kind back.

My last reason is that GOD was kind and so we should be kind to everyone and everybody you meet. It doesn't matter if they are short or tall. God wants us to be kind so I believe we should be kind.

You now have my reasons of why my RIGHT THING IS being kind. You now have a decision to make. If I were you I would choose to be kind to everybody I know. and to love and help a stranger in need who needs some kindness in their life if they are down. Please consider choosing to be kind to everyone.

YOUTH LEVEL 2
(GRADES 5-7)
WINNER

RIGHT THING

WRITTEN BY:
**LILLIAN
SCHULTZ**

TEEN LEVEL 1
(GRADES 8-9)
WINNER

EDUCATION

WRITTEN BY:

**GAVIN
FLAKKER**

≡≡≡ AN OVERLOOKED CRISIS: LACK OF RESOURCES FOR NON-SPEAKING STUDENTS

Today we're going to talk about something I've struggled with my whole life: the education system in the United States.

I was placed in a position where going to school was beyond frustrating. Just going to school became the most stressful task I was burdened with everyday. Teachers and aides told my parents I was physically present, but not mentally there. Now I am in advanced placement literature,

learning world history and geography, finishing up 6th grade math (which is way too easy by the way), and 9th grade biology.

Despite growing awareness of inclusive education, many schools lack the resources necessary to support students who communicate without speech, including students who use spell boards and communication partners, have speech impairments, or are autistic. In today's education system non-speaking children remain the most underserved student population. Classrooms continue to rely heavily on verbal instruction, which unintentionally excludes those who cannot participate in traditional ways.

The absence of proper resources such as communication software, trained paraprofessionals, and communication partners creates significant barriers to learning. When students are unable to express their understanding or needs, they are often misinterpreted as disengaged or incapable. This misconception can lead to lowered expectations, academic stagnation, and social isolation.

Beyond academics, communication is essential for emotional expression and self-advocacy. Without the ability to communicate effectively, many non-speaking students experience frustration, anxiety, or behavioral challenges that could otherwise be prevented. Teachers, though often compassionate, are frequently under-trained and over-extended, limiting their ability to provide meaningful support.

Addressing this crisis requires intentional investment, policy reform, and a commitment to equity. Now is the time to step up and do the right thing for those in need. Will education do the right thing? When schools prioritize communication access, they empower non-speaking students to participate fully, and ensure that every child's voice – spoken or not - matters.

MY RIGHT THING

TEEN LEVEL 1
(GRADES 8-9)
WINNER

My right thing is being selfish. Hear me out.

Being selfish didn't make me cold or careless; it saved me. It taught me how to love myself before searching for love anywhere else. For a long time, I lived for other people. I spoke the way they wanted, acted the way they expected, and shaped myself into someone easier to like. I wore a version of myself that wasn't real, hoping it would earn me love. The truth is, everyone liked that version, except me.

I tried to be perfect. The perfect daughter. The perfect friend. The perfect student. I thought perfection would finally make me feel enough. Instead, it drained me. I was constantly tired, constantly anxious, constantly afraid of messing up. I wasn't living; I was just performing. Last week, while searching for a baby picture for my yearbook, I stumbled across an old vlog of little me. She was wild, loud, careless, and full of joy. She laughed without embarrassment. She spoke without worrying if it looked "cringe." She didn't shrink herself to fit into anyone's expectations. She lived for herself. Watching her felt like looking at a stranger I somehow missed deeply. I paused the video and realized something that hurt more than I expected. I had become someone I didn't recognize. Someone little me would never grow into on purpose. She didn't care about being everyone's favorite. She didn't measure her worth by approval. She did what made her happy. She was selfish.

That realization changed everything. I stopped trying to be who people wanted and started becoming who I actually was. I began doing things I loved, even if they didn't make sense to anyone else. I learned to love myself, I started to love the way I look, the way I talk, the way I handle life. I became honest, not just with others, but with myself. I stopped telling people what they wanted to hear and started telling the truth. So long, I searched for love in other people, believing they could fill what I lacked. But it turns out, I was just ignoring the love that already lived inside me.

Being selfish didn't make me less kind; it made me real. It taught me that loving myself isn't wrong, and choosing myself isn't cruel. Yes, some people may hate me for it but I don't exist to be perfect for everyone else. I exist to be whole for myself. And maybe the bravest thing I've ever done wasn't changing who I was, but finally becoming her again. Becoming selfish.

PERFECT

WRITTEN BY:
**JANISHA
SUGUMAR**

TEEN LEVEL 1
(GRADES 8-9)
WINNER

JUSTICE

WRITTEN BY:
**CONNOR
CELESTIAL**

MY RIGHT THING **ESSAY**

My right thing is being an anti-hero. I believe that being an anti-hero is the right thing to do because in certain situations the punishment or the way that justice is served is too light.

I believe that sometimes our justice system is too light, and that people are let off the hook too easily. My grandfather grew up as a Filipino citizen during World War II. When the Japanese invaded the Philippines his job was to shine the soldiers shoes; they treated him poorly and with disrespect. Later the U.S. liberated the Philippines from the Japanese, and he had to shine their shoes, but they treated him with respect. Later in his life he joined the U.S. Navy to get his citizenship and to serve his soon-to-be country.

