

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2011
WWW.LAYOUTH.COM

L.A.youth

the newspaper by and about teens

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

- 6** Running away didn't solve my problems
- 22** Can guys & girls be just friends?
- 26** Favorite holiday movies

WHAT
NOW?

As an undocumented immigrant,
it's unfair that my hard work
might not lead to college • PAGE 10

L.A.youth

Senior Writers: Stacey Avnes, S.O.C.E.S. • Kevin Ko, Wilson HS • Ha Young Kwen, Wilson HS • Jessica Marin, Culver City HS • Chantelle Moghadam, Viewpoint School • Jasper Nahid, Hamilton HS • Stephany Yong, Walnut HS • Brian Yu, Walnut HS

Staff: Angela Aie, Walnut HS • Karen Ashley, The Linden Center • Rosie Baek, South HS • Sarah Barnes, New Village Charter HS • Victor Beteta, University HS • Tyler Bradshaw, Redondo Union HS • Michelle Cao, Temple City HS • Heidi Carreon, Gladstone HS • Sydney Chou, Sonora HS • Moviz Dar, Hawthorne HS • Merrick Dickerson, Pacifica Christian HS • Camille Didelet-Hearn, L.A.C.E.S. • Avika Dua, Walnut HS • Amy Fan, Temple City HS • David Garcia, Monrovia HS • Jennifer Gonzales-Romero • Blanca Gonzalez, Hollywood HS • Alex Hattori, South HS • Tiffany Hattori, South HS • Maria Khan, S.O.C.E.S. • Julie Kim, Cleveland HS • Timothy Kim, North Hollywood HS • Yuri Kim, Beverly Hills HS • Haley King, Marshall Fundamental HS • Alison Lee, Whitney HS • Kelly Lin, Wilson HS • Courtney Loi, Sierra Vista HS • Jazmine Mendoza, Valley Regional HS #5 • Polina Mkrtchian, Burroughs HS • Hanifat Mokhammad, Pacific Coast HS • Miguel Molina, Film & Theatre Arts Charter HS • Shivani Patel, Whitney HS • Kiera Peltz, CHAMPS • Andrea Perez, Bravo Medical Magnet HS • Anne Phan, S.O.C.E.S. • Kristy Plaza, Duarte HS • Nelly Quintanilla, Junipero Serra HS • Laura Rios, Bishop Conaty—Our Lady of Loretto HS • Nicholas Robinson, Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts • Stefano Rumi, L.A.C.E.S. • Jaanvi Sant, San Marino HS • Christian Santiago • Aaron Schwartz, Gabrielson HS • Sydney Sellers, Windward School • Precious Sims, Central HS • Alexia Sison, Marshall HS • Henry Studebaker, Hamilton HS • Arpine Tsaturyan, Glendale HS • Elizabeth Vidar, North Hollywood HS Zoo Magnet • Julia Waldow, Beverly Hills HS • Sakshi Walia, Whitney HS

Publisher: Donna C. Myrow

Managing Editors: Mike Fricano, Amanda Riddle

Administrative Director: Robyn Zelmanovitz

Design Consultant: Wayne M. DeSelle

L.A. Youth is published by Youth News Service (YNS), a non-profit organization.
Editorial offices are at 5967 W. Third St. Suite 301, Los Angeles CA 90036. Phone (323) 938-9194.
Website: layouth.com. Email: editor@layouth.com

L.A. Youth would like to express its gratitude to the following individuals
who donate their time and expertise to our writers:

L.A. Youth Board of Directors

Paul Catherwood — The Capital Group

Nicole Childers — Media Consultant

Eva Semple Davis — Warner Brothers Home Video

Fred Freeman — Writer/Producer

Jordan Katz — The Gores Group

David Rickley — *Los Angeles Times*

Jeff Sperber — Educator

David Tokofsky — Education Strategies Consultant

Leo Wolinsky — *Los Angeles Times* (retired)

L.A. Youth Advisory Board

Noel Greenwood, *Los Angeles Times* (retired) • Alan Duignan • Zeek Interactive, Inc. • *Los Angeles Times* Staff Production Advisors: Agustin Moran, Dave Novotney, Rick Terry

Donors

Annenberg Foundation • AT&T • Bank of America Foundation • Bay & Paul Foundation • Best Buy • Bing Family Foundation • Blue Shield of California Foundation • Brinson Foundation • The California Endowment • The California Wellness Foundation • The Capital Group • Marcy Carsey • City National Bank • Carol and James Collins Foundation • Compton Foundation • D. Dougherty Foundation • Brad and Grace Ellis • Endeavor Foundation • Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation • The Ford Foundation • Leonard Green Foundation • The James Irvine Foundation • Mayer and Morris Kaplan Foundation • L.A. County Board of Supervisors • Majestic Realty • McCormick Foundation • Northrup Grumman • Open Society Institute • Parsons Foundation • The Rose Hills Foundation • Robert Ellis Simon Foundation • Lon Smith Foundation • Sony Pictures • Helen and Jeff Sperber • S. Stern Trust • Dwight Stuart Youth Foundation • Stuart Foundation • Surdna Foundation • Union Bank • Weingart Foundation

The *Los Angeles Times* donates the printing of L.A. Youth.

To get a single-copy subscription through the mail, send \$15 for one year (six issues) to:

L.A. Youth Subscriptions, 5967 W. Third St. Suite 301, Los Angeles CA 90036.

Provide name, address and zip code. Copyright © 2011 All rights reserved.

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

About L.A. Youth

How L.A. Youth started

Former teacher Donna Myrow founded the nonprofit teen newspaper in 1988 after the Supreme Court Hazelwood decision, which struck down student press rights. Myrow saw a need for an independent, uncensored forum for youth expression. L.A. Youth is now celebrating its 23rd year of publishing.

How L.A. Youth is doing today

L.A. Youth now has a readership of 350,000 in Los Angeles County. Hundreds of students have benefited from L.A. Youth's journalism training. Many have graduated from college and have built on their experiences at L.A. Youth to pursue careers in media, teaching and other fields. Our Foster Youth Writing Project has brought the stories of teens in foster care into the newspaper. For more info, see layout.com.

How L.A. Youth is funded

L.A. Youth is a nonprofit charitable organization funded by donations from foundations, corporations and individuals.

L.A. Youth's mission

L.A. Youth is a leading advocacy voice for teens through journalism, literacy and civic engagement. We use media as a tool for young people to examine themselves, their communities and the world at large.

Advocating for teens

Do you like what we do and want to support us? Go to why.layout.com, our blog written by L.A. Youth's adult staff, to learn more about the issues L.A. Youth cares about. You can read our criticisms and praise of policies affecting teens. We take stands on education, access to mental health, foster youth rights, teens' rights to free speech and more. There you can make a donation to help us provide a place where teen voices are valued.

Free copies of L.A. Youth for Los Angeles teachers

L.A. Youth is distributed free six times a year to high school and middle school teachers in Los Angeles County. We do not share your info with other organizations or businesses.

YES I would like to receive L.A. Youth free of charge six times a year.

Name _____

School _____

School Phone _____ Ext. _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip code _____

E-mail _____

Special delivery instructions: _____

I would like: _____ copies (20-copy minimum order)

Mail to: L.A. Youth Subscriptions, 5967 W. Third St. Suite 301, Los Angeles CA 90036 or call (323) 938-9194 or e-mail editor@layout.com.

IN THIS ISSUE

CONTENTS



10

Cover Story: What now?

As an undocumented immigrant, our writer says it isn't fair that his hard work might not lead to college

PLUS: A new state law allows undocumented students to apply for financial aid in California **12**

Don't cut what I care about **5**

Heidi says music and performing arts programs have taught her valuable lessons.

Reality check **6**

When Precious ran away from home she thought she'd be a rap star, but she found out life isn't that easy.

Fighting AIDS with every step **14**

Elizabeth says the AIDS Walk was fun, and she felt good raising money for an important cause.

College essays that worked **16**

These real college essays will show you what colleges are looking for.

Protesting school cuts **18**

Nicholas and Jazmine saw lots of teachers but not many teens at the Occupy LAUSD march.

Holiday favorites **26**

To get in the holiday spirit, rent Elf, It's a Wonderful Life, Home Alone and The Nightmare Before Christmas.

Stretched for time **19**

Sometimes it's hard to fit ballet into her schedule, but Haley loves it too much to quit.

Too much temptation **20**

It was hard for these teens to give up Facebook, YouTube and texting while doing their homework.

Friendship is enough **22**

Even though it can get complicated, Tiffany has been just friends with lots of guys.

What I wish I could give up **24**

Our essay contest winners wrote about gang life, shopping and soft serve ice cream.

CD reviews **27**

Our teen staff says to check out The Strokes, Britney Spears and Owl City.

**Holiday
Movies**

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

I love taking photos for L.A. Youth. I get to learn more about the story by representing it in a photograph. In the photos I took for my AIDS Walk article (p. 14), I wanted to capture the feeling I got from participating. (Also turn to page 20 to see Elizabeth's photo for the no-distraction homework challenge.)—**Elizabeth Vidar, 17, North Hollywood HS Zoo Magnet**



BEHIND THE SCENES

At our weekly staff meetings, the editors often hear the teens on our staff complain about how tired they are from staying up late doing homework. When we've asked them about it, they say that things like Facebook, texting and the TV distract them so it's hard to focus on studying. So we challenged them to do their homework without distractions, to see if it would help them do their homework faster. To find out how they did, turn to page 20.



STAY IN TOUCH WITH US

Did you like a story in this issue? Hate it? Could you relate? Tell us what you think. Leave a comment on [layouth.com](#) or on our Facebook page. You can also email us at editor@layouth.com or send us a letter to L.A. Youth • 5967 W. 3rd St. Suite 301 • Los Angeles CA 90036. We might choose your comment to be published in the newspaper.

OCTOBER 2011 ISSUE

A STRAIGHT GIRL SUPPORTS GAY RIGHTS

THE ARTICLE "STANDING up for gay rights" was amazing. I think that everyone should stand up for gay or bisexual people because they're just like everyone else. I know people who are gay or bisexual and people always make fun of them. Honestly, I was one of those people. I used to change quickly in the changing room just because somebody bisexual or lesbian was around me. But now I really feel bad for thinking that and I want to try and make sure everyone is treated the same. Therefore, if any of my friends start to make fun of somebody because they're gay or lesbian, I will explain to them how rude they sound and that they need to stop talking about other people that way. This article changed my mind about gays, bisexuals and lesbians.

Jordan Willner

Wilson MS (Glendale)

AT MY OLD school people would say, "Wow, that's so gay." My teacher would reply, "I wonder what homosexual people say about us. 'That's so straight?'" The class would laugh, but then realize that it's offensive. People used to have a problem with race, but we came to the conclusion that everyone should be treated equally. So why should it matter what sexual orientation you are?

Nino Kukhaleishvili

East Valley HS (North Hollywood)

WHEN KRISTY MENTIONED that she noticed students at her school saying "no homo" or "faggot," I connected because I have overheard people saying things like that. The only thing I disagreed with was when Kristy wrote, "I don't explain to them why it's offensive because I don't think they would listen to me." I think that if you take the time to explain, you can make anyone listen to you.

Angela Gonzalez

Cortines School
of Visual and Performing Arts



Illustration by Michelle Cao, 17, Temple City HS

WE ALL HAVE to learn to stand up for what is right instead of choosing what is easier. If a gay person was being bullied at school, would you defend him or her and have all your friends laugh at you? Or would you join the crowd in mockery?

William Cabison

Cortines School
of Visual and Performing Arts

I'M SO APPRECIATIVE of Kristy Plaza and her article because she demonstrates that it is possible for straight people to accept gay people. Many homosexuals, students especially, are suffering because of homophobia. We need more people like Kristy to show the world that inside every gay person is a heart and a soul. I am no different from you; I laugh when I find something funny, I cry when I am hurt and I procrastinate when I am assigned homework. It is our generation's duty to start ridding the world of such damaging mindsets. We need to move away from same-sex tolerance and start advancing to same-sex acceptance! The fates of thousands of homosexuals are depending on us—on you. We need your help.

Andio Manguray

Cortines School
of Visual and Performing Arts

LEARNING ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS IS IMPORTANT

THE ARTICLE "LEARNING beyond books" shows that more students would be interested in history class if it related to current events. To many people, current events are more important than ancient history. It is important [to teach current events] because people need to know how current events relate to the past. A good example is how the current economic problems relate to the Great Depression. I think that teachers should be allowed more freedom to teach current events.

Ian Flores

East Valley HS

LAUSD'S NEW MENU NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

I AGREE WITH the article "Lunch time has a whole new taste" because everything it says is 100 percent true! As teens, we understand that we have to eat healthier and make the right food choices but that doesn't mean that LAUSD had to totally change our

school menu from food that we like to eat to food that looks unappetizing. One thing that LAUSD could do to fix this is bring back the one thing that we all know and love: chocolate milk. I'm pretty sure that if they brought back chocolate milk, then the students might be at least a bit more satisfied.

Diego Gonzalez

East Valley HS

A BOY APPRECIATES HIS ADOPTED MOTHER

I REALLY ENJOYED the article "I'm glad she adopted me." I also did not care about school during middle school. I wouldn't do my homework. I would pass my classes with Ds and Cs. When I started high school I kept my bad habits of not doing my homework until I realized that I wanted to do something with my life. I want to go to college and major in something I really like. There is always a reason why our parents tell us things. We should start paying more attention.

