

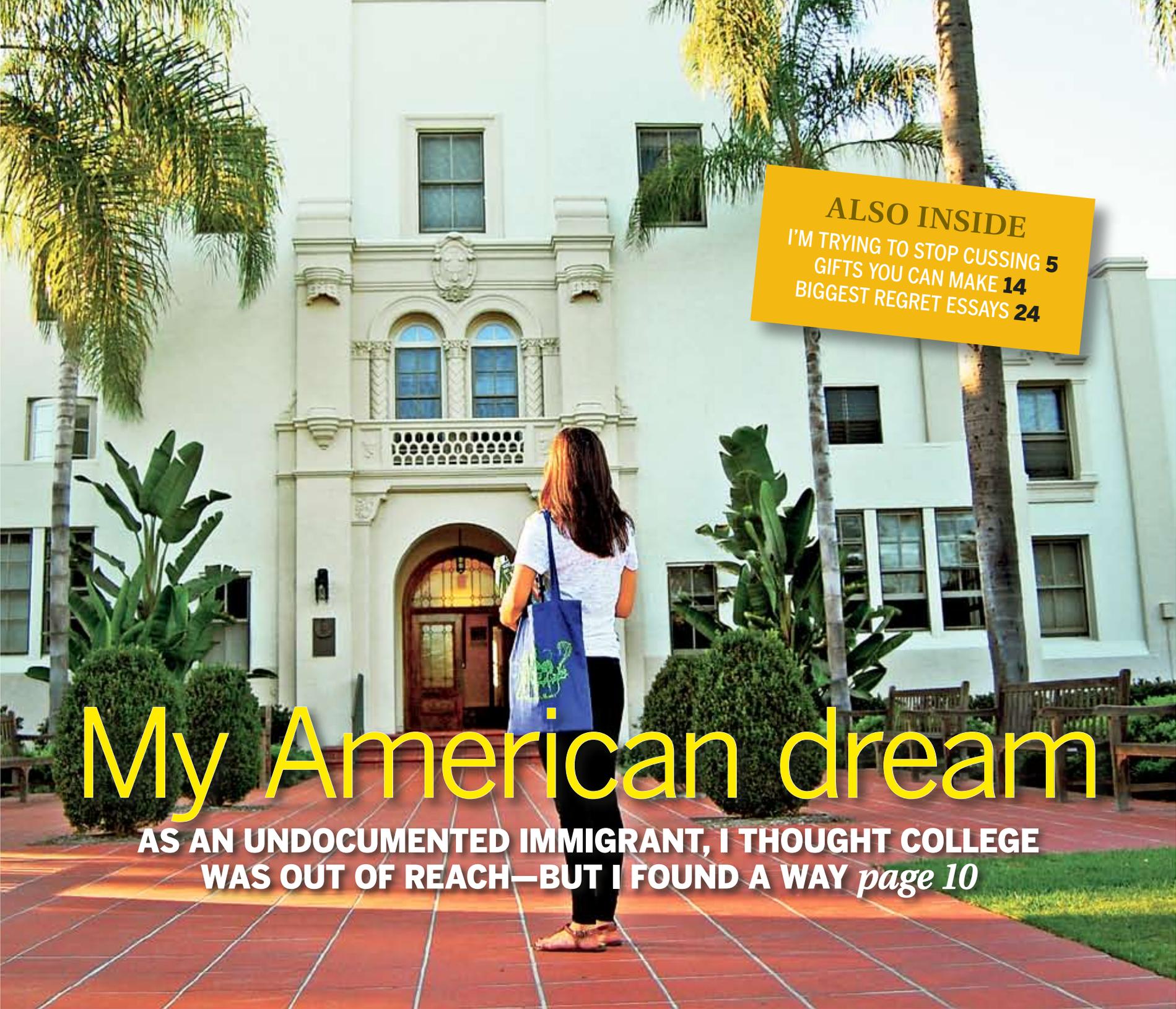
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L.A. youth

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2009
WWW.LAYOUTH.COM

the newspaper by and about teens

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My American dream

AS AN UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANT, I THOUGHT COLLEGE
WAS OUT OF REACH—BUT I FOUND A WAY *page 10*

About L.A. Youth

How did L.A. Youth start?

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 21st year of publishing.

How is L.A. Youth 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 journalism, teaching, research and other fields. Our Foster Youth Writing Project has brought the stories of teens in foster care to the newspaper. For more info, see www.layouth.com.

How do teens get involved with L.A. Youth?

Teens usually join the staff of L.A. Youth when they read the newspaper and see a notice inviting them to a newcomer's orientation. They also get involved through our summer workshop for writers. Sometimes a teacher or parent will encourage them to get

involved. Newcomer's orientations are held every other month on Saturday mornings. Call for info at (323) 938-9194. Regular staff meetings are held every Saturday from 1 to 3 p.m.

Where is L.A. Youth distributed?

L.A. Youth is distributed free to teachers at public and private schools throughout Los Angeles County. It can also be picked up for free at many public libraries and is available online at www.layouth.com.

How is L.A. Youth funded?

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

What is L.A. Youth's mission?

We will provide teens with the highest level of journalism education, civic literacy and job skills. We will strengthen and build our relationships with more teachers to bring relevant issues into the classroom and improve the quality of education. We will reach out to the community to better educate policy makers about teen issues; create a more positive image of teens in the mainstream media; and raise the credibility and awareness of L.A. Youth.

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

L.A. Youth is distributed free six times a year to high school or middle school teachers in most of Los Angeles County. Teachers also can download a free L.A. Youth Teacher's Guide for each issue at www.layouth.com. We do not share your info with other organizations or businesses.

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M A I L

These are letters we received about stories in the October 2009 issue of L.A. Youth:

LISTENING TO THOUGHTFUL RAP MUSIC

THE ARTICLE "RAP that makes me think" is very powerful. The writer, Stanton, is right about what a lot of artists rap about. I agree with him because there are a lot of rappers who only say how rich they are and how they're better than everybody else. On the other hand there are a lot of rappers who talk about life, politics and just express themselves, which is what music is supposed to do. I think music is supposed to be a way for people to say what they feel. Rap is no different—it doesn't all have to be parties, drugs and women. This article inspired me. Rap is more than a party, it's a way of life.

Rene Chino

Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

MATH IS HARD

I LOVE THIS story. I felt as if I wrote it. I'm going through the same thing in algebra. I just don't understand it; it's like another language. Everybody has problems with math at some point so this article relates to a lot of people. I understood what the writer was going through, but if I were her, I would have done something about it sooner instead of waiting until my senior year. When things started to go bad she could have talked to a teacher. That's what I'm doing and hopefully it will help with my grades and I'll pass.

Melani Aghazarian

Wilson MS (Glendale)

I THINK THIS article was great. I liked how the writer did not give up on math just because she

didn't like it and was having a hard time with it. I think we all need to try hard in math because it is an important subject and like the writer, we know we can't neglect math just because we struggle with it.

Heber Chavez

East Valley HS (North Hollywood)

THIS STORY REALLY hit home for me. I've always been good at English but math has been complicated for as long as I can remember. Beatriz taught me to never give up even if I feel completely lost. Is it embarrassing for me to say I have a D in geometry? Of course it is, but I really am trying in my class. Beatriz has given me a new sense of hope. It's OK to struggle—no one is perfect. But it's my job to improve my grade and get help. Remember, don't be afraid to ask questions. It doesn't mean you're stupid, it means you're concerned about your future.

Cindy Rivera

Madison MS (North Hollywood)

CHANGING MY BAD BEHAVIOR

THE ARTICLE "I was out of control" stood out to me because I used to be out of control too. The writer was in a tough situation. She was taken from her parents to live with strangers. I don't think I could ever survive without my parents or my sisters. To me, the writer is a tough girl. She did have troubles along the way, but she changed her bad ways to get back to her family. Controlling your anger is extremely hard, but fighting is never the answer. When I'm angry I like to take a walk or run and play soccer and just take it out on the ball.

Carmen Lopez

East Valley HS

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C O N T E N T S



I MADE IT
It was tough for our writer to get to college because she's undocumented, but she loves attending Loyola Marymount University.
Photo by Jasper Nahid, 15, New Roads School (Santa Monica)

10 Cover Story: My American dream

As an undocumented immigrant, a girl thought college was out of reach—but she found a way

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Hannah is trying not to cuss but admits it's hard.

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Send your letters to L.A. Youth

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or editor@layouth.com

I LIKE THIS article because it shows how the writer changed her life. It made me think about all of the teenagers who have behavior problems and because of that they end up in group homes. I've decided that when I'm older I want to help teens who have problems.

Elsa Reyes
East Valley HS

BIKING IN L.A.

THE ARTICLE "L.A. on two wheels" made me think about the county we live in. When I think about Los Angeles, I imagine paved streets and towering buildings. I never think about the scenery Los Angeles has to offer. People drive on the freeway and never even think about the beautiful scenery around them. Sometimes you just need to stop and enjoy the city you live in. This article inspired me to start walking, jogging or riding my bike around the neighborhood and just relax.

Kevan Loo
Wilson MS

THIS ARTICLE REALLY interested me. Growing up surrounded by buildings, I never thought about biking places. I love how the writer talked about her biking trips as going sightseeing. Not only does it seem like a better way to spend time, it looks entertaining. New adventures are thrilling. It would be such a great time exploring places by bike instead of riding in a car. Being able to reach all these destinations would be awesome.

Tristine Nubla
Wilson MS

RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT THE RISK OF PREGNANCY

THE ARTICLE "TAKING on teen pregnancy" was really serious. I think it is interesting and good for people to know what sex is and the consequences. Teens should get more education about this subject. I wouldn't want to risk being pregnant or getting STDs.

Desiree Nieto
Wilson MS

I THOUGHT THIS article was very interesting because it talks about sex and the consequences of it. Teen pregnancy is a big problem. I think everyone should think about the consequences of sex. The best thing to do is to wait or use protection. A simple mistake can change your life.

Pamela Flores
East Valley HS

AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL HELPED ME SUCCEED

THE SAYING "NEVER give up" may come from many different places, like a teacher or a lecture or the article "A second chance at school." This article was just great. It is a clear example of why we should never give up. If the writer had given up, she'd probably be working a low-paying job like at a fast-food restaurant or something. It takes a lot of dedication to do everything she did.

Jose Rocha
East Valley HS

LEARNING HOW TO JUGGLE

I REALLY LIKED the article "Catching on to juggling." I also love to juggle. I am not a pro or anything, but I still enjoy juggling two or three balls. I also enjoy doing tricks similar to those the writer did. I also liked this article because it made me laugh. I liked reading what Freddy went through to learn juggling because it taught me perseverance. I like how he felt accomplished after he learned how to juggle. I can relate because I feel the same way about juggling.

Kevin Yi
Wilson MS

PROUD THAT MY FAMILY RECYCLES

AT HOME, WE are big recyclers. We get \$30 a month from recycling, which gives us extra spending cash. My dad has a bin for recycling outside the kitchen door. We don't really think about it anymore, it's just a habit now. When my dad walks the dog at the park

he sometimes picks up bottles and cans lying around. The money really adds up and we help the environment at the same time! Recycling is a habit worth having.

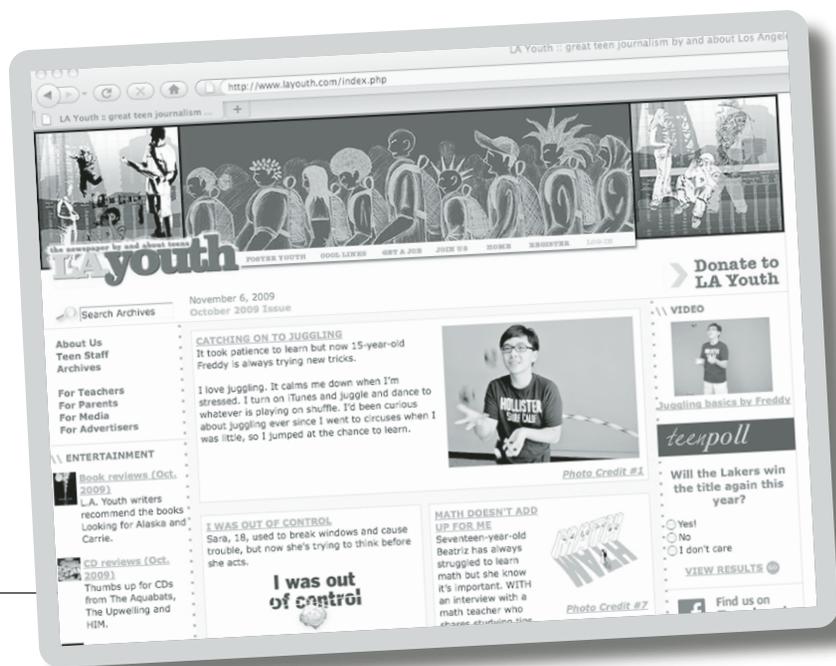
Ashley Mendoza
Madison MS

MORE TO SCHOOL THAN BOOKS

I REALLY UNDERSTAND how Ben feels about moving to the United States from Korea. I came from the Philippines and our schools are similar to the schools in Korea. The teachers didn't care what your interests were. They only cared how much you memorized. I'm glad I left school there in the first grade. The schools and the teachers here understand and care about what I say and what I'm interested in. Ben and I have a lot in common. I really like how he talks about his true feelings about his school in Korea and how he compares it to schools here in the U.S.

Kyle Hulguin
Wilson MS

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I swear not to swear

I've realized cussing makes me look bad, so I'm trying to stop

By **Hannah Song**

16, Mark Keppel HS (Alhambra)

The bell rang and the hallways flooded with students. Slightly dizzy from only four hours of sleep, I tripped and collided with a stranger ... a very large stranger.

"Stupid f***ing freshman," he growled, "who the f*** do you think you f***ing are? Watch where the f*** you're going."

Muttering a quick "My bad," I ducked back into the flow of hallway traffic. During class, I thought about his words and realized that it's easy to use bad language.

I thought about all the stories I'd told, and realized that when I cut out the bad words, I was left with a text as bland as a second-grade phonetics book. A conversation about "the bleeping unfair teacher" became about "the unfair teacher."

Why did I have to rely on profanity to make my stories sound more exciting? The New York



Hannah continues to watch her language and is proud to say she's swearing less.

Times would never publish the f-word. President Obama didn't have to use it in his "Yes We Can" speech to get elected. Neither did Martin Luther King Jr. They could make a strong point without an f-bomb for emphasis.

My friends and I started using profanity regularly in middle school. Ironically, we were the good kids. Looking back, the biggest appeal of bad language was that it gave us a chance to rebel against the constant expectations of honor roll certificates and A-plus papers.

I WAS PROUD THAT I SWORE THE MOST

My friends' mouths were pretty bad—but no one could outdo me. When my friends introduced me, they said, "and this is Hannah, with the potty mouth." I didn't feel bad about it—it was refreshing to come out of a classroom and lash out verbally about a teacher. I didn't tag desks, I didn't listen to heavy metal or dye my hair—swearing was my rebellion.

One day a student I had just met told me, "It seems like you throw in at least one cuss word per sentence!" I laughed it off, but her comment bothered me. Her tone made it obvious that she didn't appreciate my language, while I had thought everyone liked how I told my stories. However, even this didn't prevent me from cussing.

What made me try to stop were my younger brothers: 13-year-old Eric and 11-year-old David.

One day sophomore year, I overheard them arguing. "Eric, can you stop tapping your foot?!"

David shouted.

"Shut the f*** up!" Eric responded.

Before I knew it, I was roaring, "WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?" Eric flinched as I slapped his arm.

