

How to MAXIMIZE Student Participation in Your Contest

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In the second year of the Georgia Contest, 21 high schools and 8,907 kids participated, representing 27% of eligible students.

Peggy: Tell us about your “game plan” for promoting the contest to teachers.

Amy: The support of teachers either makes or breaks a successful contest! I think the key to winning their support is to hold a well-attended teachers’ orientation meeting. Here is how I hold mine:

Step One: Find the best place in town to hold the teachers’ orientation meeting and luncheon, so everyone will want to come. Once I learn which dates suit everyone, I invite two people from each school I am targeting.

Step Two: Communicate personally with all meeting invitees. Invite teachers well in advance of the teachers’ orientation meeting (three to four weeks) and ask them to get a substitute teacher (which I offer to pay for) if necessary. On the invitation, indicate that one representative from the school must attend the orientation in order for the school to participate in the contest. Make sure to get RSVPs.

Step Three: Secure the speaker and develop the meeting agenda. (Including lunch, the meeting lasts about 2½ hours.) Make folders that include all of the pertinent information

and 3) show teachers how to run the program in their schools. Since the Georgia Contest involves the participation of multiple schools, I ask each school to select one individual as the school’s “contest chair.” This person is responsible for facilitating the program within his/her school and helping to maximize student participation. (The contest chair is given a \$100 honorarium.) Having one contest chair at each school really helps the program to run smoothly and enables schools to take ownership of the contest.

Peggy: Promoting the contest to schools can sometimes be tricky, since teachers are often under pressure with full teaching schedules, state testing standards, etc. How were you able to convince teachers this was a project worth their time?

Amy: Teachers are inundated with special contests for them to do in class. I tried to reinforce that the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is different because: 1) the program is not an add-on and can be used to reinforce existing lesson material – plus, teachers do not need to read or grade the essays; 2) each school is guaranteed to have at least one finalist who will be invited with their parents and English teacher to the awards dinner; 3) some students can use their essays for college applications; and 4) the top seven essays will be published and distributed to schools.

the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest to the list of approved programs by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. I believe in establishing as many coalitions in the community as possible to market the contest and generate support for the program.

Peggy: Many contest organizers ask me, “What is Amy’s secret to achieving such phenomenal participation?” While every community is different, what do you think are the key ways that organizers can maximize student participation in the essay contest?

Amy: **First** and foremost, communicate, communicate, communicate! The initial communication I have with schools consists of a “press kit,” which I send out before the teachers’ orientation meeting. The kit outlines the benefits of the contest for principals and English department chairs. Also, once I have identified the contest chair in each school, I communicate regularly with him or her to keep updated about the school’s progress in promoting the contest and provide any needed support.

Second, be enthusiastic about the program. Try to make a personal connection with every teacher at the teachers’ orientation meeting, sharing with them that this contest is important to kids and has a lot to do with why teachers became educators in the first

“The support of teachers either makes or breaks a successful contest”

to be distributed: contest timeline, your own “contest newsletter” or flyer that advertises the contest, list of prizes and awards, list of sample essay topics, past essays, entry forms, school tally sheets, and copies of the John Templeton Foundation’s *Teacher’s Guide*.

Use the teachers’ orientation meeting to: 1) inspire teachers to get involved with the program; 2) share with teachers the incredible benefits that the contest will offer their stu-

Peggy: Do you think that getting the endorsements of the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Character Education Center made a difference as you promoted the contest to schools and teachers?

Amy: Absolutely! It is important to get endorsements from prominent organizations prior to approaching schools so that they know you are creditable and approved. That’s why I am so excited about the addition of

place. It helps to have all of the teachers together in one room for the meeting to compare notes and generate interest among their peers.

Third, give lots of recognition and prize money to motivate teachers and students – about 80% of our donor’s funds benefit teachers and students via the prize money, awards dinner, publication of the top essays, and the teachers’ luncheon. Also, the teacher

the power of writing

Writing, Healing, and Growing

By Arthur J. Schwartz, Ed.D., Director of Character Development Programs, John Templeton Foundation

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS a number of contest sponsors have perceived an increase in the number of *laws of life* essays that focus on a particularly traumatic event, such as a death, paralyzing accident, or abuse. Quite often these essays may end up receiving special recognition (if not a top prize), and some sponsors are concerned that students may be choosing to dramatize the most traumatic event in their life instead of focusing on the values and principles they want to live by.

My response has always been to share with sponsors that we often learn most about ourselves through the crucible of personal experience – and adolescents are perhaps most

moral undertaking as well as a way to maintain their health and well-being.

