



IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

Winning 2017 Essays



Intercultural Development Research Association – May 2017
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101 • San Antonio, Texas 78023
210-444-1710 • www.idra.org • www.facebook.com/IDRAed

IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest Winner: High School First Place



Ana Luisa Valenzuela

12TH GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

I'm going to be quite frank with you, I'm not going to tell you some generic story about how I joined the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program because I love working with kids. Although I really do love working with kids, that's not the real reason I got into this program in the beginning. To be honest, the reason I joined was because I thought it would be cool to get some extra cash just for going to class. But I took a little more than just money from this program.

Little did I know that this program would impact my perspective on teachers and my life. I realized that our teachers are underappreciated for what they do every day. We, as students, believe that teachers are people who nag us from eight to four, but they are actually building blocks for our future. I thank you for that.

This also made me understand how impressionable and vulnerable kids are in this world. I didn't realize that I would be a role model for these kids. Every day that I enter my classroom, I get welcomed with hugs and artwork that my tutee and his classmates created. Every day, I get told stories about what they did the previous day. I feel like if a kid can tell you about their day or a secret, you are a role model and, more importantly, a friend to them.

I believe that I learned more from my tutee than he learned from me. He may have learned his ABCs and his numbers, but I learned way more than that. I learned that every child needs a "backbone" to support him or her. I learned that not every child has that stability at home and, as a random stranger, I became that backbone for some of those kids who didn't have anyone. These kids came to me with a smile and a hug every day. And that is something that cost nothing, yet means everything.

"Success isn't about how much money you make; it's about the difference you make in people's lives" (Michelle Obama). This world is a very cruel and cold place, and if we do not spread kindness, love and joy, we will become cold too. We must help each other because if not, no one else will.



IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest

Winner: High School Second Place



Anahi Ayala

12TH GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

Never did I think, in all my years of school, that a program like this would possibly change the outlook on my future. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program has been the first school program that I have ever been a part of. I was never one to be accepted into any fun electives; I was always stuck in taking business classes or accounting. Don't get me wrong, they were amazing classes and I learned a lot, but I never imagined my future self having a passion for business. After the first semester in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program something changed: I discovered I wanted to become a teacher.

At the beginning of the year, my parents always asked, "What are you going to study in college after you graduate?" Since I was a senior in high school, I had to have something figured out, but I had no clue what I wanted to do. My parents always told me to get into a career that pays well, but a career as a doctor or an accountant would never be a career I would love, I was so frustrated and confused, thinking maybe I shouldn't even go to college. My thoughts were: why pay for an education in a career I will never genuinely be fond of. For me the thought of my future career was just a big blur to me.

The day I joined the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program was the day my thoughts for my future became clear. It was the day I

became a tutor and met my tutee. My tutee struggled through the first semester of school trying his hardest to learn his alphabet and how to sound out words.

Toward the last week before break, he did the most amazing thing: he read a sentence all by himself!

To anyone else this may seem like it's not a big deal, but to me, it was like climbing to the top of the mountain. The emotions I felt when he was reading filled me with glee. It hit me that I was part of the reason he knows how to read, that because of my help, he could now see letters and put them into words!



That day was the best day because I realized I could change a kid's life. This realization opened my career options. The work and activities I made for my tutees made me feel like this was my calling. After all the struggling I put myself through on finding the right career, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth helped me realize that teaching is my future profession. This Coca-Cola Valued Youth program has sincerely been a blessing to me.

IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest

Winner: High School Third Place



Esmeray Olivas

12TH GRADE

ODESSA HIGH SCHOOL, ECTOR COUNTY ISD, TEXAS

Imagine if love was captivated; our hearts would become activated. This statement inspired me after I joined the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Before I began to volunteer, I had a vague misconception of what love really was. I learned what it takes to love what you do and how to reflect love in my own life from working with my tutees in this program.

When I began to work with my tutees, it required attention, focus and double the patience I thought I had. For example, when I spend time with my student, it gets frustrating, and he has a hard time staying on task or staying focused. This requires me to constantly come up with different ways to grab his attention in order to re-focus on the task. At first I would get just as frustrated as he would. But I noticed that the more I helped him there began to be a shift in my life. I no longer was getting irritated, I was intrigued in the possibilities of him learning. I then realized that it can be very easy to say that you know how to work with kids, but it's not until you do it that your heart and mind begin to transform.

This is where I began to reflect more. It was no longer about getting paid or wasting time. It became about my heart desiring to help. I began to want the best, to strive for more, to practice

kindness, to be slow to anger, to experience achievement together – not only for myself but for others. One day after school I was tired and overwhelmed, but despite the fact that my body was screaming for sleep, I felt this longing in my heart to go the extra mile and help around the house. It was in that decision-making moment that I began to think, not only am I tutoring a kid, I am also practicing unselfish love for whenever I have my own kids and my own home.