"What the h*** did you do that for?!" Eric yelled back.

When my parents found out what he said, they took away his beloved GameBoy and said, "That is a bad word, and we do not have bad words inside this house."

They explained that people didn't respect you when you talked "like a gang member." Eric tuned them out, nodding at intervals to get things over with. However, my parents believed they had convinced him to stop swearing.

Later that night, I remembered how when I was a fifth grader I told someone to "shut up" in front of my mom. My mom was shocked and scolded me. I suddenly realized how I must sound to the rest of the world—immature. I knew the way I felt about my brother was exactly what my mother must have felt when I used "shut up." I never wanted anyone to feel that way about my language again.

Now, I would like to tell you that I never used a bad word again ... but I can't.

IT WAS REALLY HARD TO STOP

Often, my stories would start, "So one day, I was so f***ing late for class ..." then stop immediately as I realized my mistake. My friends didn't know I was trying to cut back on cussing, resulting in many impatient stares.

I kept my crusade to myself because I

couldn't stand the thought of someone knowing I couldn't stop cussing. After several weeks, I was failing dismally. Every day before I would go to bed, I would think about my progress. The entire time, I didn't have one curse-free day.

Finally, I told one of my close friends. "Janet, do you think I cuss a lot?"

She gave me the "Are you seriously asking me that question?" look. I cringed, but didn't back down.

"Not at all," she said.

"Really?!"

"No, you idiot!"

I sighed. "Janet, I want to try and stop cussing. Do you think you could let me know every time I said something vaguely not PG?"

She seemed surprised. "Sure Hannah. I'll even slap you, so the message really gets through to you."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks."

Sure enough, weeks passed, new bruises bloomed (thanks, Janet) and then faded, and people noticed that I swore less. I'm not advocating abuse among friends, although it may be effective. All I needed was a little support, and maybe a little discipline.

As for my brother, I had one of those "serious talks," which he mostly ignored.

Even if he ignored my words, I was sure he'd be using less inappropriate language, even if the only reason was to avoid another long and boring lecture from me. I only hoped that the next time I lectured him, I wouldn't be a hypocrite, but a role model.

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"I don't mind cussing. It doesn't make me think any less of anybody."

Jordan Calvin, 18, Fairfax HS

"Everybody uses it. It's not a big deal. I don't realize when I do it. But I don't think you should cuss when you're 5. Once you're a teen, it's OK to."

Echo Theohar, 16, Santa Monica HS

"To a certain extent it's all right but if you keep doing it, it gets annoying. It also depends on what words you use."

Andy Hoelting, 17, Notre Dame HS (Sherman Oaks)



"I think that it's really overused. You see people cussing so much in every other sentence or word. I think people show themselves as a better person when they don't cuss."

Shannon Martinear, 17, Santa Monica College

"I think it shouldn't be yelled out like after every other word. It doesn't have to be said."

Randy Gonzalez, 18, Cal State Los Angeles

"I haven't cussed ever. I don't like it. It's unnecessary. When someone is mad then I guess they can say it, but it's really unnecessary."

Richard Yoo, 15, Cleveland HS (Reseda)

Hit with the real cost of college

I wanted to go out of state but when I couldn't get the loans I needed, I ended up at a community college

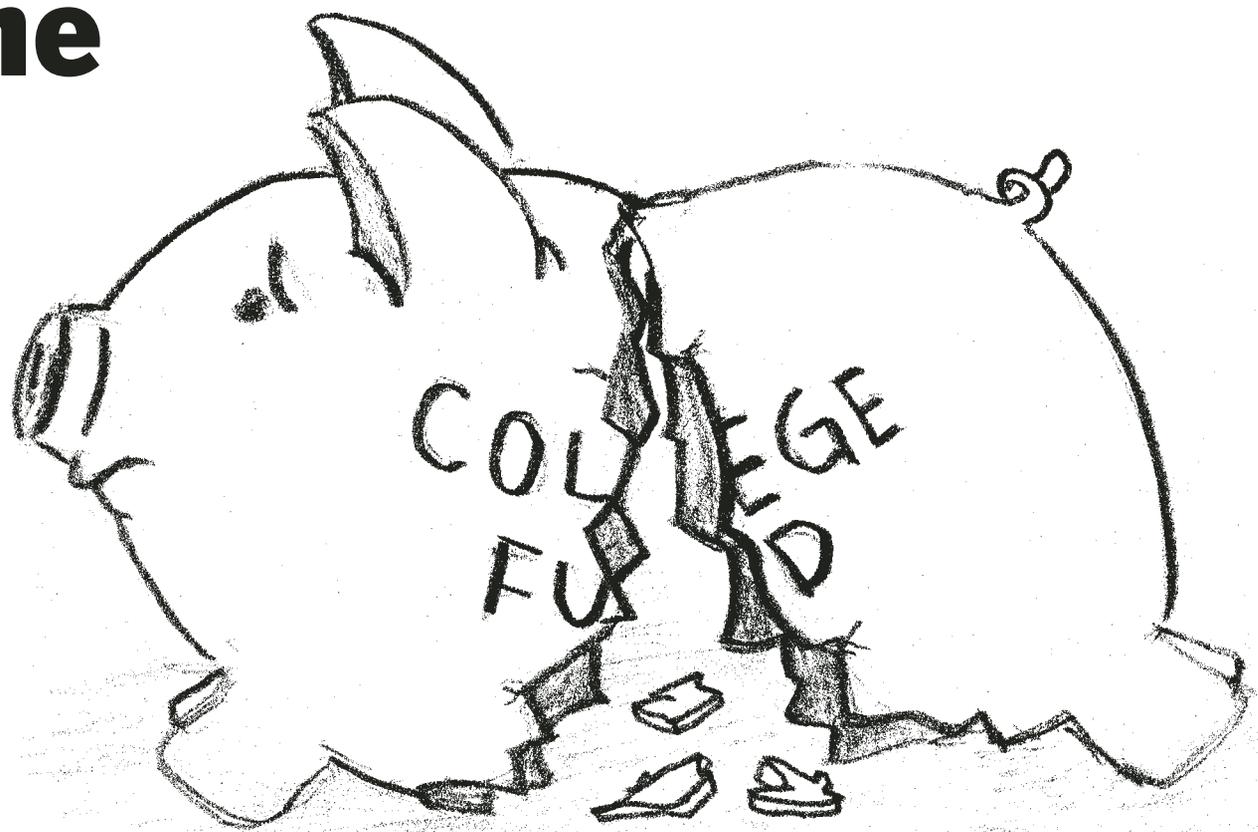


Illustration by Nadi Khairi, 15, Reseda HS

By Amanda Ly

18, Mark Keppel HS (2009 graduate)

I always imagined myself on my own at a college far from home, seeing new places and experiencing new things.

I felt I could go to any college I wanted because I had worked hard in high school. After my brother started at Cal Poly Pomona, I realized I would be paying for my education on my own since my parents didn't pay for his because they couldn't afford to. But I figured I could get scholarships and grants and pay for the rest with loans. Now that I look back, I realize I was too optimistic. I didn't understand that the economy was so bad that it wouldn't be that easy.

Since I didn't know which colleges I wanted to apply to, my guidance counselor suggested I apply anywhere so I'd have options when I made my choice in the spring. She spent about five minutes with each student. She didn't tell me to consider the cost of college or ask how much my family could afford.

I didn't put that much effort into finding the perfect school. I looked into colleges that contacted me or I heard about from school presentations, and the ones my friends recommended.

I wanted to attend a private school where classes are smaller so you can approach the professors and ask for help, and possibly a school with religious affiliations because I wanted to take theology classes. So I applied to Cal Poly Pomona and Concordia University in Irvine (my backups if I stayed in California), Harvard (our school encourages kids to apply because it's free for low-income students), New York University, St. John's University in New York and the University of New Haven in Connecticut.

I didn't know much about financial aid. In January, our school guidance counselors came into our classes and gave us a copy of the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and explained the form. I knew it was how you apply for financial aid, which is money given to you to go to college depending on your family's income. They said, "Some of you will get loans. Some of you will get grants or scholarships."

I knew the private schools I had applied to cost more than public universities, but I thought I could get loans and pay them back later.

I GOT INTO A SMALL EAST COAST SCHOOL

I was rejected from Cal Poly Pomona, then waitlisted at St. John's in December. I was at a family dinner at my grandma's on Lunar New

Year when I got an e-mail welcoming me to the University of New Haven. At first I was in shock. I turned to my cousin and said, "Oh my god Megan, look, I got in!"

The cost of UNH for the 2009-10 school year was about \$42,000, which included tuition, housing and meals. I thought I should wait for the financial aid letter to come before I figured out how to pay for it.

I received my financial aid award letter from UNH in May. Each semester I was to receive a \$2,600 federal Pell Grant, \$1,750 from a subsidized Stafford loan and \$1,000 from an unsubsidized Stafford loan, plus a \$9,000 grant from the university. Grants and loans covered 70 percent of costs. Each semester, I was expected to pay about \$6,000.

There were parts of the award letter I didn't understand so I had to Google them to find out what they meant. The first terms I searched were "subsidized" and "unsubsidized." I learned that they are both government loans. The subsidized loan does not accrue interest until after you graduate, while the unsubsidized loan starts accruing interest right away. I discovered a grant was money I didn't need to pay back. The university grant was given based on academic performance and the federal Pell Grant was

given based on income.

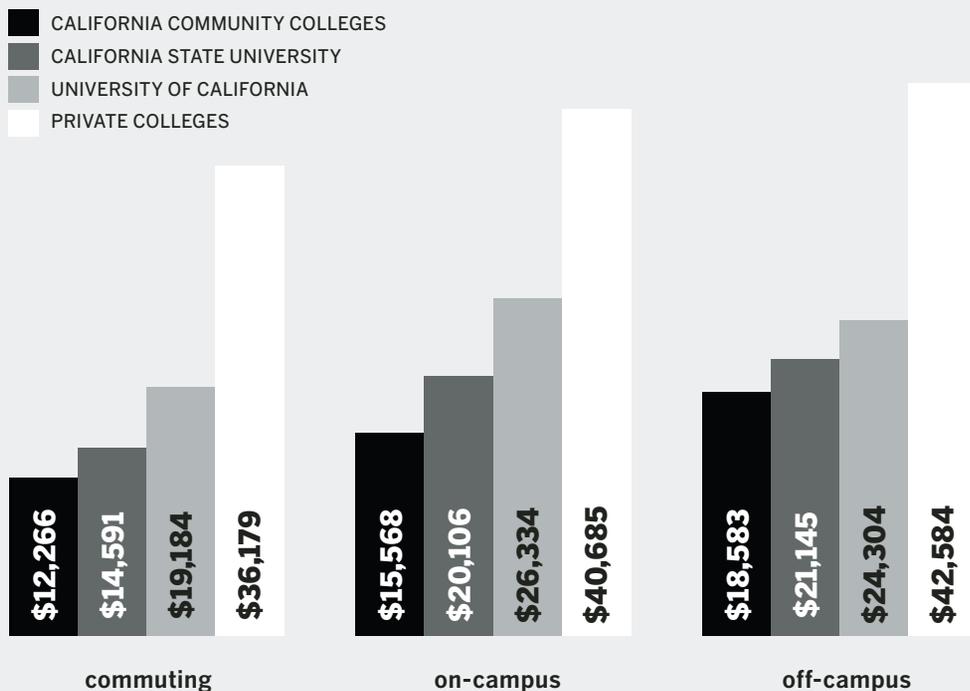
I understood I would have to pay back the Stafford loans, plus the private loans I planned on taking out for the \$6,000 I had to come up with each semester. But I did not add it up to figure out how much in loans I would need over four years (\$70,000). I was just focused on paying for the first year.

The first time I visited UNH was for freshman orientation, the week after high school let out in June. The school was just as it looked in the pictures. It had a mix of new and old buildings. The older buildings were brick as most of the school was, and the newer buildings were more modern. I liked the small class sizes and academic opportunities like internships and study abroad. Although I was not used to the cold, gloomy, wet weather in June, I liked the small-town atmosphere (population 124,000) and the people. I met people from all over the East Coast and made new friends. After orientation, I felt that it was the school for me. I thought, "I can make this work."

When I came back from orientation, I started thinking about paying for college. Neither of my parents went to college and they don't speak English so they don't understand how things work.

FIGURING OUT HOW MUCH YOU'LL HAVE TO PAY

This chart shows the average annual college costs for students during the 2009-2010 school year, including tuition, fees, room, food, books, supplies, transportation and personal expenses such as clothing, laundry and entertainment. Contact each college for specific costs.



There are several factors to consider when determining how much a college will cost you to attend.

It may seem expensive, but most people don't pay the full amount because of financial aid. The total cost of college minus your family contribution, which is how much you or your family can pay, equals your financial need.

To get financial aid, you must file a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). You'll be awarded financial aid based on family income. Pick up a FAFSA form at your school's college office or fill it out online at www.fafsa.ed.gov.

TYPES OF FINANCIAL AID:

- **Grants** are money you don't have to pay back and are typically based on financial need. These include federal Pell Grants and Cal Grants. Get info about Cal Grants at calgrants.org.

- **Scholarships** are also free money for college you don't have to pay back. Learn about which scholarships you qualify for at fastweb.com.

- **Work-study** lets you earn money through jobs on or off campus to help pay for your college costs.

- **Loans** are borrowed money you must pay back, with interest. There are different types of loans. The Stafford is a federal loan which can be subsidized (which means the government pays the interest while you're in school) or unsubsidized (which means you pay the interest while you're in school). Another type of federal loan is the Perkins Loan, which is need-based. There are also private loans for college, which you apply for through banks.

Source: California Student Aid Commission "Fund Your Future" workbook at www.csac.ca.gov

During the first week of July, I went to Wells Fargo with my dad to apply for a private student loan. The loan officer asked my dad and I questions regarding my parents' and my credit history, employment info and debts. She came back 10 minutes later and told us our request for a collegiate loan was denied because our household income was too low.

THE BAD ECONOMY MADE IT HARDER TO GET LOANS

As my dad and I were leaving, the loan officer said that right now the economy is bad and they can't give out as many loans as they used to. She said, "If you came a few years earlier you probably would have gotten it." I was sad. It was unfair. I'd done a lot of things, like taking AP and honors classes, doing community service and working part-time in a law office since I was 16. But because of the economy, I couldn't come up with the money to go to the college I wanted.

After that, I tried Sallie Mae and U.S. Bank's student loan programs and I got the same answer: I don't qualify.

I contacted UNH and asked them for advice. They told me if I couldn't pay tuition by Aug. 3 I should reconsider attending. I continued to do the assigned summer reading as I

A week after tuition was due, I finally called the University of New Haven to notify them of my decision to withdraw. Twice I dialed the number, let it ring once or twice, then hung up. On the third call I finally found the courage to speak. After I told them of my decision, I felt sad and empty, like my life had just been paused.

tried to think of ways to attend. I applied for a couple higher-paying jobs and scholarships, but I didn't get them. I realized that UNH was not going to happen.

A week after tuition was due, on Aug. 11, I finally called UNH to notify them of my decision to withdraw. Twice I dialed the number, let it ring once or twice, then hung up. On the third call I finally found the courage to speak. After I told them of my decision, I felt sad and empty, like my life had just been paused. My college dreams were put on hold.

Now I live at home and attend East Los Angeles College. I'm tired because I work during the day and my classes are at night. After community college, I plan on transferring to Humboldt State or another four-year school to get my bachelor's degree in psychology or administration of justice.

I'm disappointed I'm not at UNH this fall. I was really looking forward to moving out and living the college life. Yet at the same time I understand that the economy makes it harder for people to get loans because banks are not willing to take risks giving them out right now.