Several centuries later, the early Christians developed the function of confession as a technique to understand the self; and in the seventeenth century, the Puritans wrote in “confessional diaries” as a way to monitor the tempest of their moral lives. Ben Franklin did his part to popularize this form of confessional writing in the eighteenth century with his Project for Achieving Moral Perfection (serialized in his *Poor Richard* almanacs). For Franklin, reflecting on and writing about our moral flaws and lapses was a tried-and-true blueprint for self-improvement. And of course, Freud’s theory of treatment was largely based on the supposition

Of course, we must be careful not to turn the classroom into a therapy session. There is a fine line between self-disclosure and self-absorption. But let us also recognize that some cultures dismiss disclosure as a form of shame or moral weakness. For example, there is a popular adage in China that goes something like this: “Swallow the seeds of the bitter melon. Don’t speak out!” And in our own society, all too often the dominant messages exchanged among members of dysfunctional families are just as harsh: don’t feel, don’t trust, and don’t talk about it.

The point I want to underscore is that writing can be cathartic. Writing has the potential to change one’s life, and in light of recent national tragedies, perhaps we should be

“Writing has the potential to change one’s life”

susceptible to this form of learning. It is natural, I argue, for young people to draw from the wellspring of their own lives when composing an essay about their own values and moral principles.

But more recently I have begun to think about the benefits (and potential harm) of this form of writing. Here is what I have come to understand:

First, as a form of writing, self-disclosure has been used for two millennia. We know that the Stoics inscribed their thoughts and actions in diaries, journals, and letters as a means to overcome their flaws. This reflective process was developed by the Stoics as a

that disclosing and talking about seminal events is the vehicle by which to “cure” a patient.

Today, there is a general consensus among researchers that disclosure, especially personal stories rife with emotion, can have positive consequences. More specifically, a number of researchers are studying the benefits of writing about traumatic events. Their studies have shown that writing about such events can help to reduce health problems, heighten our immune function, enable us to better adjust to new surroundings, and effectively reduce stress. Indeed, researchers may one day discover that we are biologically hardwired to “disclose.”

grateful that we live in a society where writing is used in classrooms as a pedagogical vehicle to help young people discover what matters most to them. In some cases this emphasis may result in student essays that are overly personal or dripping with emotion. The challenge before us all – as parents, teachers, youth ministers, and elders in our communities – is to encourage and inspire our young people to integrate these emotionally charged experiences into a larger framework of values, principles, and ideals that constitute our moral heritage and ethical inheritance.



Contest

New

Laws of Life Essay Contest Launched in Pune, India

By Dr. Kuruwilla Pandikattu SJ, professor of theology at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth and director of the Pune Contest

At the Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, an independent Christian college located in metropolitan Pune, students pursue their undergraduate and graduate studies in philosophy, religion, and the social sciences. When we first learned about the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in Sir John Templeton's book *Worldwide Laws of Life*, we realized the program would be an excellent way to contribute something meaningful to the young generation of our time, and so we considered it our privilege to conduct this project.

The general response to our contest has been heartening. Our principal sponsor is the Association of Science, Society, and Religion (ASSR) of the institute. ASSR serves the students and staff of the institute as well as an important segment of the people of Pune (population 2.3 million). The organization sponsors a variety of programs including a lecture series, teaching programs, and a new annual research publication, the *ASSR Series on Science and Religion*. The President of ASSR Dr. Job Kozhamthadam has highly endorsed the project and believes the essay contest is an ideal program for the young people of Pune.

We also got special support and encouragement from the International Education and Resource Network, or I*EARN, which conducts a *Laws of Life* Essay Project in Pune through the Internet. Earlier this year, we submitted our students' essays to I*EARN's program in addition to holding our own contest. Thanks to I*EARN, our students have been recognized twice – on the Internet and in our local contest – for writing a *laws of life* essay.



At Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Contest Director Dr. Kuruwilla Pandikattu (on left) and Contest Coordinator Jerome Sathyan plan their Laws of Life Essay Contest

As a first step in planning our contest, we approached seven selected high schools in Pune, and we mobilized the teachers of the schools to organize the contest as a group activity. We purposely limited the number of schools since it was the first time we were trying it out.

The whole essay contest took more than six months to complete. About 150 high school students from the seven schools took part in the contest, and the general response has been highly positive. During the writing process, the young people were encouraged to reflect on what they wrote and to rewrite their essays, incorporating comments from teachers and peers. The students were very enthusiastic about the contest and have expressed their sentiments of gratitude and self-discovery.

