

**Second Place-Youth**  
**Marshall Yaklin, Elgin, TX**

Character:  
Five generations of Texans

I am only twelve years old but I know what character is because I can look back on the generations who have come before me and see this word defined by their lives. Let me tell you the story of the first Texan in my family.

During the Civil War, General Sherman decimated my great-great-great grandfather's home in Georgia. Like many Southerners, his son, Luther Ruben Snelson resolved to seek a new life in Texas. The hardships he faced in the years that followed molded his character.

After more than thirty years in central Texas, Luther purchased his own farm in West Texas. He arrived in Monahans by the T&P train on a day in January 1903 so cold the water tower had ice-sickles hanging down over twenty feet. He and his wife, Susan, disembarked with everything necessary to start their new life: livestock, furniture, farm utensils, and most importantly, strong sons.

West Texas proved to be the anvil on which his character was forged. If a man's character is known by the fruit he bears, look at the generations of Texans who descended from Luther. His descendants fought in both World Wars and have become rancher, oilmen, sheriffs, farmers, journalist, lawyers, teachers, and artists. His legacy of determination has inspired five generations of Texas. His grandson, my grandfather Pete Snelson, after helping liberate Nazi concentration camp, spent twenty years serving in the Texas Senate. His great-granddaughter became an interpreter for the military in Korea. She went on to become a nurse and then my mother.

When I visit the cemetery, where Luther, Susan, and some of their sons rest, I realize that a man's character is the obituary Time writes for him. His legacy inspires me to become a man of character like those who have come before me.

**Third Place-Youth**  
**Alexandra Noll, Austin, TX**

Baron Thomas Babington Macauley, an English historian once said, "The measure of man's character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out." This means a person's true character is revealed by what they do when they think no one is watching.

Two years ago, I participated in a church-sponsored fund-raiser called the 30 Hour Famine. We weren't allowed to eat from 2:00 p.m. Friday until 8:00p.m. Saturday. We raised money by getting people to sponsor us. I casually mentioned to one of my sponsors that I was going to eat dinner before heading to church so I wouldn't be too hungry. She looked at me and said, "Alex, I am surprised. You said you weren't going to eat for 30 hours and got me to pledge money. Now you tell me you are going to break that pledge and eat?" I hadn't thought about it like that. I didn't think my actions would have consequences because, after all, I had been successful in raising money for a good cause. I didn't realize that my pledge to not eat for that period of time was just as important as the money that I raised. In fact, I think my pledge was more important because it was my promise. I could have eaten, and she would not have known. But I would have known.

It would have been hypocritical of me to have eaten that day because I would have been breaking my word. Even though I was hungry, I felt good about my decision not to eat. Although my stomach was empty, my heart was full because I had honored an agreement and kept my word.

**Finalist-Youth**  
**Lisa Callahan, Pflugerville, TX**

The Diary of an Independent Aspirant  
Essences of an "Award-Winning" Character

Almost every average teenage girl, like myself, has found herself idolizing at least one person in this world, whether it be a parent, sibling, teacher, or wealthy celebrity. From my point of view, the individual traits of our heroes have helped lead us to a dream of becoming better people. For me personally, over time, I've held a particular respect for not a specific person, but a wide variety of personalities that have helped me realize exactly who has made herself into something exquisite and genuine; The kind of girl who you can randomly wave to along an open street, and instantly be astonished by her inner beauty, as her character never hesitates to shine through.

Sincerely admired former first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, once stated, "People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously. This is how character is built." One of many respected, heroic icons of the past, her outlook of "true character" is very much similar to my own. Through my own words, one who possesses true character has the exceptional ability to rise above the influence; having the courage to live their own lives and make their own decisions, despite the overruling power that we now call, "peer pressure." Individuality depends on the makeup of your character; also known as the voice in your heart that tends to "hide away in the dark," so say many. Those who possess such a gift don't just appear in movies, along the red carpet, or during national celebrations; they step into our lives every day and have the potential to make an incredible impact on our self-images. Although, in and out of complicated situations of our lives, we start to find it harder to show our true colors, those who find the strength to do so end up being the most admired of them all.

