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Six Teens Win 2013 National Essay Contest Award

Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Tutors Tell How the Program has Helped Them

"I was no longer the girl that was looked at by teachers as always failing. I was going to be somebody in life, and it started now." – María Del Rosario Zuñiga

Six students received prizes in a national competition among participants in the [Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program](#), a nationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program of the Intercultural Development Research Association. Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutors wrote about how the program helped them do better in school and how they had helped their tutees to do better.

- First Place High School Winner – Yesenia Villarreal, 12th Grade, South San Antonio High School
- Second Place High School Winner – Angelica Cavazos, 11th Grade, Odessa High School
- Third Place High School Winner – Heather Perez, 11th Grade, South San Antonio High School
- First Place Middle School Winner – Luis P. Acosta, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Second Place Middle School Winner – María Del Rosario Zuñiga, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Third Place Middle School Winner – Pedro Ramirez, 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas

There were competitions at both the middle school and high school levels in the United States. Winners from each competition are being awarded \$200 for first place, \$150 for second place and \$100 for third place.

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Yesenia Villarreal: "I have grown"

In her essay, Yesenia Villarreal wrote: "Since I started tutoring, I have grown more patient, and many have said I seem more caring. I have grown with the children and have seen them excel in their work. I enjoy working with them and seeing their reactions when they learn something new... Being in the Cola-Cola Valued Youth Program has helped me think about my future and what I want to do with my life."



Angelica Cavazos: "I would hate to leave"

"The Coca-Cola Youth Program is a great program. We tutors are teaching our tutees everything they need to know and what we know," Angelica Cavazos wrote in her essay. "I loved all my little kindergarteners. I hate that the end of this year I'll have to stop tutoring them. It just kills me. I don't think you all will understand why I would hate to leave. These kids run up to me and hugged me

every day that I go.”



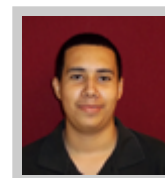
Heather Perez: "...things started to change"

“Since I became a tutor in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program things started to change for myself,” wrote Heather Perez. “Things were not just about me, but it was now about my tutees and me. Just the feeling of seeing them every day was such an inspiration, because not only was I glad to see them but they were also glad to see me. Just getting the chance to tutor the children strengthens me in every perspective.”



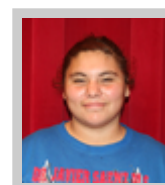
Luis P. Acosta: "I always believed..."

In his essay, Luis P. Acosta wrote: “The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made me a better individual all around. I used to be a big troublemaker who would not care about who I hurt, what grades I got or how rude I was to everyone around me, including teachers and my parents... I always believed that I could never do anything right. Every time I tried my best in whatever I did at school or at home, I failed... The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has transformed me into a smart, responsible, caring and respectful individual not only within my school, but out in my community and at home... This program has guided me into even thinking of my educational goals beyond high school.”



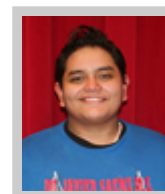
María Del Rosario Zuñiga: "Life changed"

“Life changed for me the first week of school this year. Our counselor informed me that I would be placed in a program called the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program... My hopes and self-esteem went up by a lot. I was no longer the girl that was looked at by teachers as always failing. I was going to be somebody in life, and it started now...,” María Del Rosario Zuñiga wrote in her essay. “As the weeks and months went by, the checks started coming in, and it was a true blessing for my family and me. I started focusing more on my classes and made sure I was passing them. My attendance improved because having my own job didn’t mean I had to go and look for one to help out my family at home. I also was encouraged to pass my class because I wanted to become smarter for my elementary tutees.”



Pedro Ramirez: "...an opportunity to shine"

Pedro Ramirez wrote: “Every day in this program is a blessing to me... the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program... gives students like me an opportunity to shine and become better and more responsible individuals while at the same time getting paid. That’s why when I go to the elementary for tutoring, I feel like I have God in my heart, and He gives me the potential and the love to go teach my tutees. I have also seen the success my students have displayed in their learning.”



Honorable Mentions

Honorable mentions were awarded to students in schools that submitted multiple student essays; these students had the highest score at their campus.

High School Honorable Mentions

- Steven Andre Mares – 12th Grade, South San Antonio High School, San Antonio
- Elaine Ovalle – 11th grade, Odessa High School, Odessa, Texas

Middle School Honorable Mentions

- José Luis Arrellano – 7th Grade, Ann Richards Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Stephanie Cantu – 7th Grade, Irene M. García Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Alicia Gonzalez – 7th Grade, J.D. Salinas Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Krystal Johnson – 7th Grade, Abraham Kazen Middle School, San Antonio
- Elizabeth Miranda – 8th Grade, Dr. Javier Saenz Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Robert Morales – 7th Grade, Robert C. Zamora Middle School, San Antonio
- Heriberto Quintero – 8th Grade, Dwight Middle School, San Antonio
- Danielle Ramirez – 8th Grade, César E. Chávez Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Cristina Valdez – 8th Grade, Memorial Middle School, La Joya, Texas

Learn More

The [Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program](#), created by IDRA, is an internationally-recognized cross-age tutoring program. Since its inception in 1984, the program has kept more than 33,000 students in school, young people who were previously at risk of dropping out. According to the Valued Youth creed, all students are valuable, none is expendable. The lives of more than 787,000 children, families and educators have been positively impacted by the program. The full text of [all of the winning essays](#) is available online.



The **Intercultural Development Research Association** is an independent private non-profit organization dedicated to realizing the right of every child to a quality education. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

IDRA works hand-in-hand with hundreds of thousands of educators and families each year in communities and classrooms around the country. All our work rests on an unwavering commitment to creating self-renewing schools that value and promote the success of students of all backgrounds.

We are a small organization with a powerful mission: to create schools that work for *all* children.

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