

What Matters To Me

On the Minds and Through the Eyes
of Middle School Students

Personal Essays and Self-Portraits by Sixth Grade Authors and Artists

Duggan Middle School ~ Springfield, Massachusetts

Expedition Teachers: Mrs. Anne Kelleher, English Language Arts & Mr. Tom Vanderlinden, Visual Arts



What Matters To Me



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Foreword:



As an Expeditionary Learning school, we have the unique and privileged opportunity to learn and practice skills in a most engaging way. What a gift! Instead of just learning sentence structure, or reading essays for the main idea, students create stories and compose essays for an authentic audience who will read, and be influenced by their hard work. As their teacher, I'm positive you'll be impressed with this touching, sometimes funny, collection. The following is a brief summary and the path our students have taken throughout this expedition from September, 2006 through April, 2007.

I'm saddened, but not shocked, by the fact that most students in the middle school years don't believe they have much to offer the world, and feel that most people don't listen to kids their age. I know that what they have to say impacts our school, our community, and our future, and I thought this book would be the forum for these courageous students to say what was on their minds. In order to accomplish this work, they had to put aside their fears and speak from the heart. From the first day of school, I knew this expedition would require a deep level of trust. Through their hard work and honesty, students were able to slowly reveal their thoughts in class discussions and debates, through original poetry, autobiographies and essays, and ultimately, the climate of trust has allowed them to share what's inside them with others. There is so much said, and so much unsaid, in these poignant stories, that I can't imagine how they have ever felt they've have nothing to contribute. You need only remember your in-between years to remember that they are uncertain times, full of anxiety, teasing, and an overwhelming need to fit in.

These are the young people responsible for the future. Listen to them now, believe in them now, and they will be successful leaders and contributors to our community tomorrow. Please savor every morsel of this delicious account of what matters to middle schoolers.

The Objective

The students set out to learn about themselves. In order to find out who they are so far, they had to start at the beginning. To know what they were like as babies or little children, they had to ask the help of the adults in their lives who can fill in the details they cannot readily remember. Through interviews with family members students found out when and where they were born, how much they weighed at birth, who was at the hospital with them, and all of the regular kinds of questions one would want to know. Then, they also created interview questions that went a little deeper into the kinds of things they liked and disliked to see if there was still any connection to their likes and dislikes now. They asked to hear stories about all sorts of interesting subjects- who calmed them down when they cried, what toys they played with, what their first words were, any funny phrases that were said, and if they had any exciting events or accidents in their young lives that parents or guardians remembered even if they didn't. It was completely fascinating! The realization came then that you don't learn about your younger self unless you ask questions of the people who knew you. From this activity, the students were able to write their autobiographies.

A Product of Influences

They wanted to find out more. They looked at a few important questions, like who and what influences them and why students feel the way they do about things now. Are personalities products of these influences? Where do fears come from, and have they always had those fears? They wrote short stories to answer some of these questions.

Fiction & Non-Fiction Literary Works

Students discovered that you could learn a lot about a person by what they've written about their lives. As a class, they read an excerpt from Gary Paulson's *Woodson*, his personal memoir of life growing up in the wilderness. Also, on the internet, students read short essays written for National Public Radio's "This I Believe" segments that are broadcast on NPR stations across the country. It didn't take long to discover that when someone writes about a personal event in their own life, we can find something in our lives that usually can relate.

Next, students read and related to *The Skin I'm In*, a short novel by Sharon Flake. This award-winning book was an eye opener for all, bringing to the surface the timely topics of bullying, prejudice, fitting in, being in middle school, and all of the subjects important to middle schoolers. Essays and poetry were written about the controversial subjects. Students experimented with coffee and cream to match their skin color, and then painted a wall of paper "bricks" to represent their skin and the skin color of someone they admire. What they ended up learning is that we're all slightly different on the outside, but made up of the same ingredients on the inside. No matter what our skin color, we are stronger when we stand together than when we stand alone.

