

VFW Patriotic Essays



QCHS seniors tie for first place in audio contest

By Gary Weckselblatt

Two Quakertown Community High School seniors have been chosen as winners in the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy Patriotic Audio Essay competition.

Samantha Norton and Leo Bernabei tied for the best essay at the Post level, according to the commander of the John Rivers Memorial VFW Post 11322.

"Being the commander, I have other judges that listen to the audios and give me the picks," Paul Gerhart said. "This time Samantha and Leo were so close that we actually took it to the membership."

Gerhart praised the youngsters for taking part in the competition, which includes \$2 million in scholarships, including \$30,000 to the national winner.

"I commend them for their drive and their initiative to be involved with a veterans organization," Gerhart said. "It

means so much to the veterans when students actually participate in these programs."

Samantha learned of the essay contest when it was posted in her political science class by her teacher Jonathan Pallone at the suggestion of guidance counselor Eric Gossard.

The theme for the 2017-18 essay is "American History: Our Hope for the Future."

"I'm so passionate about politics and have so many ideas, so I thought this would be a great opportunity," Samantha said. "I'm really surprised that I won."

Pallone said she wrote a "great essay.... I am very proud of her. She is a hard-working student who takes a genuine interest in political Science."

While this is the first time Samantha entered the VFW competition, Leo is a veteran, having been involved with the program since eighth grade when he placed second at the Post level, and

second at the District level out of 800 entries.

"I was thrilled to hear the results and was honored to read my essay for a large group of veterans," he said. "Starting my freshman year, I entered the Voice of Democracy program, their essay contest for high school students. Each year, I have placed either first or second at the Post level."

He described the topics as "engaging" and said "they spur my research of broad issues such as American values and our national history. But above all, I'm deeply honored to represent those who have sacrificed so much for our great country. The veterans I've met through the VFW are some of the nicest people I know, and I'm proud to call many of them friends."

Gary Weckselblatt, director of communications, writes about the people and the programs that impact the Quakertown Community School District. He can be reached at 215-529-2028 or gweckselblatt@qcsd.org.

American History: Our Hope for the Future

By Samantha Norton



It is approximately 7:15 a.m. as the bell rings, finally waking me up in preparation for yet another long day in school. My peers and I rise and recite the words we and every other American know by heart: our Nation's pledge.



As I am proudly making my pledge to America, in the corner of my eye, I notice a student sitting down. This student is not only sitting, but on their phone as well. The other students and I descend back into our seats while our teacher introduces the next topic. However, I

am not able to focus. I sit perplexed as to why this student remained seated. My thoughts drift, and I begin to contemplate the state of our Country.

Today, through all forms of media, we see public figures and celebrities kneeling when the pledge or anthem is playing at sporting and other public events. Individuals kneel or sit and some athletes remain in their locker rooms while fans sing the our National Anthem. Recently, Pitts-

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By Leo Bernabei



Today in the United States we live in a turbulent time: an ever-changing, interconnected world, filled with complicated politics and an economy which seems to benefit too few at the cost of the masses. Despite this, I offer you my basis on why I have never been more hopeful about the future of our great country.



The American people have always been a forward-looking, problem-solving, optimistic, and above all, patriotic people. No matter our social class, economic elevation, race, or

gender, we are all united by the common bond of our love of country. We are willing to give up time, energy, and even our lives to make this Union more perfect. Every time that we recite our Pledge of Allegiance and National Anthem, we are standing up for the core values of our republic: a just legal system, equal protection for *all under the law*, *freedom of speech*, and *the pursuit of happiness*.

In tumultuous times like this, it is necessary to look back on

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our history and listen to the voices of average Americans. They are the ones who save us in times of trouble.

The year is 1861 and the Civil War has just begun. Union Major Sullivan Ballou is in Washington, D.C. preparing for battle with his comrades in the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry. It is a mucky June day in the nation's capital, exacerbated by the warring fears of soldiers. The nadir of our country, faith in government is at an all-time low, and hostilities between fellow Americans have never reached this high. Sensing the end is near, Sullivan pens a letter to his wife, Sarah. Let us listen to an excerpt from this letter.

My very dear Sarah:

The indications are very strong that we shall move in a few days—perhaps tomorrow.

... If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt.

Sarah, my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break; and yet my love of Country comes over me like a



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strong wind and bears me irresistibly on with all these chains to the battlefield.

Sullivan Ballou gave his life fifteen days later during the First Battle of Bull Run.

