

resources to start a new life. It took a few months before I was fully resettled with my Aunt and Uncle. I feel blessed that I have been given this new life. It has been very hard at times not understanding the English language that most people speak. Sometimes I feel down when people stare at me as if I don't belong here. I still have nightmares daily of the torture and persecution that I have endured. I get startled when I hear loud noises and I find it hard to trust in another fully. But I am strong. I am a survivor. I am alive.

Wars are not made so we have something to write in the blank pages of our history books. Human trafficking is not a fictional story you watch on Netflix. There are millions of people just like me that are being trafficked every day. The International Labour Organization estimates that there are 20.9 million victims of human trafficking globally. 68% are trapped in forced labor, 26% are children and 55% are women and girls (Polaris. Pars 2). Unless we speak out and stop those that are making it a reality, more lives will be destroyed. I feel more than blessed that I am alive. I am determined to graduate from high school and then enroll in a college to get my degree as a social worker. I want to work with organizations that will fight and help the victims of human trafficking. We must embrace, offer a helping hand and spread the word of peace.

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Div II Second Place

Emily Swehla Modesto HS Maggie Monjure Marriage Across the Sea

Throughout my life, it has been the stories that I remember most. Walking by Papa's office in the back of the church, I would hear Mama speaking to him softly saying, "Well dearest, the young Panckiv girl is moving to America. The family has asked for our prayers." Their names would then be added to the small list kept in the altar, and Papa, the priest at St. Vladimir's Church, would pray for them. Often, Mama would receive word from the family, and a name would be taken off the list in a prayer of thanksgiving. Other times, it would remain, and I would see the tears well up in a mother's eyes when her daughter was mentioned during the procession on a Sunday liturgy. America is a long distance away from Ukraine.

I grew up in Hlukhiv, Ukraine, with the given name Irina, meaning peace. My childhood was wrapped in the comfort of the Orthodox Church, where my father was a priest. I was confused when my friend, Natasha, asked me what I would do after finishing school. I was just nearing adulthood and responded casually that I would probably get a job working for Papa in the church. She laughed. "I knew you would say that." Natasha informed me that she was considering marrying an American through AnastasiaDate.com, a dating website that connects Ukrainian women to foreign men. She was nervous to tell me because there were mixed views about the "mail order bride" in Hlukhiv. Some marveled at the courage the young Ukrainian women displayed, and they saw their ticket to America as a wonderful opportunity. The elderly contradicted it though, displeased with the girls for their ungratefulness and lack of patriotism for their own country.

Years passed. Having graduated from the local university, I worked as the church secretary. Every month, more young women were leaving for America. Hearing stories of the wonderful lives they now possessed, I felt a tinge of jealousy. What was my future in Hlukhiv, Ukraine? There is a shortage of men in Ukraine and alcoholism is a widespread problem that leaves many young women looking overseas for a husband. Furthermore

there is political unrest stirring within Ukraine. I felt war was about to break out and could feel the tension growing every time I turned on the news. Our government is making decisions without the say of the people. Half the population in Ukraine wants to make a deal and become "European," while the other half wants to join with Russia. Our town is very small and unconcerned with troubles outside of Hlukhiv. I knew, however, that if the protesting continued on, it would affect everyone, and I had no desire to be in the midst of it. I knew I could not live in fear of our past Communist days, and needed to leave Ukraine. I now understood the desire to live in America.

Following Natasha's example, I got on AnastasiaDate.com. Applying for the website required applications and interviews, but I was accepted. I checked the website every day, growing tense whenever I received a message. One day, I received one from a man named Peter Johnson who was living in Boston. He was looking for a wife with traditional views of marriage and motherhood. Here was my chance. After hours of correspondence and a visit from Peter, I made my decision to marry.

I tried not to think about it too much as I packed my bags. I was going to a safer place full of opportunity! I thought of Natasha and her luck. I tried to see the same hopes for myself, but I could not help but come across stories of "mail order brides" while I was on the computer. There were horror stories of young women who were abused and even killed by their husbands. I thought of the conversations I'd had with Peter. Surely he would never do such a thing. I ignored my doubts and prayed to my patron Saint, Irene, for protection.

"God be with you", Mama whispered as I embraced her. "He always is," I responded, trying not to cry. One look at Papa and my efforts were in vain as tears streamed down my cheeks. I did not bother to ask if they would come to America because I knew Papa would never leave the church. I clasped the three barred cross around my neck as the plane rose into the sky.

Our wedding was small and only a few of Peter's family members attended, but I did not mind. We were married in his church. The flat ceilings, the small stage with a pedestal, and the dark walls were far from the elaborate paintings, the gold leafed dome, and the candles of the Orthodox Church.

I found it difficult to adjust at first. The culture in America is remarkably different and the language is confusing to learn. In addition, to get to know someone new, especially when you are their wife, is slow and

Khalid. I was 10 years old when the Syrian Civil War started. I am now 16 and I am alive.

My home was bombed and destroyed during the Syrian conflict. While trying to flee, my parents were senselessly killed by the Assad Regime. I ended up fleeing to a temporary camp on the outskirts of Aleppo and stayed there for almost 2 years. I had nothing and was full of hunger and thirst for many days and nights, but was relieved that I had escaped the terror that was engulfing the city. I had not escaped the nightmare, but had entered into another nightmare. While at the camp, a man approached me and some of the other children who had lost their parents. He told us he would take us to Lebanon, where there were families that would take care of us. I was young and naive and felt blessed that I was chosen to get out of the migrant camp to go to a new home. I was taken in a van with other women and children who had also lost everything from the conflict. After driving for hours, we arrived at a rundown building in Maamaltein, Lebanon. We were all herded like cattle into a tattered building that was adorned with bars on all of the windows. For years, I was beaten and tortured and was enslaved by my captors, forced to do the unthinkable. One day, four of the women escaped, which led to the raid and my freedom from enslavement. I was taken to Dar Al Amal, the House of Hope, which helps women and children that have been trafficked. While there, they found that I had family in the United States. They also contacted the United Nations Refugee Agency to consider me for resettlement. I was one of the fortunate ones to be chosen for resettlement. The International Rescue Committee helped me through the process and guided me through this long tiring journey.

I was sad, scared and torn apart that I would have to leave my homeland of Syria. I did not know what to expect from this land that I would make my new home. Would I be welcomed or looked down upon? Will I practice the culture that I am so proud of? At times I felt that was I being punished for everything that has happened in my life. After years of waiting, I finally arrived in the United States. The IRC brought me to Sacramento, California, where they helped me adjust to my new home.

I have had such warm welcomes from the people I have met in Sacramento. The IRC has helped me in so many ways. Once I arrived, I was given clothes, food, medical care, and I started school again. I have also started counseling to help me with the mental pain and nightmares that I can't control. They have given me the

my H-2B visa has been extended. They asked if I'd like to stay and I obviously said yes.

September 30, 2015 Today I had a horrible encounter. While pushing my cart through the hall, I accidentally bumped a woman carrying coffee, causing her to spill some of it. This infuriated the woman, resulting in her calling me a "stupid immigrant" and said I should "go back to where I belong". I wanted to cry. I miss my family.

