THE MEANING OF COURAGE

Each year sixth-graders in the Boston Public Schools and elsewhere in the area write about courage as part of The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, a literacy program that honors the memory of an 11-year-old Boston sixth-grader who died of leukemia in 1991.

These are among the winning essays that will be recognized at a ceremony in Boston on Wednesday.

Photos by Craig Bailey

SAMANTHA VANCE
Teacher: Matthew Knapp
Frederick Middle School

DO YOU know how it feels to be made fun of? Well I do. A lot of times people talk about me. They are always talking about how big I am.

When people talk about me, my feelings get hurt, and it makes me feel like nobody wants to be my friend. Sometimes I wish I could be as skinny as them, but I don't think it should matter how big someone is. What should matter is your personality and how you treat others.

People call me names like "fatty," and I just ignore them. I think people call me names because they might think I'm different.

I think that the kids who call me names are not going to have a good job when they grow up because they always say mean words to me or to other students. I think the kids that get called names like me must feel the same way as I do. Sometimes I wish people could not be overweight so that nobody would have to get called names.

When I come home and I tell my mom or stepdad that somebody called me a name they make me feel better. I always say to myself that I am going to lose weight so I won't get made fun of. My mom and stepdad say, "Don't listen to the people who call you names because it isn't true."

I try not to eat a lot because sometimes when I eat I think I gain weight. I also try not to eat a lot so people won't say, "Oh, you gained weight." I think that the people that are skinny don't know how big people feel when they call them mean names.

I am courageous because I do not say anything back to the people who call me names. I just ignore them. It shouldn't matter how big you are. The most important thing is how you treat people. I think that I show a lot of courage when people call me names.

ROSE ALLOCCA
Teacher: Melanie Livingston
Rafael Hernández School

I DON'T want to," I replied flatly with my second-grader voice.

"You have to say it. Stand up!" my teacher said, getting angrier. I knew I didn't have to say the Pledge of Allegiance. My family doesn't support it.

I shouldn't be forced to say something I'm against. It's a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution: Freedom of Speech.

"Rose," she said sternly. "Stand up right now." I refused to get up. My teacher was surprised. I was the student who would get a little prize at the end of the week for behaving well. I listened to what teachers said, I did my homework, and always followed directions. But that didn't mean I was going to say something I do not believe in.

This is something courageous that I've done. It may have only lasted five minutes at a time, but it was brave. Just because I say that I was brave does not mean that I wasn't scared too. It was very scary. I was only in the second grade.

My mom called the ACLU for a lawyer. My mom, my dad, and my lawyer all defended me. My teacher finally stopped telling me to stand and finally started concentrating on teaching. My parents were so proud of me.

My mother and I walked into my third-grade class before the first day of school and started to talk to my new teacher, Richard. I braced myself for the continuing problem about the pledge. My mother explained the whole story to Richard. He actually supported my decision. Richard said I was welcome to write my own pledge.

I gladly began thinking of words for my pledge, one I was proud to say.

That year, I had learned that you could change even the most unfair and negative thing into something positive.

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

"I pledge allegiance to my family, friends, and to the world. I believe that all the countries should be kind and nice to each other with liberty and justice for all."

YEISON QUINCENO
Teacher: Wendy Conzo
Mario Umana/Joseph H. Barnes Middle School

YOU KNOW that you have shown courage when you have stood up for something. Very few people are able to show their bravery because they think it is not worth it or that it is stupid. I know that it is not easy to do, but I guarantee that if you are able to be courageous, you will be proud of yourself and find out that you can make things better.

The first time that I showed courage was when I was in the fifth grade. One of my classmates was Carlos. Nobody liked him, and nobody wanted to be his partner. The reason that nobody liked him was because he liked to bother everyone. I showed courage by deciding to help him.

Carlos always bothered everybody by writing on desks, pulling everybody's hair, and taking things without permission. One day the teacher asked, "Who's going to be Carlos's partner?" I felt kind of sad because he was lonely and putting his head down. I said, "I'll be his partner."

When I was going to his desk, I was sweating and worried because the only thing on my mind was how I was going to suffer. When I came to his desk he was quiet, and about 30 seconds later he asked, "So how do we start?" I opened my notebook and I told him, "Copy what's on the board." He did the exact things I told him to do, which really surprised me.

His head went down again, and he asked, "Why didn't anyone decide to help me?" That also surprised me, and I said, "If you stop bothering everyone else, I'm sure they would help you." From that day we became friends, and he didn't bother anybody anymore.

