

An abstract painting on the left side of the cover, featuring a path that starts as a dark, textured blue at the bottom and transitions into bright, vibrant orange and red at the top. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth.

saint mary's press

SHE SAID . . .
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Teens
Speak Out
on Life and Faith

Edited by Laurie Delgatto

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With Contributions by Janet Claussen and K. Sean Buvala



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The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Gabrielle Koenig, copy editor; James H. Gurley, production editor and typesetter; Cären Yang, art director and designer; Andy Palmer, designer; manufacturing coordinated by the production services department of Saint Mary's Press.

Cover art by Britta Feuerhelm, Winona, MN

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Printed in the United States of America

5026

ISBN 978-0-88489-742-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

She said— he said— : teens speak out on life and faith / edited by Laurie Delgatto.

p. cm.

Includes index.

Summary: Writings drawn from submissions of almost 700 Catholic teenagers from throughout the United States, who responded to the questions included in the book.

ISBN 978-0-88489-742-2 (pbk.)

1. Teenagers—Religious life—Miscellanea. 2. Teenagers—Conduct of life—Miscellanea. [1. Youths' writings. 2. Catholics. 3. Christian life.] I. Delgatto, Laurie.

BV4531.3 .S54 2003

248.8'3—dc21

2002010246

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A few years ago, back in the last century, a small group of women involved in various ministries with young people gathered to discuss the lives of adolescent girls. The principle that guided the discussion was the belief that human experience mediates spirituality. A plethora of literature about girls, based on research as well as anecdotal evidence, confirmed the age-old intuitive sense that girls' experience is unique to their gender.

The issue of gender differences was a driving force for this gathering, and the leaders clearly recognized that the world of adolescent boys had its own issues and challenges. If gender differences affect physical, emotional, and psychological development, then certainly spirituality is shaped as well by feminine or masculine perspectives. All young people must learn to navigate the waters of adolescence on their way to adulthood, but the challenges may be different for each gender. *She Said . . . He Said . . .* reveals both the similarities and differences of boys' and girls' responses to challenging questions about life and about faith.

Invitations to participate in the *She Said . . . He Said . . .* project went out to over five thousand schools and parishes across the country, inviting high school students to send us their responses to one (or more) of the questions at the end of each chapter. Almost seven hundred teenagers submitted their responses. The difficult process of deciding which ones to include in the book involved several readers from across the country evaluating each of the responses. The result is an insightful look into the world of adolescent thinking, worrying, dreaming, and soul searching.

The number of submissions Saint Mary's Press received from boys and girls was the most obvious gender difference: girls' entries accounted for almost 75 percent of the total received. This fact accounts for the greater number of girls' writings in this book. The number of responses to particular questions was also revealing. Friendship was by far the most popular topic with girls' musings, outnumbering boys' in this category five to one. Boys' favorite topics were spread out

fairly evenly among friendship, fears, and values that they learned from their parents. Girls too had much to say about their parents.

The thoughts about family and parents were overwhelmingly positive from both genders. Questions that were specifically religious in nature—the meaning of the Eucharist, experiences of God, encounters with Jesus and other biblical and holy people—were less popular, though intensely meaningful.

With a book like this one, we are limited to a certain number of pages. All the responses we received are worthy of publication because they speak of the wisdom that young people have to offer one another and the world at large. We express gratitude to all the young people who took the time to write and share their thoughts.

So many youth ministers, religious educators, teachers, and parents continually support our efforts to make the voices of young people heard and known through books such as this one. We extend our deepest thanks to those who encouraged so many young people to put their words into writing and then sent them onto us.

And finally, I wish to thank Mary Koehler for all her administrative assistance with this project. I also extend my gratitude to Marilyn Kielbasa, Janet Claussen, and K. Sean Buvala, for the many contributions they made to this book and for their ongoing commitment to empowering young people, girls and boys alike.

This book is for young people by young people, but we hope that parents, teachers, counselors, and youth ministers will benefit from its wisdom as well. Enjoy this wonderful glimpse into the lives, hopes, and faith of young people.



Laurie Delgatto, editor

Two friends can sit on a porch swing for three hours **without saying a word** and walk away like it was the **best conversation** they have ever had.

—Janessa Ann Damico, Rochester, NY

Great friends **tell you that you have a chance** with your latest crush even when he's the lead singer in the most popular band in the United States.