**Finalist-Youth**  
**Spencer Smith, Austin, TX**

They Call Me Mama

I am the "A Team" starting inside linebacker for my seventh grade football team. I have played football since fourth grade and have learned plenty about character. One thing I am sure of is that it takes a leader to be a linebacker and you have to have brains and the ability to make the right decision when it is crunch time. Character is not only being able to make decisions and lead on the field but also being able to lead during school and in your everyday life. Sometimes in life you have to make the right choices, even if it does not make you the most popular kid in school. Whether it is standing up for somebody that can't stand up for themselves or not giving into peer pressure and sticking tight to your morals. Character is using your words and reasoning, not your physical size or strength to resolve situations. Not only does being an athlete help build character, academic strength and success is vital as well. Middle school can be challenging so it's always good to have a little help from your friends. I am grateful to have a good group of sidekicks that have supported me since kindergarten. Being funny is one way to keep them around. My family has led me on his journey to find my true character and I will be eternally grateful for that, but I always look to the future to improve what I have now started. For me, football is my favorite way to demonstrate my strengths. I've been told by many that I am a great leader and I am good at taking care of others, (like my mother) so that is why the defensive line calls me "Mama" and I will always take care of them.

**Finalist-Youth**  
**Mateo Salazar, Hutto, TX**

The Right Thing

"Hurry grab the cigarettes" Steve said. "No I do not want to get in trouble" I whispered. I was really scared I had never done this. "Hurry" Steve hurried me. "I don't want to." "I already told you I have your back I will distract him." "Sir there is not more soda can you go check?" Steve told the clerk. "I will be right back" the clerk exclaimed. I hurried and grabbed the cigarettes I put them in my backpack.

"I'm back is there anyway else I can help you?" the clerk asked. "Let's go" Steve hurried. "There is one more thing I need you to do" I said. I gave the cigarettes to the clerk. "What is this?" the clerk asked. "I had stolen this from your store, but I won't do it again" I said.

Steve and I ran out of the store. "Why you do that?" Steve asked. "Maybe smoking is cool, but being with my family is much cooler" I said. If you like smoking so much go do it yourself. Since that day he never talked to me but I did the right thing.

**Second Place-Adult**  
**Mel Daniels, Austin, TX**

Character

Character is manufacturing cans of mixed nuts, and having the picture on the front of the can show the same percentage of peanuts that actually appear inside the can.

Character is throwing a newspaper from your bicycle on a rainy morning, and when it misses the porch where you aimed, getting off your bicycle and placing the paper on the porch near the door.

Character is taking a plate of turkey and all the trimmings to the widow who lives in the house next door, even though she has scorned you, and has told you that she has no regard for Thanksgiving day, or any of its traditions.

It is baking two pies and taking them to the woman who lives two blocks away when you have just read in the newspaper that her husband has died, even though you never heard of her or her husband.

It is returning to the man at the payment window the extra ten dollar bill that he inadvertently gave to you when making change for your purchase.

It is going to see your mother-in-law in the nursing home, as you had promised, even though it turned out to be a beautiful day and your golfing buddies have been calling.

It is standing in line to pay your traffic fine, and noticing that the girl of another race standing in front of you is beginning to cry because she didn't bring enough money, and then extracting the amount she needs from your own pocket.

Character is doing all these things and everything else that is right and fair, and honest, and good, even though you don't benefit from it in any way.

**Third Place-Adult**  
**Shari Janak, Goliad, TX**

Character Thrives Among Us

I live and breathe character every day as I walk among the promise of Texas' tomorrow in the hallways of our schools. Character thrives among us. It cannot be taught in isolation of our schools, but must be build, reinforces from what already exists within the home and church. It is there...

I've seen character in the eyes of the fourteen year old child who opens the door for others because that's the way his grandparents raised him. I've heard character in the tender last words at the end of a son's phone call, "Love you, Mom/"

I've admired character in a seventeen-year old young man who worded two jobs, attended school, complete college courses, and graduated with honors- all because his family's deeply engrained work ethic.

I've tasted character in the homemade cake the daughter brought home from college in the backseat of her car- just so Mom wouldn't have to spend her first birthday without her Baby Girl.

I've walked on character as young adults who've been up since dawn feeding show calves bring the soil from their boots to school, marking the halls with proof of their dedication and effort.

I've shed tears over character as one young man wrapped his hands around his baby brother's tender ones still needing guidance, showing him the way after a father's boots were left empty.

I've witnessed character when this same lowered his father to his final resting place, using his dad's working lassos- the crowds whispers of "Cowboy Up" recognizing his shift to manhood that day.

