

Destiny A. Beal
Manti High School
Manti, Utah

Like the legendary prize fighter, Muhammad Ali, Destiny Beal believes “helping others is the rent we pay for living on this earth.”

Destiny joined 4-H when she was 14, and the club quickly became an integral part of her life. “Learning by doing,” she developed leadership and life skills through her work on service projects. In less than three years, she has served as a Teen Leader, President of her club, a Teen Council officer, a County Workshop Presenter, and an Ambassador for her county and for the region.

As president of her 4-H Club, Destiny presided over monthly meetings during which members planned one community service project each month and four larger community projects each year. At Destiny’s suggestion, the club cleaned up nine campsites in the nearby mountains, collecting over 500 pounds of aluminum cans. The proceeds they raised from recycling the cans were donated to a local family in need. As an officer of the Teen Council, Destiny spearheaded a project where the teens made and distributed quilts to every child who checked into the Primary Children’s Medical Center. Another project involved putting together more than 250 personal care pouches and delivering them to a local homeless shelter. As a Workshop Presenter, Destiny has taught classes to over 160 young people on insect classification, health care and neighborhood safety.

Selected as a 4-H County Ambassador her junior year, Destiny helped supervise 10 service projects throughout the county. She visited elementary and middle schools to encourage student participation, and promoted 4-H activities through news coverage. She and her fellow County Ambassadors helped construct a playground in one community and are planting trees in another.

When Destiny learned that the historic Sanpete County Fairgrounds was slated for demolition, Destiny approached the County Commissioners and proposed a renovation effort. She marshaled a group of 4-H volunteers, who sanded and painted the horse and cattle chutes used during rodeos. The group gave Fair Arena a fresh look in time for the annual County Fair and helped save the community landmark.

As one of 25 Regional Ambassadors, Destiny planned, organized and promoted a Teen Retreat in 2008. More than 300 teens from a six-county region gathered for three days to learn leadership skills and participate in a statewide service project, making toys that were sent to orphaned children in Africa.

Destiny feels a strong conviction to help others because she once needed help herself. One night when she was five years old, Destiny lay on the couch beneath a large window. She heard a horrible crash and shattered glass rained down on her. Moments later, a man burst through the front door and started attacking her mother. Destiny and her five sisters spent the night hiding in the basement. The next morning, when they emerged, they found their mother gone and their home in ruins, the air thick with the smells of smoke and alcohol.

It wasn’t an isolated incident. Strange people often came into Destiny’s home, usually with bottles and needles and pipes. Terrified for their safety, Destiny and her sisters learned to keep out of sight. When she was five, Destiny and her sisters were removed from their home, separated and placed in the state foster care system. Destiny remembers feeling lost and alone until a year later when a loving family offered to adopt the girls.

For the first time, Destiny had parents who loved and protected her. But a loving family wasn’t enough to put her difficult childhood behind her. As a young teen, Destiny experienced terrifying flashbacks and severe depression. She began putting the past behind her by learning to appreciate the gifts she’s been given and to forgive those who once hurt her.

Today, Destiny has overcome the odds she faced as a young child. In addition to her community service work, she has mastered no fewer than six musical instruments. She plays clarinet in the pep band, is the first chair bassoon in her school’s concert band and symphony orchestra, and plays the piano, mallet percussion, oboe and guitar. She accompanies the high school choir in rehearsal and performance, while maintaining a 3.75 GPA.

Destiny would like to attend medical school and continue helping others as a neurosurgeon.

Caitlyn J. Darnell
Pueblo County High School
Avondale, Colorado

During the long, dry summer months, wildfires sweep through the Colorado mountains, charring hundreds of forested acres. Slurry bomber crews fly 18-hour shifts through the burning canyons, dispersing fire retardant from air tankers, at times for months on end. When they return to their base at the Pueblo Airport, they have electricity, running water and a hot meal waiting – thanks to Caitlyn Darnell.

“Operation Slurry Bomber” was launched when Caitlyn, then 11 years old, learned the pilots and mechanics had no utilities or access to food and running water. Others had tried before to upgrade the crew facility through government channels, but each time their efforts had failed. Caitlyn would not be deterred. She appealed to the Pueblo City Council to install basic utilities. She persuaded local restaurants to donate food and approached a bottling company to donate water – enough for a 16-man crew for four months. She developed and implemented a schedule of daily deliveries. Now when extended operations occur, the utilities are permanently on-site and local businesses are prepared to provide food and drinking water to the crews.