—Erica Moore, Washington Township, NJ

A B O U T O U R F R I E N D S

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Friends are those people with whom we have **detailed conversations**. Even if they do not answer back, we know **they are listening**.

—Dan Kick, Athol Springs, NY

Acquaintances are easy to come by, but a **great friend** is hard to find.

—Sean Ryan, Briarwood, NY

If you speak, they listen.

If you call, they answer.

If you're down, they lift.

If you refuse, they coax.

If you're frustrated, they advise.

If you cry, they cry.

If you sulk, they cheer.

If you curse, they understand.

They finish your sentences

And make a dream out of your nightmare.

They are the highest notes in your laughter

And the brightest glow-in-the-dark stars on your ceiling.

They are number 1 on your speed dial

And the reason your father blames you for the phone bill.

They are your opposite, your twin, and your partner-in-crime,

While voluntarily becoming your emotional punching bag.

They are door openers, truth tellers, and mind readers,

Main characters in your autobiography.

The song "Lean on Me," by Bill Withers, defines great friends. The song describes someone who is understanding and willing to make sacrifices, someone who wants to help his friend get through a tough time. This is what a perfect friend is. Such genuine care tends to become mutual. However, a person doesn't constantly go through tough times, which brings up the second part of a great friend. A great friend should also be capable of keeping good times rolling. He should try to keep his friend from getting down, and he should make their time together enjoyable. A great friend should also be willing to let his friends assist him when he is in need and they want to help. That completes the circle of mutuality, which is the basis of friendship.

—Name withheld, Middleton, CT

Why keep a diary

When they hold secrets safer than a locked book?

Best friends don't have to tell each other that they are

When actions speak louder than words.

—Norain Siddiqui, Morristown, NJ

I realized that a great friend is not just one who lends a listening ear, offers a shoulder to cry on, or shares your secrets. Rather a great friend is one who willingly accompanies you through life's various moments, holding your hand through times of trial, sharing a smile during days filled with laughter, and all the while encouraging you to achieve your goals and aspirations. As years pass, a great friend is one who undoubtedly remains by your side allowing you to grow separately without growing apart. A great friend is a precious gift from God, delivered to aid you through life and assist you in becoming the person you one day hope to be.

—Samantha Lynne Fusco, Worcester, MA

A friend is someone you can trust.

A friend will never let you down.

He never leaves you when you're sad;

He cheers you up when you frown.

He's always there to listen,

Always willing to advise,

And if there is a fight,

He's always first to compromise.

Only one man is a lifelong friend.

His name is Jesus;

He is both human and divine.

—Tim Healy, Pontiac, MI

As I face increasingly difficult struggles in my life, I find myself drawing on the strength of my friends. I depend on them to listen to me and to understand, to tell me what I want to hear, and to talk me into doing what I need to do. I often wonder if I am a burden on them—too much of a drain on their energy. They never complain or say a word against me. They comfort me and drag me through the long days. We laugh together and have random adventures. I can't do anything without them. They are by no means perfect people. They have flaws and struggles of their own, but they care, and I could never ask for more.

—Jenny Torgerson, Claymont, DE

I see a friend as someone I trust and who is of value to me. A great friend, however, is that and more. A great friend knows everything about you. Your souls are so closely connected that you are practically bonded as one. You can tell a great friend from a regular friend. It's like finding your soul mate. You just know, and that's the greatest part. You'll know who your true friends are amongst all the people who may be

A great friend is hard to acquire and is far beyond any ordinary acquaintance. Once you find a great friend, you should always value this majestic gift. There are many factors and qualities in a great friend. Some people may think that a great friend is just a friend who treats them well. Other people look deep into the friendship when calling somebody a great friend, and I am one of those people. I thank God every day for my many friends, but there are a few distinguished, amazing people whom I would go far enough to call my great friends. They are my soul mates, my confidants, my brothers and sisters at heart.

I believe that great friends have a past together and that they each know what the other has endured over the years. Great friends are there when you celebrate the good times in your life. They are also there to help you through the bad parts. Great friends are those people who are happy to hear your voice after a long day at school. These outstanding people rush home to call you because they are eager to tell you that they made the honor roll or that they have been accepted to Harvard. No matter how envious they may be, great friends will be on the sidelines cheering you on during a victory.