This really made the difference. Carlos became a much nicer person, and I also changed. That day I felt courageous and I realized that one small kindness could make a huge difference. This showed me that I can be courageous and can make a lot of changes.

WLEESAYMAH HANKERSON
Teacher: Norma Hargrove
Sarah Greenwood School

MY COURAGE story is about how my friends wanted to talk about their different religions. When they talked to me and asked me what my religion was, I was too ashamed to tell them at first.

It started when I was at the Holland School in third grade. During lunchtime my friends were talking about their different religions. All the girls said their different religions, and then it was my turn. They asked me what my religion was, and when they did, my heart started pumping even faster. I became all sweaty until I said that I was a Jehovah's Witness.

They all started laughing and saying that I should not be with those kinds of people because they don't celebrate anything. I explained to them that they were being rude. Jehovah's Witnesses are very kind and very respectful. They helped me understand that in life you do not get a chance to do all of the things that you want. Sometimes people are disrespectful and they don't seem to care. They might even shoot you right there.

I think that I was very courageous to tell them what my religion was and that I am not ashamed to tell anybody. I am proud to be a Jehovah's Witness!

NAOMI LEONARD
Teacher: Scott Larivee
Mary Lyon School

SOMEONE once said to me courage doesn't have to be a roar, that courage can be as silent as a whisper. I love those words because they tell me that even though my courage may not have helped a whole city, it still helped my mom a great deal for the year she was going through treatment for breast cancer. I helped her be brave.

Do you know what it feels like to watch someone you love be in pain and unhealthy day after day? I do. I was by my mother's side for the year she went through treatment for breast cancer. She was always tired, and at the beginning, she was unhappy. I tried to cheer her up. I was only 8, so I couldn't cook or do all the cleaning. I couldn't even walk down the street by myself. I wondered what to do.

I asked my mom. "There isn't really anything you can do," she told me as she lay in bed. I felt powerless. The prospect of losing my mom was heartbreaking. I had to find something I could do to help.

I decided to spend more time with my mother. I was going to go to Massachusetts General Hospital with her so when she finished there we could spend time talking and I could make her laugh. It didn't really work at first, but after a while she started to ask me to do more things with her. She said I was one of the people who were making her better.

I was terrified of cancer and death, but even though I was the kid, I held my head up high and tried to be strong for my mom. I had always thought she would be the one to pick me up when I was down. Now she was sick, and I was going to give her as much love and care as she would give me.

I became much more responsible after my mother's treatment. I guess that means that being courageous helped me just as much as it helped my mom. I will never regret spending all that time with my mother for that year. I know my courage doesn't sound too daring, but I was terrified that if I got too close to my mother my heart would be shattered into a million pieces if she died. I am thankful that she did not.

KATIE MCGOFF
Teacher: Melissa Shea
Warren-Prescott School

COURAGE IS a word with many definitions. It can be anything, from jumping into a burning building to giving a special toy to someone less fortunate than you. To me, it means doing something new. Sometimes you can't find out what courage is until someone shows you. Sometimes they don't even mean to.

The person in my life who showed me what courage was is Fadima. When I was in fourth grade, Fadima came to America from Somalia. She didn't speak any English when she came to my class at the Harvard-Kent Elementary School.

No one knew why she wasn't speaking. When I walked into school the next day, I went to my seat and found out that Fadima was sitting next to me. We were all reading except for Fadima. I told my teacher, Mrs. Moloney. I wasn't telling on her; I just wanted my teacher to tell her what she needed to do. That's when I found out: Fadima couldn't read English.

For the next two months, Fadima and I worked on reading, spelling, and speaking English. Then, one December day, Fadima read her first book, "Black, Brown, and Tan." During this time, little did I know that she was going to help me with a change. I found out that at the end of the year I was going to change schools. I was scared at first. Then I remembered Fadima. I would need the same courage she had: the courage to change.

Overall, I think Fadima had great courage. I think the road of life is not always smooth. There are bumps and turns along the way and you have to deal with them. Just think: Your destination may not be that far away. It just takes a little courage.

DANNY N. PHAM
Teacher: Marie Marsden
John W. McCormack Middle School

TO ME, courage means being strong in mind and having the power to stand up for your rights. That's just what I did. My ethnicity is Asian, so people make fun of me. That is, until I had had enough.