Caitlyn has always been a problem solver. Where some people look for a “quick fix,” Caitlyn looks for lasting solutions. Five years ago, she noticed that her 4-H Club, the “Mighty Dogs”, was losing many of its beginning members. Not understanding how to train their dogs, they would easily become discouraged and quit. Caitlyn launched a Junior Trainer Program to match new members with more experienced trainers who own the same breed. Since the program began, attrition has dropped from 70% to 20%, basic dog behavior, obedience and showmanship training skills have improved dramatically and many of the club’s new members have gone on to qualify for the 4-H State Dog Trials.

For three years, Caitlyn’s 4-H Club has participated in the annual Feet ‘n’ Fur fundraiser, which benefits five local animal rescue groups. Last year, as chair of the Planning Committee, she coordinated the different organizations involved and helped organize the community event. The only member of the committee under 18, Caitlyn quickly learned how to present her ideas effectively to her peers and the adults on the committee. She proposed and successfully recruited local and national kennel clubs to participate, which resulted in national advertising. Her suggestion of using yard signs to promote the event generated a much higher attendance, and the PowerPoint presentation she produced helped attract new sponsors and raise additional funds. She also set up and ran her own booth promoting the “Unchain Your Dog Campaign,” showing owners how to contain rather than chain their pets. Her efforts helped Feet ‘n’ Fur raise over \$10,000 – the best result in the event’s nine-year history.

In her American Sign Language class, Caitlyn learned that people with developmental disabilities who have trouble speaking can use sign language to better communicate. Caitlyn contacted the director of the Arkansas Valley Community Center, and offered to design and teach a workshop for “consumers” and their caregivers. She also convinced the American Association of the Deaf to donate sign language posters and teaching CD-ROMs. Communication improved so dramatically that the Center asked Caitlyn to teach a week-long class for its staff and the at-risk individuals it serves. Caitlyn remembers working with one young man who was considered a behavior problem. When Caitlyn started shadow signing with him, his eyes lit up. He grabbed her hand and began finger-signing into her palm – a skill he’d been taught as a child, but hadn’t been able to use in over five years. The success of Caitlyn’s efforts prompted the Center to pursue funding for a full-time sign language interpreter.

Her creativity and resourcefulness have helped Caitlyn adapt at home, as well. Her parents run a portrait studio that has struggled as the economy has declined. Rather than feeling deprived, Caitlyn works in the family business during the summer, invites friends over for “game nights” instead of going out, and has become an expert at shopping for secondhand clothes. But despite her optimistic outlook, there was one problem Caitlyn couldn’t solve alone.

A congenital defect caused the bones in her lower legs to twist as Caitlyn grew. By the time she was seven, her feet turned in at a 90-degree angle, causing her tremendous pain and difficulty walking. After numerous medical consultations, when Caitlyn was 10, a surgeon severed her femurs, reattaching them with metal plates and four-inch screws. Caitlyn spent eight weeks in a wheelchair before she learned how to walk all over again. Two additional surgeries were required to remove the plates and screws, along with calcium deposits and scar tissue, but today Caitlyn can walk without tripping or experiencing excruciating pain.

Caitlyn hopes to use her problem-solving skills one day on-air – as a network news anchor.

Laura E. D'Asaro
Nathan Hale High School
Seattle, Washington

Laura D'Asaro was walking by a playground when she first realized she could make a difference. The park was a favorite place from her childhood, where families built snowmen, walked their dogs and enjoyed the largest freshwater bathing beach in Seattle. But over the years, the playground in the park had steadily declined. Much of the equipment had been removed because of age, disrepair or vandalism. Only a few small play structures remained.

Neighbors had talked before about refurbishing Matthews Beach Park, and some had even attempted initial efforts. But Laura, at age 15, championed the cause. She contacted the city and learned everything she could about playground design, grant-writing, matching funds and how to work through the system. She met with neighbors, community leaders and representatives from the Parks Department. She consulted with landscape designers, researched suppliers and sketched layouts for the space. She applied for and received a \$500 youth grant to help rejuvenate the site.

To raise additional funds, she baked 10 dozen cookies early every morning for eight weeks and sold them at a lemonade stand, which she ran from 11 am to 8 pm. She recruited friends and neighbors to help staff the stand, put up signs and appeared on television and radio to spread the word. Soon, business boomed. Laura's lemonade stand brought in another \$13,000 to support the park renovation. A year later, Laura helped install the new playground equipment and watched as a new generation of children played in her favorite park.