December 2, 2016 It has been awhile since I've written in here. My life has been changing drastically, faster than I could ever imagine. Regarding my job, I received a promotion, meaning I am able to send more money home to my family (who are doing well). But most importantly, I am going to become a U.S. citizen. Joseph proposed to me, which means I am able to apply for citizenship. The process is lengthy, but we have already finished most of the paperwork and have begun interviews. Every day I continue to grow and become more accustomed to western culture. America has given me a new life, a better life. One where I do not have to worry about being killed in the streets, or running out of food. As I look around me, I see people from all backgrounds, African, Hispanic, Asian, and though these observations, I've come to realize that America truly is an ethnic melting pot, filled with different perspectives and experiences. America truly is my home.

Div II First Place

Ciara Bargas Modesto HS Maggie Monjure I Am Alive

I'm walking slowly down a white road lined with ashes and dust. I look around me and see the crumbling buildings. The walls of rubble cascading down like waterfalls. There is black smoke waving up in the air as if it was also trying to escape into the bright blue skies. The smell of gas and death lingers throughout the air. The frightening melody of thundering bombs is bursting from a distance and the fireworks of bullets raining from the sky. I try to breathe as I gasp for air. I try to run as fast as I can but I'm not moving. My legs won't move. They are melting into the ground. I start panicking. I start to cry. I open my eyes and awaken. "It was just a dream, just a dream", I tell myself as I take a deep breath of relief. But I then realize, it was not a dream or a horrible nightmare. Those are the visions of my last days in Syria that haunt me to this day. My name is Amira Amon

sometimes difficult. It took many months to feel settled, and it was not until I could speak the language that I started to feel at home. After some months, I visited Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral in Boston. It is not Russian Orthodox, and I did not know anyone. Finishing the Anaphora, I waited for The Lord's Prayer, hoping to recognize it when suddenly, "Our Father, who Art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." I looked up and saw a few rows in front of me, a couple people reciting the prayer in Russian. I joined in. "Now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." Warmth filled my heart knowing that I was not alone in the church or in America.

My first years were so different from that which I knew from home, but I have grown accustomed to the culture and my husband. I watch Ukrainian news and pray for my parents and my native country. I now understand the courage it takes to give up a way of life and move to another country, but America is safe and full of possibilities. I have made close friends with other ladies from my church who are also from former USSR countries. Many were also "mail order brides" who immigrated the same way I did. We laugh silently at the expressions we get from other Americans when they find this out. I miss Hlukhiv, and hope very much that someday I will be able to return and visit, but I thank God for all he has blessed me with.

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IDiv II Third Place

Reza Banankhah Independent Student Teacher Susan Janis Sailing to a Better Life

I was not about to farm tobacco until I died. My name is Rafael and my wife had passed away fairly recently from malaria. Now with twice the workload, I could not keep up in the struggling economy. My wife and I had always dreamed of leaving the country to be with my cousin in America. I was an older man living in Cuba, and the United States wasn't very far away. It is what my wife would have wanted for me anyway.

Since I was nearing the age of sixty, the trip would be harder for me than the countless young teenagers who had made the trip before me. Their trips however, had proven to me that sailing from Cuba to Florida is possible. Years of working on the farm has kept me fit and I knew that friends in the nearby town would have one reason or another for wanting to leave as well. My hopes were simple; I wanted my last years to be happy ones, without working from dusk until dawn.

I started to discuss leaving the country with my friends. They all agreed that they would be better off in America, but they were unsure if they could make the journey. Many people had drowned at sea. While they were reluctant at first, they began to welcome the idea when I told them my plan. Alejandro was one of such friends and he worked as a carpenter. He would be able to build the ship parts in his back room to be assembled later. It was illegal to leave the country by boat, so this was all done in secrecy. I had five friends joining me. There were two farmers, one fisherman, one person with underground market connections, and one was a tailor. They all agreed that migrating to America would improve their economic situation. I was glad most of my friends were younger than me as well. Leaving for America sooner was better for them.

We hastily constructed a boat for ourselves over the next thirteen months. Alonzo had located a phone with a GPS and a battery to charge it. This meant we would be able to navigate to America without becoming lost at sea. We planned to sail for six days and had stocked up on food and supplies. Everyone prepared themselves to face the hardships to come, and to leave everything else behind. It was the eleventh of April and the next six days would shape the rest of our lives.

The previous day we had moved all the ship parts to the coast in my wagon, disguising them under a tarp and hay. We had assembled the boat with only minor issues. It wasn't the greatest, but it had enough space for everyone to lie down, just not very comfortably. It was

The application process was lengthy. It required submitting personal documents, an interview, a background check, and proof of my family in Chiapas. Spring was quickly approaching and I needed confirmation to begin my travels to the States. I waited and waited and waited, and eventually, on the warmest day of winter, I received my confirmation documents and approval to work temporarily in America. It was the best day of my life.

March 25, 2015 Today is the big day, today I leave my home for America. Unfortunately, because of a lack of travel services in my area, I am forced to ride with a coyote, someone who illegally smuggles people over the border. I plan to separate myself from the caravan prior to crossing the border, because I am able to enter legally.

March 27, 2015 Dirt. When I look up, all I see is dirt. As the truck bumps along I wonder how much longer it will be until we arrive at the checkpoint. I am scared, scared of the future, but more broadly, scared of the unknown.

March 28, 2015 At last we have reached the final checkpoint, this is where I plan to embark on foot. The resort has arranged for my pickup once I am in America.

May 20, 2015 It is amazing here! Everything is so beautiful, the food is good, and the work fun. Some of the Americans on the maintenance staff complain about the work being difficult, which puzzles me. When I hear this, I have to bite my tongue, for I know they have never spent twelve hour workdays, bent over picking vegetables. If Americans find this job laborious, work must come easy in the U.S.

July 11, 2015 While I am really enjoying it here, I also miss my family. One of my coworkers helps me wire money to them back home. It is not much but I know it helps. I am beginning to fall in love with America. The way the sun peeks over the hills in the early morning, the lack of boundaries on what I'm allowed to wear or say, and the way people act towards me, respectful. While some do give me funny, almost demeaning looks, the majority are kind to me. What makes this experience even better is this attractive young man, who heads the lifeguards, that I have spoken with a couple times and hope to see more.

September 1, 2015 Officially the second best day of my life! The head of lifeguards, Joseph, has asked me on a date. America keeps getting better and better, furthermore as a result of understaffing,

husband was here to see what I have accomplished, but I know he is smiling down on me from Heaven. I hope and pray to see my grandchildren thrive in America. I am thankful for the opportunities America has provided for my family and continue to thank God for all he has done and will do.

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Div I Third Place

Matthew Hesse Turlock HS Abbi Snider

Mi Patria

January 13, 2014 My name is Carmen Saldana, I am nineteen years old and come from Chiapas, Mexico. I am headed for America and as a going away present my father gifted me this diary. Before I begin my official entry, I'd like to take a step back to introduce how I got here.

