

This I Believe
Rock Bridge High School with KBIA

Casting My Line
Emily Vu (Senior, RBHS)

I come from a long line of hard work, sacrifice, and survival—a family with a unique story, one that has made me the person I am today. At a young age, my parents each escaped a war-ravaged country on a fishing boat, leaving their parents, in hopes of finding a world that would allow them the freedom to live their dreams. Despite their hardships and struggles, they persevered; both becoming the first in their families to earn a college education—my mother a successful entrepreneur and my father a respected nuclear engineer. This success; however, did not define them to the extent in which their selflessness did, having sponsored 23 of their relatives to move to the US. In this sponsorship, my father has said, “I have given them the pole. Now they have to catch the fish.”

This responsibility resonates with me each and every day of my life. Never is there a day in which I am not appreciative of their sacrifices and the opportunities they have given me. They have given me a sense of family they never had; they have instilled a sense of community and compassion never shown to them. They have done all of this without expecting anything in return. This is pride, this is dedication, and this is love.

To simply match their passion would be an accomplishment in and of itself; but I know there is something more. My parents have shown me the path of living a comfortable life. To them, this meant being able to provide for themselves and their family. While they have established a solid foundation on which our family was built, it is up to me to expand upon it.

To me, this means finding balance between my professional and personal life. It means obtaining a college education and pursuing a career that would make the world a better place, all while finding enjoyment through my passions and sharing it with those I love. By finding balance between my career and personal interests, I hope to find fulfillment in my life and give back to my parents. I hope to show them that I have taken advantage of the opportunities they’ve given me throughout my life; that it is now their turn to focus on their personal endeavors and live their lives to the fullest.

Unlike my parents, I have been given a stable family life; a solid support system and an inherent understanding of unconditional love, and from that, I’ve grown to believe in the power of family and balance. I have been given a fishing pole, one that I will hold fast to, no matter how hard life tugs. I am a proud second generation Vietnamese-American, casting my line in the sea of life.

Always Believe
Ruth Wu (Freshman, RBHS)

I used to believe in fairytales. I used to dream of true love. I used to think of “once upon a times” and heart gripping first sights – I used to wish upon stars that a faraway knight would save me someday, and whisk me away on his white horse to a “happily ever after”. I used to believe. I still want to believe. But things changed. Time passed. I grew older and my idealistic daydreams were made fun of, my childhood innocence replaced by the cruel, raw truth. I went from being an oblivious sweet girl to a depressed teenager. I’d tried for years to keep up a façade of all my loved ones’ hopes and dreams but it all came tumbling down one October evening when I was told that I would no longer be the daughter who heard her parents bicker every night. Not anymore. I would now be the daughter of divorced parents who would not see each other long enough to utter a word. I had already not seen my father for three years. My mother being diagnosed with an early stage of uterine cancer right after the divorce didn’t change that.

I felt so empty, broken, and confused. I didn’t know whether I should believe in fairytales. “Once upon a times” had let me down - and the only sights I saw were ones of despair. I didn’t feel worthy of a knight who would probably pause halfway in the mission for a better princess – and there were no more stars to wish upon because of light pollution. Yet I still yearned to believe, to continue to hope for a love that can be true even as I continued to struggle with self worth - running to anyone who called me “pretty” for the slightest feeling of satisfaction. I defined myself with the negative things I overheard until eventually I hesitated to believe any compliments. Every night I’d drive myself from sleep analyzing phrases in my head, wondering what I must be like to other people, - and any mean act people committed against me convinced me that I deserved the pain I felt. I was born laughing yet after 14 years of practically raising myself, I’m living in sadness.

That’s all the tale of my life is so far. No happy endings. No miracles. No drastic changes, even as I wake up every morning vowing to be a better version of myself, to be the knight in my stories. Maybe I am still that girl who dreams of fairy tales. I used to believe in fairytales and I still believe in things I probably shouldn’t. I dream often of a love that will become true and think of generations that will tell my story beginning with “once upon a time.” I will continue to wish upon stars for someone far away to be touched by this essay. And I will always, always, believe.

This I believe.

