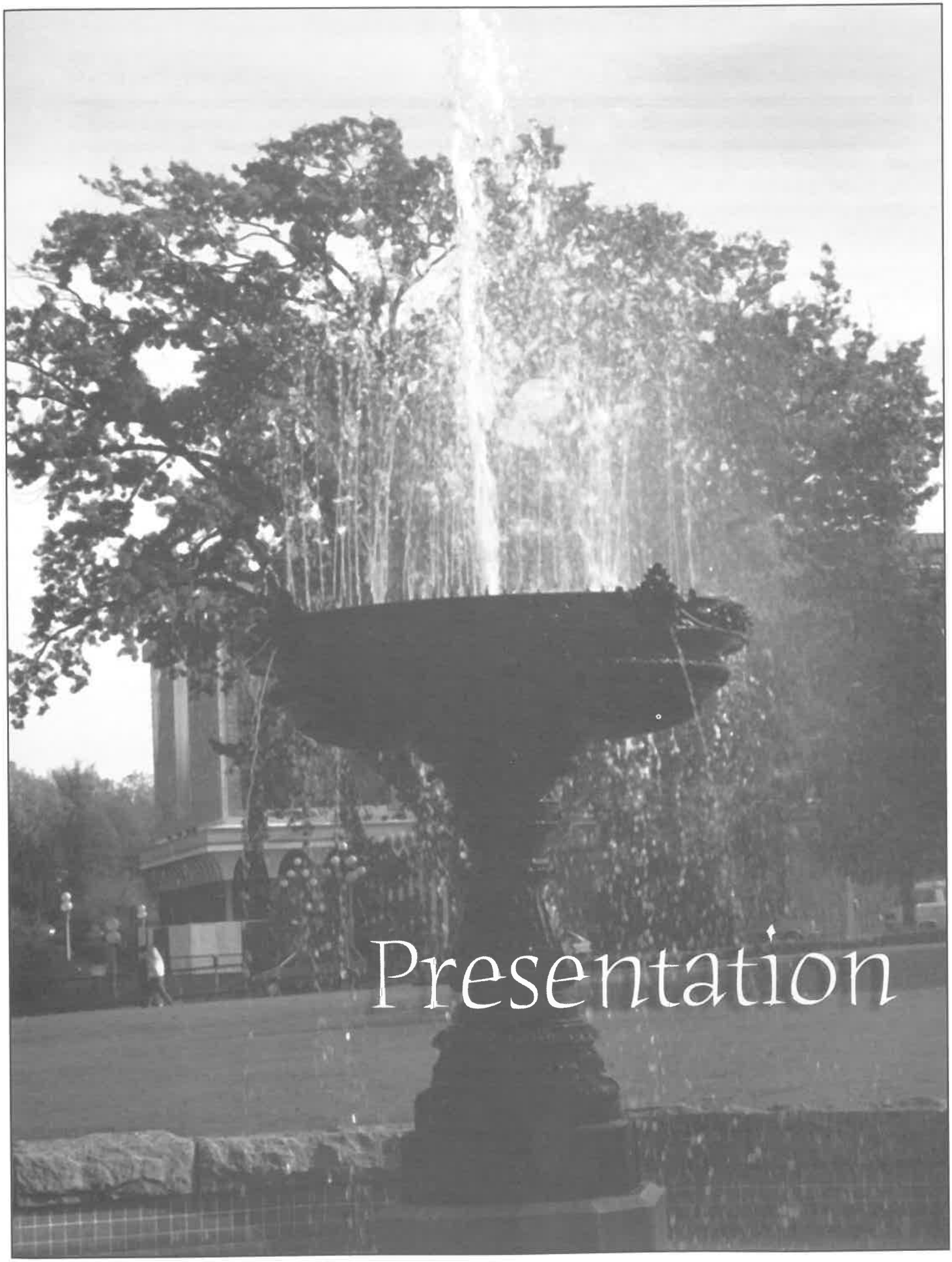

Presentation

Promising Young Writers Award Program

Impromptu Topic: Most of us have difficulty imagining life without a telephone. Think about a piece of equipment such as the telephone, a calculator, computer, VCR, or CD player that you believe you must have. Explain why it is important to you.

Casey O'Brien, Annunciation School, Minneapolis, grade 8

The Mistress

"Oh, my God! Where is it!" I screeched as I frantically looked around.

"I don't know! I don't know! Maybe if you kept this place clean, we would be able to find it," my dad angrily hissed.

"Not now, Dad. We need to find it fast! It's almost time!"

"Casey, you look over there!"

I immediately dropped to my knees and quickly prowled to where my dad had instructed. I scrummaged through a pile of clutter and desperately searched through bins upon bins of junk. Still no success.