Life in Chiapas is difficult. My family and I are impoverished. I lived in a small house on the northern outskirts of Chiapas with my mother, father, and two younger brothers. My father works in a nearby factory while my mother stays home to take care of me and my brothers. For most of my life, I helped my mother at home with basic chores: washing, cooking and cleaning. I hated it. When I turned eighteen, I decided I needed to work. My father was growing older and as he was our only source of income, if he were to perish, so would we. I set out on my employment journey by heading into the city, looking for work. Unfortunately after months of searching I was unable to find a decent job. I became discouraged. It was not until I saw an advertisement for a job in the America that things began to look up. A resort in Arizona was looking for seasonal employees to work as maintenance staff and was offering temporary work visas to those interested. I brought the flyer home, as excited as a kid on Christmas Eve. Immediately my father said no, but after some time, he began to warm up to the idea and eventually allowed me to apply. I worked at a nearby field for the next few months, picking vegetables for atrocious wages. As bad as it was, it was worth it, for I was able to save up enough money to apply for my H-2B temporary work visa.

before dawn when we set off, leaving behind our past lives and setting sail for a new life.

The first day was tense as we searched for Cuban ships. The mere sight of one could mean disaster. We were not used to the sea, and with it came seasickness. As I fell asleep, I heard the sounds of others vomiting. With every heave, some of our food left us. The next morning I arose to the crash of a wave. Water slammed into my face as I shot up, immediately alert. We were going through some rough waters and water was pooling in the ship. I grabbed a bucket like the others around me, and started to throw water back out as fast as I could. The waves battered our boat for hours before they calmed down, but when they cleared we spotted our stop along the way, Anguilla Cays.

We steered the ship over and landed our craft. Abelardo managed to catch us fish for dinner that day and we all enjoyed the meal. I felt free. I did not need to work all day to be able to eat dinner as I would have in Cuba. I could feel the wind on my face and I felt young again. I was out in search of a better life and felt reinvigorated after the ordeal at sea. We decided to leave the same night to save time. The next few days were terrible. The waves and wind were ever-fluctuating and I was beginning to tire. When we neared our destination, we were ecstatic. We knew however, if the Coast Guard caught us they would send us back and we would be worse off than when we started. We sailed in the cover of darkness. We took down the sails when we spotted another ship, which delayed us. This happened twice, and we thought we would be spotted for sure. The silence was suffocating as we waited for the boats to pass. We finally reached land and navigated to a local dock. The sensation of being on dry land after three days was invigorating. We headed over to the main road with our belongings and, sure enough, we saw the name of the dock in English. We walked over to a public phone, and like many others before us, immediately dialed 9-1-1, something we learned through the underground network. The person on the phone spoke Spanish and they sent help.

They brought us into the city where we were given food and a place to stay. They openly welcomed us and spoke fluent Spanish. I was sent to my cousin, who had left many years before me and was living in the Florida Keys. It was the happiest moment of my life. He had applied for the Cuban Family Reunification Parole, which let me stay in the United States and work before I had my visa. However, I would still have to overcome language barriers and learn the customs. Many Cubans had

come before me, and it was clear to see where most Cubans lived. People of other races seemed almost tired of the number of Cubans that had migrated here. Since I did not know English well, communicating with these people was also very difficult. I was hopeful however, I had reached America and had no plans of going back anytime soon. I was determined to live long and retell my story to others.

I ended up working in the Florida Keys in a local restaurant as a waiter, and even had a small apartment to myself. I had a steady income and did not live the difficult and tiring life I had once lived. I found love in the arts and took up painting as a hobby. My paintings reflect my hopes for a happy future that have stayed with me. They reflect the hardships I faced, and the dream of a better life that I was able to achieve. I painted a scene of Cuba, as seen from when I was sailing away, as I hope to remember and pass on my story to others.

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Div III First Place

**Rana Banankhah Independent Student Teacher Susan Janis
Liberty or Death**

My name is Imamu Shaka. I am twelve years old, in a refugee camp, running from the guerrillas, and in dire need of true refuge. We are about to embark on our journey from Congo to America. If I don't make it, I want people to remember me this way. I am Imamu Shaka." I slowly closed the brown leather journal my mother had once treasured. Had we lived a different life, my mother would be here, now: peering over my shoulder with her keen, beautiful hazelnut eyes. My sister would enlighten our spirits in the worst situations with her contagious smile and optimism. My friends would come over to play football in the middle of the deserted dirt field with the sun tickling our skins. But things were different. My mother was slowly choked to death, as if *they* took pleasure in her

God kept my daughter in the camp so I would not have to travel alone. I was very worried to fly on an airplane. I had never been inside one before. The thought of flying in a giant metal structure was not a thought that appealed to me. My palms were sweating and my heart was racing, but I prayed to God to give me strength. The flight was long and uncomfortable. I felt closed in and confined by thick walls. I decided to close my eyes and rest. As soon as my eyes closed, I fell asleep.

We arrived in America and were met by a team of people who told us they were going to help us navigate our new lives in our new country. We were exhausted from a long day of traveling, but I knew we were going to be alright when I saw my grandchildren smile. We arrived at our host family's house, and settled into our rooms. I was told that I would go to school the next day and begin to learn English, apply for a visa, and become an American citizen. It would be a long process, but again I was reminded of the miracles and blessings that God provides.

I walked into the school classroom alone. These were the times when I missed Ohnmar most. I knew learning English would be difficult even with Ohnmar here, but it would have made it easier to know we were both learning the same thing and could help each other. Learning English was very straining for me. Because of my old mind, I often times would forget everything I had learned in class by the time I arrived at home. I was frustrated that I was unable to learn as fast as the younger people. They all seemed to be advancing so quickly, and I could not keep up. Being behind in my English made it difficult to move on with everything in the process of becoming an American citizen. I was unable to read, write, drive, and speak. This made simple tasks such as going to the grocery store extremely maddening. I could not go anywhere by myself. When I was living in Burma, I was independent. I could go to the market, talk with my friends, and make my way around all by myself. In America, I am dependent. I do not like the feeling of dependency. Not only does it make me feel weak, but it makes me feel old. Some people might say, "Htet, you are old," but I do not feel old. At least I did not feel old until I came to America. It was a relief to go back to my daughter's house and not have to speak English all of the time. Even though their family can all speak English, they still speak in our village's Karen language.

After living in America for seven years now, I am beginning to understand and speak English very well. I have begun working at a local grocery store and have finally become an American citizen. I wish my

"You are approved to leave for the refugee camp. We have a very nice, but small, hospital in the village there. Because of your husband's condition, we have arranged transportation for you to leave right away. God bless you. I am praying for you and your husband." The kindness and empathy of this woman's soul made my heart realize that in a world full of sorrow, there can still be glimmers of hope given to us by the Lord.

We arrived at the refugee camp, and drove to the hospital in the village. I did not want to leave Ohnmar there, but I needed to go to receive our rations and housing. I gave him a hug, kiss, and watched the nurses wheel him away. We pulled into the main area of the village where the office was to turn in our papers. I stepped out of the car and walked into the building. My heart stopped. I could not believe my eyes. There, standing in front of me, was my daughter Mya, and my grandchildren. I ran to greet them with tears flying down my face. "I thought you were in America!" I exclaimed. "We turned in our application, but we were denied. We have kept on applying ever since we arrived here months ago. Mama, I am so happy to see you," Mya told me. It was in that moment I realized that this process was not as easy as I thought. I was overjoyed to see my family, but I kept thinking, "Will we ever get out of here?"