I Believe in the Potential of Failed Cooking
Michele Yang (Senior, RBHS)

Two weeks after I was picked up from the Nanjing train station by my aunt, who I hadn't seen in more than 6 years, I decided to learn how to cook. By this time, the novelty of living in a different country by myself was starting to dwindle. But I still couldn't shake the feeling of discomfort—of being a stranger surrounded by my own family. My knowledge of Mandarin Chinese, mediocre at best, made for frustratingly simple conversations. I was learning the complicated naming hierarchy of familial relationships, but I felt insincere in calling these strangers family. I, so talkative in America, became quiet. But I could communicate through food. Every night, three generations of Yang's sat down at the rickety dining table and enjoyed dinner together. Everyone knew the sacred Yang family recipes, and I decided it was time I, the youngest of nearly forty family members, continued the tradition.

Learning to cook was much more difficult than I expected. I woke up at five each morning to go to the market and brought home bok choy caked with dirt and fish wriggling in the bag. But no matter how much effort I put into cooking, I never seemed to improve. When I was finally deemed ready to prepare my own meal, I felt incredibly nervous. Everyone was hovering around the tiny kitchen, poorly attempting to seem like they weren't scrutinizing my every move. I plated the last course and awaited

To my delight, everyone praised it enthusiastically and I, so happy at my success, didn't notice at first the strained smiles. But when I sat down to taste my meal, I understood the quiet tension in the room. It was terrible! Halfway through dinner, my uncle made an offhand comment that I had added too much salt to the vegetables. It was like a dam had broken; nearly every person had a complaint about my meal. Suddenly, everyone seemed to remember who I was and looked at me anxiously. To the surprise of everyone, I burst into a smile. They were finally treating me like family.

All my life I have been driven by a love of learning—a curiosity so intense it dictated nearly all my life. My motivations for learning to cook had started with this curiosity. I thought that if I learned something so integral to my family's identity, I might miraculously become a part of the family. But in the face of my failure, I didn't feel disappointed. Looking around the table, at all the openly distasteful faces and upturned noses, I felt a rush of warmth and affection. I knew that only a few weeks ago they would have suffered in silence. From then on, my role in the kitchen was strictly that of a helper—lucky for me, lucky for them— but I acquired a new belief. I believe knowledge is important, but I also believe in the power of deep relationships with those around me.

The Preservation of Compliments Stephanie (Sophomore RBHS)

I, like many people, think that we should preserve many things, such as non-renewable resources, money, and relationships, for all these have much value. Have you ever thought of preserving compliments? A “You look stylish today,” “You have a great sense of humor,” “You are such a trustworthy person.” You should not throw out every slightest positive observation that crosses your mind, because the more you do, the less meaning your words will possess. This action of conserving comments unless they are fully sincere can be referred to as the “preservation of compliments.”

Imagine your absolute favorite place to go out to eat. Maybe it’s that sophisticated, piquant Italian restaurant a few miles away. Maybe it’s that greasy fast food chain you cannot resist. Maybe it’s a quaint café that is like no other place you know. Whatever it is, envision going out to eat there every single day, which I assume you don’t already do. What do you presume would happen to the amount of meaning that going there brings? I think it would decrease, and you would no longer appreciate it as much. To me, this is what happens with compliments. The more someone says them, the less meaningful they become.

A personal experience that comes to mind is one involving a student who was extremely reserved. I had never even heard her voice after being in class with her for three months. Then one day during the middle of the school year, this student came up to me and spoke some particularly kind words. Frankly, I don’t remember exactly what those words were or what aspect of life they involved, but I do remember that it meant a lot to me that she went out of her way to compliment me. I could truly sense the sincerity of her words. This may sound like a cliché situation, but it reaffirms that the less excessive you are with your words, the more sincerity they will have.

Don’t get me wrong. I still treasure any compliment that comes my way, but ultimately, I want people to make the absolute most of their words. A simple yet effective way to do this is to consciously choose and craft meaningful compliments. Human beings are naturally able to sense the sincerity of people’s words, so be sure not to throw out compliments excessively like candy being tossed from a parade float. Instead, I advocate preserving our compliments by selecting the best words at the best times to make the best possible use and bestow them with meaning.