Being from the Philippines he faced much discrimination from the white soldiers. During his time in the Navy he served in the Vietnam War and had three tours as a logistician delivering supplies to his fellow brothers. In 1976 he retired and lived a nice life in Goose Creek, South Carolina as a defense contractor and was active in the masonic orders and shriners. He believed that if anyone had a chance to help someone else they had an obligation to do that thing. He always helped those in need

and if someone was rude to him he'd forgive them and let it go because he knew that they would get whatever punishment they deserved.

I am not my grandfather, but I respect him and his moral code. I believe that you should do whatever you can to help those in need, but also that if someone does a wrong thing they need a push instead of a talking to. I believe that some people should get a harsher punishment than what some get, especially those who think that just because of their social status they're above the law. I believe that if you do a very big and bad thing you should get a very big and bad punishment and that you can't just wiggle your way out of it. I believe in this because I see those who get wronged, but they never get the justification or satisfaction that the person who did the bad thing got what they deserved.

I hope you like my essay and that it makes you view the justice system differently. I hope that you go around looking at people's punishments as either too light or just right.

WHAT IS YOUR **RIGHT THING?**

My right thing is being grateful for what you have.

There are so many times people take for granted the blessings they receive every day, that another would die for. There is a common saying for this, "The things you take for granted, someone else is praying for." Imagine, complaining that you only have 2 pairs of shoes, while someone else has blisters and bruises all over their feet, praying for a pair of shoes.

When I was 10, I was begging for my parents to get me a phone. It seemed like all my classmates had a phone and I was just left out. I asked day after day and thought if I got a phone, I would seem cooler or nicer. I then came to the realization that some of my friends didn't even have I pads or consoles. It may seem like a silly little story, but it taught me something important: be grateful for what you have.

We should be grateful for the many blessings that we receive everyday. Sometimes we don't even think about our blessings, like a bed to sleep on, or food to eat in the morning; it shows that humanity is becoming ungrateful. Instead you can wake up and praise that you have loving parents that care for you, and show to them you are grateful for them. We should also be lucky for the country we live in. In 1939, millions of Jews were being persecuted and unjustly killed in the Holocaust. We should be thankful that we live in a country so blessed that we will never have to deal with that. This event really reshaped my thoughts because it taught me to be very grateful for freedom and the right to live.

I think the right thing to do is to be grateful. Whether it's the little things, like telling your mom you love her, or the big things like your freedom and your country. You should always be grateful because there is someone who wishes for what you have.

**TEEN LEVEL 1
(GRADES 8-9)
WINNER**

**YOUTH
LITERATURE
AWARDS**

(TIE FOR CATEGORY)

**WRITTEN BY:
ANDREW
STEPAN**

TEEN LEVEL 1
(GRADES 8-9)
WINNER

HUMANITY

(TIE FOR CATEGORY)

WRITTEN BY:
**ISADORA
MYERS**

MY RIGHT THING

When you get hit with a setback while trying to reach your goals, do you give up? Do you let your dreams slip past your fingertips when they are really just a few more steps ahead of you? I have come to learn that when something gets in the way you push through the struggle, doing your best, even if your best is not good enough. Not giving up is one factor of emotional strength. Emotional strength has many factors that go into it. Eagerness, confidence, self-love, kindness, control and forgiveness are all examples of emotional strength. My right thing is emotional strength.

When I was in 7th grade I was insecure, emotionally insecure. Being an emotionally insecure person made me doubt myself and even my ability to do tasks that were rather simple. This made my confidence at an all time low and I felt utterly lost with no one I felt like I could really talk to. Then I started things that helped me work on myself like positive affirmations and working out. This helped me with body positivity and overall mental health. I was getting

stronger physically and mentally. I started standing in front of the mirror and saying all the good things about me and not only the bad; when I did something wrong I said, "I will work on that" instead of "I'm so stupid". These words of affirmation helped me be emotionally stable.

The next step was to be emotionally strong. The thing is I didn't know my emotional stability was transforming into emotional strength. Over time, being positive to myself, forgiving myself and gaining control of my emotions and body made me become emotionally strong. As I grew stronger my actions changed. In the morning I smile and say "good morning" to my family instead of nodding my head in a way of saying hello, I became a better friend and person in general.

Being emotionally strong has not only changed my life, but the lives of the people around me. I have been a shoulder to cry on for many occasions. People come to me for advice and comfort, but this all blossomed from self-care and putting myself first. Giving to yourself first is the starting point of giving to others.

Being good to yourself is a form of emotional strength, so start there and then you can project all the other virtues to others to make the world a better place. Eagerness, kindness and especially self-love, confidence and control. My right thing is emotional strength. True emotional strength takes a long time to develop; start now.

TEEN LEVEL 2
(GRADES 10-11)

RESPECT

WRITTEN BY:

**ETHAN
DONG**

ALTRUISM'S **CALL**

Leaving the bus, I walked down the school sidewalk littered with snow from days ago. As I hurried through the cold and the crowd to the entrance, I noticed a young boy silently sobbing, his water bottle lying on the ground and his beanie dusted with frost—it was evident that he had slipped and fallen. At that moment, I knew what I was supposed to do, what I was taught to do: help the small boy. However, as I came next to him, I hesitated. What if I cause more harm than good? Nobody would know if I didn't help him... why did I have to help? Within milliseconds, I found myself embroiled in an internal conflict. Before I could make a decision, a girl behind

me—without pause—picked up the water bottle and brushed the snow off of his beanie. With a subconscious feeling of shame, I resumed my walk to the school entrance; yet, an unknown heaviness lingered in my heart: Why hadn't I helped the boy?

