

## LAWS OF LIFE ESSAY CONTEST

### *Matters of the Heart*

**The Laws of Life Essay Contest was created in 1987 in Sir John’s hometown of Winchester, Tennessee. Sir John gave the community the best gift possible: the chance to reach young people of all backgrounds and abilities and inspire them to focus on their values and principles. Since that time, the Laws of Life program has taken on a life of its own, as people tell people about the extraordinary benefits of the essay contest and communities “grow their own” programs. Today, there are hundreds of locally sponsored contests in countries around the world.**

I stood with my father, respecting him, loving him and discovering him all over again. I also discovered a Law of Life in that moment; I realized how much my father means to me, that family is the most important thing in my life. I discovered all that by the river that day.” – From “My Father and the River,” by Robert D. Butts, age 18, Midland, Michigan.

“Perseverance is a valuable Law of Life, imperative to reaching one’s dream. My parents had little when we lived under Communism, yet they were willing to live with nothing. Realizing that I cannot fully appreciate my parents’ perseverance and indomitable spirit that brought us here, I remain thankful for the chance to live a wonderful life in which I have boundless opportunities.” – From “Escaping,” by Zdenko Slobodnik, age 17, Jackson, Mississippi.

“The key to becoming a better person is always growing and improving. Through life, I am learning from these Laws of Life: self-sacrifice, passion and integrity. Many times I just want to put myself before others, but I know the happiness of being a self-sacrificing person. I know that there is freedom in those who follow their passions with no retreat.” – From “Selfish or Selfless,” by Jessie L. Marshall, age 16, Stuart, Florida.

“A few calculated words can completely destroy one’s ego, but a few words of love can restore all feelings of hope and compassion. In my opinion, love is the true Law of Life and the greatest virtue of mankind – it is the inexplicable healer of all human souls.” – From “The Competition,” by Kristina Jacinth, age 15, Carlsbad, California.

When Sir John was growing up in rural Tennessee, it was, by the standards of today, a simpler time. Parents and elders were respected; community was valued, as was a good work ethic and a generous spirit. Business agreements could be finalized with a handshake, and a person’s word was his bond. These were the lessons the young Templeton received at home and at school, exemplified by the members of his community and carefully reflected upon in private moments.

What are the Laws of Life? “An attitude of gratitude creates blessings.” “You are only as good as your word.” “Honesty is the best policy.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

These wise sayings, or maxims, are what Sir John likes to call the “Laws of Life.” They took root in his character at an early age and guided him as he rose to the pinnacle of the financial world.

Throughout his life, Sir John has continued to reflect on the Laws of Life he acquired as a boy and, like many whose efforts have been crowned with great success, thanked God for the way he was raised. In 1987, he decided to give back to his hometown of Winchester, Tennessee, by inaugurating the first Laws of Life Essay Contest. Winchester teenagers were encouraged to reflect on their own Laws of Life and write about them, with the most meaningful essays receiving cash awards and public recognition.

“To be a happy and useful person, we must understand and practice the Laws of Life,” says Sir John. “The world operates on moral and spiritual principles just as it does on the laws of physics and gravity. It is up to us to learn what those principles are and then live by them.”

From Winchester, the Laws of Life program has grown dramatically and become an important character education program in schools and communities around the world. It also provides excellent writing practice, preparing many young people for the essay section of their statewide achievement tests. Contests involving

hundreds of thousands of students have spread across the United States. Semi-retired insurance executive Carl Schoenstedt launched a contest in Mankato, Minnesota, by enlisting a network of friends, colleagues and neighbors. The YMCA of Greater New York started a contest to highlight the importance of core values, as did two Kiwanis clubs in Spirit Lake, Iowa. Businessman Leo Hawk heard about the contest from a friend who sponsored one in North Carolina and decided it was a natural fit for his close-knit community in western Ohio. In Plainfield, New Jersey, a highly distressed urban community, Laws of Life has become a core component of the district's Social and Emotional Learning curriculum in the hope that the program will keep kids in school and inspire them to keep striving for their dreams.

“Oftentimes, students in at-risk districts have lost their way. We wanted to help kids to think about how they are living their life, to set their beliefs down on paper, to share them, to ‘own’ them and, ultimately, to live their positive Laws of Life,” says Maurice Elias, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University who brought the contest to Plainfield.

Goals like these lead to what Peggy Veljkovic, director of the Laws of Life Essay Contest, calls the Aha! moment — the realization young people have when writing the essay. Often, they come to realize that they have a lot to say about life's greatest lessons.

Veljkovic has heard many stories from teachers and students that demonstrate how writing a Laws of Life essay can cause a transformation in how young people think about themselves and the importance of living a life of values. “Through the power of their essays and the public recognition they receive, these young people realize, many for the first time, that they have something important to say, and that their voice matters,” Veljkovic says. The contest's goal is “to provide young people with the opportunity to reflect and write about their own Laws of Life.” In other words, kids are challenged to discover for themselves the core values and principles that will guide them, whatever they do and wherever they go. They are encouraged to think about the people and experiences that have helped shape these values and asked to take a stand for what they believe in. They are rewarded, with prizes, awards ceremonies, and honor and praise from their parents, teachers, school administrators and the community.

“It's the only essay contest of its kind that enables young people to respond on their own terms and write about what they think matters most in life,” says Veljkovic. “As Sir John has said, the central focus of this program is not on telling young people what to think; it's asking them to share from their own well of personal experience. The hope is that by publicly honoring and recognizing the young people who have taken the time to reflect and write, that this reinforcement will fortify their thinking, and ultimately they'll want to live by their values.”

Last year, more than 100,000 students wrote a Laws of Life essay, which means more than 100,000 students reflected on the lessons they had learned, thought about what mattered most to them and then wrote from the heart. *Teen Ink: What Matters*, published by Health Communications (publisher of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series), is the latest anthology of Laws of Life essays, featuring the work of young writers from contests all over the world, including China, Russia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Uganda and New Zealand.

The hallmark of the Laws of Life program is its flexibility. The essay contest is adaptable to all age levels, and each community sponsors its own contest. All of the decisions for the program — judges, prizes, ceremonies, even the name of the program itself — are made by local organizers.

“It's really a grassroots program and is immediately identifiable as a local initiative,” says Veljkovic. Beyond the benefits of the program to young people, the contest enables citizens and educators to partner together on an uplifting activity that will ultimately benefit the entire community.

Rotarian Sandy McDonnell, Chairman Emeritus of McDonnell Douglas who launched the contest in Clayton, Missouri, says, “We want people coming into our communities who know the good, desire the good, and do the good. By helping young people reflect on the Laws of Life that mean the most, we know they are more likely to live by those principles and ideals throughout their lives.”

Still, while each and every contest is unique, and contestants come from different cultures, nationalities, backgrounds and age groups, Veljkovic says, “Young people are writing about the same core values, which really reinforces what Sir John says about the Laws of Life, that these are principles that unite us all. The locations of the contests may be different, but the lesson is a universal one.”