—R. J. Y., Somerville, NJ

dishonest and untrustworthy. With all said, I thank God for the people I am blessed with. Every person I have met or will meet is important to me because they all affect my life in some way. To me a great friend is someone who has walked with me through the darkest times of my life and is still standing with me. To me a great friend is God.

—Michelle Apostol, Staten Island, NY

A great friend has the qualities of a hero.

Great friends don't come along just when you want them. True friends are one in a million. They have a personality that is always right for the occasion. They make you laugh when you think nothing can. They make you feel loved and wanted when you feel like you are worthless. They stand by you through everything. When you find a great friend, you wordlessly say that oath from the Book of Ruth, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. . . . and your God [will be] my God."

—Angela Riechert, Saint Louis, MO

What makes a good friend?

A good friend is someone who will listen to you.

A good friend will tell you the truth no matter what.

A good friend will catch you when you fall.

A good friend will stop other people from saying bad things about you.

A good friend will give you his last dollar if you need it.

A good friend will treat you like you want to be treated.

A good friend will put down what he is doing to help you.

A good friend will always make time for you.

A good friend is someone you can talk to about anything at any time.

A good friend is a shoulder to cry on.

A good friend is like a brother or a sister.

That is what makes a good friend.

—Brian D. Stephenson, San Diego, CA

Friends will come and go through the revolving door on the threshold of my life. However, only a precious few will leave an imprint on my soul and stay with me until my dying day. Common threads are woven through all true friendships. One of these threads is trust. Without trust, the foundation on which a friendship is built would deteriorate, causing the whole relationship to collapse. You should be able to share your deepest thoughts, hopes, and fears with a true friend, no matter what. They share in your accomplishments and comfort you through tears. There is a sixth sense that exists between only the closest of friends. The best lessons learned cannot be read from a textbook; we must experience the joys and trials of this journey with our friends and look inside their souls to see life's truths. Great friends are extensions of ourselves, and they guide us through this obstacle course called life.

—Amber Brown, East Syracuse, NY

From womb to tomb,
From birth to earth,
Friends are always near.
They always guide you when you need help.
They always hold you dear.
They do not care where you are from,
But they do care where you are going.
They will quickly be at your side,
And they will not show signs of slowing.
They will always be there to hear your problems,
But friends will never judge you.
They will give you insight to steer you right,
And everything they say will be true.
Friends really care about how you feel;
They do not act fake, they always act real.
All these things you find in a friend,
A friend who is really sincere.

We find ourselves telling one another the deepest details of our lives—things we don't even share with our families. But what is a friend? a confidant? a shoulder to cry on? an ear to listen? a heart to feel? A friend is all these things and more. No matter where we met, no matter how long we have been together, I call you friend. It is a word so small yet so large in feeling, a word filled with emotion and overflowing with love. Once the package of friendship has been opened, it can never be closed. It is a book that is always waiting to be read and enjoyed. We have our disagreements and our disappointments, but we also have concern for one another. Friendship is a unique bond that lasts through all tribulations. Parts of us go into our friendships—our humor, our experiences, our tears. Friendships are foundations necessary for life and love.

—Lauren Bianchi, Dobbs Ferry, NY

These are the friends everyone should have,
For in them you have nothing to fear.

—Jason Mar-Tang, Staten Island, NY

A great friend is someone who is a positive influence in your life. They help you not only find mistakes in yourself, but they help you correct those mistakes as well. A great friend sticks by you during both the good times and the rough times in your life. They pick you up when you are down and help you to stay up when you are falling. They do not turn their backs on you, and they always remain faithful. A great friend is someone you can trust with secrets about your life that you would not want anyone to know. They keep you company when you need it. A great friend helps you do what is right in order for you to develop a greater relationship with God.

—Stephen Jacob, Cincinnati, OH

A great friend is a dream to most people. They believe that a great friend is like some fairy godmother who will smooth over all problems with a wave of her magic wand. They want a superfriend who is able to cure a blue day or a confrontation with someone faster than a speeding bullet. I have found no such friend, nor do I really wish to. You see, I don't believe that a great friend should be able to correct everything. I think that creates a relationship that mirrors a parent-child relationship rather than a friendship. A truly great friend is someone who goes through the same problems as everyone else and comes out of their trials a little better, or at least a little wiser. A great friend helps when they can, is honest about what they think, and will even put up with your complaining if the occasion calls for it. The hardest part of having a great friend is to remember that your friend needs a great friend too. It takes two people to make a great friendship. A great friend is like having your own private teddy bear that talks back to you to help you, guide you, or laugh with you.