That day, I realized that my actions were no longer bound by morals but rather by convenience. My selfish desire to only pursue my own interests clouded who I thought I was. Taught from a young age, I knew the importance of serving and loving your neighbor as you would yourself. This common mantra was fully embraced in my childhood: kindness was instinctive, and self-serving ambition

rarely dominated the scene. However, as I have grown older, I recognized that there is an innate motive within all of us to care and only care about our own well-being. There is no consideration for how we treat one another, no thought for the words we speak, and no regard for the impact we leave behind. This disparate difference in motive can be seen in our communities, in our institutions, and most alarmingly, in the standards that we uphold.

In our world, rejection, discrimination, and abuse are utilized to push others down while pushing ourselves higher. Those who hold contrasting beliefs are swiftly belittled, and those who refuse to conform to social hierarchy are ostracized. Despite the overwhelming “cancellation” culture of the generation, it is critical to understand that a person’s intrinsic value is not defined by their acceptance or ignorance of conventional values. Their adoption of societal values or lack thereof does not inherently disregard their basic human rights and should not influence

how we treat them. They are as worthy of respect and dignity as you and me. The most basic of human values is to acknowledge each individual’s freedom to think, act, and exist authentically. Through this single principle, humanity can flourish and preserve the foundations of a just and compassionate society.

And so I return to that winter morning—the young boy in the snow and my silent hesitation. I cannot rewrite that moment, but I can allow it to remind me of what is truly important. In a world often driven by self-interest, I have learned that true courage is not prioritizing myself first, but stepping forward in service to one another. This is my right thing.

(RUNNER-UP)

TEEN LEVEL 2
(GRADES 10-11)

HUMANITY

WRITTEN BY:
**KYLIE
WHARTON**

WHAT IS THE RIGHT THING?



What really is the right thing? This is a question that most people do not realize needs to be answered before taking any sort of action in hopes of doing "the right thing." Many individuals assume that they are generally good people, and they will often come to the conclusion that anything that they do which feels right to them is, in fact, right. While this may seem like a reliable way to distinguish the right decision from every other choice, it can lead to a person ignoring the real meaning of what the right thing is. If we were to look at every action of a person that claimed that these were the right things to do, there would be a very great

possibility that some of these steps were not necessarily "right" as this individual thought they were. So, addressing the question stated at the beginning, what makes an action right?

There are many ways that one can identify an action as "right." Some people use only their conscience, as briefly stated before. Others rely on words of wisdom from people and things such as mentors, family members, friends, historical figures, and/or religious texts. Many people could also determine what is right to them by observing what their peers are doing and following suit. All these things can help decide what the right

thing is, but there can be a significant amount of confusion and hesitation if one is unsure of which of these methods to use.

For example, if someone tells a lie to prevent a friend from getting in trouble, they may believe that this was the right decision because they were helping that friend. Other sources, however, would say that this was not the right decision because lying is never the right thing to do. So, how can this person decide if their action was right? It ultimately comes down to natural moral rules of humanity and what seems like "common sense" to people. In the example mentioned before, lying to help a friend escape the consequences of their actions would not be the right decision. Lying only would only make the situation worse, because then the friend would not learn from their mistake, and they could start carelessly making more bad choices because they would be relying on someone to bail them out of every situation. Lying is one of the things that most people regard as a bad choice, simply by using common sense and good morals.

So, with all this being said, the right thing can be determined in many ways, but what most people go by when choosing the right decision is the morals that they have learned from simply being alive and noticing how certain actions affect people. There will always be different opinions and viewpoints against certain decisions, and it is not a bad thing to take advice from others on what the right choice is. But, overall, the right thing is whatever seems morally right to each person.

(RUNNER-UP)

ADULT WINNER

EDUCATION MOTIVATION

WRITTEN BY:

**LAINIEY
PEYTON**

MY MOTIVATIONS

Observing scrapes and bruises, I was alone, locked inside a middle school bathroom stall. She pushed me down, violently. I was too scared to say anything. She would get in trouble! I would be labeled a "tattletale." She was my best friend of 7 years. I was very confused. I thought I must have done something to deserve this. She had verbally assaulted me for quite a while, but it had now become physical. I finally cut ties with her and became depressed. I had very dark thoughts and even purposefully hurt myself at one point. I played middle school basketball, and I'm sure my parents wondered why I wore a long-sleeve shirt under my jersey during games. I never told them it was to hide the bruises.

I was an impressionable 12-year-old girl, and all I wanted was to be accepted. My parents told me all the right things;

how wonderful and smart I was, etc. But they were my parents, so they were supposed to say those things. It wasn't until I began receiving validation from coaches, and **ESPECIALLY** teachers, that my perspective changed.

I no longer walked the halls wondering what people thought of me. I began looking into the eyes of kids passing me, wondering what struggles they were facing that nobody knew about. I wanted to befriend them all and help them get past whatever hurdles they were up against. It was at that moment I realized I wanted to become a teacher! I could reach so many kids and maintain countless relationships as they grew into adults.

I've concluded that kindness and empathy are behaviors learned at an early age. Aside from parents, teachers have the best chance at instilling these values in children.

