The Courage of Children: Boston and Beyond
Volume XXVII

MAXCOURAGE
2018

Award-winning essays on courage written by sixth-grade students participating in The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum
The Board of Trustees and staff of The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, Inc. would like to express their sincere gratitude and appreciation to those individuals and organizations who have given so generously of their time, talent, and energy to THE COURAGE OF CHILDREN: BOSTON AND BEYOND, VOLUME XXVII.

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Courage Beyond Boston

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Clara del Valle Masoliver – Dawn Austin, Teacher
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Dedication

We dedicate the 2018 edition of THE COURAGE OF CHILDREN: BOSTON AND BEYOND to the following partners and volunteers, who continue to demonstrate their unwavering support to advance our mission by sharing their expertise and passion to educate students around the globe.

Oneida Fox Roye, Director of English Language Arts and Literacy K - 12, Boston Public Schools
Nancy Adams, MAX Board Member
Heather Faris, MAX Cambodia and Advisory Council Member
Elizabeth Goodenough, Lecturer in Literature, University of Michigan

Champion of Courage Award

We honor CARRIE MINOT BELL as the first recipient of the Champion of Courage Award.

She has inspired all involved with the Courage Curriculum in her more than ten years of service, with energy, leadership, friendship, dedication, and vision. We thank her for guiding the MAX to its highest levels of achievement and strength in pursuit of its important mission.
Each “Courage In My Life” essay is at once an illumination of a sixth-grader’s particular experience and a piece in the mosaic collectively representing the deepest concerns of all children in our global culture. In this year’s Volume XXVII of THE COURAGE OF CHILDREN: BOSTON AND BEYOND there is a bold urgency accompanied by a pressing and powerful determination to protect the vulnerable and overcome all forms of discrimination. Impressive in these essays is the way these children are bravely speaking out about what it is to live with disability, or difference, or racial hatred, or emotional distress, or the fear of losing what fragile stability there is in their family lives. What greater hope is there than that these children are so alert that, when invited to discover courage within themselves, they are able to respond with such eloquent resolve!

In our first essay about daring to confront racism, and being vindicated, a child writes, “For my grandfather’s courageous actions I always make sure things are equal for everyone.” Another writing about homophobia learns, “You are good, and it is fine to be yourself, no matter what anyone’s opinion is.” The common theme of bullying is reversed by a changed child who sees, “I knew that I was with the wrong group of friends, and I will never make that mistake again.” A resilient child is able to find, “Autism is giving me strength.” And another affirms, “Diabetes isn’t easy, and it never will be, but courage means understanding that and keeping going.”

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum is a dynamic and flexible values and literacy program created for the Boston Public Schools and now also embraced by other public, charter, pilot, parochial, and independent schools. The program’s reach is regional, national, and international, this year involving thirty-two schools in Boston and twenty-two schools in other cities and countries, including Barcelona, Belize, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Yemen.

Across the country and around the world, the children are listening, and want to be heard.

Alexandra Marshall is the author of six books. She has coordinated the annual selection and publication of “Courage In My Life” essays since the founding of the Curriculum.
Max’s Story
By Stephanie Warburg and Charlotte Harris

Max Warburg was born and brought up in Boston, Massachusetts. Not long ago, Max lived in an apartment near the center of the city with his parents and his brother, Fred. Max was two and a half years older than Fred. Max had wavy light brown hair and bright brown eyes, and Fred had straight black hair and hazel eyes, but when they smiled, they looked a lot alike even though Max was much bigger.

The boys liked sports. They liked to swim in the summer, ski in the winter, and sail whenever they got a chance. Mostly, their father, who is an architect, had to work, but as often as he could he took the boys sailing, teaching them to tie lines, trim sails, and steer a course.

“Here,” he would say, “Max, you take the wheel. Fred, you hold this line tight and Max will sail us out of the harbor.”

And Max would. He’d stand at the helm the way he thought his father stood. Eyes on the sail to be sure it didn’t spill its wind, both hands on the big wheel, and feet spread apart, wind blowing his hair and puffing out his jacket, Max would play the part of the captain, dreaming of the day he would have his own boat. He knew exactly what he wanted: a sixteen-foot, drop-centerboard boat called a 420, just the right size for a twelve-year-old, which he figured he would be before he would ever get his 420. Then he could take Fred on some great sails, even on the days his dad was too busy. Better yet, then he could race and maybe win.

He knew what he’d call his boat, too. Take It To The Max, he’d call it, not just because it had his name in it, but because it sounded like the sky was the limit and that’s how Max felt.

Max had other dreams. Ever since he was little, Max had been good at imitating people. His mom would talk to someone on the phone, and when she hung up, Max could imitate her ‘talking to a stranger’ voice or ‘talking to her best friend’ voice perfectly. He could hear an accent once and reproduce it exactly. He could mimic actors and other kids, making his friends laugh and fascinating everyone with this ability.

“You ought to be an actor when you grow up,” people would tell him. So he started looking at the actors on TV with his mind on learning acting skills and camera angles.

“Mom,” Max said one day, “Do you think I could ever be on TV?”

“Well, I don’t see why not if you work at it,” she told him. Max’s mom was an artist, and it pleased her to see her son interested in growing up to be in one of the arts. Max joined a children’s theater group and went for acting lessons. He started to gain the confidence an actor needs, and signed up with an agency that looks for children to act and model. One day a call came.

“Max, do you think you’re ready to act in a television commercial?” the agency representative asked. “Sure I am. Will my friends be able to see me?” he replied.

“Not this time. This commercial is going to run in New Jersey, but maybe next time. Will you do it anyway? Right away?”

“Oh, yes! This is my first chance!” Max ran to get his mom, and, alive with anticipation, Max, Fred, and their mom drove to the studio. They spent a day taping and re-taping. Max watched the professionals, followed
directions intently, and caught on quickly to what was expected of him. When the long day was done, Max tried to guess when the next time would be that he would get a chance in front of the cameras. He couldn’t have guessed then that six short months later he would be a frequent talk show guest, but not for a reason anyone would want.

For Max, acting was fun and easy, and so was schoolwork. He loved to be with his friends in school, and he loved to read and figure things out. He loved to laugh and play jokes. At school, they called Max the peacemaker. Kids would argue or get to fighting, but Max would get into the middle and try to calm things down. Being a good sport and thinking of the other guy were Max’s way. In tense situations, Max would be the one to lighten things up with a joke.

Not everything came easy. Living in the city surrounded by buildings and pavement, Max didn’t have much chance to play ball, but he wanted to. As soon as he was old enough, Max joined a baseball league. They played on the Boston Common. Max was the youngest player and afraid of the fastballs coming straight at him. A couple of times he didn’t get out of the way of the ball and it hit him, but he didn’t let it get him down. For one thing, he knew Fred was watching and he knew as the big brother he’d better get right back up. Max was philosophical about his shortcomings. “I’ll be better next time,” he would say, and then he’d work at it. He never missed a practice. Even though he never got to be the best player on his team, by his third season his teammates knew they could count on him for a solid performance.

During the summers, Max and his family left the city for the seashore.

One morning in July 1990, when Max was eleven, Max’s mom needed something at the hardware store, and Max was looking for something to do. “I’ll go. Let me do it,” he said, and he got on his bike and pedaled off toward town. About a mile from the house his front tire hit a pocket of sand the wrong way. The wheel skewed around sideways and Max fell. He landed on his shoulder, the breath knocked out of him. Hot burning pain filled his stomach and chest, making him curl in a ball and squeeze his eyes shut.

Max knew something was wrong, more wrong than just a fall from his bike. Max’s mother knew something was really wrong as soon as she saw him walking beside his bike, steps slow and head down. Before he could get in the house she had him in the car and on the way to the local hospital emergency room.

“Max fell off his bike and he doesn’t feel right,” Max’s mom told the doctor. The doctor felt Max’s back and side and the smile left her face. “What’s this here? His side is all swollen. I think he’s ruptured his spleen. Max is in trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Max and his mom said, almost at the same time.

“I’m not sure, but we need to find out fast,” said the doctor, frowning with concern.

She called an ambulance to take Max to Children’s Hospital back in the city. Siren and lights clearing a path, the ambulance rushed up the highway to Boston, barely slowing down for the tight corners near the entrance to the hospital. Max was wheeled straight into the emergency room.

“This doesn’t look good,” the emergency room doctor said.

“If my spleen is split, why don’t you operate on me and sew it up?” Max wanted to know.

“Can you sew Jell-O? That’s what a spleen looks like. Not much to look at, but good to have because that’s what your body uses to clean your blood. Mrs. Warburg, this boy is going to be here for at least ten days.”

Sad and frightened, Mr. and Mrs. Warburg made their plans. Max’s mom would stay with him, and his dad would take Fred back to the shore to keep things as normal as possible for him. The news from the hospital wasn’t good. It looked as if Max had leukemia, a dangerous cancer in his bone marrow, but the doctors weren’t sure which kind of leukemia he had. Some kinds were less difficult to cure, and some were easier to bear than others. Hoping their son had the commonest kind that could be cured, the Warburgs started to learn about leukemia.

The results of the blood tests came back. Max had a rare form of leukemia, found in one in a million children. The lab doctor told Max’s parents, “Now that we’ve seen these results, I wonder how Max ever got himself off the ground and back to the house the day he fell off his bike. He must be a very determined boy.”

“Yes, he is,” Max’s father said. “He is going to need to be.”
It was Dr. Susan Parsons who told Max what he had. “Leukemia is hard to beat. You’ll have to have chemotherapy and radiation stronger than one hundred thousand X-rays. In order to test your blood and feed you, we’re going to have to make an incision near your heart and insert a tube. You can’t play ball and you can’t play soccer or ride your bike. If your spleen gets hit again, it will kill you.”

Max thought a bit. “Tell me what is going to happen.”

“You have to have a bone marrow transplant. Do you know what that is, Max? That means taking the fluid out of the middle of all your bones and then putting in the fluid from someone else’s bones in its place. We can’t do it unless we can find the right donor—someone whose bone and blood type match yours almost exactly. Often, not even members of your own family are a close enough match. Right now, there are about six thousand people out there looking for the one perfect match to save their lives. You’ll be joining them, Max. Your chance of finding a match is about one in twenty thousand.”

Again, Max thought a minute. “So, there are six thousand others. Okay, I’ll be six thousand plus one. I’ll be one of the lucky ones.”

“You already have been. Because you fell off your bike, we were able to catch your disease early, before there were other symptoms. If we get a donor fast, time will be on your side.”

After ten days of testing, they let Max come home to the apartment in Boston. Every week, in order to adjust his medicine, he had to go to the hospital for blood tests, which meant a little needle, and for blood samples, which meant a big needle and a tube. Max hated needles. His mother knew he hated needles and wondered when she didn’t see him flinch each week as the nurse aimed the needle toward his arm. Even the nurse, who had seen so many different kinds of reactions to needles over the years, was surprised by Max’s calm.

“What are you thinking about, young man?” she said to him on one of his visits to the blood lab, not really expecting a reply.

Max answered very seriously, “First, I wait and prepare myself. Then I put all my energy where the needle is going to go, then I make fun of the needle.”

On his own, Max had found a way to conquer a fear that, if he did not get the best of it, could make it harder for him to get well.

No sports for at least six months, he’d been told, so he found a calendar, tacked it up, and drew a smiling face on the date six months away. Max had a goal. He knew he’d be sick for a while but he knew when it would be over. On the space for February 6, 1991, beside the smile he wrote, “Cured” and underlined it in red.

In September, Max went back to school. When he told Nurse Hoolihan at the hospital that the kids didn’t seem to understand what was wrong with him, she said she’d come to his school and explain. The kids listened carefully to Nurse Hoolihan, but it was Max they wanted to hear from.

“How did you catch leukemia?” asked someone, saying out loud the big question in everyone’s mind.

“I didn’t just catch it,” Max said matter-of-factly. “First, I had to have inherited a particular gene and then I had to have what my doctor said was an accident in my blood cells. One cell went crazy. It started making the other cells produce too many white cells and platelets. My white cells are crowding out my red cells, and that’s not good for me. But, listen; no one can catch this from me.”

You could see the kids were relieved. They stopped sitting so stiffly and acting so polite. Even Max’s teacher and the other grownups in the room seemed to relax a little.

“What can we do for you?” Max’s best friend wanted to know.

“Don’t treat me funny. I’m not supposed to bump my spleen but I’m the same old Max.”

There were reminders at home, too, that his life had changed. Max had to choose whether to give up his kitten, Fantasy, or have her claws out so that she couldn’t scratch him and start an infection. Max couldn’t bring himself to hurt Fantasy that way, so he found her another home. He missed his kitten. “Be careful, Max. Be careful,” it seemed to him his mother kept saying. He missed hearing her say, “Off you go and have a good time,” without a worried look.

The hospital did what it could to find a donor for Max so he could have the transplant that could save his life. His parents were tested and Fred
was tested, but no perfect match was found. Close relatives were tested and then friends of the family, and still no match. Wait, the hospital told them, a match might be found in the new national marrow donor registry.

His parents were troubled by waiting. The registry had too few matches and too many other people who were counting on the registry but hadn’t been helped. “We can help. We can learn how to do donor drives.” It was going to be hard, but they knew they had to try. What they didn’t realize at first was that Max would make the donor drive succeed. At first, only the family worked on the drives. Then they were joined by many of their friends, and soon, old friends were joined by the hundreds of new friends Max found through television and radio.

Max’s campaign for a donor was called the “Max + 6,000.” Always, Max wanted people to remember that this wasn’t just for him. It was for Max and all the others in America who needed the one perfect donor. Many people didn’t really know what leukemia was all about or about bone marrow transplants, or how to help even if they wanted to help. One morning, figuring he had nothing to lose and plenty to gain, Max called a radio station to see if he could make his appeal on the air. He spoke on local radio shows. He was invited to talk on Channel 4 and then Channel 7 and then Channel 2. Smiling into the camera, Max would say, “Leukemia is a blood disease that starts in the marrow of bones. I need new bone marrow in order to get better. Come have a simple blood test and see if you can be my donor. Perhaps you will be my MUD, my matched unrelated donor.”

Tom Bergeron, one talk show host, said to Max, “You’re good at this. You look as if you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I am, sir. I wanted to be on TV and here I am. Maybe this is what I was getting ready for. Even if no donor turns up for me, I can help someone else.”

For the people watching Max, it wasn’t pity that moved them; it was Max’s cheerful way of thinking of others before himself. The stations asked him back again and again. Hundreds and eventually thousands of people came to give a sample of their blood and promised to be a bone marrow donor if their type matched the type of anyone in need.

_The Boston Globe_ and _The Boston Herald_ picked up Max’s story. “Max waits for his rescue,” said one headline. “Max leads charge against disease.” The reporters who met him liked Max and wanted to help him. Their stories reassured people and gave them practical information about when and how to become a bone marrow donor.

At every donor meeting, there was Max wearing a “Max + 6,000” button and a red carnation. Red for blood, he said, and laughed when people asked how he could joke about something so serious. Max would shake each donor’s hand and say thank you. “You may not help me but you probably will help somebody,” he’d say.

Every week, Max’s white cell count got higher. Every week, the need to find a donor got more acute. “It may be getting too late,” Dr. Parsons worried. “We have to find a donor soon.”

Days slipped by. Weeks slipped by. Leaves on the trees outside Max’s window turned red and orange and then brown and fell away in the winds of early winter. Max, Fred, and their mom and dad talked about the little events of each day and about the distant future but not often about the immediate future. They talked about missing the rest of the summer at the shore and about Take It To The Max, the dreamboat. The boat came to mean so much. It meant another summer growing up. It meant having a future. By mid-October, nearly three months after Max’s leukemia was discovered, there still was no donor. “I’m going to order the 420 for Max,” his father said. “It will mean a lot to him knowing the boat is started.” He called the boat builder, who said yes, he could have the boat ready by spring. By the time Max was well; his 420 would be ready to put into the water.

With no donor found, surgery went forward to improve Max’s chances later on, just in case a donor could be found. On November 15, Max’s spleen was removed. He recovered for a week in the hospital and for six days at home. Then, on November 28, the hospital called. The lab had found the miracle match among the last batch of samples.

“Who is it?” Max asked.

“We don’t know, but it’s a perfect match!” the nurse said. Later, during long December days in the hospital, Max and his dad sent the anonymous benefactor a picture of the intravenous bag that held the life-giving bone marrow with a letter that said, “This is all we know of you but we want to thank you!” Much later, Mr. and Mrs. Warburg learned that the donor was a doctor in Seattle, Washington, whose great-, great-, great-, great-grandfather
all the way back to the 1800s in Europe was the same as Max’s.

Now, with marrow from the donor, treatment could begin to pave the way for the transplant that might save Max. Chemotherapy would be the worst part. “Your hair is going to fall out, Max,” Dr. Parsons told him. Max could see that other kids in the cancer ward had little or no hair. “It’s part of getting better,” he told Fred. But he wasn’t sure he would be brave enough. He had seen others going for their treatment and returning exhausted and in tears. He was determined he wouldn’t let the treatment sink his spirits.

First Max had a tube implanted in his chest, as the doctor told him would happen, for giving medicine, taking blood samples, and for feeding him because he wouldn’t be able to eat normally. He would have to be almost in isolation in a special environment called the Laminar Flow Room. In the sealed room, ducts brought a steady, moving stream of oxygen down and away from the bed, blowing foreign substances away from Max as his system tried to accept the strange marrow and begin making its own blood.

Except for daily trips to the Total Body Irradiation room—the hospital people called it the TBI—Max had to stay in the isolated room and could see few visitors. When his mom and Fred visited each day and his dad came in the evening, they had to scrub like doctors and wear cover-up coats and hairnets. Even a touch could harm, so there could be no hugs to give comfort and love. Each morning the halls were cleared of contaminating strangers so Max, inside a tent, could be wheeled through the empty halls to the treatment room.

Knowing he’d be lonely and expecting he’d be scared, Dr. Parsons had given Max a tape recorder so he could make a record of what was happening to him. Max told his tape recorder, “Going to TBI is really cool, like being in a space ship. The air coming in from the top of my oxygen tent is exhilarating. I feel like a great explorer from the next century gliding in on his chair.”

The experience in the room wasn’t exhilarating. The drugs made Max sick. He had to stay on a metal table, head on blocks, neck stiff and body sore, for a long time. When finally he sat up, he threw up. The vomiting meant he was done for the day. On his tape Max said, “The table is real hard and it makes my head so stiff, but it’s fun because I can blast my music as loud as I want so it reminds me of home.”

The first seven treatment days were chemotherapy and irradiation. The eighth day, the transplant itself, wasn’t at all what Max expected. Instead of an operation with doctors cutting him open, Max lay on his bed all alone while the new marrow flowed into his body from a transparent bag of clear fluid suspended over his head and connected to him by a clear slender tube.

“How is that going to get into my bones?” he wondered while he watched, then later heard the doctors themselves marveling that the marrow sought its way to the right places once it was safely in his system.

The blood count was critical. After the transplant, Max’s white cell count was zero. They wouldn’t let him out of the Laminar Flow Room until his count was 3,000. One day after the transplant, his count was 20. The next day it was 100, then 150, then 300. Max had a long way to go, but he was making it. His body was rebuilding. Slowly the days passed.

Max knew these days would be hard. The pains doctors had warned about became the pains he felt. Max didn’t complain. Instead, he tried to cheer up other patients stuck, as he was, in the hospital for Christmas. He got his parents to help. Max’s mom and dad brought in a whole Christmas dinner for all the kids and their families in the Jimmy Fund wing, the part of the hospital where Max and the other children with cancer were staying. Ted Kennedy, Jr., who had cancer when he was thirteen and was now all grown up, brought presents for the kids, along with living proof that they could get better.

Max yearned for breakout day, the day the doctors would let him go out of his room. Finally, early in the New Year, on January 2, Max woke to see balloons on the isolation room door and crepe-paper streamers overhead. The nurses, especially Nurse Rohan, his favorite, were celebrating for him. This was it; he was out! He went by wheelchair to the hospital door, then into the fresh air for the first time in 35 days, and then home. He loved the smell, he loved the look, and he loved the feel of home! Everyone in the hospital had been great to Max and he was grateful, but home was where he wanted to be. Back in his own room, Max saw again the calendar with the smile marking February 6. It was still almost a month away. “Not quite cured,” thought Max. “But maybe I’ll be better by then. February 6 will be a happy day.”
But it wasn’t. Before long Max was back in the hospital with a high fever. Dr. Parsons sent him home again, uncertain what was wrong. Back he went again for ten days and again he came home no better. Still he had a fever and still he threw up. On February 6, he went back to the hospital again. The smile he was now famous for was still there, but it seemed to waver at the corners of his mouth. Max went back to his isolation room and this time he would have an oxygen mask, the sign of mortal struggle.

Max’s mom and dad and Fred were at the hospital every day, staying with him until the evening when Max, heavy with drugs, fell asleep. The long days in the hospital were hard on Fred. He played with Max, but it wasn’t like the last time Max was in the hospital. One day, sick and exhausted after a treatment, Max was being pushed back to his room in the wheelchair. Fred had had it. Right on the edge of crying, he pulled hard on his mother’s arm, making it difficult for her to push Max’s chair. “Come on, Fred. Max needs you to help out,” she said.

Max was used to being the helper himself. Knowing he was needed, he said, “I can cheer Fred up. Put him here in my lap.”

Fred went into his older brother’s lap, glad to be riding the long corridor and glad to have Max acting like his old self. The two rolled along, Max’s head hidden and arms waving out from under Fred’s armpits, a four-armed, laughing pair all the way from Pulmonary to the Transplant floor. Hearing them, the nurses couldn’t tell that one of the laughing boys was perilously ill until, rounding the corner; they recognized Max and his family.

“That’s like Max,” they told his mother. “At night on the transplant floor, the younger kids cry. They’re in pain and they miss their families. I hear Max call to them, ‘Don’t cry. I’m here. You’ve got a friend!’ You have an unusually brave son, Mrs. Warburg.”

“I’m not sure he realizes,” his mother said. “He says to me, ‘Mommy, do you think I’m brave?’ I don’t know why he doubts.”

“How does he keep his laughter? How can he keep on smiling?”

“That’s Max,” said his mom. “That’s the way Max is.”

On March first Dr. Parsons told Max his life was threatened. The blood transfusions and medicines pumped into him weren’t working well enough. The doctors’ skills and the hospitals’ resources and Max’s own incredible will were losing against the disease. Max saw the solemn faces around him. His body swollen in places, emaciated in places, spotted with sores in places, Max looked Dr. Parsons straight in the eyes and said, “Well, okay, so what’s the plan? How are you going to get me well?” They looked at Max in disbelief, to see his conviction so strong despite his ordeal, and took heart themselves.

“Come here to the window, Max, come look,” said his father.

