

Redemption, Forgiveness, and Hope: One boy's journey with the essay contest

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In the new closed unit for violent offenders at Taft, Ms. Siever encouraged her student Terrence McLaurine to write from the heart about his experiences and what he had learned. Terrence wrote about the murder he had committed five years earlier when he was twelve years old—and how he was sorry for his actions, had come to accept responsibility for his past and his future, and wanted to live a better, more productive life.

The judges chose Terrence's essay as the first-place winner from Taft. When Terrence read his essay at the awards ceremony, students, faculty, and guests were touched by its depth. For weeks afterward, several public school teachers said their students were still talking about how the experience had affected them.

What happened next was amazing. A columnist for *The Tennessean* newspaper, Tim Chavez, happened to read Terrence's essay. After obtaining Terrence's permission, he published the essay in his column. By chance, the family of Larry Huber, who had been Terrence's victim, read his essay in the paper.

The family contacted Mr. Chavez to ask if it would be possible to meet Terrence. Years earlier at the trial, they had not been able to talk with him. The family longed to tell Terrence of their loss and hoped he would say he was sorry. Mr. Chavez put the Hubers in touch with my husband and me, and soon we were able to arrange for Terrence to attend a private meeting with the Hubers, which my husband would facilitate.

On Wednesday, November 28 Terrence was escorted by a security officer to Nashville, where he came face to face with Larry Huber's 83-year-old father and Larry's three sisters. It was an emotional time as they listened to Terrence read his essay to them and then look directly into their eyes and speak the words they had waited to hear: "I am sorry for what I did. I would do anything to bring your son and brother back." The

Hubers shared pictures of Larry, talked about him and how they missed him, and then expressed their forgiveness to Terrence. They read a letter sent by Larry's Mother, who was unable to attend the meeting, which read:

I do want you to know that I am happy that you are doing so well. And I am glad there are people who know how to help you...

I want you to continue to improve and learn how to live a good, constructive life. If you let the Golden Rule of the Bible be your guide, you will be able to live as God wants you to do. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

In a letter Terrence sent to the Hubers after their reconciliation, he wrote: "I really didn't expect for you to show me the type of respect and grace that you did. Like I said in the meeting, 'I thought you hated me, and in all honesty you should.' I was very nervous at first, not knowing what to expect, but after

Read Terrence McLaurine's grand prizewinning essay on page six of this issue.

speaking with you, I felt like I had already known you. Larry was lucky to have had such a loving and caring family, and I'm sorry I took him away from you."

It has been personally gratifying to me to organize a *Laws of Life* Essay Contest, which I believe helps train young minds and hearts toward that which is good and noble. I have seen wonderful changes, not just in Terrence, but in the participants in general as they were challenged to reflect upon the values that are most important in life, to affirm the dignity of self and others, and to put into writing the positive goals they envisioned for themselves. There is a feeling of satisfaction that nothing else can match.



After their reconciliation with Terrence, Larry Huber's three sisters and his father pose with Dr. Eben Gilbert, right, who facilitated the meeting. Larry Senior, age 83 (next to Dr. Gilbert), called the meeting "the best day of my life."

the power of writing

Why Don't More Boys Write?

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

HERE'S A QUESTION for us to ponder: Why is it that two-thirds of first-place "winners" in local *Laws of Life* Essay Contests are girls?

Although we don't have data here at the Foundation on whether girls submit more *laws of life* essays than boys, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that they do. But we can draw on recent findings from the U.S. Department of Education to shed some empirical light on this issue.

In 1996 the Department of Education reported that girls outperformed boys by fourteen points in reading and a whopping seventeen points in writing skills. In comparison, boys outperformed girls by five points in math and eight points in science.

The Department also reported that girls got better grades, had higher educational aspirations, pursued more rigorous academic

children ages ten to seventeen who were arrested and eighty-six percent who were charged with violent crimes.

Even when boys matriculate to college, we know that they are more resistant to the culture of the written word. In 1998 UCLA researchers asked college freshman how many hours per week they spent reading for pleasure during the preceding year. Thirty-five percent of boys answered, "None." Among girls, the figure was twenty-two percent.

Recently, a number of best-selling books have addressed these issues. One widely read book by William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, suggests that the reason for this emerging crisis is an unwritten, but powerful cultural code of masculinity that discourages boys from excelling in school. There is an ideal "male code," Pollack argues, one that forces boys

Our Young Men, Sommers argues that what is causing boys to under perform in school is a teaching style that emphasizes permissive self-esteem rather than clear moral guidance.