We remember Sullivan as someone whose love of country rose above all else, and he paid the ultimate sacrifice for the welfare of the greatest nation on Earth. Over 150 years later, Ballou's spirit still holds strong in the hearts of all Americans.

One such American, twenty-four year old Welles Crowther, was starting his career as an equities trader in the South Tower on September 11th, 2001, although he hoped one day to become a firefighter. Minutes after Flight 175 struck his building, he called his mother, leaving a brief, albeit calm message saying, "Mom, this is Welles. I want you to know that I'm OK." This was the last time the Crowther's heard from their son. He raced up to the 78th floor sky lobby where he encountered a group of survivors and carried an injured young woman down seventeen stories to safety. By the time he returned to help others, he was only recognized by the red bandana he wore, which was given to him by his father when he was four and protected him

against the toxic smoke and fumes in the World Trade Center. With even firefighters evacuating, Welles was spotted moving upward shortly before the tower collapsed.

Six months later, while sifting amid the rubble in Lower Manhattan, crews recovered the body of a man in a red bandana. In the ensuing months, Welles's parents received calls from over a dozen survivors, who only could remember that "a man in a red bandana" led them to safety. Welles was never able to entertain his dream of becoming a member of the New York City Fire Department, but what he did on September 11th serves as his legacy.

Americans like Major Ballou and Mr. Crowther, who believed in America even at its lowest points, are the reasons we stand here today. Their spirits carry on in all of us – especially you – the veterans, who carried on the mission of defending and protecting the United States at home and abroad, and those like Sullivan and Welles, who never made it back. It is the essence of these Americans that gives me hope for our great country, and leads me never to doubt that our best days are yet to come.



Norton

burgh Steeler offensive lineman, Alejandro Villanueva, emerged from the Steelers' locker room alone to honor the the Anthem as it rung throughout their stadium. However, after negative media lashback, Villanueva confessed that he was sorry and explained how embarrassed he felt. Villanueva, who is an Army Veteran, apologized for honoring America by reciting the National Anthem. An Army Veteran apologizing for saluting the Country he served is simply outrageous. To sports fans, young and old, this is not only detrimental to American morale, but also adds fire to the perpetual flames of separation we have burning across our Country.

Protesters say they sit because they refuse to show pride to a Nation that oppresses people of color. What once stood as a symbol of patriotism, unity, and pride now has become a symbol of hate, a symbol of distrust, and a symbol that divides Americans.

Protesters accuse our pledge and anthem of containing hidden, racist connotations. So, now I wonder how Francis Scott Key, creator of our National Anthem, and Francis Bellamy, creator of our Pledge, would feel about this criticism. Both salutes are said to be written for pure Americanism with the intention to produce unity and patriotism throughout our Country.

It is undeniable that America's past regarding people of color is a dark one. It is also undeniable that there are still clouds of racism that loom over our society today. These clouds devastate our society and have brought us to where we are today--completely ununited. So, while I understand and empathize with those who feel victimized due to the color of their skin, as it is completely unjust, protest against racism and discrimination should not be done during our

National Anthem as it is a symbol for those who have lost their lives fighting for this Country. It is not the time or place for protest, this creates even more divisiveness and unrest between citizens.

As the granddaughter and great granddaughter of a World War II and Vietnam War Veteran, this is disrespectful to me. Standing for the pledge or anthem is a simple sign of gratitude and respect for those who give up their lives, their safety, and their families for the well being of others. Veterans and soldiers have the integrity and bravery that very few Americans obtain, it is so important to try and serve them just as they serve us. We take our lives for granted, we focus on the negative things happening around us, this clouds our judgement and we forget to acknowledge their ultimate sacrifice. This is also why it is so important to take a few seconds out of our day to stand, and honor the pledge, no matter the color of your skin.

With that said, this is my hope for our future:

I hope for a future where each and every child grows up loving this Country. I hope for a future where each and every person looks at one another, and only sees greatness. I hope for a future where we build each other up, not tear each other down. I hope for a future that brings tranquility and compromise between every race and gender. I hope for a future where each and every citizen feels safe and protected. I hope for a future that holds the answers to today's social issues. I hope for a future where we are completely united, because with unity comes strength, as Abraham Lincoln once said, "America will never be destroyed from the outside if we falter and lose our freedoms it will be because we destroyed ourselves". One day, I hope that Americans can rejoice in patriotism and unity.

God Bless America.

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