I know this career path won't make me rich or famous, and I'm ok with that. Teaching would allow me to incorporate some of my favorite hobbies. I love creative writing! I'm a member of The Young Writers Society, and recently wrote and illustrated my first children's book, "The Small, Spotted Cat," which teaches inclusion and acceptance. I also play piano and guitar, and I'm excited to weave music into lesson plans.

I'm most proud of something that happened unexpectedly. Recently, my younger brother overheard me talking to my parents about anti-bullying organizations like "It's Cool 2 be Kind," which has nation-wide chapters, and how awesome

it would be to start a chapter here in Waynesboro. I didn't realize he was listening. Well, my brother used his own money and purchased a website for me called "StandWithLainey.com." I couldn't believe it! I plan to use this platform to form a coalition that stands against bullying and promotes kindness and empathy.

I've come a long way since my middle school days. I know that I can maximize my impact on society for the better if I become a teacher. I am 1000% committed and can't wait to see what the future holds!



ADULT WINNER

JUSTICE

WRITTEN BY:

**ASHLEY
PONTIUS**

THERE IS NEVER A CONVENIENT TIME TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT


The right thing, for me, is choosing integrity even when it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or costly. I learned this not from a textbook or a history lesson alone, but from watching my friend Elizabeth Booker Houston live her values out loud. Through her work, her words, and her unwavering sense of justice, Elizabeth has shown me that doing the right thing is not a single heroic act, but a daily commitment.

Elizabeth Booker Houston is an attorney and public health professional who has dedicated her life to justice, truth, and accountability. She often refers to herself as "the Devil's Opposing Counsel," a phrase that captures her refusal to defend ideas, systems, or behaviors that cause harm. Rather than taking the easy route, Elizabeth chooses to stand firm in her beliefs, even when doing so invites criticism or resistance.


Her willingness to speak honestly about law, culture, politics, and public health reflects a deep commitment to humanity and ethical responsibility.

Knowing Elizabeth has challenged me to reflect on my own choices. She does not shy away from difficult conversations or uncomfortable truths. Instead, she approaches them with clarity, intelligence, and moral courage. Watching her navigate a world that often rewards silence or compliance has taught me that doing the right thing is rarely the easiest option but it is always the necessary one. Her example has encouraged me to examine my own actions and ask myself whether I am acting out of convenience or conviction.

Elizabeth's influence also connects deeply to the broader history of African American leaders who have insisted on justice



despite personal risk. Her values echo the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who famously said that "the time is always right to do what is right." Like so many Black leaders before her, Elizabeth understands that progress is made when individuals refuse to accept injustice as normal or acceptable. Elizabeth has earned every right to rest, to stay silent, but she never will.



Because of Elizabeth, my definition of the right thing has become clearer. The right thing is speaking up when silence would be easier. It is choosing honesty over comfort and compassion over indifference. It is recognizing that justice begins with individual accountability and moral courage. Elizabeth has shown me that doing the right thing does not require perfection, but a willingness to learn from our mistakes, to change our minds in the face of new evidence, and to embrace our humanness.

In a world where it is often tempting to look away or remain quiet, Elizabeth Booker Houston stands as a reminder that doing the right thing is always possible and always necessary. Her example has shaped how I move through the world, how I advocate for others, and how I hold myself accountable. Because of her, I understand that the right thing is not a moment-it is a way of life.

ADULT WINNER

RESPECT

WRITTEN BY:
**MARK
BURGH**

THE *RIGHT* TO KNOW

I am 68 years old.

It took most of those years to understand something invisible to me.

I grew up in working-class Pittsburgh.
Surrounded by steel mills and smokestacks.
We did not think we were privileged.

Privilege meant wealth.
Privilege meant country clubs and corner offices.
Privilege meant private schools.
Privilege meant summers at distant camps.

We had shift work and small, crowded homes.
Shared bedrooms.
We thought we were just getting by.

Privilege does not always look like money.
Sometimes it looks like insulation and isolation.
Sometimes it looks like not having to know.

My child world was uniform.
My schools.
My playgrounds.
My churches.
My neighborhood.
My incredibly narrow slice of America.

That felt normal.
There was nothing to compare it to.
I did not recognize absence as a condition.
I thought it was simply life.

Later I started to understand.
The absence of difference is an advantage.
Growing up without navigating racial tension.
Without systemic barriers.
Leads to an ease that feels earned and natural.

That ease is not earned.
It is inherited.

I saw this more clearly in school.
The way I spoke and wrote aligned with what teachers expected.
The rhythms of my home were books and a mother and father
who valued education and loved language.

That pairing matched the language of authority.

When I wrote something that caught attention doors flew open for me.
I was plucked up into higher academic tracks and remained there.
It was a soft landing.

At the time I experienced this as merit.

Years later I saw it as alignment.

Merit suggests individual achievement.

Alignment suggests the system recognizes something familiar and rewards it.

I easily walked into rooms already calibrated for someone like me.

A turning point came while working in the United States Senate.

At the enactment of Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a national holiday, I listened from the gallery as senators honored a man who had forced the nation to confront its conscience.

And then I met Coretta Scott King.

Our first exchange was brief and cordial.

Later I encountered her again walking near the Capitol.

There was space for conversation.

Not dramatic.

Simply human.

That was the moment.

Because there was no lecture.

No accusation.

Just composure.

From someone who had suffered injustice.

From someone who had endured intolerance and hate.

And yet stood with dignity.