Ashley Cuevas

International Studies Learning Center (South Gate)

DRESSING UP AS AN ANIMÉ CHARACTER

I LOVE THE idea of dressing up as the character you adore so much that I'm considering attending the next Anime Expo. I also liked how much Amy wanted to go and how she put effort into her costume. Amy looks great for her first homemade costume. It must have been fun to dress up as a cartoon character for the whole day surrounded by people.

Marlon Sevilla

East Valley HS

AN APPRECIATION FOR THE OBOE

THE ARTICLE "FINALLY music to my ears" was very interesting. I felt the way the writer did except toward the piano. I didn't want to play the piano, but my parents told me that I would love it. When I tried it out, I thought that there was no way I was playing this instrument and I knew how Sydney felt. But I started liking the piano and I still do. I would say that I am pretty good at the piano and I enjoy playing it. My parents and Sydney's parents knew what was good for us and they will always be right.

Nazeli Gharpetian

Wilson MS

Don't cut what I care about

Music and performing arts programs have taught me valuable lessons

By Heidi Carreon

16, Gladstone HS (Covina)

As a current color guard member and former choir member, I think the performing arts are some of the most important programs in my district. I can't believe that a few years ago my school district, Azusa Unified, considered cutting all music programs. I still worry that my district will cut music programs and future students won't have the valuable experiences I've had. There's so much more to performing than learning to play an instrument, dance or sing. I've learned the importance of dedication and hard work—values that make me a better student and person.

Even though there are more than 100 band and choir students at my school, my district's music coordinator told me that nearly every year music programs are threatened with budget cuts. In 2008, the district proposed to cut music programs from all schools. Because they can't cut English or science classes, the school board considers cutting programs like band or choir. My band director told me that the band gets only \$3,000 to \$4,000 a year to spend on sheet music, supplies and instrument repairs. That money cannot be used for competition fees. We fundraise for those. I know that it's tough for schools to find money because of the economy but the performing arts are important enough that they should be available for all students.

Going into freshman year I joined my high school's color guard because I thought it would be fun learning to toss a flag and meet new people. At first it was easy, but a couple months later we were taught the single-and-a-half toss. That's when you toss your flag so that it spins one-and-a-half times in the air and catch the pole straight up and down with the flag at the top. Sometimes I dropped it, other times rather than toss my flag straight up it went to one side. After an hour I was the

only one who couldn't do it.

Our instructor, Angie, singled me out to keep practicing while everyone else got to relax. I felt ashamed as my teammates watched me fail so many times I lost count. Eventually I got so tired of tossing that I didn't care about doing it right.

"Are you giving up on me?" Angie asked.

"Yes, I am," I snapped at her. She sent me inside the band room where I was allowed to cry out my frustrations. Then Angie came in and said, "You are a perfectionist." She told me never to give up. She left me alone and I realized Angie was right—by giving up, I was also giving up on the team and myself. I kept practicing and by the next practice I had mastered the toss.

I realized that color guard could teach me lessons about life. There were moments when I was going to fail, but the best thing I could do was learn from my mistakes.

I also learned to manage my time. From August to December during marching season, I practiced at least 18 hours a week and sometimes we had six-hour practices on Saturdays. I learned to do as much studying and homework as I could during breaks in the school day, because I knew that I wouldn't have the energy to do it after a weeknight rehearsal.

I LEARNED ABOUT TEAMWORK

In band, we were taught that even though we each had our own job to do in the show, it would take all of us working together to make the show great. One time this freshman couldn't get to his spot on time no matter how many times we practiced. The entire band and color guard had to hold a push-up position until he could. As my arms started to hurt while in push-up position, I remembered when I couldn't toss a single and a half with my flag. Just like Angie was patient with me, I knew we had to be patient with this freshman because the marching band is a team. He got it 20 minutes later.

I couldn't hate that freshman or the people who made us do push-ups, bear crawls and laps for leaving their stuff on the field after practice because I loved the



Heidi practices with the color guard for an upcoming competition. Photo by Amy Fan, 17, Temple City HS

people in marching band. Band was the first group in school where I felt completely accepted. My band and color guard friends liked me even though I sang Broadway show tunes in the band room and I got way too excited about Harry Potter.

Some of my fellow music geeks practically live in the band room or the choir room because they don't want to deal with problems at home. One girl in color guard said to me, "I'm not gonna lie, if it wasn't for this I'd be hanging with the cholos and watching them gang bang."

That's why I'm worried that someday the school board could finally decide to cut music programs. I know that it's not their fault that money is hard to come by. As unpopular as it sounds, I think that raising taxes could be a way to make sure that music wouldn't get cut from schools.

As I look back on how important music has been for me, all I can think of is a school board meeting a couple years ago. An art student kept asking the school board to find another way to save money other than cutting fine arts programs. The packed room of students, teachers and parents clapped their approval. Music education changed my life and the lives of many people I know; I can't imagine what our lives would be like without it.



Heidi says another great thing about color guard is meeting students from other schools at band competitions.

Reality check

I ran away from home and thought I'd become a rap star, but I found out life isn't that easy

By Precious Sims

18, Central HS (Long Beach)

When I ran away from my dad's house I was 14 and wanted to be a rapper. I thought I was going to get signed by a record label and get a lot of money. I thought I'd be famous by now. It hasn't worked out that way. I didn't make it as a rapper but I don't regret running away. It got me into the foster care system. The system helped me get back in school and learn how to be an adult. Without foster care I'd probably be a dropout or homeless right now.

My dad and mom were teenagers when I was born. They weren't ready to be parents so my grandmother raised me. When I was in seventh grade, we started having problems. If I heard the word "no," I talked back. When I was in ninth grade, my grandmother drove me to my dad's house for good. She was tired of my behavior.

My dad doesn't have a job. He drinks every day and hangs with his homies. When I first came he and his girlfriend sat me down. He said, "You're almost grown. I ain't got no rules for you. I don't know how to be a dad. I don't want you to go out on the streets to drink. If you're going to drink, you drink in this house." He was talking to me like I was a roommate. It was cool with me because I didn't like rules.

I didn't go to school because I knew my dad didn't care. I hardly did anything besides get on the computer and drink hard alcohol like brandy. I was really into writing lyrics and making music. Some of my dad's friends were rappers and I saw them work with the software. Eminem and 50 Cent rapped about where they came from and that's what I wanted to do. I'd record rap and hip-hop songs about making it big and being in "the hood." I had a music page on MySpace with three songs that had more than 1,000 listens. When I finished a song I would think, "If this has a little more work on it, it will definitely be a hit."

But not everything was good. My dad and his girl-



Precious says that the only way you can fail is if you give up.

friend would always fight about stupid stuff. One time I tried to break up a fight and my dad's girlfriend kicked me out in the middle of the night when she was drunk. My dad's friend gave me a ride to another family member's house.

After I'd been there a couple months I was fed up with everything. I asked my grandmother if I could come home but she said no.

I wanted to run away. I called a runaway hotline and told them I wasn't getting along with my parents. I said I was going to leave but that I had nowhere to go. They said there were beds at a shelter in Hollywood and that I could go there any time.

I'D HAD ENOUGH OF THE FIGHTING

I waited a month to see if things got better. But they didn't get better, they got worse. After I got into another fight with my dad's girlfriend, I went in my room and packed. I wasn't scared because I had everything I needed. I had all my notebooks full of rap music. I thought, "I'm going to Hollywood, which is the center of the music and acting industry. You can't go wrong in that city."

I left the next morning at 5 a.m., when my dad and his girlfriend were asleep. I had my bags and \$15 in my

pocket. I knew I was serious about leaving after I set my house keys on the dresser before locking the door. My heart began beating quickly. I kept glancing at the door as I headed out the front gate because I was paranoid that they'd notice I was gone. It was dark out. When I arrived at the bus stop, I hid myself in my coat. It took me two hours to get to Hollywood.

When I arrived at the shelter everyone was my age. There were people playing Xbox and some kids asked me if I smoked and I said yeah. I felt right at home. In the morning they had school at the shelter but I left before they made me take classes. I didn't want to mess with school. I wanted to chill with the other kids. We went out at night and rapped for people on Hollywood Boulevard. When we made \$5 we'd get weed or food.

When people asked me where I was from I'd say, "I'm from L.A. I'm here to be a rapper and I'm going to make

it big." One day I went to Columbia Records and I tried to go inside. A security guard said, "Oh no, you can't come in here. You have to have an appointment." It hit me that it's not as easy as I thought. I need exposure for them to represent me. I realized it takes years to get recognized. That's too much work. I stopped writing as much music and I stopped bragging about it. The more I thought about it, the sillier I thought it was.

The shelter staff lectured us that education was the only way to get to our dreams, so I started going to the shelter school. After I told a counselor at the shelter about my problems at home, they put me in the foster care system and I was assigned a social worker. I moved to a foster home for a month, then with my grandmother. She wanted me to come back. She felt I should be at home instead of in a stranger's house.

I KEPT MOVING FROM PLACE TO PLACE

For the next two years, I never stayed put for longer than three months. It wasn't long before my grandmother got fed up with my behavior again. I was sent to my mother in Victorville, 90 minutes from L.A., where I got tired of my mother and the foster care system. I didn't feel in control of my life, with a social worker checking on me every week, asking how I felt and controlling who I saw. After saving up money I took the Greyhound bus to Las Vegas and moved in with a friend. I didn't stay there long, about two to three months, which wasn't a surprise. I returned to the shelter in Hollywood but when they contacted my social worker, I left because I didn't want to be in foster care. I tried staying at my dad's house but he told me he could get in trouble for keeping me when I'm supposed to be in the system. I realized my only option was to go back to the system or be homeless. I was tired of moving

**One day I went to Columbia Records
and I tried to go inside. A security guard said,
"Oh no, you can't come in here.
You have to have an appointment."**

around so I went back to foster care.

On April 8, 2010, the day before my 17th birthday, I was placed in a foster home. That day I found out the woman was my aunt on my dad's side. I was a little more comfortable because her family was my family. But I was still being disrespectful. I ditched school to hang out and didn't bother doing work when I did attend. Some nights when I was partying I stayed out until the next day. I got kicked out of school for cussing my teacher out.

I got in a few fights with the three other foster girls in the house. One time I was joking around with my roommate about how she looked. She said, "B**** I will beat your a***" and that's all it took to make me snap. I cussed and hit the girl. My foster mom requested a seven-day notice, which gives the system seven days to move you out of a house.

They placed me in a group home, which is a home where foster youth live with adult staff. The place was nasty. The first night I saw a bug crawling on my bed. The girls walked around cussing and demanding things. They didn't allow us to go anywhere or do anything. We had to earn freedom, which took weeks or months. We had to eat according to a schedule and weren't allowed to go in the kitchen. I felt like I was in prison. I called my social worker and complained.

Two days later, I was moved back to my aunt's temporarily. She was very ill in the hospital. I didn't want to get kicked out again and go to another group home so I was on my best behavior. A few nights later as my aunt lay in the hospital bed, she said she had decided to give me a second chance. I was happy. That was a wake-up call. I sat down and thought about my future. I told myself, "Don't go back to your old ways."

Since I had gotten kicked out of my last school, my only option was a continuation school in Long Beach. My first day the teacher asked me, "What's your favorite subject?" I said English and he started me on it. He asked me, "Why are you here?" I told him I cussed a teacher out. He made a joke, "I'm a nice guy so you won't want to cuss me out." I laughed. And that's how it started. I sat down and did some work.

I BECAME A GOOD STUDENT

I continued doing all the right things for the next couple weeks. When my aunt came out of the hospital she saw that I was doing good. I got my first report card in a long time without Ds and Fs and it only got better. I liked the school. There were no cliques or gossiping and we got to work at our own pace. When I got a lot of work done my teacher, Mr. Napoltes, would tell me I did the most assignments for the day for a week

straight. He said if I kept it up I would graduate before I knew it. It kept me going.

I also began the Independent Living Program, which are classes the foster care system offers to prepare you to become an adult and live on your own, like how to write a check, pay your bills and grocery shop. I had thought that as long as you worked, you would have everything you needed. We budgeted how much housing, food and clothing cost in a year. Then we compared a job at a fast-food restaurant to one you need a college degree to get, like business or nursing. With the fast-food job we couldn't get half the stuff we needed.

Our ILP teachers said the system can help pay for college. They said that if you go to college, you'll have a better future.

But if you sit

around it's going to be harder. I realized I'm not going to make it without an education.

I never missed an ILP class and I was always on time. At the end of the six-week program, I got a certificate that called me Most Persistent. I knew I was being more serious. I said, "If I can go through this class, I can go through school and college."

I realized that no matter where you go, there will be rules and you have to follow them. I want to go to college and become successful. For once in my life I want to stay put and focus. I don't want to run anymore.

So far, life is great. I have all As. I want to go into the Navy, take college classes and be a journalist. I've realized success is a process, it happens slowly as you push toward it. I'm determined to be successful.



Illustration by Michelle Cao, 17, Temple City HS

Calling All Foster Youth in Los Angeles County

Do you want to let other teens know what foster care is like? Here's your chance.

L.A. Youth is looking for foster youth ages 14 to 18 who want to write an article to be published in L.A. Youth.

**By joining L.A. Youth,
you can:**

- EARN \$100** for each story published
- IMPROVE** your writing skills by working with an editor
- HELP** other foster youth by sharing your experiences
- INFORM** others about the system



Editor Amanda Riddle works with Charles on his story.

Contact Editor Amanda Riddle at

(323) 938-9194
or ariddle@layouth.com

Invite Amanda to speak at your school, group home or foster agency about writing for L.A. Youth.



Got questions?

Go to layouth.com and click on the Foster Youth link to learn more and read stories written by foster youth.

L.A. Youth art contest: Injustice

RULES

1) Contest entries must be original artwork of Los Angeles County youth ages 13 to 19.