If I were to do something different, it would be to more thoroughly research ways to pay for college. My advice to students is to look into the

costs of each school. Before you apply, look at the financial aid section on the school's website. Some schools tell you how many students are on financial aid, showing you how much the school expects their students to pay. Also, have a backup choice that is more affordable and save money for personal expenses. What if you want to go out with friends or catch a movie?

I would also advise students not to rely on private loans because they are more difficult to get right now. Many public universities in California offer the same education at a fraction of the price as private, out-of-state schools. So if you want to explore a new place, you can go to school in a different part of the state.

Life can't always be what you expect even if you work really hard. You learn to move on.



Amanda says college is an experience she doesn't want to miss so she hopes to transfer to a four-year school.

Jeans are always in style

I really like jeans because they're perfect for any occasion

By Jasper Nahid

15, New Roads School (Santa Monica)

After rummaging through my dresser, I found out that I have 18 pairs of jeans. This may seem like a lot, but in my defense, life is filled with lots of different occasions and settings and they are all better when you have a pair of jeans to go with them. There are the bright jeans in purple, teal, red and white for parties; soft, plain jeans for a day spent at home, and my favorite pair of faded grey Diesels for Fridays, my favorite day of the week.

When I walked into the True Religion store at the Century City mall last summer, the saleswoman pointed me to a specific pair of jeans. She told me they were a "brand new" design and that I had to try them on.

They were dark blue, super skinny, with the signature white stitches of True Religion over slightly stretchy denim. Even on the rack they looked good. I pulled them off the hanger and inspected them up close. I even started to smell them before I realized that might have looked a bit strange. So, I took them to the dressing room, pulled them on and instantly loved them. They fit my body like a glove and the soft denim made me feel like I had been born to wear them.

The only problem was that they were nearly \$200 and with the rest of my back to school shopping, they didn't fit my budget. I tried to convince my mother to get them for me but she would not give in. So I sadly went on my way. Even though I felt like I had to have them, I convinced myself there would be other pairs of jeans that I would love just as much.

I really wanted those jeans and that experience made me wonder why. Jeans became popular in California about 150 years ago by the working class who appreciated their durability and comfort, and they have been

in style ever since. Jeans are comfortable, versatile and stylish. Nowadays, jeans can be seen on the fashion runway or on a construction worker. And in both places, they work perfectly.

Jeans are year-round in L.A. I can wear them in the winter with my favorite jacket or at the beach



Jasper hopes to find a cheaper pair of jeans that he likes as much as the True Religion ones he couldn't afford.

in the summer, if I roll up the legs, even though they get soaked anyway. Jeans can be dressed up or dressed down. Just adding a jacket and nice shirt can make jeans acceptable in a dressy situation, especially for a teenager. I have washed my dog and done chores during the day and gone to a family dinner party at night, wearing the same pair of jeans the whole time.

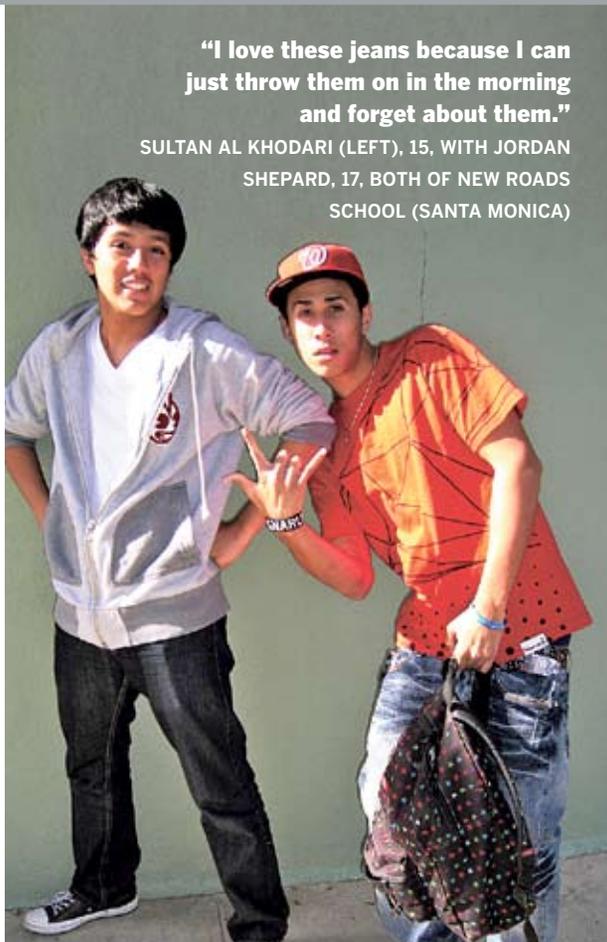
When I find a favorite pair of jeans, it's almost like I make a new friend. My first jean-friend was a boot-cut pair of Banana Republic blue jeans from about three years ago. They were as soft as the True Religion jeans but with a simpler design. These weren't kid jeans, these were grown-up jeans and they felt like it. They made me feel more comfortable and confident when I was wearing them. In part, this is because jeans are safe. It's hard to find someone wearing a shirt that clashes with their jeans because the blues, blacks and grays in jeans go perfectly with almost all other clothes.





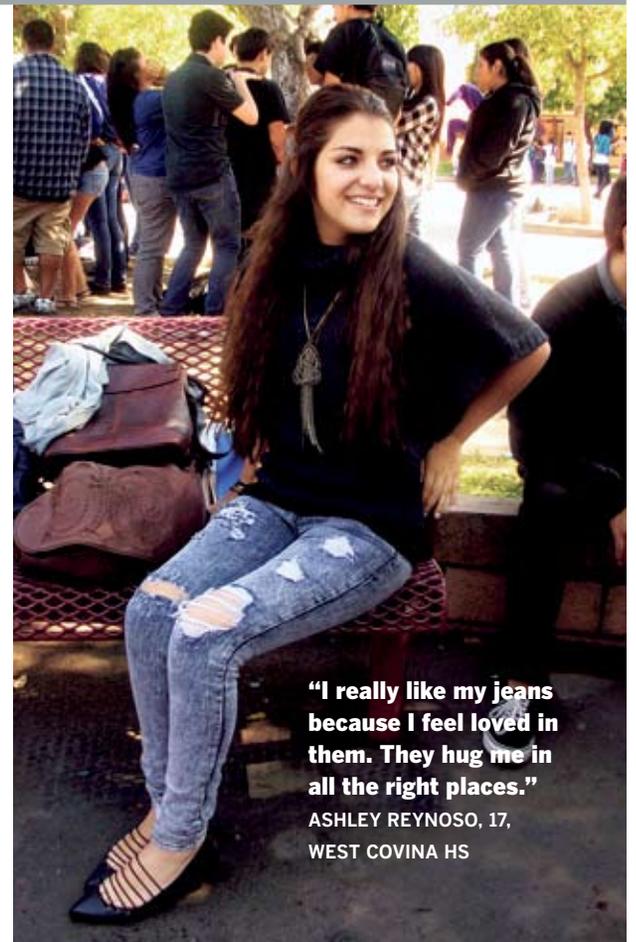
"I love how loud and different my jeans are."

CHANI MARTIN, 16,
CALIFORNIA ACADEMY
OF MATH & SCIENCE
(CARSON)



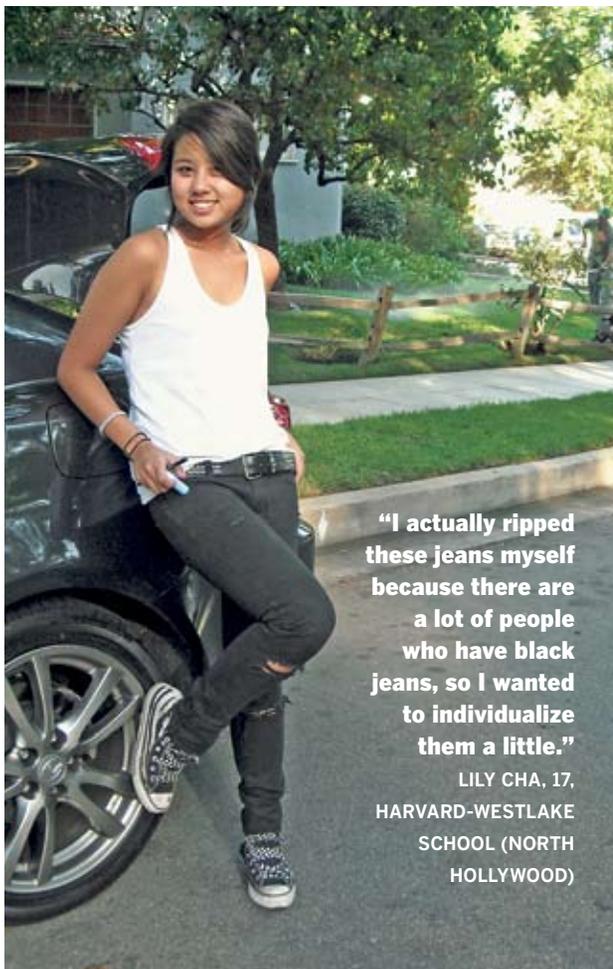
"I love these jeans because I can just throw them on in the morning and forget about them."

SULTAN AL KHODARI (LEFT), 15, WITH JORDAN SHEPARD, 17, BOTH OF NEW ROADS SCHOOL (SANTA MONICA)



"I really like my jeans because I feel loved in them. They hug me in all the right places."

ASHLEY REYNOSO, 17,
WEST COVINA HS



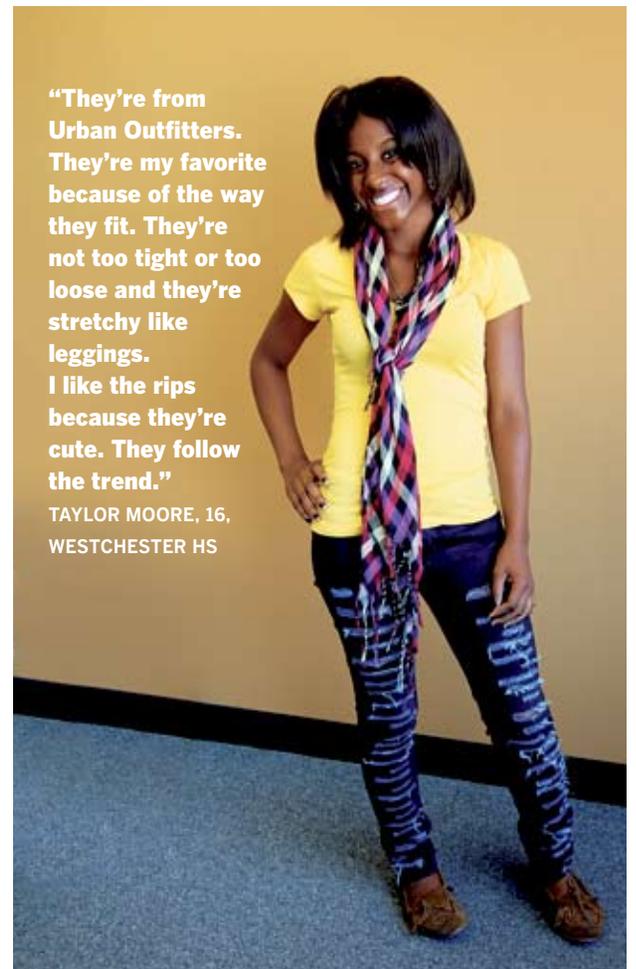
"I actually ripped these jeans myself because there are a lot of people who have black jeans, so I wanted to individualize them a little."

LILY CHA, 17,
HARVARD-WESTLAKE
SCHOOL (NORTH
HOLLYWOOD)



"The best thing about these jeans is how much they stand out in a crowd."

PEDRO HERNANDEZ,
16, CALIFORNIA
ACADEMY OF MATH
& SCIENCE



"They're from Urban Outfitters. They're my favorite because of the way they fit. They're not too tight or too loose and they're stretchy like leggings. I like the rips because they're cute. They follow the trend."

TAYLOR MOORE, 16,
WESTCHESTER HS

My American dream

As an undocumented immigrant, I thought college was out of reach—but I found a way

Author's name withheld*

A lot of people think undocumented immigrants are a drain on the economy or a danger to the country. Or that they're criminals, because they're here illegally. But if this is right, then I'm a criminal, even though I sometimes forget that I'm undocumented.

My mom and I moved here from Peru when I was 5. We came to visit my mom's family, but my mother decided she would rather have me grow up here and have my sister born here surrounded by my mom's family. Since then, like any other kid, I've gone to school, studied hard to go to college and tried to make my family proud.

Around fifth grade I noticed that unlike my classmates, my family never traveled. When I asked if I could go to Arizona with my friend who had invited me, my mom said no at first. I could get deported if I got caught by a border patrol agent since I was an undocumented immigrant. After that I never wanted to ask about my immigration status. It was too depressing.

When I was in eighth grade, I saw Legally Blonde and got inspired. Yes, it's corny and unrealistic, but the girly main character played by Reese Witherspoon proved people wrong by succeeding at Harvard Law School. I wanted to do that—break the stereotype that Hispanics from Lawndale don't go to college.

At my high school the first thing I had to overcome was the I-don't-care attitude of most of the 3,000 students. The teachers don't expect much of the students so the students don't respect the teachers. During the first few weeks of school the halls are jammed, but by the middle of the year they're empty because students are ditching or have dropped out. I could understand why. When you're in lower-level classes like "academic science," what's the point? I've seen those classes and it's so quiet with students sleeping because the teacher is not teaching or it's super-rowdy because everyone is goofing off. Even I sometimes fell into the stereotype. I ditched a lot of my non-hon-

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



Photo by Jasper Nahid, 15, New Roads School (Santa Monica)

ors classes in ninth and 10th grades because I could still pass and not get in trouble.

In ninth grade when I started looking into college during my AVID class (a program that helps students go to college), I learned that college applications and financial aid forms require a Social Security number, which as an undocumented immigrant I don't have. But I didn't give up. I thought I'd find a way to go to college.

I KEPT MY STATUS A SECRET

I didn't ask anyone what to do about not having a Social Security number because I was embarrassed and I didn't know who to ask. Also, my mom had been trying to get legal residency since a year after we had come to the United States. I prayed my mom's status would be resolved and I'd be legal by the time I was applying for college. Why tell anyone and potentially put myself at risk of being deported when it might not even matter? There were so many nights when I cried myself to sleep because I was freaking out about how I could make my college dreams come true.

I was working hard without knowing whether it was worth it. Meanwhile, the other students in my honors classes knew that their hard work was going to get them into college. Without a Social Security number or legal residency (or money) I felt like I was faking everything.

My family kept me going. My dad always worked so hard to provide for us. He moved here when I was in fifth grade and started working as a gardener. Then he got a factory job, which paid more, but he worked so many hours we didn't see him very much. Yet, he would still find time to be with us and play with my little sister. When I thought about how hard my dad worked, that motivated me to make his hard work worth it.

My parents cut out articles about college and put them on my desk. They came here because they believed that the United States would help those who wanted to be successful. I felt like I was protecting my parents by not telling them that my lack of citizenship could prevent me from going to college.

In 10th grade, my school started a peer college counseling program and I was nominated to be one of the students who would advise other students about college. We trained at UCLA for one weekend during the summer before junior year.

WITHOUT A SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER, I COULDN'T GET LOANS

At the UCLA workshops I finally had to face my citizenship status and how it affected my chances of going to college. Whenever the UCLA admissions counselors talked about financial aid and the forms that needed a So-

cial Security number, I would try my hardest not to turn red.

