

# Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program – 25th Anniversary Essay Contest

## Winner: Middle School First Place



*by Familleth Hernandez*  
*Eighth grade*

### **The Change of a Lifetime**

Throughout my life, I have always been taught to believe that I was no good, that I could never do anything right, and that maybe I should have never been born. I felt that my parents and former teachers were always disappointed in me because of my low grades. In truth, I was even disappointed in myself because I knew that I was a good student capable of getting really good grades, but because of the stuff that I would hear, I too, began to believe what they believed of me, and my grades went down. I became very rude and disrespectful. I mean, if I had no respect for myself, then how was I expected to show respect to anyone else? Even though I continued to go to school, I did so because I had to. And so went my life until I moved to Texas to live with my father and stepmother after a tragic accident.

Although you might say that I am still very young to experience “life,” I have had many struggles and hardships that have impacted me and that have led me to a place of self-doubt, low self-esteem and low self-worth. It didn’t help that as a 9-year-old girl I was blamed for the death of my little brother, Damian. My mother hated me so much for what happened that dreadful day that she would announce to anyone who would listen that her little boy’s death was my fault. “You should have been watching him,” she would exclaim. And I guess I should have, but what did I know, I was only nine.

For the longest time, I did feel responsible

for his death. After this happened, I came to Texas to live with my father to get away from all that had happened but mostly to get away from my mother’s constant physical and verbal abuse. It got to the point that she couldn’t even look at me anymore. I felt totally lost and alone, and I was hoping that with the move, things would get better. I didn’t think that it could possibly get any worse, that’s for sure.

Even though I was just trying to get away from my problems, I knew that this move was something I had to do to keep me from going crazy. Now that I look back, moving here was the best thing I could have ever done. School had already started when I moved here, so I got registered right away. As I arrived to my first day of school, my counselor gave me my schedule. Along with my regular boring classes such as English and math, I also saw that my schedule had a class called “VYP.” What was that all about, I wondered? But I didn’t question it. I figured it was another one of those dumb and boring classes that I would have to take.

When fourth period finally came around, I went to the gym where I would meet my VYP teacher. She was really pretty, but then she began to talk and I thought, “Here we go again.” All I heard for the first few minutes was, “blah, blah, blah, and blah, blah, blah, helping little kids.” That’s when I began to tune in. She explained what the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program was all about and it sounded like a lot of fun. By

that time, I was all ears, so I continued listening closely! My teacher told us that this class was open to those kids who she thought would be “good for the program” and who could be “positive role models” for our school and for the kids we would be tutoring. I can remember the feeling I got when she said those words because I had never been told that I could be “good” at anything, much less that I could be a positive “role model.” It made me feel really special!

Then she mentioned that we would be getting paid for helping the kids. WOW!!!! I started to think that this was my lucky day! I was going to do something that I knew I would really enjoy, and I was going to get paid to do it. How awesome was that? She said that we would be starting immediately the next day, so you can imagine what the rest of the day felt like. I just wanted it to be “tomorrow” already, and I have enjoyed every day since.

Because the school is right behind the school that I attend, we walk as a group. It just so happens that the kids that I help are outside in the playground when we are walking, and when the kids saw me coming, they start calling my name and waving at me. Boy, imagine the feeling of someone who is happy to see you! It is the most awesome feeling in the world; a feeling that I thought I would never have. On the day that my counselor gave me that schedule, I would have never thought how life-changing those three little letters on my schedule would be. In an instant, my whole life changed. It was truly amazing.

The highlight of my day has become seeing those little kids and knowing that I am doing something worthwhile and respectful. But to

know that I am doing something positive for others and that those kids look up to me has been the best reward of all. I love seeing the kids, and sometimes I imagine that these little kids with great big smiles and missing front teeth are those of my little brother sending his smiles to me from heaven. I know now that my brother never blamed me for what happened that awful day that I lost him forever, and I know that he is proud of his big sister and that he loves me. He is my Guardian Angel.

My mother still doesn't care too much about me, and I don't talk to her much. But that's ok. I'm doing really good in school now, and I have lots of friends who like me. My father loves me, my stepmother loves me, my teachers love me, but most important, I love myself. And I love what I am doing to make the life of these little kids a little better.

My teacher once said that maybe the high school will offer VYP to their students. I sure hope so, because I don't want VYP to ever end. But if it does, that is ok too because I know that I will be alright. I have a purpose now because of this program, but most important is that I now know that I have a reason for being alive. Thank you Coca-Cola for caring enough to provide us with such a valuable and life-changing experience. For I truly believe that if it hadn't been for the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program, I wouldn't have found the real me.

