

The meaning of courage

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Each year sixth-graders in the Boston public schools and elsewhere in the area write about courage as part of The Max Warburg Courage Curriculum, a literacy program that honors the memory of an 11-year-old Boston sixth-grader who died of leukemia in 1991.

These are among the winning essays that will be recognized at a ceremony in Boston on Tuesday.

SEI KORTI

Rebecca Fischer, Teacher

George A. Lewis Middle School

It was my cousin Flamo's first time in the United States, and therefore his first time attending an American school. Because it was the middle of the school year, I thought he would be a bit nervous. I knew it would be hard for him to make friends because he didn't speak much English, and had a strong accent. I also figured most of the kids already knew each other, and it is hard to "break in" halfway through the year.

My family moved to America during my second-grade year. I, too, knew little English, and making friends was quite a challenge. I felt very left out.

Because of my own experience, I thought I should help Flamo with any problems so he would not feel left out like I did.

If he was anything like me, I was pretty sure Flamo would not sleep well the night before he started attending an American school. He woke up early the morning school was to start. We ate breakfast, and off we went.

When he came back from school, I asked him if he had a good time. He said, "Yes."

Because that was not what I expected, I was surprised to hear this answer. I asked what happened. He said, "All we did was go over the rules and then I sat all by myself." I asked him if this was different for him than being a student in Africa.

He told me, "In Africa I was one of the smartest kids in my class. I always had a lot of fun in school."

The next day he went back to school. When he returned home, I asked him the same questions that I had asked the day before. This time, however, Flamo responded with, "I had a rough day."

When I asked him why it was such a rough day, he said, "When the teacher called my name, most of the kids started laughing. The teacher asked them what was so funny. They said, 'We are laughing at his name.'"

"Also when I raised my hand to give an answer, they all started to laugh," Flamo said.

I gave him this advice: "Act like you're not hearing them because they are trying to make you not raise your hand and that will make you get a bad grade. When you have the right answer you should always raise your hand. If they keep laughing, don't give up, tell the teacher."

Flamo asked, "You seem like you understand. Did the same thing happen to you?"

I said, "Yes, in the second grade, and I did the same thing I am telling you to do. I never gave up and didn't allow anyone's silly comments to keep me from participating and learning."

"Do you have any homework to do?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I know what to do but don't get what the question is asking." He asked me to read it. When I was doing reading and explaining, Flamo said, "Now I get it! You are the best cousin I have ever had!"

Hearing this, I felt so proud, knowing I was able to help my cousin overcome this challenge.

A few weeks later my cousin told me, "Now I am making friends. And I feel happy. Thank you."

JEFFERSON PAYNE**Melanie Smith, Teacher****Josiah Quincy Upper School**

To have courage means to stand up for both yourself and other people, to ignore the people who bother you and to love the ones you love. Courage also means to have inner strength and confidence. I am adopted and have different color skin than my parents.

Kids make fun of me because my family looks different from theirs. I had courage to ignore the people who made fun of my parents and me. I am proud of who I am.

I was born in Quito, Ecuador. My birth parents were very young. My birth mother was 15. Therefore, they put me in an orphanage.

A Caucasian couple came and adopted me when I was just a year old. They brought me to the United States, and that became my new home.

At the Josiah Quincy Elementary School, people kept asking me why I was adopted. The kids made fun of me because I was adopted and had white parents. They said stuff that was so wrong, mean, horrible, and disrespectful. When kids made fun of me, it hurt my feelings. I felt sad and angry. The kids made me feel horrible; they were rotten to me and rotten to my family. When I got angry, I sometimes felt like punching them so hard, but as Martin Luther King said, "Learn to love your enemies." Therefore, I was kind and gentle.

When the kids played games and I asked if I could play they would say "No" just because of how my family looks. I felt very left out. I sometimes felt afraid that I was not going to have any friends just because I was adopted.

I told the kids that made fun of me why I was adopted and why I had white parents. They still did not understand. They kept on taunting me. I got sick to my stomach listening to them. Every day they would say disrespectful and mean things about my parents. I was aggravated. I just could not stand it anymore.

I asked my mom what I should do and she said to "ignore their comments." I tried to do that, but I could never keep my feelings inside. The kids were annoying. I kept on trying to ignore them and it finally worked.

I said to myself, "I am proud to have a really nice family. I don't care what those kids think! It only matters what I think, and I think I have the best parents you could ever imagine! This is my life. I am sad that I will never see my birth parents face to face, but maybe it changed me for the better. The parents who adopted me are the ones I love a lot and I would never ever change my mind!"