—Olivia Paglia, Harper Woods, MI

A great friend is one who is completely open with you. A true friend will not purposely try to confuse you nor will he take advantage of you. He will not pretend to be your friend but really hate you. The real friend is on an equal level with you and is there to comfort and support you in your need. His interest in you is purely for friendship's sake and not to gain in any other way. When you are happy, he is happy. When you are sad, he is sad. There is nothing that he will not tell you, and he does not take satisfaction in your pain. A great friend is loyal to you.

—H. G., Rochester, MN

The definition of a great friend depends on the person who is creating the definition. To me a great friend must be someone you know will always be there for you. A great friend will hug you when you need it and help you up when you trip. A great friend is both truthful and loving. A great friend will dance with you even if you dance like your legs are having a seizure. The fact that they may be of a different gender, race, or faith shouldn't matter to them or to you. A great friend will tell you when your skirt makes your bottom look the size of the Titanic. A great friend will cheer you on even when you're losing and hug you like you won. A great friend should feel lucky to have you, and you should feel lucky to have them. A great friend is the kind you would have fun with at Wal-Mart. A true friend isn't afraid to say "I love you."

—Megan Howie, Danville, IL

If you want to be my friend, you need to have some desirable traits. The three that come to mind are honesty, fun-loving, and caring. I want a friend who will tell me the truth even if it's something I don't want to hear. I also want a friend who is fun to be with—if a person is easygoing with a sense of humor, he will be a great friend. A good friend needs to have a caring attitude. If I'm having a rough day, will he be there for me in my time of need? These are the three qualities I look for when I am deciding who my greatest friend will be. I must also display these same qualities so that I will be a great friend to someone else.

—Tim Ricker, Delphos, OH

Only When . . .

Friendship is a rare jewel that shines
 Only when you give it a sunny smile.
 Friendship is a song that is sung
 Only when you know its rhythms.
 Friendship is a dream that comes true
 Only when you believe in it.
 Friendship is a sun that rises
 Only when your heart has set on it.
 Friendship is a throne on which you can sit
 Only when you share your kingdom with it.
 Friendship is a path that you will find
 Only when you know you are lost.
 Friendship is a hand that holds yours
 Only when you extend yours.
 Friendship is an album of memories you can leaf through
 Only when you cherish it.

When we all look back to reflect on our lives, one of the questions that consistently emerges seems to pertain to our friends. We often ponder: Just who was the greatest friend in our life? We ask ourselves what makes a person a great friend. Some of the quick answers that come to mind are the qualities of loyalty, dependability, and honesty. I personally feel that none of these qualities are true indicators of friendship because anyone, even your greatest foe, can possess them. In my opinion, you have found a great friend when you know you would do anything and sacrifice everything in order to help that person, and they would do the very same for you. This is the single quality that is truly required in order to have a great friendship.

—Patrick Howard Jr., Athol Springs, NY

Friendship is a lantern that glows
Only when you need the warmth of it.
Friendship is a language you can speak
Only when you know the meaning of it.
Friendship is a potpourri of feelings you can smell
Only when you have a true friend.

—Cy Sison, Pontiac, MI

A good friend can be trusted to hear a secret. A great friend can be trusted to keep it. A good friend tells me jokes and makes me laugh. A great friend laughs at my jokes. Someone who will listen to your problems is a good friend. Someone who gives advice when it is needed is a great friend. Good friends, I believe, are those who know your most recent crush. Great friends will sit up with you during the night trying to think of ways to get him to notice you. Good friends don't care if you act like a dork. Great friends will join you in the act.

—Jaclyn, Omaha, NE

When I think of a great friend, I think of someone who is always there for me no matter what. They don't make fun of me for the things they know would hurt my feelings. They don't join in when other kids make fun of me. Instead, they stand up for me and tell the other kids to cut it out.

A great friend is someone who will help me get through things when I am having a hard time. A great friend is someone I can talk to when I feel the need to talk. They don't talk behind my back and never tell other people things I don't want them to tell. A great friend to me is someone who will stick by my side through the good and the bad.