It's when we become a captive audience to our passion that we can become active and volunteer for something else other than ourselves. This is what the definition of true love. I learned patience, kindness and selflessness through the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and working with my tutee. I encourage everyone to create an open mind, helping hands and a willing heart. Together, we can be known as the generation that learned how to love.

IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest Winner: Middle School First Place



Jimena Guerrero

8TH GRADE

ZAMORA MIDDLE SCHOOL, SOUTH SAN ANTONIO ISD, TEXAS

How Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program Changed My Life

My name is Jimena Guerrero, I'm 13 years old, and I'm part of the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program at Robert C. Zamora Middle School. I wasn't necessarily chosen to be in this program, so I asked Mrs. Saldana about the program and she had an open spot for me to join. I did it mainly for the money because my mom needed help with bills, and my sister just wasn't going to help. I went home and told my mom I had joined, she was very happy. She understood it wasn't a lot of money, but she was still happy. I was at least putting in some effort. Like I said, it wasn't necessarily to help the students, it was to help my family. But since I joined this program, I have learned many things that I feel will benefit me in the future.

Ever since I started this Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I feel like I am a different person. Last year, I had a rough year: constantly on campus suspension, referrals, verbally disrespecting teachers, and I would go along with my "friends" making bad choices. Now those people that were my so called friends are strangers to me. I realized they weren't real friends, while all along I was the one taking the blame for our behavior.

I'm trying to teach my first grade tutee reading skills but also life lessons through my experiences. I hope to teach him how to respect teachers and older people and also to treat others the way you would want to be treated. I just wanted to take advantage of the fact that, as a tutor, I can teach him all I can, because I never had a tutor when I was younger, and I really wish I would have. It would have helped me a lot in certain situations. Looking back at last year when I used to talk back to teachers constantly, every day, I realized that there was no point in disrespecting my teacher, not just because he was a teacher but because he was an adult.

I really enjoy going to Benavidez Elementary School to tutor my tutee, Johnathan*. He's very quiet and doesn't know how smart he is. I enjoy going to his classroom and seeing all his classmates. Johnathan has made significant improvements in his reading and writing skills. I hope to keep attending his classroom to help him with his progress. I believe Johnathan will soon reach his reading and writing level, and I encourage him to do that every day.

Now that I have joined this program, I feel I want to become a teacher and work around younger children. I think my experiences with the children have enhanced my perspective. This is why I plan on educating children in the future. I really enjoy it and becoming a teacher will be a profitable career for me. It has opened up my eyes to many possibilities.

This program has not only helped me choose what I want to do when I get older, but it also has taught me how to communicate with younger students, and it has taught me many life lessons I will use in the future. Being in this program has impacted my life, now I am more patient, caring and understanding, I have learned to appreciate being around younger children.



**names changed for privacy*

IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest Winner: Middle School Second Place



Jennifer Vela

7TH GRADE

TREVINO MIDDLE SCHOOL, LA JOYA ISD, TEXAS

I was a shy, depressed girl, that didn't talk to a lot of people, and never looked on the good side of things. That all changed when I got in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and started to tutor. I had a reason to laugh, I could finally see the good things and it was all because of my tutees.

At first when I found out about the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I wanted to be included in it because I knew we were going to get paid. The first day we went to the elementary school to tutor the tutees, I was so nervous because I don't usually talk to a lot of people, and I didn't know how it was going to be. When I entered the class along with Daisy, Mrs. García the teacher told us who we were working with and what we were going to help them with. We started working with our tutees in a separate area. My tutees were Oscar, Ben, Nia and Isiah*. Jose needed help in reading and math, Felix in vocabulary and math, Samantha in reading, and Rasheed in reading and writing. I slowly became less nervous and began teaching them.

After some time passed, I got to know more about my tutees, and they got better in the subjects they were having a hard time with. One day when I entered I noticed something different in one my tutees, it was Nia. She had her hair different almost like mine. When I was working with Nia, I asked why she changed her hair and told her it looked nice, and she said because you have your hair like that and it looks pretty. I then realized I was a role model to my tutees. I was someone they looked up to. From then on tutoring began to mean a lot to me.

I grew to enjoy tutoring and I liked to go help the kids. Every day I did it less for the money and more for the tutees. I always had a smile on my face when I left. I changed in many ways from then on. I became a better person, more responsible, respectful, passionate, understanding, and my perspective changed. I look on the bright side of things all thanks to my tutees. Because I became a tutor, life has endless possibilities, dreams and goals for me. I can truly say I've learned a lot from tutoring. I could not have asked for a better gift than having the ability to change the lives of these children. Being in this program, it's all for the future of the tutees not about the fact that you're getting paid, and I truly hope that this program helps change people like it has changed me. Because of this program, students like me have had the chance to see what it's like to teach someone and change their lives.