2) The work may be done in any medium, including acrylics, oils, charcoal, pencil, pen, watercolor, collage, multimedia, photography or sculpture. The dimensions should be 8 1/2" by 11". Three-dimensional artwork should include a photograph of the artwork.

3) Each artist may submit only one entry.

4) The artist's name, age, address and phone number should be included on the back of the artwork. If the artist is in school, the school's name should be included. If the artwork was created as an assigned project in a classroom, the teacher's name should be listed. Artwork will be returned if a return address is provided.

The teen staff of L.A. Youth will select a first-, second- and third-place winner as well as some honorable mentions. The first-place winner and his or her teacher will each receive \$100. The second-place winner and his or her teacher will each receive \$75, and the third-place student and teacher will get \$50. Winners and honorable mentions will be published in the May-June 2012 issue of L.A. Youth and on layouth.com.

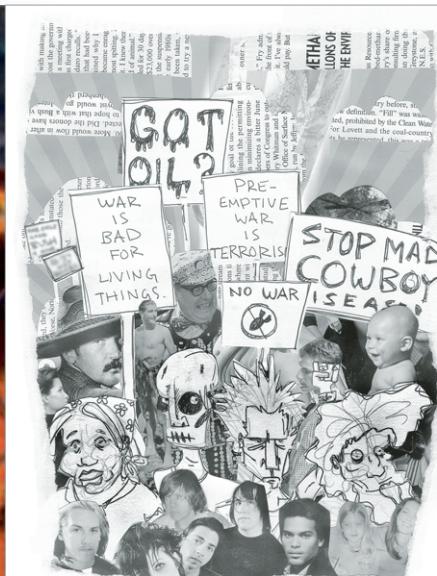
Questions?

Contact us at (323) 938-9194
or editor@layouth.com.

DEADLINE:
MARCH 31,
2012

Send your submission to:
L.A. Youth Injustice Art Contest
5967 W. Third St., Suite 301
Los Angeles, CA 90036

1ST PLACE
\$100
2ND PLACE
\$75
3RD PLACE
\$50



Illustrations from L.A. Youth archives

Art has always been used as a form of expression. Since the beginning of civilization, artists have been using art to communicate their ideas about injustices like oppression, the inhumanity of war, civil rights, political corruption and other issues important to them and their society. That's the true beauty of art. It's more than just a pretty picture—it can carry a message. Art can be a form of protest and a way for artists to try to create change.

For this year's art contest, we want you to create a piece of art about an injustice. It's your chance to raise awareness about an issue you care about. It could be about an unfairness

you see in your community, like bad schools, discrimination against certain groups like gays or minorities, or not enough opportunities for the people who live there. Or it could be an injustice happening around the world, like war, poverty or people living without freedom. Before you get started, think: What do you care about? What do you think is wrong in the world? How can you express your idea visually in a way that other people will understand what you're saying?

We hope these images from L.A. Youth's archives help inspire you. The image of the girl at the fence is about immigration. The artist said he was depicting a young Mexican

girl who has been separated from her family members who are living in America illegally. The fence represents the Mexican border and she is imagining how their lives are. The flag image was the artist's redesign of the American flag. She said, "Everyone says America is the best country, but human rights are still being violated." In the image of the fist, the artist has a more positive message and seems to be saying that we can fight AIDS. And there is an image of people protesting war.

You can also go to <http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld> and click on Guernica to read about Pablo Picasso's famous mural protesting the Spanish Civil War.

Author's name withheld*

I've always worked hard in school because I want to go to college and be successful. But because I'm not a citizen, my hard work could be for nothing. My parents don't have the money to pay for college and I can't get federal financial aid because I don't have a Social Security number. In October, Governor Jerry Brown signed the California Dream Act, which will allow undocumented students like me to get financial help to attend public colleges in California. This made me feel hopeful for my future. However, the state Dream Act doesn't provide a path to citizenship. Even if I graduate from college, would I have to work in a low-wage job? Will my status prevent me from obtaining my dream job as a journalist?

I think it's really unfair that I can't get the same opportunities as a citizen. I grew up here like any other student. Some people say that undocumented immigrants are criminals because they came here illegally. But I don't consider myself a criminal because it wasn't my choice to come here. My parents brought me here because they believed they could provide a better education and a better life for me and my sister.

When I was 2 my parents left my older sister and me with my grandma and came to the United States. They were trying to give us a better life than what they had in Mexico. We were living in a small one-room house and my sister and I were sharing a bed with our parents. Their plan was to live in the United States for a few years and then return to Mexico once they made enough to buy a house in Mexico, pay for our education and open a business. But they stayed because they weren't able to make enough money. We were brought to the United States right before I turned 3 and my sister was 5 because my mother missed us and she couldn't bear being apart from us. Three years later my little sister was born here and a few years after that my brother was born.

Once I was here for a few years I forgot about Mexico and the United States became my home. I liked McDonalds for the toys in the Happy Meals. One of my favorite things to do was watch cartoons, like Ren & Stimpy, Looney Toons and Animaniacs. I didn't know English but the TV shows were helping me learn it.

When we were young my mother would tell us to do well in school so we wouldn't end up like her and my father. I don't think they understood that attending college was hard if you're undocumented. They worked as street vendors. They'd wake up at 3 a.m. to prepare the *champurrado*, a drink like hot chocolate. They'd leave the house at 6 a.m., carrying the champurrado and heavy pots full of tamales. They'd get home at 10 a.m., rest and then prepare for the next day. They always seemed busy buying ingredients and making the tamales. But they still dedicated time to my sister and me. They'd wake us up and get us ready for school. My mom would take us to school with her cart full of tamales.

MY MOM PUSHED US TO WORK HARD

After I go home from school I would finish my homework and go outside to play with my friends. When my mother saw me playing she'd tell me to come inside and read a book or do extra math problems. She would tell us that nobody's

* We're running this story anonymously to protect the identity of the writer, who is an undocumented immigrant.

What now?

As an undocumented immigrant,
it's unfair that all my hard work
might not lead to college



Photo by Sarah Barnes, 14,
New Village Charter HS

born smart and we need to study and that's how you become successful.

I wasn't aware that I was illegal until fifth grade. We took a trip to Mexico because my aunt was getting married. Coming back, my younger sister got on the plane with our relatives who were born in the United States. My parents had to cross the border illegally and me and my older sister went through the car line with someone my parents knew. They told us it was because we didn't have the same papers my sister had. We had to pretend we were sleeping. When the Border Patrol agents stopped us and looked inside the car, I felt my heart beating fast, hoping that they wouldn't ask us questions. I knew that if we got caught we would be sent back to Mexico and we wouldn't be with our parents. When we got away from San Diego I felt relieved.

Even though that was a scary experience, I never thought that being undocumented would affect me. I just thought it meant that I couldn't travel to other countries and go back to the United States. I didn't

government." My sister argued that she'd be able to get private scholarships. I realized that she couldn't get financial aid because she was illegal. It confused me since my parents had always told us to work hard and we'd be able to have a better life in the United States, but now they were telling my sister to go to Mexico to pursue a better life.

My sister wanted to be an environmental scientist, which is why she chose Northland College, a small private school in Wisconsin that focuses on environmental science. They offered her \$14,000 in scholarships to help her pay the tuition and housing costs, which were about \$32,000 a year. They also offered her a job to work at the college but she didn't get it. My parents assumed it was because she lacked a Social Security number. It seemed unfair because the school had offered her the job and she was relying on it to help her pay for college. It meant my parents had to pay more but they didn't have that kind of money.

My parents had to pay \$1,000 every month but it was

years, who graduated from high school or got a GED (the high school equivalency exam) and don't have a criminal record, to become legal U.S. residents. They could apply for federal financial aid and work legally. After completing two years of college or military service they could apply for citizenship.

WE WON'T BE A BURDEN IF WE'RE GIVEN A CHANCE TO SUCCEED

Even though I knew that most of the people in Congress didn't support the DREAM Act, it was still disappointing that it didn't get passed. I don't think that it will cost the country money. It'll be a boost to our economy because undocumented students will be able to work. They'll be able to pay taxes and will not be a burden on the government because they can provide for themselves. I understand the people who say that the DREAM Act is helping someone who has broken the law but I don't agree because I didn't have a choice to come here.

I felt like my only option was to go to college in Mexico, until this summer when I attended a science research program at USC. A speaker from a low-income family said he got a full ride from Harvard. I thought that only the government gave you money for college. I realized I could receive private aid from a college and not depend on the government. Later, one of my mentors said I could go to a community college, which wouldn't cost as much, while I waited for the DREAM Act to pass. I decided I would stay in the United States.

But when I told my mother, she brought up the same arguments as always. She said I won't be able to get a job when I graduate. She told me she'd be heartbroken if she saw me working illegally like my dad. I felt discouraged and scared that I wouldn't have any other options than to go to Mexico.

When senior year began, I didn't know what to do. I wanted to stay here but I felt that going to college in the United States was out of reach. How would I pay for college? What would I do after college? But if I go to Mexico, when will I see my family again? Will I be able to return to the United States and work here? In Mexico I hear it's really dangerous to be a journalist.

Then one Sunday in October I read that Gov. Brown signed the California Dream Act (which is different from the federal DREAM Act). The state Dream Act allows undocumented students to get financial aid from California public colleges. The news was exciting. I felt like the struggles of undocumented students were finally being heard.

Now that the California Dream Act has passed, I've decided I'm going to stay here. I told my parents and they told me about a scholarship they had heard about. I felt like they were supporting my decision to stay in the United States for college. I've been researching schools to see which ones offer journalism. And I'm hoping that Congress will pass the federal DREAM Act while I'm in college. If they do, undocumented students won't have to worry as much about how to pay for college and what they're going to do once they graduate. They'll be much more motivated to go to college, knowing that the American dream exists for them.

I don't consider myself a criminal because it wasn't my choice to come here. My parents brought me here because they believed they could provide a better education and a better life for me and my sister.

understand that not having papers meant you aren't a legal U.S. citizen. I always thought I was a citizen because I was living here.

I started realizing in middle school that being illegal meant you had to be careful or else you'll get deported. The news would talk about ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids at workplaces and how the undocumented workers were deported back to their home countries.

Also in middle school my mom started talking to us about college. She always said that she would be the happiest mother in the world if she could see her children at a university like UCLA or Harvard, which were the schools she'd heard about. I really wanted to go to college because I knew it was important. My mother would say to my older sister and me, "Hopefully Congress will pass the DREAM Act someday and you'll be a citizen." I didn't understand what the DREAM Act was or that being a citizen helped you pay for college.

HOW COULD MY FAMILY AFFORD COLLEGE WITHOUT FINANCIAL AID?

When my sister started looking at colleges when I was in 10th grade, I'd overhear her and my parents arguing. They saw that Congress wasn't going to pass the DREAM Act soon so they were trying to persuade her to go to Mexico for college since they didn't have the money to pay for college in the United States. My parents said, "You won't be able to get a loan from the

difficult and they had to borrow money from friends and my uncle. At the end of my sister's first year of school, they owed \$7,000 but they didn't know where to get the money. My sister had to return home without getting her report card since my parents didn't pay the bill.

My parents gave her a decision to make—to pay for her college herself or go to Mexico. She knew that she couldn't come up with the money because without a Social Security number, she couldn't get a job. So she went to Mexico to live with our relatives and study there.

I was sad that my sister had left but I wasn't worrying about what I would do about college because it still seemed far away.

But in 11th grade, people started talking about their dream colleges. I felt it was unfair that I wouldn't be able to go to college here. My parents pay taxes when they buy food and clothes. I've been here my whole life, so why can't I continue my education in this country? If I go to Mexico I'd feel sad not being close to my family.

When the DREAM Act was introduced in Congress again my mom talked to me about it. She'd watch the news and saw that there was no support for it in Congress. She'd say, "You see what's happening? This is why you should go to Mexico." I wanted to stay in the U.S. but I wouldn't say anything because she seemed right.

I wanted to find out more about the DREAM Act so I Googled it. I learned that it's a proposed bill in Congress that would allow undocumented students who have been in the United States for at least five

Undocumented students get help to pay for college

I was happy that the California Dream Act passed, but I wondered if it was right to give financial aid to illegal residents

By Kristy Plaza

17, Duarte HS

I've always supported the federal DREAM Act, a bill that would give undocumented students financial aid for college and a path to citizenship. I believe that it shouldn't matter what your citizenship status is because education should be for anyone who wants to be successful. So when I heard that the governor signed the California Dream Act, which is similar, I was excited. The state law allows undocumented students to apply for state financial aid to attend public colleges in California. I have a relative who grew up in California but who isn't a legal citizen. He graduated from high school and was going to community college, but he stopped after a year. He had no money to pay for the classes and couldn't get a loan or grant because he's undocumented so he saw it as pointless. Now that the California Dream Act has passed, I believe that he will go back to college because he wants to succeed.

However, there's another side to this. I have a friend who told me that she and her family came to the United States legally on visas, and they are on the long journey to citizenship. They have been here for seven years and are still waiting to become permanent residents. Is it fair for undocumented students to get financial aid for their schooling when they haven't waited in line like my friend has? Recently at a staff meeting at

L.A. Youth, we talked about the passage of this law and what it means. Some staff members said it wasn't right that illegal residents could take away financial aid from legal students.

I wanted to know how the California Dream Act will affect people like my relative and my friend. So I interviewed Erik Fallis, the media relations manager for the California State University system. After doing this interview, I have high hopes that this law won't prevent residents from getting financial aid and that undocumented students will feel safe applying.