A brain expert named Frank Kros came and visited from Baltimore, Maryland, and helped students get a better look at themselves and their unique, middle-school aged brains. Students studied the brain structure and talked about how, at their age, they are in the most unique stage since the learning explosion that happens at two years old. They talked about the effects of alcohol, drugs and smoking and even looked at actual brain scans. All students celebrated the brain's uniqueness with activities and artwork to show what they learned.

Our Own Personal Essays

Students brainstormed and made a list of what mattered to them. The themes of family, love, culture, tradition, teamwork, and heroism came up often. They became the subjects they used to begin writing their own stories. They practiced using simile, metaphor, alliteration and other literary tools to help enrich their writing. Peers worked on editing and revising their work, adding colorful details, actual accounts, and vivid vocabulary. Originally, students didn't think that what they were writing about had anything useful for other people to hear, but surprisingly, the words of each student had an influence on the rest of the class and team. Enjoy the wide range of narrative essays included in Team 6A's first published book, *What Matters To Me*.

Anne McDowell Kelleher, English Language Arts teacher



It was a privilege to learn together with the students of this expedition.

The self-portraits in this book are the end result of skill building and investigative work which lasted over an entire semester. In *Drawing the Truth Across the Table*, students faced one another and took turns posing and drawing each other's faces as accurately as possible. Another assignment, *A Side View Portrait of a Member of My Household*, was exactly that, drawn directly from life. They also produced *A Side View Portrait of an Imaginary Person* (many of these bore a remarkable resemblance to their creators.) These initial exercises developed their abilities to carefully observe, to hold still for long periods of time, to notice errors, and then make changes, and then make changes, and then make changes. This work required the students to display personal observations of their own appearance and the appearance of those closest to them.



Self-Portrait with a Pattern of Concerns, the portraits that you see reproduced here, are the results of three areas of labor: careful observation & recording; introspective investigation & symbol making; and imaginative, intensive application of color.

Observation & Recording

The primary line work of the faces was created as the students looked into a mirror with an imposed grid on it. A matching grid of lines was drawn by the students on light gray, patterned Strathmore Elements paper. With one eye closed, they observed each grid segment in the mirror, and then drew into the grid on the paper before them. The task was to produce a truthful rendering of the proportions of their own face. This can be a difficult task at any age. This work was done in pencil to facilitate revisions.

Introspective Investigation & Symbolic Meaning

Students were asked to record some of their personal concerns, worries and hopes. The students were sometimes very frank about the real concerns of their lives. Two concerns were selected and for each, a physical object that reminded them of that concern. These objects were drawn in detail, and then simplified and abstracted into symbols that could be repeated in a pattern in the background of the self-portrait.

Imaginative, Intensive Application of Color

The guiding grid lines, combined with the line drawing of the face, created a map of enclosed areas. Each was to be filled with beautiful, imaginative, and intentionally nonrealistic hue transitions, done in colored pencils. Beneath each self-portrait is an artist's statement in which the students reveal details about the work that might not otherwise be apparent to the uninformed observer.

On the wall of the visual art classroom at Duggan Middle School, there are eleven statements, based on the Massachusetts curriculum standards for visual art. They are titled "This is how I know that I am an artist." One of these statements is "I show through my art what I see, what I think about, what I remember, and what I imagine." The self-portraits address three of these four abilities: "what I see" in the accurate, honest depiction of the face; "what I think about" in the introspective symbols in the background; and "what I imagine" in the creative application of unexpected color.

The self-portraits show a large range of responses to the multiple challenges that the students faced as artists. Some of the challenges included technical skills, which have to be learned over time; physical limitations, such as hand-eye coordination, vision, and the ability to pose; and perhaps most significantly, the emotional challenges, such as personal self-assuredness, maturity, willingness to revise, self-confidence in a public setting, perseverance, acceptance of critique, and the ability to respond to that critique with thoughtful revisions. The work we have chosen to include in this book reveals the students' varied response to these significant challenges.