—David A. Kotula, McSherrystown, PA

I have encountered many people in my lifetime. Some are mere acquaintances, some are companions when it suits them, and others cannot be trusted. Few have become great friends. A great friend is one I can count on to be there for me in all situations—in good times and in bad times, in joy and in sorrow. A great friend is a source of refuge, a person I go to when I am in need of comfort, wisdom, or strength. A great friend shows sincere loyalty and honesty without ever having to be tested. A great friend can bring out the best in me, even when I am at my worst. A great friend is one who expects the same from me, for a great friendship is shared by two people who are great friends to each other.

—Erin O’Connor, Morristown, NJ

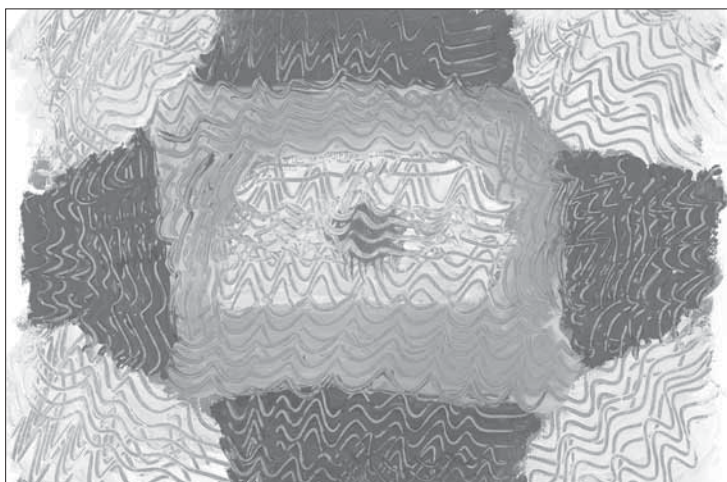


Art by Troy Koehler, Winona, MN

My best friend left me—deserted me. Without a second thought, she just walked away. She knows what she wants, and I am standing in her way. Losing her has made me appreciate what a friend really is, or at least should be.

Friendship is a two-way street. Both people must respect each other as individuals and not take the relationship for granted. Even the best friendship could fall apart if it is neglected. Both friends must be honest, loyal, and supportive of each other through good times and bad times. A best friend is someone who can always be counted on, no matter what.

—Jacqueline Marie, Chelsea, IA



Art by Katie Appelwick, Winona, MN

Most of all, **they know** when you are feeling **loved** by the world, **hated** by the world, or just **lonely** in the world, and they **stand by your side** through it all.

—Katie Eileen Donovan, Saint Louis, MO

My friends are my **escape**. They are more **family to me** and are of more importance to me than **anything else** in the world.

—Lauren DeFavero, East Syracuse, NY

The main qualities of a noble friend are what the Holy Spirit bestows on us during the sacrament of Confirmation. The seven gifts are **courage** to do what is right, **reverence** to show profound respect to the Lord, **awe** for appreciating life, **wisdom** and **understanding** to proclaim the Good News, **right judgment**, and **fortitude** to endure pain and peril.

—Salvatore Mazzurco, Bronx, NY

A great friend is like a favorite movie that you watch over and over and **never get tired of**. Every time you watch it, you find out something different and new.

—Amanda, Maysville, KY

True friends are the people who ask you how you are and wait for an answer.

—Kristin Rossi, Pontiac, MI

A **part of you** belongs to them, and it is locked away like a **treasure** deep within their heart.

—Allison Marie Zimpfer, Buffalo, NY

Great friends **know what you're thinking** so well, they start taking the words right out of your mouth. . . .
Great friends are like a **rare jewel**; they are hard to find and not easily forgotten.

—Selena Barnes, Brooklyn, NY

I think people use the term *best friend* too loosely. . . .
There is a **gap between** having an **acquaintance** and having a **best friend**, and sometimes the gap is **blurred** in people's minds.

—Jeremiah McCarthy, Staten Island, NY

A great friend tells you when you are **wrong** and when you are **right**, not just when you are right.

—Thomas M. Bulow, Chicago, IL

MY THOUGHTS

What makes a good friend?

I ask, “Mom, how do you do what you do?”
And she tells me that **God is how** she does
what she does.

