

2024 Javedd Khan Essay Prize Winners



2024 JKE Prize First Place Winner: *Irene Hernandez*

Choose Your Hard

I was raised by a strong, single mother raising eight children all on her own. All eight children, including me, have lived in a one-bedroom apartment for most of their lives, with nothing but hopes of making it out. All eight of us have so much potential, but we've grown up in an uncomfortable environment where indolence is accepted. For a substantial amount of my life, I had the mentality that I've been set up from the start, that the stack of cards I've been dealt has been tinkered with and sabotaged to the point of no return. I'd tell myself that there's no way I'm making it out of the ghetto, thus I'd use my struggles to sulk in self-pity. That was, of course, until I realized one thing: I was looking at it wrong; I realized that what was holding me back was the reason I had to keep going.

I don't want to live this way forever but if I had continued with the mentality I had a mere year ago, I would've. Further, I remember the day I realized what I wanted to do with my life, at age seven. I received a phone call from my mother asking if I was okay. She then

went on to explain she saw a video of me crying on my iPad. I had watched Vampire Diaries and reenacted a scene with the character crying a few days prior so when she called me, I was enthralled. I made her believe that I was going through everything I had said in the video. The same day I decided to become an actress was the same day I was discouraged. I read that there's a 2% chance that I could make a living out of acting. To add to my hesitation to turn my passion into my career, my family had a tradition, a cycle we were not allowed not break. The tradition was to go for a guaranteed career; the tradition was to not take any financial risks as we didn't have the finances to do so. My mother was a stay-at-home mother while my dad was a waste collector. Most of my older siblings are van drivers. Not one individual in my big family is in the entertainment industry or anywhere close to what I want to be. I remember telling my family my dream. I told my grandparents first and the face they made is something I don't think I'll ever forget. They were kind to me every day but the day I confessed. They blatantly told me it'd be better if I became a teacher. One of my little brothers told me I'd never make it to the big screen. My mother simply lowered her head and didn't say a word. My father laughed as he thought I was kidding. Not one person believed in me or my capabilities. So, I did what I thought was the most logical thing to do: I gave up on that dream.

I had never been so depressed in my life. I hit an all-time low researching teachers and their salaries and education levels. It wasn't the teacher role that saddened me, it was that I would have to do something I didn't want to do for the rest of my life. I would continue to live my life with the question, "What if?" What if I got famous? What if I just tried? What if I stand up for my passion? Fortunately, after giving it more thought, I snapped out of it. I wrote in my notes, "Choose your hard." It's hard to live in a one-bedroom apartment with seven other people. It's also hard to pay bills in a mansion. It's hard to become an actress, yet it's hard to be homeless. Everything is hard but nothing is impossible. From that day on, I decided to be proud of the bed I made, instead of complaining about it. From that day on, I decided to choose my hard.

Additionally, I started looking at tradition much differently. Tradition can certainly be a good thing, but sometimes, if it stops you from doing what makes you happy, then it's time to let it go. Traditions are just that: beliefs that carry on from one generation to the next, but society is advancing. Time is changing everything, including mindsets and perspectives. While my family is still not encouraging, they've grown to accept that I'm chasing this path, and I'm content with that. And maybe I'll be famous. Maybe I won't, but at least I'll be doing something that I love.

Overall, the situation I'm in is difficult, to say the least, but letting a difficult obstacle to jump over determine my future would be ignorant. I am here, twelve years later, with improved acting, communication, memorization, and creativity skills. I am here, twelve years later, and I'm still fighting. My stamina's full, my energy has stayed on a constant high and that's not going anywhere. Again, there's a 2% chance I can make a living off acting but a 0% chance if I had just given up then.



2024 JKE Prize First Place Winner: *Jalisa Martinez*

They Are More Than Traditions, They Are My Identity

Thoughts such as, “Who are you, but no more than the son or daughter of your country?” or “Those who do not love their country, do not love their mother” are part of the Puerto Rican mentality. That is the mindset of born and raised Puerto Ricans, specifically. Those are the sentiments that are ingrained in our brains when growing up. Since early childhood, we have been taught to love our country, our land, and our people, embrace our traditions and pass them down from generation to generation.

Many may know that Puerto Ricans are patriotic, and many have witnessed cars and buildings with Puerto Rican flags, all over the place, displaying said pride. They may have even attended to the iconic New York Puerto Rican Pride Parade. But what people may not know is the reason behind that immense love for our country. Behind that Puerto Rican pride, hides the grief and sorrow lived by our ancestors, who were punished for just existing and being Puerto Rican. It was not long ago that it happened.

In 1898, the Spanish-American War happened, and as a result of the war, the United States of America gained many territories after defeating Spain, and among those territories was Puerto Rico. Ever since we have been a modern colony, the only thing making it modern is

the times, not the treatment. The US government tried everything it could to erase our Puerto Rican identity. From forcing us to only speak English, criminalizing calling ourselves Puerto Ricans and singing our national anthem, to banning our flag. Banning our flag is the reason we have it everywhere now; it is like a trauma-response, or a rebellious sign, more of like a “in your face” type of thing. The government tried hard; however, all their effort was in vain. A revolution began. We fought against them with everything that we had; blood was shed. And a fact not so fun, is that right then, when we started revolutionizing against the US government, they bombed us, making it the first time that US fighter planes attacked US soil. A lot of our people died in several massacres that, still to this day, we commemorate. They will never be forgotten, always remembered. Even if we do not know them by name, we will be forever grateful, because thanks to them we call ourselves Puerto Ricans. Thanks to them we enjoy and practice all our customs and traditions.

Tradition means a lot to us. Our traditions are our identity. When we dance “la bomba” or “la plena” we do not just dance in the moment. Once the drums start to produce rhythm, it rushes through our veins and we start expressing our emotions through dance, we are transported back in time. A time when our African ancestors would forget their grief and sorrow through art, enjoying music and dancing. Additionally, when we cook our traditional dishes, it is incredibly special to us because it is like keeping alive our ancestors’ palate and taste. Another particularly important way we show our culture is through art such as drawings and tattoos, which Taíno petroglyphs are the go-to.

Puerto Rico has an incredibly beautiful and rich history and culture, just like the island itself. And as a result, Puerto Ricans cannot help it; we must appreciate and love our culture and our traditions. I can confidently say that anyone who spends enough time in Puerto Rico would immediately understand Puerto Rican pride. And that is how my traditions not only make me enjoy my heritage but are my heritage and who I am.
