

Kate Naranjo
First Place

“Homebase” Hits Hard

In my new high heels, a perfect dress and pearls around my neck, I have everything I've ever wanted. Ironically, I'm standing next to my mother, nearly crying over people that aren't as lucky as I am. "I'd give up all the designer jeans in the world to save these kids," I whisper to her. Jeans that the days before I was whining because I needed them. But tonight, I'm at a charity dinner at which a remarkable woman is speaking about a non-profit organization. This organization takes devastated homeless youth off the street and helps them get their troubled lives back with things like shelter, counseling and simply a meal.

Martin Luther King, Jr. made people want to change they way they lived their lives. And in a small respect, this woman does this same thing to me. She makes me wish I could change my life, and every teen's life that has nowhere to sleep. This woman is Ms. Patricia Leach and she is the president of Homebase Youth Services.

She formed Homebase in 1991, when she discovered there were no homeless services for people between eighteen and twenty-one, which broke her heart. So, taking charge, she formed Homebase. With the help of her board members, she helps to raise money to change lives. Slowly, Homebase has grown. In 2003, her vision provided services to 2,315 teens who would otherwise have been lonely and terrified on the streets.

Homebase is an amazing charity, brought about by people who just want to make a difference. My parents have a scholarship program in place for teens of Homebase, and I literally cannot wait until I can start helping them. When I start thinking my life is tough, I imagine the horrible situations Ms. Leach helps with every day, and somehow, my life seems that much easier.

Carly Fusco
Second Place

True Inspiration

The phone rings, “Teen Lifeline, this is Nikki.” The afternoon begins for Nikki Kontz, a supervisor at Teen Lifeline, a peer counseling hotline which provides access for troubled teens to get help 365 days a year. Nikki’s dedication to serving began when she was a teen in high school working as a peer counselor at Teen Lifeline a passion she continues as an adult today. She has devoted her life to helping teens in crisis. Nikki faces each day fearlessly. Taking a phone call at Teen Lifeline, she never knows what to expect or the impact she will have on the caller. She serves as a strong leader and role model for the peer counselors who work at Teen Lifeline.

Nikki carries on the hope of a better tomorrow. She educates and trains teens to work on the line. Each teen interested in becoming a peer counselor must undergo 70 hours of training that covers listening skills, communication skills, self-esteem, problem solving, and relevant teen issues. Nikki is there as a teacher throughout all of this training making sure each teen is fully prepared to answer a call for help.

Before my experience at Teen Lifeline I was not sure of what direction my life might take. My contact and association with Nikki has inspired me to seek a future serving in a capacity where I will assist people through their lives crises. Nikki’s leadership has helped me in my own relationships to give me a better understanding of the issues that confront teens today.

Pam Weir
Third Place

Silent Hero

Throughout my life, I have realized that the real heroes in society often go unrecognized. In my life, heroes have always been my teachers. They ensure that younger generations will have a bright future, and the backbone of our world.

Miss Barb Wissmann, my freshman English teacher, is one of these silent heroes. At school, she is most famous for her first lesson of the year. Wissmann calms the nerves of scared freshman by making them feel proud to be themselves. Standing at the front of the classroom on the first day of school, she waves a bright red balloon in the air and explains that every student has their own unique balloon of life that needs to be handled with care. Her enthusiasm for learning is contagious, making students excited to be at school.

Miss Wissmann's love for teaching is as tall as she is. While most teachers limit teaching to the classroom, her guidance goes beyond the fences of our school. She gives all students her home phone number, and puts in extra hours to make sure that no child is left behind. Despite the difficulty of her curriculum, students not only survive, but pass with flying colors thanks to her willingness to recognize each student as an individual, not as job security. Teens walk out of her classroom at the end of the year knowing that they have the potential to lead a remarkable life.

Somewhere among hundreds of vocabulary words, dozens of essays, and a faulty air conditioner, I learned life's real lessons. I have come to realize that I would love to teach and pass on the same knowledge to my students that Miss Wissmann has given to me. Like Martin Luther King, she inspires me to achieve the impossible and settle for nothing but the best. While I continue to make a life for myself, I have faith in the future knowing that Barb Wissmann is back at the high school, teaching the next year of students.