L.A. Youth: Are grants limited or unlimited? So if an undocumented student gets a grant, does that mean a legal resident misses out? Fallis: Need-based Cal Grants are potentially unlimited. They only real limit is the state's willingness to fund them. But for our competitive Cal Grants, there are a limited number available. Only after resident students receive funding do we start giving non-resident students competitive Cal Grants [the Cal States use the term "non-resident" instead of "undocumented" because that's the term the state law uses]. But in order to receive financial aid, the non-resident students need to have attended a California high school for three years and graduated from a California high school or earned a GED or its equivalent. [They also must show financial need and meet academic requirements.]

TWO ACTS THAT HELP UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS

There are two parts to the California Dream Act. The first, which Governor Jerry Brown signed into law in July, gives undocumented students access to private scholarships (non-government money). The second part, which the governor signed into law in October, allows them to receive public financial aid like community college fee waivers, Cal Grants and other aid from the UCs and Cal States. It goes into effect in 2013, although some Republican lawmakers have said they will try to repeal it.

The state Dream Act is different from the federal DREAM Act, which is a bill in the U.S. Congress that has not been voted on. The DREAM Act, which stands for the Development, Relief

and Education for Alien Minors Act, would provide a path to college and citizenship.

If signed into law, the federal DREAM Act would give people who came to the United States when they were 15 or younger a chance to become citizens if they met certain requirements. If they graduate from high school or get a GED and are accepted to college, they could work legally and get a driver's license. They also would be able to get federal student loans and work study. They would not be eligible for federal Pell Grants.

Individuals would have six years to complete two years of college or vocational school or military service, while avoiding a criminal record. Then they would be granted permanent resident status and could remain in the United States legally. They could then apply for citizenship.



Kristy says that even though it's not always easy to get a college education, it's worth it because it will give you a better future.

How many undocumented students do you expect will now qualify for financial help across the Cal State system? We are not making any predictions. Out of our total student population (412,000), less than 1 percent of students are in this situation, a total of 3,827 students.

Do you expect to get more applications from undocumented students? We have no expectations but we know that it is a financial hardship for some students to attend college without financial aid.

In addition to Cal Grants, there are also grants that the Cal States give out. Are those limited or unlimited? Those would be limited based on what funding is available [the grants are funded by students when they pay tuition]. Since the law would make non-resident students eligible for these grants, it may affect students whose families have incomes at the very top range of state university grant participants. But when you're talking about less than 1 percent of the student population, that's still going to be a pretty small percentage.

Is it safe for an undocumented student to reveal their status in seeking out this aid? CSU takes [state laws that protect students' privacy] very seriously. When seeking financial aid, students don't need to tell us [their citizenship status], but they must demonstrate that they meet the criteria for the financial aid. This may require the student to submit said information, but it's very rare when individual student information is released. This information can't be released without the expressed consent of the student. CSU doesn't release names, just numbers like the total number who apply, in order to protect the individual identity of students.

Why did the CSU system support the state Dream Act? We believe that an educated student is a benefit to California and to their community. Students deserve the opportunity to better their lives.

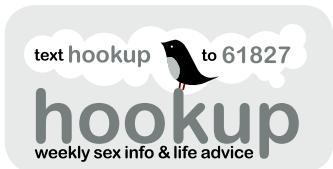


Hooking up?

→ Visit Teensource.org to find your nearest reproductive health clinic or get teen-friendly sexual health info. You can also get hooked-up with teen-focused sex info and life advice by texting HOOKUP to 61827. Sign up today for weekly text messages.*

* standard rates apply

SEX + HEALTH
+ YOU
teensource.org



Are projects of the California Family Health Council

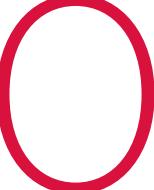
Tell Us What You Think!

The screenshot shows the homepage of LA Youth, a newspaper for and about teens. At the top, there's a large graphic of various teens. Below it, the header reads "LA Youth" with "the newspaper for and about teens". Navigation links include "FOR TEEN YOUTH", "GOALS", "GET A JOB", "JOIN US", "HOME", "EDITORIAL", and "LEVEL UP". A search bar says "Search Archives". On the left, there are sections for "About Us", "Teen Staff", "Archives", "Editors Blog", "For Teachers", "For Parents", "For Media", and "For Advertisers". In the center, there's an article titled "FRESH FOOD INSTEAD OF FAST FOOD" about a community garden. Another article discusses "BRINGING ANIMÉ TO LIFE". On the right, there's a "DONATE TO LA YOUTH" button, a "POLL" section asking "What's your favorite thing about the rain?", and social media links for "Find us on Facebook" and "twitter". A "SCHOOL CUTS SURVEY" is also mentioned.

Go to layouth.com to vote in our poll and let us know what you think about a story by leaving a comment. You can also share the stories that you like on Facebook.

L.A. youth
www.layouth.com

By Elizabeth Vidar
17, North Hollywood HS Zoo Magnet

 On Sunday, Oct. 16, I woke up at 6:30 a.m., sleepy. But when I realized what I was about to do I jumped out of bed and put on my AIDS Walk T-shirt. I texted my friends to make sure they were awake and getting ready to go walk. I changed my Facebook status to "Getting ready for AIDS Walk 2011!"

I had been getting ready for this since the summer when I started recruiting people at my school to do the

AIDS Walk. We raised money by making T-shirts and selling them to the kids and parents at my school. The shirts were designed by my friend Roxanne and we wore them during the AIDS Walk. We sold about 40 T-shirts for \$10 each and donated the \$200 profit the morning of the walk. People who couldn't walk still bought the shirt because they could contribute to AIDS Walk without walking, and they liked the design. It was an easier way to raise money than asking someone to donate \$10.

The AIDS Walk raises money for AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA). The money goes toward HIV prevention and to support people living with HIV and AIDS. I've organized a team from my school for the past three years.

It is important to me because I know people who have HIV, including family and friends. They've remained healthy because they're controlling the HIV with drugs and it hasn't developed into AIDS yet. I know there are many other people in the same situation who are being helped by the AIDS Walk.

The morning of the walk I was so excited that I skipped breakfast because I wanted to get out the door. Some of my friends met me at my house and then we picked up the rest of my friends. When we arrived at the park in West Hollywood where all the teams meet up, we saw a bunch of kids from our school in their T-shirts, signing in and getting ready to walk. I felt good that the

people I had recruited had more than 20 peo-

SIX MILES AREN'T S
WHEN YOU'RE WIT

Getting ready to st
The most exciting tim
cause the team wasn'
The six miles that we
year our team finds w
were people from oth
cheers and our team
had a balloon on her b



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

(Above) Hessed Porras, David Yang and Caetano Santos, all 17, goof around. (Right) Edgar Carpio and Christian Antwine, both 17, represent their school.

Photos by Christian Santiago, 18, Santa Monica College, and Elizabeth Vidar, 17, North Hollywood HS Zoo Magnet

FIGHTING AIDS WITH

ed from my school showed up. We people on our team.

SO BAD H FRIENDS

art, everyone was packed together. me was right when we started be tired and we were all still together. walk each year are long, but every ways to make them exciting. There er schools doing call-and-response started doing them too. My friend elt loop. She walked under scaffold-

ing and it got stuck. Her eyes got big and we all laughed. The balloon came off her belt loop and flew away.

About 15 minutes into the walk we turned a corner and there were people protesting. They held signs that said things like "Homo Sex is Sin." I wasn't surprised because I had seen protesters at AIDS Walk before but it's frustrating every year. I can't believe they're protesting finding a cure for a disease. Having a disease isn't a lifestyle that somebody chooses. Protesting someone wanting to be healthy doesn't make sense. My friend Anabelle said to me, "I just wish we could walk in peace."

We were tired but proud when we crossed the finish line. We were all hot and my friend Devon started a

water fight with Dana and Angela. Dana got drenched. I laughed about it even though Dana did not feel the same way. We got handed our certificates and our team gave each other high fives and took pictures. Crossing the finish line made me feel great about what I accomplished.

I went home, showered and then laid around because I was really tired and my feet hurt. But one afternoon of feeling tired is worth contributing to an event I feel is important. This year the AIDS Walk raised \$3 million and had about 30,000 walkers. I felt accomplished and like I had wrapped up a cool part of my life since I'm a senior and I won't be organizing my school's team anymore. It was a good end to three years of supporting a great cause.

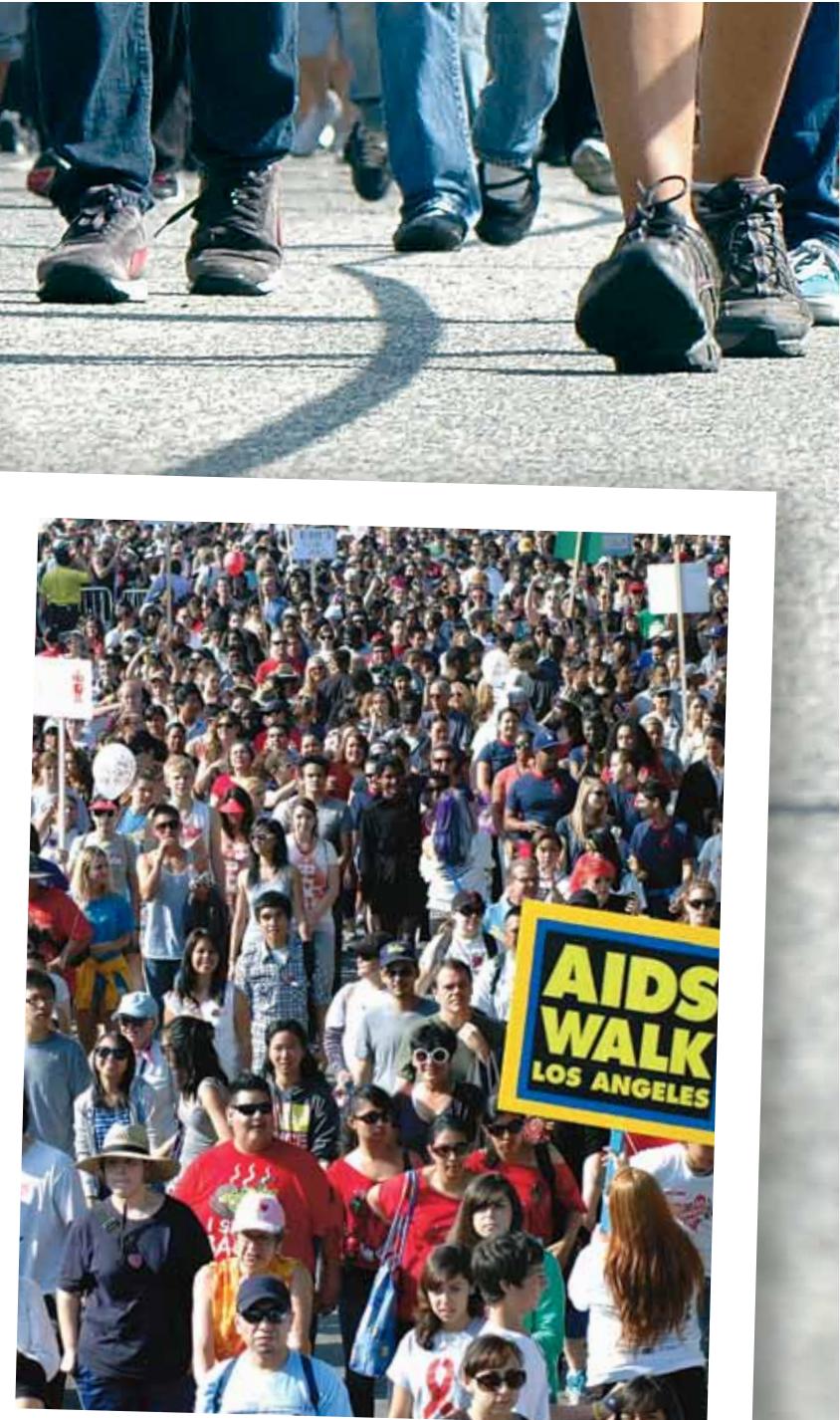


Elizabeth says raising money for AIDS Project Los Angeles helps people get treatment, testing, support groups and much more.

I know that I will continue to support APLA even after I graduate. I can't wait to hear who will continue the AIDS Walk tradition at my school after I'm gone.

THE AIDS WALK
WAS FUN AND
I FELT GOOD RAISING
MONEY FOR AN
IMPORTANT CAUSE

EVERY STEP



College essays that worked

To show you what colleges are looking for, here are essays former L.A. Youth writers wrote when they applied

By Ben Bang

According to Google Maps, for the past two years, I have been living exactly 5,987 miles away from my family. My family came to America in 2007 from the Republic of Korea when my dad was selected as a visiting professor at Cal State Fullerton for a year. After his time was done, my parents and older sister returned to Korea. But I chose to stay behind because I found the United States' education system more attractive than Korea's due to its greater focus on individualism and freedom. My parents understood my perspective and so my mom set me up with a homestay. Because I have no relatives in the U.S., I was in a whole new environment with no one to rely on but myself.

Separation meant freedom at first. My guardians rarely took the initiative to bother me about my grades. My mom's authority over me was inversely related to the physical distance between us. Everything I did was completely up to me. I was thrilled to have total independence. I could binge on video games for days and days without anyone nagging me.

But soon, my autonomy turned out to be a curse rather than a blessing. Feelings of loneliness, the burden of responsibility, and lack of guidance quickly overshadowed the joy of freedom. First of all, I was painfully alone. In a new neighborhood and a new country, fitting into a group of students who speak a totally different language was intimidatingly hard. People were nice to me, but I was never able to feel as natural as when I was in Korea with my family. Slowly, however, I found my niche at school and church.