I told Mya about her father, and after I turned in our application, we went back to the hospital to see Ohnmar. When I saw him, I immediately knew he would not make it to America with us. He was pale and breathing slowly. Mya rushed to his bedside and laid her head on her father's chest, gripping his hand as if for dear life. "I thought I would never see you again," Mya sobbed. Ohnmar lifted his head slightly to see his only child smiling at him. "Take care of your mother," he commanded, "Get to America safely, and thank God for his blessings." Ohnmar passed away quietly in the night. My husband was gone, and I felt helpless.

A few weeks later, I heard my application was denied, and I felt as if everything in the world was coming apart. I knelt on the dirt floor of my daughter's hut and cried out to God, "Please bring us out of this trial. Please bring us to America soon. Let us be safe and happy again." The Lord heard my cries and after a few weeks, my daughter's and my application were approved for immigration to America. We gathered our things and drove to our plane together. I thanked God for this miracle. In the midst of the happiness we felt for finally being granted this blessing, I felt sorrow that my husband could not be with us. He would have loved to make it to America and start a new life of accomplishment, but I believe

suffering. My sister: murdered by the disease that plagued her tiny, frail body. All of my friends were kidnapped and recruited as soldiers, as if they were merely being turned into pawns in a game of chess. But this was no game. This was my life... And now we must leave this war zone we call home in search of a better life. My father is the only one I trust and love. All the others are dead.

It seemed impossible to leave the Congo for a life in America, but somehow my father managed to make it work. We were finally freed from the shackles that bound us to this land; we finally had our visas. When I walked out of that plane, a wave of liberation emanated through my veins. "*I'm finally free*," I thought to myself "*I'm free*." I strutted the way over to the massive airport. My head was high and my chest was up. I was free.

A week later we were settled into a small apartment in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia. I could wander out and upon the foreign city for days. But I didn't have time for distractions, for it was my first day of school and we were already running late. I quickly tossed my pencil and notebook into my bag and bolted my way over to the school. The bell rang just as I stepped foot on campus. I looked around. It was as if I was a crow in a sea of doves. My head hung low as I walked towards the class. I took my seat in the far corner of the class. I could tell that people were already talking about me, but I pretended not to notice. The class soon started with everyone telling each other their names. Wyatt, Emma, Jack, Abigail... The list went on and soon it was my turn.

"My name is Imamu Shaka," I said softly. I heard whispers among the class. I just slouched in my seat. I had the strangest name, I had the strangest accent, I had the strangest face. I was the only one whose lip was deformed. Back in the Congo, it wasn't abnormal for one to display such a formation, but things were different here. I prayed not to be called on for the rest of the day, but my prayers weren't answered.

"I just wanted to specifically introduce our school's newest student, Imamu. He is from the Congo and doesn't know much English so be sure to give him a warm welcome to our school," Mrs. Anne said as she turned to write on the board. I felt something bounce off my neck. At first I thought it was all in my head until it hit me again, and again. Every time I turned around I didn't see anything, but someone was throwing something at me. I sat in that class for what felt like hours waiting for break. When the bell finally rang, I swiftly stood up from my chair and went outside. I stood near the fence by myself. People were giving me looks as if I were an alien. Oh how

I yearned for my mother's affection. I was fortunate enough to meet a young boy named Jack during that break, who would forever change my life. He stood up for me. He helped me. He was a brother to me.

Before I knew it, school ended and it wasn't so bad at all. I walked home and began my homework. I spent hours on the one page that we had. It was all too confusing. I didn't understand any of it. I spent hour after frustrating hour on it until I was finally finished. When I had completed my homework, I routinely wrote about my day in my journal. I was in the middle of entry number ten when I heard the front door open. I looked up and saw my father with a grin on his face. "Let's go," he said excitedly. "Go where? When? For what?" I asked. "I'll answer all your questions later," He said briskly as he opened the door. I cluelessly followed him to the bus stop. We hopped on the bus and rode to a hospital. We entered the waiting room and sat for a few minutes until we were in a strange room with many unknown devices. "This organization saved us from our past life in the Congo, so don't fear. Be brave my boy," my father whispered in the silence. I slowly scanned the room and everything in it. There were medical tools, gloves, antibiotics. I paused for a moment and tilted my head. "*The walls*," I thought. The walls were covered with pictures of people like me, with the same lip deformation. I stopped. I could hardly breathe. My heart raced. I swallowed heavily trying to hold back the tears. I finally knew why I was here.

The surgery went well. When I first looked at myself in the mirror I was almost unrecognizable. I was overcome with such joy. And that's when it hit me. Like a slap in the face. I wanted to help others. I wanted to be a doctor.

"Journal entry number ten... Living in America has given me a whole new perspective on life. There aren't wars when you step out of your house. The school roofs don't look like they're about to crumble down on you. Everyone is given a fair chance at life. I have come to realize how incredibly lucky I am to be living in such a country, a place I now call home. And even though there might be obstacles in the way, crows can fly over them. I hope the next time I read this journal, I will be helping others, like those doctors helped me. And if I ever forget how grateful I should be living in such a country, I can look back at the memories housed inside of these rough leather covers. "I am Imamu Shaka, and this is my story."

who by this time, had fled with her husband and two children to a refugee camp and maybe to America. Because my husband was so ill, our grandson had helped to run the farm. He would harvest our rice, beans, and vegetables, take them to the village market, and sell them. He would bring us back the little money we had earned. However, since my daughter's family had left, Ohnmar and I were unable to make any more money. It was very difficult to tend to the farm by myself. When our village was slowly being invaded, I knew it was time to leave. There were times when I would try and talk myself out of leaving, but after thinking it through, I realized that learning a completely new way of life was better than living life afraid of death.

I knew this was not going to be easy. With Ohnmar being so sick, it would be extremely straining to make the journey to the refugee camp. I remembered my daughter telling me about the process. We had to travel to the reception center first, to get an application approved to stay in the refugee camp. Once that was accomplished, we could go to the camp and apply to leave to America. Our plan was to harvest the produce from our small farm and take them to the market. When we had sold our goods, we would buy a little food for our journey, pack it in our car, and leave immediately after. I was the most frightened I had ever been in my life. If we were caught, we could be put in prison, but I prayed to God for the strength to persevere through this trial I knew we had to endure.

God provided safe travels for us all the way to the reception center. The journey was strenuous on poor Ohnmar's body. I could not imagine what it would have been like if we had to make our trek on foot. As we pulled up close to the reception center, I could see the line to enter the building was trailing outside of the door. "Lord, please let us get in tonight," I prayed. I helped Ohnmar out of the car, and we gathered our belongings. We walked up to the center to see if we could wait inside while we filled out our papers. We found a place to sit and catch our breath from the stress of a long day. We had been resting for a while when a woman came up to us and asked, "Are your papers filled out?" I nodded, but explained that we had not waited in line. I saw the woman's eyes looking back at me. She saw Ohnmar was very sick, and looked at my husband with compassion. She smiled at me and proceeded to say, "Your husband, he needs a doctor and rest. I will take your papers and get you set up as quickly as I can." Without another word, the woman took our papers and rushed away. After a while, she came back out again and said,

that sees us as a nation of immigrants whose differences should be championed, not suppressed. As it is true for the Morgans, it is true for me: America is my country, and just like the thousands of refugees and immigrants that come to this country every year seeking a better life that only America-land of the free and home of the brave can offer, I am American. I don't know exactly where I have yet to go in life, but for the first time ever, I can say that I live in a country that I trust will get me where I need to be, because in America, there will always be life since there will always be freedom—and thus, there will *always* be hope.