When you are searching for something you love which you have lost, you become panicky and frightened. Sometimes violent. The device my dad and I were looking for was beautiful and ingenious, yet so simple. When you held it, you felt a sense of power run through your veins. When you wanted something changed, but were too lazy to do anything about it, it was there for you. When you wanted to find happiness, but you didn't know where to find it, it was there for you. Without it, life would almost be meaningless.

I scrambled around on my knees, frantically searching. I threw my old blanket to the side of the room, in hopes I would find something. And what I saw lying underneath almost brought tears of joy to my eyes. I picked it up and stared at it in joyful silence. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, "The greatest invention created by man has been returned to its rightful owner!"

But all I squeaked out was, "Found it."

"Oh good. Just in time," my dad said, with a grin on his face. I rose to my feet and sat on my futon. I stared at it in its majestic beauty. Then I pressed the power button. It turned on my TV. I sighed with relief, set down the remote and went upstairs to get some chips.

Writing Achievement Award Program

Impromptu Topic A – Lyrical Content of Popular Music

Your local newspaper ran an article criticizing the lyrics of popular music. Yet the lyrics of popular music offer many images which reflect positive perspectives of the human potential. In his song, "Living for the City," Stevie Wonder wrote of the determination of a poor family with these inspiring words, "her clothes are old but never are they dirty."

Identify a theme from one of more of today's popular music lyrics in which you find inspiring images of human behavior. Write a guest editorial for your local newspaper explaining how these images reflect thoughts, values, and acts that you find admirable.

Jenny Holm, Minnetonka High School, grade 11

There are those who argue that today's popular music has done away with the innocent nature embodied by the tunes of "the good old times." They say that the unordered noise blaring out of radios today does nothing but teach disrespect for authority, encourage unlawful behavior and promote sexual promiscuity. While I agree that some current music does seem to condone these things, I feel that I must call the cynics' attention to the overwhelmingly positive messages present in today's music.

Leeann Woemack's "I Hope You Dance" encompasses several life-affirming themes that many unenlightened critics would argue have been lost in the music of twenty-first century society. The song is a collection of dreams the singer has for someone who is moving on to a new stage in life. It begins with her hope that this person will "never lose that sense of wonder" that allows humans to view each day as a new beginning, filled with untapped opportunities and paths yet to be discovered. "To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wildflower," as William Blake wrote at the end of the eighteenth century, is the ability to prevent oneself from getting bored with the world. To possess this power is to hold the key to a fulfilling and rewarding life. The song goes on to remind the person in question to always "keep that hunger," that inner fire that drives humans to make the most of their individual potential. This call to be the best one can be has been heard over and over, as a rallying cry in the Italian Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the US Army. The verse closes with the singer's plea to "never take one single breath for granted." The beauty inherent in every aspect of life on Earth is too precious to experience passively; to be alive is to take part in the intricate mystery of the universe, an experience meant to be savored in every sense of the word. These lessons have been taught for hundreds of years and still retain the same amount of relevance today.

A later verse continues teaching life lessons. "I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance," the singer reminds her audience. The obstacles that loom ahead may seem too much for one person to handle, but with perseverance and determination, they can be conquered. As long as humans "never settle for the path of least resistance," their lives, although they will not be easy, will be far more rewarding than those traveled on the road of convenience.

The refrain of the song serves as a metaphor for life. "If you get the choice," Woemack sings, "to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance!" This one line encompasses all the other lessons of the piece. To simply be alive and to live are two completely different things. Humans should strive to squeeze the every drop of life-essence they can from each experience, not only existing as part of the universe but also actively taking part in it. To revel in the beauty of this world, live each day to the fullest, and stretch one's capabilities to their greatest extent, even if that means overcoming adversity, is to truly live.

As I originally stated, the popular music of the twenty-first century is not entirely devoid of life-affirming themes. Although somewhat more blatant in its teaching of universally applicable lessons than most other songs, "I Hope You Dance" gives a representative sampling of the types of messages that are being presented to young people through music today. With popular pieces such as this on the air, perhaps there is hope for the future after all.

Impromptu: Topic B – Lessons Not Learned in the High School Classroom

In his book All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, Robert Fulghum makes the case that the important lessons of life were shaped in him in his kindergarten class. However, contrary to that notion, many of us can cite times when we learned equally important lessons from experiences outside the regular classroom.

Assume you have received the Student-of-the-Month Award from a local community group. While you are very proud of your school success, you also want the community leaders to know that you have learned valuable lessons outside the classroom. Write your acceptance speech in which you describe one of those lessons and explain what you learned and what it has meant to you.

Ted Anderson, Hopkins High School, grade 11

You know, I'd like to think that I deserve this award purely because of academic achievement. I'd like to think that what I learned at school is what has earned me this high praise. I'd like to think that my grades are the only things that matter–then again, if they are, then that 'B-' I got in Photography will forever haunt the rest of my life.