Although undocumented students can't get federal financial aid, they mentioned that there was a form certain undocumented students could fill out so that they wouldn't have to pay out-of-state tuition in California. This form verified that they had attended a California high school for at least three years and graduated. Eligible undocumented students would pay in-state tuition, but college still costs a lot—about \$9,000 a year for the UCs and \$4,000 a year for the Cal States (and that doesn't include housing). When someone is undocumented, chances are they're really poor and that would still be too expensive.

I thought that it would be awesome to make my parents proud and have them be able to tell their friends that their daughter is attending UCLA (the only school they'd heard of). But I tried not to get too attached, because it was hard to get in and I didn't know how I would pay for it.

At the beginning of senior year everyone was asking, "Where are you applying?" I thought about my dream out-of-state schools like Boston College, Columbia or St. John's (both in New York City) and two UCs.

I wanted big-name schools, because I thought they would have more generous financial aid. I also wanted schools in big cities, with good journalism or communications programs and plenty of internships. My counselor had suggested applying to private schools because he knew that two alums from my high school who were undocumented had gotten generous financial aid packages from Loyola Marymount University. I added LMU to my list.

As I was filling out applications online, I would leave the Social Security number blank and then the websites would think I was an international student. Then I would e-mail the schools and ask how I should apply. Some schools said to apply as an international student and others said to leave it blank.

I decided not to apply to most of the out-of-state schools. I didn't want to be alone in another state where there might be more negative attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. Instead I narrowed it down to UCLA, UC Riverside, Loyola Marymount University, University of San Francisco and Columbia.

LMU and University of San Francisco seemed friendlier toward undocumented students because of their Jesuit mission of social justice, which means trying to help the less fortunate. Thinking about the undocumented girl from my high school who had received a great financial aid package from LMU the year before, LMU became my first choice.

During my hectic senior year I met with my counselor every week asking a million questions

My parents cut out articles about college and put them on my desk. They came here because they believed that the United States would help those who wanted to be successful. They didn't know that my citizenship status could prevent me from going to college.

and venting my frustrations. By then I knew that my mom's citizenship application wouldn't be resolved in time.

Second semester was a tear-fest. I cried so many times in my AP human geography class after hearing friends tell me about all the colleges they got into. Despite not knowing if I'd even go to college in the fall, I tried my hardest last semester. Deep down I was still crossing my fingers.

After telling counselors and friends about my immigration status, I saw that people didn't look down on me or see me differently. They wanted to help me. Through them I learned about the DREAM Act. This is a bill in the U.S. Congress that would make it easier for undocumented students to attend college and give them a path to U.S. citizenship. It would apply to people who came to the United States when they were 15 or younger who graduated high school, completed at least two years of college or military service and stayed out of legal trouble. They could work legally, get a driver's license and some federal financial aid.

The DREAM Act seems like the perfect solution. It doesn't ask for anything unreasonable, just a chance to succeed by making the road to college a little easier.

My first acceptance letter came in February; it was from the University of San Francisco. It was exciting to have any acceptance letter in my hand and my parents were proud. Then UCR sent me an acceptance letter.

I GOT IN, BUT HOW WOULD I PAY?

I received my acceptance letter from LMU in early March. I was relieved. But I didn't get too excited because this didn't mean that I was go-

ing to go. May 1 was the date that I had to send my enrollment commitment. So if I didn't get enough financial assistance by then, I would go to community college.

In April, LMU hosted an overnight visit for Latino students who had been accepted to help make sure that they actually enrolled. I got paired up with the undocumented student from my high school, who was now a freshman at LMU. She was really encouraging and told me that the school might be able to help me get enough money to pay for any costs my family couldn't afford. But I was still too nervous to buy an LMU sweatshirt.

I fell in love with the school; LMU has the most beautiful campus. My mom and sister got to come and they also thought it was beautiful. The hardest thing was to hear my dad say that if I really wanted to go to LMU that he would make it work somehow. Hearing that brought me to tears; it would be impossible for my father to come up with \$52,000 a year (for tuition, housing and everything else). I was not going to plunge my family into debt.

Two days before the May 1 deadline to sign my LMU commitment I still hadn't heard about any financial aid package. While I was out with my boyfriend, I got a phone message saying I had just been awarded \$6,000 from LMU and that I needed to call back. I was disappointed and felt like I would have to go to community college if that was all I was getting.

When I called back I was told to call one of the admissions counselors who was trying to get additional financial aid for me. Soon I would find out my fate. I was anxious, scared and hopeful.

After the "hello, how are you," which felt like an eternity, she let me know that the school would offer me enough financial aid and scholarships to cover all the costs!

I cried. I didn't know what the right thing to say was but I thanked her and told her I was excited. My mom gave me a tight hug and I asked her to call everyone we knew. She said that she had believed in me from the beginning, so she had already been telling everyone I was going to LMU. She could have jinxed it!

The next day I went with my dad to buy that LMU sweatshirt. We were surprised at how all the students smiled or said hi to us. My dad looked at me and said, "You're going to be happy here."

Now that I've been here a couple months, I want to thank all the people who helped me. But I am one of very few undocumented students who had this much help, the courage to look for help and an opportunity to get financial aid like what I received from LMU. And that's why Congress needs to pass the DREAM Act. This law would help every one of us who wants a better future.

THE DREAM ACT: A PATH TO COLLEGE AND CITIZENSHIP

The DREAM Act, which stands for the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, is a bill in the U.S. Congress that would provide a path to citizenship for undocumented students. The idea is that teens shouldn't be penalized for a decision their parents made. It was their parents' decision to come to the United States, and children had no choice but to come with them.

If signed into law, the 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, and states could provide financial aid to these students. 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.

The DREAM Act is a proposed law that hasn't been voted on by Congress.

Source: Undocumented Students Action and Resource Network (dreamactivist.org) and the National Immigration Law Center.

Learning to live with ADHD

Once I was diagnosed, I got help that made it easier to focus in school

By Elis Lee

17, Crescenta Valley HS

I've always had trouble staying focused, but it wasn't until sophomore year when it became a problem. An atomic bomb dropped on me when I got three Cs. They were in honors English, chemistry and AP European history. I was used to getting As, but was having a hard time taking the tests. Either I couldn't finish in time or I'd rush through. I couldn't concentrate in class and was bored with homework.

In English class we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* aloud in class. I couldn't focus on reading it even though I was hearing and looking at the words. My mind would wander off. I sat near the window and stared at the pool or counted the birds that flew by.

I finally got an idea of what might be wrong. During meetings with Jane, a counselor my parents had hired to help me prepare for college, our conversations would start on one subject and end up on another. I'd ask her a question. Then I'd think of another question to ask and then another question. By the end of the meeting, I would end up on a totally different topic! Jane, who is also a psychologist, told me I might have ADHD or another learning disability. Hearing that made me worry



Illustration by Ellen Khansefid, 17, Hamilton HS

about my future. I didn't think I'd be able to get into good colleges with Cs. I didn't want to get in trouble with my parents. They were always pressuring me to strive for the best. No matter how hard I tried, not getting As in my classes was proof to my parents that I was not trying hard, even when I was.

So that I could learn more about ADHD, Jane and I went online. ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. It causes people to have trouble concentrating. People with ADHD sometimes are forgetful, distracted and do things without thinking. This disorder is usually noticed in childhood. We also

to convince them to get me tested for ADHD. They didn't believe there was a problem. They thought my classes were too hard or maybe I wasn't trying hard enough. Jane kept talking to them and told them that it would affect my grades if I was not diagnosed and didn't receive accommodations at school. I agreed with her. She said that after hours of studying, it's not normal to be getting Fs on tests like I was.

My grades were still bad and three months later my parents decided we had nothing to lose by finding out if something was wrong. I went to a psychologist and took a series of tests. The tests had vocabulary games, drawing imag-

Multiple choice tests were the worst. I had a hard time reading through all of the answer choices. Now I read the question, come up with the answer and then look to see which of the choices fits best. My grades went from Cs to mostly As.

read that premature birth is known to be one of the leading causes of learning disabilities. I was born a month early and had a seizure as soon as I was born. But because the doctor told my parents that I was perfectly fine, they never worried.

WAS THIS WHY I GET DISTRACTED EASILY?

A lot of what I read about ADHD sounded like me—making stupid, careless mistakes and struggling to stay on task. But concentrating in school and finishing homework was the worst. My mind would start wandering or I'd get a song stuck in my head and play it over and over again until I couldn't even hear myself think. Or sometimes, I would think about how hungry I was and try to decide what to eat for dinner. It would take me hours to finish homework because I would get distracted when working on my laptop. I would go on Facebook or check out the latest music in Korea on the Internet and forget that I hadn't finished the homework I'd started. I also always forgot things and I would call my mom during first period, asking her to bring my homework, textbook or pencil case.

My counselor talked to my parents and tried

es from memory, finding patterns, memorizing lists, reading comprehension, simple math calculations, and identifying figures such as blocks and dots. Some of the tests were simple, but others were really hard. The memorization part was difficult because I had to memorize a passage and say it back. I tried to rush through the tests as fast as possible because they were so boring. I completed the 12-hour test in eight hours over two days.

A week later, I was back in the psychologist's office with my parents. The psychologist handed us a packet containing my scores and diagnosis. It said I had been diagnosed with ADHD. I was sad and happy. I was sad because it's a learning disorder, but I was happy because it answered a lot of what I had been going through.

Not too long after, I Googled ADHD to find out more about it. I found that many famous people had characteristics that experts now believe are ADHD, like Albert Einstein who won the Nobel Prize for physics and Vincent van Gogh who was a great artist. My favorite example is Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the most accomplished composers of all time. I am a musician and I love playing his compositions on the piano and viola. His music shows

very spontaneous moments. This shows that people with ADHD are just as capable, if not more, as anyone else.

A QUIET LIBRARY HELPED ME DO BETTER ON TESTS

Once I had the diagnosis, I could get extra help at school. I had a meeting with my parents, my school counselor and the vice principal to discuss accommodations that I would be getting. I can choose where I want to sit in class. I usually sit in the back because when I sit in front I feel like everyone is staring at my head and I can't concentrate. Because I forget to bring my homework to school or I forget to do it, I can turn in my work a day later with no penalty. I used to have friends text me the night before an assignment was due to remind me, but I couldn't deal with all of the text messages so I asked them to stop.

I get as much extra time as I need on tests and I can also take tests in the library or somewhere where it's quieter. The library is big and I have space around me. I feel like I am the only one there. I feel like I can think and I don't feel the time passing. I don't have to worry about people finishing faster than me. Once, it took everyone else two hours to take a test, but I took it in three.

My doctor prescribed Adderall to help me concentrate. It took about 30 minutes to work. It's like I'd have tunnel vision all of a sudden. It was like magic that suddenly helped me do better in school. I would take it after breakfast. Before, I couldn't sit still for an hour in class. I would get up three or four times to throw something away. But when I took Adderall, I didn't feel like I needed to get up. It made me calmer.

My friends said I was like a different person. When they used to talk to me, my mind was all over the place, but now I was actually listening to what they were saying and looking at them when they were talking to me. My friend said, "Elis, it's like you're walking in a straight line. Before it was like you were walking in curves."

Before I was diagnosed, school was so much harder. Most of the tests were multiple choice and those were the worst. The answers are long and I have a hard time concentrating and reading through all of the answer choices. They all look similar. Now I read the question, come up with the answer and then look to see which of the choices fits best. My school counselor had suggested I try doing that. My grades went from Cs to mostly As.

ADHD affects my social life as well. I have episodes of hyperactivity. Because I'm so hyperactive and burn so much energy, I last no more than two hours without food. I would talk

non-stop in conversations with my friends and have trouble being quiet. People often compared me to Tigger from Winnie the Pooh because I am always bouncing around. I have even had friends say that being around me just sucked their energy and they would suddenly become tired.

I realize now that ADHD has always been a part of me. Because I was born with this disorder, I don't know what "normal" life is. When I was in elementary school, my teachers described me as inattentive and hyper. Even now, when I'm at home, I'll go to the kitchen to eat. But once I walk down the stairs, I forget where I'm going and why I was walking down the stairs because my thoughts about what I was going to eat trail off and I start to think of something else. This is what I have lived with my whole life so this is what I am used to.

I'M STILL GOING TO BE SUCCESSFUL

My brother makes fun of me because of my ADHD. He tells me I won't be able to graduate from college because I won't get good grades. He always says, "Oh Elis, I heard that everything in life is going to be harder for you." I want to prove to him that I can be like everyone else and do normal things.

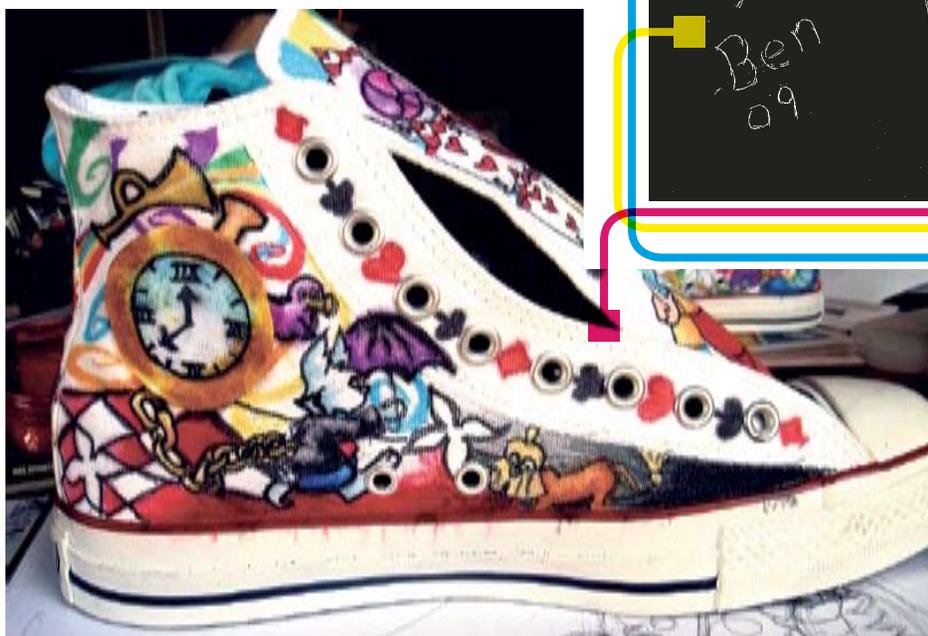
I don't take Adderall anymore. At the beginning of junior year my parents lowered my dosage. They were worried about side effects like nausea and dizziness (which I never had) and they didn't like that I showed less emotion and had trouble sleeping for several months. They also worried that I might get addicted. My parents lowered my dose so much that it felt useless so I stopped taking it. But I'm still doing well in school because of the help I've gotten. I force myself to study more and sometimes it literally hurts to think.

No matter how much I wish things were different, it's not going to change the fact that I have ADHD. One of the lessons ADHD taught me was to just suck it up and deal with it. I know I have to make the most of the life I have. I feel good about my grades getting better. I want to go to law school and get a job where I can help people. I'm not going to let it hold me back from living my life to the fullest.



Understanding ADHD helps Elis not feel bad about herself when she struggles.

Creative gif



NOTEBOOK

My friend Kristina made this personalized notebook for herself to put her poetry in. Her poetry is about love, which is what the pictures represent. It makes a good gift idea because it reflects someone's interests. You could decorate a sketchbook, notebook or journal.