Along with the social hurdle was a higher hurdle of responsibility. School forms, cell phone bills, daily chores

quickly took over the time I spent for my own entertainment. At some point, I was angry at the ironic fact that I had to take care of someone—myself. Then it struck me that this was what my parents had felt when they were cleaning my mess all the time. I didn't complain about my work after that. It became second nature to fill out my address, insurance subscriber number, last tetanus shot date, and my checking account number. I had to attend both the parent and student meetings for school, sports and extracurricular activities. With no one nagging me, I had to pinch myself to work whenever I felt like procrastinating. In addition, because I didn't have my parents with me, I sought out my own network of friends and counselors whom I could ask for any kind of advice.

My pastor once said to take struggles as blessings, as they provide chances to grow in character. He was right. These past two years of struggles and separation from my family helped me develop my character and achieve my goal of becoming a well-educated, independent person. Also, even with this great chasm between us, my family has greatly influenced me. I dream of becoming a great businessman following the footsteps of my business professor dad and possessing my mom's outgoing and brave personality. I gradually figured out that my world is a value that is neither fixed nor stationary. It is a continuous accumulation of my family's influence and my own experiences. It does not matter where I go or who I am with because my world always resides in me. My first adventure turned out to be a success, and I am very excited to embark on a bigger one in college.

Ben Bang is a Palos Verdes Peninsula High School graduate who now attends UC Berkeley.



Ben Bang

By Audrey Salas

I do not watch TV. It is not that I hate it. It is just that it has rarely conjured up enough interest for me to make it a priority in my life. Books, school, friends, and family were much more interesting than the junk on TV. As a result, I considered myself above the schmucks who wasted hours of their lives in front of the tube. Unfortunately, as fate would have it, I was blackmailed by my boyfriend into watching the 2005 series of Doctor Who. It is a show about time travel that first aired in 1963 and taped its last episode in 1989. It disappeared for 16 years and for good reason: the computer animation was horrible, the plot lines outrageous, and the soundtrack beyond cheesy. Despite all of that, the ninth Doctor (played by Christopher Eccleston), and his beautiful companion in time travel, Rose (played by Billie Piper), changed the way I viewed the world and the "schmucks" in it.

Doctor Who is one of those shows most people would not openly admit to liking; its mystery and comedy are best reserved for hardcore nerds who do not have a reputation to harm in the first place. That was me, so I figured watching it could not damage anything but my own self-respect. Despite the fact that I knew I was a nerd, I still thought that I was better than people like my boyfriend who spent their time watching that kind of stuff. I thought that being book smart and occasionally witty would be enough to advance my social status in the world. I was being a pretentious twit.

I would not admit it to myself, but I was getting much too attached to the storyline. Each episode seemed to desensitize me to its corniness. With every battle the Doctor and Rose won against intergalactic fiends, my face got closer and closer to my glowing computer screen. With every intimate, verging-on-point-of-love scene the Doctor and Rose shared, my heart thudded louder than the lame sci-fi music coming from my red Lego speakers. When it came time to watch the Doctor's final episode, I could not help the sinking sensation in my stomach. It was coming. Christopher Eccleston, an actor and personality whom I had come to love, was not going to be a part of the Doctor Who universe anymore. Worse still was the fact that the romance he built with Rose could be destroyed by his change in personality. When it finally did happen and the season ended, I bawled for a good ten minutes.

A few tissues and a hot, steamy shower later, I realized that I had become what I had previously considered to be a loser: a TV show-watching schmuck. I allowed a mere TV show to humble me into embittered tears and an embarrassingly unrelenting emotional attachment. The funny thing was that I was better for it. I lost the stupid idea that I was better than anyone just because they were doing something they enjoyed. I was being the real loser, but thanks to the Doctor, I am not like that anymore. I learned to embrace people's interests and accept that even something as cheesy and lame as Doctor Who could make a positive difference in someone's view of the world. Thanks, Doctor.

Audrey Salas is a Bravo Medical Magnet High School graduate who now attends UCLA.



By Esteban Garcia

I could feel my stomach turn as the girl next to me ended her response. I cleared my throat and addressed the members of the press assembled for the Teen Roundtable on Community Violence in the offices of L.A. Youth, a newspaper by and for teenagers. I spoke about the occasional outbreaks of violence at my school and in my community but also of the general sense of security I feel. I was pleased, confident in my response. But the next girl made what I had said seem like an illusion. My own words of security were destroyed by her story of death threats and sleeping with fear.

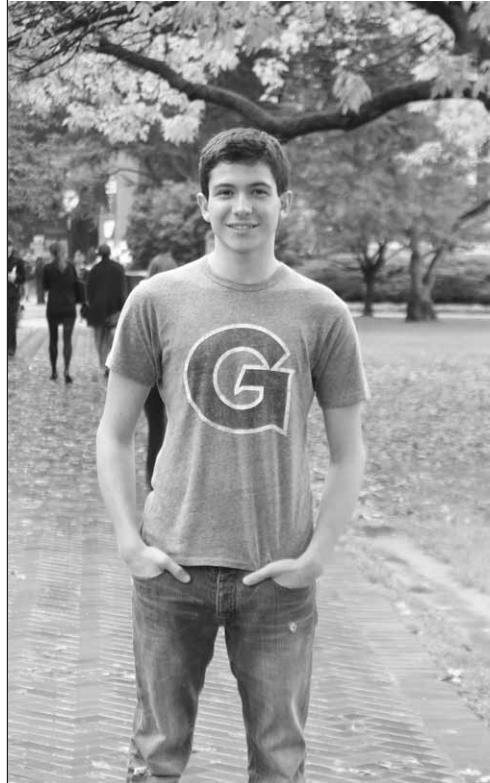
Of the five different teens assembled there from across the city, I knew only her. Despite living in the same general area, her experience with violence shocked me. Thus far, I had lived a life in which violence was a series of images of gangsters and thugs, people who looked nothing like me. It happened to other people in other places, and I had never been touched by it. But words of fear from someone I went to school with shocked me. After the initial shock, however, came a period of reckoning. I opened my eyes to the realities of living in an area of great diversity. Diversity itself changed for me. I no longer saw cartoon images of children of different colors, but I instead recounted that story of the struggles of my schoolmate. I slowly came to recognize that diversity lies not in coming from different countries and eating different foods. It comes from living entirely different realities.

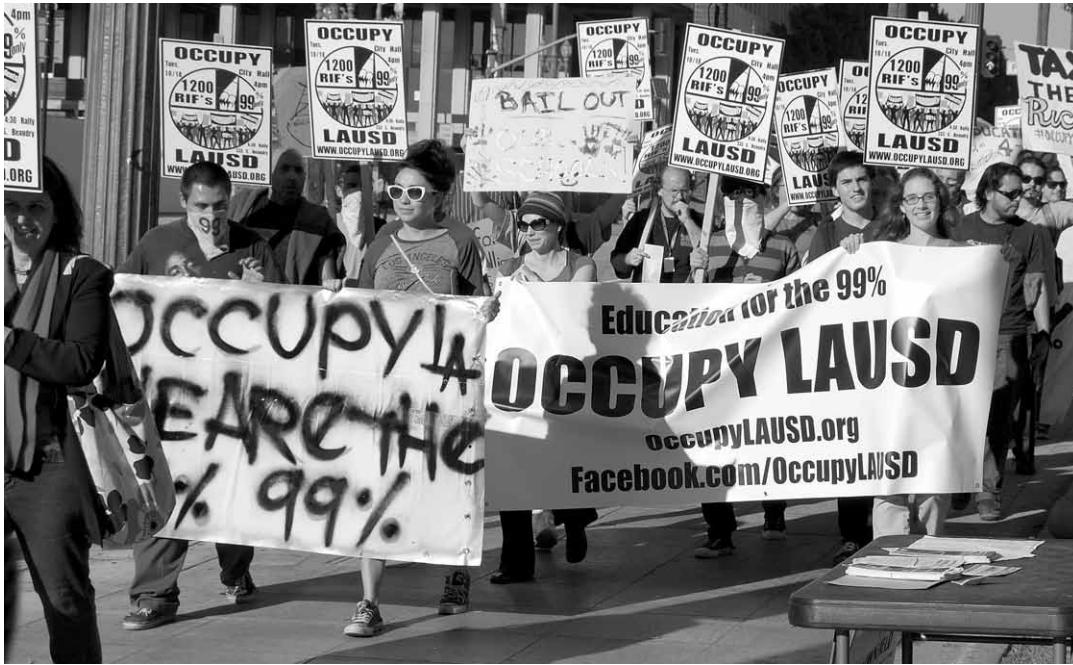
Following the conference, I made an effort to continue my exposure. I spoke to the friends I already had and made new ones in an effort to really absorb the opportunity I had in living in such a diverse area as Southern California. I again listened intently as another friend spoke of her struggles as a smart, strong female in a home in which traditional Arab Orthodoxy was in full force. While I could not feel what she was feeling, I did come to appreciate her strength and the wealth that her experiences and those of others I spoke to brought to my environment.

The future life I would like to live is one in which diversity is not

a cartoon image but a working reality. My efforts now to understand how others live have not only armed me with an appreciation for diversity but with an important skill: the ability to make connections. In exposing myself to others, I have learned how to draw links between my own life, what I already know, and what new information is provided me. It is this skill that will serve me well on my path of higher education and beyond.

Esteban Garcia is a Warren High School graduate who now attends Georgetown.





Protesting school cuts

We saw lots of teachers but not many teens at the Occupy LAUSD march

By Jazmine Mendoza

16, Valley Regional HS #5 (San Fernando)

Occupy LAUSD was my first protest. I was excited to go because I think that it's important for teachers and students to have their voices heard protesting school cuts. The march was organized by teachers and school staff who want people who have lost their jobs because of budget cuts to be re-hired.

When I got to City Hall after school on Oct. 18, I saw a group of people with posters that had messages about education written on them. I joined the group and started marching with them to Los Angeles Unified School District headquarters. I was disappointed that I didn't see any students. I had mentioned it to my friends. Although they seemed interested in the cause, they didn't come. I had imagined thousands of students and teachers overcrowding the streets to call attention to teacher layoffs and budget cuts. When I didn't see that many people marching, I figured they would all be at LAUSD headquarters.

During the one-mile march, which took about 30 minutes, the marchers waved at cars and were getting interviewed. I thought the teachers marching would be mad because they had been laid off but instead they

were enthusiastic.

It excited me that teachers, librarians, custodians and school counselors were taking action by protesting. As we walked, drivers honked to support us, which made me glad. I started yelling some of the chants like, "Money for jobs and education, not for war and corporations."

When we got to LAUSD headquarters I still didn't see any teens. I was disappointed because I wanted students to be represented. When the speakers were talking they each seemed to be bringing up the same issues—wanting teachers, nurses, librarians and librarian aids back. But I didn't hear many people mention how the layoffs have affected students. Like when teachers get laid off, it's not fair that students end up in overcrowded classrooms.

I still believe in the cause we were protesting for, but the Occupy LAUSD demonstration didn't seem like the best way to solve the problem.



By Nicholas Robinson

16, Cortines School of Visual and Performing Arts

I arrived at Los Angeles City Hall in downtown half an hour early to check out the Occupy LA protest. I had heard about it in my history class and on the news. About 200 tents surrounded City Hall. There were protest signs taped to trees, people playing bongo drums and I got a whiff of pot. But I was more interested in the Occupy LAUSD protest that was about to begin. I went because it bothers me that we have fewer counselors and custodians at my school and that teachers everywhere are losing their jobs.

At 4 p.m. a woman who helped organize the protest got on a megaphone and said, "We're starting the march." Only around 30 people were there. It wasn't very impressive. She said that we were marching because of the cuts to teachers, custodians, nurses, etc., and how it's hurting students. She also said that the Los Angeles Unified School District had a budget surplus of \$55 million and the district was using it to pay administrators. I was surprised. Every time students at my school have asked why we can't get materials like textbooks and lab equipment, we were told that there was no money in the budget.

Before we walked toward LAUSD headquarters just west of downtown, we walked around City Hall. Midway, I noticed that the crowd had grown from 30 to around 150 people. As we walked the crowd was chanting things like, "We are the 99 percent" and "Banks got paid off, teachers got laid off!"

It was a mix of people who were from Occupy LA and people dressed professionally, who I assumed were teachers. I go to school only a 15-minute walk from City Hall, so I was disappointed that I saw only one person I knew, a Spanish teacher I had for a

few weeks before I dropped his class. I was hoping that a protest about education would have more teens involved.

When we arrived at LAUSD headquarters we gathered on the sidewalk in front

of the building's entrance. People held up giant banners as teachers and others spoke about the increased class sizes and how some students don't have college counselors to help them. After about 30 minutes, they let anyone who wanted come up and talk on the microphone. Some of the speakers made outlandish comments like tax the media and destroy capitalism.

I felt the things the few extremist speakers said made the entire protest look bad and I worried that the protest's most important message wouldn't be taken seriously. But while I didn't enjoy the protest as much as I hoped, I agreed with the message of bringing teachers, nurses and custodians back.

By Haley King

16, Marshall Fundamental HS (Pasadena)

I love ballet but when I'm tired after school or I can't hang out with friends or I have to stay up late doing schoolwork because of practice, I think my life would be easier without it.

I started taking ballet when I was 3 years old. Every year my ballet studio put on a performance of The Nutcracker during Christmas time. The choreography was so much fun because we were characters. When I was a soldier we marched with candy cane "guns." After every performance my grandma would give me roses from her garden that filled our house with the smell of flowers.