But grades don't really matter. After college, no one remembers what they got in English, or History, or Biology. You look back, and it all just fades into gray. So while I love my school, and I'm proud of my grades, I don't want to get an award for something as temporary as my high school GPA.

You know what I remember most about tenth grade? I don't recall any of the tests, or the papers, or the homework. I remember my grandfather.

This is where I tell you every inspiring word Grandpa ever said to me. This is where I tell you about the time he told me to keep smiling, or always look ahead, or that beauty is on the inside. But frankly, I don't remember him ever saying something like that, any trite and overused slogan like out of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* . I don't recall any optimistic aphorisms or shiny pearls of wisdom. He didn't ever say anything like that, because the best teachers are those who show but do not tell.

My grandfather was, well, like everyone's grandfather–wrinkly, bright-eyed, hair on top faded into gray, like he'd just forgotten what color it was. He smiled a lot.

I remember him dying when I was in tenth grade, and I remember exactly what that meant to me. I remember trying to remember, trying to piece together everything I knew about him, because memories were all I had. Father of two, one of whom was my mother. Grandfather of two, one of whom was me. Lover of jazz. (He'd seen concerts by Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman both.) Greatest whistler in ten states.

What I remember most is my grandpa trying to remember. Tangled neurons, clogged with plaque. Alzheimer's. I know the medical term. What I remember is the time he and Grandma came over for dinner, and he kept trying to rearrange the plates like it was his house–taking them out of the cabinets, restacking them, putting them on different shelves.

I didn't ever get angry at him, or cry my sinuses out for him. It wasn't so much like I'd lost him, more like he'd lost himself. That's what Alzheimer's is, after all: a loss of memory, recollections fading into gray. You're still there. Your memories aren't.

I remember the week my grandfather died. There wasn't a day I didn't cry myself to sleep. I was remembering my grandfather, and how he remembered.

I know this sounds old. I know you've all heard about how people are sad when they lose their beloved relatives. I know you've lost relatives. I know how you felt; you know how I felt. This is all old hat.

But losing my grandfather was, to me, more than just grief, more than just some simple lesson in holding on to our loved ones. It was about something deeper, more personal. It was about memory.

Everyone tells you that if you remember someone who's dead, they're not really gone. That's wrong. They're gone. Nothing can be done about that. But memory isn't about making people come back to life. It's about making your own life better–your life, and the lives of everyone else.

I could try and dredge up some lesson Grandpa taught me about being the best, or never giving up, or taking responsibility, or something just as preachy and tired. But my grandfather didn't teach me anything as simple as that. He taught me that memory is what shapes this world, that memories of a better time are what drive us to recreate it, that memories of better people are what change us into the best of people.

When a person dies, you want to bring them back. That's what most people feel. You learn to live life to the fullest, to never let a moment pass by.

You have to remember. That's what I learned. You can't bring someone back. Memory is not a substitute for reality–it is a blueprint for the future.

Memories are what we build upon. Memories of ourselves, our past, our families. You are who you are because you know who you were. Losing your memory isn't losing your mind; it's much worse. You forget where you came from, and you forget where you are.

There isn't a day when I don't remember my grandfather. I miss him. But I know he can't come back, and I know that grief can't be the only thing you feel. You forget the past, and your future dwindles. You start trying to live only in the past, and the rest of your life, your future, just fades into gray. You have to remember. That's what Grandpa taught me.

NCTE Writing Contests

Promising Young Writers

This contest is open to 8th graders. Students submit up to a ten page piece of their best writing (prose or poetry) and complete an impromptu essay, written in a supervised 75 minute period. Nominations are sent in early January to NCTE. Thestudents' writing is sent to the State Coordinator by the same deadline. There is a $5 per student entry fee. The number of entries per school is determined by the size of school's 8th grade enrollment. Each school uses its own procedures to select nominees.

Papers are judged on content, purpose, audience, tone, word choice, organization, development, and style. The panel of judges is assembled by the State Coordinator. The naximum number of winners is equal to the number of the state's members in the U.S. House of Representatives.

For more specific entry details see www.ncte.org/student_awards/2003_PYW.shtml

Writing Achievement Awards

This contest is open to 11th graders. Students submit one writing sample of their best work, not to exceed 10 typed, double-spaced pages. Research papers, term papers, or novels will not be accepted. Students also complete an impromptu essay on one of two assigned topics in a supervised setting of not longer than two hours. Nomination forms must be sent to NCTE by mid-January. The impromptu topics are mailed in March, and all best work and impromput submissions must be sent to the State Coordinator by mid-April.

Papers are judged on content, purpose, audience, tone, word choice, organization, development, and style. The panel of judges is assembled by the State Coordinator. The naximum number of winners is equal to the number of the state's members in the U.S. House of Representatives.

For more specific entry details see www.ncte.org/student_awards/achieve.shtml