The teachers too realized the importance of involving students in an activity that enables them to discover their own *laws of life* and deepen their appreciation for their values. Parents and other family members also got

involved in helping their children to articulate their *laws of life*. In their essays, the young people revealed a highly developed moral sense and respect for life. Some of the essays have been really inspiring.

Once our students finished their essays, they were evaluated by members of ASSR. Each participating student and teacher was awarded a merit certificate, and each school received some inspiring books to enrich their libraries. We also plan to print selected student essays in a booklet. We hope to provide a copy of the booklet to each student who took part in the contest.





New Contests In the works

Since the first attempt was highly successful, next year we would like to include more schools in the vicinity of Pune. For example, we plan to conduct the contest in Nagpur, another city in this province. We also intend to involve the media in our next contest. We hope that next year's contest will be on a larger scale and an even greater success.

[Ed.'s note: for more information on the I*EARN Internet Laws of Life Essay Project, visit <http://www.earn.org/projects/laws.html>]

Cartersville, Georgia

The Cartersville/Bartow County **Chamber of Commerce** through its Character Education Program is launching a *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in four area high schools. The contest will be held next spring in partnership with the Georgia *Laws of Life* Essay Contest.

Douglas, Arizona

Public library volunteers will launch the state's first *Laws of Life* Essay Contest next spring, with high school administrators helping to run the contest. Student competitors will participate from two local high schools and from the homeschool community.

Eastern Shore, Maryland

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest that was so successful in Talbot County last year is being expanded this fall to include all 32 middle and high schools in a five-county region on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The contest is being co-sponsored by the Committee for Character Development of the **Shore Leadership Association** and **Character Counts! Mid-Shore Community**. Once again, the contest will benefit from the involvement of Carol Reed, the 2000 Teacher of the Year in Talbot County, who truly orchestrated the 2000 Talbot County Contest. With total prize money in excess of \$10,000, Shore Leadership believes the contest represents a wonderful opportunity to help kids and the entire community make the connection between character and leadership.

Just Hatched!

Neptune, New Jersey

Unity Church By The Shore just held its first essay contest for 12th graders at Asbury Park High School. The two top winners won scholarship assistance for their college studies. Language arts teacher Dr. James Flanagan coordinated the program at the high school, and the scholarships were supported by tithes from the church. The Unity Church hopes to expand its partnership with the local schools and community by launching an even larger contest next year.

McMinnville, Tennessee

Linda Gilbert spearheaded a contest that was launched this fall for students at Warren County High School and the Taft Youth Center, an institution for Tennessee's most serious juvenile offenders. Contest sponsors included **Wal-Mart** and **Bridgestone**. The distinguished **John Seigenthaler**, founder of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University and a former member of President Kennedy's cabinet, hosted the awards ceremony.

Laws of Life

Laws of Life

ay Project as a Participant/Organizer,
and promote values of life, organised by
dyapeeth, Pune; World-Life-Web, Templeton
g) and I*EARN, New York (www.earn-in.org).

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In the spring of this year, Allison Whalen, an eighth grade student at Albert D. Griswold Middle School in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, was named one of ten state finalists in Connecticut's first Laws of Life Essay Contest. Congratulations, Allison!

Cherish Every Moment

By Allison Whalen



Allison Whalen,
Rocky Hill, Connecticut

WHAT DOES LIFE MEAN TO YOU? Is it the span of time that you are alive, or is it more than that? This summer, I experienced something that made me re-think my definition of life, appreciation, and emotional strength. This experience caused me to reflect on my life and be thankful for just what I have.

Over the summer, I volunteered with a new non-profit organization known as Time for Life. This organization's purpose is to provide approximately twenty less fortunate families of children with cancer a free vacation on Martha's Vineyard. These getaways are an effort to provide the families a break from their daily worries, and, in most cases, are the first vacation the families are able to take since their child's diagnosis. I had the pleasure of knowing just eight of these families, and they changed my life dramatically.

I have always been taught to help people and to be charitable. My parents continuously tell me to give to the needy, and enforce their lesson by donating to charitable causes such as clothing drives and

"I didn't realize how much strength I would gain from watching these children and spending time with them."

soup kitchens. They also incorporate this value into everyday life. For example, they teach us to hold doors for people older than ourselves. Therefore, it was easy for me to decide to volunteer my time to such a wonderful organization. My family, though, had second thoughts. The experience with these children and the emotional drain of it would be a sure test of my emotional strength. I reassured my family that I could handle difficult situations and proceeded with my plans. I didn't realize how much strength I would gain from watching these children and spending time with them.