Sommers just doesn't understand why "stoic behavior," often found in boys, has gotten such a bad rap. All of the major religions and their moral teachings suggest that it is important for us to control our emotions. For example, the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes the emotional needs and feelings of others—not one's own.

How might these competing ideas inform those of us involved in *Laws of Life* programs? Perhaps just being aware of the facts regarding boys and writing is a solid first step.

We should also recognize that not every *laws of life* essay needs to be written from the crucible of personal experience.

At its core, our contests ought to be about

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studies, participated more in the prestigious Advanced Placement program, and outnumbered boys in student government, in honor societies, on school newspapers, and even in debating clubs!

Conversely, we know that more boys than girls are suspended from school and that more boys are held back or drop out. Boys are three times as likely to be enrolled in special education programs and four times as likely to be diagnosed with an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

We also know that more boys than girls are involved in crime, alcohol, and drugs. In 1993, boys made up seventy-three percent of

to resist at all costs such "sissy stuff" like schoolwork (and essay contests?). For example, the "code" explains why boys, compared to girls, don't write in journals or diaries.

What does Dr. Pollack recommend? Educational programs at the earliest ages to draw boys out emotionally and interest them in talking about their feelings and personal relationships. He writes: "Let boys know that they don't need to be sturdy oaks."

Encouraging boys to "get in touch with their feelings" is nothing short of wrong-headed thinking, suggests Christina Hoff Sommers. In her book, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming*

the ability to succinctly explain a particular universal ethical or moral principle and why it is important to live by that principle. Boys, as well as girls, know what are the right values to live by and throughout history have displayed the courage to live by their principles.

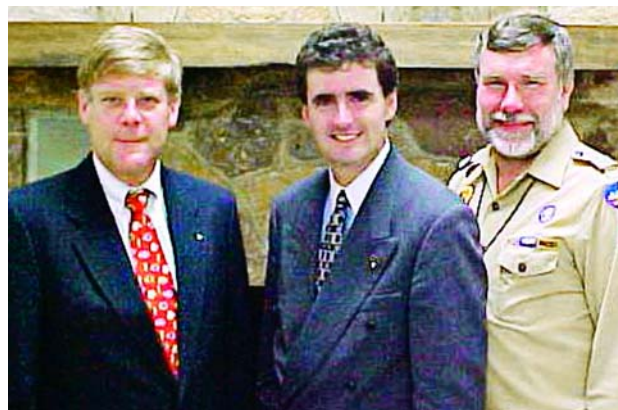
Perhaps we just need to think harder about how to encourage boys to put their principles to paper. In other words, the key may not be to draw them out emotionally, but to find a way to inspire them to write about their ethical code in ways that respect their preferred style of writing and thinking.

Contests

New

Bucks County, Pennsylvania Boy Scouts to Launch the Essay Contest

By David E. Hasel, Council Executive, Bucks County Council, Boy Scouts of America



The Eagle Scouts launching the Bucks County Contest, from left to right: Council Commissioner Robert L.B. Harman, Council President Michael G. Fitzpatrick, and Council Executive David E. Hasel

In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, three Eagle Scouts from the local Boy Scouts council are teaming up with the council's Learning for Life program to launch a county-wide *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. Following a successful first year, the Bucks County Boy Scouts hopes to promote the *Laws of Life* program to other councils across the United States.

The Eagle Scouts, Council President Michael G. Fitzpatrick, Council Executive David E. Hasel, and Council Commissioner Robert L.B. Harman, announced at January's executive board meeting that the essay contest would be a key program feature in 2002. Staff member Ann Doyle, director of Learn-

ing for Life, the council's co-ed, older youth program, would coordinate the contest.

Over the next several months the Bucks County Council will introduce the contest to students at elementary, middle, and high schools in thirteen area school districts, as well as to private and parochial schools throughout Bucks County. The council will encourage local schools and school districts to organize and launch their own essay contests. The council's packs, troops, crews, and posts, as well as area Girl Scout troops,

will also be invited to start their own contests.

Once the local contests have been completed, organizers will submit their top essays for additional recognition in a second, county-wide contest. The council will approach business and community leaders to judge the top finalists in the countywide competition, and the awards ceremony is planned for the fall.

The *Laws of Life* Essay Contest is closely aligned with the mission of the Boy Scouts, whose aim is to focus young people on the core values that will guide them throughout life and enable them to reach their full potential. The Boy Scouts have identified twelve core values in their Scout Oath and Law, which are: Trustworthiness, Loyalty, Help-

fulness, Friendliness, Courtesy, Kindness, Obedience, Cheerfulness, Thrift, Bravery, Cleanliness, and Reverence.