There in the hospital driveway below, high on a truck and with mainsail flying, was Take It To The Max. Max’s eyes widened in pleasure, his delight was evident in every gesture of his excitement. He glowed, knowing the care and love that brought his boat to him at this place at this time. Nurses and doctors all came to exclaim about Max’s treasure and enjoy his infectious happiness.

That night, Max stayed up until close to midnight working on a project with his dad. When he was ready to put out the light, Max and his mom and dad prayed together and thanked God for all the help He had given and all the people who had been so kind to him. Then Max went to sleep.

Max died in his mother’s arms, holding his father’s hand, at 6:55a.m. on March 5, 1991.

In the days that followed there was a terrible silence. The silence swelled and roared, because silences can do that if what you want to hear isn’t there and what you don’t want to hear is everywhere. Then stories started to fill the empty spaces, stories about Max.

Many stories ended with a shake of the head, a glance away, and the simple statement, “Max amazed me then. He was so brave. Children amaze me. I am amazed by the courage of children.”
Courage of Boston
The mission of The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, Inc. is to strengthen the literacy skills of participating students. Our nonprofit program, provided free of charge, invites educators and students to explore the idea of courage in literature, their own lives, and within the broader community.

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum is a year-long language arts program, founded to honor the life of Max Warburg, a courageous sixth-grader whose steadfast determination and heartfelt hope in the face of his battle with leukemia continue to inspire our work.

Since the program’s inception in 1991, the Courage Curriculum has positively impacted the academic performance and increased the essential knowledge of over 200,000 sixth-grade students in Boston Public Schools and surrounding public and private schools. By connecting with Max’s story and with award-winning literature featuring courageous young people, students come to recognize and celebrate the role that courage plays in their own lives. Our work with talented classroom teachers allows us to empower young people to continue to act courageously, to the benefit of their classmates, families, communities, and themselves.

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, Courage in My Life, works to improve the reading, writing and critical thinking skills of students. We inspire participants to celebrate acts of courage in their own lives and the lives of others. We train and support teachers in the use of the Courage Curriculum to improve their own instruction and to engage and inspire their students to make meaningful connections to literature. The success of the program is evidenced by the resulting quality of students’ writing and individual pride in their work. This is accomplished through a direct correlation between its emphasis on literature content and writing competency.

Although it is intensely focused on classroom practice and teacher instruction, The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum also disseminates this work on its website, in this annual publication of essays, and at an annual awards luncheon for Max Warburg Fellows. The luncheon draws families and the larger community together for a culminating event, to celebrate the outcomes of the program and the students’ efforts. The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum has been featured in academic journals and other publications, positioning the program as a national model for excellent school and community partnerships.

Our sixth-grade program, Courage in My Life, focuses on exploring and understanding the nature of courage, featuring the following novels: Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson; Facing the Lion: Growing up Maasai on the African Savanna by Joseph Lemasolai Lekuton; Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli; Number the Stars by Lois Lowry; Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor; and Taking Sides by Gary Soto.

This year, 1,362 Boston sixth-graders submitted essays, and over 1,500 students participated outside of Boston and worldwide. The Courage Curriculum program continues to grow on a local, national, and global scale. Max Warburg’s legacy continues to inspire young people to recognize and celebrate the courage in their lives.
Cari-Ann Dufresne, Teacher
Boston Renaissance Charter Public School

Courage means to me that you stand up for what is right anytime, anywhere. This can mean someone being rude to someone on the street, or a bully knocking someone’s books over. One person in my life who shows courage is my grandfather, for standing up for injustice on the football field.

In 1970, my grandfather, Al Newton Jr., was playing football for Syracuse University. As the year went on they noticed that black players were treated differently and far worse than white players. The players made four demands if they were to stay on the football team: they wanted to have better medical care for injured players, stronger academic support for African American student-athletes, the right to compete fairly for any position on the starting team, and diversity in the coaching staff. My grandfather knew he needed to have equal rights if he were to continue on the football team. My grandfather and his teammates decided to boycott the spring football practice. Knowing that they could be kicked off the team and might not have a future playing football, they still chose to boycott. They all were soon kicked off the team.

My grandfather and his fellow eight teammates paid a high price for their courage. However, thirty-six years later the university realized that they were in the wrong, and awarded the nine players the Chancellor’s Medal of Courage. Also in 2016, a book was released called Leveling the Playing Field: The Story of the Syracuse 8.

For my grandfather’s courageous actions I always make sure things are equal for everyone. Courage is when you stand up for what is right, and if something is wrong, you make it right. My grandfather is a very courageous person in my life and I am so grateful for him.
To me, courage is when you stand up to a bully and are being brave and confident. I showed courage when I started ballet, and I was the only person of color. It was super uncomfortable.

This was in September of 2016, and I really wanted to move to level 3 after finishing level 2, because level 3 looked harder and more interesting. It was my first day, and from the start I knew that no one liked me or wanted to be my friend. All of the girls in the class showed me looks of hatred and disgust. I felt like the only rose in a garden full of daisies. For grand allegro, no one wanted to be my partner, because they thought that I was disgusting and they did not like my hair. I know this because of the way they stared at me when I walked into the room. I felt that I was unwanted in the class.

But no one was as bad as Victoria. The second day of ballet was when she started to bully me. She came up to me and said, “Hi, I’m Victoria.” I responded, “Hi, I’m Shaumba.” She then looked me up and down and said nastily, “Why are you so curvy? You don’t look like the rest of us.” After she said that, class was over and I left, crying my eyes out to my mother, feeling very unneeded and depressed. When she asked what was wrong, I didn’t want to answer because there were a lot of people around.

The next day, I tried to keep my distance from Victoria, but she just kept finding ways to insult me and hurt me and make me feel bad about myself. This time what she said was really horrible and mean. When I walked up to do barre, she turned to me and said, “Why are you still here? You’re too big and fat.” My teacher did not even notice, and I was really angry and really melancholy the rest of class. When it was time to go, Victoria kept giving me dirty looks and talking about me to her friends as I collected my things to go home. Every time I tried to avoid her, she found a way to make fun of me. Yet again, I came out of the class crying, but this time my mom had to hold me down so I did not yell and scream and hurt myself or hurt her. That was one of the worst days of my life.

That night, I decided not to eat anything because I wanted to get skinnier, but when I told my mom how I was feeling, she said, “Subira, your body is perfect, and you are curvy because you are black and beautiful. You don’t have to change for anybody, because I love you and that’s all that matters. If you stand up for yourself and you are confident, everything will be all right.” When she said that, it really inspired me to stick up for myself. The next day, I knew what I had to do.

I had to tell this person, who thinks she can just make fun of me for her own benefit, “Oh no, girl! Oh no. You messed with the wrong girl.” When I went into class, before I could give it to her, Victoria said to me, “Little girl, you need to leave right now because you really don’t belong here, and you just don’t fit in with the rest of us. You smell like feet and rotten eggs and have so much negativity around you.” I was momentarily stunned and forgot about what my mom and I talked about. I spent all class thinking about how I wanted a redo so I could speak my mind.

After class that day, I got my chance. Victoria came up to me and said, “Shaumba, you need to leave because,” but then I interrupted, “Victoria, I have had it with your mean and conceited comments about my body and the way I look, and about me not belonging here. I TOTALLY belong here, so I am putting my foot down and telling you to BACK OFF OF ME!” After I said that, I saw her face and her friends’ faces change from hatred to consideration to compassion. Victoria’s friends said to me, “Shaumba, we really want to be your new friends, if you want us to be,” and I said, “Of course I do!” After that I had made four new friends, and Victoria never made fun of me again.

“The next day, I knew what I had to do.”
When you do what you think is right no matter what someone else thinks of you, when you stand up for yourself even if you have no supporters, that is what courage means to me.

When you are different from other people, you sometimes get judged on how you act. I started wearing my hijab when I was 11 years old. A hijab is a traditional headscarf that Muslim girls wear when they reach a certain age. I decided that I should start to get used to it early, so it would become easier when it becomes an obligation.

I talked to my mom about starting early. She said that it was a great idea, and she encouraged me to wear it. The night before school started, I made a commitment to myself to try to get used to wearing my hijab. I was proud of myself.

The next morning, my mom dropped me off at school. Before I left, she said, “Be brave.” As she drove off, I started to get the worst thoughts in my head. I imagined people laughing at me, criticizing me, and that no one would want to be my friend. I ran to the bathroom, pulled it off my head, and went to class acting like everything was normal.

When I was picked up from school my mom asked me, “How was school today?”

I didn’t respond, afraid of seeing her reaction, but all of a sudden I said, “I took it off, because I was scared!”

My mom told me not to let the negativity of others bring me down and to try again tomorrow. The next morning my mom asked me if I was wearing my hijab today. I wanted to, so I told her I was. When my mom dropped me off I walked confidently to my classroom. When I walked in the classroom everyone stared at me. Then the teacher broke the silence, “That is a very pretty scarf you are wearing.” I said thank you. When I walked to my seat, my friends started complimenting me too. There was one girl who didn’t agree with what I was wearing, but I did not let that put down my pride.

The day was over, my mom came to pick me up. I told her that the day went better than I expected and that most people complimented me. I also realized that not everyone would agree with my beliefs and I may be treated differently because of how I dressed or what beliefs I had. Every day I come home proud of myself for not letting other people’s negativity get to me. Although I faced some opposition, I found the courage to express my religious identity.

“Every day I come home proud of myself for not letting other people’s negativity get to me.”
Kaitlenn Paz Benitez  
Jane Wright, Teacher  
Salemwood School

It was a sunny and normal day after school. My dad was at work, mom was at home with my brother (that was what I thought), one of my sisters was at school camp, and my other sister had picked me up from school. When we got home I started doing my homework and my dad called home. I answered and said hi, and he asked if I had heard the news. I said no, and he told me he was brought to the hospital in an ambulance, because he had broken his leg. I thought he was joking around and didn’t believe him. I asked my sister and she said it was true. My mind felt like it got completely emptied out. I was scared, sad, and mad all at the same time. I didn’t know what to do, and I started to cry. My baby brother felt bad for me, and I knew that I had to be strong no matter what, and I had to show my brother everything was going to be okay.

About two weeks later my dad came back home, but he could barely stand up. When my dad broke his leg he was at work. My dad was a construction worker. When my dad worked he would put his tools around his waist, so when he fell off a ladder his hip fell on top of the tools, breaking and displacing the bone from his waist to his knee.

When my dad was feeling better, his friend took him and my baby brother to my dad’s employer, to pick up money he had earned working. When my dad was exiting his employer’s office, the ICE Police were outside waiting for him. My baby brother kept crying, because he was frightened when my dad got arrested.

When my mom got the call from my dad, he told her he had gotten arrested by ICE and she needed to pick up my brother. A few minutes later my dad called again and told my mom his employer had set a trap. When my mom told me what happened, I was scared and felt weak for many reasons. I couldn’t concentrate in school, which was even worse because we were taking the PARCC test that week.

A few days later I got to talk to my dad while he was in jail. I knew I had to be strong, but as soon as I heard his voice I started to tear up. I knew my dad was tearing up, too, and didn’t want to sound it. My dad told me I might not see him ever again, if he get deported. I only got to talk to my dad for one minute. I started to beg God for strength. A few days later we went to a program which assisted my dad and our family. I was really grateful because people were helping my dad, and we didn’t even know them. I felt like that was a sign of hope for our family.

My dad was released two days later, thanks to the lawyers the program found for us and the money it raised for my dad to be released.

I learned that it doesn’t matter what tough times you are going through. You just have to raise your head up and have hope and courage, because those tough times will benefit you and your loved ones. Because of what happened to my dad, my parents and oldest sisters are in the process of getting residency in the U.S.

“People were helping my dad, and we didn’t even know them.”
Courage is not about superheroes rescuing innocent people from collapsing buildings, it can also be something out of your darkest, most sorrowful memories. There are two people in the entire world that are the most courageous to me. My mother and my father are the courageous ones, and I will never have as much courage as my mother did.

My mother brought me into the world when it was dangerous to do so. It was a time when China had such a tremendously large population that the country would not have enough food for everyone. If this continued, the country would dive into poverty and everyone would starve. So the government decided to make a law that every couple could have only one child. This was called China’s one-child policy. If a family was caught with two or more children, the government would kill them. If a pregnant woman was caught on the streets, the government would inject a poison into the woman’s arm to kill the baby. This was a time when people with cruel blood were in power.

However, my father always wanted two children, one boy and one girl, so his children would always have each other. They already had my sister, but my mother decided to have another baby. My family all thought that I was going to be a baby boy. My parents had already bought a set of boy’s clothes for me. When my mother had me she had to hide at home, and her friends and relatives helped us by buying groceries, since she couldn’t leave the house. She stayed home and was very frail, but she continued on. If they caught her, I would not have lived, and my mother might have been punished. My mother was the brave one. She persevered by not doing the lawful (and also dreadful) thing, and she gave birth to me. My parents even had to give money to certain government officials to prevent them from killing me.

My father and mother wanted to move to America because they knew of America’s great education and the life we could have. Once we made it to America, my father bought a car because he was worried that I would get cold and frozen in the bitter snows. My father worked hard to maintain a living for us. He worked hard making minimum wage, and he barely had any time to eat lunch. But my mother kept us united. During those years, life was harsh, but we were still a happy family.

Then one day, the people who were living below us robbed our house. That was even more terrible. They took everything. Our Green Cards were lost, our Bank Cards, and even our jewelry was stolen—total upheaval. My father’s laptop was stolen, the thing most precious to us. That laptop contained memories, photos, videos of our life. The memories of our precious moments, lost to the hands of robbers. Still my mom and my father kept on. They had guided us through our most terrible moments, and kept us safe, but not without our saddest most concealed moments in our minds. My mother and my father are the most courageous and brave people in my life. They are the ones who kept our family together.

“My mother… persevered by not doing the lawful (and also dreadful) thing, and she gave birth to me.”
The world used to revolve around other people’s thoughts. I felt like a spy digging for clues of what others thought of me. Until now. I am facing my fears and doing something no one thought I would do. I am thinking of this while I look in the mirror and drape the purple chiffon hijab around my head and secure it with a pin.

My name is Aliyah Mohamed Jama. I am a muslim Somali-American girl. Yes, I’m muslim. Yes, I wear a hijab. I’m just your typical Somali-American muslim girl. I am living in a country which is being ruled by an anti-muslim leader. And yet, I don’t feel like an outsider. I always used to think of what others thought of me. Until today. I’m being bold. Taking risks. I’m like a bird first learning to spread its wings and fly.

I’m in the hallway looking around, hunching down with my purple Jansport backpack hanging on my shoulders. I soon hear my mom’s voice echoing in my ears saying, “Do you want to be a hunchback when you get older?” So I lift my back up and roll my shoulders. I look around and see eyes piercing through me. Most of the teachers smile and wave. That’s different. They usually don’t notice me and just go on with their business. Then I pass my friends. They all are touching their hair and bouncing it around, fixing their curls and talking to their friends.

“Hair flippers…” I whisper to myself and break out in a whisper-giggle. It’s sort of awkward, because I am wearing the hijab and have nothing to flip anymore.

So, I just make sure my pin is secured and start heading toward them. All of a sudden I stop and make a U-turn, because it hits me right then: our conversation will probably be about my decision to wear the hijab and their opinions of it. I go in my classroom and take a seat. I look around and see more eyes. I smile and unpack my stuff.

I walk to my locker and am stopped once – no, twice, no, 5 times - on my way across the classroom just to get to my locker. People ask questions like, “Why do you wear that?”

“Are you forced to wear that?”

“Does it get hot?”

“Can you take it off?”

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“Does it get hot?”

“Can you take it off?”

So, I dodge all of the questions and finally get to my locker. When I’m done I sprint to my seat to avoid all of the people.

Pewh, no more questions, I thought, just when my desk partner, Presley, asked, “Why do you wear that?”

I groaned. “Because I want to”

“I know, but why do you wear that?”

The rest of the day I stayed hidden and answered only a few questions. When the shark toy was in my hands, I said, “Well, today I showed an act of courage by wearing the hijab to school. But other than that, not really…” Then I realized that I was only thinking of what others thought about me. My eyes grew wide and I gripped the shark toy.

“I wasn’t really showing courage because I was too interested in what others thought of me wearing the hijab,” I said, more to myself than anyone else.

“Ah, I see. You were not being true to yourself,” the teacher said.

“That’s such a cliche…”

“It might be, but it’s true.”

Then something hit me. Why should I care about what others thought of me? Was this social anxiety? Why did it matter? I quickly passed the shark toy and took a deep breath.

That same day, I made a promise to myself: to not care what others thought or did, and just do what made me happy. Then, I smiled for the first time that day.

“Then, I smiled for the first time that day.”
The Courage of Children: Boston and Beyond

Payton Bonang

Chris Beeson, Teacher

The Park School

When I measure courage, I imagine a courage scale. Zero on the scale is someone who shows no courage. For example, one day I was passing by my friend in the lower division hallway, when I noticed that the seam of her baby blue shirt poked out at the sleeves and neck. I hesitated...should I tell her that her shirt is inside out? Pro: she could fix her shirt, so it’s not inside out. Con: she could get embarrassed and feel bad. I only had a few seconds more before I would be passing right by her, right next to her. I needed to decide soon! Finally, not hurting her feelings overruled my having the courage to tell her.

"Hi," I said calmly.
"Hey!" she said in her sweet, innocent voice.

I had turned down the option to show courage. The next day when I saw her again, she came up to me and said how her mom told her on the way home that her shirt was inside out.

"Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?" she asked in an annoyed sort of tone.
"I was scared that I would end up hurting your feelings," I said.

I also apologized for not having any courage, and she forgave me. Sometimes showing no courage will break your friendship forever, and you might not be able to find the glue to stick the pieces back together.

Five on the scale is when you show a medium amount of courage. For example, I was bored one day, so I decided to plan/choreograph a dance. I worked hard the whole day until I got the dance down and thought that it was amazingly perfect. I decided that I wanted to perform it in front of people. The next day in school, one of the teachers was looking for people to present at morning meeting. I told her that I would like to perform my dance at morning meeting. I started practicing my dance more and more until it was the day before the presentation. I was ready. But, when I got onto the stage I wasn’t just excited, I was a little nervous. What if I messed up? I performed it, and I got a standing ovation. I did mess up, but how would they know? Only I knew the dance. They thought that I did everything exactly how it was supposed to be, and that feeling calmed me. It helped me to have courage.

Ten on the scale is when you show maximum courage. For example, one day my older sister was working at the library with her friend, when three girls came into the library. The girls were talking pretty loudly, and two of them kept on saying to the other one:

"Oh my gosh, you are such a lesbian!"

They said it in a tone that made it seem like being a lesbian is a bad thing. The girl kept telling them to stop saying that. My sister got up and went over to them on her way out of the library.

"Excuse me. I am sorry to bother you, and I am not sure if you are just joking with each other or not, but if she is asking you to stop calling her a lesbian, then you should be respectful of her and stop."

"Oh, we were just joking, like how she jokes with us. Thank you, though, for saying that to us. That was good and brave of you," the girls responded to her in a kind tone.

My sister left the library, with her friend, in a light and cheerful mood; she knew that she did the right thing. She walked away knowing that when she saw a chance to have courage, she took it, and she succeeded.

I believe that everyone has their own definition of courage. I, for one, am not sure yet what my personal definition of courage is. I still need to observe life a little longer to be able to hold onto a theory of courage.
Andrew Voner
Sara DeOreo, Teacher
Proctor School

As the saying goes, “It’s easy to stand in a crowd, but it takes courage to stand alone.” It all started one day when my dad brought me to a baseball clinic. I thought it was going to be cool, but I would soon find out that nothing was going to go as planned. When I got to the clinic, the first thing we did were some drills where we would throw the ball to each other and settle some grounders. I was in line for the third drill where we ran for the ball to try to catch it, and some boy behind me called me a sweaty trans. At first, I had no idea what that meant, but when I got home, my mom told me that trans was short for transgender. I was blown away that someone would say something about me that wasn’t true, and even worse, use the term like it was an insult.

One reason I think that the boy called me a sweaty trans is because I sat with and still sit with a group of nice girls at lunch. I sit with this group of girls because they have the qualities I look for in my friends. These girls are loyal, trustworthy, honest, and one hundred percent kind. We accept each other for who we are, even if we are different from each other. People may call me names or say things about me, but nothing can get in the way of our unbreakable friendship.

Another reason the boy might have called me transgender is that I dance. Sometimes it’s a challenge to be the only boy at my dance studio, but I love dancing so much; nothing can take me away from it. You may think that dancing is just for girls, but that isn’t true. I love dancing; it is my passion. I get to show how I feel without ever saying a word.

Standing alone doesn’t mean you have to stand in the shadows. Being picked on because you are unique may be annoying and hurtful, but remember, there are upsides to standing out. You are who you are, and nobody can change that. If you stand out, you might get your own chance to shine. If you stay in a shell your whole life, people won’t get to see the talent inside of you.

“Standing alone doesn’t mean you have to stand in the shadows.”
Winona Wardwell  
Sylvia Rua, Teacher  
Curley K-8 School

To have courage is to do something that you find hard or challenging, and face it. It does not have to be something huge. It can just be something that you thought you couldn’t do that you did and felt proud of. It’s all about perspective.

Approximately two years ago in March, when I was nine years old in the fourth grade, my cousin changed his name to Chris, then changed his gender. It was not like I did not like transgender people. It was just that of my 22 cousins there were four girls, and now only three are girls. So when I heard about my cousin, I was happy for him. He is happier now, but I was sad. I thought that we had lost a bond that we had always had.

Every year we go to Washington for Christmas and every other year we go for the summer. This year we were going for the summer. I was so nervous about how he would act, and how my sister would act. I was worried she would make fun of him or offend him (because she didn’t quite understand what was happening). But most of all, I was worried how I would act and if I would offend him. When we finally met my cousin, he had changed a lot. He had cut his hair and changed his clothing. But once I got to know this new person I realized that I didn’t care what gender he was. I loved him for who he was, and he and I still had our bond. He was happier now, so I am happier too.

We spent the whole week swimming in my grandma’s oval pool, eating and having a fun time playing with my cousins in the yard, learning how to play badminton and football. It was nice and sunny, not a cloud in the sky. I was overjoyed, and so was all of my family. What I learned that week is that, no matter what you do, change is going to happen. It’s how you deal with it that matters. Courage comes in all shapes and sizes. Doing everyday things can be courageous. It is the way you look and think about it that really matters.

“It’s all about perspective.”
I think courage is being yourself and waking up in the morning and saying to yourself: You are good, and it is fine to be yourself, no matter what anyone’s opinion is. It is wearing the clothing you like, and it is ignoring people who try to make you feel bad and don’t think you’re good enough.