Whenever Laura encounters a challenge, she remembers what Henry Ford said. "Whether you think you can or you think you can't – you're right." Growing up with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and learning disabilities, Laura always had to work harder than her peers. She spent twice as long as her friends on homework and was easily distracted. She sometimes had to read a passage four or five times to grasp it, yet she has maintained a 4.0 GPA for six years.

Realizing she was different made Laura question the desire to be "normal". Instead of wishing she could change, Laura has embraced everything that makes her unique – from her optimism and imagination to her creativity and passion for change.

As president of her school's chapter of Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA), Laura heads weekly meetings where the 30-member group learns leadership skills and plans community service projects. Under her direction, the group collected and bagged individually packaged toiletries for distribution to homeless teens, and helped serve meals to people in need. Laura has learned her main job as the group's leader is to help each member build the self-confidence they need to become leaders themselves.

Because reading remains difficult for her, Laura has found books on tape to be a helpful resource. Hearing the spoken word helps improve her comprehension. When she met a young girl whose school couldn't afford books on tape, Laura found a new opportunity to make a difference. She used her babysitting money to buy children's books, and scoured thrift shops and yard sales for used titles. She organized a service project at her school and convinced students to donate their own books. She enlisted a group of classmates who spent more than 70 hours recording over 150 books onto tape. They paired each tape with its book, and Laura donated the sets to classrooms and libraries at four local elementary schools. Her program was so successful, it received a \$500 grant from the National Education Association, which enabled the purchase of 500 additional books, cassette tapes, microphones and other supplies. Laura is now recording those books and planning book drives at local schools to serve even more elementary students in other areas.

Laura brought the same energy and enthusiasm to her now annual Halloween Candy Drive. When she noticed that many families didn't have money for sweets, she organized volunteers from her high school, two local elementary schools and a community center to collect more than 1,000 pounds of excess Halloween candy. Using her babysitting money, she bought supplies and spent eight days creating silver gift bags, which were distributed to almost 2,000 children across the state of Washington during the holidays.

That same enthusiasm, creativity and leadership Laura brings to every project will come in handy one day when she launches her own non-profit organization.

Sejal Hathi
Notre Dame High School
Fremont, California

Sejal Hathi believes in the power of girls. She feels that empowering girls is essential to the progress of humanity, and the best way to promote social change. And she should know – Sejal has been changing the world since she was 13 years old.

In 7th grade, Sejal applied for and was accepted as the youngest member of Fremont's Mayoral Youth Advisory Commission, a group of 13 teens who collaborate with the city council to identify and address issues facing local youth. For four years, she has been an advocate for Fremont's 15,000 young people, working to increase their voice in municipal programs and policies, and spearheading community-building initiatives.

Her freshman year of high school, Sejal was selected from 100 applicants to sit on the National Youth Council of Youth Service America (YSA). Among many other projects, she helped develop a grant program sponsored by the Department of Justice that enables organizations to expand their youth leadership initiatives. She also helped organized the first national youth service briefing and the launch of the Youth Voice Network to promote collaboration among youth leaders nationwide. Sejal now represents YSA on its National Board of Directors.

Sejal's focus on empowering girls began three years ago when she joined Girls For a Change (GFC). As part of a Girl Action Team, she conceived and organized an annual self-esteem summit for 6th grade girls, a Big Sister-Little Sister mentoring program for middle school girls, and a Darfur Awareness Benefit to raise funds for women and children victims of the genocide in Sudan.

The next year, Sejal was appointed to GFC's Steering Committee and to the National Board of Directors. In this capacity, she helped run a local political advocacy campaign, and organized major GFC events for 1,500 girls in California. She has trained consultants on coaching girls to lead projects and helped organize an annual grant program, while mentoring new members and continuing to support girls with low self-esteem.

Through her work with YSA and GFC, Sejal has spoken at national, regional and state conferences, advising thousands of people on ways to engage youth and girls in service initiatives, including business and government executives and fellow students who share her desire to promote change. She even co-authored a book on the topic with a service-learning professional. *Effective Practices for Engaging At-Risk Youth in Service* is being published by Youth Service America later this year.