—Maureen Hayes, Magnolia, DE

Beauty is **skin deep** and can be changed,
but in the end **inner beauty** is not reversible.

—Karintha M. Ashe, Chicago, IL

ABOUT OUR VALUES

25

My parents have always told me, “We will
trust you until you give us a reason not to.”

—Matthew Dickman, Athol Springs, NY

A line of **communication** between parents
and children creates a strong relationship.

—Philip Muscarella, Hamburg, NY

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned about being a parent is that parents never stop learning. I know that each child is different. They have different needs and wants, and they must be cared for equally but differently. It is imperative that each child's different emotions, feelings, and attitudes are taken into account. It is important that parents never claim to be anything more than humans who make mistakes and who are open to learning from their children. Children have so much to teach. Knowing when to be firm and when to be soft is also important. Personal feelings should never stand in the way of parents' being supportive and loving of their child. My goal as a parent will not be to have a cool or popular child; my goal will be to raise a loving, nurturing, and independent adult.

—Christina E. Laughter, San Diego, CA

I couldn't sleep. I had a guilty feeling inside me. The neat pack of cards I had won in the third-grade spelling contest today lay beside me. I wished I wouldn't have cheated. I didn't deserve the cards. I had to tell someone, so I woke my parents. They suggested I tell the teacher so that the prize could be given to the rightful winner. My parents have always taught me to be honest. Through their teaching me, I have developed a strong conscience that implants a terrible feeling in my stomach when I do wrong. Honesty is a value I hope I can keep with me for the rest of my life.

—Mark J. Mueller, Delphos, OH

“Don’t worry about what other people think.” I’ve heard that a million times from my mom. However, I didn’t listen to my mother. We moved to a new town last year. When I started school there, I wanted everyone to like me. I tried my hardest to fit in. If everyone wore an orange shirt, I would do the same just to fit in.

One of my “friends” was the same way, and that was one of the reasons we got along. Then she started doing drugs to fit in. I wasn’t going to stoop that low, so I told her she either had quit or stop hanging around me. She chose drugs. I got to thinking and realized I wasn’t happy with my new self. I was busy trying to make everyone like me, but I didn’t like me. The day I stopped worrying about what other people thought was the day I was truly happy. Like my mother says, “You shouldn’t change for anyone.”

—Jillian Cabrera, Hoboken, NJ

My older brother is married and has two children. Over the years I have observed how he and his wife have raised their two wonderful boys. I have noticed that my brother and sister-in-law always interact with their children in a positive fashion. Instead of constantly saying no to the child, they will divert his attention to something else, or they will politely remind him what he must do. There is no yelling or screaming, except for some crying here and there. The example of my brother and sister-in-law has shown me the value of having a positive attitude with children.

—Michael Nork, Middleton, CT

One of the great things that my parents have instilled in me is the value of free society and diversity. From the time I became able to formulate opinions and perform simple tasks, they allowed me to openly share my feelings, and they provided encouragement when my feelings and desires differed from theirs. I have been taught to respect all people, regardless of their race, creed, or culture. My parents demand respect from me, but they show me the same respect. My upbringing has made me realize that no one deserves to be discriminated against for any reason. All people are different, and it is this uniqueness that makes the world we live in so appealing. We are all children of God and should be treated as such. I am always encouraged to find out more about someone when I don't understand them instead of stereotyping them because of their differences and missing out on a potentially good friend. I firmly believe that if more parents would teach their children at young ages to take the time to understand and communicate with the people around them, our world would be much more peaceful, and people would be much more educated.

—Kenicia D. Adams, Harper Woods, MI

One of the values that I have learned from my parents is to never give up, whether it is related to my academic work, athletic programs, or my own personal goals in life. My parents have instilled this value in me and have taught me to believe in my abilities and in myself. Even if others may not believe in me, I must stay strong and keep my dreams and goals alive. This value has been extremely important to me in my academic work at school, in football and baseball, and in my own personal life. Even if a particular subject or a specific sports activity appears difficult at first, if you really have the desire and the heart to be the best you can be, you must persevere and maintain that drive to achieve your specific goals.

—Ryan Stearrett, Wilmington, DE

I have learned that if you are strict on a kid and show a lot of love, he will come up right. I learned that because my dad was always strict and didn't take anything from me, and now my brother and I are trying to do right.