The eight families that I met with were the most inspiring people I have ever encountered. Over the course of the two weeks I spent on the Vineyard, I cooked, cleaned, and played with the sick children and their siblings. Most importantly, though, I watched how these families dealt with the difficulty of living with an ill child. I real-

**"The families I met taught me ...
to be thankful for every moment of my life."**

ized that these families were just like mine and they tried to live as normal a life as possible. I know that at one point their lives were not unlike mine. This caused me to step back and see just how lucky I am that my family is healthy. These families have to deal with the severe illness of a child, brother, or sister everyday. Another observation I made was that these families had enormous emotional strength. Each family made a tremendous effort to help their ailing child feel as normal as possible, despite his or her medical needs. They lived every day on Martha's Vineyard to its fullest, and truly cherished every small smile on the face of their child with cancer.

Many different people helped to reinforce two strong values while I was helping at this camp. The families themselves taught me appreciation. I learned how to be thankful for my good health and happy life. They also taught me to cherish every day with my family because they might not be there the next day. The children with cancer taught me strength. They never showed any fear of their illness, death, or what might happen the next day. They were trying to be regular kids and they didn't let cancer get in their way. They always had positive attitudes. I hope to gain as much wisdom and strength in my whole life as these children have at such a young age.

There was one girl I met that taught me my most valuable lesson. Her name was Ginny, and she was four years old. She was a very sweet girl who always loved to play. She swam for the first time while on the Vineyard, and proudly proclaimed that she would not need swimming lessons because she was such a good swimmer. Ginny never did get to swim again. She died in late September. This was my greatest test of emotional strength yet, but by spending time with these inspiring children, I learned to be strong and appreciate the happy times. Without even knowing it, Ginny showed me that my daily problems and troubles may be insignificant within the span of my lifetime and that there is no certainty about what tomorrow may bring.

This summer I learned far more than the satisfaction of helping others. The families I met taught me not to fear the consequences of the next day and to be thankful for every moment of my life. These courageous people helped me more than I could ever dream of helping them. I will forever be grateful to them for giving me the added strength to continue to cherish my life in a more meaningful way.



Amy Butler poses with David Andrews, top finalist in the Year 2000 Contest, his mother, and his English teacher Davey Mills (on right)

of the student who writes the grand prizewinning essay receives \$500.

Fourth, treat the teachers with respect and keep them informed, so they feel they are part of the process. Ask their opinion, and let those teachers who are very enthusiastic about the contest speak at the orientation

meeting. *Remember, the support of teachers either makes or breaks a successful contest, which I measure by the number of essays as a percentage of total eligible students.*

Peggy: What are your plans for year three of the Georgia Contest?

Amy: For the third year of the contest, I have decided to “step out” and delegate the marketing and administration of the program to strategic partners. This summer, I received double the funding from the donor, who liked the fact that we came in under our year two budget and recognized his support in published materials. Our goal for this year is to generate 20,000 essays.

Peggy: What would you tell someone who was considering starting a contest in his or her community?

Amy: The first time I was asked to get involved in the contest I said, “No.” I was too busy. But, after reflecting on the benefits I had received from being influenced by various mentors in my life, I agreed to take on the role of unpaid volunteer more as a token of gratitude than with the expectation of personal reward. I can tell you that once I got involved in the contest, manifold blessings followed. The *law of life* that says, “The more you give the more you get,” is true. I have found that I am a better mother, person, friend, sister, aunt, daughter, and professional person because of the opportunity to reflect on my character and its origins and constantly remind myself to “walk the talk” in all aspects and relationships in my life.

Got a great idea for how to maximize student participation in the essay contest?

Don't keep it to yourself — subscribe to the Laws of Life Listserv, where more than 100 contest sponsors and organizers from programs all over the world share their 'secrets' for running a successful essay contest, ask questions, and learn about each other's contests. Contact Peggy Veljkovic at veljkovic@templeton.org to subscribe today!



Giving Thanks to our Teachers

The Laws of Life Essay Contest owes its success to the tremendous support and dedication of the more than 800 teachers worldwide who have participated in the program. It is the teachers who introduce the contest to their students and encourage, cajole, and sometimes even require them to write a laws of life essay. We thought you would enjoy reading what some young people think about the teachers who worked with them on the essay contest.

“I’m sure you have had a teacher who respected you, and believed in you no matter what. My teacher Mrs. Stewart was like that to me. She respected and believed in me as I thought no teacher ever would. I can’t believe that if Mrs. Stewart did not insist that I should enter the contest I would not be where I am now.”

Joanisa Tenreiro, age 12, Naples, Florida

“My English teacher Mr. Austin has always been a person that I look up to. The class discussions he engaged us students in always brought our minds to deeper levels. His wisdom was evident both in and out of the classroom. He is a great model for what it means to have true character.”