Through her service efforts, Sejal became convinced that any girl, however disadvantaged, has the power to make a difference. When she was 15 years old, she launched the international non-profit organization, Girls Helping Girls (GHG), to enable young women around the world to harness that power within them.

In the last two years, Girls Helping Girls has mobilized over 500 girls in over 10 countries to help eradicate poverty, increase access to education, improve health and promote peace. GHG focuses on two initiatives: the Empower-a-Girl program and the Sisters 4 Peace Network. Empower-a-Girl partners middle and high school girls in the U.S. with girls in developing countries to exchange ideas, learn about global issues and work on social change projects inspired by the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. Sejal developed four curriculum guides and a Social Change Toolkit to support the program. The Sisters 4 Peace Network is a social-change web portal that provides mentorship, training and toolkits to aspiring girls around the globe who are working independently to launch their own ventures.

Through fundraising activities and partnerships Sejal negotiated with corporate and non-profit organizations, GHG has raised over \$20,000 to purchase computers, books, school supplies and scholarships for girls. Current projects include building a school in Ghana and a library in India.

Her confidence in the power of girls to achieve change has helped Sejal conquer her own challenges with anorexia nervosa. Sejal was diagnosed with the condition at the age of 15, and has suffered many ongoing symptoms including low bone density, low blood pressure, amenorrhea and hair loss. After two years of denial, she finally confronted her condition, educating herself on the eating disorder and seeking professional help to address its physical and emotional aspects.

Sejal is currently working on a memoir about her experiences fighting anorexia and providing medical advice to help those newly diagnosed. She plans a career either as a gynecologist or a neurobiologist.

Trey Stewart Jones
Roncalli Catholic High School
Omaha, Nebraska

Less than 50% of African-American students in Omaha graduate from high school. Trey Stewart Jones is working to change that statistic – one child at a time.

Trey first volunteered with The Salvation Army in 2006 as a teen leader for children aged 5-12, almost all of whom came from disadvantaged families. Trey devoted more than 300 hours that summer to mentoring at-risk children and exposing them to new cultural experiences. He helped with art projects and took them on field trips to expand their horizons. Realizing that the younger kids looked up to him as a role model, he took every opportunity to demonstrate and teach appropriate social skills. He spoke frequently about the importance of education, encouraging them to stay focused and stay in school. The more he talked about the value of education, the more Trey found himself motivated to succeed academically.

Even when he had the opportunity to pursue his own goals, Trey made an effort to help others benefit from their education. In his sophomore year, he was assigned to a group project with two students who didn't appear to share his enthusiasm for learning. Trey considered simply doing the project himself, but knew that would deprive the others of an opportunity to learn. Instead, he divided the project into three parts and held his partners accountable for researching their assignments. Even when he didn't see progress initially, Trey didn't give up. The week the project was due, both students submitted their research, the group pulled together, and they all took pride in the grade they earned as a team.

A member of his school's Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Trey has participated in clothing and canned food drives for homeless shelters and helped run the school's bookstore, the Pride Den, which is FBLA's major fundraising activity. Another FBLA fundraiser is the annual "lock-in" – an all-night sleepover held at the high school to welcome incoming freshmen. As an event supervisor, Trey helped create a fun and safe environment for the transitioning teens. He ran basketball and dodgeball tournaments, supervised dancing and movie activities, helped with clean-up, and ensured that all the students were picked up safely the following morning.

Trey understands the power of encouragement firsthand. His father and grandmother always urged him to achieve his goals, even when chronic asthma and allergies limited his participation in sports and resulted in numerous hospitalizations. Then, in 2000, Trey's father was murdered and five months later, he lost his grandmother. At the age of eight, Trey's life was turned upside down. He was sad and angry most of the time, and afraid that everyone, including his mother, would leave him.

A year later, Trey's mother started taking him to piano lessons. The instructor, Mrs. Rogers, was a stern woman who Trey later learned was his mother's 6th grade music teacher. At first, Mrs. Rogers intimidated Trey, but then they began to talk. Their half-hour lessons extended to an hour or more, during which they talked more than Trey played the piano. She showed him the difference one person can make in a young life, simply by paying attention and caring. Trey took her example to heart.

Last summer, Trey volunteered with the Omaha Children's Museum, a place he often visited with his grandmother. He greeted visitors, worked in the gift shop and assisted the marketing director in enhancing the museum's hands-on workshops. He worked on developing a coloring project children can complete during their visit and take home to remember their experience.