“OK, fine, I’ll tell him, but you know he isn’t going to be happy,” my mom said. Wait, let me backtrack. My mom has always been a tomboy who is good at sports and can do just as much as the boys. At the time she did not know she was going to be a lesbian. As things went on, she began to realize it more, and so did her family and her teachers. When she was in 7th grade she went to a dance, and she wore a beautiful peach flowered dress with lace around the neck and poofy shoulders that she loved, but her teacher said something that really hurt her feelings. She said, “You look great, but you still look like you’re walking to a baseball game.” My mom says things like that are “gender policing,” when someone feels like they have to keep you from coloring outside the straight guidelines. I think so, too. It crushed her feelings and made her feel horrible about herself.

When her parents started to realize that she might be gay, they asked their priest if they had done anything wrong or if they had failed her. “Why is my baby like this? Did we do anything wrong? What can we do to stop it?” They started encouraging her to wear more poofy dresses and jeweled earrings and citrus perfumes and to be more girly. But that wasn’t my mom’s style, and she knew it and they knew it too. She didn’t actually know she was gay, she just wanted to be herself.

Then it happened. In her freshman year of college, she kissed a girl for the first time. This was when everything changed. She knew, but her parents didn’t know because she was too afraid to tell them. She knew they were pretty old-fashioned and her mom was very religious. She didn’t want them to be upset or throw her out of the family because she was different.

Then she met a group of women like her, who are all friends to this day. They spent all their time together and they helped each other through breakups and dealing with family and school. Then she met my mama. My mom was helping one of her friends move a bed into my mama's house, and when they met they instantly clicked. My mom asked her friend for my mama's phone number and called her up to ask her out. They went out the next Thursday and pretty much were a couple from then on.

During this time, her parents did not know they were dating, and she was very scared to tell them. She was worried that her dad would hate her or be disgusted or disappointed. All these thoughts raced through her mind and she questioned herself and her choices. She told her mom first, and her mom told her she already knew, and that she loved her and just wanted her to be happy. But she still had to face her father. She put it off as long as she could, but then when she asked my mama to marry her, she knew she had to tell him because she wanted him and the rest of her family to be at the wedding.

When she finally got up the courage to tell him, she said, “Dad, I have something to tell you. You probably already know this, but I’m gay.” His reaction was not at all what she had feared. He was not mad, he wasn’t (very) disappointed, he wasn’t angry with her, and he simply said, “We already knew.” In fact, he tried to make her feel more comfortable by pointing out all the gay people he’d known and gotten along with over the years. Later, her stepmother pulled her aside and said, “Don’t worry. He loves you just the same.” My mom replied, “I don’t think he is too happy about it.” Her stepmother whispered, “Give him time. He will come around.” When she brought my mama home to meet her dad, he was very welcoming and friendly. He said, “Nice to meet you,” asked if she needed any food or drink, and tried to get to know her.

There was still one more person she had to win over, and that was her uncle. Her uncle was a Catholic from Puerto Rico, who was prejudiced against gay people and had made it clear that he was not going to accept it. He did not like, respect, or acknowledge gay people, and since he lived so far away, she left it to her mother to decide whether or not to tell him. Her mother did eventually tell him about the wedding.

Then when I was born, that’s when he finally started to acknowledge my mama and me. He loves kids and wanted to be part of his great-nephew’s life. Even then, she still had to work up her courage to be open about it in front of him and to bring me, mama, and the twins to Puerto Rico to visit him and the rest of the family. He was very welcoming and nice, and I had no idea that he used to disapprove of my mom’s choices. It was great, and I loved our visit. My mom did not feel uncomfortable, and she and my mama did not have to try to change who they were.

Both of my moms now have a lot of experience sharing who they are with other people, and they don’t take anyone’s surprise personally. They are both very brave and show a lot of courage by telling people every day. The lesson I learned is that it is important to be yourself and not to be what someone else wants you to be.
I was sitting at lunch with a couple of my friends, talking about our families, and it was my turn. I told everyone that my parents were gay. One of my friends wasn’t there when I was sharing my story. When he came back it was his turn to talk. After we finished talking about our families, we were talking about gay people, and I felt a little uncomfortable because my parents are gay. After we stopped talking about it, we went up to get our lunch and I told my friend that I felt a little uncomfortable about talking about gay people, because I’m scared that people are going to make fun of my parents and who I am. I am also adopted, so it was going to be weird if we were talking about our parents and what happened when we first were born. I don’t know any of my background information. After we got our lunch, we went to go sit back at our seats. We all were still talking about our families, and I didn’t want to talk about our families again.

We all finished our food and then it happened. One of my good friends was making fun of gay people. My heart dropped into my stomach. He was saying that if he had two brothers and one of them was gay, he would dress the gay one up in girl clothes and make fun of him just because he was gay. He also said that he would make the brother who was not gay fight the gay one, and that the brother who wasn’t gay would win. He said gay people dress up in girl clothes, act like girls, and usually are only friends with girls. Also, he said that the gay brother would always get bullied, and he would like the other brother better than the gay brother.

I finally said, “One, all gay people don’t wear girl clothes, and what is the problem with that?” I ran away and started to cry because of the hurtful words that my parents got called because they were gay.

All my friends talked to him and were like, “Why would you say that? Do you know how hard that was for her?” Or, “That was very rude of you.”

I ran into the bathroom and started to think, “What if my parents have to face this prejudice their entire lives?” My friend ran into the bathroom and told me not to worry because everything is going to be OK. That day I told myself that words can’t bring me down.
Danyael Morales
Ted Doolin, Teacher
William H. Ohrenberger School

Courage is the word that to me means: be yourself, stay strong and positive, and protect others. It is a word that motivates people, including myself, to work harder, no matter how much it destroys us mentally or physically. Courage is a word that negates the world’s advice to give up when life becomes difficult. And courage is what is allowing me to talk about a piece of my life.

I am biracial, meaning I am more than one race. I am always asked the most frustrating question, “What are you?” Being unique has always been hard for me, because I am different from the majority of students at the five schools I’ve attended. This affects me because being biracial is accompanied by certain stereotypes. Stereotypes that people, such as me, are judged upon, often resulting in bullying. But I have refused to let other people bring me down by saying that I have identity issues. This is because I know that I have family and friends who support and love me for who I am, and above all, I love myself.

An example of my courage was October of 2016. My parents had gone through a temporary divorce. I was depressed and angry, as I am very insecure about myself. I always thought their separation was my fault. I had anxiety, so I always felt nervous and uneasy. I also had panic attacks. I almost felt like there was no escape. I say ‘almost,’ because there was only one: cutting. Cutting was the only thing that allowed me to release a flow of bottled emotions that I couldn’t let go of. I never really felt happy at the time. I never really felt anything. I would sit, motionless, and think, “Every bad thing that happens to me is my fault.” But then, I was considered an “Easy One.” I was called horrific things like “Fat, Retard, Waste of Life, Hideous!” and those insults were just the beginning. After being hurt by words I would be hurt physically. As I was kicked around and punched I could only feel one thing. Pain. I would try to tell someone, but I never had the courage, and I just wanted to die. Death was the only thing I had on my mind. Sometimes I would just sit in my room with a blade for twenty minutes a day, but courage prevented me from carrying it out.

Soon after this my mother was hospitalized from an accidental overdose. Visiting her would be so hard for me, because all I could think about was, “What’s the point of living, if everyone dies anyway?” I contemplated simply taking the easy way out. I was trying so hard to just hang in there. But one day when I visited my mother in the hospital, she noticed the dozens of scars (some old and some fresh) covering a majority of my arm. She wanted me to sit down and talk with her and my father. I sat with them for about thirty minutes and fused the most memorable words into my head. “Danyael, we will always love you no matter what, and you need to stop hurting yourself like this. We need you to see me walk out of this hospital. What will we do if we won’t be able to kiss you in the morning and say ‘I love you’? You are a unique and talented boy, and those children envy you. Don’t give them the satisfaction of seeing you hurt, because they are clouded by jealousy.” I am still horrified by the nightmares of me losing my life to suicide, but it was my parents who gave me courage.

That next day the same boys came and tried to torment me again, but I stood up for myself. I simply walked away, not allowing them to bother me. I did this again, and again. They soon left me alone to go prey upon another poor soul. I didn’t really want that to happen, so I told the teachers. I saw them pushing a girl, telling her, “A fat girl like you should go on a diet!” This was followed by pig snorts. So I instantly ran out to help her. I rushed in to push them both away. I saw her crying, and I was instantly filled with rage. I screamed “She has done nothing to you guys. Now LEAVE, you abominable low-lifes!” So they left, embarrassed that the prey became the predator. An hour later she thanked me, this was followed by a brief hug. This actually brought me the joy I longed for. I realized: that was the light I needed. That was courage. Courage allowed me to see my mom come home from the hospital and stand up to the bullies who tormented many others and me. My parents got back together, and I was finally happy again, and so was my family.

These experiences showed me that in life you’re going to need courage to overcome your hardest challenges, and that you are always going to have a horizon to leap for, leaving nothing behind but fear.
Courage to many people can be a very simple thing, like introducing yourself to someone you’ve never met, or something as scary and big as skydiving or surfing a giant wave. But courage to me is something as simple as walking out of my house and waiting at my bus stop. To me, something that tons of people do on a day-to-day basis is courageous, because I have anxiety. Crossing the street gives me anxiety, because I feel like I’m making a fool out of myself when I walk by cars and the people in them turn to look at me, even though I’m doing absolutely nothing wrong. It seems like not many people understand, though, so I’m putting lots of courage into writing this, to give people like me courage to write things like this, too.

A lot of it started last year, when I started taking the things bullies said to me to heart and to head, and letting them affect me. I knew it wasn’t what I was supposed to do, but it was hard to ignore, when it was all I heard when I walked into the school building. I was always a sensitive person, and my feelings were like a porcelain figure. They would shatter very easily. The World Wide Web had a big influence on me, and I started texting toxic people, emotionally unstable people. I didn’t realize, at the time, that if I try to help people who are emotionally unstable, if I try to force help on them, then I’ll also become emotionally unstable, due to being so fragile and sensitive.

That’s exactly what happened. I had told my friends about my anxiety before anyone else, spilling all my emotions out. Not very long after, my mother saw that I was becoming more distant, considering that I was always mommy’s girl. It got me tangled up in school counseling, and then I was enlisted to get a therapeutic mentor. After some time, I went to the hospital, and my doctor told my mom that I had a lot of symptoms and signs of depression. I was diagnosed, and my doctor wanted to put me on medication, but my mother refused. I realized my anxiety had also grown within me.

A year goes by faster than a squirrel crossing the road, and I finished my goals with my therapeutic mentor. She let me go, because I didn’t need counseling anymore. My depression has gotten better since then, although anxiety is still hanging on my shoulder every second of every day.

It’s hard to do daily tasks with anxiety, especially if you feel like you don’t have courage. Nobody can promise you that it will get better or go away anytime soon, nor can anyone guarantee that any of your other problems will go away or get better. For the many people out there like me, who don’t feel like they have the courage to do things like these, I want to help you gain that courage. Having courage to write about my life, hoping this story gets published, will hopefully help people out there get places. That’s why we all need lots of courage: to outrun the obstacles that stop us from doing what our heart wants us to do.
Natalya Martinello
Jane Wright, Teacher
Salemwood School

What I think of when I hear courage is “Courage conquers fear.” I show courage a lot. Every day of my life. I have gotten bullied a lot, I have depression, and I’m suicidal. I always think about what it would be like if I was not alive anymore. I voice this to my guidance counselor on hard days. I had to have a safety evaluation this year.

During this evaluation I was really nervous and told my dad. My dad and somebody from the crisis team decided I needed to go to a placement facility. First, an ambulance came to pick me up at my house and brought me to a hospital in Salem, and then from there I went to a place to help me feel better. This was really hard for me, but my dad helped me through it all.

When I was there, I started taking medication for my depression, and I continued when I got home. I went back to school the very next day and I was happy to see all my friends again. I caught up with most of my work and thought everything was fine, but soon everything went downhill AGAIN. I was having the same thoughts again, and I had a lot going on with family and friend drama.

I had another safety evaluation, and I had to go to another place to help me. This time I really wanted to hurt myself. The place I went was in Needham, MA, which is far from where I live in Malden.

Being far from home meant I couldn’t see my dad as much, which made me sad. When I am sad I always want to hurt myself. I had never done it before, but when I was there, I started to cut. I had a fidget toy with a wire and I started to cut with the wire.

This was a struggle and really hard to get through. My support team is amazing and they are still helping me get through the little bits. At the end of those days my courage kept saying I’ll try again tomorrow.

“At the end of those days my courage kept saying I’ll try again tomorrow.”
Do you ever feel disappointed in yourself? That’s what I hear in my head. Every. Single. Day. Convincing myself not to believe the lies in my head is a struggle. “You’re not good enough. You’re too thin. Stop trying to be someone else!” These are the lies I tell myself every day. I started to believe them!

It all started in the 5th grade. My mind was changing a lot. My thoughts changed from childish ideas to “tween thoughts;” from happy and carefree ideas to sad depressing thoughts. During the transition from elementary school to middle school, people became more judgmental. I always felt lost and invisible, so I started to ask myself, “What happens if I die?” I told one of my close friends what I was wondering and she told the school counselor. In the middle of third period, I was pulled aside by the school counselor. She asked, “Do you know why I pulled you over?” “My arm?” I said softly. She couldn’t hear me so she said, “Your arm.” We stayed silent for a moment. I looked down at the many cuts on my arm. I pulled my sweatshirt all the way down to my fingertips. When we got into her office, she called my mom to inform her. Although she tried a few times, my mom didn’t pick up. The counselor was about to call my dad. “Please no!” I cried. At that time I was so scared of my dad’s reaction, so she didn’t call my dad.

Ten minutes before school ended, the counselor brought me up to her office again to call my mom one more time. She picked up the phone and I started to tear up. The counselor told me to count the cuts on my arm. “Thirteen,” I said softly. She told my mom to come to school to talk. When she arrived, I sat on my mom’s lap, and when she cried, I cried with her and felt so sorry that she was sad. I wanted to die that second. They told my mom to take me to the therapist, and she did.

My dad met us in the parking lot, shaking and trembling with fear. We walked up to the waiting room, to wait for the therapist. My palms were sweaty, my heart was racing, and I was holding back my tears.

A few moments later, the therapist called me in and asked me some questions. She wanted me to be honest. I wasn’t fully honest. When she asked me, “Why did you do this?” I stumbled across my words and said, “Because...
Have you ever shown courage? That one word means many different things. To me, courage is not just a word. It’s the bravery to step up and not be afraid to conquer that fear. When I was afraid to express my feelings and thoughts about something personal, I didn’t just give up. I had the bravery to defeat that fear. The fear didn’t just go away. I had the bravery to walk right in there and speak loud and proud.

It all began on the 5th of March, 2017. That was the day I found my definition of courage and even found my own courage. That day my 14-year-old sister, Ella, was admitted to Franciscan Children’s Hospital. She was there for weeks because she was suffering with depression and anxiety. I knew she had so much courage, but maybe she had it stored somewhere inside of her and didn’t know how to get to it. I didn’t like to talk about what was going on, because I felt uncomfortable and thought no one would understand. It felt as if everything was stuck inside of me; all my words were stuck in a locked chest and no one could find the key.

Holding it all inside of me and not talking about it affected my mood, which is why my mom wanted me to go to a siblings meeting. This meeting was all about talking about your sibling and about what brought them to the hospital. At first I didn’t want to go. I didn’t have the courage to talk about Ella with people I didn’t even know. It was way out of my comfort zone. But then I thought of my mom. I realized that she thought it would be good for me. I listened to her and went to the meeting. If my sister could talk about what was happening, so could I.

Later that evening, I walked into the meeting alone. I felt better because it was only me and two others, a brother and sister. They talked about their older brother who was also at the hospital. It felt good to hear from other people who were going through the same thing. Hearing them talk about similar emotions made me feel relaxed. It made me feel like I wasn’t the only person I knew who was stuck in this nightmare. After they finished speaking it was time for me to tell my story. Silence spread across the room waiting for me to speak, and so I did. I shared loud and showed my bravery. It felt so good to be able to speak about my sister to others without feeling uncomfortable. It felt like I found the key to my chest of emotions, and everything I was keeping in went out. It made me feel free.

After the meeting my mom talked to me, and she was happy that I participated and overcame my fear. Hearing my mom tell me how proud she was made me feel proud too. I felt amazing. I was happy that I found the bravery to overcome my fear.

Courage is not just a word, it’s an action. Courage is not just fear going away. It’s having the bravery to not be afraid anymore and to conquer your fears. Courage is bravery, which I showed in my own story of courage. I defeated my fear.

“It made me feel free.”
Nicole Resnick
Leila Huff, Teacher
Buckingham Browne & Nichols School

Courage doesn’t mean that everything is easy, or that you accomplish something without difficulty. In fact, it means going through something very difficult, sticking with it and not giving up. I believe that everyone is courageous deep down because it’s the everyday situations that others may not notice which make us brave and courageous. My mom, dad, brother, and friends are all courageous. I am too. A way that I express courage on a daily basis is through my OCD, or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

OCD isn’t uncommon, but it makes ordinary life much more difficult. Sometimes people relate OCD with having to make things perfect, but that’s not what I have. I get anxiety, like worrying about my family or friends. To “prevent” this anxiety from happening, I have to go up and down the stairs or turn the lights on and off. Often, I do it in front of my peers: “What are you doing?” “What’s OCD?” Then I have to explain about OCD: “Oh, it’s a form of anxiety.” “What do you mean?” I slowly explain, as if I’m describing a simple thing like a piece of paper.

I sometimes get a look of pity. This makes a pit in my stomach because there really is no reason to feel bad. Sometimes people respond with an awkward, “Oh, okay,” and then we quickly change the conversation. I’ve always been a very happy cheerful person on the outside, not letting many people know how anxious I am feeling on the inside. Sometimes, people respond by saying, “Really? I had no idea!” When I was younger, I didn’t really understand why people would react this way; I thought I had done something wrong. The worst part is that I feel very worried or anxious about people that I love, like my family. Then my anxiety gets really high, and I barely have any power.

I’ve always wanted to just start over, and get back to my life without repeating things or worrying about everything. It is incredibly difficult when my family sees me struggling with OCD. There is a look of sadness, but also a look of disappointment that I’m not “fighting back.” It’s hard to know that people I am so close to believe that I can simply stop opening and closing doors, avoid certain spots on the floor, turn the light on and off, or stop “doing” OCD. I have recently been told by my parents that I will soon have to take medication for it, so I have been working extra hard to “fight back” or not to exhibit OCD tendencies. At school I try to think positively. At home, I try even harder. I was nervous to get help, but now I accept it.

I want other people to know that someone is always there for you; even a complete stranger can help, if you let them. But it’s still hard, and I still get met with, “What are you doing?” “What’s OCD?” and then a look of pity. Like I said at the beginning, it’s not about getting over something easy, but dealing with a difficult struggle. To try even though you might fail. Every day, I am faced with multiple anxieties and get overwhelmed. Every day, I work through them, I “fight back,” and my OCD hopefully gets weaker, too. That’s what I’ve been doing, and I really hope that others can do the same. I will continue to work on my OCD, but more than that, I hope others can get over their challenges successfully, because courage is a harder thing than most people realize. I admire people who take a positive step towards their goal. Courage may not be noticed by others, but it is a battle that you go through with your personal challenge, a fight that you do not give up. Everybody is courageous.

“I HOPE OTHERS CAN GET OVER THEIR CHALLENGES SUCCESSFULLY, BECAUSE COURAGE IS A HARDER THING THAN MOST PEOPLE REALIZE.”
When I was little, my mother noticed that I talked weirdly and my hands were shaking strangely. My mom knew before the doctor told her. She wasn’t shocked to find out that I have autism. I was three years old then. The doctor confirmed all her thoughts and questions. At the time, my mom and I lived in a shelter. The diagnosis changed our lives, because the doctors helped us find a better home placement for my autism care and away from the shelter. My mom felt that she had to do everything to help me and provide for me.

When I started school, I went to a special class. What I thought was very hard was learning how to read and being able to connect. Autism affects my thinking skills and makes it harder for me to understand what other students might find easy. Every time I think too hard, I get even more confused. I have to ask my teachers, my friends, or my family for help so I can understand better. My classmates bully me every time I share with them about my difficulty. They do not know what autism means. They just laugh and make fun of me.

I don’t understand why they would treat me like that. Sometimes I stand up for myself. For example, if someone is bullying me, I tell them to stop and I try to explain to them why I have difficulty. I would also tell the teacher and ask for help. I would tell my classmates what autism means and that autism is a condition I have that makes it more challenging for me to learn and be with others. I’m trying hard to be better each day. I understand what bullying means, and I do not want to let that take me down.

When I get in trouble and the teacher comes to me and says, “Look at me,” I cannot look at my teacher because it’s kind of hard. It is difficult for autistic people because we see strangers’ faces as scary and it makes us look away. It takes courage for me to look into my teacher’s eyes and try to fix it. I work hard in school so I can get good grades and improve my learning every day. Autism is giving me strength. A special class is a place for people who have special brains; for example, I have autism and I am in a special class. I see autism as my courage and my strength to be better each day.

“They do not know what autism means.”
Hannah Haddadi
Merrill Hawkins, Teacher
The Park School

Courage to me is not about not being scared and not having fears, but being scared and doing something anyway. It is not always having strength and being strong, but going on even if you don’t think you have the strength. Courage means pushing through the hard times, even when it seems like you can't. To different people it can mean many different things, but that is what courage means to me.

I was dancing and jumping just like always. I felt no different than I had a week before, but I was different. I had been really thirsty and really tired. My skin turned pale, and I got skinnier. I hadn’t noticed much of a difference, but my mother did. I was hungry a lot, and I weighed so much less.

My mom knew something was off. When she talked to my nurse the tone in their voices told me something was wrong. The next thing I knew, my mom was driving me to the doctors while trying to explain what was going on. The doctors ran some sort of test, then told us to go straight to the hospital. When we arrived we got taken to a small room with a table for me to sit on. They gave me a movie to watch, but it didn’t calm me down. I could feel the rubber band becoming tighter. My mom and I got left alone so the doctors could talk. Her smile calmed me down and her jokes made me laugh. When the doctor returned he spoke directly to my mom and told her that the test had come back positive for type one diabetes, and that I would have to spend the night. Then the doctor told us that they were short on rooms, so we had to sleep in a surgery room. For the first few days nothing really happened. Occasionally the doctors would check in, but mostly I explored the toy room, watched movies, and played with the hospital bed, making it go up and down and up and down. My brother, who was two at the time, came to visit and then peed on the floor. I was really missing school. My mom had to live off of the Au Bon Pain in the lobby, while I was given hospital food. Finally they moved us to another room.

After days of what seemed like nothing, they brought me and my mom to a room with a round table that had all these needles and bottles on it. The doctors taught both me and my mom about living with diabetes and what it means. The doctors had been giving me shots every time I ate and it was really annoying. My mom made sure everything was okay and placed an order for the things we would need. I knew this was going to be hard. I would have to make a lot of changes, and that was scary. We stayed at the hospital for one more week so they could teach us how to use the needles and help us understand. I got out right before my birthday and got to go back to school.