This expeditionary learning experience has strengthened my own desire to overcome my own challenges as a teacher and an artist.

Thomas McKinlay Vanderlinden, 26 April 2007

Dedication



This book is dedicated to these sixth grade students who have the courage to be seen and heard, who also have the respect it takes to support each other throughout the editing and revising process, the compassion they need to show one another about their personal concerns, the responsibility they show every day, and for the quality of work they can be proud of well beyond their middle school years.

It is also dedicated to younger students not yet at Duggan Middle School who can appreciate, enjoy, emulate, and learn from the work of this talented team of students.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to acknowledge the following people for their assistance, guidance, and support throughout this expedition:

Mr. Jonathan Swan, Principal
Magnet Schools Assistance Program
Rachel Romano, Duggan's English CPDT
Jill Mirman, Expeditionary Learning School Designer
Justin Harbour, Magnet Substitute Teacher
Team 6A Navigators Team Teachers
and all those who supported our work!

Dalajah

The Sun

The sun matters to me because in the summer, without the sun, we wouldn't be able to enjoy sprinklers, pools, and spraying each other with the hose. With no sun at all it would probably snow five times a week! Besides, without the sun there would be no life cycle; there wouldn't be any plants, and that means no insects, which also means no animals, and it all adds up to no meat for us to eat. If you're thinking about planting food, think again! You need sun to make the plants grow. Without the sun we wouldn't be living right now, because we would probably be frozen solid and we would all starve to death. Those are just some of the reasons why the sun is important to me, and why I wish the sun would never go away! Everything in life depends on the sun and that matters to me.

Once, in the summer, I went to a party which was supposed to be outside, but the weatherman predicted rain so the party was going to be moved indoors. Instead it turned out to be sunny. I guess the sun woke up and I was especially happy to see it. The best part of that party was that we got to splash each other in the pool!

Summer is important to me because it is a time to get wet and have fun. How would you feel if you couldn't get wet anymore? I don't mean in the shower or the tub; I mean outside, under the bright, hot sunshine. Summer is also a time to play with friends and go to parties! In the early summer I wanted to have a party and I was wishing that it wouldn't be cold, it wouldn't rain and that it would be sunny so that my friends, family and I could go outside. I got my wish! That whole day was fun because we went outside all day. We went to the store to get prizes for the games, all the guests arrived, and it was still sunny! The sun was there for me and my party!

The sun matters to me because without it there would be no light. The world would be blanketed all in darkness, and personally, I hate going to school in the dark. If there is no light you have to walk home in the dark from the bus stop and that is very dangerous, because there are a lot of people snatching kids these days, so you'd have to be extremely careful!

What if, when you wake up, it was all dark and dreary? You'd never wake up happy if the sun isn't there shining bright, now would you? It's hard to totally explain how much the sun matters to me...just know that I'm glad it's usually there when I wake up in the morning!



Dalajah Evans

The ponytail and earrings I have drawn on my self-portrait remind me of my mom and how she always wears earrings. The two main reasons I think it has taken courage to do this expedition is having to find confidence to do the work and then be able to accept what people say.

Dezaray

A Family To Have Fun With

What's the most important thing that matters to me? For some people it might be a good education, something expensive they own, living in a big house; but for me, it is my family. Without family you wouldn't have anything, like a place to live, anyone to love, or to have fun with. Life would be miserable.

My family shows me they love me. It could be my mom and dad, my one brother, or my whole extended family who comes to celebrate with me; my uncles, aunts, cousins, my grandmother and godfather, and even family friends. My parents taught me right from wrong; they showed me how to do my hair, how to brush my teeth, and how to get dressed. I learned by my family's example how to live a good life. Some unfortunate kids don't have family and have to learn basic necessities by themselves.