Eighth grade was a good ballet year. Although classes were four times a week, they were only an hour long. That year I began going on pointe. Pointe is when you go all the way up on your toes wearing pointe shoes. It was strange standing on my toes for the first time. We all had fun looking in the mirror and seeing how pretty being in the shoes made us look. It didn't hurt that day because we did simple exercises like lifting up and down. Going on pointe made me feel like I had grown as a dancer. Dancing was now a bigger part of my life. I began to take it more seriously and I was able to do more moves, like turning on pointe.

In high school I had more homework and ballet classes got harder because we were on pointe for the whole class. But I never seriously thought about quitting ballet. How could I leave my friends? How would I get exercise? What would I do every day after school?

SO MANY TIMES I WISHED I COULD SKIP CLASS

In 10th grade classes were an hour and a half long. Monday and Wednesday pointe class started at 5:15 p.m. I came home from school around 3:30 p.m. and would get myself a snack. After that I would lie down, maybe watch TV, and just relax until I had to start getting ready. I'd lie on my couch and look at the time on my phone, thinking, "OK, I have four minutes left. If I get up in four minutes I'll be good." Sometimes I'd think, "Why am I still doing this? I wish I could just stay home." When it's hot I hate the thought of putting on tights. But when those minutes were up I dragged myself off the couch and slowly began the routine I knew so well. I was usually in a rush to get out the door, running around grabbing everything I needed, making sure my mom knew it was time for me to go.

I'd get back home at 7 p.m. and have dinner right away. Then I started my homework and I went to sleep around midnight. I had history tests every week and



Haley says school is way harder junior year, but ballet relieves her stress.



Stretched for time

Sometimes it's hard to fit ballet into my schedule, but I love it too much to quit

would sometimes stay up until 1:30 a.m. studying for them. I would think, "Oh man if I didn't go to ballet I could have started studying right when I got home and could have gone to bed by 11:30 p.m." Sometimes if I had too much homework, I'd tell my mom and she would let me skip class.

My friends think it's cool that I do ballet and love to watch me perform. But it's annoying when we have to schedule our plans around ballet. I have class Friday nights so I always say, "I can't do Friday but Saturday is good." It's the worst when I'm not in charge of the plans so I have to miss out but there is nothing I can do. Once I had to miss the first two hours of my best friend's birthday party because I had Nutcracker rehearsal.

However, any negative thoughts about ballet drift away when I get to class. A typical ballet class begins with about 30 minutes of warming up on the barre (the ballet term for the bar). Then we come to the center. We do combinations from the corner going across the room, from the back of the room coming forward, and in lines. We usually end with big leaps across the floor.

Ballet soothes me. One time I was really mad at my mom before class and in a bad mood. I didn't want to go to class but I forced myself to go because I knew I

would feel guilty if I didn't. My mom and I were arguing in the car the whole way over. After I slammed the car door shut I walked into class and found a spot at the barre. The second our pianist started playing slow classical music and we began pliés, an exercise where you bend your knees while keeping your back straight, I felt calm. No one in the class knew how upset I was. I thought, "I'm going to leave that all behind and have a good class." Afterward I felt so much better and I wasn't even mad at my mom anymore.

Performances are still amazing too. I love being backstage. The energy is so high and fast paced. As soon as I hear the music for my dance I know to get ready to run on. When I'm on stage with the lights shining on me, I become a whole new person. All of my hard work seems worth it when I'm up there dancing. I have to remember the choreography and watch the other girls so that we are all together with the music. When we are done with our part we run off stage and wait in the wings for the curtain call.

This year I'm dancing five days a week. It's intense but I don't see myself stopping. When I get something right or do something I couldn't do the day before it feels incredible. Ballet makes me feel refreshed and calm and like I can do anything. I need dance in my life.

DISTRACTIONS ARE ALL around us—Facebook, YouTube, texting, TV. It's sometimes so overwhelming that it can be hard to focus on homework. So we challenged these teens to do their homework without distractions for three days. They were allowed to take breaks to do things like check their Facebook, go on YouTube, talk to their friends or watch TV, but they couldn't do those things while doing their homework.

By Moviz Dar

18, Hawthorne HS

I usually come home after school and eat, sleep for one to three hours and then watch videos on YouTube. I promise myself that I'll start my homework the next hour but it never happens. I do my homework from 9

p.m. until midnight. I knew that starting my homework at 9 was bad because I wasn't getting all my work done.

On the first day of the challenge, I deactivated my Facebook account and put my phone on silent. My brain was telling me every second that I had to log onto Facebook and reply to text messages I assumed I had. But I was able to resist. I finished my economics homework in half an hour. I usually take two hours. And I finished all of my homework one hour earlier than normal and got eight hours of sleep.

Even though I got homework done faster, I felt like I was stuck in a cage and being forced to do it. So on the last two days I went back to my old habits. I texted, watched YouTube videos and went on Facebook while doing my homework. Because of all the distractions, I stayed up until 1 a.m.

I realized that if I want to do my homework fast I need to remove the distractions around me. When the three days were over, I wanted to do my homework without distractions but I was unsuccessful again and again. One day I didn't even do my homework. I woke up at 4 a.m. and I rushed through it but I didn't have enough time and I finished only half of it. When my English teacher said, "OK, turn in your homework," I felt guilty that I let myself procrastinate.

By Jazmine Mendoza

16, Valley Regional HS #5 (San Fernando)

I was excited to do this challenge because I need to learn to stay focused. I do my homework with my computer on because I listen to music. When I get bored I check Facebook or spend an hour listening to new bands on YouTube. When I call a friend for homework help, or



Photo by Elizabeth Vidar, 17,
North Hollywood HS Zoo Magnet

Too much temptation

It was hard for these teens to give up Facebook, YouTube and texting while doing their homework

to take a break, I end up talking for hours.

I was confident the first day. I left my computer and phone on because I wanted to challenge myself by keeping temptations nearby. I felt more focused because I wasn't thinking about checking my Facebook every five minutes. I spent only three hours doing homework instead of the six to seven hours I usually take. I even had time to read for pleasure before going to bed. The following day at school I felt better prepared because without distractions, I had fully understood the homework.

During the second night I found myself dozing off and getting bored since I was used to going online or calling a friend when my homework got hard. I didn't want to cave in though, so I dedicated myself to doing portions of my homework for about an hour and then taking five-minute breaks. I didn't use the breaks to go online though, because I knew that I'd stay on longer than five minutes. Instead I cleaned my room, got a snack or saw what my family was doing. Then I continued my homework more refreshed.

I repeated the same routine the third day, and will try to keep that routine from now on. Spending less time on Facebook made it less important. I knew I wasn't missing out on much because I could go on later and nothing had changed. It feels good being on the computer less.

By Jessica Marin

17, Culver City HS

The first day, I forgot that I had to be distraction free until I realized it took me 30 minutes to come back to a government question because I was texting my friends and checking my email. When I stopped replying to

texts, I finished my homework in less than 20 minutes. I was able to work on college applications the rest of the night and go to sleep before 11. I usually stay up until midnight and spend about four hours doing homework.

The next two days were not as successful. I tried not to get distracted by my phone but I couldn't help it. I could have moved it away from my desk, but what if I missed an important call or text? Like what if my friend broke up with her boyfriend? I'm so attached to my phone that if I don't have it near me I feel like a part of me is missing, which is not normal—it is just an object. Text messages would come in, I would ignore them but then another message would come in and another one after that one. I gave in and texted and called my best friend. We didn't even talk about anything important, just the usual rundown of how our day went and complaints about our homework.

My mom said she knew I would fail this challenge because according to her I'm "addicted" to my phone. In my defense, the challenge worked for one day but then I went back to how things usually are, staying up until midnight. But I'm OK with that because I feel like I need mini-distractions during homework or else I'd go crazy.

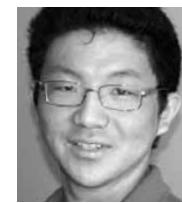


By Brian Yu

17, Walnut HS

I knew the challenge would for the most part be cake. Last year I would go on Facebook or Tumblr while doing my homework. I would also go on YouTube for a lecture and get distracted by the sidebar, wasting an hour or two on random links. So I installed an app on my browser called Stayfocusd. I gave myself 50 minutes a day for browsing and once those minutes were up, the sites were blocked. My only distraction now is instant messaging my friends about girls, classes and schoolwork.

For the challenge I chose the Stayfocusd option that didn't let me browse at all, and I didn't log in to AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) until I was done with my homework. I came home from band practice at 7 p.m. and napped for two hours before starting my homework. I got bored while working on my essay about Fidel Castro and I had the urge to use AIM or check out videos on YouTube.



However, I was doing the challenge so I made myself a sandwich and went back to work. After I finished my stuff, it was around 2 a.m. Not bad for a school night; I usually finish around 3.

On Day 2, I went home after band practice and woke up around 8. I put on my headphones and started my AP Spanish homework. It wasn't hard staying off the Internet. Because band practice leaves me exhausted, I just wanted to finish my homework and go to sleep. I finished around 12, which was faster than usual.

On Day 3, I studied for my history test and did my homework for my other classes. Occasionally I would wonder what my friends were up to and how they were doing, but the essays I had to outline brought me back to reality (and homework) really fast.

This distraction-free way isn't hard, but a little too restrictive for me. I like to have AIM open on my browser window to have a friend to talk to while I'm working. You can only focus so much before you get distracted. Taking breaks helps keep me refreshed.

By Maria Khan

17, Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies

I'm always telling my friends how exhausted I am because I stayed up until midnight doing my homework and woke up at 5 a.m. to finish it. Little did I know that I spend most of my time texting, instant messaging and on Facebook.

The first night I decided to socialize until 6:30 p.m. and then start the challenge. Bad idea to start off with dessert before dinner. A few hours later, I'm talking to five people on AIM, listening to music videos they sent me, helping them with their homework and feeling guilty for being on for so long! I didn't start my homework until 9 p.m. The first 30 minutes, my hands felt awkward not grabbing my phone every five minutes. I had to turn my phone off and put it in another room. Except that didn't work since I ran across the house to grab it because I "had" to tell my

friend to bring me blue nail polish the next day. So I gave it to my older sister to hide. After those first 30 minutes were over, I focused on my homework and finished in an hour and 40 minutes. Usually three hours is a minimum. I did not go to bed at midnight for once!

The second night I was stressed from all the assignments and tests I had. Learning from the night before, I started my homework right away. I spent an hour in the middle on a shower/dinner break and 30 minutes before going to bed replying to my messages. I went to bed at 11 p.m.

The third night, I was able to leave my phone turned off on my desk. I was tempted to turn on my phone but I didn't and focused on my homework.



The challenge showed me it was worth missing out on talks about who broke up with who. I got more sleep and I felt on top of everything during a stressful week. I've realized I can get my work done as long as I ignore the "dings" and "rings" tempting me.

By Tyler Bradshaw

15, Redondo Union HS

At 7 p.m. I usually turn the radio to 104.3 FM or turn to channel 299 to watch Friends so I can do my homework. I've never seen anything wrong with listening to the radio or watching television while doing homework because that made it fun.

Doing my homework without the radio or TV sounded boring and it was. I told my little brother that he couldn't distract me so he would tiptoe by my bedroom door and peek inside. Because I was bored and was dying for human contact I asked, "What you doin'?" My brother said "Nothing." I continued that useless conversation for two minutes. When my brother wasn't there to spy on me I started singing a song in my head and the next thing I knew I was dancing. One second I was trying to find the value of x, then I was wondering how paper and pencils are made. It took me about an hour to do one homework assignment and I felt even more distracted because I was trying to find anything to do but homework.



The second night I didn't want to do my homework because I knew that it would be boring. When I did start, I was surprised that I did my geometry homework in about 30 minutes. Since it was quiet, I was able to work out the problems without going to the back of the book to look up the answers. Since I finished my homework so quickly, I had time to listen to the radio. The third night I did my history homework in 10 minutes because I wasn't distracted.

Before the challenge I sometimes wouldn't finish my homework, but during the challenge I was turning it in. I would love to say that I will continue doing my homework without the radio or TV, but knowing me, I won't. Homework without the radio or TV is just too boring.

By Tiffany Hattori
15, South HS (Torrance)

I believe that guys and girls can be friends, and not just in a big group but one guy and one girl can be really good friends. I have always been close to guys. Even though people like to assume that we're together or that I like the guy, they are usually wrong. Even if one person starts liking the other, the friendship doesn't have to end, which I say from experience.

I like being friends with guys because I feel like I can trust guys more than girls. It seems like whenever girls find out a secret they almost always tell someone else. In sixth grade I liked this guy and one of my girl friends told everybody. And the guys I've been friends with haven't judged other people as much. When I tell one of my girl friends that I like playing the card game Yu Gi Oh, they're shocked and say, "It's a guy's card game" with a tone that implies I shouldn't be playing it. But a guy I didn't know that well saw me playing one time and he wanted to play me immediately. I also like hanging out with guys because I can be myself. I like to tease and make fun of my friends, but around most girls I have to be more careful about their feelings. I almost made a friend cry once when I made an innocent joke.

In elementary school, I liked how we could just accept friendships. I played tetherball with my girl friends and handball with the boys. No one ever asked me whether I had a crush on any of the boys I played handball with. There was one boy who I called my boyfriend, but it was childish. We were just good friends and since we hung out a lot we thought we "like liked" each other.

By the start of middle school, I realized that boy-girl relationships wouldn't be as innocent as they were in elementary school. In sixth grade I was friends with these four girls and every once in a while I went to play handball with the guys. One day one of the girls told me that the other three hated me and didn't want to be my friend anymore because I hung out with the guys sometimes. I couldn't believe it. I stopped hanging out with those girls because I wanted friends who let me hang out with my other friends too. The guys didn't care that I hung out with the girls, so this showed me that guys were more accepting.