Trey also inspires other young African-American males through his role as a Junior Deacon – the youngest in his church. In addition to assisting with communion and devotions, Trey presents a Bible passage to the congregation every Sunday. He researches the Bible to find just the right words that will help people who are facing personal struggles. He gains satisfaction each time someone comes up to him after the service and says the passage Trey selected was just what they needed to hear.

Like his spiritual mentors, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Trey believes the only way out of poverty and hopelessness is prayer, education and hard work. He was inducted this year into the National Honor Society and has already completed 12 hours of community college in computer-assisted drafting and mathematics courses.

Trey plans to study architectural engineering and one day would like to design affordable homes and apartment buildings for low-income families.

Rebecca A. Robison (Becca)
Layton High School
Layton, Utah

Becca Robison is the first to admit that she's a "science geek." When she had the opportunity to go to Space Camp at the age of 10, she was thrilled. She returned with dreams of becoming an astronaut, but soon discovered that other girls thought space exploration was a "boy's job".

Becca rebelled. At age 10, she founded AstroTots: Space Camp for Little Dippers, a traveling day camp that encourages at-risk girls aged 4-10 to explore the world of science and mathematics. Becca writes the program curriculum, and develops interactive experiments and activities. She also raises corporate funding and writes grants so girls can attend the camp at no cost. In seven years, Becca has recruited and supervised over 100 teen volunteers, bringing the camp experience to more than 1,000 girls in 15 states, Mexico and, this year, Russia and China. AstroTots has been featured in *The New York Times Magazine*, *People*, *TeenPeople*, *Do Something*, *Inspire Magazine*, *Disney Adventures* and on several television news programs. The new Children's Museum of Utah set up a permanent display about the project to encourage other young people to make a difference in their communities, and Becca was invited to speak about AstroTots at several youth events during President George W. Bush's second Inauguration.

Her success in winning grants to support AstroTots launched Becca onto the national stage. At age 12, she was selected to join the Ashoka Youth Venture, a global organization that empowers youth through training and start-up grants to support projects impacting their communities. Named to the Youth Council at 14, she started teaching seminars on engaging young people in service, researching grant opportunities and writing successful grant applications. She has made presentations about youth empowerment through service to national learning conferences and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' 2005 National Youth Summit attended by 500 policymakers, community leaders, educators and youth.

Becca was asked to serve a two-year term on the youth board of the Nestle Very Best in Youth Foundation. As chair of the Grant Committee, Becca reviews applications and helps the foundation distribute \$50,000 in grants to support youth service projects. She also speaks at youth events about her own projects and how she made them self-sustaining.

One of the projects she often discusses is Operation: Cozy, which Becca launched to provide handmade blankets to homeless people. She solicited fabric donations from individuals and retail stores, and used grant money to buy sewing supplies. She spent four months marshaling 300 volunteers to make more than 500 blankets, which were distributed to local shelters. Becca also took blankets to Mexico when she volunteered to help build an orphanage in Navajoa. Operation: Cozy, now an annual event, was featured on *Nick News* with Linda Ellerbee.

Becca doesn't let obstacles get in the way of her goals. Last summer, unbearable pain tore through her leg. An MRI revealed a rare and aggressive tumor that had nearly eaten through the bone. The simple act of lifting her leg caused the bone to shatter. Becca's initial fear became scientific fascination as the doctors described what they would do to save her leg. They removed the tumor, gutted the bone and cemented the remaining fragments together with rods and plates. After surgery, Becca readily agreed to donate her tumor tissue for scientific research.

Focusing on AstroTots provided Becca with much-needed focus during her recovery. The day she learned her diagnosis, she went ahead and taught a service workshop for 40 young people. Eight weeks after surgery, she held an AstroTots event during the Salt Lake City Fire Department's Annual Burn Camp, which benefits children whose lives have been impacted by fire. From her wheelchair, she inspired the kids' excitement in science and used the opportunity to demonstrate how physical impairments don't have to be a barrier to success.

Her dedication to academics is as strong as her passion for science. For the past year, Becca has been an early college student at Weber State University. She took a particularly challenging course in Deductive Logic, which only 55% of college students typically pass. Becca got an A. She also works with Weber's ethics bowl team as they prepare for regional and national competitions, and recently learned she has been named to the team for next year.

Graduating from high school with an associates degree from Weber, Becca would like to continue studying Physics and Electrical Engineering. She plans to open science centers for girls around the world ... and maybe one day to become an astronaut.