Thankful Thursday, Teaching Gratitude to High School Students
Kathryn Fishman-Weaver (RBHS, Teacher)

I get to school early. I set the kettle to warm. I turn on my favorite classical music radio station. It's Thursday, so I also pull out our bowl of construction paper leaves. Students drop in to prepare for their school day. They brew a cup of tea, grab a marker, write something they are thankful for on a construction paper leaf and wish me a "Happy Thankful Thursday." I teach advanced courses at a public high school, but this early childhood, construction paper lesson may be the most important concept I give my students. I believe gratitude is a practice we can all develop.

Like all skills, we sharpen our aptitude for gratitude with practice. When I started Thankful Thursdays many of my students struggled to find an appropriate noun with which to attach their appreciation. My request to "fill out a thankful leaf" was met with scrunched eyebrows and perplexed looks. Students asked tentatively, "My mom?" "Coffee?" "My cross country teammates?" They wanted to know if these were appropriate things to be thankful for. I smiled and said, "Absolutely."

Science of happiness researchers report that cultivating a gratitude practice is one of the most effective things you can do to improve your personal outlook on life. Teaching is heart heavy work. Many times young people are asked to deal with loss and other challenges. Across the board, my students wrestle with anxiety, stress, and pressures from parents, teachers, coaches, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-image.

They are teenagers coming of age in an overachievement culture. In the advanced placement world we are adept at teaching high level learning, yet at what cost? I believe that cost is too little attention given to social emotional health including the importance of gratitude. Thankful Thursday is an opportunity to bring reflection and appreciation to a pace that otherwise moves too quickly for these "softer" practices.

This is now our second year of the Thankful Thursday tradition and my students are hooked on gratitude. They are also becoming mavens at finding ordinary reasons to be thankful, a skill I hope they carry with them all their lives. To kick off this school year, one of my students engineered us a new three dimensional gratitude tree. By early October I already had to duck under the lower hanging, glitter splattered leaves to make my way to my desk.

Students, who formerly struggled to find one noun, now write gratitude lists in tiny print on their Thursday leaves. Our tree is heavy with the sweet declarations of young people, "jazz music" "Kristen" "perfect fall weather," my cat" "peppermint tea"...

This past Thursday I was off campus for a field trip. When I returned to school, I opened my desk drawer to discover a brown and yellow construction paper leaf. On it was a single word "you." And sitting under our multi-colored construction paper tree, my high school teacher's heart swelled.

Lucky Side Up
Delaney Tevis (Senior, RBHS)

For much of my young life I wanted desperately to save the world: to rid it of hunger, disease, poverty, and war. I was an idealist and to some extent I still am. But now I realize that no matter how grandiose my dreams are, change starts small. Perhaps in my life I will only be able to make small changes and I am okay with that. I am okay with that because I realize with every good deed and kind-hearted intention, I am making the world a better place. This is why I believe in flipping pennies for strangers.

As children we are taught that finding a penny, heads up, indicates good luck for the day. We grow older and realize that one arbitrary penny does not change anything and can even become a nuisance, weighing down your purse. I, like many others, fell victim to this way of thinking and stopped picking up pennies. One day, however, I witnessed how a small act of kindness can bring great joy to an individual. I was standing outside of Wal-Mart on a cold winter day selling Girl Scout cookies when a girl and her father walked to the entryway. Suddenly, she stopped and bent down, exclaiming that she had found a penny! But instead of grabbing it she stood up and sadly told her dad that it was tails up, meaning she would have bad luck if she took it. He reassured her that she would find another penny someday, and while she was distracted by our cookie booth, he flipped the penny over to its lucky side. When they came out a little later, she returned to the penny and was delighted to find that it was heads up. She thought it was fate but her dad and I knew the truth. Yet she was so happy, skipping and dancing all the way to their car. How could something so simple make someone so happy?

