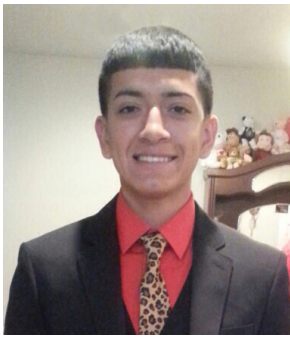


# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2015 Essay Contest

## Winner: High School First Place



**Nathaniel Duarte**

11<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

People tend to ask me the same question once they find out I'm in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, "Why are you in it?" Well why not? I get to help fifth graders better themselves in academics. And that's not all, you gain a special relationship with them, you start calling them "your kids," and you start caring about them without even noticing. You constantly ask them, "How's life?" or "How are you doing?" because you truly care. To me it's special because how many high school kids can say they are helping and are role models to fifth graders? Not many.

Another thing is that – I don't mean to brag – but my kids are pretty great, David, Luis and Rashaard\*. David has so much heart and is hungry for success at such a young age, he just needs to work hard like he is and he will become successful. Luis is the more confident, relaxed kind of guy. He's living free and doesn't worry about other people's negativity, a bit of a troublemaker but still a great kid. Now Rashaard is the little genius, as he grows older he'll learn to lift others who need help. I know my guys will grow to become great men because they have such a bright spirit.

But honestly, they're changing me. I used to believe that I didn't have a purpose, but because of them, I'm starting to feel like I have a reason.

Because if I don't go to their school one day, they'll ask me the next day where was I and why didn't I go. That's how I know that I matter to them.

Another reason this program is special to me is because they lift me up when I'm down. For example, in March I lost a great friend and brother who ran with me in track. He was in a car crash and died instantly. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. I truly lost a brother that day, and it affected me. I went to my kids as strong as I could be, but it still wasn't enough because they asked me what was wrong. I told them what happened and instead of feeling sorry for me, they made me laugh and just spoke to me. They completely changed my depression to laughter. Not only is this program special but so are my kids.

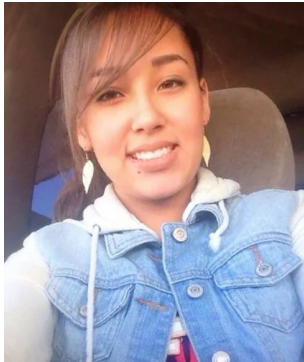
One of my goals in life is for someone to walk up to me and say, "Because of you, I didn't give up." That is what I'm trying to accomplish in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, so that maybe by motivating my kids now they will be able to say that to me in the future.



*\*name changed for privacy*

# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2015 Essay Contest

## Winner: High School Second Place



**Jerelie Márquez**

12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

Before I was in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program everything was fine – or so I thought it was. Yes, I was an A-B honor roll student catching up after having my rebel year. What ended up happening to me was that I ended up pregnant. After that, everything changed. I saw things in a mother's perspective. I wanted my son to learn and become the greatest thing he could achieve. I'm a senior in high school, and the main thing that bothered me was that I was a grown up going into the real world, and when you're going from school to a job it's a huge step in life. I heard about the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program a little into last year and, silly me, I thought: "Well all we're really doing is reading a book with them or going over multiplication problems. What's the big deal in that?" I won't lie, the thing that pulled me in at first was the fact that I was getting paid. I needed some extra money. So after some convincing from the teacher and some paperwork, I was set!

I remember the first day I walked in there. Oh man! My palms were sweaty, and I was actually shaking from how nervous I was. The teacher assigned me my students: Gabriella, Danielle, and Mary\*. When I first saw them, I didn't just see some random strangers, but excited kids who were excited because they got to be taught by a high school tutor.

After getting to know each and every one of them, there is nothing in the world that will make you quit that program. For example, if I'm having a

day with a rough start, the kids' minds just help you remember how you were. They don't have a worry at all except for finishing their homework. My kids are competitive but in a good way to where they push themselves and each other to learn more. Seeing that every day, it encourages me to do that in my classroom in school without worrying what's next on my to-do list. Since the moment I had my son, I knew I had him to worry about for the rest of my life.

My kids taught me to just relax and do what's in the moment. They tell me about their future career plans. Gabriella's was what really impressed me because she says she wants to be a judge! Every time they tell me what

they want to do, I just see a twinkle in their eyes and their motivation. I put myself in their position and wonder to myself what made my motivation fade over the years. From seeing them, all I wanted was the motivation they have now. They eventually brought it back, and it made me strive to try harder at what I do, all while having fun and not forcing it upon myself miserably like I used to do. I love the irony of how we all get taught something new every day I walk through that door in the elementary building. It's an exciting experience.