—Sophia Richardson, 15,
Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies

SHOES

It was our friend's Bat Mitzvah and she's really into Alice in Wonderland. We decided to make a gift because making something is unique and heartfelt. She always wanted some of our drawings but she wouldn't have been able to show off a piece of paper. One of her wish list items was Converse shoes. We used Prismacolor pens, then a waterproof seal so it wouldn't bleed. She was almost speechless.

—Isabella Betita, who made the shoes with
Sophia Richardson, both 15, of Sherman
Oaks Center for Enriched Studies

SCRATCHBOARD

I decided to make a scratchboard piece for Anthony, the little brother of my close family friend Elli. Since Elli was a senior and going to the East Coast for college, I thought making a meaningful work of art was a good idea. I used a photo of the two of them and scratchboard materials from my art class. I gave it to Anthony and both he and Elli loved it.

—Ben Bang, 17, Palos Verdes Peninsula HS

MIX CD

Since it will soon be Christmas, I decided to make my dad a mix CD. My dad is a major music snob who blasts KCRW (a public radio station that plays indie music) in his car, while I listen to Top 40 radio. I wanted my dad to feel comforted by familiar songs but also surprised by new music that he hasn't heard. So near the end I added "Loud Pipes" by Ratatat and "Sex on Fire" by Kings of Leon, songs with a strong beat that are on the edge of his musical taste.

Jasper Nahid, 15, New Roads
School (Santa Monica)

ts

With the holidays coming up, we asked our teen staff for their ideas of things you can make on a budget that show you care. **Here are gifts they have made for their friends and family that you can try too.**

BOWS

While I was browsing one of my favorite crafting websites, craftster.org, I found tutorials on how to make gift bows from magazines. I think these bows are a nice addition to any present because they're one of a kind and customizable. You can use old wrapping paper, magazine paper or, for a sentimental touch, you can take blank printer paper and write little notes on the strips.

—**Ashley Ngo, 15, California Academy of Math & Science (Carson)**



SCARVES

I have never been able to come up with good holiday gifts for my friends, so I figured, because I knit so much anyway, I'd make scarves for them! I made scarves for almost everyone I knew (my family, guy friends and girl friends) and I decided to personalize each scarf for who I was making it for.

—**Chelsea McNay, 16, Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies**



BAGS

I learned how to sew from my mother. I like sewing tote bags for friends because they're useful and thoughtful. When I look at a tote bag, I see a blank canvas. I try to choose fabrics with designs that match the personality or tastes of the person I'm giving it to. I once made a bag out of zebra print with ruby-red heart buttons for a friend who liked zebras. I love seeing my friends smile when they carry their bags for the first time.

—**Ashley Ngo, 15, California Academy of Math & Science**



Go to layout.com to find out how to make these gifts

Thinking about race

A museum exhibit says we aren't as different as we think



I LOVED THAT the exhibit was based on the idea that race is not something you can determine by looking at someone's genes. It is a concept created by society during

the era of European exploration. The Europeans felt that a different skin color justified selling people into slavery.

A lot of people ask me what race I am when they meet me because they think I'm white but I look a little Middle Eastern because I'm tan. I say I'm half Persian (my dad is from Iran). They say, "Really? I thought you were white." It surprises me because I don't think of myself as white. I think of myself as half-Iranian and part Armenian. The exhibit made me think about why people ask that. There is no reason for somebody to ask you about your race.

There was a quiz that showed the names of different countries. Visitors would choose if they thought people from those countries were white or non-white or if they were unsure. People thought of "white" as mostly people from European countries. I did too. I was surprised I was making the same judgments that people place upon me. Everyone does it, even without knowing, even me.

—By **Chantelle Moghadam, 15, Viewpoint School (Calabasas)**

VISITING THIS EXHIBIT reaffirmed to me how bad discriminating based on race is. The part of the exhibit on American Indians



made me feel really bad for them. Sports teams have given themselves Indian mascots, such as the Cleveland Indians and the Washington Redskins. These teams make Indians

seem aggressive and ruthless when in fact they're peaceful. This section of the exhibit ends with American Indians proclaiming in a video, "I am not a mascot." Before seeing this exhibit, I fell for the stereotype. I



We recently checked out an exhibit on race at the California Science Center. Our staff writers say the exhibit got them thinking about why we make judgments and stereotypes based on race.

now feel bad for thinking that way.

Growing up as a Mexican American in Los Angeles, I've noticed that people discriminate against my race, and I'm tired of it. One time I was walking to class when I overheard a boy ask his friend, "What is the difference between an elevator and a Mexican?" The other said he didn't know. The boy told him, "One can raise a child." This isn't true because my family works hard every day to put food on the table and to support my two brothers and I. I was mad but I didn't have the courage to tell him what he said was wrong.

People shouldn't be judged on their race, they should be judged on their own characteristics, such as being nice or hardworking.

—By **Alex Quintana, 17, Warren HS (Downey)**

I WENT IN with an open mind. One part of the exhibit was about how we make assumptions based on what people look like. There was an activity with pictures of six men and six women. I pressed a button and listened to someone talk and had to figure out who the voice belonged to. There was one wom-

an who had a Jamaican accent. I guessed she was black, but she turned out to be white. (I only guessed three right.)



The exhibit showed me that people make assumptions about race when they don't know the person. It made me more aware. Some-

times I make assumptions about people based on the way they talk. Once I was talking to someone on the phone who I hadn't met. As he talked I was wondering if he was white or black. When I met him, I was surprised to see he was Asian. I felt embarrassed that I assumed his race by the way he talked. I shouldn't assume so quickly. I should get to know more about the person.

—By **Caitlin Bryan, 17, Valley Alternative Magnet School (Van Nuys)**

WHEN I READ that African Americans and

Hispanics are highly underrepresented in colleges and workplaces even though affirmative action was created almost 50 years ago, it seemed like it wasn't working. Affirmative action gives preference to minorities to ensure diversity in the workplace and college.

One quote I read said that affirmative action sends the message that there is something wrong with certain races and that they need more help getting into colleges. That's how I've felt at my school, which



is mostly white, especially this year since I'm a senior and applying to colleges. Affirmative action makes me feel like I'm below my white classmates because I'll be getting the bene-

fit of it when I apply to some colleges.

After going to the exhibit, I feel that affirmative action shouldn't be race based, but should include other factors that can be a disadvantage, like income and where you went to school. I'm African American, attend a private school and my dad is a doctor, so I don't think I should get the benefits of affirmative action. I think someone who is white and is from a low-income family and doesn't go to a private school deserves the advantage much more than I do. I have a college counselor I can meet with every week and SAT tutors. If someone doesn't have these things, that isn't their fault.

—By **Casey Peeks, 18, Marlborough School**

The **RACE: Are We So Different?** exhibit is at the California Science Center until Dec. 31, 2009. It's open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily with free admission. Parking is \$8. The Science Center is two miles from downtown at 39th Street and Figueroa. For more info (323) 724-3623 or californiasciencecenter.org.

Blinded by stereotypes

When we make assumptions about people, we don't see who they really are

By **Charlene Lee**

16, Walnut HS

“Let's take pictures!” After being cooped up in the U.S. Capitol for more than 10 hours, my friends and I were eager to document our fun outside of work. We'd been working in the Senate as pages, delivering messages between the Capitol and Senate offices. We huddled in front of the Iwo Jima Memorial, taking direction from one of the pages for each pose. Lion roar pose. Model pose. Deep-thinking pose. And then, “ASIAN POSE!”

He pulled at his eyes to imitate slanted Asian eyes and did the victory sign that people do in Asia (when you form a “V” with your index and middle finger). Some followed his lead, but I noticed others were uncomfortable. I didn't know what to do since I was Asian, so I said, “I'll be right back” and stood off to the side.

I heard jokes and stereotypes about my race throughout my month as a Senate Page. At first it didn't bother me, but the more they made jokes, the more I feared they actually believed what they said.

Working in Washington, D.C., was the first time I had ever been distinguished by my race. Living in Walnut, a suburb of Los Angeles, I forget Asians are a minority in the United States because there are so many of us in Walnut.

I applied to be a page to learn politics firsthand. Senators sponsor high school juniors to serve for a session each summer. I was excited to meet everyone because they'd be from across the country.

On the first day, the Sergeant at Arms, who is like the law enforcer of the Senate, told us that we would be treated as federal employees, meaning that discrimination, including racial jokes, would not be tolerated. It seemed so overdramatic. At school I heard racial jokes all the time. I knew they weren't the nicest things but I didn't think they offended anyone because they were meant to be funny.

WHAT DO MY GRADES HAVE TO DO WITH MY RACE?

Following orientation, one page asked me about my GPA. When I told him, he rolled his eyes and said, “Of course, you're Asian, why did I even ask?” Because it was the first day, I wanted to show that I could take jokes, so I



Illustration by Brian Lopez-Santos, 18, Marshall HS (2009 graduate)

just laughed it off.

I wanted to make sure people didn't think I was uncomfortable being the only Asian girl (there was one other Asian, a boy, in the group of 40). One time, I told my roommates I only took showers during the day, since I was taught that sleeping with wet hair caused headaches. I called it one of my “Asian antics.” But it's really a “Charlene Lee's family antic” and we happen to be Asian. I think that since other people saw that I was able to laugh at my race, they thought it would be fine if they did too.

Some stereotypes were actually compliments, but those were just as irritating. Many of the girls talked about the straightness of my “Asian hair” and the clearness of my “Asian skin.” Others called me a “tight Asian” because I was talkative and sometimes bent the rules. But then I realized that if I were considered “tight” because I was different, that would mean they considered most Asians nerdy, awkward and shy. It made me feel like people automatically

assume that we all fit into one category. I was scared that all anyone would ever see was an Asian girl.

Even though it bothered me, I wouldn't say anything. I didn't want people to be uncomfortable around me.

One night, my three roommates and I were discussing our religions when one said she was Mormon. I was excited because I had never met a Mormon before. I agreed when she asked me if I wanted to go with her to church.

I REALIZED I MADE ASSUMPTIONS TOO

As we were waiting for the service to begin, I tried to think of everything I'd heard about Mormonism, which was living in Utah and practicing polygamy (have multiple marriages at the same time). I was embarrassed that I didn't even know if they still practiced polygamy (I know now that they don't).

My friend explained how Mormons belong to a ward, which is a church branch, and members of it became a second family. Around me, I

saw families, single people and elderly couples, hugging and making small talk as they greeted each other. No one questioned me for being there. They smiled, introduced themselves and asked if I was staying for Sunday school, acting as if I was a regular member who came every week.

I realized that there must be so much more to this religion than the stereotypes. I had always liked to think that I was cultured enough to know about different religions, but I was perfectly comfortable basing everything I knew about Mormons on stereotypes.

A few days later, I realized that this was exactly what the other pages had done to me. They didn't make jokes to be racist or mean. They were just imitating what everyone else was doing, without realizing that the jokes and assumptions they made were offensive.

Before, I never talked about my culture when I met people. It didn't seem important. But when I got back from D.C., I wanted to talk about it because I didn't want people to continue thinking these stereotypes were true.

One time my friend Sammie, who is Jewish, and I were swapping stories about our cultures. I was telling her about Asian etiquette, like how you have to eat whatever a host offers and how it's rude to point your chopsticks at someone. She told me about Passover, a holiday when people hunt for hidden matzoh (Jewish flat bread) and win money. I realized how much more willing I was to talk about my race than when I was in D.C., mostly because my friend showed an interest in learning about my culture instead of generalizing about it.

Now I feel proud to share my culture with others because it helps to end stereotypes. Even I am guilty of them, but if we try to understand other people's cultures, we will use them less. If people understand who I am as an individual, they will see past race and see me as me.



Charlene says we shouldn't stereotype, especially since we live in a city that is a melting pot.

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Foster Youth Editor Amanda Riddle (left) works with Sally on her story.



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A family away from home

The girls in my group home have been there for me like sisters

By **Sally Choi**
16, *The Linden Center*

I have two brothers but I've always wanted a sister. My ideal sister is someone who goes through the same things you do and can relate to you. Someone you share your feelings with and is your friend. I asked God for a sister and never got one. It wasn't until I was sent to a group home that I realized I got what I asked for. All the girls at my group home are like sisters to me.

I live in a group home with five other girls but I still get to see my parents on the weekends. Teens live in a group home to get help with their problems like drugs, running away, ditching school, cutting, drinking or fighting. I went to my first group home when I was 10 because I was ditching school and getting into fights. I didn't change so they sent me to a stricter group home out of state. I was doing good so they moved me back to California to the group home I'm at now.

When I came to the group home I was 13 and the other girls were at least two years older than me. They said I was better off hanging out with someone younger. I felt that they didn't like hanging out with me. Some would be mean. They'd do little things like when I walked out of the bathroom one girl said, "Yeah b**** get out." Another time I sat down on the couch in the living room and they said, "You can't sit here, it's saved." I think they wanted someone else sitting next to them rather than me. I felt like I didn't fit in and I felt alone. I wanted to go back to my other group home. After about a year, I got more mature and the girls started to accept me. I started to hang out with them and they got to know me.

THEY ASKED WHAT WAS WRONG WHEN I WAS UPSET

I started to open up to the girls. One time I made my dad mad so he told the staff that I had flipped him off. I started crying because I felt like he betrayed me because I had already apologized to him and he had said, "It's OK, I love you." A few days later we had a meeting

called "house group." The girls asked me what had happened because they had heard me crying. I told them that I got into a fight with my dad. They said they were worried about me. I was surprised that they cared. It made me feel happy that the girls were there to listen.

As we got to know each other more, we be-

of junk food. At one party I ate five or six pieces of pizza, a couple cups of ice cream, several popsicles, a couple Zingers, chips and gummy worms and drank soda. In the middle of the party, all of a sudden we started throwing Zingers at each other, even the staff. It was so fun.

couldn't even tell my friends, like her problems with her dad and getting in trouble at school. It looked so easy when she talked about her life. It helped me realize that just because you have a hardship in life, it doesn't mean you should sit there feeling bad for yourself. Now I tell people about my problems. It helps me to not keep everything inside.

Another person I'm close to is Angela. As soon as she moved into the group home, we got along. We would watch Korean soap operas together even though she didn't understand what they were saying. Once in a while Angela and I would get into fights. Once Angela told me I should break up with my boyfriend because she thought he was making things up to get my attention. I got mad and defended him but that made her mad. But we didn't stay angry at each other for long. After a few minutes I told her that she was important to me. She told me I was really important to her too. Then she said, "I love you and I care about you. I just don't want you to get hurt." I said, "I love you too." It sounds like a corny movie moment but it was important because it showed we were really good friends.

The girls in the group home helped me become a person I'm proud to be. I'm more confident because they tell me I'm smart, pretty and funny. They tell me I'm a good friend and that they're glad they have someone like me to talk to. When I leave the group home and move back with my family, I'll miss them.

** The names of Sally's friends have been changed to protect their privacy.*



Illustration by Sally Choi, 16, *The Linden Center*

came really good friends. We have fun talking about anything when we eat together at the dining room table. One time we were messing around and talking about all the things we would do at a restaurant that would make people think we were crazy. Rochelle* said she was going to pull a napkin out of her mouth slowly and put it on her lap. We were laughing really hard.

Every now and then the adult staff let us have parties just for fun. These are the best times I have with the girls because it's spontaneous and you never know what's going to happen next. We watch movies and eat a lot

Another time, one of the girls was saying she didn't like men with chest hair. I said, "Oh, so you like women with chest hair." She played along with it and said, "yes." Then I joked, "So you'll like me." Everybody was laughing. It makes me happy when they like my humor because I feel special.

MY ROLE MODEL

My roommate Emily has had a big influence on me. She has gone through much more than you could imagine. What is so special about her is that she doesn't care about what others think. She tells strangers things that I



Sally says she likes feeling like a big sister now that she's one of the oldest girls in her group home.