In that exchange, I realized I grew up to debate justice as an idea.

But others learned justice as survival.

I could assume my place in institutions.

But others had to fight to enter.

Privilege is not about guilt.

It is about awareness.

Doing the right thing begins with recognition.

Awareness of the things you did not know that you did not know.

And allowing recognition to shape how you move forward.

That is where the right thing begins.

That is how we must confront privilege.

ADULT WINNER

HUMANITY

WRITTEN BY:
**BRENDAN
PEYTON**

“EMPATHY AND ACTION”

AN ESSAY TO HONOR DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

The last thing she remembered before passing out from the pain was the whistling of bombs falling outside the hospital in Shanghai. My grandmother was a child and had appendix surgery without anesthetic. She was born in East Berlin in 1938. She and her parents fled Germany right before Hitler came through and killed thousands of Jews, including the rest of her family. They took a freight boat around the southern tip of Africa and were forced off at the final port in Shanghai, China. My family was immediately put in a concentration camp by the Japanese. My great grandmother would inspect each grain of rice, picking out bugs before cooking it, as this was their only food. They collected rainwater and at one point my great grandfather traded his silver cigarette case for an apple, so that my grandmother could finally experience the taste of fruit. My family was released after the war ended and was eventually able to barter for tickets on another freight boat to the United States.

It wasn't until recently that I learned of all the challenges my family endured. These experiences moved me deeply, and shaped the person I have become. Every day tens of thousands of families around the world face atrocities such as



Here are my grandmother and great grandparents on the freight boat, on the way to China.

the ones my family dealt with. My German grandmother used to tell me, “Don’t just feel bad for someone, get off your butt and help them!” Empathy and action are two words that are very important to me, and words I have tried very hard to live by. She also taught me to, “be the first!” She said that others would follow if I had the courage to do something positive. When my dad was in grade school, he was often a captain for games during P.E. My grandmother always told him to pick kids first that were always picked last. Ever since I was little, my parents told me to do the same thing. So, I did. My close friends got so mad at me because our team would usually lose. I believe that it is valuable to make someone feel needed and wanted rather than to let them become discouraged. I would rather risk an unfair balance in teams if it meant bringing happiness to someone's life. And now some of my closest friends are those who my parents said to pick first. We still lose, but we have fun doing it.



The crew created a play pin for her so she wouldn't get hurt or lost.

I am currently a 3rd year Aerospace Engineering student at Kent State University and recently obtained my private pilot certificate. It is my dream to obtain a degree in this field, and one day own an aviation company that provides humanitarian aid, both domestically and internationally. As an engineer, I'll be able to maximize my positive impact on society. And as a pilot, I'll be able to help people face-to-face, people like my grandmother. Everyone, no matter their background, deserves respect, equal human rights, and the ability to pursue prosperity and happiness.




Here's my grandmother with a Japanese soldier. They loved her curly, red hair, and would often pose with her for pictures.

ADULT WINNER

LIBERTY

WRITTEN BY:
ISHAN
CHATTOPADHYAY

MY RIGHT THING



I didn't stop to think whether it was the right thing to do. It was the only thing I could do that day. Even at just 7 years old, I somehow knew how to stop bullies with empathy, not my fists.

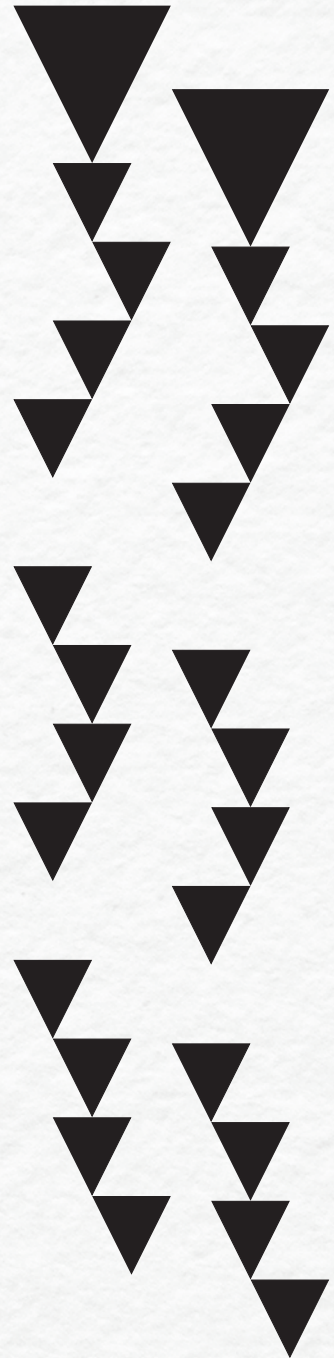
Let me share my story. Kim, a young boy from South Korea, had joined our second-grade classroom at Crim Elementary. He spoke very little English; our classmates either laughed at his accent or avoided him completely. But that afternoon, one boy kicked Kim's lunch box because "it stank of smelly fish." Some of the other students sniggered and whispered. They seemed to sense a fight. However, Kim merely bowed his head and tried hard not to cry. He picked the remnants of his lunch off the floor and closed the latch of his lunchbox.

I got up from my seat and walked over to Kim. I did not engage in a fistfight with those other kids, although I had started training in karate and could probably have taken them down. I remembered the big bully was a foster child and never brought a packed lunchbox from home.