To the parents I love: You are the best in the world. I love you.

ANTHONY MARK**Sarah Elin, Teacher****Mildred Avenue Middle School**

Have you ever had to have courage in your life? Well I do, right now. I just lost my mom in January 2007.

It took so much courage for me to handle losing my mom, the closest person in my life. It took even more courage for me to come back to school and to face my everyday routine without my mom by my side.

I can remember when I came back to school after losing my mom. It took courage to come back to school. I tried to hold in all my cries, but I decided I could not hold it in any longer. It took courage because my teachers and different people were saying "Sorry for your loss."

It seemed strange because it had only been two weeks that I was out of school, but it felt like I was gone for a month. It was extra hard for me because while I was gone my specialty class changed from music to dance and my social studies class switched over to science.

Seeing my old teachers was weird because they said that they all missed me when I was gone, and they missed me on the last day of their class.

I had new teachers so it took courage to be in their classes for the first time, when the other kids already knew them. There was no way my new teachers would know what I had been going through.

It was also hard because I had to worry about getting all of my supplies for the new classes, such as notebooks and binders.

Saying "What up" to all of my friends after not seeing them for two weeks felt strange because I usually do it every day. It took courage to get me back to school and to see kids talking to me who I did not know. People were even getting my phone number and calling me up to say, "We need you back in school, we miss you."

It felt good to see how much people cared.

It took a lot of courage for me to face school and my everyday life after losing my mom. What I learned from teachers and friends is that they are very caring people, and any time I need help I can feel free to ask. I also learned that you should try to respect everybody who you really do not know.

I am always going to need courage to continue my struggle, but it's nice to know that I have support.

AFNAN NEHELA
Rouba Abou-Samra, Teacher
Al-Noor Academy

Courage is doing the right thing without fear and compromise. A short time after 9/11 many Muslims were afraid of expected discrimination and harassment. Some Muslims were too afraid to even go shopping or to work, or to the mosque. Some Muslim women were afraid to wear their hijabs (head scarf) outside.

It was a painful, fearful time for Muslims. During this time my mom started writing a book on hijab. Many times I overheard her discussing book chapters about the importance, merit, and benefits of hijab. Her words attracted me and I believed in it more. I wanted to wear hijab but I was hesitant. It took me three stages to reach my final decision.

First I asked my parents for their opinions. They said I was free to do what I wanted. Second, I thought hard about it. I considered the benefits and the good deeds I would be rewarded, then of the disadvantages of how I would be treated in public. Finally I made my decision with courage and no hesitation. I decided on wearing the hijab.

Now, I feel very proud that I made the right decision and am able to practice my religion with freedom and courage.

HEATHER QUIGLEY
Nasrin Samadi, Teacher
Patrick F. Gavin Middle School

I'm not the most courageous person in the world because I get terrified of things like rats, mice, or spiders. But I was courageous in this memory. My dad is my main influence, the most courageous person I know.

It all started around 5 p.m. on Aug. 19, 2003. He just got out of work. (He worked as a carpenter, painter, and anything else that has to do with home improvement.) Our neighbor Billy, who lives on the second floor, came downstairs and asked my dad to put in a bathroom window.

Just so you know, my dad tries to help anyone. So he said, "OK."

He went outside to the backyard and got the ladder. And then he set it up. I felt trapped because I was on the other side of the ladder near the entrance of the backyard. There was no way out except under the ladder. So I took my chances and went under the ladder. Oops! That's bad luck!

About five or 10 minutes later, I was on the playset in our backyard. I heard him holler, "Heather! Go get my caulking gun on the stairs." When I retrieved it and gave it to him, he put it in his back pocket and climbed steadily back up the ladder.

And then it happened. He must have reached for his caulking gun and lost his balance and then plummeted to the ground. All I can remember is him doing somersaults in the air and then landing on his side in our next-door neighbor's alley. He was rushed to the emergency room and was in a slight coma. He came out of it a little more than two months later.

After he was released from Boston Medical Center, he was moved to Spaulding for rehab. Now he's in Milton Health Care and is doing better, but it has taken more than 3 1/2 years to get to this point.