My mom is all I need

Even though my dad is not around, I believe in myself because of my mom's love and support

Photo by Jennifer Kim, 15, South Pasadena HS

By **Jessica Palomo**

17, Ramona Convent (Alhambra)

Being raised by a single mom, I feel like I've always been treated differently. People pitied me or thought I'd turn out bad. But my mother always made me feel better through her optimism and warm heart.

My parents separated when I was 2. To most people in my family, except my mother, my dad was undeserving of the title of father. When I was little, I liked to decorate my room with pictures and posters. Once, I put up a small picture of my dad and me. I liked it because of the way we were posed and because I liked my outfit. In the photo we're at Yosemite and there are a bunch of trees behind us. I'm sitting on a short wall and he's standing beside me. I'm wearing a pink dress and purple tights, with my hair in pigtails. My grandma came into my room one day and saw the picture. She cursed at me in Spanish, pointing to the picture and then pointing back at me. I felt as if I was worshipping the devil. My grandma called it disrespectful to my mother. She came back a few hours later, to make sure I had taken it down. When she saw that I had, she sat on my bed and told me that my dad would never love me. Her words hurt me more than anything had ever hurt me before. And it wasn't what she said, but she said it in a way that made me seem unworthy of being loved.

But my mom told me otherwise. When I was younger my mother sat down with me beneath the lemon tree on the side of our house one summer evening. Through whispers and held back tears, she explained to me that although their marriage was anything but perfect, it was nothing to be ashamed of. And instead of instilling any sort of hatred toward my dad, my mother said something I admire more than anything else: "I love you. That's what matters. Don't listen to your grandma or anyone who tells you there's something wrong with you. You're the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me. Don't forget that. I know you're upset—I was for a long time too, but we have to forgive so we can have peace in our hearts."

I've been able to form my own image of my father—the problem is, that image is just about



the blurriest image you could ever imagine. He's a dad who lives on the other side of the planet, even if his house is half an hour away. I see him about twice a year. Our meetings consist of my dad naming titles of dense books I've never read in hopes that I'll know something about the plot so we can have something to discuss for the next hour. In his apartment you'll find a huge pyramid of plastic Tropicana lemonade bottles, and a copy of Andy Warhol's Triple Elvis painting. I know he's my dad, but I don't know much about him.

MY DAD DIDN'T EVEN REMEMBER MY BIRTHDAY

I remember visiting him on my 11th birthday, and sitting on the wooden porch swing outside his house, while my mother spoke to him inside. I overheard her say, "Did you wish

her a happy birthday?" "No," he said. "How am I supposed to know when her birthday is?" My heart sank. No one had ever forgotten my birthday before. I thought maybe I'd get an apology. So when it was time to go, I held on longer than usual when hugging him goodbye, waiting for one. But I never got my apology.

Growing up, I had a clear vision of what my dad was supposed to be like. Having spent a lot of time with my cousins, I saw the way their dads spoke and acted around them. They were gentle, and kissed my cousins on the forehead before they went to sleep. The thing I remember the most was how they taught my cousins how to ride a bike one summer. My cousins weren't afraid of falling after a while because their dads were right behind them, ready to help. I felt ashamed that at 12 years old, I was older than some of my cousins and didn't have the first

clue about riding a bike. I didn't know how to pedal, and I didn't have a dad to teach me.

That same summer, I begged my mom for a bike. It could be any bike—as long as I had one. Then Christmas came, along with my first Schwinn. But when I saw it, I couldn't bear to look at it. What I really wanted was a dad to teach me how to ride one, and that Christmas, Dad didn't come. It wasn't until February that I took it out from the dusty shed I had buried it in. I took a long look at it. Then I got on and slowly, I started pedaling, building up speed as I took it for a ride on the patio around my house. I wobbled. I wasn't perfect, but I didn't fall. The smile on my face that day was as big as ever. I discovered that even though I didn't have a dad to encourage me, I had faith in myself.

Still, I've also thought about how much my dad's absence has affected me. After looking up

information on the Internet about kids with single moms, hundreds of links popped up. I saw things like, "As children from single-parent families become adults, they are more likely to marry early, have children early, and divorce." I felt as if people I had never even met had the same idea about me as some of my family members. Maybe I was supposed to end up unhappy and unsuccessful. After all, who was I to argue with public opinion? My mother noticed my gloomy

"Who do you think you are?" my mother asked. After a few seconds, I answered, "I'm me." "Keep it, and don't let it go," she said. "There are going to be people telling you who they think you are. Prove them wrong." She always reminded me that I was in control of my life. If I didn't want to turn out a certain way, I wasn't going to.

attitude. She assured me that I could prove them wrong. Her confidence in me was what helped me have confidence in myself. But at times, this confidence wasn't always easy to keep.

ACCUSED OF BEING A FLIRT

The parents of friends I've known since elementary school even had ideas about the kind of person I was. Two years ago I was watching a movie at a friend's house and her older sister and her sister's boyfriend were with us. We were on one couch, and I was sitting next to her sister's boyfriend. We all had fun and when the movie was over, my mom picked me up and I went home. The next day my mom told me about a phone call she had gotten. My friend's mom said she felt like I was flirting with her daughter's boyfriend and that because I had no father figure, I'd be throwing myself at guys

all the time. I was shocked. These were people we'd known for years. My friendship fell apart. I wanted to confront my friend's mom, but I couldn't look at her or her family without wanting to cry, hurt because of what was said about me.

I probably would have let these comments seep into how I felt about myself, but my mom was there to comfort me. That night we were in the middle of dinner when she stopped and looked at me. "Who do you think you are?" she asked. After a few seconds, I answered. "I'm me." "Keep it, and don't let it go," she said. "There are going to be people telling you who they think you are. Prove them wrong." By encouraging me to keep my head up, she reminded me that I was in control of my life. If I didn't want to turn out a certain way, I wasn't going to.

This mindset wasn't always easy to maintain. Flipping through the channels one evening last spring, I landed on the Dr. Phil show. Seated was Ann Coulter, author of *Guilty: Liberal "Victims" and Their Assault on America*, a book that devoted an entire chapter to single mothers. I sat on my couch watching as this woman connected America's crime rate to the actions of children belonging to single mothers. The audience clapped as she went on to say that these children, or "future strippers" as she referred to them, were responsible for years of crime in America. I kept watching, unsure if it was some sort of joke. Why were they clapping? I was shocked by the audience members uniting in what seemed to be hatred toward my mom and I.

Coulter's comments echoed those belonging to people I've encountered over the years, whose judgment of me has been based on the fact that I, like so many other teens, have a single mom. I explained my frustration to my mom as soon as she came home from work. She listened patiently and took a deep breath before

speaking. "Do you believe her?" "How could I?" I said. She said, "Jessie, you'll find these people everywhere. Ignorant people who choose to criticize others. Don't listen to their comments, don't dwell. Listen to yourself. You know what you're made of."

I WANT RESPECT, NOT PITY

Last year I was required to write a personal statement for my English class. Mine was about my dad's absence in my life and the positive attitude that I try to maintain. After sharing our essays, I had people come up to me and give me hugs, expressing how sorry they were. My friend Jane hugged me, whispering, "I'm so sorry." I try my best not to feel sorry for myself, but it's difficult to do when people look at you with pity. I'd rather have people treat me kindly because of who I am, not what I've been through. I'm so much more than that. I'm an honors student and a peer counselor at my high school and I volunteer at my church to work with children. I go through life knowing that belief in myself is the most valuable thing I could ever have.

This faith in myself has only grown stronger with the help of my mother. She doesn't just tell me to believe in myself—she shows me what can happen when you do. I can remember doing my homework while she did hers right next to me—I was learning addition while she was studying for her degree in public health. She worked nights as a nurse at one of the busiest hospitals in southern California and still had time to come home and read me my favorite book, *The Tortoise and the Hare*. Her 14 years in the Army Reserve also showed me how much willpower she has, because of the high rank she worked so hard for. And she's not all work—she's wisdom too. My mom understands the statistics about children of single parents that I've seen, but she also understands that a person's dreams and aspirations are more powerful than presumptions made by so-called experts. Telling me that everyone else's opinions didn't compare to my determination, her confidence in me has never faded. And as far as I can tell, everything I have accomplished in life has drowned out any assumptions made about me.



Jessica says no matter what type of family you have, there's nothing you can't do.

WHO IS IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE?



"My father came here from a rich family in Africa, but when he came, he didn't take any money

and started fresh. He showed that he could do anything by himself without help from others and he's successful. It shows me that I can do anything as long as I try."

Melaku Shiferaw, 13, Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies



"My uncle is the only person who when I'm with him I'm grateful for the small things—to be alive, to have

friends in my life, being healthy and having a good family. He's very grateful for small things and gives back to his community. I feel like that mentality is lacking in my generation. I'm grateful he's in my life to show me there are things bigger than me."

Jean Park, 16, Harvard-Westlake School (North Hollywood)



"Me and my mom are really close. If I do something wrong I don't feel right if I don't tell her. So I always

end up telling on myself. I can tell her anything."

Justen Cade, Westchester HS

My family can't afford to get sick

I worry because we don't have health insurance

By Serli Polatoglu

16, AGBU Manoogian-Demirdjian School (Canoga Park)

A few months ago my father came home from work holding what looked like a small black ball in his left fist. It took a moment to register the pained look on his face and that the black ball was actually the tip of his thumb.

I was freaking out. The sight of his hand, bruised and blackened, made me gasp.

"Ser, nothing happened," he said using my nickname, trying to soothe me.

It didn't work. "Dad, what do you mean nothing happened? What did you do?!" I screamed at him in Turkish.

"Calm down, everything's going to be fine," he said. But he couldn't move his hand without wincing.

Why did this happen?! Why him?! I knew it was an accident, but I couldn't take it. This is my dad; he's supposed to be strong. It didn't make sense to see him in pain, and it tore me up knowing he was acting tough.

Luckily, my older brother went into doctor-in-training mode (he's applying to medical school). The blood building up in my father's thumb was creating painful pressure in his hand. My brother grabbed a towel and a sterilized needle, and sat next to my dad on the couch in the living room. I'm squeamish and I couldn't watch, so when I asked my mother what they were going to do, she explained that my brother would prick my dad's thumb with a needle to let the blood out and relieve some of the pressure. The mental picture was vivid enough to make me want to throw up.

My dad didn't see a doctor, but I felt like he should have. My brother assured me that "the damage is done—he's healing now." That didn't make me feel any better.

My family has had health insurance on and off for the past 13 years—but, more often than not, we haven't been covered. We all manage to stay fairly healthy, but the occasional injury scares us half to death.

My family doesn't make a lot of money. My

father is self-employed—the sole operator of his own machine shop. My mom doesn't work. Since they don't have jobs that give them health insurance, they would have to buy it on their own, which is really expensive. If my parents were paying for us to be covered by an insurance company right now, we'd have to pay about \$500 a month.

I don't know much about healthcare. HMOs, Medicare—those are just words so-called experts toss around regularly on news shows. I was in middle school by the time I figured out that most families have a family doctor and get regular checkups. I can't remember the last time I went to the dentist. I eventually figured out that health insurance is when you make a monthly payment to your insurance company and they cover some or all the costs of you going to the doctor or hospital if you get sick or hurt.

MY DAD'S INJURY WAS A WAKE-UP CALL

After I saw my dad get hurt, I decided to talk to my mom about why we don't have medical insurance. I knew we'd been covered at one point, but my parents never explained why we aren't covered now.

A few weeks ago, I saw my mother sprawled across the couch in a way that said "I'm so tired I could fall asleep with the stove on," and almost backed away. But, I decided to test my courage and ask her just the same.

"Mom, do you have a minute?" I asked.

"Of course sweetie, what do you need?" she said.

I sat on the edge of our leathery sofa. "Well, I was wondering if you could tell me about our health insurance."

She took a deep breath, sat upright, and launched into an explanation. According to my mother, when I was born every member of my family was covered. She told me that 16 years ago she was comforted knowing our Kaiser Permanente health insurance plan would save us money if anything happened to one of us. We were able to keep our health insurance for three more years, and live comfortably as a single-income family.

And then came the part of the story that

made my mother red and nervous. "After a while, we hit a rough patch. Business started to slow down, and we needed to cut back a bit."

I was 7 and my brother was 14, and, though it pained her, my mom didn't foresee any mishaps in our future that would make health insurance a necessity. My parents took a leap of faith and canceled our Kaiser plan. All four of us were left vulnerable.

I've only just begun to understand the weight of that decision. What if my brother got sick? What if my dad got hurt, or my mom? What if?

Medical insurance may seem unnecessary

than nothing.

However, you are only eligible for Healthy Families if your annual income is within a certain range. During the first year, my parents made too much money and our plan was terminated. My mom re-applied the year after that, but that plan was canceled after our income was too low. Though we might have qualified for MediCal, a free government health insurance plan, we didn't apply. The third year we had Healthy Families, our income was too high once again, and it was canceled.

My mom told me that things got really tight after that. Jobs were few and far between for my dad. We had to start cutting corners again,

I'm glad I've been able to get annual checkups, but my parents haven't been to the doctor in years. I wish they had health insurance so they could visit the doctor when they get sick and have regular checkups to detect any health problems.

to those who never had a health scare, but being protected just in case is extremely important. I haven't had health insurance for the majority of my life, and when I take the time to think about what that really means, it feels like I have to walk on eggshells. I can't afford to get injured; I can't afford to get sick.

When I was 10, I was part of Healthy Families, a healthcare plan subsidized by the state of California for minors and pregnant women. After our application was accepted, we were sent a pamphlet that directed us to choose an insurance provider (Blue Cross) and types of insurance (health, vision, dental). I was the only one in my family eligible. It was cheaper than other plans (\$9 a month), and my parents thought some coverage would be better

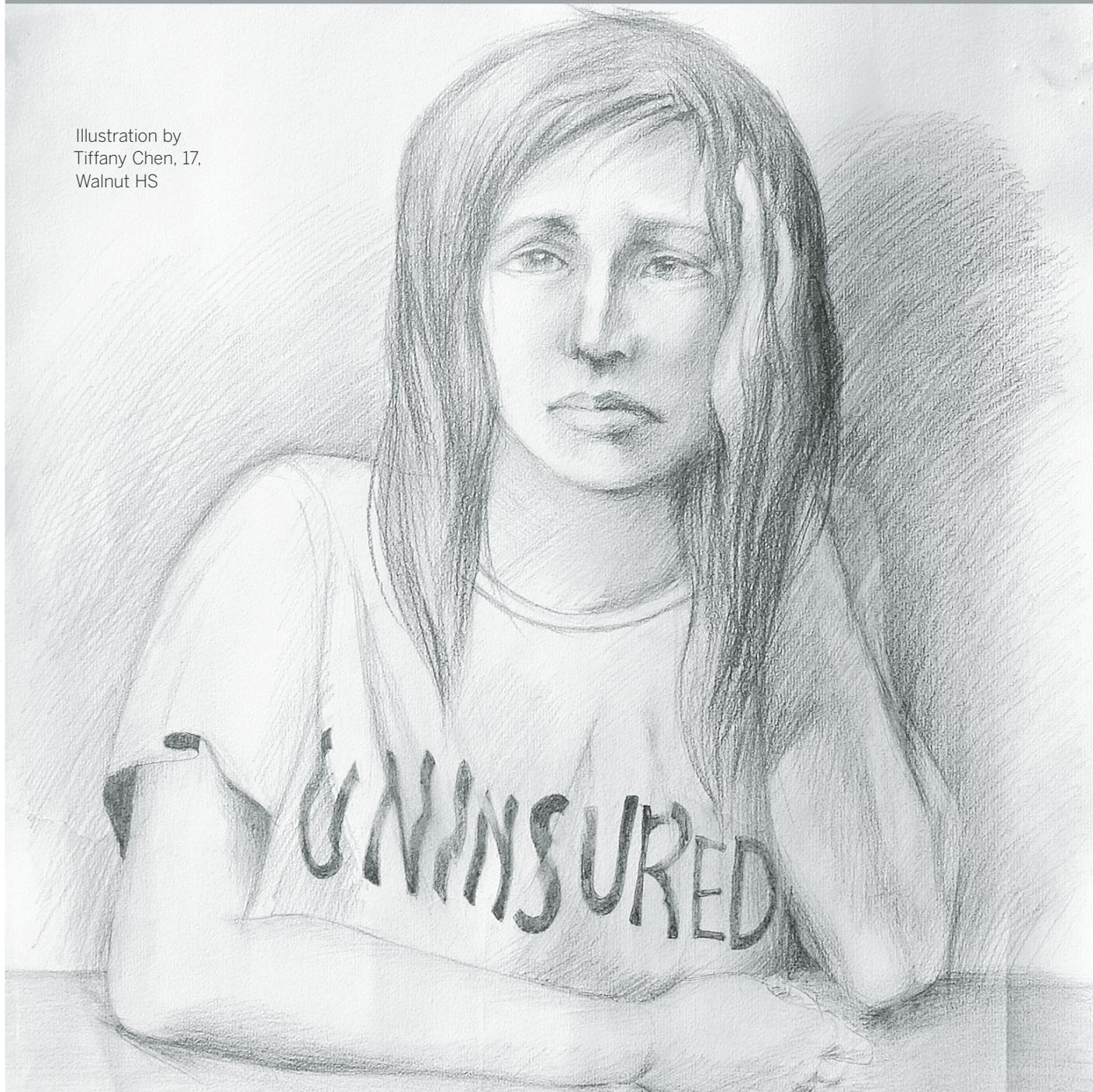
and cut back on luxuries like new clothes and family outings.