Ever since I was in kindergarten people have made fun of me by saying things in what they thought was my native language. They always picked on me and called me names. Once in kindergarten they even shoved me into a closet during recess and left me there for half an hour. I was taught that fighting and doing bad was a sin and that I shouldn't yell or fight back. I also didn't know how to defend myself then. It was all wrong. I then learned that it was not wrong to fight back if I had to protect myself.

Every time someone called me a name I just asked them, "How would you feel if I called you . . . ?" That stopped them from calling me names, but it also brought more trouble. A lot of kids would try to jump me at almost every corner. I managed to escape every time except for once, when I got cornered and got beat up pretty bad. I panicked and called the police, and the kids stopped trying to jump me. Still, every so often I still think that the kids have a grudge against me.

I may have managed to stop people from calling me names, mocking me, and trying to jump me but I still have one more problem. Because I'm Asian, people think I am really smart and ask me questions that they don't know on assignments. They get mad if I don't know the answer because they think I'm trying to make them fail, and they pick fights with me. I tell them Asians don't know everything and that it is just a stereotype. I know some kids are mean and that they may beat me up, but I still tell them.

These things may not seem courageous to you but to me they are the bravest things I've ever done. I can't just sit here and let them bully me just because I am a certain race. Standing up for what I think is right takes a lot of courage.

MATTHEW WONG
Teacher: Judy Woo
Josiah Quincy Upper School

I THINK courage is something that comes from your heart. You don't need to be Superman to have courage. Everyone has courage, but they need to find it first. Courage is something that builds up in you, and it will never fade away. My dad has courage because he has all of these qualities.

My dad is a good person. However, the thing that hurts most is that he is an alcoholic. When my dad was a kid he had four brothers. They grew up in a house and drove my grandparents crazy. My father grew up as the oldest and had many responsibilities. He started out smoking, then gambling, and then drinking. The smoking was bad, but the drinking and gambling were worse. My dad won large sums of cash but mostly lost it.

Everyone was yelling at my dad and telling him to stop gambling and drinking. So little by little, he eventually stopped gambling.

When my dad got drunk, I always got mad because there was always yelling. I was always getting in trouble because I took my anger out in school. I got suspended, written up, yelled at, and got switched to another class because of my behavior.

I encouraged my dad to stop and to get help. He did get help, and he is still getting help. Now I am doing better in school. I know my dad has courage because he is trying to stop drinking. Like I said, you don't need to be Superman to have courage. My father was doing so well he got a certificate. I think I also have courage because I am doing better in school.

MANAR BOUZAN
Teacher: Rouba Abou-Samra
Al-Noor Academy

COURAGE to me is when a person is brave and stands up for himself or herself.

Three years ago, my mother, brother, sisters, and I were in my mother's car. As we passed a man on the street he mouthed a swear word at us. My mother heard what he had said and put the car in reverse, backing the car up alongside the man. In her most commanding voice, she asked the man what he had said. He would not look at my mother and answered with "nothing." My mother mockingly replied, "You better tell me what you just said, like a man." When hearing this, the man's face turned beet red. My mother asked him once more what he had said.

He finally told her. The man was close to tears, his eyes looked wet. That is how much of a coward he was. My mother then called the police and reported what had happened. When the police officer arrived he said that he would take care of the situation so we could leave.

A few days later while we were driving again another man acted rudely to my mother. He gave her the finger because she was wearing a hijab (a head cover). My mother had not seen this action so I told her. This time, however, she said to just leave the man alone and avoid looking at him. There are times to fight back, and there are times to just ignore hatred.

I got to witness how brave and courageous my mother was. When she had to, she stood up for herself and her family because she is a proud Muslim woman.

MULLER MIRVILLE
Teacher: Delores Blake-Richardson
Solomon Lewenberg Middle School

WHEN I think of courage, I think of my mom. My mom has gone through a lot. My big brother doesn't respect her.

She never stops loving him, and she does all that she can for him. When he is in trouble, she is always there for him.

Even when the trouble is with the law, she loves him unconditionally.

I realize this is part of being a mom, but to me it must take courage to be there for someone who is so mean to you. People talk about my mom and say that she doesn't know how to raise children. I agree with my mother that there are no rule books instructing parents on how to raise their children; you just do the best you can.

Courage is when you continue to support the person causing the problems despite the fact that you are going through hard times. Courage is a lot of things to me, but most of all courage is my mother.