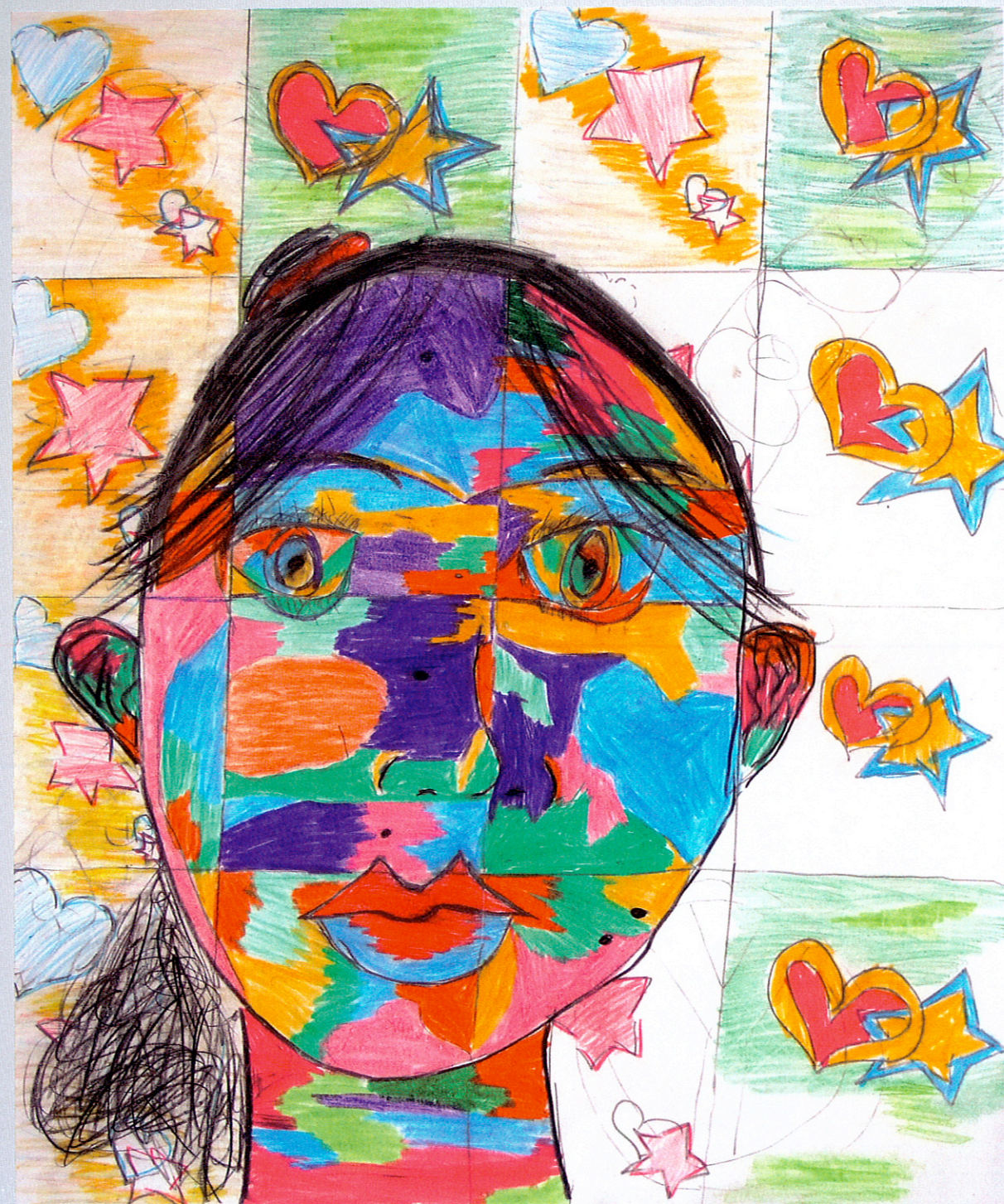
I know a kid like me who has to learn things on her own. My cousin's mom passed away, so she can't do fun things with her mom like go to the mall or the movies. Now she is living with our grandmother, grandfather, and her brother Jason. Her other sister is 17 and she's living with her boyfriend Kevin. She had a baby named Naomi on January 2, 2007. The worst part about it, Naomi will grow up without a grandmother while my cousins are still growing up without a mom.