I hated making my mom admit that she and my father couldn't provide us with such a basic need. I hated the fact that this country made health insurance so expensive that people like my parents couldn't afford to protect themselves and our family.

My parents and I haven't been covered for the past five years or so. My brother has been more fortunate. He attended UCLA and Georgetown, and both schools require their students to have health insurance. So my parents bought him the student plan offered by the schools.

Thankfully, none of us have had any major emergencies. We've been relatively healthy,

Illustration by
Tiffany Chen, 17,
Walnut HS



with the exception of the occasional cold, flu or sports injury. We tend to let a common illness like a cold or sore throat go untreated.

My volleyball team requires us to get yearly checkups. If it wasn't for those physicals, I'm fairly confident I would've gone the last seven years without a visit to a doctor.

I LIKED THE CARE I GOT AT AN AFFORDABLE HEALTH CLINIC

I used to see a doctor who treated a lot of kids at my school. When I was covered by Healthy Families my parents had a co-payment of \$5 per visit. (When you have health insurance you pay only part of the cost of a doctor's visit, which is called a co-payment.) Once we were no longer eligible for Healthy

Families we had to pay the full cost, which was about \$100, and about \$40 more if I were to get a vaccination. My parents started to feel that he wasn't giving me a complete checkup, so for the past two years I've been getting free checkups at Mid-Valley Family Health Center, a clinic near my house.

When my mother and I arrived at the clinic for my checkup in August, the receptionist gave us an application to re-apply for Healthy Families. Since my mother agreed to apply, the clinic gave us free healthcare for a month. (The clinic charges \$60 for a return visit when you're uninsured.)

Unlike my previous doctor, the doctor at the clinic gave me a thorough checkup. My old doctor did the bare minimum. He measured

my height, weight, and conducted a few other simple tests that would complete the physical form my school required to play on a sports team. Mid-Valley went beyond the basics and it felt great to get a complete physical.

First, a nurse measured my height and weight. She then followed up with an eye exam. As I waited for the doctor, the nurse did a quick blood test to check for anemia. She stuck my finger and put a sample of my blood into a machine. Once the doctor walked in, she did a spinal exam, a chest exam and checked my breathing.

My ankle hurt and was swollen. When I asked my doctor about it, she told me it was probably because I hadn't done much exercise during the summer, and my body wasn't

used to volleyball practice. She told me to come back in two weeks if it still hurt, and since I was covered for an entire month, my mother made another appointment.

By the time our next visit rolled around, the pain in my ankle had gotten worse. The doctor gave me some foot exercises to help relieve the pain. I never got around to doing the exercises, but I did take my doctor's advice about arch supports. I bought arch supports, and they really helped lessen the pain in my ankle. Then I invested in a pair of comfy new volleyball shoes because I'd been playing in the same pair for three years and they had worn out.

I'm glad I've been able to get these annual checkups and that I got my ankle looked at, but my parents haven't been to the doctor in years. I wish they had health insurance so they could visit the doctor when they get sick and have regular checkups to detect any health problems.

EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO AFFORD HEALTHCARE

The events of this past year and the media coverage of the debate over healthcare have opened my eyes to the importance of health insurance. It's made me realize how scary not having health insurance really is. I can understand why teens might not be concerned with healthcare, but it is a basic need. Our government should be able to ensure our well-being without people having to spend ridiculous amounts of money on healthcare.

My mom recently re-applied for Healthy Families and I was accepted! I can't tell you how much of a relief it is to finally have health insurance, but I wish the rest of my family were covered as well.

My family has been extremely fortunate—we haven't had any major mishaps that have sent us to the hospital. But that's also a reason why my parents don't make a fuss about our lack of health insurance. Most people think that, because they haven't experienced some kind of medical trauma, they'll always be safe. Well, none of us are. Accidents and injuries can happen anytime, anywhere, and that's why it's so important to have health insurance.



As a teen, Serli may feel invincible, but she knows it's important to have health insurance.

My biggest regret

ESSAY CONTEST WINNERS

1ST PLACE \$50

I wish I had spent more time with my sister

By **Bellen Avelar**

Clark Magnet HS (La Crescenta)

I have always heard people say, "Don't have any regrets." For some reason I believed it was true. Why regret something if there is nothing you can do to change the past? On January 14, 2007 I realized that I did have one regret—not spending more time with Quira, my sister. Quira was a loving and caring person, someone who could make you smile. She had cerebral palsy and on January 14, 2007 she passed away.

I remember the day as if it were yesterday. The day before, my mom, Quira and I went to a birthday party. We got home late and woke up late the next morning. I had to run an errand and my mom went to the kitchen to make breakfast. I was with my sister Elsy's husband when he got a phone call. He told me to run to his car. I was scared not knowing what was going on. It felt like the longest car ride of my life. When we were about five minutes away from my house he told me that maybe my sister had passed away. I could not move. I could not cry. My body went cold. When I got home I saw the ambulance and my family around my house. I ran and saw my mom and Elsy crying and I knew it was true, Quira was dead. I have never felt so much pain in my life. I started to cry and hugged Elsy.

For the next few days my life was a blur. I would go to school and forget Quira was dead and feel that she was still alive, but when I would get home, the day of her death replayed. It was a recurring nightmare.

As time went by I started to think of all the things Quira and I had not done together, all the things she missed in life. I regret not doing more for her. I regret not telling her thank you for all the things she did for me. I regret not say-

ing sorry for making her feel bad or for upsetting her. I regret not making an effort to help her when she needed my help. I regret not being there to defend her when people made fun of her. I regret not accompanying her when she had doctor appointments. I have many regrets when it comes to all of the things I could've

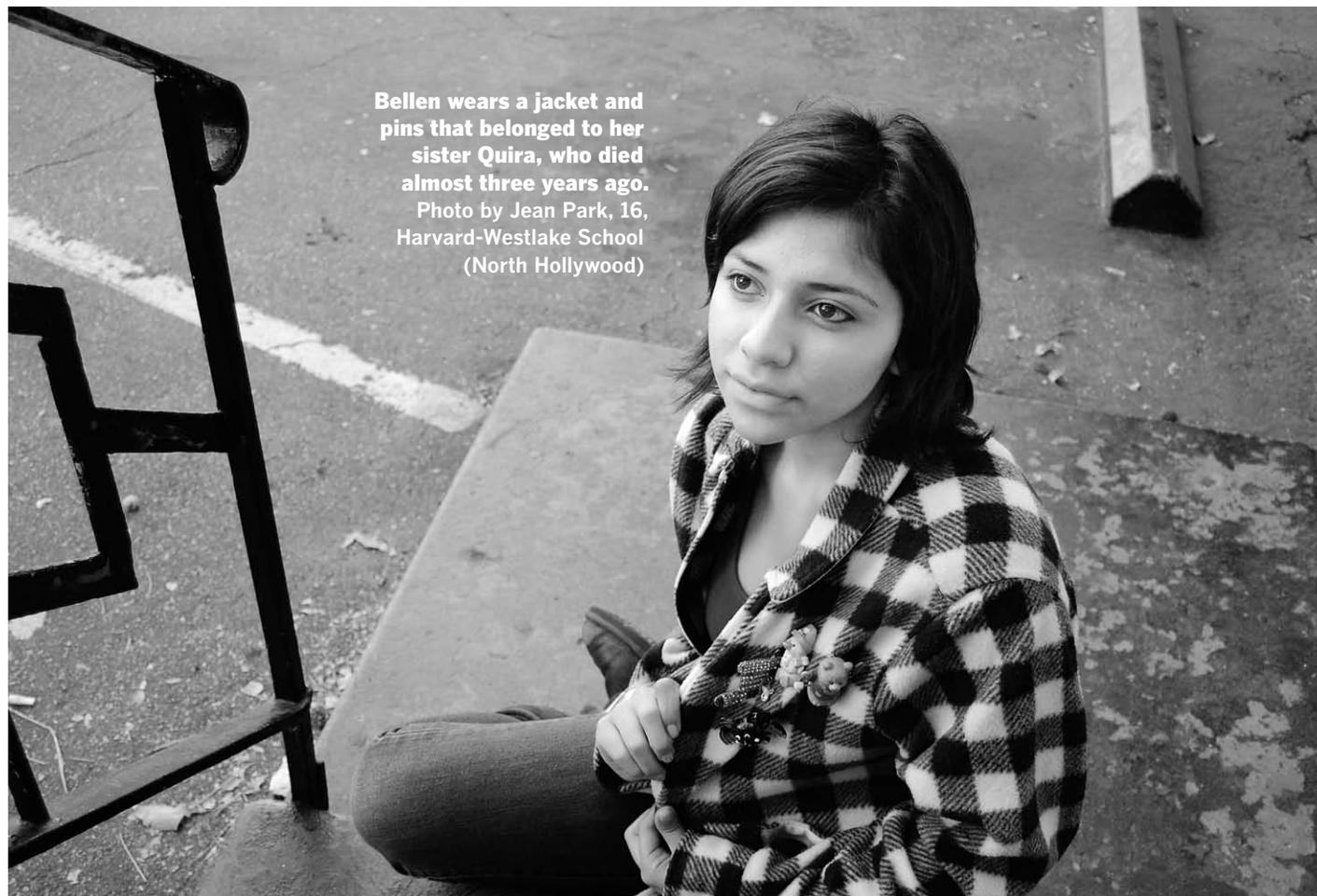
done and did not do.

Now that she is dead I realize how much I didn't do for her. If I could go back in time and be a better sister I would do it without thinking. I would change my attitude and help much more. I would stop being so selfish. I know death is a part of life, but that doesn't

stop death from hurting.

It has been almost three years since Quira passed away and I still feel terrible. When I heard about this contest I knew it was the perfect opportunity for me to let go of all the pain I feel. I want people to know to never go to sleep mad at someone or without telling the person "I love you" because you never know if they will wake up.

I want people to learn from my mistake and appreciate their loved ones. Now that I have written this I feel a lot better and hopefully I will no longer hold on to all these regrets. My sister passed away and holding on to regrets will not bring her back to life. Instead of thinking of all my regrets, I should focus on the beautiful moments we had together.



Bellen wears a jacket and pins that belonged to her sister Quira, who died almost three years ago.

Photo by Jean Park, 16,
Harvard-Westlake School
(North Hollywood)

2ND PLACE \$30

My father is in prison

By J.S., Washington Prep HS

When I was 11, I didn't make a good choice. One night I was watching TV with my cousins while my dad was drinking with his friends in the other room. A few moments later I heard a lot of commotion and arguing. I went to check on my dad and he was ready to fight. I pulled him out of the room to talk but he wasn't willing to listen to me. I then told him to take me home.

We were walking down the street because we lived just down the block. He seemed pretty mad about what had happened, but I had no idea how he felt. As we walked up the steps he kissed me on my forehead and said "I love you." At that point I knew some-

thing was wrong. He then walked away as I went in the house.

The next day I received some bad news. Two of my neighbors had been reported dead. Then it hit me—the reason my dad didn't stay the night and the reason he didn't tuck me into bed and the reason he didn't eat dinner with me. I regret not pushing him to stay the night with me and my mother, sister and brother. Maybe I would still have my father to look up to and count on instead of him being in prison. He was my everything, my other half, my best friend and a loving father. I didn't get why this would happen to me at such a young age. I figured I was cursed or just had bad luck with the things that were most important to me.

As the years went by I cried a lot, but as I got older I realized I had to live with it. I never forgave my dad for leaving me. He would write me letters but I would never reply. I didn't know what to say. When I was mature enough to understand everything I wrote him back and expressed all my feelings. I was just so angry because he said he would never leave me again. Maybe if I would have had a clue or was old enough to change his mind that night, I would still have my father.

3RD PLACE \$20

A sketchy Internet relationship

Author's name withheld

Not too long ago, I was in a "relationship" with someone I met on MySpace. We had never met and I had never even been in a relationship. The fact that we were both gay and had to keep it secret from our friends made the situation more awkward. We first had to come out to each other and our "relationship" grew from there. Soon after we started our conversations, we decided that it was time to hear each other's voices, so we started to talk on the phone. Now, keep in mind that I still had never met this person. For all I knew, he could've been a 50-year-old man pretending to be a young adult, yet I stupidly continued to talk to him.

We talked on the phone nightly until the wee hours of the morning. This left me grumpy in the morning, and my schoolwork became sloppy. This relationship with a person that I really didn't know was affecting every aspect of my life. My friends didn't know why I was mad, my teachers didn't know why my work kept getting worse and worse, and my parents didn't know what was happening to their son.

Things felt OK for a while, but the guy slowly began to show his true colors. Every conversation we had, on-

line or on the phone, kept getting more and more sexual. All that mattered to him was sex. What's worse is that I played along with everything that was happening.

Eventually, we decided that it was time to meet. Deciding on the place was difficult. I wanted a public place like the mall, but all of his suggestions were private places. He invited me to his house, or a little cove with plenty of deserted areas where anything could happen. It was clear that he was either an online pedophile or a guy my age who was looking only for sex. Whichever it was, I refused to go along with it. I finally made the decision not to go.

After I missed the first meeting, we stopped writing. We essentially broke up. However, this could barely be labeled a breakup because it wasn't much of a healthy relationship to start with.

The decisions I made while talking to him were stupid, and I still feel unbelievably angry with myself for doing it. I am constantly asking myself, "Why did you play along with what he was saying?" I knew that I wasn't ready for what was going on, yet I pushed myself to do it anyway, thinking that somehow it was what I needed.