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Div I Second Place

Aimee Gundlach Independent Student Susan Janis
A New Life of Hope

My friends and family were being killed because they believed in God. It had become too dangerous to be a Christian in our country of Burma. Many people in my village were being persecuted and killed because of ethnic and religious cleansing that had started in our country. This is why, one day, I gathered my most prized possessions and left with my husband, Ohnmar. I was terrified to leave everything I was familiar with, but I knew that fleeing to America would provide more opportunities for my family and me.

I was born and raised in Burma. Groups of families were escaping, but they were young and able-bodied. I was sixty-five, and my husband was sixty-nine. He was very ill. I knew that if we tried to escape, we might not make it very far. Because my husband was so weak, he would say, "Htet, you have to get out of here. You have to leave without me. I knew I could not leave him to die alone. We had a daughter, Mya,

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Div III Second Place

Stephen Romano Hart Ransom Charter Teacher Susan Janis
A Place that Feels Like Home

My name is Matias Macero. I was born on the outskirts of the Venezuelan capital of Caracas. This is the story of my journey to America.

I sat on a run down porch swing next to my father, gazing out into the thick brush that surrounded my house. My mama had gone to Caracas hours before, but my father and I still waited patiently. Just as the sun began to set, I could hear the sound of tires on the worn down dirt road that lead to my house. My father had dozed off, so I shook him. "Papa," I whispered excitedly in his ear, "Someone is here." My father stirred and walked toward the car. I stood a little ways from the car as my father spoke to the driver. After a few minutes, my father finally turned towards me, his face pale. "What's wrong?" I said, obviously sounding worried. "Matias," he finally said slowly. "Your mother has been murdered." I just stood there in shock, tears streaming down my face. My father came to me and we embraced. "Come now," he whispered, choking on his words, "we have a grave to dig." The next few weeks were hard. After the funeral my father had told me that we were moving. Not just moving, but immigrating to the United States of America. He said he and mama were planning to leave before she died, because the violence was increasing. He chuckled a little, "Ironic, isn't it," he said desperately trying to crack a smile. At first I was very angry, especially because of the timing, but I began to warm up to the idea. New hopes and dreams. Sounded good to me.

We spent the next six months waiting for our green cards and selling most of our possessions so we could afford our plane

tickets. My father had gotten a job in North Dakota, working for an oil company. North Dakota sounded very different from Venezuela, and from what I understood, it was. When the day came to leave, I was less ready than I thought. The whole night before, I tossed and turned. Before breakfast, I threw up. Twice. I tried to use it as a reason not to leave, but my father knew it was just nerves. It didn't help that we got to the airport two hours early, so I had to just sit there, miserable. When our names were called to board, I almost fainted, but I dragged myself into my seat on the plane. As the plane took off, I looked out my window over the lush green forests, and I leaned into my seat and cried.

I was awakened by the sound of the pilot over the intercom telling everyone to prepare for descent into Bismarck, North Dakota. When we left the airport, there was a rental car waiting for us. Our new house was a couple of hours from the airport and both my dad and I didn't say a word on the way there. I just looked out the window at the vast landscape.

The town that I was now supposed to call my home was small compared to Bismarck, and I took in all of the odd sights that I had never seen in Venezuela. We weren't that far into town when my father pointed out a group of white-washed buildings. One of the buildings read: "Maddock High School Home of the Wildcats"

I gave him a quizzical look because he knew I couldn't read English. "Escuela Secundaria," he said. I nodded in response. Not far past the school my father turned down a driveway that read "Rob's Trailer Park". Our new house wasn't that much different from our's in Venezuela; disturbingly small, and ugly compared to the ones I saw in Bismarck.

The next couple of days were spent getting settled into our new house. When the day finally came when I had to go to school, I was terrified. The first few periods were horrible. I couldn't understand a word the teacher said. When lunch came I found an empty table and sat down. Thoughts floated through my head that my years in high school would always be this miserable and lonely, but not five minutes into my lunch a kid with red hair came and sat down next to me. "I'm Logan," he said calmly. "Que?" I asked. "You don't speak English, do you? Hold on one second," he said, holding up his finger. "Jeremy," he called, "come here." A strong looking kid with curly brown hair walked over. "This one can't speak English," Logan said to Jeremy. "Can you translate?" "No problem," replied Jeremy. Jeremy sat down on the other side of me and said "Hola mi nombre es Jeremy y este es Logan." I smiled and responded.

I spent the rest of the day with Logan and Jeremy and when I

final token of kindness, the local fishing community in which we had found shelter, offered us a pair of old fishing boats, in hopes that somehow we could find our way to the Philippines, a country that was willing to accept refugees (Evangelista).

Like sardines in a can, we set off, our destiny held in the unsteady palms of the waves. For eight days and nine nights- each that I thought would be my last—we were tossed at sea. Every time the boat lurched, my father would whisper once more, "Còn nước, còn tát." There is not a doubt in my mind that those words were what kept me alive. By some miracle, we made it to the western coast of the Philippines, where we were received by the Philippine Coast Guard.

International workers helped my family explore the possible places we could settle permanently, and my parents decided that the United States would be their first choice. After an exorbitant amount of paperwork and countless months of waiting, our refugee status was approved. We were going to America.

Life did not immediately get easy when we arrived, however. When we landed, I remember worrying how I'd ever adapt to a world where all Americans look alike and everyone drives on the wrong side of the road. Bigger issues arose when my father had to settle for a job as a security guard because his teaching credentials from Vietnam simply couldn't be transferred to the American education system. The most difficult obstacle to our success turned out to be our background, though. I remember three graffiti-painted words scrawled on a broken-down house that accosted us when we first drove through Little Saigon. They read, "Asians go home!" Go home to where? The country that had all but banished my family for independent thought? Or its friend Cambodia that valued a political alliance more than our lives? I didn't have a "home" to go back to.

Nevertheless, for every one person that wanted us gone, there were ten more that made us feel welcome, most memorably the Morgan family. Mr. Harold Morgan, the caucasian owner of a local chain of doughnut shops, met my father at a nearby mall where he'd been hired. He invited my family to dinner one night, and although I couldn't understand the entire conversation because of my weak English, it was the first time in a long time I had felt happy.

Later tonight we will celebrate Tet with the Morgans, just like we celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving with them. Through this relationship I've come to understand that Morgans are much more than family friends, they represent America at its finest – the part

Div I First Place

William Foote Turlock HS Abbi Snider

Còn Nước, Còn Tát

Like any normal day, the sun peeked over the city and barged its way into my family's small apartment. I'm always the first to be greeted by this unwanted visitor, and as such have created a ritual-comprised mostly of groaning-to meet my nemesis. Today, however, is different. It's the one time a year I jump out of bed, brush my hair without a fuss, and meet the sun with a smile. After all, today is Tet, Vietnamese New Year, a holiday where our worries are drowned out by laughter and song (Ly).

I am Hang Le, a 17-year-old resident of Little Saigon in Orange County, and before I was allowed to celebrate Tet as a time of lightheartedness, life was extremely taxing. When I was 14, my family lived in Vietnam. My father, who taught English at the local secondary school, had joined a political group that advocated on behalf of the local Christian indigenous people, called the Montagnards (Crane). Such support of religion and free political thought practically guaranteed him a run-in with the government. I remember my father recalling something a colleague of his had said: "It's not the old guerrilla battlefield—South versus North. It's religion versus communism, freedom versus control" (Kenning).