From that day on I have had to deal with diabetes every day. My mom and I found ways of making it easier for everyone. Diabetes isn't easy, and it will never be, but courage means understanding that and keeping going. I need help every day, but I know now that that's okay.

“I WOULD HAVE TO MAKE A LOT OF CHANGES, AND THAT WAS SCARY.”
Sebastian Forero-Tarquino

Sylvia Rua, Teacher
Curley K-8 School

Being deaf is a struggle. I am basically the only deaf kid in my class and it has its problems. I constantly do not understand or hear what people say. I have to get my FM (a device that syncs up to my cochlear implants to help me hear better) to help me hear most things in school. Even with the FM, I sometimes still can’t hear others. It kinda sounds muffled sometimes. It’s annoying when you can’t hear people and then they say, “Never mind,” because I couldn’t hear them. This can be frustrating because I want to hear what they have to say! Also, I often miss something my teacher and/or partner says during class, and I need them to repeat and repeat again!

Being deaf slows me down. It makes me have more responsibilities with the FM and the cochlear implants. For example, I constantly have to charge it. I also have to sync it up to my cochlear implants during assemblies. Sometimes I have to sync it for other situations as well. Throughout the day, I have to go to my homeroom to get the equipment. I need to return to my homeroom after lunch and recess.

Plus, I have even more equipment to worry about. Once someone stole the cable for my iPad, so I couldn’t charge it. People in my class say that I think I am better than them, just because of the FM and iPad I recently got. The iPad is for taking pictures of things we need to write down. If I’m writing I might miss something the teacher says, so I need to read their lips to help me understand what they say. I have Safari and other default apps, but I can’t download games, because the iPad is for school purposes. Other students say, “Ooh! Sebastian is using the iPad during school!!” Sure, I use it to read memes sometimes, but only during free time.

I know I have courage to endure more responsibilities and the disabilities of being deaf. My mother says, “It’s not a disability; it is a challenge.” I have the strength to keep going with my disabilities and continue my life because I continuing learning and making friends, which makes me happy...most of the time.
Chase Bell
Therese Evans, Teacher
South Boston Catholic Academy

Courage in my life is trying to live with the pain of having a hearing loss. Having a hearing loss is hard, just ask the many kids in the world who have it. I have had a hearing loss for my whole life, and it has been really hard. But I manage to deal with it. The reason my hearing loss gives me courage is because it makes me think: would anything be better if it changed me and made me different than what God gave me?

When I was little my hearing was not as good as some kids, but my parents helped a lot by bringing me to an otolaryngologist, who is a hearing loss doctor. One of the reasons I go to the ENT (Ear-Nose-Throat) doctor a lot is that my hearing can get worse. I have already lost all of the hearing in my right ear. Every time my hearing is tested I have to be brave because I know there is a chance it could have gotten worse. I am so thankful that it has stayed the same for a long time, and I hope it stays that way.

Another way my hearing loss has given me courage is that I look different when I wear my FM system. An FM system is like a miniature radio station operating on special frequencies, and I put a hearing piece in my ear so I can hear the teachers better. The reason I say I am different is because in my school nobody else has a hearing loss. Sometimes I feel self-conscious wearing it, but I have learned to fit in and make friends. If someone isn’t your friend because you don’t hear well, they probably aren’t a good friend anyway.

I have to start in a new school next year, so I will have to use my courage to explain my hearing all over again. I know I can do it, but I would be lying if I didn’t say I wish I didn’t have to.

“I know I can do it, but I would be lying if I didn’t say I wish I didn’t have to.”
Valereen Dejesus
Aaron Cohen, Teacher
Jackson/Mann K-8 School

Courage is one of those words that can have different meanings to different people. To some, it means sacrificing yourself for the greater good, while others say it means facing challenges and difficulties head-on. To me, it means finding the good in yourself and in the world.

I was born with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), a mental disorder that causes a lot of things to happen. I can hardly focus in school, I have a lot of extra energy, I act without thinking things over first, and one of the symptoms I have is depression.

Since I couldn’t focus in school, I took a medication that was helping me with that. I was getting great grades then, like honor roll, and my parents were very proud of me! But the year I came to my current school, the Jackson/Mann, I stopped taking that specific one. At first, nothing bad really happened. My grades were fine and I wasn’t feeling sad or anything negative, but around the end of the fourth grade year, my grades were getting worse and worse.

When fifth grade started my grades were even worse, and I was starting to feel very discouraged. I was trying my hardest to focus in school, but I just couldn’t do it! It was like my mind had another mind of its own. My teachers were pushing me to try to do better, so I said I would and could, but that was a white lie.

Of course, at this time I was browsing the internet a LOT. I was looking at average things, like funny videos or memes and such. But the internet is a very big place, like the world, and there are bad things everywhere. I was seeing the true colors of some people, people discriminating against others for things like skin color, nationality, preferences, and everything! At first, I didn’t care at all, I said to myself, “I am perfect the way I am and their negativity won’t hurt me!” But as time went by, I was starting to focus on just the bad things.

I was thinking a lot of how people would love to hurt others just because they are a certain religion, or want to destroy every citizen of a country, for no reason at all! Most of the people saying these things had never met a person from the group they were hating. They just said these things, and I could never understand why. I had seen a lot of things about my race, which was making me kind of self conscious, and my grades weren’t exactly helping.

School was one of the things making me feel the worst. My grades were failing now, and the end of the year was right around the corner, so grades had closed and there wasn’t very much I could do. Once the sixth grade year had started, I was feeling basically the same, maybe even worse.

I was taking a different medication now, which was supposed to help me not feel sad, and another one to help me focus in school. The one that was supposed to help me focus wasn’t working. I did not say anything to anyone, because I did not want to seem like a super needy child that couldn’t solve any problems themselves. So the school year continued, but my grades were getting worse and worse and I was losing my self respect. I was still thinking about the terrible things happening in the world, mainly politics and such. I still wasn’t saying anything to the people I should have told, and I felt like this was how I would feel forever, that I had no future and that I was not going to be a valuable member of society. I thought I was worthless, and I told myself that everyday. One day I couldn’t take it anymore.

Eventually I was tired of keeping all of my feelings to myself, and I had to tell someone. I told my mom and she was very understanding. Once I got all of my feelings out I felt a lot better. I started thinking more positively, and I was focusing on the good things in life. I didn’t care anymore about the people who were crude and closed-minded, I was a nice person and that’s all that mattered. As for my grades, I was trying my best and that was good enough. My point is, never forget about the good things in life and yourself. You’re trying your best and that’s all that matters, and if you’re feeling down, talk to someone. Things will get better.

“My point is, never forget about the good things in life and yourself.”
Lara Sontag-Campbell
Amy Donovan and Amy Higginbotham, Teachers
Dennis C. Haley Pilot School

Courage to me is when you are going through a hard time and not giving up on yourself physically and mentally. It can be anything, from almost dying to standing up to a bully. I had to show courage when I found out I was a dyslexic, by learning how to accept it.

“Another doctor’s office! We have been going to one almost every day for 4 months.” My mom told me this would hopefully be the last, but I had been going to a different doctor’s office to take a test almost every week since Christmas, and it is early September of the next year! Ugh!

Squeak. I heard the door open and the doctor call my name. “Laura.” He had said my name wrong, but I still knew it was me. I waved my mom goodbye and headed in. As I walked in I knew where to sit because all the offices are about the same. There were usually “Winnie the Pooh” stickers all over the light yellow walls, with a little red and green plastic table, like the ones you would find in a daycare. There was another table next to the big metal and wood desk, covered in lots and lots of unknown cluttered papers.

The doctor told me where to sit, which was the little plastic desk of course. Then he handed me a booklet and told me to read the first 17 words out loud to him. They were very simple words like dog, to, was, why and cat. I looked at them and all I saw was jumbled up and floating letters. I had no idea what any of them said, but he told me I still had to try. Once he realized how bad I was doing, he went out to go get my mom so she could see how I was doing. When the doctor got back he gave me a new set of words, again easy ones. Again, I saw jumbled up floating letters but tried reading them. I was completely wrong and my mom and the doctor exchanged nervous looks. He asked me to sit outside for a minute. Twenty minutes later, they finished the conversation as they came out. Then he told us to go home.

We got home and my older sister Emelie and I went to go play dolls in the living room. Later that night, when I was lying in bed I overheard my parents talking about me. “I really don’t know what we can do about her. Maybe we should pull her out of school and homeschool her, or just stop school overall,” my mom said. Then my dad reassuringly told her that we were getting results the next day and would go from there.

The next morning I heard my mom and dad talking to the doctor. All I could hear was my mom responding, “Yes, Yes, OK.” All day my mom made phone calls. Later that night, as we were turning on the TV to watch a movie, but before we picked one out, my mom, dad, and older sister Emelie looked at me and told me that I was dyslexic, and that I would always have dyslexia, but it was not that straightforward. My mom was telling me all these weird things to help me accept the news, my entire body stopped, and a million thoughts roamed and flew around my head. All I did was stare. I could feel my heart beating inside of me at a million mph. When I finally took a breath I said, “It must be a mistake.” I had a lump in my throat like I was going to cry or throw up or something. My mom told me it wasn’t.

It’s been four years since then and I am still learning to accept myself with my dyslexia, so if you are ever going through a hard time, realize that it might be hard, but you can do it. Use your courage and believe that you are special. Believe in yourself. Now that I have learned to accept myself I have also learned how to share that I have dyslexia, and to explain what dyslexia is and how it affects me. This means I am using courage all the time in trying to tell people and trying to read aloud in public. Every day is a struggle, but I make it through. With Courage.

“Every day is a struggle, but I make it through.”
Fears are chains keeping us from our hopes. Courage is the strength in all of us that breaks us free.

I woke up smiling as my mother said, “Happy Birthday.” Her long black hair cascaded onto my cheek as she kissed me. It was April 8th, 2015, my ninth birthday. Over the excitement, however, a dark cloud hung on my head.

I was taking MCAS.

I got to school and walked up the stairs as my heart pounded. All of a sudden my head ached with pressure. I wondered, “Would I make it?” I remember my frustration entering the classroom. The walls had bright colors, but for me it was all gray.

Our teacher said, “Begin,” with a very deep voice. She always wore dark clothes and her hair in a ponytail so we could see her face. My hand shook, as I held back the tears. My frustration took over, and, paralyzed by fear, I stopped.

All I heard were pencils and papers in the background. All I could see was my answer booklet waiting to be written on. Its colors were bright red and white, while my name was written in bold black ink. Such a terrifying moment in my life.

I’ll be okay. Focus, just focus. Those two sentences and a deep breath kept my head in the game. I bravely made a decision. My grip tightened as I read the math problems, mostly story problems on multiplication that we had learned earlier. I held up my pencil and didn’t notice when 20 minutes had passed. It already had been half an hour. My earlier panic attack had wasted ten minutes; I knew I had to work hard. Still I couldn’t believe it – it seemed like five minutes.

“Time’s up,” I heard as I filled in the last bubble in the booklet. It took courage, but I have to admit I felt relieved in that moment. “Good job,” our teacher said smiling towards everyone. I noticed her eyes sparkled; she looked proud of us. After so much anxiety, somehow I was happy. At the end it all worked out.

I got home and my mom threw me a surprise party. She had cooked my favorite dishes. Family and friends joined us for lunch and chocolate cake. The hot pink and white balloons were beautiful. The pink frosting on the cake said, “Happy Birthday Yola.” My morning began worse than having to walk through a hailstorm, yet it ended better than ever.

My mom’s eyes sparkled when she saw my face light up. What she had prepared was huge for me on such a bad day. Believing in myself that day gave me more strength to be courageous.

“FEARS ARE CHAINS KEEPING US FROM OUR HOPES.”
Aidan McVay
Ted Doolin, Teacher
William H. Ohrenberger School

In my opinion, courage is standing up for yourself and not having someone else stand up for you. It’s true that standing up for someone who can’t stand up for him or herself is very important. Many people do not seem to agree with this, however. The idea of kids standing up for themselves seems to be constantly discouraged. If you were to ask someone what the best thing for a child to do when being bullied is, often they will answer that the child should tell an adult, not confront the bully him or herself, but just hide behind a grown-up. While this will solve the problem, it will not help the child later on in life.

My story takes place when I was even younger than I am now. I was in second or third grade. Currently, I am in AWC, or advanced work classes. But this hasn’t always been true. The way to get into AWC is to do well on a test called the Terranova. In the time that this story takes place I wasn’t in AWC. It wasn’t offered at the school I was going to at the time, and AWC didn’t start until fourth grade anyway. I was about two years ahead of the rest of my class in English and about three years ahead of them in math. This might sound like it made school more enjoyable for me, but instead, it made it miserable in so many different ways.

Probably one of the most obvious reasons that being a bit advanced made school hard was that I knew every single thing that was being taught. I knew how to multiply large numbers when everyone else was learning basic addition. But there was another problem, too. There were probably at least five kids in my class who made fun of me on a daily basis. It was mostly just the classic, “Nerd!” or “Get a life.” I guess everyone was expecting me to cry, tell a teacher, yell at them, or respond emotionally in some way. But I didn’t. I simply ignored them and let all the insults go in one ear and out the other, so most people just gave up. Anyone who didn’t wasn’t really getting to me, anyway, so I had nothing to worry about.

At first, you might think that this wasn’t really courage or standing up for myself, but in my opinion, it’s both. I can’t tell you how hard it was to resist the urge to respond by being rude, too. I just kept telling myself that acting like I didn’t care would be more effective, and it was. I stood up for myself and showed courage by taking matters into my own hands and proving that I didn’t need someone else’s help to get along in life. I mean, I still had friends, but if I needed to, I could fend for myself. And that’s how I stood up for myself and showed courage.

Of course, this doesn’t just apply to kids, even though it did in my case. Everyone has someone or something in their life that is a bully figure, and it doesn’t have to be a person. What’s important is that you stand up for what is right. If everyone did that, the world would be a truly perfect place.

“What’s important is that you stand up for what is right.”
The main word to describe courage is bravery. Being brave and/or confident is really important, since you could change someone’s life just by doing a small or big thing that requires confidence or bravery.

Let’s begin this essay with something courageous I’ve done in my life: dealing with being cyberbullied. You may ask, “What is cyberbullying?” Cyberbullying is getting bullied online. For example, it could be an anonymous person calling you names, or even a classmate just bullying you online. As a twelve-year-old girl who’s experienced something so bizarre in the past, it makes me sad that this still happens today.

This happened about two or three years ago, when I was only nine years old. I’ve been using my iPad since I was too young to have a phone. I was bored and decided to make myself an account on an app and post some pictures of myself.

She’s so fat. She’s so ugly. Nobody as ugly as her would have friends. She’s such a loser. She should kill herself. Hurtful and disgusting things were said to me by strangers, people I had no idea existed. It was just a simple picture of a nine-year-old who wanted to have fun.

I was turning ten years old, and that was when I wanted to give up; I wanted to hurt myself. People would call me lonely and useless, so I just started to believe the things these strangers would comment on my pictures. I was so young, but I knew I was depressed. It’s scary to think that I wanted to cause harm to myself, but it just went through my mind all day.

It was summer; I didn’t go outside; I didn’t play with my friends because I really thought I wouldn’t have any at this point. I stopped eating since the comments I saw about me being fat hurt me so much. My mother noticed that I would never come out of my room, not for food, or to use the bathroom. She would always come to my room and check on me, and I would just ignore her and not let her help me. She was super worried, and all I did was make her worry more about me.

Despite what was happening, I couldn’t bring myself to delete the posted photos. Sometimes I would go back to the app and read new comments saying the same things or worse. I knew it was a bad idea to keep reading, but I couldn’t help myself. I started to cry and I had so many questions going through my mind.

Why do these people hate me? What have I done wrong to make these people call me these horrible names? I was so confused about why this was happening to me. It took time for me to realize that people do not think too much about the bad parts in the things that they cause.

One day, my mom was looking through my iPad and saw notifications of comments saying the same mean things, or even worse things on the pictures.

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One day, my mom was looking through my iPad and saw notifications of comments saying the same mean things, or even worse things on the pictures.

“God... what is all of this?” she asked in shock as she looked through the comments and found out why I never spent time with my family, went outside, or even ate. She then went into my room to talk to me, and once she told me the things she saw coming from my iPad, I started to cry. I felt so scared knowing she had found out. I didn’t want her making such a big deal about it, so I had kept it from her.

It felt like she talked to me for 100 hours, telling me how scared she was and telling me that I should always tell her when I feel sad or receive rude and hateful comments on an app. But it was really only an hour. I learned in that moment not to hide my emotions so much.

This actually affects my life a bit today. I have become more anxious, nervous, and emotional during these years, mostly about school and sometimes about my family. I even worry about my future.

When I wrote, “Being brave and/or confident is really important, since you could change someone’s life just by doing a small or big thing that requires confidence or bravery,” that part is reflecting on how I was nervous to seek help, but I felt so brave after that talk with my mom, knowing I can feel safe and happy again.

Remember, if you’re getting picked on online or in public, please tell someone about it. Bullying is one of the most horrible things someone can do to somebody else. Please do not be afraid to ask for help.

“Please do not be afraid to ask for help.”
When I was in 4th grade I was mean to people. It might have been a phase in my life that I didn’t know was going on. I don’t know why I did it, but I did it anyway. One day when my friends and I were at recess, we saw one of my best friends. My friends didn’t know that she was my best friend, and they said that I should go call her a nerd. So we all walked over to her and called her a nerd. I felt really bad that I called her that, because she was my best friend, but I felt pressured by the others. I was afraid they wouldn’t like me if I didn’t do it. Before I could say sorry to my best friend, she ran away crying.

The next day, a group of people I have never seen in school walked up to me and said, “Why did you call our friend a nerd?” I said, “I don’t know—my friends said I had to if I wanted to be their friend.” Then they called me a bully. I didn’t like it when those people called me that, but I can’t lie—it was true. Later that day at recess, that same group came up to me and started to bully me. “If you don’t stop bothering our friend, then we’ll get you expelled,” they yelled.

It went on for a couple of days until one day I stood up for myself and told them to stop. Then they said, “Now you know what it feels like to get bullied.” At that moment I knew exactly what they were trying to say and why they did that. Then I ran as fast as I could to find my best friend. I finally found her and gave her a big hug and I whispered, “I’m sorry, I will change, I promise.”

The next day, my friends came up to me and said that we should go make fun of someone else. I looked at my best friend and I looked back at them and said, “No, I don’t want to. I am going to go with my best friend and stay out of trouble. You guys should be nicer to people, and you’ll realize it soon enough.” I left with my best friend.

Ever since that day I was nicer and I stopped bullying people. Every time I see someone sad, hurt, or getting bullied, I stick up for them or help them. I changed because of my best friend. I had the courage to change and to stick up for myself and others. Also, I knew that I was with the wrong group of friends, and I will never make that mistake again.

“I CHANGED BECAUSE OF MY BEST FRIEND.”
Lucas Kenneally
Scott Larivee, Teacher
Mary Lyon K-8 School

Courage is doing something you believe is right even when you have to struggle through your emotions and the possibility of pain. I found a quote from former football player and deceased Army Ranger, Pat Tillman: “Somewhere inside we hear a voice. It leads us in the direction of the person we wish to become. But it is up to us whether or not to follow.” What I understand from this is when you know something is going on that is not right, you’ve got to be the person you want to be. You want to be a good person, but you could be hanging with a bad crowd and they might lead you in the wrong direction. This is the moment that the voice is saying, “Be the person you want to be,” and it is up to you to follow that.

I play hockey in a cold, freezing rink, and I was the kid who was not physical and was terrified to get someone so mad that they would want to fight me. Then one game a kid on my team got punched right in the face. It looked so painful I felt like I was the one that got punched. This was difficult because I know I am not the person to step out of my comfort zone. I was someone who saw a situation that did not look good and would avoid it.

Until the time my friend got punched in the face, and I wanted to help him. Knowing my friend, I was not going to let him stay on the ground like that. This was the time I told myself “Get out of your comfort zone, Lucas, and stick up for your teammate!” I was faced with the difficult emotions of getting a penalty and hurting my team, but I could also feel the fear of getting my butt kicked. I paused for a moment and thought to myself, “Lucas, just go and shove him away from the scene.” So, I shoved my opponent away from my friend, to prevent something worse from happening.

I felt so strong and great afterward. I was no longer the bystander. I chose to stick up for my friend against a kid who was taller and stronger than I was. I stick up for my teammates all the time now and I am not afraid to be aggressive. This is my time for courage. You have to believe it is the right thing to do. I had so much emotion going through my head, and I had mixed feelings about doing what I did, but my friend was okay afterwards, so I knew I did the right thing.

After hearing Pat Tillman’s story, I felt connected to it in a way. He had to go through a lot of emotional times when choosing to become an Army Ranger and leave football, the sport he loved. He believed what he did was right, just like I did. The advice I would give to people is: step out of your comfort zone, do something you know is not something you would usually do, and do it because you feel it is right.

“I had mixed feelings about doing what I did.”
Sophia Doumas

Julie Scott, Teacher

Proctor School

Wide open in the end zone, I was wide receiver, ready to catch a potential game-winning touchdown. The quarterback aimed his gaze at me. I gave him a wave to signal I was ready, but then a flash of doubt crossed his face. He threw it to another target, one more heavily covered than myself, resulting in an interception. Quickly, that interception turned into a score for our opponents. We lost that game.

What is courage? Courage takes different forms in different people. It could be focus in a difficult time, independence when you need it, or facing your fears. To me, however, it is sticking up for and believing in myself when everyone else chooses not to. My courage is being authentic and being proud and true to myself, despite whatever obstacles may block my path.

I don’t know, and might never know, what made me feel so strongly about playing flag football, but maybe it was because ever since I was around eight or nine, I have loved the sport of football and everything about it. The voice of the commentators on TV. The click of the helmets. The sleek spiral of the ball when Tom Brady threw it impeccably. I believe it was this passion that inspired me to play it for myself, even though it was a male-dominated sport.

On day one of my flag football season, when my coach handed me a jersey, I had no idea that the experiences to follow would change my life. After I had all my gear set up, when it was time for our game, my initial reaction was to feel totally psyched. That overexcited feeling didn’t last very long. Only when our team started practicing for the first time together did I really feel the tension in the air. The atmosphere was heavy with doubt and discrimination, based solely on me, because I happened to be the only girl on our team. I knew I was capable of so much more than the boys thought of me, but I never got a pass because I was the apparent “deadweight” of the team. When the boys would talk about the highlights of a professional football game, I was the outcast, the helpless, unwanted nobody. Eventually I composed myself and my emotions enough so I could think straight, but after that I really didn’t know what to do.

Then the realization came to me that however hard everyone else was working, I would have to work twice, even three times as hard to be included. So I did. I set aside my fears of messing up, of not being accepted or even recognized. I put down my head, worked harder than I ever had, listened to coach, and didn’t let my other teammates’ rude remarks about me like “She’s trash,” or “She stinks,” get in my way, because my love of the game won over my fear. I kept telling myself that adversity should be a motive, not a wall. Just keep your head up. Rise up to the challenge.