I WAS JUST ONE OF THE GUYS

After that I almost always hung out with my guy friends during lunch and talked to them in classes so I think they saw me as one of them. They even talked about girls in front of me. One of them asked me about a girl he liked. He wanted to know if I thought she was pretty, if she was single and if I thought she had feelings.



Tiffany has made some new guy friends this year who are in band and love video games.

Friendship is enough

Even though it can get complicated, I've been just friends with lots of guys



Illustration by Courtney Loi, 15, Sierra Vista HS (Baldwin Park)

for him. I liked that I was included. The only thing that was bad about being so accepted was that they didn't feel embarrassed making stupid sexual jokes (which weren't even funny) in front of me. I could tell that puberty and hormones were going to make friendship a lot more complicated.

I'll admit that sometimes girl-guy friendships don't work out. In seventh grade I sat next to this cute boy in English. We started talking every day and became friends. Then I thought that I shouldn't think of him as cute, because it could become awkward. But we kept talking and he kept being cute and it became a full-fledged crush.

I told my friend that I liked him and then a week later he asked me out. I squeaked, "yes." The next day I heard that my friend had paid him gum to ask me out. I was so sad that I had my friends ask him if that was true. It was, but he kept saying he actually liked me and would've asked me out anyway. After that I avoided him because I was embarrassed that he was paid to go out with me. We barely talked to each other and English class was awkward the rest of the year. I found out in eighth grade that he never got his gum.

Going into high school I still thought that boys and girls could be the best of friends. I wasn't going to let one bad experience in middle school spoil that belief. During band camp before freshman year I met one of my best guy friends, even though he was a senior and I was a freshman. We marched near each other on the football field so we waved to each other all the time. Pretty soon we started talking during breaks and whenever we saw each other outside of marching band. I felt like we were becoming friends, so one day I asked for his phone number the way that I would with anyone, a girl or a guy.

When he asked me to homecoming I said yes, but I said only if we went as friends. I thought, "We're friends so, yay, let's go." After he asked me, some girls in band I didn't even know asked me if I was going out with him. I thought they were crazy. We didn't hold hands or act like a couple. I didn't even hug him. I wondered why everyone would assume one of us liked the other. Why couldn't a guy and a girl just be friends?

By spring of that year, I ate lunch and played hacky sack with him and his friends every day. We talked about random stuff like video games we liked and also more serious stuff like who we liked. When I told him who I liked, I knew he wouldn't make fun of me and that he wouldn't tell that guy, even though it was one of his friends. He felt like the cool (even though he's actually kind of dorky) older brother I wished I had.

HE ADMITTED HE LIKED ME

One day in May, we were messaging on Facebook about who I liked. He kept telling me to stop talking about the other guy. When I asked why several times he typed, "I like you." I wasn't that surprised. Since asking me to homecoming I had had a feeling that he might. I replied, "I'm sorry" several times until he told me to stop saying that. I also told him that I didn't feel the same.

A few awkward minutes later we were talking about random stuff like YouTube and video games again. Still, I was worried that he might not want to be friends

CAN GUYS AND GIRLS BE JUST FRIENDS?

"Yeah, sure they can, as long as feelings aren't involved because then it gets all complicated. I have a lot of girl friends."

**JESSE ARDON,
17, FAIRFAX HS**

"No, people get hurt. When guys who are my friends like me they flirt with me and make it awkward. I just stop talking to them. Once you start liking each other it's not the same anymore."

**PAULINE SALIGUMBA,
14, WILSON MS
(GLENDALE)**

"Yeah, because not everyone is interested in a relationship."

**ALEX CARRION, 15,
PALISADES HS**

"I don't know, because if you're together for so long you can develop feelings for the other person. I had a group of guy friends and I eventually had feelings for one of them, but our friendship became awkward because they figured it out."

**JENNIFER
VILLALOBOS, 16,
LENNOX ACADEMY
(HAWTHORNE)**



"Yeah, it doesn't matter. Anyone can just be friends with anyone."

**BENJAMIN
BUSTAMANTE, 14,
PALISADES HS**

"I don't know. If one person has feelings for the other I don't think it's possible."

**CHANELLE
MOGHADAM, 17,
VIEWPOINT SCHOOL
(CALABASAS)**

"Yes, they can be friends. Most of my girl friends' best friends are guys. It doesn't have to become a relationship because if you start by having so much in common, then the girl and guy will start looking at each other more as brother and sister."

**SARAH BARNES,
14, NEW VILLAGE
CHARTER HS**

"Yeah, because not all guys and girls are attracted to each other."

**JENNIFER FLORES,
14, FAIRFAX HS**

anymore. I considered him my best friend, but I wasn't sure if he felt the same.

The next day when we saw each other things were cool between us. We were playing hacky sack and hanging out at lunch as if nothing had happened. I was so happy that our friendship wasn't ruined. I was also relieved that he had told me because then I didn't have to keep wondering whether he liked me.

I appreciated his being honest about his feelings, so out of respect for him I stopped mentioning who I liked when I was around him. Otherwise things didn't change. He still teased me about everything, we still

texted dozens of times a day and talked on Facebook all the time. I'm really happy that we stayed friends. We were already so used to hanging out and talking all the time that if we had stopped, it would have been weird. It's that closeness that preserved our friendship.

I think that the key to a successful friendship with anyone, guy or girl, is having stuff in common that you can talk about and feeling comfortable with the other person. And if you start becoming attracted to your friend, I think you should tell them. Maybe they feel the same way. But even if they don't, a truly strong friendship will survive.

ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

What I wish I could give up

1ST PLACE \$50

Gang life sucked me in

Author's name withheld

Many people wish to give up addictions. People tend to complain about not being able to give up chocolate, their favorite TV show, an addictive video game or texting at any hour of the day. I wish this was the case for me, but it's not.

My addiction was perilous. My addiction contains chaos. This addiction was hard to give up because at any minute, my life could come to an end if I gave it up. It's the gang life. I wanted to give it up, but I would be placing my life in danger.

I grew up on the streets of Los Angeles. Mom was always at work, Dad was MIA (Missing in Action) and I was left alone to deal with life on my own. I had no role models in my life. I had no guidance and there was no one to teach me values or morals. I was alone in a dangerous world. I was only 8 years old when I went to the store to buy some milk. When I arrived, I noticed gang members loitering at the entrance. One of them offered me \$5. Since my mom was struggling with money, I didn't hesitate to take it. They even called me "little homie." I felt cool!

As I got older, I continued to admire the gang life and the respect that it gave me. I inhaled THC (marijuana) at the age of 9, meth at 11 and joined a gang at 12. I didn't know any better; I mean these guys took me out to barbecues, the beach and even bought me what my mom couldn't afford. I joined their gang. My mom always told me they were no good, but how bad were they if they took care of me? I was young and ignorant with no one to teach me otherwise. This was the plan, the way to pull me into their lifestyle of deception.

I was arrested on July 18, 2008 when I was only 15 years old. When I got to juvenile hall, I thought to myself,



L.A. YOUTH ARCHIVES

self, "How did I get here? How did things end up like this?" But there was no one to answer my cries, just like there wasn't anyone to help me when I needed help to prevent me from getting into that lifestyle. When you join a gang there is only one way out: death. So I was scared to quit. I wanted to so badly, but it was a big risk.

Now I'm 19 years old and I'm on my way to state prison to serve a sentence of 23 years. This was my first time being incarcerated and being 15 at the time of the arrest didn't mean I was going to get the benefit of the doubt. If you're arrested for a violent crime at age 14 or older, you have to fight for your fitness. This is where the court decides if you will remain in juvenile court, where the most time you will serve is seven years, or be sent to adult court and risk spending your life in the

system. Unfortunately, I was sent to adult court.

At that moment I realized that gangs were not worth dying for. None of my "homies" ever wrote to me or offered my mom money for gas to visit me. They didn't even offer to bring her to visit me. I realized that no one was going to kill me if I gave up the gang life because no one cared what happened to me. This is how I came to the conclusion to give up the gang life. If I could go back in time, I would have joined programs, sports or anything else to keep me off the streets while my mom was at work and my dad was out of my life. But I can't go back in time, so when I get the chance to help others, I will try to warn them not to come into this lifestyle. I won't hesitate to be there for somebody else. So keep away from gangs because no one can help you if you don't want to be helped.

As we were reading through the more than 200 essays we received, we noticed that many of the writers picked the same thing that they wanted to give up. Here are the most common responses we got, with the number of times they were chosen.

JUNK FOOD*: 31
VIDEO GAMES: 22
FACEBOOK: 19

PHONE/TEXTING: 17
COMPUTER/INTERNET: 16
TV: 10

PROCRASTINATION: 9
MUSIC/IPOD: 7
SODA: 6

*including chocolate, sweets, Hot Cheetos and ice cream

2ND PLACE \$30

Shopping is my addiction

By Christine Matossian

Wilson MS (Glendale)

Like most girls, I can't give up shopping. Every store I enter, I have to buy at least one thing to calm myself down whether it is small, big, cheap or expensive. I am a big shopaholic and I can't stop myself.

I find that my shopaholic disease is worse than other girls. I have done things that I am ashamed of. No, I haven't shoplifted, but I have done some pathetic things just to buy something I wanted. When I am going shopping with my friends, my mom gives me money. I tell my dad that my mom told me to get shopping money from him. I dig into my stash of birthday money and take some of that. Look at how much money I have to spend now, every girl's wish. But me? Not satisfied at

all. I spend all that money, holding 50 shopping bags on each arm. I spend all that money and I still want more clothes.

There are more crazy things I've done. One time, I went to Forever 21 with my grandma while my mom was picking up my dad's new watch across the street. I brought \$100 from my birthday money. I spent it all in less than 40 minutes. I also borrowed \$50 from my grandma. I felt embarrassed borrowing money from her but I couldn't put anything back! Don't think I'm crazy just yet, there's more to the story. On my way out, I found the cutest cardigan! I was dying. I had to have it! My grandma didn't have more money with her so I conned my mom and told her I wanted the cardigan and she was on her way to buy it for me. I told my grandma to hide my shopping bags in her bag before my mom got mad at me. Thank God my grandma brought her big purse. My mom bought me my cardigan, not knowing that I bought so many clothes before she got there. I know I am pathetic.

If my shopping problem doesn't stop sooner or later, I'll be broke! Maybe if I won this essay contest, I would have \$50 more to spend! I'm a shopaholic and I can't stop. Shopping is my drug and I am addicted.

3RD PLACE \$20

I can't stop eating soft serve

By Valerie Duarte

Wilmington MS

To tell you the truth, I have a big problem. No, I'm not dying of a rare infectious disease, but I do have a harmful addiction. I wish I could give it up, but I just can't. I've attempted to quit numerous times but the outcome is always the same: I have to have more. What is it that always leaves me craving more you ask? It's soft serve.

Not just the ice cream you scoop out from the pints in your freezer. It has to be the soft, creamy, deliciousness you buy from the ice cream truck. Of course, it always has to be chocolate. Not vanilla, not pineapple coconut. It starts when I hear the music from the ice cream truck. I can be concentrating doing homework but once I hear that music I throw whatever I'm doing off to the side and start searching for the nearest dollar. Once I have my money, I dash outside (while dodging

the cars, of course) and order a single scoop, chocolate waffle cone. Then I sit happily on my front porch and enjoy my dollar well spent. Nothing in the world can compare to the creamy, chocolatey goodness of soft serve.

I may sound as if I would never want to quit, right? Wrong! The list of reasons why I should quit is extremely long, so I'll just explain the most important reasons.

First of all, I don't get an allowance. I usually get money for my birthdays, Christmas or if I get really good grades on my report cards. Or if I get really lucky, my parents give me money once they get paid. I usually try to save up for something bigger than ice cream, but over the past few months my addiction has spiraled out of control. I need to stop spending my money on ice cream or I'll be out of money in no time.

Soft serve is not exactly the healthiest snack I could have. Especially having it three to four times a week. I don't work out or play sports on a daily basis, except P.E., so maintaining a healthy diet is not the easiest thing. That's another reason to quit this addiction.

As you can see, eating soft serve is tasty and filling, but over time it can leave your wallet feeling a bit empty. It can also lead to an unhealthy lifestyle. Yes, it is one of the world's greatest food inventions, but I don't think it's worth all that trouble. For these reasons and many, many more, I wish I could find the strength to give up eating soft serve.

NEW ESSAY CONTEST

Is it OK to lie?

When we're young we learn that lying is wrong and to always tell the truth. But as we get older we realize that life is more complicated than that. We want to know

if you think it's ever OK to lie. Before you start

writing, think about the times when you've lied. Were they little white lies, like telling a friend you liked their new haircut?

Or maybe you've told big lies. Do you feel that

lying saved someone's feelings from getting hurt? Or that it wasn't worth it because you lost someone's trust?

Or maybe you've been lied to. Share a time when you lied or were lied to, what happened and how it made you feel.



Write an essay to L.A. Youth and tell us about it:

Essays should be a page or more. Include your name, school, age and phone number with your essay. Your name will be withheld if you request it. The staff of L.A. Youth will read the entries and pick three winners. The first-place winner will receive \$50. The second-place winner will get \$30 and the third-place winner will receive \$20. Winning essays will be printed in our January-February issue and put on our website at www.layouth.com.