My father's job, which he had held for two decades, was terminated almost instantly. "Rough economic times" had been the excuse. Shortly thereafter, a man in a uniform knocked on our door and seized my father. A week later, he returned—battered and bruised. I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact with him for days, but when I did, I saw the same fighting gleam in his smile that I had grown up admiring. "Còn nước, còn tát," he had told me—while there's life, there's hope.

In the span of a month, 150 protesters, including my family, escaped to the neighboring Cambodia. In an instant, my friends, home, and life as I had know it, vanished. With every step taken, my feet ached more, and with every day that food became scarcer, I became hungrier. Each night, when my mother's nightmares jolted her awake screaming "Đừng bắn! Đừng bắn!" (Don't shoot! Don't shoot!), I cried myself to sleep. And at the moment I was absolutely positive life couldn't get any worse, it did.

Cambodia, being an ally of the Vietnamese government, soon began pursuing those of us seeking asylum in their country. The group which we had traveled with quickly dispersed out of fear that they would be deported back to the country which they had fled just months earlier. As a

arrived home I sat down on my couch. America wasn't as bad as I thought. Besides, I now have the chance to become something beside an oil worker, unlike in Venezuela. "Here," I thought, I have a future."

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Div III Third Place

Mora Collins Hart Ransom Teacher Susan Janis

A New Beginning

Overwhelmed yet overflowing with joy, my mind and my emotions struggle to take in the immensity of the situation, of finally being in America. Hello, my name is Raqiya, I am a ten-year-old girl from South Sudan. I thought it would be easier once we came, but now that I am here I find it a bit hard dealing with all of the changes and having to adapt to my new way of life. You see, my family and I have lived in a refugee camp in Uganda for the past three years. We fled Sudan because of the civil war that was going on. We have never had much, but we have always had joy. Here in America, it is so different. People have so much. Do they even realize it? I hope I never take for granted my new life in America and use the opportunities I have been given to someday help others, like me.

I remember vividly the day my mom was screaming with excitement, "We made the list! We made the list, Raqiya! We made the list!" I did not know much about the "list," but I knew that if we were on the list it meant we got to go to America, and from what I heard that was something to look forward to. That night I dreamt of having a great feast; eating kissra bread, miris stew, and drinking hilumur. The next morning I woke up early to gather the things I wanted to take. I took my doll which was made out of straw that I had received for my fifth birthday. Before getting on the plane, we were led into a room and people explained to us the things that they have in America such as toilets, showers, phones, and many other items in America that I did not know of.

Once we landed in New York, we looked around and found we were

surrounded by big buildings and lights. In awe, my family and I stared at the sky, marveling at the dark clouds above us and the fluffy white mounds spread out on the ground. It was so cold and we had never seen nor felt anything like it. In Sudan, it was typically sunny and hot. When we finally made it to the place where we were going to stay, called an "apartment," I was amazed at how huge it was. It had a room to cook food in, two other rooms, and a place to go to the bathroom. Back in Uganda, all we had was a tent; there were no rooms. We settled in and lay on the floor, all of us smiling and rejoicing in the fact that we were in the United States.

A week has passed and now that I am in school I realize that being here in America is more challenging than I had thought it would be. I have had to learn so much so quickly. It has been exciting, but I find that my brain is constantly exhausted trying to memorize new words and learn new information. Daily, my teacher shows me pictures, says the words in English, and then I repeat it. My classmates make fun of me for this. There are days that I go home crying and feel so alone, but then I realize how absurd it is to get upset. I realize that if I can live through what I have experienced in my life; escaping a civil war, living in a tent, and moving to a strange new world, then I can do anything. All in all, I am very happy living in America. I have a new friend, named Emma and I am enjoying science and math.

Over time, I have noticed quite a few differences between Sudan and New York. People back home do not have much, but they talk to each other, quite often, even if they do not know each other. Here in America, people are always staring at their "phones," looking down instead of looking around them. I find this very strange. Why not talk to the people next to you? Although America is different, and on a daily basis somewhat challenging, I am clinging to the hope of living what they call "the American dream," and to be given a chance to become something I never thought I could become back in Sudan. My dream of becoming a doctor and helping others is possible.

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Division IV Grades 5 & 6

Student	School	Teacher
First Place		
Heidi Bowman*	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Second Place		
Bailey Christopher	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Third Place		
Joanna Hoffmann	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Honorable Mention		
Marcella Coleman	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Pooja Dubey*	Lakewood Elementary	Carrie Ann Burrows
Nolan Cheek	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Finalist		
Yousuf Ahmed	Hickman Charter	David Meyer
Kaydence Bispo	Lakewood Elementary	Carrie Ann Burrows
Sutton Edeal	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Toni David
Jordan Henry	Sonoma Elementary	Gina Grgich
Ali Hou	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Toni David
Lorraine Mansell	Hart-Ransom Acad Chtr	Susan Janis
Nathalia Martinez	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Michelle Danner
Stella McDaniel	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Toni David
David McCann*	Daniel J. Savage Middle	Kari Caviness
Jacob Miller	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Toni David
Chelsea Paul*	John Fremont Open Plan	Todd Brownell
Ari Sello*	John Fremont Elementary	Dorene Arnold
Maddie Turner	Hart-Ransom Acad Chtr	Susan Janis
Jared Warter*	Agnes Baptist Elementary	Michelle Danner
School Winner		
Elyse Munoz	Salida Middle School Vella	Cara Ornellas

*School winners are awarded to the top essay in a school submitting 10 or more essays in a division

Division III Grades 7 & 8

Student	School	Teacher
First Place		
Rana Banankhah	Independent Student	Susan Janis
Second Place		
Stephen Romano*	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Third Place		
Mora Collins	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Honorable Mention		
Lauren Bowman	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Victoria Blanc*	Oakdale Jr HS	Dee Hawksworth
Aidan Pink	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Finalists		
Jeslyn Chavez	La Loma Jr HS	Juana Rosas
Joseph Edwards	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Francis Evans	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Jason Fritz	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Ashlin Hartley	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis
Emiliano Lopez*	Yolo Middle School	Brandi Decator
Evelyn Martinez*	Turlock Jr HS	Jill Harlan-Gran
Abbygail Morales	Prescott Sr Elementary	Maia Tobin
Skylar Nguyen*	Prescott Sr Elementary	Maia Tobin
Kate Oliveira	Sacred Heart Elem, Turlock	Elaine Magni
Alexandra B Ortiz	Oakdale Jr HS	June Botto
Ximena Perez*	Sacred Heart Elem, Turlock	Elaine Magni
Jordan Robinson	Prescott Sr Elementary	Maia Tobin
Matthew Swehla	Hart-Ransom Acad Charter	Susan Janis

* School Winner

School Winners are recognized for the top essay from a school submitting 10 or more essays in the Division

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 "Weather and Climate: Sudan, average monthly rainfall, sunshine, temperature, humidity, wind speed."