This event has changed my life because I can't ask my dad to teach me how to play baseball or basketball. That makes it hard to ask somebody else for help because I'm not sharing it with somebody special. My fears are my dad dying when I am a kid because I need him and so does my family. I've noticed that when he gets sick, he doesn't act like himself. He acts like he is a prisoner in his own body. How I deal with his accident every day is just thinking he's my dad no matter what he says, does, or feels. He can't talk, walk, eat, or drink by himself, but he still knows he is special in many, many hearts.

So now you know my dad's and my story of courage. To me, courage means to not give up and to live with something horrible. My dad is my hero and I am his.

TSEGA BIRKNEH**Jenna Wilsey, Teacher****James P. Timilty Middle School**

In 2005, at the James W. Hennigan School, I was a fifth-grader. One day we got our math test scores back and a girl named Kalsang had a better score than anyone. A boy in my class was not happy that she got the best score. So he told me and all of his other friends that he had a plan to do something about it.

At lunchtime he was going to hit her with a milk box that had milk in it so that everyone could laugh at her. I felt something inside. He was taking it too far.

I realized that I became friends with him because I wanted to hang out with the cool kids, but this was something I could not let him do, even if I had to give up hanging out with the cool kids. So, at lunchtime, instead of being with my friends, I followed Kalsang everywhere.

He could not do it at lunch because of the lunch mothers, so he told everyone that he would do it at recess. I did not stop following her. I went everywhere she went. She told me, "Go away! You're the same as them!"

I was just like them until then. Who could blame her for her response? When we got outside, he was hiding somewhere so I was looking everywhere for him. After about five minutes it was time to line up and there were people everywhere, so he took advantage of that and threw the box. I knew he was going to, so I jumped in front of her and took the hit. Everyone was laughing at me. I know I did the right thing even though I lost my so-called friend.

After that day they always called me names and said that she was my girlfriend. I ignored all that. Because of this incident, I learned how to make real friends -- the type who know what is good. These are the real cool kids. I was also happy because some of the good kids got to know the real me, the one who is nice and kind, not the one who does things that are crazy just to be cool.

ARIANA DEPINA**Nada Cuvalo, Teacher****Mother Caroline Academy**

Three years ago my brother's future was taken away. Franklin was shot on my street, just a couple of houses down from ours.

Courage in my life is talking about his death.

I am not afraid because I am proud of who he was. He was a nice man who was proud of his family and was fun to hang out with. Franklin wasn't the type of brother to kick you out of his room; instead, he invited you in and would share what he had. He even taught me how to play basketball.

I have the courage to walk the streets where he was shot. Every day I walk down the street I see the exact spot where his life was taken. I say a little prayer and hope that we can get the help for everything he used to do for us. Franklin helped us with the bills because he worked with an electrician. He watched out for us so we wouldn't get in any trouble.

I have courage in my life because I understand that he is not coming back. He will not be here to take me to school, the mall, or to meetings.

My family and I have nobody to take his place or help pay our house bills. My mother is a single parent and now we have to try harder to get through life.

This is what courage means to me and how I use it in my life.

Thinking about Franklin brings back so many memories. I feel that there is still a part of him left with me.

All I know is that he is still watching over his family.

CLAUDIA AMADOR**Amber Malm, Teacher****Patrick Lyndon Pilot School**

Failure is not an option. We have to triumph no matter what the odds. I fail at times, but my mind's determination has led me to overcome my weakness. Courage is letting tears flow when you are discouraged, not keeping them in your heart.

I had done what could be impossible and made it possible. It was torture every day to try to stay on top of my schoolwork. I was sobbing and feeling disappointed every time I was doing math. The frustration was like a nightmare. My friend supported me by cheering me up in my desperate times. I had the determination to get up every day and try until I got an excellent score that I would be proud of, even though that never happened. I passed fourth grade, but I wasn't on my feet the next year. I got better, but still not enough to feel successful. I didn't pass fifth grade, but I was making progress in math. I no longer felt like an inept person. One should always hope to do well every time you are working on certain subjects.

Facing an obstacle makes you stronger. The teacher would explain the lesson but I didn't get it. I would ask her questions and still be left with unanswered questions. Since it was a fourth- and fifth-grade class grouped together, she couldn't help me whenever I wanted her to. Obstacles are walls that can be broken.

Many good things happen when you dedicate yourself to something. At the end of fifth grade I got an award for the most improved in math. It felt like a dream. One knows this hard work has been worth it when it results in success.

I overcame my failure, which shows what a human being is capable of doing. People shouldn't fall, but stand proudly. Tears hidden show discouragement; however, letting them out for everyone to see is courage. ■

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