The moral of this story is you have to appreciate what you have. I've learned that without your family you don't know who you are; because of this I appreciate my family greatly.



Dezaray Negron

I included the Puerto Rican flag because that is my heritage and I'm very proud of it. The good grades are there to remind me that when I do well I get rewarded at home. I want people to like my portrait and not laugh at it.



Natasha Feliberty

I love abstract drawing, and lots of color! I worry about my art work, because one day I would love to be an artist, an interior designer, a comedian, a poet, or a fashion designer. The hearts and stars stand for love and the night sky because at night your emotions get to you. I love to add details in everything I do, and one day you'll see my name in big letters 'cause I will make it in this world!

Just Enough

My mom gives me just enough freedom for a girl my age. The freedom that parents give to their kids shouldn't be too much or too little. There is a secret way to give your child enough freedom. Parents should judge the amount of freedom allowed based on what the child deserves, and that should be based on their age, how they show respect to others, how they treat themselves and their stuff, and how well they respect the belongings of others, whether they're important or just regular items.

My mom lets me talk on the phone with anyone I want to talk to, like my friends or boys, and also family members, of course! I can talk on the phone for hours. I can call people and they can call me. That's freedom (good freedom) because in our house you get bored and sometimes you need someone to cheer you up or talk to you when you don't feel like doing anything else. I'm allowed to have company come over my house; I can also go to their house. It's good to let your kids have experiences, or just spend time out and spend nights over their buddy's house. It's also good to just let them visit with friends. After all, they do need some air to get out and breathe.

"Blast the radio! Pump up the stereo!" I can listen to music, scream, and dance! I can go online and chat with my buddies on Yahoo or MSN; I love it. I also watch TV quite a bit, and I can choose any show that I want to watch or any program I want to view. I can party until my feet feel like they'll fall off. I think it's also fantastic to have a bit of excitement in the otherwise shallow and dull life of a pre-teen.

When your children want to go somewhere they haven't been and you are worried, here's the way to handle this kind of problem. This is what my mom does: she gives me her cell phone, but if you want, you could buy them their own cell phone, but you need to make it clear to them that their cell phone is only for emergency use and should never be used to prank-call people. If you still are unsure or worried if your child is going to run the bill up, then stop being worried, because there is a solution for this kind of problem.