*\*name changed for privacy*

# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2015 Essay Contest

## Winner: High School Third Place



### **Mónica Pando**

11<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

Many people struggle in school because they do not understand what the teacher is explaining to them. I have always received good grades, but most of the time I did not pass because I knew the material. Everyone in class would want to sit next to me when we would take test because I was “the smart girl.” But honestly, the only reason I would pass is because the teachers would help me on the assignments. But I did not truly understand the information on the paper.

When I joined the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I thought it was going to be the only class I can really understand what was going on. But what I did not realize is that it was going to help me obtain strategies that will later help me absorb and retain the information my teachers are telling me.

The first semester when I walked into that fifth grade class and attempted to help my tutees with their schoolwork, it was hard! I would explain things to them, but the next day they would forget what I taught them. Then I realized they had the same problem I had. They were receiving the information, but instead of absorbing the information they would

lose it. So I decided that night to research ways to help them grasp and keep the information. I would try different methods each day but nothing seemed to be helping. I got on this one website that seemed like it should help my tutees. When they were doing math, I noticed they were struggling with long division problems, so I showed them “Dead Monsters Smell Bad,” which is the steps for long division: divide, multiply, subtract, and bring down. I did not think it would help, but surprisingly it did. So I kept researching different ways to help them. One night I stayed up late making flashcards for them. It seemed to help them, so I decided to try it for myself. I made flashcards for most of my classes, and it helped me. I not only just received the information but I also knew the information that the teachers were teaching me. Since I joined the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I learned a new method of learning that helps me.



# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2015 Essay Contest

## Winner: Middle School First Place



**Agustina García**

7<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

DR. JAVIER SAENZ MIDDLE SCHOOL, LA JOYA ISD, TEXAS

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a great experience that every student should participate in during their middle school years. For those individuals who think there is no hope for their future, this is the program for you. I had no desire to receive an education, and because of my bad behavior, my teachers and parents did not think I would succeed in life. This all changed when I was chosen to participate in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Because of what I have learned through this program, I have learned to develop positive characteristics that will help me achieve greatness in my life. Let me explain my reasons as to how this program changed me from the person I once was.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made me a better student and individual. I used to get into so much trouble at school, mainly because I was hanging out with the wrong people. I was easily influenced to do things that I know I should not have been doing. I described myself as being rude and disrespectful to not only teachers, but also to my parents. I felt like I would not amount to anything because everything I always did was a failure. My parents would try to advise me on how to follow the right path in life and that education was the answer to my success. But everything they told me went into one ear and out the other.

As I started my seventh grade year, I thought everything was going to continue exactly as the previous year. I would be in more trouble, and my grades would be low. As I approached registration

day, I noticed that my counselor gave me a schedule that included a class called Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. I had heard some things about this class, but I did not really know what it was all about. I asked my counselor what this class was, but she just informed me to wait until I attended and my teacher would tell me all about it.

Upon entering class for the first day, I noticed I was surrounded by some friends I knew, the majority of them being smart students. I asked myself, "What in the world am I doing here?" When class started, Mr. Ramírez, our teacher, began to explain the purpose of the program and added by informing us that we would be getting a monthly check for our work with tutoring. It all seemed too good to be true. I was shocked and could not believe that my counselor believed that I could be a part of this awesome program. As the class went on, I began to feel a sense of belonging, and maybe this was something good for me that would change my attitude and view on school. I was right!!

Over the next several months, my views on education and life changed. I was starting to apply myself more in my schoolwork, and I even began to join organizations, such as student council and UIL, to try to learn and be a role model for others in my school and community.



Every day when we go to Clinton Elementary to tutor my tutees, I get excited to know that I am making a difference in their lives. I feel needed when I walk into my class, and my tutees begin to jump up and down yelling my name, "Ms. García!" There are times when we don't go tutor because there are scheduling conflicts at my school. During these times, I feel like my tutees miss me, and I feel like I am letting them down by not being there for them to support their learning. The relationship I have built with these kids will always remain in my heart.

