

THIRD PLACE – WINNER OF A \$500 SCHOLARSHIP

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Life is a special, nonrefundable gift. It doesn't come with instructions for assembly or cleaning directions for if you make a mess of it. With life, one size doesn't fit all, everyone's is different. As an individual, you are the one who decides how to use your gift. You are the one who makes the decisions along the way that will affect how your life will turn out. Life is full of different experiences and choices. God gave us the freedom of choice so we can shape and form our lives into whatever we want. God also lets us decide if we want to incorporate Him in our lives. Some will choose to shut Him out, under the belief that they don't need Him, and they can do everything by themselves. However, others will embrace God, and seek unity with Him and his plan for their lives. They will most likely stray from him every once in a while, but with God's guidance, they will seek forgiveness. These are the people who will find their gift of life to be the most satisfying and fulfilling. The mission of unity and reconciliation belonging to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia reflects this idea. I feel it is an important and meaningful mission, and I try to incorporate it in my own life.

I've found one of the most important parts of my life is my family. There are many ways to have unity with God and with each other within my family. Demonstrating unity with each other as a family is essential. If we didn't work together, living together would be impossible. I have three mischievous brothers and one sister. In all there are seven of us. I am the oldest, and two of my brothers are in high school with me. Since we range in ages from eight to eighteen, our schedule can get a little hectic. We are all involved in several activities. My two brothers and I play fall and winter sports; we also are in a variety of school organizations. My youngest brother and sister do gymnastics, my dad is always working on our farm, and my mom works in a hospital. During the week we are all going in different directions, and seem to always be running somewhere. Communication is

key. We all have to be on the same page in order for every day to go smoothly. Something as simple as how we are going to get to school must be planned for. When we work together, we are happier as a family.

Teamwork isn't the only way we show unity. My parents have always believed in praying together as a family before we eat. We aren't always home, but when we are, we wait for everyone to get to the table and we pray. When I was younger, I didn't understand why we had this rule. I was hungry! I didn't see why I had to wait when I could pray to myself faster than with my family. Now I understand the importance of this simple act. After a stressful, busy day, by coming together for a moment just to focus on prayer, I feel more a part of my family unit. It helps me slow down, and appreciate what I have. It's kind of like we all push "pause" and take the time to just be there with each other, and God.

My family certainly isn't perfect. My younger siblings really know how to push my buttons. Every once in a while, we get into fights that leave someone with hurt feelings. Our anger never lasts for long; we always end up making up. We love each other so we are able to apologize and forgive one another. I like to compare that to the reconciliation I seek from God. I know I make mistakes. I fall for worldly temptations. It is extremely comforting to know that I can turn to God after I sin, and ask for forgiveness.

Having unity with my family helps me keep unity with God. I know God gave me each one of the people I call family. When we work together, and are able to forgive each other, it's a beautiful thing. I think that's how God intended it. Interacting with my family positively is a way to praise God. He wants us to work together, and forgive each other. Family is a gift I really appreciate.

Like most teenage girls, I love spending time with my friends. I go to a small high school, with about twenty-one students in my class, Going to school in a small town is great because everyone knows your name. I have the chance to be close to all of my classmates. We have really come together as

seniors this year. We've demonstrated our unity on several occasions.

I remember at the end of my sophomore year, my classmate's mom took her own life. It was a horrible tragedy. As a class we left school, and car-pooled to her funeral. It was pretty powerful to see three pews full of high school kids all supporting one classmate. I felt really good about joining my classmates to be there for a friend. God wanted to comfort him through us, I think. We came together again my junior year when a student in our school was killed in a car accident. In a small school like mine, a tragedy like that really hits home. I was proud of how we comforted each other that day. Our teachers let us leave class to go across the street to church to pray. Most of our school ended up in the pews of St. John's Catholic Church. This year, my class again left school to attend a classmate's grandpa's funeral. Recently, over Christmas break, one of the girls in my class lost both of her grandparents. Most of my class canceled plans to attend the funeral. I'm thankful for my friends, and how close we are as a class. I know we will make the most of our last year together.

Like with any relationship, friendship requires forgiveness sometimes. Even though we are close, our class has had our share of fights and arguments. In fact, we sometimes argue just to argue. Most of us like to use the "forgive and forget" motto, and we're never mad for long.

I usually find myself being the mediator in arguments between friends. I think they find me trustworthy, so they come to me for advice. I try to make sure I'm not judgmental towards anyone who comes to me to talk. Some of my friends aren't Catholic, and they have asked me for advice about problems they are facing. My advice usually includes forgiveness. I feel forgiveness is extremely important. If someone wrongs you, holding a grudge will only be detrimental. I always tell my friends that they will feel better if they just forgive. If you do something to hurt another person, guilt can really haunt you. I know that I always feel better after I apologize.

Life is all about balance. In my life I have to juggle relationships with family, friends and God.

The relationship between God and I deserves special attention. I like to set aside time in my day for just God and me. On nice days, I enjoy going on walks down the country roads by my house. I live on a farm, so the area is very scenic. When I go on walks, I usually don't go for exercise. I go to appreciate the earth's beauty. I like to watch the wheat fields roll like waves in an ocean, and the tree tops dance in the breeze. I like to stand on a bridge and listen to the creek trickle by, as the bull frogs and crickets sing. Sometimes I walk into a pasture, and hike up a steep hill that overlooks our farm. From up there I can see for miles. I love going up there to watch the sunset. Sometimes I get so busy; I don't notice or appreciate them. Sunsets are one of God's most beautiful masterpieces. They are different every time, splashing different variations of pinks, purples, yellows, and blues. When I just sit still long enough to really look at it, I feel much closer to God. That's what I love about living on a farm. I love seeing God in the miracle of nature.

Sometimes I go out alone so I can talk to God. If I am feeling stressed, angry or sad, I find comfort in sharing my thoughts with God. It's easier for me to pray while I'm out in nature, because I feel closer to God. I usually ask Him for help, or forgiveness. I use my walks to help me stay "in touch" with God.

I've only seen eighteen years of my gift of life. I have always tried incorporate unity and reconciliation. Looking ahead, I plan to keep striving for unity and reconciliation in my life. I will make sure I keep my faith when I go to college. I'll continue making friends, and turning to God when things go wrong. I won't be there physically for my family as much, but I will continue to set an example for my younger siblings, serve as someone they can talk to, and continue treating my parents with respect. After college, when I start working, I'll take my beliefs and values into the workplace. When I start my own family someday, I will also make sure I teach them to appreciate the gift of life. I will stress the importance of unity with God and each other, as well as reconciliation.

Life truly is a gift. We all are given different life situations, and talents. I believe that in order to get the most out of your gift, you need to strive to do God's will. God's plan for us isn't always laid out in black and white. Sometimes it takes a little looking, and praying to figure out what it is. God loves us, and wants us to be happy. I really appreciate mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph. I believe unity and reconciliation are important to maintain healthy and holy relationships. There is a need for those things everyday life, and it's up to the individual to decide how they will incorporate them in their everyday life. I take every day as it comes, and always keep God in my heart. I will continue to use my precious gift that is life.