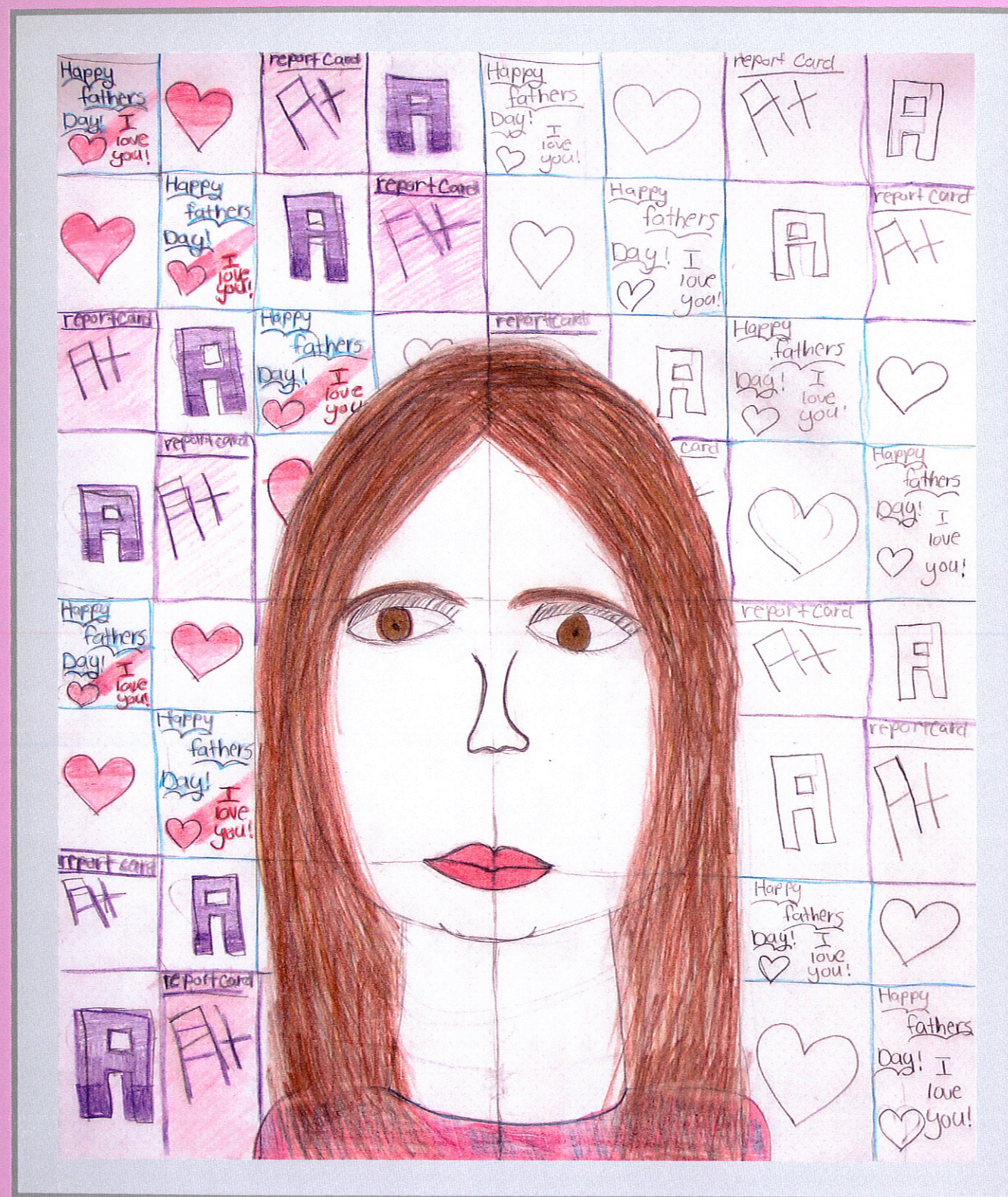
Natasha

You can buy them a pre-paid cell phone where all you do is buy minutes as you need them. The kids could even pay for their own, teaching them responsibility in taking care of their own phone; that's a better way to help you and your child.

We all deserve freedom. It's a need, not a want. If you don't give your child freedom it's not the proper way to deal with children my age. If your child doesn't experience freedom, they will never be independent on their own. They will always depend on someone else to survive. It could also give your child stress because they will be teased, and bullies will say they're "loners," or "poor" because they don't go out and do things on their own. Kids need to go and buy fashion that's "in" and remember that's a necessity! Not allowing freedom is not an option for kids who are about to be teenagers. Right after that, they are adults and need to know how to make decisions for themselves. How can they ever make a decision if they've never been given the freedom to choose?

Of course, if a kid abuses their freedom, disrespects their parents or other adults, freedoms may have to be cut down, or cut out completely for awhile, until the child learns from his or her mistake and repents for their wrongs. Freedom teaches me to be dependent on myself and not others. I'm pretty sure you don't want your child to end up living with you for life. Giving small amounts of freedom over a period of time teaches them about reality; the real deal.

When you're young you don't have freedoms for a reason; like if you're between the ages of two and seven, and you still believe in Santa Claus, you're stuck in some imaginary wonderland where teddy bears walk and talk, and adults are there to take care of every single thing you need. When you're older, freedoms given teach you that there are consequences to every single thing you do. All consequences aren't bad ones, but there is always some consequence to having freedom.