What I learned from those first games was to hold my self-esteem up high, no matter what my teammates or adversaries thought of me, because I knew that if I let it get to me, then I was just going to slow down. I let my team underestimate me, because I knew if I did my thing, rewards from hard work would naturally follow. Because I listened to those voices in my head telling me not to stop, I’m still playing co-ed flag football. I’m still underestimated quite frequently by those who don’t know me, but my fearlessness has led me to keep going. After all, courage isn’t the absence of fear, it is looking your fears in the eye and not letting them stop you.

“Rise up to the challenge.”
Have you ever had the courage to make yourself a better player in a sport? In 2016, when I was in fifth grade, I was the worst player you could ever see! Over the summer, I went to the YMCA every day and improved a lot in my basketball skills. I improved so much that now I am one of the best players in my school!

In our school, grades six, seven, and eight play a game of basketball every day during recess. I had one friend, named Taaha, who was good at basketball. I played with those mini nets when I was around seven years old, but I still wasn’t good. Taaha and I were allowed to play basketball with the older students for the first few weeks of school; however, because of how bad I was, they stopped letting me play. I knew I couldn’t sit down and do nothing for the rest of the year during recess, so I decided that every recess, I would play with my other friend, Karim, in the park.

I did that for the rest of the year. On the last day of school, we (the fifth graders) couldn’t go to recess, because we had to rehearse for our graduation. Then, a few hours later, the real graduation happened. It was really fun. We mixed sodas, had slingshot wars, and made a fort. I left afterward and started planning my summer.

The first day of summer vacation I had to go to the YMCA, because my parents go there every day. I told my mom that this place was boring. She said I could sit on one of the chairs in the basketball court. I went to the third floor, where the basketball court was, and I sat down. Then, I started to look closely at everyone and how they played basketball. Bing! An idea hit my head. If I could practice every day on the court, I could possibly be as good as my classmates.

The next day, I found the ball I used when I was little, and surprisingly, it was in pretty good shape! I headed to the YMCA an hour later and started to play. I started by only working on improving my shots in July. I became strong at free throws, but still couldn’t shoot a three-point shot. Finally, in early August I could shoot a three-point shot if I ran a few steps. I knew it was a travel, so I still kept trying. In mid-August, I finally started to shoot three pointers, but for some reason, sometimes, the ball would go over the backboard. Then, I realized that the ball was too light. I didn’t sell the ball though, because my dad gave me that ball as a present on my sixth birthday. I went to Modell’s Sporting goods and bought the official NBA ball. When I returned to the court, I made nothing but the SWISH sound on one-on-ones.

On the first day of sixth grade, I played basketball with Taaha, the seventh graders, and the eighth graders. I played pretty well, but found out I couldn’t score a driving layup. At the end of the week, I returned to the YMCA and went right to the court to practice my layups. By Monday, I had perfected my layups. I also noticed that I was good at defense. A lot of people ask me how am I so good at defense. Here is the answer: I DON’T KNOW. All I do is focus on the ball and try to steal it after I have memorized a person’s patterns. Some people ask me: “How did you improve so much?” Well, I improved by practicing the whole summer on my weaknesses. There is only one weakness I can’t fix, which is that I AM TOO COMPETITIVE. It also shapes my character, and I have gotten into trouble because of it, but it isn’t such a huge problem. In fact, it actually has some pros, like not giving up. I just try improving myself in every area.

In conclusion, you should never give up. I became one of the best players after having been one of the worst players at my school. I practiced my weaknesses so that I could improve. I became better by striving. I showed courage by stepping my game up! You can do it too!

“I BECAME ONE OF THE BEST PLAYERS AFTER HAVING BEEN ONE OF THE WORST PLAYERS AT MY SCHOOL.”
DREXLER PIERRE

KAYLA KMETZ AND RITA FLYNN, TEACHERS
Prospect Hill Academy

I feel like people have different opinions of courage. Courage could be anything, big or small, just like Rosa Parks standing up for her rights in a bus. One small act of courage is like sticking up to a bully. In my opinion, courage could be anything that you did that was special. It could be the little things that count in life or the big things too. There is one time in my life where I showed courage, and I felt like it was the right thing to do.

It all started in summer. I always play basketball at the Saint Clement’s gym in Medford, and I would go five days a week. I would usually go with my sister and brother and my friends to see our old school, because it had just shut down due to money. I would wake up at 9:00 am just to go to basketball practice, and we would scrimmage and usually do shooting drills. Every year there are new kids that go, so I was happy that new kids would be joining us. By the time I was ready to go in, I saw some young kids playing basketball. People were just laughing at them and making fun of them. They were trying to play with the older kids, to prove that they were good at basketball. Every time they tried to play, there would be too many kids for them to join, so they would always play by themselves.

Then we had a scrimmage the next day, and we were picking the teams. There were a lot of players there, but not enough so the little kids could play. I was the team captain, and I got to pick my team, but I saw those little kids ask to play. After that I said yes to them, and they were on my team. We were in second place so we were going to the championship. We were down by seven points in the championship, and it was not fair because the little kids were too small to guard the big kids. Then we were all tied up. I had the ball and I was wide open when I saw the little kid wide open and his defender was guarding me. I passed him the ball at the three point line. He shot the ball, and I was nervous because I didn’t think that he would make it in, but the ball bounced three times on the rim and went in. I was so happy, and I was proud of him for taking the shot.

After that day the little kids on my team would play with the older kids. I felt like I showed courage because I did something that people didn’t want to do.

“I FEEL LIKE I SHOWED COURAGE BECAUSE I DID SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE DIDN’T WANT TO DO.”
Rochelly Silverio
Kristina Dolce, Robin Horgan, and Cullen Dolson, Teachers
Esperanza Academy

I went to a gigantic, noisy farm with my best friend, my little brother and my mom. First, we got ice cream. My friend, my brother, and I got cookies and cream and my mom got coconut. Then, we went to the back of the ice cream place and saw a lot of animals. There were cows, sheep, pigs, donkeys, chickens, roosters, and horses.

We found out later on that we could ride the horses. None of us had ridden a horse before. My best friend and I went on the horse, and we both got scared. My friend was more scared because she was afraid of heights, and the horse was tall. I went first, and I started to get used to it. Then it was my friend’s turn and she hesitated at first, but I told her that she would be fine. She finally got on the horse. She didn’t cry, but she was about to. When she finished riding the horse, she was really happy that she’d accomplished it and wanted to do it again! I thought that was really courageous because I was also a little scared, and so I knew how she felt. Also, she had never done anything like that before, so I thought she was really brave for doing it.

“We both got scared.”
When I was little, I used to go to my cousins’ house every summer and every day before I started school. One year their mother got a summer job at the Y so they started going to the summer camp there. When they started summer camp I was told I wasn’t going to stay at their house for the summer and instead I was going to the Murphy’s summer camp. I was heartbroken that I wasn’t able to see my cousins, and I thought about when we could see each other again almost every day.

The next time I saw them I tried to bring back old memories, but they seemed disinterested. I felt like a little part of me broke, because we had spent so much time together. It seemed most of our old memories and inside jokes were forgotten or discarded. When I got home I started to cry at the loss of our memories. We had done so much together, but they didn’t seem to care. For a while I was in a small depressive state, but then I said to myself, “Stop acting like it’s the end of the world!” and eventually, I did feel better about it. I decided to spend more time around friends and other family members to clear my head. It still creeps back into my mind every now and then, but I think about the new memories we made. I still get upset about it sometimes, but hey, people change, and you just have to go along with it.

Courage to me is entering change sadly, and sometimes alone, but coming out of it stronger than before! I showed courage by standing up for myself and accepting that everything changes and sometimes you can’t stop it. Accepting change means growth.

“Courage to me is entering change sadly, and sometimes alone, but coming out of it stronger than before!”
Abigail Arevalo Rodriguez
Jennifer Gayda, Teacher
Linden STEAM Academy

I woke up happy and excited. It was a special day at school. The entire fourth grade was about to perform in the auditorium. I felt so excited to perform. I am always courageous and I like to try new things.

But then something hit me. We got on stage, sat down, and started to play. I thought I started playing, but the tip of my mouth wasn’t even touching my recorder. I felt very afraid and scared to perform. I took one glance at the crowd and just froze.

Instead of playing, I pretended to play. When my classmates finished playing the first song, I was afraid that I would accidentally blow into my recorder and make a sound.

I looked up and saw my mom smiling at me. Then, after the applause, I felt that I had the courage to play. We started playing the next song, and I finally picked up my recorder and started playing. At that moment, I felt very courageous. I didn’t even realize that I was playing.

My little brother went to perform a few weeks after I did. He was so nervous, and I had to be a big sister and tell him to have courage. When it was time to perform he looked so scared, but I smiled at him and said, “Be courageous.” Then he smiled. His scared face turned into a happy face and he did an excellent job. I was so proud.

Courage taught me that if you are ever nervous, it is better to be brave.

“I took one glance at the crowd and just froze.”
“Buzzzz!” My mom went to her room to pick up the phone. My older brother was on the phone, and I overheard my mom talking to him about her job. She was saying how she had worked hard for her license to become a hair stylist when she was young. She was always talking to my brother about things when she was young and her life story. At the time I didn’t understand, but now that I am older, I do understand her life story.

I was four years old, and my mom was living at my grandma’s house. It was late at night and my mom was coming home from work. My brother and I were in my great-great-grandma’s room looking out the window. My grandma was outside, and the person inside of a black van gave my grandma a brown bag out the window. I asked my brother, “Xavien, why is grandma outside?” My brother said, “I really don’t know, Tatiana.” My mom came home from work, and my brother and I were sent to our rooms by my mom, because it was past our bedtime. As I was falling asleep, I heard my mom fighting with my grandma.

The next day my mom was packing our stuff. I asked my mom, “Are we leaving grandma’s house?” She said, “Yes.” So we left my grandma’s house and we went to a new home. I thought I was going to be here forever, but I wasn’t. I thought to myself, “Is this my new home? Am I going to see my friends again? Will I go to a new school? What is going on?” This was all going through my head, and I didn’t know what to do. What I should have known was that we were living in a shelter.

I found out later that my mom had shown courage, because she wasn’t afraid to leave my grandma’s, and wasn’t embarrassed by who she was. She got out of my grandma’s house because my grandma was doing drugs while my mom, my siblings, and I were in the house. So that’s why my mom left and went to a shelter.

She worked full time and raised three kids by herself. This took a lot of courage because she worked 24/7 every day providing us with food. She also spoiled us with all her love. She tried to not only work, but to spend quality time with her kids, and she took us everywhere in Boston.

My mom loves us deeply. She bought us so many things, and I knew that she loved us more than she loved herself. For me, my big brother, and my little sister, living in a shelter felt like home to us. For my mom, it felt like a safe place for her three kids. I lived in a shelter for about seven years.

Finally, my mom got out of the shelter, and I had to move to a new school. The school was very frustrating because all of the kids were mean to me, but the school work was just fine. My mom went to church, and she said to me, “Tatiana, God has said to me that my future husband is around the corner.” So my mom prayed, and prayed. Then one day my mom got married. It was so sudden that I didn’t even care anymore. My mom was pregnant and she had a baby girl. The baby’s name is Victoria. She is my half sister, but I call her baby sister.

My definition of courage is: never be afraid to do something that is right. Take a step forward and never ever look back, just keep on going and protect the things you love.

The lesson that my mom learned was to never be afraid to speak up for what’s right, even when your family member is ill or doing something wrong. The lesson I learned was to never let people take advantage of what you are. Be you.

“My definition of courage is:
NEVER BE AFRAID TO DO SOMETHING THAT IS RIGHT.”
Elieser Geraldo
David Russell, Teacher
McKinley South End Academy

Have you ever had to protect your mom? I have, and this is my story. Hi, my name is Eli. I am 12 years old, but this story happened when I was about six or seven. This story is about when my mom got beaten by my dad, and I had to protect her. I had to have courage to stand up to my dad and help my mom.

One day, it was a normal day. At least it seemed like it until I got home. Then I heard my dad screaming at my mom, and my brother was crying. I asked what was wrong. He said, “Dad hit me.”

So, I told my older brother what was going on. He burst through the doorway and screamed at my dad. Then my dad threw my big brother down the stairs. My dad closed the door, and we heard her scream.

My big brother sprung into action to help my mom. He got up and opened the door. He shot my dad in the back with a BB gun, and my dad was bleeding from his back. Luckily, that stopped my dad, and I was able to help my mom out of the room. She was very upset, but I hugged her and she stopped crying.

Ever since this incident, I felt sad and angry at my dad at the same time. However, I learned to stand up for people, especially family or people that I love. This was especially hard for me, because both people involved are my parents, and I love them both. It took a lot of courage to stand up to my dad, but my dad was hurting my mom and that was not acceptable. I love my family a lot, and I’m very happy we were able to move on from this incident.

My dad now regrets what he did then, and he’s living a better life. He’s respectful to women and wants me to be respectful also. I will never hit a girl or a woman.

“I WILL NEVER HIT A GIRL OR A WOMAN.”
What does courage mean to you? There are many ways people see courage. My way of seeing courage is being strong and confident, even when you feel like you are hated by many people or sad about something.

I lived with my dad when I was little. I remember all the happy moments. I remember when I was living with him, every holiday we would all celebrate together and we would laugh. I also remember when he came to my graduation in kindergarten, and how proud he was of me. In first grade, he would walk me to school every day and pick me up. He was always there. When I started third grade, he wouldn't walk me to school anymore. I had to start taking the bus. Every weekend, my dad would pick my brother up, and I would always ask him if he could pick me up, too. He would always say "another day," but he never did. I began to think that my dad didn't love me, even though I still loved him.

One day he met a woman and they started dating. She would always be nice to me, and she would treat me like she was my mother. On November 28, 2015 my dad and his new girlfriend got married. I felt so happy for them. But during the past few years, everything has changed. She has been acting so differently. She would give me attitude whenever I would speak to my dad in private. She didn’t care about me anymore. She started telling my dad not to see me anymore. I pondered why she would say this. I didn’t do anything wrong to her. I would always ask her if she had a problem with me, but she would always say no. My dad started spending less and less time with me, and I was livid.

I thought that I could stay over at my dad’s house for summer vacation, but I was wrong. I even found out that she told him not to attend my fifth grade graduation last year. Every time she sees me, her face suggests that there is a problem between us. If I want to ask my dad something simple such as, “Can you buy me new sneakers?” or “Can you pick me up?” I can’t speak to him in front of his wife, because she will interrupt and offer excuses. She will respond with comments like, “You already have sneakers” or “I have an appointment, so he can’t pick you up.”

She’s my stepmother, but I don’t identify with her as my stepmother. When she wasn’t married, she would invite me to go to church with her, but now, she doesn’t ask me anymore. In my mind, I’m always thinking, “Where did the old version of her go?” My mom always tries to placate me when I am upset. I feel sad because I worry that I will never spend meaningful time with my dad again.

I feel as though I’m losing somebody little by little, like my dad is getting farther and farther away from me. I want him to still be part of my life because without a dad, my mom would have to do everything by herself. If I could wish for one thing, my wish would be for my dad to stay in my life and to make great decisions. This relates to courage because, even though I’m still struggling through this difficult situation, I work hard to focus on my education and make sure I reach my goals.

“I FEEL AS THOUGH I’M LOSING SOMEBODY LITTLE BY LITTLE.”
I think courage is being your best self, no matter what the situation, and when I think of courage, I think of my best friend Dylan. Dylan and I first met in kindergarten. He was a generous and loving boy, who wouldn't let anyone bring him down. Little did we know that soon his life would change forever.

One day Dylan's mother was feeling sick. Soon she became severely ill, and was on the list for a lung transplant. Her lungs became clogged. With each passing day, she would hope to die. She would always love her family as if it was her last day on earth, and it soon would be. We'd all be in despair.

One day Arni, Dylan's father, came home from work ready to give his wife a kiss and pick up Dylan, who was at my house. He saw his wife dead right on the apartment floor. He rushed over to my house and wanted Dylan to sleep over so he could be safe. Dylan was having fun, but he didn't want to sleep over. Dylan kept on saying, “I want to see mom.” Arni figured that Dylan would have to know one day, and that day was today. He drove Dylan home and Dylan couldn’t believe his eyes.

Dylan was sobbing for the next few days. My mother and I would try to talk to him about it, but he would just push us away. He would sometimes go into long periods of isolation. He then started to see the positive things coming out of the situation. Then, one day he snapped out of it. He began to talk with me and my mother and wanted to be around people again. He was himself again, saying I love you or always finding time to hang out with us.

I think the best definition of courage is August Wilson's. He once stated, "Confront the dark parts in yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing." I love this quote, because it reminds me of Dylan's mother in heaven, with all of the angels. It also reminds me to always look on the bright side in every situation. It makes me want to overcome the dark parts of everything.

“IT MAKES ME WANT TO OVERCOME THE DARK PARTS OF EVERYTHING”
Winning, succeeding, being the best, overcoming, defeating. All pretty good words, right? But what about, trying? Or giving it your best shot? How about putting up a fight? We can’t forget those, because those all require courage. You know what also requires courage? Doing the right thing and making the correct decision. My story is an example of courage because I did what was right and my dad didn’t give up the fight to cancer even though he lost.

It all started about 2 years ago. My dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. I was in the 4th grade then, so I didn’t really understand. But by summer time I started to understand more. One day, we got some really great news. The doctors told us that my dad was clear from cancer. A few days later it turned out he still had cancer. I remember the night we found that out. My mom, my older sister, Ellen, and I were driving to hockey practice and my mom told us that my dad’s cancer was getting worse. My mom cried, so did my sister, but I didn’t. I was sad, but more mad and disappointed. My sister said, crying, “Why does it have to be us? What did we do for this?”

And I agreed.

Let’s go back to August 24, 2017. I, my older brother Frankie, Ellen, and little sister, Nora, were playing outside on a warm summer night. My mom and dad just got back from the hospital, and about half an hour later my mom came out and we all stood next to the tree house. My mom looked at us nervously and said, “Dad is not going to survive this cancer.”

And my heart dropped to the bottom of my stomach. We all cried, a lot. We went inside and sat with our dad. He gave us a little speech and one thing he said hit me: “Life throws a lot of curve balls at ya, and this one’s a real bender.” That got to me and I knew it meant a lot to all of us. Another thing that got to me was when my mom said, “I never understood why I was able to get such healthy, great kids, but now I do.” That reminded me of the moment when my older sister said, “Why does it have to be us?”

And now I really knew why. Now it’s September 11, and I just got home from school and was wondering where my mom was. When she came home, we left to go to the hospital to see my dad. He was completely out of it and hardly moving. I started to cry. He could barely speak and neither could I. Right there was when it hit me that he was most likely going to pass away that week. I knew he could hear me, so I didn’t break down and cry because I wanted him to know I was going to be okay. So all I said was, “I love you.” Then he moved his head up a little and I knew that meant, “I love you too.” Both my father and I showed courage at this moment, and I will never forget it.

Now it’s September 14, 2017. I was asleep at about 12:30 am when my dad passed. At 6:00 am my mom usually stands in my doorway and tells me to wake up, but I knew the second, that very second my mom took that second step into my room, I knew.
Madeline Brogen
Joanna Zajac-Medor, Teacher
Saint Patrick School

Courage. Courage can be so much or so little. Courage to me is not the lack of fear, but more so, the acceptance of fear. Fear of loss, fear of the unknown, there are so many reasons to be afraid. You cannot give up hope. Hope and courage go hand-in-hand. Hope is thinking things will get better, and courage is the strength to make them better. Letting go, however, is a solution when you give up hope. Has there ever been a time when you wanted to let go?

My grandparents dated since the ages of 17 and 19. They were married at ages 21 and 23. They loved each other and worked as a team for over 50 years. For example, my grandmother loved to shop for Christmas presents, but hated to wrap. My grandfather would wrap gifts at night while watching television. After my grandfather retired, my grandmother worked and he did the chores around the house. When my grandmother was nervous about driving in stormy conditions or at night, my grandfather would drive her to where she needed to be. That all changed nine days after their 49th anniversary, September 23, 2012.

Sometimes when my parents worked, my grandparents would babysit my siblings and me. On September 23, 2012, that is exactly what they did, but on the way home from our house, as my grandfather was driving as usual, my grandmother’s life changed forever. My grandfather had a heart attack, causing him to lose control of the car. My grandmother clutched the steering wheel for dear life, when she had an epiphany. My grandfather was everything to her...he cooked, cleaned, drove her to Red Hat Meetings; their lives were completely intertwined. She had the idea to let go of the steering wheel instead of holding on and keeping the car out of traffic. Steeling her nerves, my grandmother chose to hold on.

Later that night, reality set in for my grandmother that she now had to face her fear of being alone; the fear of having to relearn many of the day-to-day chores my grandfather did for her. She had to dig deep to find some sliver of hope. Over the last five years, that’s exactly what she has done. She has found the hope to move forward, and the courage to fight her fears. Sometimes she makes mistakes, but she survives, knowing that my grandfather is still with her in spirit. Each day, with the love and support of her family, she grows stronger and more confident, and as a result, she is mastering things that seemed overwhelming before.

Everyone is devastated by loss, but not everyone has to relearn how to live. When you want to let go, hold on tighter. You have to tell yourself, “I can do anything!” I am proud of my grandmother for accepting her fear and telling herself daily, “I can do this.” I lost my grandfather that day, but I thankfully kept my grandmother.

“When you want to let go, hold on tighter.”
The dictionary defines courage as the ability to do something that frightens one. I can agree with that, but I look at courage as the will to do something to help others, even if you are afraid. My courage was to get out of my mom’s car and cover my aunt Susie, so two people would stop hurting her. My mom has always told me to stay out of adult business, but my instincts kicked in and I had to help my aunt.

On this particular Sunday after my football game, we drove to my grandparents’ house to have lunch with them at Kelly’s. My aunt Susie greeted us as we pulled up, asked how the game was and what we were up to. We told my aunt Susie we were going to lunch with Nana and Papa. She asked us if she could join us, and my mom said it was up to my grandparents. As I watched my aunt Susie turn around and head towards my grandparents door, I saw an older woman pull my aunt’s ponytail and pull her to the ground. I immediately unbuckled my seat belt, opened the door, and ran to cover her. The woman and her daughter kept pushing my head and pulling my body to get me off my aunt, so they could continue to beat her up. As I lay there covering my aunt, all I could think of was protecting her and not letting these women hurt her. I did my best, but they continued to hurt my aunt and even my mom. My mom was only trying to help me. I wouldn’t get off my aunt until they fled. They fled when my mom said she had called the police.

I was quite shaken up by this situation, but physically okay. My aunt had to go to the hospital via ambulance. The police said I shouldn’t have gotten involved, and the two women beating up my aunt should have stopped the minute I came on the scene. Regardless, they said I had helped save my aunt as her injuries could have been a lot worse.