Mail your essay to:

L.A. Youth
5967 W. 3rd St. Suite 301
Los Angeles CA 90036
or to editor@layouth.com

DEADLINE:
Friday, Dec. 16, 2011

MOVIES

Elf

Reviewed by Anne Phan

17, Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies

I first saw Elf with my best friend during one of our sleepovers. We wrapped ourselves in blankets, clutched our stomachs from laughing uncontrollably, and even quoted lines for the rest of the night, calling ourselves "cotton-headed ninny-muggins!" The movie has become our special Christmas tradition that gets us into the holiday spirit with its family-friendly humor, festive Christmas music and great characters.

Imagine growing up adopted by Santa's elves in the North Pole and spending 30 years of your life making toys in Santa's workshop. That's the life of Buddy, played by Will Ferrell, until he learns he's human. He walks to New York City to find his birth father. Unfortunately, life in the Big Apple is not filled with gumdrops, candy canes and Christmas spirit, as Buddy expects. His obsession with sweets and candy isn't satisfied by the gum found on the sidewalk and his father is a workaholic. But Buddy's optimistic spirit enables him to build a loving relationship with his father, win the heart of Jovie, a department store worker played by Zooey Deschanel, and save Christmas for everyone.

Buddy's attempts to spread cheer to everyone embody the true essence of Christmas. The combination of laughter, music and family makes Elf the perfect movie to kick off the holidays.

It's a Wonderful Life

Reviewed by Camille

Didelot-Hearn

15, Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies

Every Christmas Eve, it's a family tradition to watch It's a Wonderful Life. My dad lights a fire and we flip to the channel that plays it every year.

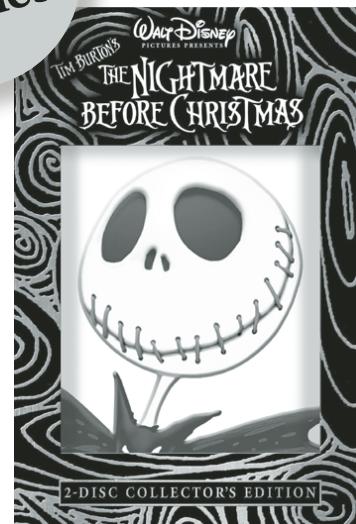
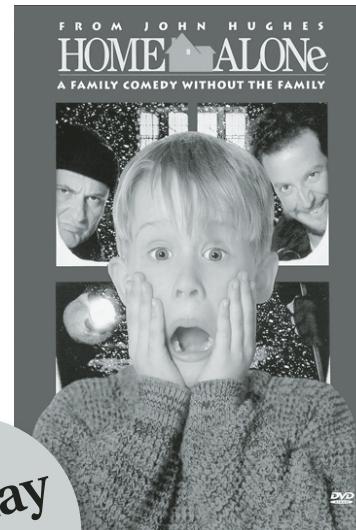
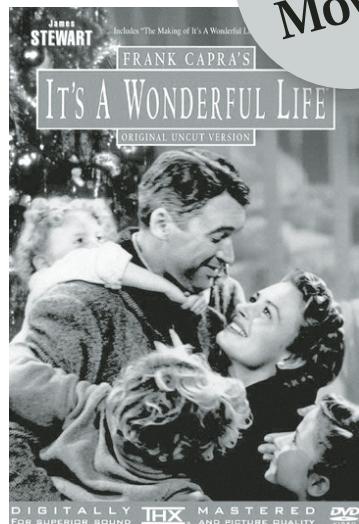
Have you ever wondered what life would be like if you weren't in the picture? If so, rent It's a Wonderful Life. Small-town hero George Bailey (played by the great James Stewart) tries to commit suicide on Christmas Eve by jumping off a bridge into a freezing river. But before he can do it, a man falls in and George jumps in and saves his life. The man tells George he's his guardian angel, Clarence. George doesn't believe him and bitterly wishes that he had never been born, and Clarence grants his wish.

George begins to see that without him, people's lives would be much worse: his brother would have died and his uncle would have been put in an insane asylum. And the town became sleazy and dirty. George realizes how many lives he has touched and begs God to let him have been born again. His wish is granted and he is reunited with his family, more appreciative of life than ever.

This is one of my favorite movies because it makes me so happy and appreciative of my life every time I see it. Even though it was made more than 60 years ago, It's a Wonderful Life will make you realize how big an effect you have on those around you.



Holiday
Movies



Home Alone

Reviewed by Christian Santiago

18, Santa Monica College

When I was in second grade I fell in love with Home Alone. I really wanted to try some of the movie's pranks, though it wouldn't be a good idea to throw a hot iron at someone from 20 feet high. The movie also had a great message. The holidays are about appreciating the time you have with one another. That's why Home Alone is one of my favorite films to watch with my family during Christmas break.

The movie stars Macaulay Culkin, as Kevin, the youngest of five kids who gets pushed around by his family. So the night before his family leaves for Paris he wishes they would disappear. The next morning the family rushes to the airport and they forget Kevin! When he realizes that his family is gone he says this is the best Christmas present ever.

While home alone Kevin must stop two men from breaking into his house on Christmas Eve. He comes up with the best pranks and traps to stop them. No matter how many times I've seen this movie, I always laugh like it's the first time.

Even though this movie is hilarious, the ending is what makes it special. Although Kevin may have problems with his family, he's relieved when they come back from Paris early. At the end of the film, I have a better understanding of what family means to me: appreciating one another and not taking anything for granted.

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Reviewed by Kristy Plaza

17, Duarte HS

For the last eight years my younger sister, Samantha, and I have woken up at 8 a.m. every Christmas morning to watch The Nightmare Before Christmas. That's saying something because every other vacation day even an earthquake couldn't wake me up

before 8. We make our breakfast, she starts the movie, and we spend the rest of the morning singing along to every song.

Jack Skellington is the king of Halloween Town and while all the other ghouls are happy with their fright-filled lives, Jack is bored having the same Halloween parade every year. So after he stumbles upon Christmas Land, he enlists the help of the townspeople, his friend Sally and the Boogey Man's henchmen (Lock, Shock and Barrel), to kidnap Santa and take over Christmas, adding a Halloween twist.

Unfortunately things don't work out. Jack's idea of a kid-friendly toy is a possessed vampire doll that flies (the kid who gets it starts screaming). Eventually though Jack learns to accept that he's the King of Halloween. He realizes that Santa brings Christmas joy to people, so Jack embraces his scariness and wants to make Halloween super scary.

During the holidays, I love to watch movies with a great message like learning to be true to yourself. Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas does this so well that it's a holiday tradition every year for me.



The Strokes

CD: Angles

Reviewed by Amy Fan

17, Temple City HS

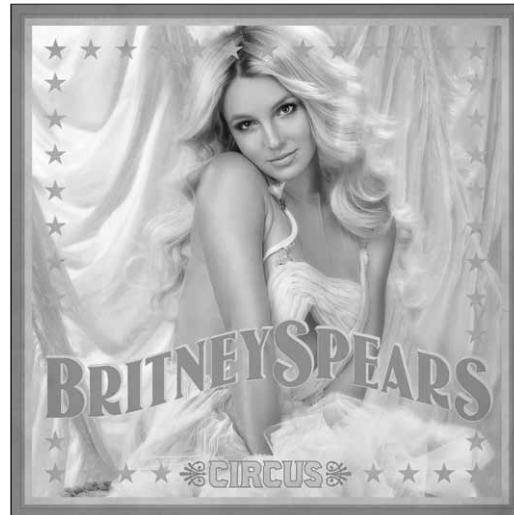
After listening to The Strokes' latest album Angles for a few minutes, I felt like jumping on my bed and air-guitaring. The entire CD is fueled with feel-good lyrics and high-energy guitar riffs. When lead singer Julian Casablancas extends his notes, I feel like I'm being spun around in a circle, while the beats of the drum are bouncing me up and down.

My favorite song is "Under Cover of Darkness," with its addicting chorus and great guitar solo. "We got the right to live, fight to use it/ Got everything but you can just choose it/ I won't just be a puppet on a string." I love how the catchy beat mixes with the bittersweet lyrics. I can imagine it being played as a finale at a school dance.

Like with most indie bands I've listened to, some of the songs have lyrics that leave me wondering what they're talking about. "Waves turn to grey/ Life in the shade/ A violent cloud/ and that's on USA," is one confusing line from "Machu Picchu." I'm not sure what the song's about, but I like it too much to care. Even if you don't understand the lyrics, this CD is filled with catchy melodies.

I learned about The Strokes when my two indie-rock-fan friends started going crazy about this album. I'm surprised that the band was every bit as good as they said. They might laugh at me now for doubting them, but I'm just glad that I have more good songs in my music library.

My favorite song is "Under Cover of Darkness," with its addicting chorus and great guitar solo. "We got the right to live/ Fight to use it."



Britney Spears

CD: Circus

Reviewed by Sarah Barnes

14, New Village Charter HS

In Circus, Britney Spears created an album of dance songs that sucked me in. I also liked how some of the songs related to her life, which made her singing sound more passionate.

My favorite song on the album is the title track "Circus." She sings the verse slower and the chorus fast and as someone who likes to perform I can relate to this song. Britney sings, "There's only two types of people in the world/ The ones that entertain and the ones that observe." I don't necessarily agree with that line, but if I had to choose I'd rather be the one who entertains.

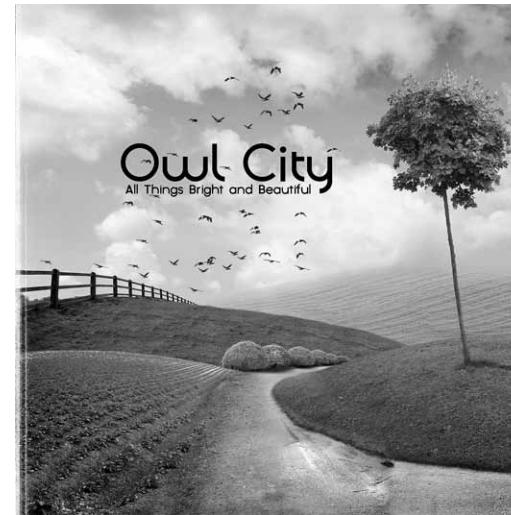
"Womanizer" is a great dance song. The beats are what you expect from dance music. This is a perfect song for a school dance because everybody could dance to it.

The album isn't all dance songs though. The song "My Baby" is softer and slower and was written for one of her sons. Her voice sounds like an angel when she sings, "Tiny hands, yes that's you/ And all you show, it's simply true." These lyrics don't relate to my life because I'm not a mom, but I like the music.

The slower song "Blur" was the worst. This song really is a blur. The music and her deeper voice didn't seem to go together. And the beat of the drums is repetitive in the beginning.

Even though Circus is from 2008, it still has a modern sound and I would recommend this CD if you're into pop music or great dance songs.

The album isn't all dance songs though. The song "My Baby" is softer and slower and was written for one of her sons.



Owl City

CD: All Things Bright and Beautiful

Reviewed by Tyler Bradshaw

15, Redondo Union HS

I first listened to Owl City because a girl I liked was obsessed with Owl City, which is the artist Adam Young. When we talked I didn't like her anymore. Instead, I fell in love with Owl City. The songs on his latest album, All Things Bright and Beautiful, put me in a good mood.

"Alligator Sky" featuring rapper Shawn Christopher is a great mix with Owl City's electronic sound. The song has fun lyrics like "Where was I when the rockets came to life/ And carried you away into the alligator sky?"

At first I thought "Kamikaze" had confusing lyrics like "Oh comet come down/ Kamikaze over me." But after I looked up the word "kamikaze" I understood it. A kamikaze is a Japanese suicide pilot. The song reminds me of how silly Owl City is. He says, "Oh comet, come down" in the annoyed voice of a parent yelling up at their kid who is dangling from a tree.

"Deer In The Headlights" is my favorite song on the album. He sings, "Tell me again was it love at first sight/ When I walked by and you caught my eye/ Didn't you know love could shine this bright/ Well smile because you're the deer in the headlights," which means that the girl he's talking about is his target. The line, "And all I did was say hello/ Her pepper spray made it rather hard/ For me to walk her home" left me turning red from laughter. The song is easy to relate to because everyone has met that person you instantly fall in love with but they don't even think of you.

This is the best album I've listened to in a while. Every song shows insight into the bright and beautiful things in life.

The line, "Her pepper spray made it rather hard/ For me to walk her home" left me turning red from laughter.

BE A PART OF L.A. YOUTH!

JOIN OUR STAFF
AT THE NEXT
NEWCOMER'S DAY

No experience necessary!
Writers, artists and photographers welcome. You will be invited to stay for the regular staff meeting which starts at 1 p.m.

PLEASE RSVP:

CALL (323) 938-9194
E-MAIL editor@layouth.com
5967 W. Third St., Suite 301,
Los Angeles CA 90036

I ENJOY BEING ON THE STAFF of L.A. Youth. I like having a place to express my thoughts and opinions. The weekly staff meetings are a great way to discuss important topics like budget cuts and racial diversity with other teens from all over Los Angeles County. Writing for L.A. Youth is fun. I love seeing my finished work in the paper and working with an editor has improved my writing.

—*Jessica Marin, 17, Culver City HS*



Staff members judge a photo contest.



FREE PIZZA
We'll have pizza for everyone who stays for the staff meeting!

L. A. YOUTH HAS BECOME a big part of my life.

At the weekly meetings we discuss current events and controversial issues and I get to hear the opinions of other teens.

My writing has improved and I've become more aware of the mistakes I used to make. The editors not only help you write your stories, but are always there to listen to you about anything. I also like how I've gotten to take pictures for the newspaper.

—*Victor Beteta, 18, University HS*

L.A.youth

www.layouth.com