Samantha Carliell

A really important issue for me is getting A's on my report card. I also drew a Happy Father's Day card because of concerns I have about my Dad. I want him to be happy and healthy. I am a shy person, so drawing my self-portrait, writing an personal essay and sharing it with the world is just about a nightmare.

Samantha

Being the Oldest is an Important Role

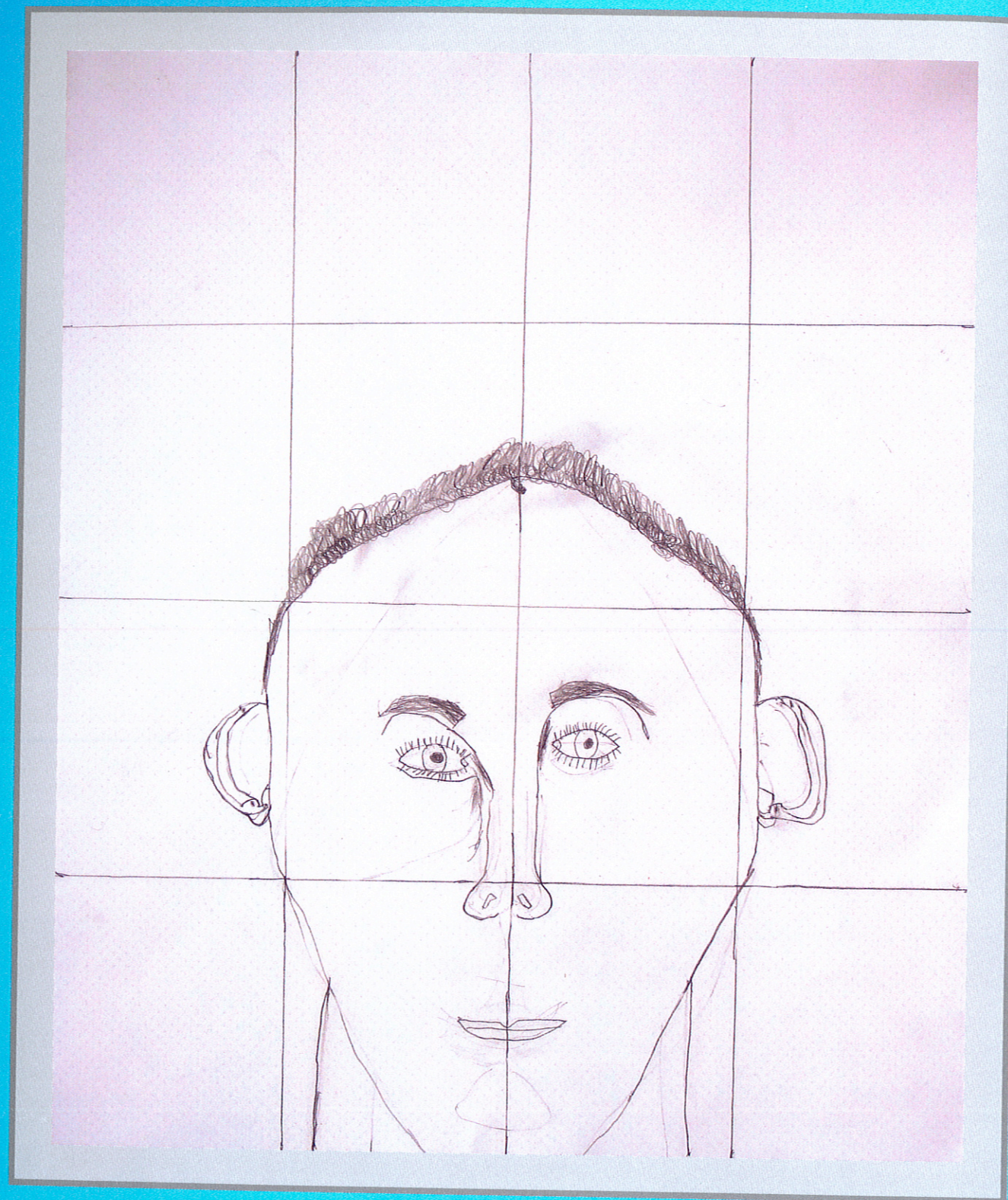
Being the oldest in my family means I have an important role to play. Who doesn't like being the oldest? I love it, but then again, I hate it! There are positives and negatives about being the oldest in your family. It's a great responsibility if you think about it.