We had to go to court, and I had to have the courage to tell the District Attorney what happened, and to write down what happened. However, I didn’t have to testify in court as the judge and my mom felt I had been through enough. They gave us a temporary restraining order against the two women until the case went to trial, but I was afraid to walk around Charlestown, because I wasn’t going to let these women win, and neither were my mom and aunt Susie. We finally went to trial, and I had to go again and tell the District Attorney how I felt and what happened. I didn’t have to go into open court and testify, because both the judge and my mom agreed that was too much. They told me how courageous I was to help my aunt, and that I must love her very much. I wasn’t trying to be courageous that day; I was just trying to protect my aunt Susie, who has always protected me and taken such great care of me as a baby while my mom worked. I would never advise another kid to interfere with adult arguments, but I wouldn’t change a thing about what I did that day. I am glad I had the courage to help my aunt Susie.

However, I mustered up the courage to continue to practice and play, since no one was going to take that from me, and eventually I felt safe walking around Charlestown, because I wasn’t going to let these women win, and neither were my mom and aunt Susie. We finally went to trial, and I had to go again and tell the District Attorney how I felt and what happened. I didn’t have to go into open court and testify, because both the judge and my mom agreed that was too much. They told me how courageous I was to help my aunt, and that I must love her very much. I wasn’t trying to be courageous that day; I was just trying to protect my aunt Susie, who has always protected me and taken such great care of me as a baby while my mom worked. I would never advise another kid to interfere with adult arguments, but I wouldn’t change a thing about what I did that day. I am glad I had the courage to help my aunt Susie.

“I WOULDN’T CHANGE A THING ABOUT WHAT I DID THAT DAY.”
Tristin Pecevich  
Carolyn Miller, Teacher  
Perry K-8 School

My mom has told me this story many times because I wasn’t born when this happened. My sister, Sydni, is now thirteen, and she has survived brain cancer. It all started when my sister was born. When she was two months old, the doctors told my mom and dad that Sydni had a type of brain cancer called Immature Teratoma. My mom and dad were sooo scared and worried! After they heard the news, my mom would stay at the hospital with Sydni while my dad took care of my other sister, Tari.

Sydni’s first surgery was twelve hours long, and the doctor took out a lot of the cancer from her brain. Toward the middle of the surgery they thought Sydni was going to die because there was massive bleeding in her brain, and they couldn’t stop it. They tried many things and nothing seemed to be working, but then a miracle happened: they stopped the bleeding. She stayed in the hospital for many months and had more surgeries and chemotherapy. Although she survived all of that, she was left with a lot of brain damage.

Sydni can’t walk or talk the way I can, but she doesn’t let that stop her from being happy. I have learned that there are many ways you can communicate, even when you can’t talk with words. Throughout the years, Sydni has worked hard with therapists and others to help her communicate as best she can. Now she uses a machine that is really tall and has a computer on it. When Sydni looks at a word, the computer senses her eyes and reads the word she’s looking at out loud, so that we can hear what she said. Sydni has taught me a lot about being brave and happy despite her challenges. She is always overcoming obstacles.

Being Sydni’s brother can be challenging. I have to help out with bringing her on and off the bus, transferring her in and out of the house, operating her feeding machine, and anything else that I can do. At night, I help carry her to put her to bed. I also stay with her and watch over her when my family goes out for quick errands. My sister, Tari, and I work together as a team to do anything Sydni needs, and our biggest goal is to make her laugh and keep her the happy sister she always is for us.

Sydni has taught my whole family about courage because of her daily challenges and how she faces them. I think we are all courageous in our own ways, and I have met many families that have challenges like ours. I used to think that courage meant fighting in wars and being a hero, but I’ve learned that there are actually many definitions of courage. I think courage means always staying strong, even through the toughest times.

“I think courage means always staying strong, even through the toughest times.”
Courage means being brave. You know what I did to be brave? I spent four years in foster care and only got to see my family on Sundays. I know it is hard to be in foster care, but for me it was good and sad at the same time. I was sad every day, but then my dad started to go to a program for dads, so he could be a better dad. At first I was living in a very bad house. I was only in that house for 1 month, but there was a teenager in that house who always hated me. There was one day when I asked God if I could go to a house that speaks the same language as me, and then I did. I was happy then, and I was in that house for two years and got to see my dad almost every day. But I was still sad, because my brother was living in Worcester, so I could only see him some Sundays.

It took courage to ask my social worker seventeen times to bring my brother close to my dad. Being courageous was good because in about one more month I am going to live with my grandma and my grandpa and also my brother. Every Saturday, my dad gets to have a sleepover with us.

I also had courage by being brave when I visited my mom in the Dominican Republic, who I had not seen in many years. When I was there, I got my ears pierced and I dyed my hair black for the first time. I met my sisters for the first time in my life, and I also got to see how tall my friends have become after all this time.

After all of these experiences, this is what I have learned about courage. I learned that you should be brave and that crying doesn’t solve anything. I also learned that most people have courage by being brave, moving on, and talking to people. I would also say that if you are in foster care, don’t be scared or ashamed. Don’t let people bully you, because it hurts. If they bully you, tell the teacher. As Oprah Winfrey said, “The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate.”

“IF YOU ARE IN FOSTER CARE, DON’T BE SCARED OR ASHAMED.”
Ciera Samet
Colleen Clifford, Teacher
Beebe School

My definition of courage is doing something that is hard and scary.

The first four years of my life I lived with my birth family. It felt like there was always something bad happening. It was a very hard and sad place to live. In 2011, I was placed in a foster home. My foster mom was pretty mean to me. I didn’t think she really cared about me at all. There were other kids living in the house too, but no one seemed to like me except for one other girl my age. I couldn’t understand what they didn’t like about me.

Finally, I was matched with a family. My foster family was so excited about me moving out. I was excited too, but not the way they were. I went to go stay with my new family for one week. They decided that they didn’t want me, so I went back to my foster family. Two weeks later my social worker found another family for me. I was excited, but mostly I was scared. I was scared because I had been part of several other families before, and it didn’t work out. What if this time didn’t work out either?

The first time I met my Mom and Dad I was so scared that I hid under the restaurant table and I called my dad “mean” and my mom “ugly.” A few days later I moved in with them. It was scary, but I did it anyway. I had the courage to believe that they would be my forever family, and they are!

I was adopted in November of 2012, and I will never forget all of the fun and happy moments in my life over the past six years. I have been through hard things in my life, but they have all been worth it. If I wasn’t as courageous as I was when I got adopted, I would be a totally different person than I am today.

“It was scary, but I did it anyway.”
Courage Beyond Boston

A special supplement featuring essays from our national and international partners

The essays featured in this section were written by students participating in our national and international programs. They represent the universal nature of courage, and support our conviction that all people have the capacity to be courageous.

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum’s Global Initiative

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum began working with international partners in 2007 in response to a growing interest in implementing an accessible, proven curriculum. To date, the program has been taught in 16 countries, including Belize, Pakistan, India, Lebanon, Cambodia, China and Yemen. This list continues to grow, as our organization forms partnerships with schools and learning communities across the globe to engage students in the reading and writing process, while empowering them to discover, recognize, and celebrate the courage in their lives.

This year, we are honored to continue our partnerships with The Cambridge School for Cambodia, Maw Volunteers in Yemen, the Personal Development Institute of Mongolia, The American School in Barcelona, and Dr. Marcia Harris and the six schools in Belize. We are grateful to each of these partners for their compassionate work with teachers and students in their respective countries and for sharing in the vision of The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum.

We welcome any organization wishing to work with The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum. Recognizing that the stories of courage from children across the globe enrich the educational experience for all students, we seek to share our materials and offer educational opportunities for children outside of Boston.

Courage in My Life National Essay Contest

The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum proudly hosts the Courage in My Life National Essay Contest, open to students in grades 5-8 in the United States. This program engages students in the reading and writing process, while encouraging young people to write about personal experiences with courage.

We are proud to share inspiring essays written by courageous students from across the United States in the 27th volume of The Courage of Children: Boston and Beyond, including our national essay contest winner, Rehma Saeed from Beverly Hills Academy in Beverly Hills, MI and honorable mention candidates Kayla Stevens and Sydney Lane from Heritage Middle School in Ringgold, GA.

All schools that participate in our national program are given access to teaching guides and online resources. We encourage participating schools to deepen their experience by exploring and implementing our sixth grade curriculum, and we continue to offer support and guidance to make this possible.

For more information about The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum and our programs, please visit www.maxcourage.org
I was sitting with my best friend, Kyleigh, doing vocabulary, and my teacher, Mr. Costa, was talking to me about a word on my vocabulary list. Then out of thin air he was stuttering. I thought for a second he was messing with me. But he was not OK. All my classmates started to laugh at him. I told them to stop. My friend Kyleigh walked away to her desk. Mr. Costa walked towards the box of tissues, grabbed one and walked out of the room. Two minutes later he came back.

He was not himself, but I stood calmly. He walked towards the table where I was sitting, fell down, and hit his head on the table. Everyone was still looking at him like nothing had happened. I told Kyleigh to get a teacher. I rushed to the button that called the office and pushed it. They told me to tell everyone to leave the room. But I didn’t leave. I stood by his side. The paramedics came, and they said he was having a stroke. I saved his life, they all said. I went downstairs. And all doors had to be closed. Suddenly, I burst into tears. He is my favorite teacher. I went to this lady’s room because she wanted to talk to me about how I stayed so calm. I told her I don’t know. She told me that I was a hero.

As days and months went by, he recovered. I got a text from him. He told me how much he was thankful for having me as his student and that he will always remember me. I still go to that school to visit. Mr. Costa told me that he will be able to teach again in a year. I was happy for him. Now he’s a big part of my life, a chapter. Some people think courage is not a big deal, but it is. It’s your mark on the world.

“Some people think courage is not a big deal, but it is. It’s your mark on the world.”
What does courage mean to you? Well, courage for me means being brave enough and having the audacity to stand up to the people who are, and were, being racist towards me.

Being judged about how I look or my race is not just a thing that happens to me every once in a while, but on a daily basis. I am Cambodian, so I am judged because of my eyes and what other people in Asian cultures eat, wear, and do. People of a different race always make assumptions of what the Asian culture is like. They just sound uneducated and crazy with the things they say.

I am called out for my race and usually made fun of in school. I used to be this sweet little girl that always kept to herself, and then I kept getting made fun of because I was Asian. Some of the things said to me were like “Chinese girl,” “She has small eyes and can’t see,” “Her family eats cats and dogs,” “Go back to China,” and “Jackie Chan,” referring to the famous Korean actor. The rest gets even worse. I have been dealing with this all throughout elementary and now middle school. I’ve always tried to act like it doesn’t get to me, but truthfully, I hurt so much inside. It got to the point where I had to toughen up and build this hard shell, because I had enough of it. Then I finally stood up, with enough courage, to the people who kept making fun of how I look or what I did. I would ask them, “Why are you talking about me? You don’t even really know what my race is.” I used to try to ignore it and walk away, but when I did stand up for myself, it felt pretty good.

This part of my life shows courage because having to take all this judging and racism from someone is a lot, and then finally being able to stand up to them is a big thing. I think over time anyone can build up enough courage to stand up to the many people who have made fun of them for something that is not right. If I can do it, anyone can.

“Courage for me means being brave enough and having the audacity to stand up to the people who are, and were, being racist towards me.”
It takes everything I have not to think there’s something wrong with me. Don’t let anyone tell you that there’s something wrong with you. Especially if you can’t help it, or you were born with it. Tell someone.”

I’m eleven. I have a sister named Paige, a mom, a dad, and pets. Normal, right? But for some reason EVERYONE talks about my eyes, and how they’re crossed. I’ve dealt with this my entire life! One boy younger than I am told me I have “googely eyes,” and another one said that having them was a disability. It’s not, but needless to say I spent the rest of the day in the principal’s office crying. I didn’t see the problem with it, but apparently everyone else did. I began to think that there was something wrong with me, and that it was my fault for being this way.

I was sad. It hurts because they don’t know that I was born like this, and that I’ve had THREE surgeries to try and fix it. They don’t know the feeling of waking up to immense pain and tears, not being able to see for a MONTH and a half, and having it hurt when you try to open your eyes.

It’s taken me some time with my friends and family telling me that there’s nothing wrong with me to realize there’s not. I’m special, and I like it that way. This is my type of courage, and I hope it can be yours, too.

“I’m special, and I like it that way.”
Some people think single moms and single dads must be helpless without their soulmate, unable to do anything like take good care of their children, pay rent, or pay bills, and will probably never be able to get up on their feet. People often assume that single parents just wasted their time and energy over the girl or man that left them; that they must be weak, that they have no courage and need help with everything. The truth is that some parents do think about their children’s future and how they’re going to survive, so that their children can thrive, too. One of those caring, hardworking parents is my mother.

Despite what some people might say about single moms, my mother is the bravest, most courageous woman on Planet Earth. I can still recall when I was four or five years old, and my mother and father broke up, for whatever reason. My father left us with absolutely nothing—just a two-bedroom apartment and a pile of responsibilities. My mom cried and cried for nights and days; over and over I’d hear her asking my dad to help with rent, or buy us a little food, but it didn’t do any good—he refused to help at all. At that point, my mom made up her mind. She was on her own now, raising my younger brother and me alone. My dad simply wasn’t going to help us; so she never called him again.

I can’t imagine the courage that decision took and how hard it must have been for her to focus on finding some way to get back on her feet, with so much stress on her. But that didn’t matter to her. She was our mother and she’d do anything to take care of us, support us, and feed us. She worked hard to find a job to earn a little more cash, but every time she applied for one, she couldn’t have it, because she was an undocumented immigrant (which means she didn’t have the right paperwork that would allow her to get a job legally). Her immigration status made all our problems worse, because as we found out, if she was caught, she could get deported. That was a very scary thought. I’d already lost my father—the last thing I wanted was for my mom to be taken away from me, too.

Meanwhile, a couple of months passed, and during this time my family was basically broke. We had to borrow money from family and friends sometimes, to buy food or help to pay the bills. My mom never considered taking two jobs, though, because she knew that she needed to spend time bonding with her children. Even though two jobs would’ve helped a lot, kids our age need their mom home with them sometimes.

Mom’s solution was to find bargains and spend money very carefully. She was never wasteful! For example, most of our furniture came from garage sales; if it looked clean and was in good condition, we would take it. We have a table that we got that way, and with a little paint, it looks fantastic now. Even my bed came from a garage sale. Mom got some clothes for my brother and me by shopping at the flea market; sometimes we got clothing donations from church. My mom would never let us leave the house with ragged clothes on, because she was afraid that other kids might bully us. So, with a little bit of her savings, my mom would take a rare trip to the mall to get my brother or me a pair of stylish shoes, or a brand-name shirt, or pants that wouldn’t be picked on by any mean kids at school. Saving money was important to our survival, so our family never went to fancy restaurants or expensive vacations. That was rough at times, but 2013 changed our life.

My mother worked hard, and she finally found a job that paid her more, so that before very long, she had saved so much money that we bought a better house! After that, I never had to buy my clothes, toys, or furniture from places like flea markets ever again. Our family’s life was changing in an awesome way! I went from being broke, thinking that I was always going to only be able to look at nice clothes and fancy stuff from a distance—from being that kid—to being someone who can shop where everyone else does, and not be so worried about money all the time.

Overall, it truly may be said my mother is the strongest mom to breathe or set foot on this Earth. Because my mother was so strong and determined, because she was brave at a time that she needed to dig deep inside herself to show courage, my life has changed, and I’m so happy it did. I came from having nothing to having everything that I need. I thank my mom to this very day for not abandoning us, for leading us to the greatest future my siblings and I can have, for always putting her best foot forward, and for showing me how to never give up. My mom is the most courageous person I know.
Andrea Orellana
Ashley Pereira, Teacher
Normandin Middle School, New Bedford, MA

Writing this essay is already an act of courage for me, because I was unsure of how I have been courageous and didn’t know what to write. I took my time, really thought about it, and I realized that both my mom and I have needed to be courageous since I was born.

As a young child, I lived in Boston with my mom and dad. Unfortunately, my mom and dad had some major problems. When I was about three or four years old, my mom and I ended up having to move from Boston to New Bedford. Because I was so young, I didn’t quite understand what was happening, but now that I am older, I understand very well.

When my mom and I moved to New Bedford we didn’t have anything, and for a long time we lived in a homeless shelter. The people at the shelter were so incredibly kind. However, despite their kindness, my mom would cry at night. Sometimes when I would watch her, I would start crying too. It was sad to see her cry and all I wanted was to make her feel better. When these times would occur, I would tell my mom that it would be okay. We needed to be strong and have faith and courage.

Soon after, things started to turn around. We were moved to housing and my mom was able to find a job. However, even though she was making a little bit of money, we didn’t have much, and I could not have things that I wanted like many of my peers could. Students would make comments about my material possessions, but I didn’t care. I was strong enough to know better, and all I wanted was to see my mom happy. She wanted the same for me as well. We were strong and courageous together.

I am twelve now and things are MUCH better. My mom and I live in a house of our own. She blessed me with a beautiful and silly little sister, Allyson. My mom and I showed courage because we pushed through the difficult times together and it made us stronger, especially mentally. Sometimes all you have to do is find the courage to push through and believe things will turn around. We still live this way today and I am confident that we will remain this courageous for days, months and years to come!

“My mom and I showed courage because we pushed through the difficult times together and it made us stronger, especially mentally.”
Presley Silva
Stefanie Machado, Teacher
Keith Middle School, New Bedford, MA

There are many different definitions and different meanings for the word courage. It’s not easy for me to pick just one. I guess if I had to, the most appropriate would be that courage is sacrificing everything for the people you love.

A perfect example of this to me, is that of my dad. My dad’s life hasn’t always been easy or without challenges. Ever since I can remember, he’s always had the most courage of anyone I’ve known and faced things head on and with dignity. His life isn’t just made up of a couple of things or highlights, but he’s had two important jobs in his life that I believe define his courage.

My dad was a police officer for five years before joining the Army. When he was still an officer, he would be sent out at night to catch criminals and keep people safe. I remember my mom talking about how one night he was almost shot, but he quickly tackled the man and arrested him. I know that he was almost stabbed once and was stuck with a needle another time. His police car was hit several times while he was inside of it. He never singled anyone out for anything, and always looked for the good in others.

My dad joined the Army after being a police officer. While my father was in the Army, he was very respectful and always followed orders. I know the first time he went to Iraq, he didn’t have to go but they needed him. So, he left his family and the safety of his home, to do the right thing and make a difference. His work ethic, loyalty, bravery, and everything else about him was respected. He got hurt there, but kept going and never quit. The second time he went he did jobs that weren’t his specialty, and anything else they asked. He faced danger every day and every night, both times he was there, and didn’t know if he would come back home. I know he was hurt once again, and had many close calls, yet he never gave up and did make it back home to us.

Today, my dad is retired and can’t do as many things as he once did before. My dad has always loved us and put us first. I know he always will. I see courage in my dad every day, even when he is in pain. I hope that I always carry on his example.
The first time I ever showed courage was when my sister Courtney had a friend she talked to everyday. Courtney thought of her as a sister, and so did I. The next day my sister’s friend, Jaylan, told my sister that she likes girls, and then my sister started to like her more than as a friend.

Courtney really wanted to ask Jaylan out, but she was scared of how our mom would act or what Jaylan would say. After school our mom would wait for her across the street. When she got in the car, Courtney was mad. Mom asked her what was wrong and she said, “People in my class are bullying me.” My mom asked, “Well, why are they bullying you?” And she did not answer.

The next day our mom asked me what was wrong with Courtney. I said I didn’t know, but I really knew. I knew everything that was wrong with her, but I did not want to tell mom, because it was not my business and my sister would get really mad at me.

The next day I wanted to talk to my sister about telling mom that she likes girls. I was worried that if I went in her room, she might throw a book at me. But I thought that if I did not go talk to her, she would have to deal with all of Mom’s questions alone. I decided to help her with Mom and Jaylan.

I went to Courtney’s room and luckily she didn’t throw a book at me, but I saw her crying. I asked her what was wrong. She said, “Life.” I told her that life can be about a lot of things, but whatever happens I will be here for you, no matter what.

Later, she told me what happened. She went in mom’s room and told her everything that was going on. I was happy for her, and she was happy for herself.

Then I said, “Now there is only one thing left for you to do.”
“And what would that be?” she asked.
“Well, aren’t you going to ask Jaylan out?” I asked.
She went to her phone and called Jaylan. She asked, “Do you want to go out with me?” And Jaylan said, “Yes, 100 times yes.”
Showing courage made our relationship stronger.
Kiara Watson  
Linda Reed, Teacher  
Henry Lord Community School, Fall River, MA

Have you ever wondered if there was something wrong with you because of someone else’s actions? When I was little, my dad barely acknowledged me for some unknown reason. I felt like I didn’t matter to him and that he didn’t love me. He was never like that with my brother, just me. When he left, I thought it was because of me and that he didn’t want to be around me, but I’ve learned that’s not true. I don’t make people do the things they do; it’s they who make the choice.

Ever since I was a baby, my dad has been in and out of my life. Each time he left, he would just shut us out. No calls. No visits. Nothing. I kept telling myself that he’d come back or answer our calls. I got my hopes up and was upset because I believed he would change, but it wasn’t my fault or anyone else’s fault. He made the choice to not come back for months. I didn’t understand that before, but I do now.

Every time he came back, I would jump into his arms and yell, “DADDY!!!” and give him a huge hug. He would greet me quickly, and disappear into my brother’s room to play video games. That made me upset because he never spent time with me. I would always just sit in my room or hang out with my mom. He would occasionally watch television with me, but that’s about all of the affection I got from him. It really hurt that he spent all his time with my brother.

I grew accustomed to him not paying attention to me. I started to not feel any emotion when he left and reappeared. I would hide my emotions and let them build up inside me. I would pretend to be excited to see him when he came, but I knew it was pointless, because I’d barely see him anyway. I became so used to this that whenever he did come to spend time with me, it seemed strange.

After a while of him disappointing me, I began building barriers to protect myself from being hurt. I would push him away when he did try to spend time with me, and our relationship got so bad that it didn’t bother me anymore when he left.

Today, things are sort of still the same, but we are trying to fix our relationship. We spend a little more time together, but I’m not sure about one-on-one yet. He continues to leave, but I don’t really feel any emotion whether he’s here or not. I don’t let him in too much, just enough to try and make the relationship a little bit better. I don’t want to be disappointed. I still don’t understand why he does this to us, but I’m not going to keep blaming myself when he does. It took a long time for me to realize that I wasn’t the one with the problem; I wasn’t the reason he left. I understand now that it’s not worth crying about or putting myself down. I needed a lot of courage and strength to get through this and I still do today. So, for me, courage means strength.