Kati Lestmann, age 18, Dayton, Tennessee

“Mr. Simpson is actually a retired teacher and administrator who came back to teach my communication skills class when my regular teacher left. Mr. Simpson not only taught us skills in reading and writing, but he also taught us about values. He is the kind of person who lives the *laws of life* every day.”

Andrew Gilman, age 13, Troy, North Carolina

“Ms. Bush has played an important role in my life. Her guidance and leadership has provided me with the knowledge to excel in my writing. She is compassionate and caring toward her students and always has their best interests in mind. Her passion for her career is undying, as will be the memory of the impact she’s had in my life. She is a true role model and someone who has earned my greatest respect.”

Ashley Cowan, age 18, Lima, Ohio

“I am so thankful to Mrs. Leonard for assigning this essay to my English class. If she hadn’t, I would probably not have submitted an essay. With her encouragement, my essay turned out to be a winner. Thank you so much Mrs. Leonard!”

Nicole Kuncl, age 16, Jensen Beach, Florida

Thank you to all of the teachers around the world who support the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest.

The program would not be a success without you!

*If you have written about a law of life, please feel free to send your writing to us. We would be happy to consider your work for publication in a future issue. Send your contribution to **Peggy Veljkovic at veljkovic@templeton.org**.*

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Your comments are most welcome. Please direct them to Peggy Veljkovic.

Visit our website:
www.lawsoflife.org

In 1987, Sir John Templeton created the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in his hometown of Winchester, Tennessee to encourage young people to reflect and write about their own *laws of life*. At that time, Sir John never imagined that the contest would spread throughout the United States and around the world, that thousands of students would write a *laws of life* essay each year, or that individuals, business leaders, and civic groups would fund and sponsor their own contest. We invite you to launch a contest in your community!

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Laws of Life

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E S S A Y C O N T E S T

How to MAXIMIZE Student Participation in Your Contest

By Amy Butler, director of the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest
Interviewed by Peggy Veljkovic



Amy Butler emcees the Georgia Laws of Life Awards Banquet

Whether you are considering starting a Laws of Life Essay Contest or have already launched a program in your community, this article should be required reading. Amy Butler has championed two of our largest contests to date: in Palm Beach County, Florida (10,000 writers in one year) and Atlanta, Georgia (8,900 participants in just the second year of the program). Recently, Amy shared with me her “secrets” for running a successful essay contest and maximizing student participation – even in the first year of the program.

Peggy: Before you began to develop the Georgia Laws of Life Essay Contest two years ago, you secured local funding for the program. How did you do that?

Dear Friends,

Sir John tells us that “An attitude of gratitude creates blessings.” This month, as we celebrate Thanksgiving here in the U.S. (which is, by the way, Sir John’s favorite holiday), the John Templeton Foundation would like to give thanks to the thousands of contest sponsors, organizers, teachers, students, and parents around the world who participate in a local *Laws of Life* Essay Contest.

In this issue, we recognize just a few of the individuals and organizations whose commitment to the *Laws of Life* Program has brought countless blessings to us all. Meet Amy Butler on page one, whose leadership of the Georgia Contest has touched the lives of more than 15,000 young people. On page four, learn about the brand new essay contest in Pune, India, which was launched by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, an independent Christian college. On the back page, read some students’ expressions of gratitude toward the teachers who worked with them on the essay contest.

On page six, eighth grader Allison Whalen reminds us that we need to “Cherish Every Moment.” During this difficult time in our world’s history, I think that Allison’s message is especially important for us to hear. I hope you will consider passing on Allison’s essay to someone you know so that they can read about the gift of gratitude from a very special twelve-year-old.

Peggy

Amy: I tried to identify wealthy philanthropists and like-minded individuals who had made considerable investments in the betterment of the community. I thought they might consider the *Laws of Life* Program a good investment. I prepared a sample budget, which included the targeted schools, number of prizes, and administrative expenses, before calling on potential donors, so they would know that I was credible and businesslike in asking for a certain amount. J.B. Fuqua, a prominent Atlanta businessman and philanthropist, understood the vision of the program. He has fully funded the first

two years of the contest and has committed to sponsoring the third.

Peggy: How many high schools and students participated in the first two years of the Georgia Contest?

Amy: For the first year, I had originally targeted 20 high schools and 2,000 essays – about 10% of eligible students. In actuality, 15 high schools and 6,407 students participated in the inaugural contest, which represents a much higher penetration than I had anticipated – about 26% of possible participants.

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