The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program offers an excellent experience to young teenagers. This program has changed the way I view things immensely. Since I became a tutor, my life has gone through a positive drastic change. This program really is life changing. It has been an honor being in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program.

**names changed for privacy*

IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest Winner: Middle School Third Place



Lilibeth Berlanga

7TH GRADE

MEMORIAL MIDDLE SCHOOL, LA JOYA ISD, TEXAS

What does tutoring mean to me? Tutoring can mean many things, but to me it means helping younger students increase their knowledge. In the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, we learn valuable lessons in life. We learn how to respect, to be responsible and to care for someone else.

My tutees mean a lot to me. They are like my little brothers or sisters who I have to take care of and help with things they need. I help my tutees in math, science and reading, just like my brothers. Some of them didn't even know how to read; I had to read to them at first, and then they would practice reading themselves. As time went on, they would read to me.

Tutoring is important for me because I get to see the minds of my tutees grow. I love to teach my tutees new concepts because, as they learn, I learn. There are times I need to get reassurance from my teacher, because there are new ideas that I have to show my tutees. One of the biggest of these ideas is love and compassion.

My tutees love me so much that they even fight because they want to be with me. They want me to help them, but the teacher has a list that shows me who needs help and who needs to test. The tutees sometimes behave badly, but I talk to them. I make them understand that they need to be good and try their best. They need not behave badly with the teacher, me or each other. The tutees tell each other mean things, like "you're so ugly," and I tell them don't be rude, let's be nice and be good friends and then help each other up. And my tutee tells the other girl that she is sorry. So that's how much tutoring means to me.

I love to teach others how to help others and make others feel better and how they can reach their goals. This helps me try my

best in my classes and pass, so I can stay in tutoring. Thank you Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program for this great opportunity!

Tutoring is fun and cool because I love little kids. They are so cute. I love showing other kids so they could be someone in their lives. My tutees try their best. I know they're still little, but they need to learn more. I know when they're little they don't understand, but when they grow up they will. This is something I am learning from being in the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. Tutoring others is rewarding because someone else is learning from you what has been taught to you. I have had a lot of fun with them. They are good tutees, and I love them. Sometimes they don't pay attention to me, but I know that it is part of my job to be patient and guide them back to listening to me.

My mom is very proud of me because I help other kids in need. This alone has made me want to come to school every day. Before, I used to miss a lot of school because I had no motive to go. I would get frustrated by how I was being taught and didn't understand my teachers. Now, that I am in this program, I have valued more the efforts my teachers are making in teaching me.

I wish to continue this program, but I know it's a one-shot deal, and I am making the best of it the rest of this year. Thank you, Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, for such a great opportunity.



IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 2017 Essay Contest

High School Honorable Mentions

- Nohemi Gavaldon, 12th Grade, Odessa High School, Ector County ISD, Texas
- Bryanna Menchaca, 10th Grade, South San Antonio High School, Texas

Middle School Honorable Mentions

- Daniella McBryde, 8th Grade, Zamora Middle School, San Antonio
- Yuliana Calvillo, 7th Grade, Memorial Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Gerardo Rodríguez, 7th Grade, César Chávez Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Yahlitza Rosales, 8th Grade, Lorenzo De Zavala Middle School, La Joya, Texas
- Daisy García, 7th Grade, Domingo Treviño Middle School, La Joya, Texas

- Jeffry Rios, 9th Grade, New Open World Academy, Los Angeles
- Mellene Heart Del Mundo, 8th Grade, John Still Middle School, Sacramento
- Yarmell Ruffin, 8th Grade, Manierre Elementary School, Chicago
- Khadija Begum, 8th Grade, Captain Manuel Rivera, Jr. PS/MS279, New York City

Elementary School Winners from PS94 Kings College School, New York City*

- First Place – J'sean Johnson, 5th Grade
- Second Place – Liju Sheikh, 5th Grade
- Third Place – Karla Llerena, 5th Grade
- Fourth Place – Alijah Coles, 5th Grade
- Fifth Place – Sebastian Davis, 5th Grade
- Honorable Mention – Joshua Ruiz, 5th Grade



The IDRA Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a research-based, internationally-recognized dropout prevention program that has kept 98 percent of its tutors in school.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, created by the Intercultural Development Research Association, is an internationally-recognized, cross-age tutoring program with an unusual twist. This dropout prevention program works by identifying junior high and high school students in at-risk situations and enlisting them as tutors for elementary school youngsters who are also struggling in school. Given this role of personal and academic responsibility, the Valued Youth tutors learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem; schools shift to the philosophy and practices of valuing students considered at-risk. Results show that tutors stay in school, have increased academic performance, improved school attendance and advanced to higher education.

Learn more at
www.idra.org/coca-cola-valued-youth-program



Intercultural Development Research Association

María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., President & CEO
5815 Callaghan Road, Suite 101 • San Antonio, Texas 78228

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