"We think the Bucks County Contest can become a blueprint for councils across the country," said David Hasel. Following the completion of the first year, Mr. Hasel hopes to promote the contest to his peers at regional and national scouting conferences. "Scouting is the ideal vehicle to take this program nationwide," continued Mr. Hasel, "and we are looking forward to a very successful first year bringing the contest to the young people of Bucks County."

What is an Eagle Scout?

This is the highest award a youth can earn in scouting, usually taking eight to ten years of work. Only one or two out of a hundred Scouts earn the Eagle Scout Award.

We think the Bucks County Contest can become a blueprint for councils across the country.

New Contests In the works

Green, Ohio.

Green Local Schools in Summit County will be launching their first essay contest this spring. The **Green Schools Foundation** is sponsoring the program, providing both financial assistance and judges for the contest. Eleventh graders at Green High School will be assigned the topic as a class writing activity. Next year, students in visual arts classes will also be encouraged to create a piece of art that expresses their *laws of life*. Green Local Schools looks forward to uniting their excellent writing and character education programs through the essay contest, which will give students an additional opportunity to develop quality work and be recognized for their efforts.

Invercargill, New Zealand.

Neil Riley, high school teacher and chairman of the **New Zealand Foundation for Character Education**, will work with a number of high schools on the South Island to establish New Zealand's first *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. The national winners will have their prizes presented at the Foundation's first National Character Education Conference in September of this year.

Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

Tsuey-ling Wu just launched the country's first *Laws of Life* Essay Contest and is actively promoting the program to local sponsors. Participants will be encouraged to use the Internet as a tool for writing their individual *laws of life* essays. Contest activities will include online chatting, sharing of comments, and peer editing. Ms. Wu first learned about the contest from the **International Education and Resource Network (I*EARN)**, which runs an Internet *laws of life* essay project. To find out more about I*EARN's Internet project, visit the organization's website at www.iearn.org/projects/laws.html.

Just Hatched!

Longview, Texas.

Last fall, eleventh graders from four high schools throughout Gregg County participated in the essay contest. The contest was sponsored and hosted by the **Longview News-Journal**, which first heard about the program from County Commissioner Darryl Primo. The newspaper published the top essays in a special booklet. Organizers sent the booklet to area schools and have already heard from several schools that are interested in participating in next year's contest. You can learn more about the Longview Contest online at www.news-journal.com/essaysmain.html.

Philippines.

Dr. Zen Udani, principal adviser of the **Alliance of Character Educators** and assistant professor at the **University of Asia and the Pacific**, is actively promoting the essay contest to teachers at thirty public and private schools all over the Philippines. The teachers will explore the possibility of implementing the essay contest schoolwide, which is very timely in light of the current emphasis on character and values education in schools throughout the country.

San Diego, California.

The **International Center for Character Education (ICCE)** at the **University of San Diego** and the **San Diego Union-Tribune** are co-sponsoring the first *Laws of Life* Essay Contest in San Diego. This spring, students in grades three to twelve will participate in the contest, and the winners will be awarded prizes at ICCE's annual summer academy following a performance and program presentation by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, & Mary fame.



Terrence McLaurine is a seventeen-year-old student and inmate of the Taft Youth Center in Pikesville, Tennessee. Last fall, Terrence won grand prize in the Warren County Laws of Life Essay Contest. For more on the contest, see page one of this issue.

The Laws of Life are Hard to Identify and Even Harder to Apply

By Terrence McLaurine



Terrence McLaurine, Taft Youth Center, Pikesville, Tennessee

THE “LAWS OF LIFE” aren’t that easy. At least it seems that way when you’re a twelve-year-old boy sitting in a cell, being charged as an adult for first-degree murder. Then, it seems that there are no *laws of life*. It feels like the whole world has turned against you, but you never seem to look at what you did to make the world come against you.

I was given a fifteen-year sentence. I am now seventeen years old, and I’ve been locked up for half a decade. During this time of incarceration, I’ve had time to look back

on my life, and I’ve noticed the bad choices that I’ve made.