Rhonda Samples
Milford Mill Academy
Pikesville, Maryland

Some people stand out in crowd. Rhonda Samples is the strong, silent type. In fact, even her fellow students at Milford Mill Academy know little about her.

Rhonda's strength is evident on the tennis courts. A member of the team since she was in 9th grade, Rhonda has grown from a talented but tentative player into a worthy adversary. Her leadership skills emerged off the court, as well. Rhonda eagerly took on additional responsibilities for the team, earning the respect of her teammates and her coach. "She has taken on all the challenges that were presented to her playing at a varsity level at such a young age," her coach says. "And she has learned from both her trials and her successes."

This year, in recognition of her contributions, Rhonda was elected captain of the varsity team. Now that she's responsible for the conduct and attitude of her teammates, Rhonda takes extra time to make sure everyone is physically and mentally prepared for each game. Just as she stocks the medical kit in case someone is injured, Rhonda takes stock of her teammates prior to every match, offering whatever support they need to perform their best.

Off the court, Rhonda helps her fellow students strengthen their leadership skills. As a vice president of her school's Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Rhonda plans and runs weekly club activities designed to help members prepare for careers in business. Chair of the Activities Committee, she encourages other students to practice their leadership skills through participation in after-school sports activities and service projects. She helped organize Milford Mill's annual food drive benefiting the Maryland Food Bank, and taught computer literacy to local seniors.

Rhonda has become a role model for her teammates and fellow FBLA club members. But few of them know just how far Rhonda has come in developing her own inner strength and self-confidence.

When she was just five years old, Rhonda and her siblings were taken from their home by the police. Rhonda couldn't understand why her parents didn't try to stop them. She waited for hours in a Baltimore police station, silently praying for her mother or father to come and get her. They never did.

Rhonda and her older sister were sent to live in a temporary foster home, while her younger brother and sister were placed in a different facility. The children didn't see each other, or their parents, except in court during custody hearings. Eventually, the older girls went to live with an aunt, while the younger children were placed with their grandmother. Rhonda and her siblings visit their mother a few times a year, but she hasn't seen her father since.

Coping with the separation from her parents has taken an emotional toll on Rhonda. She becomes distracted easily. Discussions at school about family relationships and trust have a deeper meaning for Rhonda; she still finds it difficult to depend on other people.

Helping others in need has helped Rhonda through her healing process. Every summer since she was 11, she has volunteered to do service projects in her community. She has worked in the Baltimore County Public Library's summer program encouraging younger children to read, and assisted counselors at a local day camp with arts and crafts activities, team sports and computer games. For two summers, she volunteered at Kernan Hospital, greeting families and helping stroke patients to their rooms, shadowing nurses, answering phones and assisting the staff with hospital paperwork. Last summer, she was selected to be part of the Johns Hopkins Hospital summer intern program, working with rehabilitation therapists, organizing the Occupational Therapy Clinic, and helping patients with their range of motion exercises and daily living skills.

Rhonda lives by the advice a friend of her aunt once gave her: "Don't let the negatives bring you down, look for the positives." She plans to become a physical or occupational therapist.

Marilyn Sanchez
Paul D. Schreiber High School
Port Washington, New York

Marilyn Sanchez has learned that sometimes you gain the most when you least expect it.

Marilyn decided to run for school treasurer because she wanted to challenge herself, motivate others and explore new horizons. She posted campaign signs and researched ways she could improve the school. She practiced her speech over and over again. When election day finally arrived, Marilyn delivered her speech with pride. She didn't win, but Marilyn gained experience speaking her mind and confidence in her own ability to guide her fellow students.

Looking for ways to practice her leadership skills, Marilyn read about an upcoming Hispanic Heritage Day celebration at the local library. She immediately signed up as a volunteer. She attended planning meetings and helped organize the annual event. She identified the Latin and South American countries that would be showcased, contributed theme concepts and came up with ideas for entertainment, menus and decorations to celebrate each culture. Marilyn was put in charge of event décor and led a group of volunteers in designing, making and installing themed decorations throughout the facility. The day of event, Marilyn worked in the information office, serving as a translator and guiding visitors to the various country displays and performances. In addition to the experience she gained organizing a community-wide event, Marilyn found great pride in her own Hispanic heritage.