What I did was sit next to Kim. We shared my lunch that day, and I made my mom pack fish sticks for us the next day. My quiet support was all the detraction the bullies needed. They knew Kim wasn't alone. I requested to sit next to him in class and explained English terms he couldn't grasp immediately. Soon enough, Kim started opening up and became a cheerful, happy second grader. No one ever dared to get into any fishy business with us.

Ever since, I have tried to walk with the Kims of the world and will continue to do so when I step into campus life. That is the right thing to do for me. I am now a second-degree karate black belt; my training has empowered me to defuse tense situations without physical altercations. Violence begets violence; my mantra lies in peacefully resolving issues. Bullies are often people who have faced trauma themselves, so I try to give grace while defending their potential victims. The right thing to do is to have the right mix of empathy, courage, and integrity.

In a world where bullying happens almost equally in physical, digital, and personal spaces, I believe each of us must carry the aforementioned values. I stand at the threshold of an exciting life of change: going off to college and living on my own. I know I can stand up for what is right with grace and dignity. That knowledge is my lodestar.



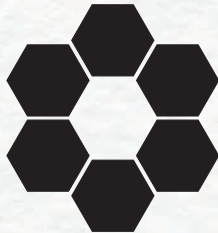
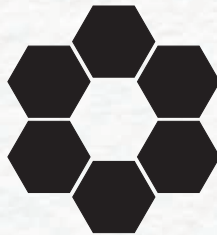
ADULT WINNER

A LESSON BEYOND THE LAB BENCH

EDUCATION

WRITTEN BY:
**AMBER
MARBLE**

When Martin Luther King Jr. said, “It’s always the right time to do the right thing,” he was speaking about moments far more consequential than a college laboratory. Yet that line brings to mind one humid August afternoon during my graduate years in Georgia, as I faced a room of students in the first year of the pandemic. I had prepared for questions about streak plates and aseptic technique, not a debate about masks.



Students filed into the lab, some quiet, some anxious, some defiantly maskless. The university had issued guidance encouraging masks but not requiring them, and that gray area became my responsibility when I stepped into the role of instructor. I was 23, barely older than my students, still learning how to wear confidence like a lab coat that didn’t quite fit yet. But I was also the authority in a room where the real danger wasn’t the harmless bacteria on the plates, but the virus running rampant on campus.

Our first lab was simple: compare contamination on petri plates handled with and without a mask. It was an exercise I loved because it didn’t preach; it demonstrated. Science speaks loudest through evidence, and there is something powerful about watching a concept materialize as colonies on agar. After explaining the procedure, I paused. A few students stared at me, almost daring me to take a stand. Others looked down, waiting.

“We’re going to wear masks today,” I said, steadying my voice. “Not because of what’s on these plates, but because of what’s in the air. This class asks us to think about how our choices affect the people around us.”

A tense silence followed. One student sighed; another rolled his eyes. But eventually, masks were taken from the front table and put on reluctantly, but voluntarily enough. It was a small win that felt heavy with meaning.

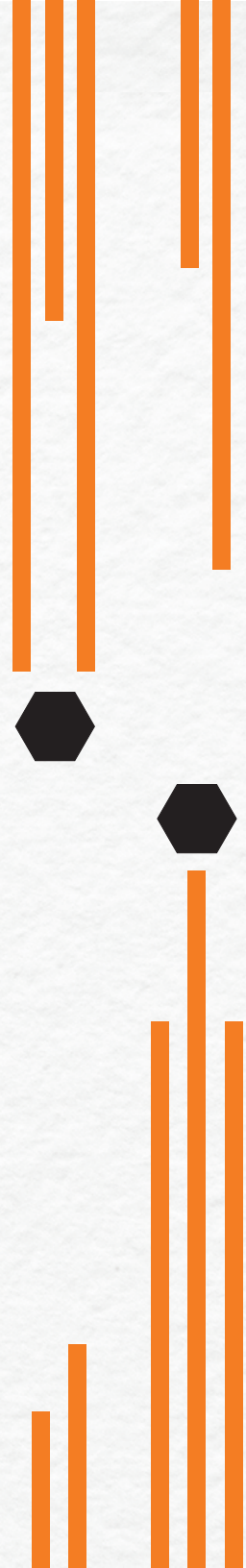
A week later, we checked the plates. The difference was undeniable. The “no-mask” plates were freckled with colonies, visible proof of the invisible journey our breath travels. The “mask” plates had dramatically fewer. Their chatter shifted from resistance to curiosity.

One student, who had argued the hardest, stared at her plate before saying quietly, “I didn’t think it would be that different.”

There it was. Not triumph. Not vindication. Just understanding.

Teaching is rarely about grand gestures. More often, it’s about small moments when clarity breaks through resistance—choosing honesty over comfort, evidence over convenience. The pandemic taught me that educators don’t always get to choose the timing of their most important lessons. Sometimes the curriculum is reshaped by the world outside the classroom. Sometimes the “right thing” is asking students to protect not only themselves but their community.

MLK’s words remind us that justice, compassion, and integrity don’t wait for ideal conditions. Neither does education. That day in the lab, I didn’t solve the pandemic or change the world. Rather, I helped a few students see something differently. And sometimes, that is enough. Sometimes that is the right thing.



GROUP WINNER

LIBERTY

WRITTEN BY:

LAKELYN
KEMP,

DANICA
BEAUDRY

LIBERTY FOR ALL? A STORY OF HOPE AND TEARS.