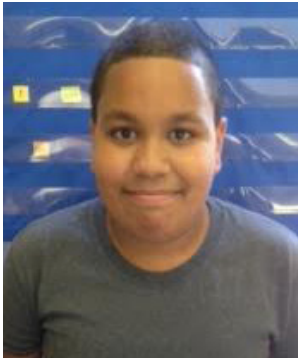
There were some other changes I noticed with myself. My grades began to go up, and before I knew it, I was getting the honor roll. I always asked myself how I was supposed to tutor kids when I myself was failing my own classes. This inspired me to get on the ball and begin to study hard. My confidence went up, I had more

motivation, and the cool part was that my teachers and parents began to notice this positive change also.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has changed the type of individual I once was. I no longer want to be referred to as the student who is a troublemaker and doesn't seem to care about her education. I want to be looked at as a role model, responsible student, and community leader. I cannot let my friends tell me what I can and cannot do just to try to fit in with them. I get very excited when we take college tours as part of our field trips because I am now looking at a teaching career in my future. I would have never thought of becoming an educator and making a difference in the lives of others if it wasn't for the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Because of this program, my life has meaning and prospective future.



# Winner: Middle School Second Place



**José Rodríguez**

8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

CAPTAIN MANUEL RIVERA, JR. PS/MS279, NEW YORK CITY



## How the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Changed My Life

Ever since I became a Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program tutor, my life has changed drastically. I used to be a very obnoxious kid, always fighting with kids at school, bullying others, talking back to my parents, and arguing with my teacher. But this program opened my eyes and revealed that I really needed to stop this, because my bad decisions led me to a bad consequence: a Level 3 write up for cutting class. This program took me from being a D student to a B+ student. I used to be horrific at English language arts and science, and the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program made me realize that to get a good education, you need good grades, so I stepped up my game and now I am passing every subject.

My responsibility in this program is tutoring first grade students, which is actually not bad. I wouldn't think that it would help me change my behavior, but it did. When I help my tutees with their homework, I feel like I'm a role model to them, because Jessica\*, one of my tutees, used to be a pain in the neck. I kept my patience, and I spoke to her with passion, and the next day (Which was on January 12, 2015, and Yes, I remember the date) the teacher told me

that Jesse was now behaving. And I told Jesse that she did a fabulous job, and I gave her some of my Lemon Heads™.

The tutees always make my day with their enjoyment of seeing my presence and running to me and hugging me in Mr. Rodríguez's class every day. I also help them with reading, math, and spelling, you know, the basics. And those kids have proven to me that they are a very intelligent trio. They always tell me to teach them tips and little tricks so they can finish their homework faster and then go read a book.

I thought that I was never going to become a leader, but God has given me the opportunity to experience what it feels like!!! It is a wonderful experience!!! I feel like a special person because kids are following my good decisions. I am still struggling a little bit on English language arts, but I am working very hard to at least get an average in the 90s. I told my parents that I'm never going to be the devious child I was before. Thank you IDRA and Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program for changing my life.

*\*name changed for privacy*

# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2015 Essay Contest

## Winner: Middle School Third Place



### Johan Servones

8<sup>TH</sup> GRADE

CAPTAIN MANUEL RIVERA, JR. PS/MS279, NEW YORK CITY

Since I became a tutor in the Coca Cola Valued Youth Program, it has made me a better student for a variety of reasons. I have also learned what it takes to be a leader as well as life skills, like active listening, planning and self-discipline.

Active listening involves listening with all your senses. It also means giving your full attention to others, for example my tutees. This is a skill that I apply during every tutoring session. Being a tutor is not easy because first graders still need a lot of attention and patience. They move around a lot, cry and sometimes need a lot of help and assistance because they're impatient.

Even though tutoring is a required part of the program, it has become something that I really love to do. It is interesting when you can convey thoughts to others by using both verbal and non-verbal messages. This includes maintaining eye contact, nodding the head and smiling and agreeing by saying "yes" or a simple "mm hmm" to encourage my tutees to continue.

Planning – a thinking skill – helps a tutor develop strategies to accomplish tasks. For example, every day as a tutor you have to teach your tutees the process of establishing a goal, as

well as creating and following through on a plan in order to accomplish that goal.

Lastly, the program has made me a better student because it has taught me self-discipline and self-directed learning. This skill means a lot because it is very challenging but necessary in many different aspects of life.

In conclusion, I think being able to participate in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has made me a better student for the reasons shown and also has taught me that the future comes from the actions and choices you choose now. I think this program, including the tutees I've had the pleasure of working with, has motivated me to be someone special in life.

I want to thank the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and Ms. Coyle for supporting me and motivating me to do better and succeed in life, and special thanks to Dr. Avilés who told me these words "You're the best." I will carry these words with me for the rest of my life, no matter how difficult the challenges.