When she was a sophomore, Marilyn contacted the director of the Landmark Theater, a local non-profit theater, and offered her services. She provided administrative support in the office answering the theater's busy phones. She helped in the box office and organized the green room for the actors. She ushered at performances, helped sell artists' CDs and tallied the evening's receipts. To promote the theater, she distributed flyers to businesses in the community and organized five years of performance advertisements and press clippings into a comprehensive reference book. Marilyn worked with Landmark for two years, during which she gained an understanding of theater management and a greater appreciation for the benefits of volunteerism.

Perhaps the greatest lesson Marilyn has learned in her young life is that you can't take anything for granted. Three years ago, Marilyn's mother was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. The hospital became her second home, as Marilyn accompanied her mother to regular check-ups, surgery, a month of radiation and five months of chemotherapy. Marilyn struggled to maintain hope as her mother became weaker.

Just as Marilyn's mother was winning her battle with cancer, Marilyn's father began experiencing painful migraine headaches. The doctors discovered a tumor in his head, and once again, Marilyn found herself spending hours at the hospital. Surgery to remove her father's tumor was successful, but his recovery has been difficult and slow. Because of their health issues, Marilyn's mother can no longer work, and her father was forced to take a leave of absence. Bills for hospital care, rent and utilities began piling up. Marilyn learned firsthand how quickly a family's circumstances can change.

Once again, Marilyn chose to cope with her hardships by giving back to others. Volunteering at her church's consignment shop, Marilyn worked every Saturday morning pricing clothing and household donations, organizing merchandise, designing store displays and translating for customers who do not speak English. During the annual fall carnival, she worked overtime in the consignment shop, helping with the increased traffic and directing visitors to the various carnival activities.

Working in the consignment shop has been good professional experience for Marilyn, as well. She hopes to attend the New York Institute of Fashion Technology and to pursue a career in the fashion industry.

Sarah L. Wooten
Franklin High School
Franklin, Tennessee

Sarah Wooten was born in Ukraine. When she was just eight years old, she watched her youngest sister die and her mother become dependant on alcohol and drugs. After living on the streets of Kiev for six weeks, Sarah, at age 10, was placed in a state orphanage. Two years later, Sarah's younger sister, Elizabeth, joined her when their mother died.

When Sarah was 13, an American family came to the orphanage, looking for a little girl to adopt. When they met Sarah and her sister, they decided to adopt both girls.

On the flight to her new home in America, Sarah met a girl her age who spoke both English and Ukrainian and helped the girls begin to communicate with their new parents. Sarah enrolled in the 7th grade knowing only how to say "hello" and "goodbye," and how to count to 10 in English. Working hard to learn her new language, she struggled to keep up with her classmates and schoolwork. Three years later, she spoke English fluently, and started taking honors classes.

A talented athlete, Sarah joined the swim and track teams her freshman year. This year, she was elected captain of the girls' track team and embraced the challenge by designing a motivational program to support her teammates on and off the track. Once a week, she gathers the group together after practice to participate in spirit-building activities. She invited teammates to exchange email addresses, so they could keep in touch and support each other during the week with their running exercises, academics and school issues. She also formed a Relay For Life team, and urged her teammates to join and help raise money for cancer research.

In her junior year, Sarah was chosen by the administration, faculty and student body to represent Franklin High School in the Girls State Program at Middle Tennessee State University. She lived and worked with 250 other high school students for six days as they formed and ran a mock government, learned leadership skills, and discovered how state and federal government works.

Sarah has come a long way since the orphanage in Ukraine, but she's never forgotten how it felt to be a young child facing an uncertain future. With her church youth group, Sarah has participated in mission trips to the inner city of Savannah, Georgia, as well as Puerto Rico, Mexico and Ukraine. While the focus of each trip is constructing and painting homes for families in need, Sarah always spends as much time as possible with the local children. By playing with them and encouraging them, she hopes to share some of the strength and hope she's gained since her new parents adopted Sarah and her sister.

Sarah has returned to Ukraine twice with her new family on trips for Hope House International, an organization Sarah's adoptive parents helped form in 2001 to promote domestic adoptions. Hope House promises to build or renovate a home for local families who agree to adopt three or more Ukrainian children. Sarah has worked on the biennial benefit, "An Evening of Hope," to help raise funds for the organization. She created and distributed invitations, worked on-site as a hostess and provided childcare. In addition to raising funds, Sarah's involvement in Hope House has put a face on the plight of orphans in Ukraine.