—Durrell Johnson, Audubon, PA

My parents taught me that people with disabilities are a gift from God. They showed me this through their care of my brother, Danny.

When Danny was diagnosed with autism, my mom wanted to give him the best education possible. That required spending every day working with him on speech, occupation, and other skills. She had to enroll him in public school when he reached sixth grade because they had better services for him.

After Danny was enrolled, my mom realized that he was not getting all the services he needed. She started fighting the school board and after three years, the fight continues. She now homeschools Danny half-days.

My father takes Danny out on the farm and lets him help out, and never once has either of them complained. I believe God chose our parents for Danny because God knew that they would help the fight for rights of disabled people.

—Julie Huber, Perryville, MO

Having been born to two great parents, I feel that I have a good idea of how to be a good parent. My parents have been parenting for over twenty years now with my brother and me. They are certainly the people that have most shaped my life. It is in their fashion that I will one day raise my own children.

The biggest problems I see with parents today are over-parenting and under-parenting. Parents who meticulously watch over every single thing their child does will limit the child from learning from mistakes and also limit independence. Parents who let their children run wild all the time have children who lack proper self-control and can't acknowledge their improper actions. In addition to knowing how much to parent, laughter and sensibility, in my opinion, are the most important aspects of parenting.

—Ryan R. Thomas, Wilmington, DE

On June 8, 1984, a little girl was born into a world of love and comfort. That little girl was me. My mother was only eighteen at the time and did not know what she had in store for her. Her mother, my grandmother, asked her to leave the house because she wanted my mother to experience the world as it is since she decided to become a parent at such a young age.

My mother was faced with many hardships, but she overcame them all. As I got older, I saw my mother struggling just to make me happy, and I tried my best to help her as much as I could, mostly by doing chores like washing the dishes, sweeping the floors, dusting the furniture, and, of course, keeping my room clean. I always made sure I told my mom I loved her so that I could see her bright smile, and that smile always made my day brighter. My mother always made sure I was her first priority.

Now that I am seventeen, I know how much of a role model my mom is to me. She has taught me the love of family, and as each day passes, that love only grows stronger. As I continue with school and fulfill the rest of my life with my mom's guidance, I hope to be as strong and loving as

My parents have instilled in me the value of unconditional love. It is evident in their support when I attempt something new. My choices may not be theirs, but they respect my pursuit nonetheless. If I succeed, they rejoice. If I fail, they comfort. They do not say, "I told you so." Instead they encourage me to try again.

They are quick to forgive when I have done wrong. While they may be disappointed, their unconditional love allows me to admit my guilt and learn from my mistakes without having to fear that I will lose their love. This empowers me to follow my own conscience.

Unconditional love is seamless and everlasting. It does not depend on my grades, my clothes, or my choice of music. Unconditional love is what God gives his children and what my parents give me.

—Josh Fong, Ocala, FL

my mom was for me. I wish that on the day I become a mother, I will be able to create the same loving and comfortable environment I was born into on that fine June day.

—Amanda M. Kearns, Hoboken, NJ

A great value that I have learned from my parents is compassion for the sick and elderly. My parents took care of my great uncle who battled cancer for thirteen years. At times things got tough, but my parents never turned their back on him. Other family members were always too busy to help or even to visit, but we were always there when he needed us.

Often we had to give up our plans and holidays to spend many long hours in the emergency room when he was not well. I think I will always remember how grateful he was that we were there and that we cared so much for him. It gives me a good feeling to know that I am able to help someone, even if all I do is talk to them or keep them company.

—Stacie Tarris, Pottsville, PA

I have learned that your parents' relationship has a drastic effect on who you become and how you act. When I was six years old, my parents divorced. Ever since then I have viewed relationships as negative and hurtful. I began improving my outlook on relationships about two years ago. I had been with my girlfriend for almost a year, and I was in love. Then my father and my stepmother divorced, and a whirlwind of negative feelings sucked me back in. The relationship I was in ended, and all proceeding relationships have also faltered. Every time I get close to a girl, I break things off and run away. My personal scar has ruined many relationship possibilities. When I have children, my wife and I will be stellar examples of a loving couple. I will teach my children to have a positive, realistic view of love and relationships.

—Austin Zang, Baltimore, MD