Character is not something that can be merely taught. It's live, walked, breathed- it's a lifestyle of who we are as Texans. And what we invest in ourselves will determine the payment for our tomorrow.

**Finalist-Adult**  
**Jacob Johnson, Austin, TX**

Character is revealed in how you live your life; how you treat your neighbor, how you spend your time and how you act upon what you believe. Yes, character shines during momentous occasions, but if you wait until those times to reveal your character, the authenticity fades.

I recently began thinking about character because a friend of mine passed away unexpectedly. I call Russell a friend the same way anyone who had the privilege to speak with him could claim his as a friend. He was a born and raised rancher who happened to be college educated as well. Despite his expertise, I could ask Russell any question, no matter how naïve, and he would answer clearly and without judgment. His smile was legendary among those who knew him and his kindness was unmatched. Russell was incapable of complaining. No matter how life was treating him, that was the way things were and he would do his best to work things through. Texas ranchers are tough, but to see him with his teenage daughter showed him as the gentle giant that he was. None of these acts are newsworthy without his passing, but at the farmer's market, seeing his friends and even acquaintances weep from this loss, the mayor naming the day in his honor and his good friend and fellow farmer speaking, tear filled, about learning, enjoying life and taking the bad with the good, I realized that Russell Altenhof had character, and I admire him.

People often wait until cameras are on them or until they are help accountable to exude greatness, but that's not true character. I picture Russell wondering what all the fuss was about, causally getting along with a smile.

## **Finalist-Adult**

**DeeAnn Toro, Austin, TX**

### Character

Character is a trait that is well sought after. It is quality that is learned and accepted by an individual. Character is a representation of a person's moral and ethnic fiber. It was been described as that feeling you get when someone mentions a friend's name. It's the person's essence, their attributes, their personality and what defines him/her when they are not present.

When someone mentions Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, what comes to mind? You may think caring, sympathetic and exhibits kindness towards others. Why? It's because their words match their actions wherever they go.

My friend Linda, who was social worker for 15 years, approached a man who was shouting at his 4 year old daughter because of her poor dance performance. As we stood by her side, she quietly but firmly read him the riot act. Three simple state employees, who on a daily basis work to protect the elderly stood there in fear and awe. I swear I could hear my heart pounding through my chest.

That day, I found that character has a sibling by the name of courage. And those two virtues word hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other.

It's returning the extra money over-looked by a cashier. It's standing up for a child's well being. It's knowing right from wrong and doing right anyways and without question.

The one who masters this wonderful trait gains unwarranted trust by all. Once the skill has been understood and accepted, it is solid, unwavering and steadfast. It does not budge or has the want or ability to do or cause harm. Be certain this person will speak up because it's the right thing to do and it's in him to do so.

**Finalist-Adult**  
**Heather Willard, Liberty Hill, TX**

### Revealing Character

There are defining moments in our lives where those who have innate integrity rise above their environment and show the grit they are made of. They have something strike them with impact that sharpens the edge of their character. They face disease, disability, or disaster and become the person they were born to be. Yet, there are some of us who reveal a different strength of character: resilience. In the face of the mundane lives around us, we who are mothers show a resilience that surpasses the brief flares of character that have been written into the history books and news reels.

The moment I became a mother I took on the highest calling I was ever destined to answer. I found within myself the ability to stretch and grow to adapt and overcome obstacles. That generated my utmost goal, a happy family. But to achieve that momentarily is as worthy as a falling star; I was looking for long-term results. That requires Texas-sized grit. This endeavor is one that will not be confirmed for decades and generations. Ask your Everett-climbers and Channel-swimmers to persevere that long, to impact that many. I took on this daunting task with full knowledge of the perils of failure, the sacrifices willingly made, and the long road afore me. It is more than lost sleep, endless worry, and sticky fingers with muddy shoes on tight budgets. It is taking the responsibility for other lives that cannot be merely taught or molded, but must be led.

Becoming a mother did not happen when I gave birth. It happened when I completely changed the way I live to protect my children and became the person I wanted them to be able to be. As we practice alphabets and balance beams, logic and lug nuts, I am not just teaching them to master tasks, but how to teach character to their children. With God's grace, I will even teach them to be a feisty grandmother. I am living a life that is full of the character of a mother.