The longer I thought about that little girl, the more I realized that she was a symbol for society. We never know how our actions will affect others. Something seemingly insignificant to us may be very meaningful to someone else. Thus, I decided that I would always flip tails up pennies over, so that someone else could have the joy of finding their lucky penny. Though I like to think that I am creating luck for someone else, I realize that in reality I am probably only giving a child a reason to smile. But perhaps that happy child will go on to complement their mother's cooking that evening and suddenly, I have made two people smile. Does this act cure disease or solve world

hunger? Of course not. However, in the three seconds it takes for me to flip the penny over I am creating positive change. I am doing a small thing to make the world a better place. Consequently, I believe in flipping pennies for strangers.

I Believe in Redefining Family
Sydney Tyler (Junior, RBHS)

I believe in redefining family. The actual definition of the word family is complex and varies between different dictionaries; no two definitions are alike. But nonetheless, many people have the same idea; families are groups of people who are related to each other. I think this definition is limiting and misleading.

I have two brothers who were adopted from Liberia, a small country in West Africa. The number of times I've been asked how many "real" siblings I have is astounding, like somehow the simple act of adoption relegates my brothers to a lesser status. Furthermore there are the well-meaning people who like to explain to me that my brother and I would make a really cute couple, and it isn't wrong because we were not actually related. What does DNA have to do with family, with love?

There's a saying, blood is thicker than water, which sums up my predicament quite well. The saying does not mean what most people may think, it actually originates from the saying "the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb." Meaning that the people you form bonds with throughout your lives, the ones you choose, oftentimes mean more to you than distant relatives who maybe share a biological uncle.

Every once in a while someone will ask me about having adopted siblings. I truly believe they ask the questions out of curiosity and not malice, but often times I struggle with my reaction. People feel comfortable questioning whether my mom loves my adopted siblings as much as she loves me, citing the "undeniable truth" of maternal instincts to defend their insensitive beliefs. Once in a biology class a girl casually stated that without maternal instinct mothers would "toss out their kids like garbage." Love should be the true measure of family, and love can't be defined in biological terms.

The word family applies to whomever chooses to use it, and for me, has little to do with biology. It is unfair and inaccurate to constantly define family by what it's not, in doing so we risk marginalizing the people of our society who don't fit in neat little boxes. I've grown up in a family that could be considered "unique"; I have step-siblings, half-siblings, and adopted siblings. My upbringing has given me the opportunity to experience family in a loving and fluid way, separate from the societal norms that dictate conformity.

I believe that family should be inclusive, not exclusive, and accepting not judgmental. I believe family is love. I wish everyone else did too.

I Believe You Will Find a Parking Spot
Kristen Tarr (Senior, RBHS)

I believe in the probability of finding a parking spot.

You are going to be late. The realization hits halfway through the drive to work when you glance at the clock. There's no getting around this. What are you going to say to your boss? Feverishly sweating through the car ride, you wrack your brain for excuses to confess while running in the door 10 minutes late. The last matter on your mind is finding a parking spot. Until, the thought hits you as you slow through the entrance and note that the parking lot is a boundless sea of glinting metallic. "All the spots are taken," you lament. "There's nowhere to park. I got here too late." Wrong. Ease up on the gas and take a careful eye to the lot. Patiently glide through the rows. Take some time amidst your hectic day to slow down. I believe there is always an open parking spot. "Look! A spot!" Good luck has struck again. See? Every time.

America is fixated on the fast-paced. In this day and age, we are constantly rushing. Rushing from place to place, grabbing a quick bite to eat, hurrying to meet a deadline. Me? I burn the midnight oil. I never say no to anything; I run from obligations and rehearsals to clubs and community activities with small breaks. And, I am notoriously late to everything. So often, that my friends purposefully tell me the wrong time of events, anticipating my late arrival. But, for one reason or another, we are all late occasionally. We get caught up in tasks, lose car keys, get caught in traffic, and just plain sleep in sometimes. Take some time to slow down. Take a deep breath. Forgive yourself. You're going to be late but that's okay. Today is not the end of the world.

I hold belief that everything will work out. I have optimism for the future and the good things in store for all of us. I believe in taking time to appreciate the present while holding a peaceful knowing of the wonderful future. In the end, a situation will work out to benefit you, even if in an unexpected way. And if it hasn't worked out yet, it isn't the end. Sending a message out to all people in a hurry somewhere today... you are going to find a parking spot. You're going to get where you're going. You are going to be okay.