Div IV First Place

Heidi Bowman Hart Ransom Acad Charter Susan Janis Fleeing for Safety

Pain surged through my body and blood gushed down my side, turning the ground where I collapsed into a bloody puddle. I screamed for help. It seemed like hours, but it was really only minutes, before a villager heard my cries and rushed to my aid. He carried me to the home of the local doctor where they managed to stop the bleeding. Healing slowly came. The biggest heartache, however, was not my missing arm. It was the dreadful reality that, for our safety, my family must leave our country.

My sister, Dim-Dim, my mother, Dante, and I, Shreya, live together in our bamboo hut near the southeast border of Myanmar (also known as Burma). We are from the Karen tribe, and our people have long been persecuted by our fellow Burmese. Landmines are scattered around our war-torn jungle, and one day, I had the great misfortune of triggering one. I am very thankful, though, that only my arm was blown off. My father died from a land bomb about a year ago and some people at church are missing multiple limbs.

A loud rap woke me from my sleep. Mother beckoned in the stranger at the door, and they sat down, talking in low tones. After several minutes, Mother stood up and asked, "How would you like to go to America?" Dim-Dim squealed with delight, but my heart sank. I didn't want to go to America, however, I knew it was best for my family's safety.

Mother woke us early in the morning to walk the many miles to the refugee camp which was just across the border in Thailand. We arrived exhausted! The refugee village was repulsive. Trash was littered everywhere and the stench was sickening. Our “house” consisted of several tarps draped over some poles.

I was worried that it would take several months to get all the paperwork, but in four weeks our documents were complete. I had signed all my papers, before we realized Mother and Dim-Dim's documents were missing. Mother told me to continue to America without them, assuring me that she and Dim-Dim would come when their paperwork arrived. I reluctantly agreed, but two weeks later, I regretted my decision. As we said a tearful goodbye, I wept bitterly and rested my head on my mother's shoulder, comforted by her warm hug and kisses. I bid Dim-Dim goodbye and realized how much my family meant to me.

I was weary and overwhelmed when my plane landed in Los Angeles. My caseworker, Kennedy, was at the airport to meet me, along with an interpreter. She told me that World Relief was working to locate an apartment, but, for now, I would be staying in a hotel. In my opinion, most anything would be better than the refugee camp. As soon as we scrambled into the car Kennedy said, "A church group has provided some necessary items to get your started, and a couple people from their group will help you learn basic English." I was so grateful for such kindness!

Now, two months later, I am desperately searching for a much needed job. Every job interview has the same answer: “No.” I feel so disheartened and discouraged. The government has provided a limited amount of money to get me started, and those funds are quickly disappearing. Money is a continual worry. In addition, transportation is a big challenge. I have to rely on public transportation since I don't have a license or a vehicle. Language is another ongoing struggle. While I have mastered some beginner words, I still have much to learn. I have discovered Americans have many unusual expressions that have such interesting meanings. Recently, on a rainy trip to the store, I overheard a lady tell her son it was raining cats and dogs. All I saw were raindrops pouring down. On a positive note, I recently discovered a nearby market that sells Burmese food. It is very comforting to have food such as Mohinga, my favorite rice noodle and fish soup.

Division III (Grades 7-8) & Division IV (Grades 5-6)

Imagine what it might be like if you live in another country and need or want to leave your homeland to come to the United States.

Write a fictional narrative that shares the story of a person from another country coming to the United States today as either an immigrant or refugee.

Research the country of origin, the immigration/travel process and the experiences that might occur upon arrival. In your narrative of 250-500 words:

- 1) Include the experiences your character faced coming to the United States;
- 2) Give details about the challenges your character experienced when he/she arrived in the United States.
- 3) Describe the experience(s) that made your character feel welcomed and/or uneasy about their new location.
- 4) End your narrative by having your character share his/her hopes for the future.

Division II Grades 9 & 10

Student	School	Teacher
First Place		
Ciara Bargas	Modesto HS	Maggie Monjure
Second Place		
Emily Swehla	Modesto HS	Maggie Monjure
Third Place		
Reza Banankhah	Independent Student	Susan Janis
Finalist		
Gabriela Ambriz	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
George Brady	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
Carson Carranza	Modesto HS	Maggie Monjure
Brian Estrada	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
Gladys Hernandez	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
Emily Machado	Central Catholic HS	Suzi Guina
Janeth Ramirez	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
Maryam Sabri	Whitmore Charter HS	Virginia Aguilera
Grecia Sanchez	Ceres HS	Tracy Pannell
Seth Simmons	Oakdale Charter HS	Jessica Menefee
Lydia Stiles	James Enochs HS	Chris Hayden
Misbah Syed	Connecting Waters Char	Lisa Bender

Although my challenges are discouraging at the moment, I am still hopeful for this chance to start a new life in America. I want to make new friends, go to school, and get a job. I also want to help other refugees from Burma. I miss my family dreadfully, and my deepest desire is for Dante and Dim-Dim to arrive in America. I am very grateful to have a fresh start in America. It has not been easy, but, for the first time in my life, I feel safe!

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Div IV Second Place

**Bailey Chistopher Hart Ranson Acad Charter Susan Janis
 The Believer**

I can hardly believe that I made it to America alive. My name is "Shin," which means belief. I did not have much belief before I came here, to the United States of America.

I was born and raised in North Korea. My family farmed, but the drought shrank our crops greatly. My father had also died in my late teens without leaving my family any money. Because of that, I was only twenty-two years old when I decided to find work. I bribed my way onto a list of government-sponsored painters going to Russia. I arrived in Vladivostok, Russia, and became a house painter. After years of working there and sending my hard-earned money back home to my

impoverished family, I learned that the government was taking almost all of the earnings I was sending back. I overheard a sailor from North Korea gossiping that the painters' families were still starving, and that a group of them were caught stealing food and were publicly executed. He then told his friend the list of names of the deceased families. I heard my family's name spoken. I was devastated, because my family had died.

After processing the horrible news, I decided to make a new life in a new country. A Russian cargo ship captain told me and a few others that America welcomed refugees. I was confused. In North Korea, I heard that Americans were monsters that wanted to kill us! I then thought, "Even if they do want to kill us, it will not matter. After all, I have nothing to lose. I might as well take the chance." I offered to bribe the captain with my savings to take me to America. He agreed, and I was assigned as the dishwasher in the galley. Frantic thoughts continued to run through my mind before we left. "What if he turns me in to the North Korean guards? He may throw me overboard! I hope that he keeps his promise. All I can do is trust and believe that he will."

After five weeks at sea, I arrived in Long Beach, California. I was soon found by a customs agent and I tried to explain to him that I was seeking asylum in America. He began shouting strange words at me and started to shove me to back to the cargo ship. Beads of sweat ran down my forehead. The Russian captain had already helped me enough, what if he took me back to Vladivostok? I would surely be killed! I felt as though I was living in a nightmare. I tried to resist and waved my hands, "No! No!" He finally gave up and motioned for me to stay there. He then ran and found another agent who spoke Korean. The agent led me through a series of immigration steps. Throughout the whole process, I was still distressed. I had no idea how I would find a house and job, but, the immigration office also helped me contact an organization that would help me with this. The organization settled me in a Korean-American neighborhood and put me in contact with a Korean-American social worker who helped me find work.