Have you ever wondered about the history of New York? Our right thing is Liberty. These things that happened in New York's past, show that Liberty was the end goal. Read these paragraphs that hold the answer to every question you have!

Do you know why France gifted the Statue of Liberty to America? French man, Frederic had created many monuments and statues before. He saw Bedloe's island in New York Harbor, and then Frederic knew it was the perfect place for his statue he imagined. Bartholdi wanted to remark the peace between America and France by showing the value of their friendship. He wanted everyone to remember the old friendship between the two countries. The statue was of a woman who symbolized the new world. This statue would have to be large and strong. In her right hand she was holding a tablet with the date of when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Finally, in 1884, Liberty was completed! That wasn't the thought. They had to take Lady Liberty apart to be shipped across the ocean. But eventually, America lost interest in the Statue of Liberty. Money had run out and work on the island had stopped. A news headline managed to raise enough money to get the statue finished. At last, Lady Liberty was standing there, symbolizing a true friendship standing in the breeze. This relates to the topic of liberty because it symbolizes the state of being able to do anything freely without breaking the law. Also, how Liberty shows the true friendship between France and America.



Ellis Island has had a rough past. New York was filled with love and sad times. Love, because you could meet old family members. Sad times because they had to go through so much for a better life. Albert Einstein was an immigrant that came to America. This relates to the topic of Liberty because Ellis Island opened its doors for immigrants to come here for a better life.

These are amazing facts that will knock your socks off! First, the Statue of Liberty is struck by lightning about 600 times each year! Also, to get the statue pieces overseas, they labeled and used 214 crates! Lastly, you can visit the statue of Liberty's crown, but it takes about 350 steps to go from ground level to the crown! On the other hand, over 12 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island. Annie Moore, the first immigrant was awarded a coin for being the first ever immigrant. Annie also had 11 kids! These were just a few fun facts!

Hope, a single word that helped millions who passed through Ellis Island, or how they hoped the Statue of Liberty welcomed the immigrants passing through Ellis Island. At the end of the day when we look at Liberty, her past of the hope that burns through her torch, not just as a normal statue that has no meaning, but as a symbol. Not just for the millions that went through Ellis Island, but a question for the future. Who will she welcome next through her past of hope?

GROUP WINNER

JUSTICE

WRITTEN BY:

**BLAIR
GAYMAN,
MILA
REGO**

LIBERTY FOR ALL? A STORY OF HOPE AND TEARS.

Did you know Rosa Parks went to jail just for refusing to give up her seat for a white person? We believe that women should have the same rights as men, because we are all equal!

On June 4, 1919, women were finally able to vote, but it took a while to get there. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was one of the many women who helped pass that law. She married Henry Brewster Stanton but insisted on removing the word obey from their wedding vows because she believed women should not be controlled over men. She also co-organized the first women's rights convention. In 1878 she drafted a federal suffrage amendment. She was also best friends with Susan B. Anthony.

As you probably know, Susan B. Anthony helped fight for women's rights to vote. She was fined \$100 just for casting a ballot in 1872. Susan had been fighting for women's rights for over 50 years! Susan . B Anthony was a founder of the Women's Loyal National League. Susan organized a petition drive that brought in four hundred thousand signatures in support of the abolition of slavery. The largest petition drive of all time! She also worked with Harriet Tubman on the underground railroad. She was then later arrested for trying to vote, and later convicted in a widely publicized trial. She was also the first woman to appear on a U.S coin, a one dollar minted coin in 1979. We believe that all women should have had equal rights since the beginning of history, because everybody deserves to be treated the same.



Alice Paul was one other person who was on the women's side. She believed not having equal rights was wrong, because she believed in gender equality. Alice Paul was best known for her tireless efforts helping with the 19th amendment. She also later was known for authoring the Equal Rights Amendment. Alice Paul was imprisoned multiple times, most notably a seven month sentence in 1917 for picketing the White House. This was the longest term for any suffragist.



This shows how women weren't always treated as equals to men and didn't have the same equal rights! We strongly agree that women shouldn't even have to fight hard just to get the same rights that men didn't have to fight for. Without these powerful women, today us women wouldn't have the same rights, or be able to vote! This is our right thing.

**All women are equal to men and are just as powerful,
and all those powerful women helped us get here!**

***"There will never be a new world order until
women are a part of it"***

- Alice Paul.



GROUP WINNER

RESPECT

WRITTEN BY:

KENSI
SITES,
LYLIANO
MOBLEY

LIBERTY FOR ALL?

A STORY OF HOPE AND TEARS.

***"Men, their rights, and nothing more;
women, their rights. and nothing less"***

- Susan B. Anthony

Freedom. a word that women thought about for a long time. Have you ever thought about how women were treated before the Women's Rights Movement? They couldn't vote, serve on juries, and even practice law. Only some brave women broke those laws. We have chosen 3 important women in history who made a difference. Because of their work and sacrifices, women now have the right to vote, serve on juries, and work at law.

Susan B Antony was a civil rights leader and pioneer for women's voting rights. She dedicated 50 years of her life to fight for women's rights to vote. On November 5, 1872 she illegally voted and was arrested. When she went to court the judge gave her a \$100 fine that she never paid. Sadly on March 13, 1906 she died from a bad cold and heart disease. She was 86 years old. Susan's story tells us that you keep going even though it's hard. Women can now vote.