Most of the time, I love being the oldest. You get to do pretty much whatever you want: stay up late and sleep over your friend's house. When I was little I never got to do that stuff. My opinion matters in my family because I'm the oldest. I like that. It's really fun being the older sister, but you have to remember you play an important role; you are a role model, and that can get tough.

Some days, I hate being the oldest in the family. I always have to watch my little brother and sister. My brother Nathaniel and I don't get along. We fight constantly. Then there is my sister Rebecca: she is a hand full. She cries non-stop sometimes. She is the littlest. It's a hassle watching them, but I still love them because we are a family.

I do play an important role being the oldest and a role model. My sister likes to copy what I do as much as she can. Because she's just learning to talk, she mimics me. For instance, when I say "I love you, Rebecca" she says "I love you." She also calls herself "Becca" because she only mimics the last part of her name when I call out to her. She follows me around the house and starts to cry when I don't play with her. When I was little, I used to lie on the floor and kick my door when I was angry. When my brother was four and five years old, that's what he did, too. He's outgrown that habit now that he is six. Besides mimicking me, Nathaniel looks up to me because he thinks that if I'm able to do something, he should be able to it as well. For an example, I get to sleep over a friend's house sometimes because I'm in middle school and I'm 11. He throws a fit when he can't go with me on a sleepover. I let him know that it is my friend, and not his, that I'm going to stay with. I let him know that he'll be able to do the same thing someday when he's older.

Now that I realize I have such an influence on my younger siblings, I have to watch what I do and what I say because someone is always watching! I want them to learn good behaviors from me and the good habits I have, like studying, doing my homework, respecting my Mom, helping out at home, and thinking about what I do before I do it. Being the oldest and a role model matters to me!



Vincent Dixson

I put on my portrait a sketch of a report card and of my dog Max. Good grades on your report card lead to high school and then a good college. My dog is important because he protects our home and helps to protect my mom.

Vincent

A Widowed Mom

My Mom is raising me alone. My dad died in 2001 when I was in first grade. He died in a horrible accident while on the job, and since then, my mom has been taking care of me, and my house, and my dog and cat, all by herself. I admire her and respect her tremendously. I asked her a few questions so she could tell me what her life has been like without my dad around. I'd like to share her answers with you.

When I asked my mom what it is like to raise me alone, she said that it is very hard trying to do everything at one time, and to be all she needs to be. Mom said, "I have to work, be your mother, a disciplinarian, a cook, clean the house, and take care of both of our needs."

I said to my mom, "You're a nurse's aid, helping other people. You chose to have a work schedule overnight so that we could have time together." My mom described what it is like to work on third shift (11 p.m. to 7 a.m.). She said it is difficult to stay awake when her body naturally wants to sleep at night. Also, the people she takes care of are all asleep. So, when everyone else is working or playing during the day, she has to try and sleep. She explained that it is especially hard in the summer when it is sunny and there is a lot of outside noise.

Even though her life is challenging without my Dad, there are good times. "It is fun and rewarding because, you are my son and I love you," my mom said. "I like the times we share; like going out on rides and adventures, camping, being a family. I also like to see you learn new things and to see you grow physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually."

All moms are very special. My mom didn't ask to be a widow but she is one; raising me and taking care of all my needs by herself. My mom, and the love I have for her, matter to me.



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