

# On 13 Years of Teaching with the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest

By Janis Bean, English Teacher, Franklin County High School, Winchester, Tennessee

Recently I retired from my position as a tenth-grade English teacher, having taught for twenty-five years in the same high school from which I had graduated. My final days were spent saying goodbye to my colleagues and students and sorting through stacks of materials I had accumulated over the years. Tucked in the back of one of my desk drawers was an old shoebox in which I had saved personal notes and cards I had received from my students. As I reread the messages, most from the previous thirteen years, I began reminiscing about my career and about the impact the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest has had not only on my students, but also on me.



Janis Bean reminding her students to hand in their essays!

I have always believed that through writing students can become more in touch with their feelings; however, motivating my students to write about themselves was always a major challenge. When the essay contest was first sponsored in our county in 1987, many of my students were reluctant to enter and complained that they had nothing to write about.

“You can’t possibly have walked this earth for fifteen years and not have anything to write about!” I countered. Eventually most of my students submitted satisfactory essays, but I

felt I had not been totally successful in getting them to take the essay contest seriously.

As the entry deadline for the next year’s contest neared, I decided to use a different approach to help my students identify their personal *laws of life*. I developed a pre-writing questionnaire on which I asked a number of soul-searching questions. I informed my students that I would use their comments to help them settle on a topic and assured them that I would keep their responses confidential. I had no idea that their answers would “turn the table” on me.

When I read over their completed questionnaires, I was totally unprepared for the honest, forthright feelings they had shared with me. One of the questions they were asked was, “Whom do you most admire and why?” Another was, “Describe a situation in which you went out of your way to help someone.” Probably the most revealing answers came from the question, “Write about an experience from which you learned a lesson the hard way.” Many students wrote about the tragic loss of a loved one. Others detailed abuse they had witnessed or experienced. Some described the responsibilities they had in caring for disabled or drug/alcohol dependent family members. A shocking number of students wrote about personal depression and, in some cases, suicide attempts. Often on these questionnaires students indicated they had never confided their feelings to another adult.

I made comments on each paper. On some papers I offered sympathy; on others I offered suggestions, encouragement, or compliments. When I returned the

questionnaires, we discussed the *laws of life* that many had unknowingly revealed in their responses: kindness, compassion, perseverance, courage, patience, faith, optimism, and countless others. I commended my students for their strength and unselfishness, and then they began to write.

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When the final essays were submitted that year, they were masterpieces! And not only had the essays improved significantly—the “climate” of my classroom began to

change as well. When we discussed reading assignments, students began identifying the *laws of life* exemplified by the characters. More students involved themselves in class discussions. Surprisingly, students began arriving for class earlier and lingering to talk to me after the dismissal bell had rung. Notes from students updating me on their lives routinely appeared on my desk and on the bottom of quiz papers. I began standing at my door to greet students as they entered. The number of students completing assignments increased, whereas the failures decreased. Students were more friendly and respectful toward their classmates and me. I noticed that my students were smiling more, and so was I! Through their comments on the pre-writing survey my students had given me a wonderful gift: the ability to know them—not just as pupils, but as very special, unique human beings. That second year of the contest was a turning point in my teaching career. Hoping that my positive experience had not been just a “fluke,” I actually looked forward to the beginning of school the following fall. I also decided to schedule my *Laws of Life* unit earlier in the semester. To my delight, I had another successful,

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rewarding year with my students, and another and another... It seems like the last thirteen years have passed much more quickly than the first twelve, but time does fly when you're having fun!

Lots of cards and notes appeared on my desk during my final days this year. They wished me well and thanked me for my help.

Students I had taught in previous years dropped by my classroom to

bid me farewell. Some told me of their resolutions and plans for the future, and even credited me with helping to change their lives; however, I am convinced that their participation in the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest played a much greater role than I did. I am grateful that these teenagers had "turned the



*Janis Bean at work with her students*

table" on me: as a result of my attempts to encourage them to reflect on the *laws of life*, they shared their experiences and feelings with me. Their courage, compassion, kindness, faith, and perseverance remind me daily of the important values that enrich our lives and the lives of others.

*Editor's note: Janis Bean has spent the last 13 years of her career helping to spread the word about the *Laws of Life* Essay Contest. At the Foundation's invitation, she has visited a variety of communities and introduced hundreds of teachers to the essay contest. Janis also co-wrote the *Teacher's Guide* for the contest, which contains the pre-writing questionnaire she describes in her article. (Please contact the Foundation for a complimentary copy of the *Teacher's Guide*.) We are so grateful to Janis for her work on behalf of the essay contest. Thank you Janis for your enthusiastic support of the contest these past 13 years!*

*– Peggy Veljkovic*