The first thing that I noticed was that the world wasn’t against me; I was against myself. I grew up in low-income housing projects and was raised by a single, independent mother of seven children. At the age of eight and with little supervision, I started selling drugs and started roaming the streets with older guys. I was determined to provide my family and myself with the necessities of life: food, clothing, and shelter. There were times that we had none of these, and even had to sleep in cars. Growing up without a positive male role model led me deeper into the roots of violence. I looked up to the big time drug dealers and admired them for the nice things that drug money was giving them, such as cars, clothes, girls, and plenty of pocket change. As you can see, my priorities started changing and were definitely getting out of order.

The streets were making me smart,
but at the same time
they were making me very stupid.

With my mind set on overcoming my many struggles, and influenced by all the trials and tribulations I had already encountered, I was led to the streets. At first, my life seemed better, but actually it was worse. I had already stopped going to school, at least on a regular basis. When I did go, I would get suspended for fighting. A couple of times I even got suspended for the whole school year. I also start-

To make...changes, all you need to do is
remain focused, be dedicated to the cause,
and have the courage to try.

ed getting into trouble with the law, by catching charges like assaults, possession of a weapon, curfew violations, reckless endangerment, resisting arrest, and theft. The streets were making me smart, but at the same time they were making me very stupid.

I smoked weed and drank alcohol to take my mind off my family’s struggles. I often snorted cocaine to help me stay awake at night for the gain of making money. Although most of this money went for the support of my family, the money wasn’t everything. Hanging with the older guys gave me the big brother or father-son relationship that I had never experienced. I guess I was looking for love in all the wrong places. This type of behavior went on until I was twelve years old, when I committed the biggest mistake of my life and was charged with first-degree murder.

Since I’ve been locked up, I have made a big change in my life by doing something that I’ve never done before. I have started setting positive goals for myself, and I am going to try my hardest to see that these ambitions are accomplished. Changing a negative life into a positive and productive one has not been easy, nor will it become any easier in the future. My life has always been rough, but just recently it has become a little smoother with just a few bumps. I plan on going to college and getting a degree in business management and eventually having a wife and a couple of children. I want to give them the love and be the father figure to them that my father never was to me.

The highlight of this story is to show that you can change, no matter where you come from or what you’ve been through. If you truly want to change, it can happen. The road may be long and rough, and at times it may seem that you are driving around in circles, but you can change. You must be strong, have self-discipline, work hard, and be willing to accept the consequences of your actions. I learned this the hard way, but now I’m on the right track where I plan on staying. Just keep in mind that no matter where you are in life or what difficulties you are experiencing, there are other people out there who are in worse shape than you. This is a free country, and you have the freedom to change the circumstances and situations in which you live. To make these changes, all you need to do is remain focused, be dedicated to the cause, and have the courage to try.



The Terrence McLaurine Story: *In my own words*

By Tim Chavez

Tim Chavez is a columnist for The Tennessean newspaper in Nashville, Tennessee. He has extensively covered the Terrence McLaurine story, from the murder of Larry Huber five years ago, to the meeting in which Terrence asked for and was granted forgiveness by the Huber family. Mr. Chavez shares his thoughts on this remarkable story and the laws of life essay that manifested a miracle.

AS JOURNALISTS, we are trained to go after the story that is unique, interesting, compelling, and elicits emotion.

The story of a twelve-year-old Nashville boy named Terrence

corrections officials. And his life was touched by an extraordinary woman named Linda Gilbert, who brought the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest to his place of incarceration. Through the contest, we were

Forgiveness in our society is so desperately needed,
but so seldom explored and pursued.

McLaurine—who murdered a forty-year-old man in a drug deal gone bad—had all of these elements. But there was no joy for me in writing about it.

Through several columns, I explored what went wrong. And I tried to find a moral, something to tell a community of parents, social workers, police officers, judges, ministers, and educators about how to avoid losing another child like Terrence, let alone a loved father and son like his victim, Larry Huber.

But in my writing, there was no avoiding the overwhelming feeling that Terrence was lost forever. And when a juvenile court judge decided to send Terrence to adult court for trial and sentencing, any remaining hope was extinguished. His future with adult criminals would just fortify the bad things he had learned. We would never want him released back into society.

Then came a miracle.

Miracles are not instantaneous happenings, except from the hand of God. When humans are involved, they are like a farmer first plowing the ground. Then sowing the seed. And the heavens bringing down needed rain. Every small action is directed toward a large and wonderful harvest. And that is what happened in Terrence’s life, beyond the eye of the news media and a community that had forgotten about him.

Terrence had good but tough teachers. He had kind but direct

able to see Terrence’s resurrection manifested. And I was thrilled and honored to tell the world.