Several weeks later, I was living in an apartment and was working as a house painter. Even though I lived with the Korean-Americans who spoke my language, I felt out of place. I almost regretted coming here, until I reminded myself that if I went back to North Korea or Russia I would be executed. Although I did not believe that Americans were monsters anymore, they were not very helpful, either. I considered taking English lessons, but could not afford it. Finally, a Korean American neighbor

Division I Grades 11 & 12

Student	School	Teacher
First Place		
William Foote	Turlock High	Abbi Snider
Second Place		
Aimee Gundlach	Independent Student	Susan Janis
Third Place		
Matthew Hesse	Turlock High	Abbi Snider
Honorable Mention		
Adam Gundlach	Independent Student	Susan Janis
Schuyler Becker	Whitmore Charter High	Kelly Hayes
Mehar Nijjar	Modesto High School	Glenn, Kerrie
Finalists		
Melissa Alcazar	Hughson High	Karalee Ruelas
Shelby Benz	Modesto High	Glenn, Kerrie
Bibiana Garcia	Hughson High	Karalee Ruelas
Valeria Hinojosa	Ceres High	Ben Middleton
Stephanie Ino-Cox	Oakdale Charter High	Jessica Menefee
Ryan Jetton	Ceres High School	Ben Middleton
Karina Jimenez*	Ceres High School	Ben Middleton
Sophia Kline*	Hughson High	Karalee Ruelas
Brett Lopez	Hughson High School	Karalee Ruelas
Lexa Ludlow	Oakdale Charter High	Jessica Menefee
Caleigh Martella	Hughson High School	Karalee Ruelas
Jillian Murray	Oakdale Charter High	Jessica Menefee
Desiree Silva	Oakdale Charter High	Jessica Menefee
Kaylee Taylor	Hughson High	Karalee Ruelas

* School Winner

School Winners are recognized for the top essay from a school submitting 10 or more essays in the Division

Division I (Grades 11-12) & Division II (Grades 9-10)

Imagine what it might be to live in another country and need or want to leave your homeland to come to the United States.

Write a fictional narrative that shares the story of a person from another country coming to the United States today as either an immigrant or refugee.

Familiarize yourself with some of the conditions around the world today that might create the desire to immigrate and choose a country of origin for your character.

Research the immigration/travel process and the experiences that might occur upon arrival. In your narrative of 500 – 1,000 words:

- 1) Introduce your “made-up” character, explaining who he/she is, their age, where they are from and why they need or want to leave their homeland. Give enough background information to make the narrative a realistically possible experience in light of today’s current events.
- 2) Include the experiences your character faces coming to the United States
- 3) Give details about the challenges your character experienced when he/she arrived in the US.
- 4) Describe the experiences that that made your character feel welcomed and/or uneasy about their new location.
- 5) End your narrative by having your character share his/her hopes for the future.

in the apartment next to me started to converse with me. I found that he was a kind man, and he began trying to teach me English. He would come once a week, then a few times a week, then every day. He also convinced me to go to the Korean Christian church with him. After attending for a month or two, I began to feel welcomed, normal, and comfortable in my new life. Days turned into weeks, which turned into months, which turned into years. I then moved into a small house in the Los Angeles suburbs.

I am now thirty-two years old. I am still working as a house painter, yet over these many years I have greatly changed. I now have many friends and am active in my community. I often volunteer in community events and I talk to Korean immigrants who are afraid, like I was. In the future, I hope to go to school and pursue a new career. I also have a greater hope that one day, the whole world will have peace. No wars, no poverty, but true peace. In North Korea, I did not have peace or belief. Here in America, though, I am helping others find it, just as I had.

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Div IV Third Place

Joanna Hoffmann Hart Ransom Acad Charter Susan Janis America to an Immigrant

“Miguel, we made it!” said Mama. We are from El Salvador, and have traveled to the U.S. to escape gangs and poverty. It had worsened until we could not leave our house after dark. Papa left a few years ago. Yesterday he sent us an envelope containing money and small books

for learning English. I had no idea the journey would be so hard.

After several several long days of traveling, as well as a few car breakdowns, we were almost there. However, the money we brought with us was running out. We were down to only a few dollars when we reached the Mexican-American border. When we presented our El Salvadoran passports at the border crossing, they said it did not require payment. We were so relieved! Papa was waiting in his rental car, and after a series of big hugs, we hopped in our car and followed him to Los Banos. The eight hours felt like forever to me. He says we will live in an apartment there. I will go to Miano Elementary School, and ride the bus back to the Central Valley Apartments. Papa says he works full-time at a market near the school, and that Mama could work there as well. Being a five-year-old, I did not think I would go to kindergarten. In El Salvador, kindergarten starts at age six. However, the next day I rode the bus to school. There, several boys called me names, but one named Ruben stood up for me. I knew basic English, and he knew basic Spanish, so he helped me understand the teacher. In turn, I will help him learn Spanish. School was very new to me, but Ruben was helpful and welcoming, so he made my first day of school fun.

A few months have passed, and I have found that America was much better than I thought it would be. It is nice to be in a place where gangs do not roam the streets, keeping you inside after dark, and forcing you to pay "rent" if you want to stay safe. Mama calls it "extortion." I am also glad we have electricity, money, and running water. I enjoy school, and my friend Ruben lives near me, so we sometimes have play dates.

One day, I came home, and was surprised to see Mama and Papa home already. I asked Papa why, and he told me that Mama was sick, but he did not know how to help her. In the meantime, I was to stay as far away as possible so I did not become sick as well. Because she was not working, the friendly landlord allowed us some leeway on the rent. Still, I worried about Mama all night. Papa had said that even with TPS (temporary protection status), it would be hard to find medical care. He was trying to find a doctor that would take her, but most were too expensive. I was afraid we would never find a doctor who would look at Mama.

Finally, we located a doctor who we could afford. He examined Mama while we waited anxiously in the lobby. When they finally came out of the examination room, both were beaming. When we asked why, she

And Still They Come

Throughout United States history, millions of people around the world have left their homelands for a chance to start a new life in this country — and they continue to come here to this day. People who come to live in a new country are called immigrants.

Over the past 400 years, immigrants have had many different reasons to come to the United States. Some came to escape war, others for the freedom to practice the religion of their choice. Still others came for the opportunity to own land or simply for a chance to work and escape poverty. Those immigrants we call refugees have come because the conditions in their homeland had become unlivable.

Over the centuries, the United States, and its people, have been more welcoming to some immigrants and refugees than to others. Immigrants must overcome the obstacles of leaving their homelands and all that is familiar to them. Once in the United States they face the challenges of adapting to a new culture, language and lifestyle.

Immigration has added to original Native American cultures a diverse mix of the practices, traditions, customs, and knowledge from a variety of homelands. The United States has become a uniquely diverse culture with the opportunity to represent the best from many lands around the world. The 2018 Peace Essay Contest invites students to research, write, and submit a fictional narrative essay addressing this prompt and following the submission rules.

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said, "Miguel is going to have a sibling!" At that news, we could hardly contain our joy. Mama said that the top names were Ana and Rafael. I want even more to stay in the U.S. now that I will have a sibling. I want to learn better English so I will be able to teach them. When I grow up, I want to make it easier for immigrants to legally make it into the U.S. and stay there. Then, families like us can live without the fear of being separated by deportation. The journey here might have been hard, but it has definitely been worth it.

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