“It took a long time for me to realize that I wasn’t the one with the problem; I wasn’t the reason he left.”
A way someone might show courage is by standing up for someone who is unable to stand up for themselves. Standing up for what you believe in can be very difficult, especially when you are fairly quiet and shy. Although it can be a difficult act to accomplish, it is sometimes the best way to solve a problem.

This world is changing in many ways, as many teens and children are becoming more and more open to different types of people, such as immigrants and members of the LGBTQ community. Some adults are having more trouble adapting to this culture of accepting everyone, no matter who they are. Many people can be closed-minded and ignorant. I witnessed an adult having a difficult time seeing my grandma in her traditional clothing while we were at the mall, and despite all of my fears, I saw no other choice but to say something.

It was the middle of July in the summer of 2016. My mom, my grandma, and I were walking around the mall just browsing around. We had just stopped in front of the Polo store. My mom wanted to pick up a few shirts for my younger brother, and my grandmother and I decided to sit outside and wait. I was teaching her how to use her new phone. We were talking back and forth in our traditional language, Urdu, and out of the corner of my eye I saw an older woman staring right at us. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable, but I just tried to ignore her for as long as I could. I didn't want to bother my mom inside the store, so I sat close to my grandmother and hoped the lady would just go away.

At one point I got up to throw something away, and when I came back I saw the lady talking to my grandmother. I cautiously walked toward the two, nervous for what was about to come. My grandma doesn’t speak very much English, so I knew she wouldn’t be able to stand up for herself if something bad was going on. As I approached them I heard the lady say, “Why can’t you speak English? You’re making everyone around you feel uncomfortable.” I immediately rushed over and stood by my grandmother, who was visibly confused as to what was going on. I used to be very shy, and I wasn’t a fan of saying what was on my mind, but in that moment I had no other choice.

“I am sure you are the only one who is feeling uncomfortable. If it bothers you so much, why don’t you walk away? No one else is having a problem with it besides you,” I said as strongly as I could, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible. The lady gave me the worst look imaginable and replied, “Many people aren’t okay with what is happening in this world, and I am one of those people. I was just stating my opinion.”

As this conversation was happening, feelings of anger rose up in me and quickly replaced my feelings of fear. I knew I wasn’t supposed to talk back to adults, but I figured this was a case where it was okay. “When your opinion insults a majority of the world, it’s better to keep that thought to yourself,” I said, trying to keep the malice out of my tone. I wasn’t looking to argue; all I wanted was for her to understand that a majority of this world doesn’t speak English very well, and there was no need for her to insult someone about it. Thankfully, the lady left us alone and I sat back down with my grandma, who kissed my forehead and thanked me in Urdu. Although that was a day I wish never to relive, it was a very important day in my growth as a person. That was the day I realized that my opinion can help people, and I shouldn’t be ashamed or scared to share it. My own opinion and words prevented an ignorant lady from insulting my grandmother any further. Ever since that day I have never stopped myself from saying what I believed was right. I greatly appreciate that experience for making me grow as a person, but I also despise it, because of what my grandma had to endure, and because I saw firsthand that some people in this world really aren’t as accepting as they need to be.
Sydney Lane
Billie Carlock, Teacher

Heritage Middle School, Ringgold, GA
Honorable Mention, Courage in My Life National Essay Contest

Courage is being able to do something you are scared to accomplish. As a young teenager, it is hard to obtain enough courage to speak up for yourself, let alone speak to your peers. Sometimes you think it is better to stay silent, but you will only be hurting yourself. Having courage to speak up for your well-being is the most important aspect of being a teen.

I knew a girl, named Sage, who was having trouble. Being a teenager, you have to balance doing schoolwork, having good relationships with friends and family, and having a social life. Sage was having trouble keeping these things balanced. It felt like when she stepped on the scale, it broke in half. The girl had bad days and then worse ones throughout the week. Sage felt like she lost control of her life and lost interest in some of the activities she loved. She had to build up the courage to tell her mother about her depressing thoughts.

Sage walked down the stairs with a heavy chest and into her parents’ room. Sage’s mother was at her work desk as she walked in and sat on the bed. She was very frightened of the thought of being vulnerable and crying in front of her mother, but she did it anyway. That was the most difficult thing she did in her entire life. Her mother listened and talked her through her problems.

Sage had to build up a huge amount of courage that night to confess her feelings. Having emotional courage is the most important aspect of life. If you take the path of fear and anxiety, you will not go far. On the other hand, if you come out from under the covers, you can finally breathe. Sage’s emotional courage enabled her to admit that she was having difficulty living the way she was.

In brief, having courage does not always have to involve doing something dangerous or risking one’s life. Sometimes it’s being strong enough to save your own life. Your life cannot be stolen from you if you have the courage to take it back.

“Your life cannot be stolen from you if you have the courage to take it back.”
Kayla Stevens
Billie Carlock, Teacher
Heritage Middle School, Ringgold, GA
Honorable Mention, Courage in My Life National Essay Contest

Courage is having the bravery to face your times of grief and the strength to persevere through your obstacles. As a dancer, your teammates are your greatest friends, and your company is your family. I dance with a girl named Aubrey Milligan. She is one of the most beautiful dancers I’ve met and one of my toughest competitors. Although she can dance very well, she has a hard time comprehending some movements, and it takes her a while before she understands some pieces of choreography or formation. In school when she was little, she wrote letters backwards and misunderstood instructions. When her mom reached out to a doctor, he diagnosed her with dyslexia.

When we danced as Petites, she would be confused about direction, since we were performing on many different stages. Her teachers and friends were there the whole way to guide her when she was lost. When people drop out of a routine or we are in a time crunch we need to block the numbers and change spacing. Sometimes this can cause you to have to reverse the routine. When Aubrey had to reverse her dance, she did not give up, nor did she request to keep her place. She genuinely put effort into learning it, and she worked toward her goals.

She has a heart of gold even after being bullied and underestimated. She continues to do what she is so very passionate about. She has grown so much and is comprehending the routines so much better. She has the courage that many people don’t have. Because of her courage, she has conquered, and she has refused to stop doing what she loves.

“Because of her courage, she has conquered, and she has refused to stop doing what she loves.”
For me courage is to overcome being discouraged. Fear and despair have power against courage. Courage and “discourage” always fight with each other. Who will win is up to you to decide.

When do I get so discouraged? When I see someone who doesn’t deserve it getting more praise. When someone who didn’t labor but had empty talk gets valued more, or those who deceive get praised more than those who have faith. These moments are the hardest for me to bear.

When I was in first grade, I had an automobile accident and broke my ankles. In that moment, bad thoughts and pain overcame me. I heard my mother’s screaming, saw a thin light at the end of the street, and I lost consciousness.

When I woke up I saw a present with a note, “Get well soon! From your Grandpa.” I saw children playing outside from my window. My legs were plastered. I started crying. Why has this thing happened to me? What I have done wrong to receive such pain and suffering? In that moment, my father came into my room and told me, “Humans are the only creatures that can smile even though they are unhappy.” I didn’t understand the meaning of this and wondered why my father told me this.

I didn’t comprehend this because I was a child. The doctors advised me not to move my legs and I would always cry because of my pain and also when I saw my parents suffering to see my pain. I was crying every day. When my father came from work, he brought me books, fruits, and other sweets to console me. A year later, little by little, I was recovered.

It is really interesting that I was drawn into playing soccer even though I had problems with my legs. My parents strongly opposed me doing this. But, I had developed such passion to play soccer and I would play in secret from my parents. I didn’t hurt my legs when I played soccer. Soccer is my joy, and makes me feel like I never had the accident. Now, I am filled with courage and joy. Smiling during the times of hardship helped me develop my courage.

"Fear and despair have power against courage."
What is courage? The one big step you take towards your happiness? Yes, courage is the power to go through the obstacles and problems in the way of your dreams and goals. I've performed many courageous acts in my life, but when I sit down to write this essay, one voice is overflowing from within me, saying, “Write about me: I’m your fear.”

Loneliness. It’s one of the things I hate the most. I’m an average girl in the ninth grade. I distinctly remember what kind of a kid I was from the grades one through six. But from the beginning of the seventh grade, I turned into a destructive child. It seemed as if everything that was bad and negative pulled me like a magnet, and I ceased to think about schoolwork and skipped school periods. I was mastering misbehavior by hanging out with the wrong crowd, wandering out and about, and lying to people. All of a sudden I had lost all my class friends and had become a sharp-tongued bully. I behaved badly for the next two years. My two sisters had left for China and had no idea about my condition. I would’ve entirely neglected my parents if I’d stayed on the same track. When Spring came and school started, I enrolled at a new school. An angel descended from heaven to save me from my past on the day of October 17. Despite having many friends, I was deeply buried in loneliness in the preceding two years. I started making an effort to overcome my fears, and it wasn’t all that easy. However, by finding myself, I regained the trust of my teachers and classmates. The angel I mentioned above was my older sister, M.Uranbaigali. Just as a stringed instrument produces beautiful music with its strings, the main string to a successful life is courage. String the music of your life!
To me, courage is overcoming fear. So what is overcoming fear? Fear is something that we struggle with when bad things happened in our lives. Overcoming fear is having courage to do the things you are afraid to do.

When I was a 6-year-old little boy, I was sucked down into the Bulgan River, the biggest river in my town. It happened when our family was having a picnic on the riverbank. We were playing and swimming in the river. My big brother was holding me to swim in the river, because I was too little to swim alone. Suddenly someone took hold of my brother’s foot. He panicked and dropped me into the river. I struggled to stay afloat in the river for 30 minutes, until a woman, who was also having a picnic with her family nearby, saved my life. She is the bravest woman I have ever known. Heroes act like her, and she is my hero. I hope I will be as courageous as she was when I become an adult.

Even though I was still alive, I became afraid of the water. I was afraid of swimming and sinking. It is hard to believe, but I would even feel fear while taking a bath and washing my face. On rainy days I couldn’t go out, and would just stay home and watch through my window.

Last year during my summer vacation I went to Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, for the first time with my family. I was in the 5th grade and my brother was a University student there. One cozy night we were talking about our childhood. He did not know that I was still fearful of water, and he felt like he was to blame. Not being able to swim is unimaginable in Bulgan Soum, the smallest administration unit of Mongolia, where every child and adult spends lots of time on the riverbank, swimming and playing in the water. Almost every child grows up swimming in the Bulgan River. He told me, “I am very sorry you are still afraid of water, and it is really upsetting for me to hear. Let’s go to the swimming course to overcome your fear of water.”

It was very scary for me to swim in the swimming pool, but swimming little by little, day by day, was helping me to overcome my fear. In a 20-day swimming course, I began to swim alone and felt my fear disappearing. If my brother hadn’t been with me, it would have been difficult for me. Now swimming is one of my favorite things.

This is one of my big achievements in life. This is courage. Without fear, we can’t have courage. We cannot be courageous in any situation unless we have something to beat. Courage brought me to find my hobby. Don’t let fear steal your courage and favorite things. 

“**Without fear, we can’t have courage.”**
E. Anuujin
B. Battsetseg, Teacher
School #1, Bulgan Soum, Khovd Province, Mongolia

I will never forget the phone ringing on that sunny and quiet day. It occurred six years ago, when I was in the first grade. I was reading the alphabet when it happened. My mom felt confused because of this sudden phone call, and she went out quickly after answering, without her outerwear. I didn’t understand what was happening.

The next morning I woke up early. There were many people at my home, and the tables were covered with all kind of foods. My mom, my brother, and sisters were crying. I tried to understand what was going on. My uncle looked seriously at me and told me that my dad was gone forever. He was dead, but I didn’t believe that he was dead. I waited for him for 2 years to come home from Korea. He was one of many Mongolian dads who work in Korea to feed their family. Because I was so young when my dad passed, I was numb to the reality of what I had lost. I don’t think I’ve ever cried like I did that morning. It was the day I became a girl who doesn’t have a father.

Two months later I lost my grandfather. My family has gone through a lot this year. It seemed like death, pain, and hatred were surrounding my life, and everybody was turning up their nose at me. I felt lonely and started thinking about my death. I became an underachiever. It was very difficult for me when our classmates talked about parents, dads, and family life at the Human and Society class. I told myself, “I don’t have all the members of my family alive. I don’t have a father.”

I entered the 6th grade and met my English teacher, named Battsetseg. She helped me to find the courage that was hidden inside of me. She helped me to study well and to find a positive attitude. Now I have become one of the best students in my class, I have many friends to share my life, and I have a good relationship with my family. I succeeded at all those achievements because of my courage.
The Courage of Children: Boston and Beyond

S. Oyunjargal
B. Battsetseg, Teacher
School #1, Bulgan Soum, Khovd Province, Mongolia

Life is an immeasurable thing, like the sky, that is always changing every day. What is courage to me? What will I write about courage? I thought about it deeply. My answer is to write about my mom’s courage. Maybe you are thinking, “Why write about your mom’s courage?” You will understand soon why I chose to write about her.

My father is an alcoholic who drinks every day, and his addiction to alcohol is the worst thing in the world. He is jobless, and it is hard to find a job for people in the countryside who are not highly educated. Because of this, many men are drinking every day. My father behaves badly when he is drunk, and he beats and abuses my mom. When my mom would get bruises on her eyes and scars on her face and body, she would lie, telling our relatives and her friends that she got injured while chopping wood, or that she beat her head against the wall. It is really hard for me to hear such things.

When we see my drunken dad coming home, we run away. Only four of us live at home, and there is nobody to protect us. It is sorrowful for me to spend my childhood years trying to protect my younger sister and supporting my mother. There is little time for me to enjoy my childhood. No one should have to beg their mother to get a divorce, or their father to stop drinking. Two months ago I asked her, “Why are you living with this badly behaved, alcoholic man?” She told me, “For you, for my daughters.” Sometimes, when my dad is drunk, I think about suicide. It is easy for me to think about suicide, growing up frightened, lost, and unlovable. But my mother’s answer gave me strength and courage to live. Through my mom’s pain I understand that life is valuable and a precious thing. Now I have the courage to stand up for my mom. Every day I pray to God that my dad will stop drinking, and we can live happily together. I want to succeed in the future, so that I can help children who have their childhoods scarred by drinking parents and women who suffer domestic violence. I found my courage from my mom.

“Through my mom’s pain
I understand that life is valuable
and a precious thing.”
Malis Sok  
Phalla Ol, Teacher  
The Cambridge Cambodia School, Kauk Rovieng,  
Kampong Cham Province

My mother was a widow who worked for a Chinese company in a sugar cane field in Preah Vihear province. I have one older brother. My father passed away when I was a little baby so I can’t remember his face at all.

My mother worked very hard in the sugar cane fields in order to get money to support me and my brother with food and school supplies. Even when my mother was weak, thin, and often had a cough, she still went to work. One day my mother was so sick that she could not walk and could not go to work as normal. Villagers helped to bring my mother to the district hospital for treatment. Two days later the doctor said that my mother had tuberculosis and that she was in serious condition. She got thinner and thinner and continued coughing. During her stay in the hospital my brother and I took care of her. We tried to feed her rice and soup, but she could eat very little while she was lying in bed. A few weeks later my mother died in the hospital. I cried because she had left me alone. She passed away when I was only 10 years old.

After my mother died, the villagers and the village chief brought me to an orphanage, because I did not have any relations who were able to look after me. I lived in the orphanage from 2014 to 2017 with many other kids who do not have fathers or mothers, and some kids whose families are too poor to support them. I was able to study from the 4th grade to the 7th grade at the orphanage.

In 2017, my aunt and uncle wanted to bring me from the orphanage in the Preah Vihear province to live in their house, here in the school village. Now I can continue the seventh grade. Before they allowed my aunt to take me out of the orphanage, they asked my aunt and uncle to sign a paper. My aunt and uncle are poor. My uncle climbs palm trees to get palm juice to make palm sugar for selling. He can earn only a little money for buying rice and food. Every day in my free time, I help villagers who are selling sugar cane juice. I help them to peel sugar cane skin and they give me a little money. I keep that money for buying my studying materials.

I miss my brother every day. I do not know where he is, or how he is. I do not know where he has been. Maybe he goes to work somewhere. I always think about him. I feel pity for myself, because some people say that I am an orphan. I do not have my parents, so I feel that they look down on me.

For me, courage is when we face problems in our lives, we endure, and we stay strong. We keep studying hard and ignore people who say mean things about us. I want all kids to do the same: to not give up hope in our lives.

“I MISS MY BROTHER EVERY DAY.”
Courage is to face obstacles and difficulties and dare to settle those problems with your eyes open.

My parents are farmers who grow rice every year. My mother works hard in the rice field for the family, and when she is at home she always washes clothes, washes dishes, cleans house, looks after the cows, and does the cooking. My father did not help my mother do that work and he often went out and drank homemade wine with friends. When he came home, he was very drunk most of the time. Every time he got drunk, he always found fault with my mother and sometimes beat her.

One day when he came back home from drinking, he argued with my mother because he was hungry, and my mother had not cooked rice on time for him. He beat my mother by kicking her. Recently he argued with my mother and slapped her in the face. It happened when he asked for some money from my mother for drinking, but my mother did not have money for him to drink. She told him that he should go to work and make money for the family instead of always drinking. Suddenly my father was very angry. He scolded my mother, slapped her, and she cried.

Because my father always beat my mother when he got drunk, I felt ashamed in front of our neighbors because of my father’s bad behavior. I thought to myself that if I do not help my mother, one day she will get injured and that will be a disaster for the family.

So I could not stay quiet anymore. I knew I must help my mother. I begged my father to stop drinking and beating her, and to stop creating any more problems in the family. When I did that my father’s face changed. He looked down and stayed quiet for a while. Then he replied to me that he cared about me very much. He told me that he would stop drinking in excess. Since then my father does not go out drinking as he did before. He helps my mother work in the house, helps her to harvest rice, and looks after and washes the cows.

He still continues to drink sometimes with his friends, but not very often, and now he only drinks a little, not like the heavy drinking before. He also stopped finding fault with my mother and has changed his bad behaviors.

When seeing a person being treated badly or being beaten, we should have courage to talk to the person, in order to help them change their behavior and to help the victim of their violence.

“So I COULD NOT STAY QUIET ANYMORE.”
There are times in life when courage is needed. For example, a while ago I spent the day with my dad, ploughing his land. I had lots of fun, but eventually I got tired of riding on the machine. I got off and started walking towards our truck.

While I was walking, a big yellow-jaw snake appeared in front of me. I quickly turned around with fright, running back towards the machine to get my dad. We headed again toward where the snake had been, scouting the area. Before we could find the snake, it found us.

We walked past it, and it sprang directly at us. We tried hard to kill it with sticks, but that didn’t work because the snake was too active and would charge at us. We ended up running it over with the machine.

That day, I saw the courage of an animal; fierce and brave, it fought for its life but unfortunately failed. This shows us that not only humans need courage but even animals need the courage to fight for their lives. Courage is the bold feeling inside that stays with you through hard, tough times. I even had the courage to walk back to the snake after seeing it the first time. P.S. I believe the snake’s last words were “ssss.”

“BEFORE WE COULD FIND THE SNAKE, IT FOUND US.”
When I was a baby, I had no idea what courage was. But when I think back, it could only have been courage that enabled me to overcome. For example, I had a bad phobia for thunderstorms. I was so afraid that whenever it rained, I would hide under the covers of the bed and try to be close to someone who seemed not to be afraid. My mom reassured me that the thunder would not hurt me as long as I was not outdoors.

Despite my mother’s comforting, I was terrified, which impaired my ability to reason and to believe her. I understood that it is perfectly natural to have feelings of fear; however, I also knew that the mind is very powerful, and if I kept telling myself that I was afraid, then I would be afraid.

My mom mentioned to me late last year that she noticed that I was no longer afraid of thunder, and that it seemed that I have grown some courage. She referred to me as a courageous boy. I paid no attention to it, since mom is always complimenting me. If my mom only knew: I do not even know when that phobia left me. It is as if it had run away, like a thief in the dark, when I was not looking.

Recently I found the courage to face my fear of being a goalkeeper. I am eager to be the best goalkeeper in the entire country of Belize, but when I think of how hard the standard six guys will kick the ball, and how much it will hurt, I get scared. But the courage inside me has led me to learn techniques to avoid injury, and I went to try out goalkeeping and face my fear. I must say that at first I got cold feet. I still, however, went to face my biggest fear anyway.

Lately when I heard of the essay topic ‘Courage in My Life,’ I realized the numerous times when courage played a very big part in my life. But what I find funny is that I do not know exactly when I got the courage and overcame my thunder phobia. I said to myself, if this is courage, I want it to live in my life and I never want to lose it. I realized that without courage we will forever be prisoners of our own fears and can never become what we really want to be in life. Courage is all that we need to become the greatest person we can be. If we just search our souls and stay focused, we will find the key to success: Courage.

“WHAT I FIND FUNNY IS THAT I DO NOT KNOW EXACTLY WHEN I GOT THE COURAGE.”
Edgar Torres
Ms. Russell, Teacher
Raymond Sheppard Nazarene Primary School,
Belmopan, Belize

One day, my mom, my sister, and I were coming home from church; we had a wonderful time at church, I was sure God was with us. Then my mom saw my dad and another girl friend. I tried to tell my mom not to go over to where my dad was, but she did not listen to me. She still went over to see what was going on. My dad did not see her and so we went home.

When my dad came home he started to beat my mom. I could hear the loud noise and the hitting sound. I hid for a little while, but I had to do something. I knew if my dad saw me he would beat me too, so I had to have courage to make sure whatever I did worked and my dad did not see me. All I was thinking about was how to help my mom. I got out from my hiding place and quietly ran out of the house to get help. I asked my neighbor to call the police and they came very quickly so they were able to help my mom by stopping my dad from beating her. I knew I had courage, because even though I was afraid and I knew the danger I was in, I still faced it and did something. From that day on my dad never hit my mom again.

“I hid for a little while, but I had to do something.”
Alaine Vanegas
Mr. Roca, Teacher
Garden City Primary School, Belmopan, Belize

One day, I accidentally broke my mom’s favorite ornament – a beautiful swan. It was under the sofa’s covering while she was cleaning up the house. I heard a loud pop as I sat down quite heavily in the chair; my eyes popped open, too! I cringed and remained as quiet as a mouse and did not say a word. I immediately stole away to my secret place, my room. I quickly took my mom’s favorite swan and hid it at the very bottom of my toy box. My secret was safe! My eyes formed slits as I smiled to myself in satisfaction.

“Has anyone seen my swan?” Mom shouted at the top of her lungs. Her voice passed through the whole house. I froze. “I will whip anyone who has moved my swan!” she said more sternly. No one answered. There was only silence. We all knew what that meant. “I will look for it one more time……” Mom said, more seriously. The ornament was from our grandma; Mom loved it very much, and was always polishing it. “If I don’t find it, Michael and Phillip will get a good beating. You boys hearing me?” Mom continued threatening and complaining and mumbling.

“No,” I said under my breath. I felt really guilty, because only I knew the whole truth.