I regret trying to force myself to find someone, and I regret doing the things I did to try and keep a boyfriend. I regret feeling that I needed someone because I felt like everyone else had someone. I regret every decision I made during the entire ordeal, and am glad that I had the power to say no. Although I said no after so many things had gone by, I am proud that I didn't go through with meeting him. I learned valuable lessons that I will never forget. I learned about the strength I possess. And I know now that drawing the line, and saying no to something you don't believe in, is not a bad thing to do. Stand up for yourself and say no when you know something isn't right.

NEW ESSAY CONTEST:

What don't your parents understand about you?

Your parents were once teenagers and they probably think they get you and know what it's like to be a teen. But do you think they do? Do they get on you about the way you dress, the music you listen to or the friends you hang out with? Do they question your interests or think you don't spend enough time studying? Do they expect you to follow in their footsteps? Tell us what you wish your parents understood about you.



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. The staff of L.A. Youth will read the entries and pick three winners. Your name will be withheld if you request it. 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.

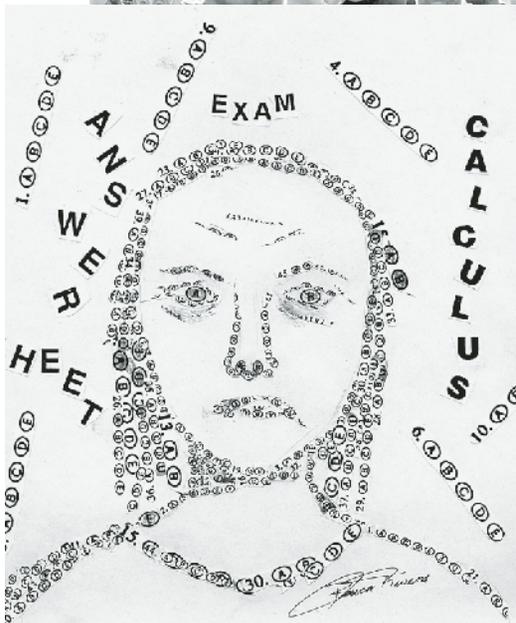
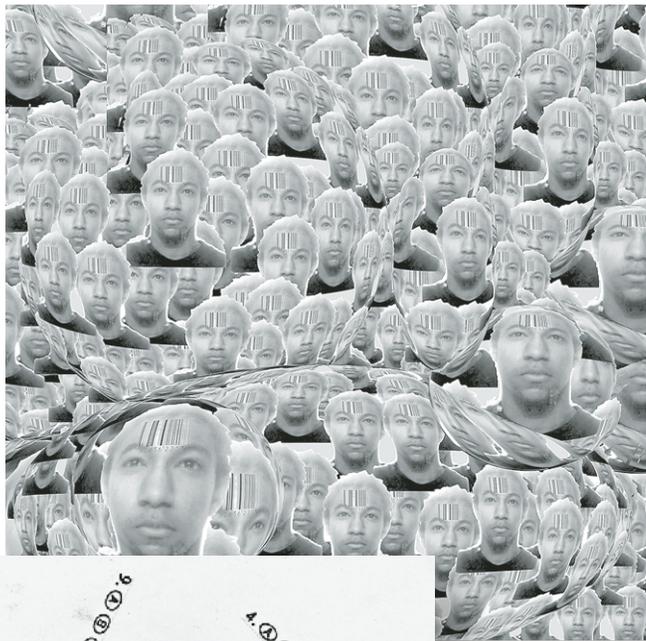
Mail your essay to:



L.A. Youth
5967 W. 3rd St. Suite 301
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or editor@layouth.com

DEADLINE: Friday, Dec. 11, 2009

L.A. youth ART CONTEST: The real me



A mirror reflects what you look like on the outside but can't fully capture who you are. We want to know how you see yourself—the you on the inside. It could be what you're passionate about—maybe it's music, sports, activism or school. Or it could be the side of you that others don't always see—the part that is creative or cares about others or is proud of your culture. Show us the real you.

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

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 \$75. Second- and third-place winning students and teachers will each receive \$50. Winners and honorable mentions will be published in the May-June 2010 issue of L.A. Youth newspaper and on www.layouth.com.

Questions?

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

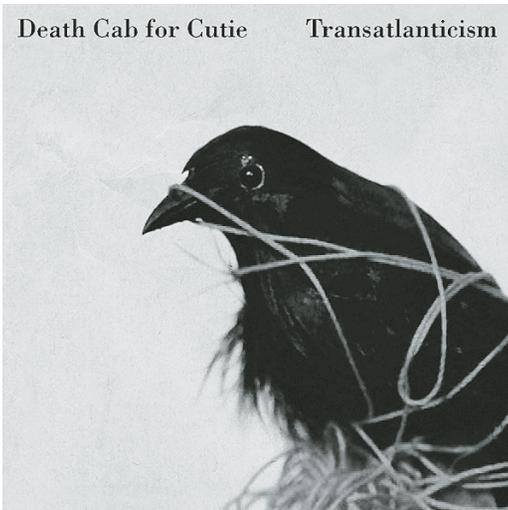
Send your submission to:

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ARTWORK FROM L.A. YOUTH ARCHIVES

DEADLINE: MARCH 31, 2010

Death Cab for Cutie Transatlanticism



Death Cab for Cutie

CD: Transatlanticism

Reviewed by Hannah Song

16, Mark Keppel HS (Alhambra)

Death Cab for Cutie's album *Transatlanticism* was love at first listen. Sometimes eccentric, sometimes melancholy, and always meaningful, lead singer Ben Gibbard croons stories of love and friendship with his smooth voice.

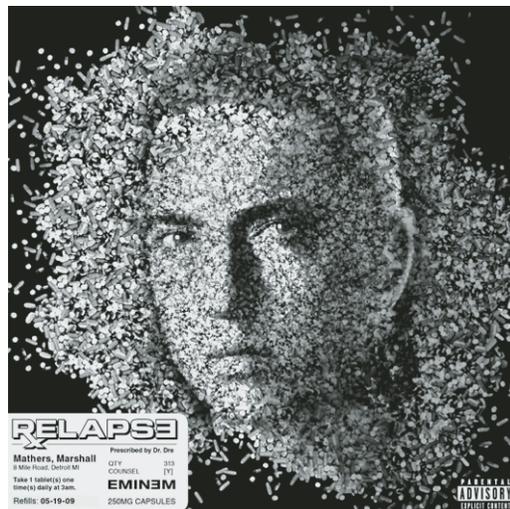
My three favorite songs are "Tiny Vessels," "The Passenger Seat" and "Transatlanticism."

"Tiny Vessels" has a pulsing melody that matches perfectly with Gibbard's voice as well as the haunting lyrics: "And she was beautiful but she didn't mean a thing to me." These words are a stark confession of an idea we're all familiar with but no one wants to admit to—the shallowness of love. "The Passenger Seat" is the kind of song you can imagine playing softly in the background as you drive home late at night. Its lyrics and tone give off a whimsical, comfortable feel: "With my feet on the dash, the world doesn't matter."

The song "Transatlanticism" has a backbeat like a steady heartbeat. Soft piano chords, the slow strum of an electric guitar and Gibbard's voice create an ambience perfect for the rare California rainy day spent with a blanket and fuzzy slippers, while listening to lyrics like: "I need you so much closer."

As a Death Cab for Cutie fan, I find this album the easiest to put on repeat. When people ask, "What's Death Cab for Cutie like?" this is the album I refer them to. The music plus Gibbard's vocals and clever lyrics make this album unforgettable.

When people ask "What's Death Cab for Cutie like?" this is the album I refer them to.



Eminem

CD: Relapse

Reviewed By Francisco Sandoval

17, Nogales HS (La Puente)

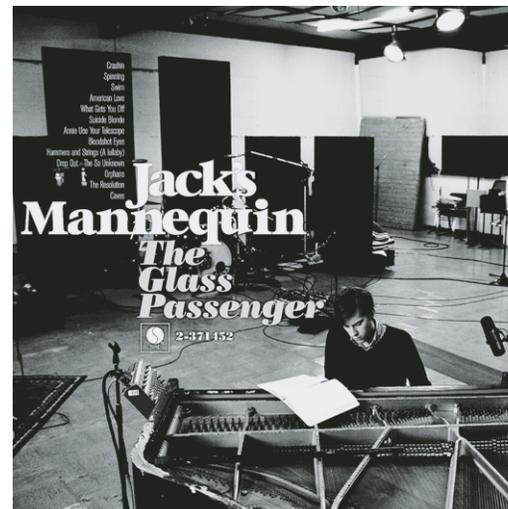
After almost five years Eminem is back with Relapse. Filled with songs about hard times at school and his time in drug rehab, this is his best and most personal album. Before this, I didn't like Eminem's music all that much because his lyrics were so violent: "But the smartest s*** I did was take the bullets out that gun/ 'cause I'd a killed 'em" (from "Cleaning Out My Closet" on his previous album, *The Eminem Show*).

"Beautiful" is an amazing, deep song about being who you are no matter what people think of you. Eminem's flow is slow and the beat makes you feel gloomy, which is ironic because the lyrics are meant to be uplifting. Eminem says, "Don't let them say you ain't beautiful/ They can all get f***ed/ Just stay true to you." This song talks about Eminem trying to fit in at school because he was different. Two other really personal songs on this album are, "Same Song & Dance" and "Underground." These two songs give us an insight into Eminem's struggle with drugs and rehab.

On "We Made You," though, Eminem is up to his old antics. He pokes fun at everybody from Jessica Simpson to Sarah Palin. My favorite lyrics are, "And little that I mention/ That Jennifer is/ In love with me so John Mayer sit on the bench." The beat is fast paced and so is Eminem's flow.

Eminem takes us even deeper into his life on a dark album that shows his more mature side.

Filled with songs about hard times at school and his time in drug rehab, this is his best and most personal album.



Jack's Mannequin

CD: The Glass Passenger

Reviewed by Kevin Ko

15, Wilson HS (Hacienda Heights)

The rock band Jack's Mannequin made a name for itself with its great first album, *Everything in Transit*. I was disappointed when I finally heard the band's second album, *The Glass Passenger*, which was nothing like I had hoped.

While the band's first album consisted of upbeat love songs, *The Glass Passenger* is filled with boring songs about breakup and sorrow.

Everything in Transit established JM's musical style, which is piano rock. But now, it's as if they're abandoning it, like on the song "Bloodshot." I didn't hear much piano, instead it had a lot of guitar. It sounded like a bad Maroon 5 song. Another song, "Suicide Blonde," sounded like a ripoff of "Wake-Up Call" by Maroon 5. JM's lead singer Andrew McMahon's voice sounds like he could be singing a song for a Disney musical not a rock song.

But there are good songs. "Spinning" is a song about how even though the world is hectic, everyone has to keep going. It has a catchy tune, good beat and great lyrics, like "I lost my place, but I can't stop this story/ I'll find my way, but until then, I'm only spinning." This song could have been on *Everything in Transit*.

My friend Kristine, who is my school's biggest Jack's Mannequin fan, was even disappointed with the album. *The Glass Passenger* isn't bad, just below most JM fans' expectations. Even with this disappointing album, I would still buy their next album, hoping that they will return to their original style of piano rock.

The Glass Passenger isn't bad, just below most fans' expectations.

BE A PART OF L.A. YOUTH!

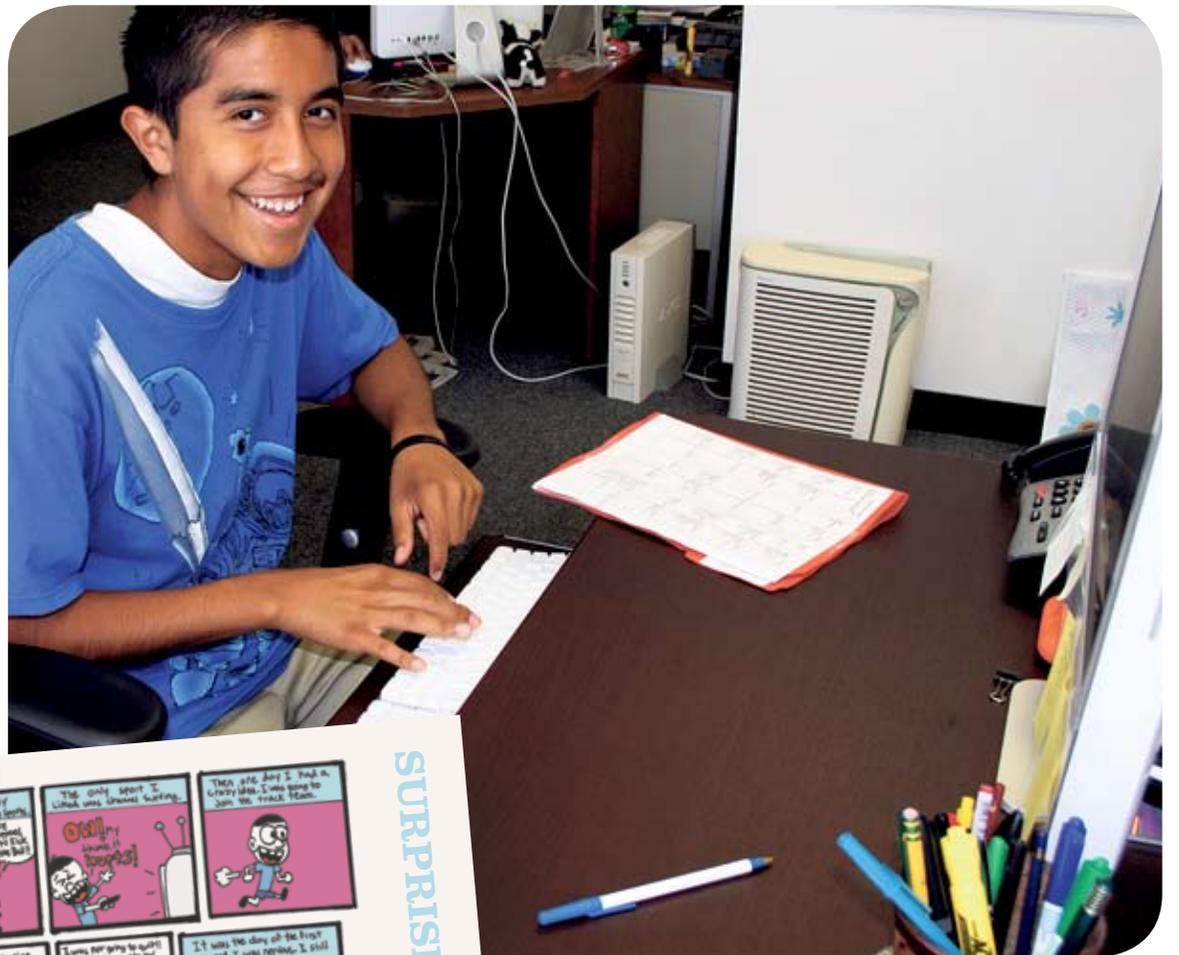
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L.A. Youth has given me an opportunity to showcase my art to hundreds of thousands of people. I have had four comics, four illustrations and six CD reviews published in the newspaper. Without L.A. Youth, my art would have remained in my sketchbook. Even better, the kids at my school would see my artwork in the paper and compliment me.

L.A. Youth has also given me the opportunity to discuss current events with other teens, like the war in Iraq and the 2008 presidential election. At school we're busy studying history and other subjects, and we never have the chance to discuss issues like these. I also like that at the weekly staff meetings I've met teens from other parts of L.A. County who are different from the kids I go to school with.

L.A. Youth has taught me to become a better writer, too. I am more confident expressing my ideas on paper than I was before I joined.

—Francisco Sandoval,
17, Nogales HS (La Puente)

L.A. youth

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