Arabella Mansfeild was the first female American lawyer. Arabella is known for breaking the gender barrier between men and women in law in the United States. In 1869 she became the first female lawyer in the United States. She was enrolled into the Iowa Women's hall of fame in 1980. Arabella died from cancer at the age of 65 on August 11, 1911. Even though she died 69 years before she was put in the Women's hall of fame, her legacy tells us that she could do anything that she wanted to, no matter what anyone told her. Women can do the same as Arabella. They don't have to listen to what others say. They can be like Arabella and break barriers that haven't been broken before. Women can work at law.

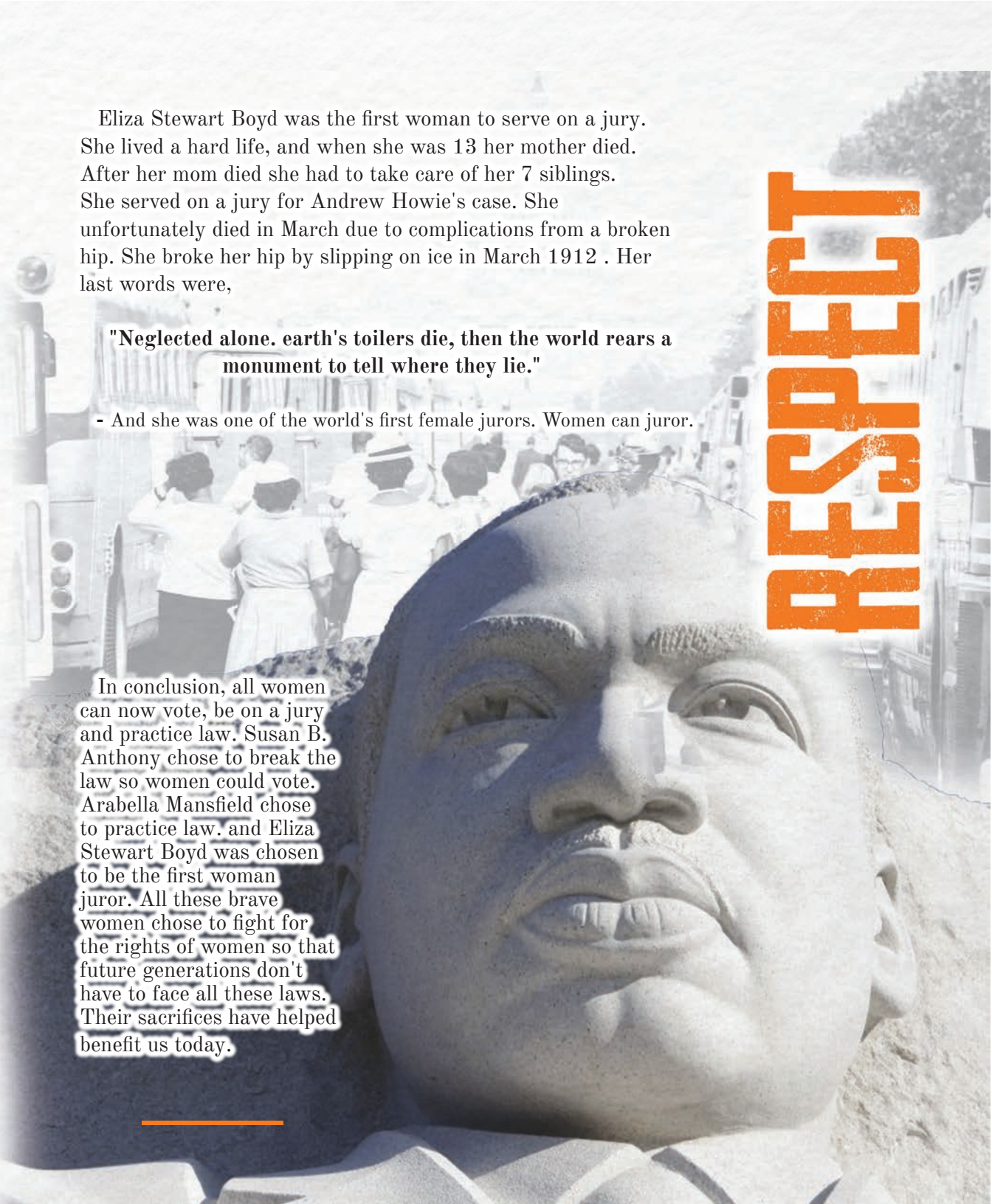
Eliza Stewart Boyd was the first woman to serve on a jury. She lived a hard life, and when she was 13 her mother died. After her mom died she had to take care of her 7 siblings. She served on a jury for Andrew Howie's case. She unfortunately died in March due to complications from a broken hip. She broke her hip by slipping on ice in March 1912 . Her last words were,

"Neglected alone. earth's toilers die, then the world rears a monument to tell where they lie."

- And she was one of the world's first female jurors. Women can juror.

In conclusion, all women can now vote, be on a jury and practice law. Susan B. Anthony chose to break the law so women could vote. Arabella Mansfield chose to practice law. and Eliza Stewart Boyd was chosen to be the first woman juror. All these brave women chose to fight for the rights of women so that future generations don't have to face all these laws. Their sacrifices have helped benefit us today.

RESPECT



**THANK YOU TO ALL
WHO PARTICIPATED**



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