I could hear my two brothers’ fast-paced footsteps coming along the corridor. They were wide-eyed and frantic. They knew I had something to do with what was taking place. My brothers asked if I knew what our mom was talking about. “Why is Mom so upset, Alaine? Tell us, please,” their voices chimed together in unison. I did not answer. I couldn’t take it anymore. What should I do now?

“Mom, please don’t beat Michael and Philip. You should beat me. I broke the ornament.” I said to my mom in my most sorrowful and sympathetic voice. “I’ll be back, ok?” I got the ornament and gave it to my mom as she waited patiently.

She said, “OK, but you need to fix it, and don’t let it happen again. I’m glad you were brave enough to tell the truth and be honest with me, Alaine.” I don’t know why, but I started to cry and hugged her.

I felt really bad thinking my brothers would get into trouble because of me. I could not let that happen, I love them too much. We always have each other’s backs and look out for one another. I learned two things that day. One: it takes courage to be honest, especially when you are wrong. Two: when you love your family, courage lets you be strong for them. Since that day I have broken many things and made some mistakes, but I always have the courage to tell the truth.

“IT TAKES COURAGE TO BE HONEST, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU ARE WRONG.”
ARRIANIE CALLES
MS. SMITH, TEACHER
Our Lady of Guadalupe Roman Catholic Primary School,
Belmopan, Belize

I have always been afraid to write, because my grammar and spelling could be wrong. I fear people who read my work will laugh at me. I fear being the village clown because of what I write. I remember writing a story once, about a parrot named Tittle. I showed my father and he found many mistakes, but he told me that I could improve by reading and writing more often. So, I've tried to read and write more often, but I still fear being laughed at.

Then at school one day the principal said that there is an essay contest going on, and she wants students to write. I was scared, but I decide to try. After getting instructions from my teacher, I went home and showed my dad, and he said, “Go for it.” Knowing I fear being laughed at, and that the topic should be about courage, he said that I should write about my fear of writing.

For a few days I have been trying to put my work in order. I read and proofread constantly, so my essay makes sense. I keep asking my dad for help as I look for the right words, and he keeps telling me to look at the forest not at the trees. I don’t understand what he means.

Who knew writing an essay could be so hard? I am sure my teacher has tried to teach us proper grammar, and I promise myself to pay more attention to what she says, since right now I could use what she has been teaching.

In the end, this is my essay. I've learned that writing one is very hard. But I have faced my fear. I know I want to win, yet if I do not, I will not be sad, because I have tried. I found the courage to try and see it through to the end.

“I KNOW I WANT TO WIN, YET IF I DO NOT, I WILL NOT BE SAD, BECAUSE I HAVE TRIED.”
Ashley Mejia
Cynthia Coc, Teacher
St. Martin’s Government School, Belmopan, Belize

Courage comes in many shapes, sizes and forms. My life requires me to have courage, so that I can step into this world and become someone important. It may seem unclear for now, but I will surely take control of it before time runs out.

One day, one of my best friends became my enemy when she started bullying me. At first I didn’t want to say anything, but as time went on the bullying became worse. It became so bad that I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t want to tell anyone, not even my parents. I was afraid because she got several of her friends involved, who also participated in bullying me. I started to cry because I really wanted to go to school; I wanted to be someone important in life.

I thought hard about what to do and eventually realized that I needed to talk to someone about my troubles: my parents, my teacher, and even the principal. I know life is full of choices, and sometimes we don’t make the right choice, but the main thing is to learn to be brave and not to let fear keep me from achieving what I want in my life. My plan in life is to do my best, because no one else will do it for me. So I built up the courage to speak out and let go of the fear I had inside of me. It was very difficult to explain what I was going through. I told my parents who insisted we talk to the principal about it. So my enemies got into a lot of trouble.

The first thing I realized was that I was in control of many things in my life. I thought about myself, and how I have to live on this earth. I had to get a grip on the things I have control over and stop obsessing about the things I had no control over. If I let go of all the bad stuff, I will overcome and avoid grief and failure. Control of my life will be automatically mine. So by speaking up I was able to free myself of fear and worry.

Now I know that I’m going to be successful because of my courage. I want to be a journalist in the future, and I am going to work hard toward that goal. Courage is very important in my life, and I’m not going to hold back and be afraid anymore.

“I WANTED TO BE SOMEONE IMPORTANT IN LIFE.”
After moving from Amsterdam to Barcelona as a young girl, I discovered my love for theater and the freedom it gave me, “the quiet one,” to have a voice. Just before going on stage, I’d feel that wonderful tingle and excitement. An audience of 400 would disappear behind the lights and I wasn’t the frightened, shy me. Time and time again, I connected to some place deep inside me and felt so happy to be able to talk.

But one time was different.

It was in the 5th grade, at a poem recital for parents. During rehearsal, I felt a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. No tingles. It felt heavy and dark. I tried to ignore it, but my arms felt numb and my knees were heavy.

Stage fright? Not me. My head began to spin. What was happening? My mind started racing. What if I forget the poem? What if people laugh? What if I fall off the stage? Tears rose up inside me. In a whisper, I asked my teacher, “Can I leave?” I didn’t wait for her answer. I sprinted through the building, the tears now streaming down my face. What was I going to do? I bumped into the music teacher. “Are you okay?” she asked. Through the hiccups and tears, I explained what I was feeling, that I was afraid to be me on stage. She hugged me.

“It’s up to you,” she said.

Simple words, but true. It was up to me. I tried to dig deep for any sort of strength, and I found it. I stood up, turned around and headed for the library. I practiced until the words of the poem were the only words swimming in my head. I took a deep breath. I could still back out, but I had to do this. With wobbly knees, I headed to the auditorium.

I walked on stage. I had the class behind me, an audience in front of me, my paper in my hands, and a voice inside me that was willing to speak... I began. I read the title. “This is a poem by Elisabeth Van Meer.” I took a deep breath and read through the lines on my sheet. And then I was done. The audience was cheering. “Good job,” somebody whispered as I walked offstage. I looked over with a weak smile. Scared, shaking, afraid, I, as myself, had done the thing I feared most: Being me.

Theatre had been a way of protecting myself and expressing my feelings in a different way. After reaching for every piece of courage deep inside, I had performed, as me. I learned that we need to take risks to overcome a fear, because no matter how hard I tried to hide my fear of public speaking and being judged, I had to cross that bridge to continue. Now, at the age of twelve, I have finally overcome my fear by trying and trying, because as long as we try, we will get somewhere.

“**AFTER REACHING FOR EVERY PIECE OF COURAGE DEEP INSIDE, I HAD PERFORMED, AS ME.”**
Neela Mohanpuhr
Dawn Austin, Teacher
The American School of Barcelona, Spain

When I first started to think about courage, all that came to mind were big challenges, such as a surgery, changing schools many times, or losing a family member. When I considered my life, I thought I had never done anything courageous. Then I realized that these symptoms of fear appeared in the everyday situations I confronted, such as going to soccer practice three times a week with a new team in a new country.

I recently moved from California to Barcelona with my family. This was my first time moving to a place where I didn’t even know the language. My new school was very welcoming. I fit in easily, and started to make friends.

And then there was soccer. In Barcelona, I joined a local team and remember dreading the first practice. The nervousness climbed up inside of me. I felt as if a claw was clenching my heart slowly with the pain growing the closer I got to practice. Soccer had always been my favorite sport since I started playing it at age six. No matter what team I was on, I always felt comfortable. Some people say that if you love playing a sport, it doesn’t matter where you are or who you’re with. But suddenly, this didn’t apply to me anymore.

I was never completely sure what I was nervous about. It could have been that my new teammates already knew each other and I was the outsider trying to fit in, or that I might never be able to connect with them, since I did not speak their language and they did not speak much of mine. They also had different approach to soccer. In California, we played 11 versus 11, but in Barcelona, they play 7 versus 7. This completely changed the way that I had to play; it required more running and better shooting skills.

For many weeks I showed up to practice, I played, and I left. I felt lonely and the thought of being on this team for one full year was terrifying. Additionally, I knew that my teammates were talking about me. They made references to “la Inglesa,” but I was never quite sure what they said. They were never openly mean, but since I couldn’t understand what they said, I did not feel welcome. Sometimes, in the changing rooms, they would speak to me in broken English, asking trivial questions. I felt that the goal was not to know me, but simply to entertain themselves.

It took a lot of courage to show up three times a week. I told myself repeatedly that I had to squash my fear or try to ignore it. Slowly things became better. I learned their way of playing soccer; I became more agile and a better shooter; My Spanish improved. Soon I understood the coach’s instructions and certain parts of my teammates’ chatter. I realized that they were never laughing at me, but rather at how they themselves spoke English.

From this experience, I have learned that it takes a little bit of courage each day to overcome your fears and to live your life. The people who have the most courage are not superheroes but ordinary people. Courage is when you face your fears, stare them in the eye, and confront them.

“Courage is when you face your fears, stare them in the eye, and confront them.”
Courage and bravery are often misunderstood. People think you have to do something huge and heroic to be brave. I believe courage can be something small. Maybe something as simple as conquering everyday fears or being your true self requires an act of great personal courage.

I felt that way when I moved to Barcelona, Spain in the 6th grade. I wasn’t nervous. I was terrified. And the thing I wanted most was to fit in. I’m a shy person, so making friends is challenging.

It was the first day of school, and it was that most dreaded part of the day: Lunchtime. All the tables were occupied, so my hopes of finding a nice, empty spot in the corner were squashed. I grabbed my lunch tray and went to the emptiest table I could find.

“Can I sit here?” I asked. A bored, upturned face stared back at me for a second before she answered. I felt the redness creeping up my neck.

“Sure,” she shrugged. I was so relieved to hear “yes” that I barely heard the next question.

“What do you think of that girl over there?” her friend asked, pointing to another table. “She’s really stuck up and stupid,” she said, not waiting for my answer.

The girl she was pointing to had helped me with my locker that morning. “I don’t know,” I replied. They moved back to their conversation that went something like this:

“Yes! And did you see the Instagram pic Mary posted? She looks horrible!" They kept going like this all through lunch. I felt sick. How could they talk like that? Tomorrow, I told myself, I would sit with someone else.

That didn’t happen. The next day, as I looked around for a safe spot, they invited me to sit with them again. I wanted to fit into this new school so badly that I didn’t dare say no, or move away. I was afraid that, since those girls were ‘popular,’ if I did something to upset them, they would make sure I never had any friends. So I followed their conversation even as my insides screamed ‘No!”

On Friday, the girls asked me to sit with them again. The routine continued and this time it was about the other new girl. She, like me, had trouble adapting and making friends and I understood her perfectly. She just sat there, so helpless. I couldn’t help but feel terrible, and yet I stayed silent. The two girls exchanged more mean comments and then asked for my opinion. Suddenly, I found my voice and I jumped up. “How can you say something like that? That’s really mean!” I shouted. In an instant, my face turned bright, cherry red, my legs trembled like Jell-O. I grabbed my lunch tray, stormed off, and sat down next to the other new girl.

It had taken every ounce of courage inside me to stand up to those girls. For some people standing up for themselves or for others comes naturally but for me, it’s one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. Courage comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it’s as simple as finding a few words and a new seat.

“Courage comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes it’s as simple as finding a few words and a new seat.”
My name is Thuraya. I used to be afraid of my shadow.

One day, I thought about getting rid of my fear. I started chasing my shadow, but I could not grab it!

I decided to cover it, so I went to my mom and asked her to sew a dress to cover my shadow. My mom laughed at me and came with me to the garden. She told me: “Sit down,” and I did. She asked me to touch my shadow, and I did. She showed me that shade is not scary. Since then I am no longer afraid of my shadow!
I am twelve years old. I live with my father, mother, and my little brother in Yemen. My story started a few years ago, when the war started in Yemen. When I heard explosions, I used to get scared. I used to lose control of myself, scream, run around the house, lie on the ground and close my ears. My parents tried to calm me down, but fear continued to grow inside me. I feared everything. My parents took me to a psychiatrist.

My parents started to talk to me about courage. They told me not to fear anything. They explained many things to me, but I did not understand most of their talk.

Days went by. One afternoon, while I was sitting in the yard of my home, I suddenly heard dogs barking and a child screaming. I ran to the yard door and opened it slowly. I saw our neighbor’s child, who was just 5 years old, standing in front of the gate of their house with the dogs surrounding him. He was screaming and shaking.

I looked left and right in the street to find somebody to help, but I could not find anybody. I felt frightened. I did not know what to do. I feared dogs, but if I did not overcome my fear, the child would be harmed. At that moment, I found myself screaming. I collected some stones from the ground and started throwing them at the dogs. I was not sure if what I did was right.

I was surprised to see the dogs running away. I ran to the child, I hugged him and calmed him down. After a few seconds, the mother of the child appeared in the doorway. She was frightened. She told me that she did not know that the gate was open, because her husband must not have closed it properly when he left.

When I explained what happened, the boy’s mother thanked me. She said that I was a brave girl. I felt proud.

I went back home. I told my parents about what happened. Father said with a smile “This is real courage. Do you remember when I told you there is fear and courage inside every one of us? It is better to face fear once, rather than to always live in fear. The first step is the most difficult one. Cowards run away from risks, and risks run away from those who are courageous. If you resist your fears, your weakness will turn into a strength. Courage is not when fear disappears, it is when you have the capacity to overcome fear. Do you understand what I said?”

I replied, “Not everything. Please write what you said on a piece of paper, so I can memorize it for when I need it again.” And we all laughed.

I remember this story that changed my life. Even the sounds of explosions don’t frighten me. I am stronger, thanks to the little child who helped me overcome my fears.

“COWARDS RUN AWAY FROM RISKS, AND RISKS RUN AWAY FROM THOSE WHO ARE COURAGEOUS.”
Shatha Al Dailamy
Najwa Alsalaal, Teacher
Abjad School, Sana’ā, Yemen

My story started with the outbreak of war in my country, Yemen, in 2015. I had been living a happy and stable life with my small family, but war changed it all. The war affected every detail of our lives.

Suddenly, I suffered a drastic drop in my eyesight. I had perfect eyesight before, but suddenly I was no longer able to read, even the teachers’ writing on the board. It was a shock to me and to my family. My parents consulted with several eye doctors, but none could explain my case, given the fact that I previously had perfect eyesight. Each doctor gave a different and unsure explanation for my case. Despite the weakness in my eyesight, I could still see the fearful glances that my parents exchanged and tried to keep away from me. My family then decided to take me to India for treatment, all amidst the war and the constant bombardment.

All embassies had evacuated Sana’a, including the Indian Embassy. Our only alternative was to fly to Malaysia, the only country in the world that admitted Yemeni nationals without a visa. We started the travel arrangement. We had an uneasy feeling about it, because we had to land at a Saudi airport (Bisha) to be cleared for travel. Finally, we traveled. We endured a three-hour stop, the annoying baggage check, and the humiliating interrogation at Bisha airport, to finally reach Amman, Jordan. We took another flight to Dubai and another to Malaysia. It was a long and exhausting journey that took over 24 hours. We waited for about one month to get visas to India. The Indian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, apologized and explained that the delay was normal for visa applicants of Yemeni origin.

In India, after consulting numerous eye specialists, we were told that I suffered a chronic, incurable disease. I, and my family, felt very sad, but I decided to challenge what seemed to be a hopeless case at the time, adapt to my new situation, and not let it affect my life and my school. I even refused to transfer from my English school to an Arabic school, which would be easier for me, as a native Arabic speaker.

I feel that this is a challenge I must overcome – one of many challenges to follow. I am still the A-student I used to be, even though I have to work harder to keep up.

“I DECIDED TO CHALLENGE WHAT SEEMED TO BE A HOPELESS CASE AT THE TIME.”
Bassam Al-Raimi
Aqil Al-Nimrani, Teacher
Dhafar School, Sana’a Governorate, Yemen

I suffer from some sort of Asthma. I am unable to talk in a good way, because I cannot complete a sentence without taking a breath. I also have heart disease for which there is no cure.

I was living in a small village. My father got a job as a doorkeeper in a building in Sana’a City. I moved with my father. I feared going to school in Sana’a, because people are not used to the way I talk, like in the village. I quit school and helped my father in his work in Sana’a, carrying stones, watering, and guarding the building.

Every day I saw children go to school. They passed by the building. I was sad. When I went to bed, I thought about my future. One day I thought to myself, “I must go to school.” I thought about registering for home schooling. I went to three schools, but I was not accepted. They asked for my documents, which were in the village. I felt I was not accepted because of the way I talk, but I was determined to complete my education.

I called my brother in the village and asked him to send me the school documents. I talked to a neighbor near the building in which my father works. I told him, “I am ready to work for free, if you could only help me register for school.” I insisted and cried, so he went with me and I registered for the school. I was so happy that I cried with joy.

The school was much bigger than the school in the village. There were lots of students. The school was far, and I did not have money to pay for transportation, so I decided to wake up early and walk to school. I arrived at school before anybody else. I like to be the first student to arrive at school. I like school. I like to see it and walk in the yard.

When I walk to school I talk to shop owners along the road. Some give me a ride to school. Some of my classmates also offer me rides.

I started to practice speaking long sentences, to improve how I talk. I am no longer afraid to talk the way I talk. I am not ashamed. I feel like a normal student. When I return home, I feel as if I was coming back from college. I sleep with my school bag beside me.

My schoolmates like me, and I like them. My father is proud of me. He asks me: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I want to be a doctor, to treat people who can’t talk normally,” I tell him. I feel happy, and I am going to finish school and be a doctor.

“I sleep with my school bag beside me.”
Amwal Khaled
Enas Sabeha, Teacher
Tokyo School, Sana’a, Yemen

My goal is to complete my education. I went to school, and I started to realize my dream. But soon my dream started to become a nightmare. I used to go to school in the morning, but my classmates used to call me “stupid” and “ignorant.” I was annoyed. I did not want to go to school anymore.

One day the teacher asked me to explain a lesson. The girls started to shout, “You stupid, the teacher is talking to you...” The teacher was not happy. “Stop that, girls,” said the teacher. “But you know, teacher, she is stupid,” shouted the girls. I started to weep and I covered my face. The teacher looked at me.

“Don’t let fear take control of you. This is your dream. You have to continue. Have trust in yourself,” said the teacher. Since that day I have changed. The words that I hear from classmates give me courage. I don’t care much about what others say about me. I worked hard, and I improved. My classmates apologized to me and became my friends. They even chose me to lead the class.

Thanks to my teacher, who supported me, I have some advice. Hold tight to your goal. Never give up because others are undermining you. Work for your goal and don’t stop.

“Work for your goal and don’t stop.”

إعمل لأجل هدفك، ولا تتوقف.
Mohamed Ali
Yemeni Child Soldier

This is a true story, written by a child who became a soldier at the age of 14 in Yemen. He miraculously escaped death, until now! (the name of the child and some details were changed to protect his identity).

I am fourteen years old, and I live in Sana’a, Yemen. I used to go to a school that I loved, where I had friends. In 2015 the war started in Yemen, and it became difficult for my father to pay my school fees. I decided to help my father. I used to go to the market in the Old City to buy some items and sell them at the market near my home. I earned a little bit of money, and my father was happy, although at the beginning he did not allow me to go to the market alone.

The war continued, and my dad lost his job. A group from the security authorities raided his office and took everything. My father transferred me to a new school with fewer fees. Suddenly, my father got very sick. We took him to the hospital, and I stayed with him in the hospital for three weeks. After that, I stayed with him at home for another month. During that period, I had to skip school, and I fell behind in my studies and did not want to go back. I was only thinking about helping my father.

I spent time with kids in the neighborhood near my home. We talked about the war. After a while they invited me to take “Qat.” I knew it was bad for me, but I used it like them. Some of the kids who were older than me asked me to join them to go to fight in Taiz. I was excited. They told me I would be a man, a brave one. They also told me that I would get a salary. It was a chance to help my family. Our neighbor, the father of my friend, told me that he would go to the battlefront with my friend. I told him I would like to join them.

The problem was to convince my father and mother, especially because I am their only son. I told them that I was going to a camp for a cultural course. My father refused to let me go, but I told him I would run away. He unwillingly allowed me to go.

The date for travel was decided. I left home at night. We went on a truck. There were three people, in addition to my friend, his father, and me. We moved from Sana’a in the morning. I was happy, but also sad when thinking about my mother, my sister, and my father, who had not completely recovered from his sickness.

At mid-day we arrived in Dhamar, a city in the mid-way. We were received by a group who took us to a special camp. They provided us with food and Qat. After that we moved to Taiz. We arrived at night. We waited at the “Gate of the Battlefront.” We slept in a home, and in the morning we walked for five hours to “Tabat Al-Balas,” the battlefront. I felt that it is real!

They gave me a machine gun, seven sets of bullets, and three hand bombs. They showed me my space. It was the first time for me to hold a gun, and it was too big for me, but there was no time to think, or to go back. I was already in the middle of the battle.

They told me that I have a shift. They told me to fire at a certain direction, the direction of “The Enemy.” I fired several times. In addition, we were required to attend “Religious Lessons.” Every day my worry was increasing. There were many kids my age. We soon became friends. They were like me, scared, but did not know what to do. They told me they came to help their families who are in need.

After two weeks I called my father, and I told him the truth: that I was not in a course. I was fighting. My father was mad at me. After this call I decided to turn off my phone.

One day, the enemy made advances toward us. I saw a tank. I was frightened. When the tank arrived at a nearby location, it turned back. We did not know why. The area was also hit many times by air strikes. We were instructed to stay in our positions. I became especially scared after they filmed me. They asked me to say my name and why I am fighting, to talk about the enemy and the “Master.” I saw similar films before, of “martyrs” who died. They gave me 30,000 Riyals. I sent most of it to my father. They also provided us with food and Qat. By now I was addicted to it. They also gave me a name “Abu Fass.” Every fighter had a nickname. This made me feel older.

After a month and a half I asked them to let me go back to visit my family in Sana’a. They allowed it, so I went back. I arrived home at midnight. My mother was extremely pleased to see me, although she told me that I look much weaker and pale. People in the neighborhood came to listen to me, and I told them about my adventure. They listened to me carefully, as if I were a hero. I felt that I needed to go back to the fight, but something was pushing me to rethink.

I felt sad that I lied to my father. My family needs me, and I put myself in danger without thinking. I thought that I must not go back. I have to be with my family. I need to help my father and complete my schooling.

How would I confront my friends, who were already asking me to go back to the battlefront? I talked to my father about my thoughts. He accepted my apology for lying to him, and he promised to help me. I also found other people who encouraged me to stay.

I went back to school, and decided to forget what happened. From now on I will think before making any decisions in my life. I want to be a man, and a successful one, but I want to be away from war. The war that almost killed me...

“I WANT TO BE A MAN, AND A SUCCESSFUL ONE, BUT I WANT TO BE AWAY FROM WAR.”

أريد أن أكون رجلاً، لكن أريد أن يكون ذلك بعيداً عن الحرب.