When Linda Gilbert sent me copies of all the essays from the Taft Youth Center contest, I recognized Terrence’s life story immediately, even though there was no name attached. When I called Linda and asked for the youngster’s first name, I told her of the miracle we had in our hands.

In defiance of my profession and training, I cannot adequately tell you in words what it has meant to me spiritually, besides professionally, to have been allowed the great honor of writing about Terrence reborn. He is a remarkable young man. And I cannot adequately describe the humbling power of seeing his reconciliation with the family of the man he murdered.

Forgiveness in our society is so desperately needed, but so seldom explored and pursued. Larry Huber’s family members are heroes and role models.

There have been so many parts to Terrence’s ultimate resurrection. And the last essential ingredient was the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. So much more needs to be done. In future columns, I’ll be pushing for Terrence to be freed from the remainder of his sentence to avoid adult prison. He has so much he can tell and teach other children like him who are in danger of losing their childhoods.

And then, the sowing of more miracles can begin.



The Teacher's Lounge

In this issue, we welcome a new columnist to the Laws of Life Newsletter. Linda Bruns has taught English at Shawnee High School in Lima, Ohio for the past 32 years. She has taken part in the Lima Contest since the program was first launched in 1997. In her new column, Linda answers your questions about teaching with the Laws of Life Essay Contest.

QUESTION: Students are so used to writing for academic assignments, in which they address a specific topic for an audience of one: their teacher. When you assign the *laws of life* essay, how do you help your students to prepare for this different kind of open-ended writing activity, which involves introspection and personal expression?



Linda Bruns,
English Instructor,
Shawnee High School

LINDA'S ANSWER: The key to good writing, whether for literature-based analytical essays or for more personal and introspective compositions, is to follow the writing process, and the first step in that process is to pre-write. A good plan always makes the writing easier and the final product better. Since the *laws of life* essay is different from most of the writing done in high school, I like to work through some brainstorming with my students.

When I first introduce the assignment, we discuss what values we hold as citizens of the world, as citizens of our nation, and as citizens of our school. Students are eager to talk about what they like or dislike, what they value in their interpersonal relationships. Then we list some of those qualities. The list always includes friendship, honesty, fairness,

compassion, reliability, perseverance, and love, among many others. Though many of my students do not realize it when we begin, even the most reluctant writers perceive that they have knowledge of, experience with, and definite opinions about these concepts.

Next, I encourage my students to think of times in their own lives at home, at school, or at work when they have been called upon to practice their own values. I ask them to think about times when they have been a good friend, told the truth when it would have been easier to equivocate, shown sympathy for someone less fortunate, or seen a difficult problem to its conclusion. At this point I usually have students volunteer personal examples of these values at work in their lives—and their excitement for the assignment blossoms.

Then, I show my students two or three examples of essays from the John Templeton Foundation's *Teacher's Guide*. Seeing other students' work gives them the confidence that they can produce a credible piece of writing of their own. Finally, I assure my students that their work will be read anonymously. Should they choose to write personal thoughts, no one, other than myself, will know who has written what.

When students feel equipped, they will want to produce a great *laws of life* essay.

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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 so many individuals, businesses, community organizations, service clubs, foundations, and colleges and universities would sponsor and organize 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

REDEMPTION, FORGIVENESS, AND HOPE: One boy's journey with the essay contest

By Linda Gilbert, Director of the Warren County, TN Laws of Life Essay Contest



Terrence McLaurine, grand prizewinner of the first Warren County Contest, and his teacher Ms. Siever

Dear Friends,

On a Wednesday about four months ago in a Nashville conference room, seventeen-year-old Terrence McLaurine sat and waited to meet the family of the man he had murdered five years ago. Terrence was going to ask for forgiveness, and as he waited nervously, he wondered if the family could possibly find it in their hearts to absolve him of his crime.

This issue tells the story of writing and redemption. On **pages one and two**, read about how Terrence, who has been incarcerated since the age of twelve, was given the opportunity last fall to participate in a local *Laws of Life* Essay Contest—and how writing an essay changed his life and the lives of others. On **page three**, Tim Chavez, a columnist for *The Tennessean*, shares his thoughts on how it felt to cover Terrence's crime five years ago, when his actions destroyed many lives, and today, when his words bring new hope to all of us. On **page six**, you can read those words in Terrence's grand prizewinning essay.

Certainly, not every young person who takes part in the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest has such a dramatic story to tell. But with programs springing up around the world (see **pages four and five** for some of our new contests), it seems that now, more than ever, focusing young people on the values of good character is a concern that unites us all, regardless of nationality, religion, or culture.

Peggy

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