Last summer, when the Hope House team visited Ukraine, Sarah served as the translator for 15 young Americans who came to build homes. She headed up the detail that mixed cement for the foundation and walls, and worked long days in 100-degree heat. After a grueling day at the construction site, the team headed to a camp for orphans miles down a narrow dirt road, deep in the mountains. They spent their evenings with 100 children, organizing soccer, volleyball, and basketball games, throwing the Frisbee, playing hopscotch and painting the children's faces.

Sarah also spent time sharing her story with the children, bringing them hope and encouragement. An adult on the trip remembers watching those conversations. "I could not understand what they were saying, but I could see the emotion in their eyes. Sarah was a great listener, she understood their plight, and she loved them just as they were. She was a great encourager and gave them faith not to give up. None of us were left unchanged by that."

A member of her school's Art Club, Sarah makes and sells her own jewelry. She hopes to continue studying design in college and one day to become an interior designer.

Ge Zhang (Andy)
George Walton High School
Marietta, Georgia

When Andy Zhang finds something that interests him, he shares it with everyone.

Andy loves computer programming, so in his sophomore year, he founded a Computer Science Club at school. He recruited teachers as sponsors and organized a series of open competitions to generate interest among the student body. As the club's first president, Andy encouraged members to test and improve their programming skills by participating in on-line competitions. He is now developing informational materials in an effort to draw middle school students into computer science.

Also elected president of his school's academic society, Andy launched "Thinkers of Tomorrow" to encourage incoming freshmen to compete in the Academic Bowl. He directed a team of student volunteers to develop a budget and program curriculum, and promoted the concept to middle school teachers in the area. He raised funds and even contributed his own money to help subsidize student fees. The summer program was held twice a week for nine weeks at the local library. Participants played quiz bowl, attended lectures, participated in independent and group study sessions, and competed with each other on challenging subjects drawn from the Advanced Placement curriculum. As program director, Andy found himself thriving in the roles of teacher, friend and inspiration to the younger students.

Andy is just as competitive in sports as he is in academics. In China, where Andy was born, his father played and taught table tennis. After the family moved to America, Andy's father shared his love of the game with his sons. A high level of concentration and dexterity is required just to become an average table tennis player. Andy was a quick study. At 10 years old, he was admitted into the junior table tennis program, placing first in the state finals, second in the U.S. Wei-Chuan Cup, and in the top four in the JOOLA North American Tour.

Andy wasn't satisfied just to play table tennis. He wanted to perfect his skills and share his talent with younger players. In 2006, he trained in China, practicing six to eight hours a day for three months. He was appointed assistant coach of the Atlanta Table Tennis Association, and used his teaching skills to encourage new players to participate in and master the game. He also established the Atlanta "Tigers" Youth Table Tennis Team to give his students a chance to demonstrate their skill. In recognition of his efforts, Andy was selected captain of the Under 16 State Junior Olympic team, which placed second in competition. Andy is now raising money to launch a local table tennis league to bring even more young people into the game.

When he was a baby, no one would have predicted Andy's academic or athletic accomplishments. Born premature, with his intestines exposed, Andy suffered from low immunity and multiple health problems for the first five years of his life. Severe asthma left him wheezing and gasping for air. A simple cold could send him into a coma. At one point, the hospital declared him "incurable", saying there was nothing more they could do. But Andy's parents refused to give up. Andy's mother, who is a doctor, concocted a bitter herbal drink which she administered to him twice a day.

Weak and frail, Andy envied the other children who spent their days outside riding bikes and playing soccer. He took refuge in books, reading anything he could get his hands on. By the age of three, Andy could memorize Chinese poetry and perform simple multiplication. As his mind strengthened, Andy's body became stronger as well.

Three years ago, Andy's father was diagnosed with advanced sebaceous cancer. Andy took on new responsibilities at home, caring for his younger brother and preparing dinner while his mother worked overtime. His father has been debilitated by radiation and chemotherapy, but Andy has learned to treasure every moment they have together.

Despite the family demands on his time, Andy ranks in the top of his class academically. He also realizes other people face far more difficult challenges. After participating in an intensive eight-week training course, he joined a church mission to Matamoros, Mexico, where he helped build homes and facilities for impoverished families. He has been awarded a Presidential Gold Volunteer Medal for his commitment to community service.

Andy plans to continue his computer studies and to focus on economics in preparation for a career in technology and global trade.