

Twelve New Jersey high school and middle school students were the winners of the New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS) New Jersey Teen Media Contest in 2018. The contest helps the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development, reinforce its mission to instill a sense of parental responsibility in New Jersey's youth.

Students were honored for their winning entries, which celebrated the students' artistic or written portrayal of what their family tree looked like. The contest was open to all New Jersey high school and middle school students.

1st Place – High School -- Artwork

Mia Tomasino

Piscataway High School

Cherishing Your Family Roots

Teacher: Dorothy Amme



2nd Place – High School – Artwork

Avia Hurley

Piscataway Township High School

My Tree Is

Teacher: Dorothy Amme



3rd Place – High School -- Artwork

Miya Preyer

Pt. Pleasant Beach High School

A Diverse Garden

Teacher: Stephanie Voit



1st Place – Middle School – Artwork

Bianca Lumang

Academy 1 Middle School

My Family Tree

Teacher: Martha Garcia



2nd Place – Middle School – Artwork

Krishna Patel

Academy 1 Middle School, Jersey City

My Family Tree

Teacher: Martha Garcia

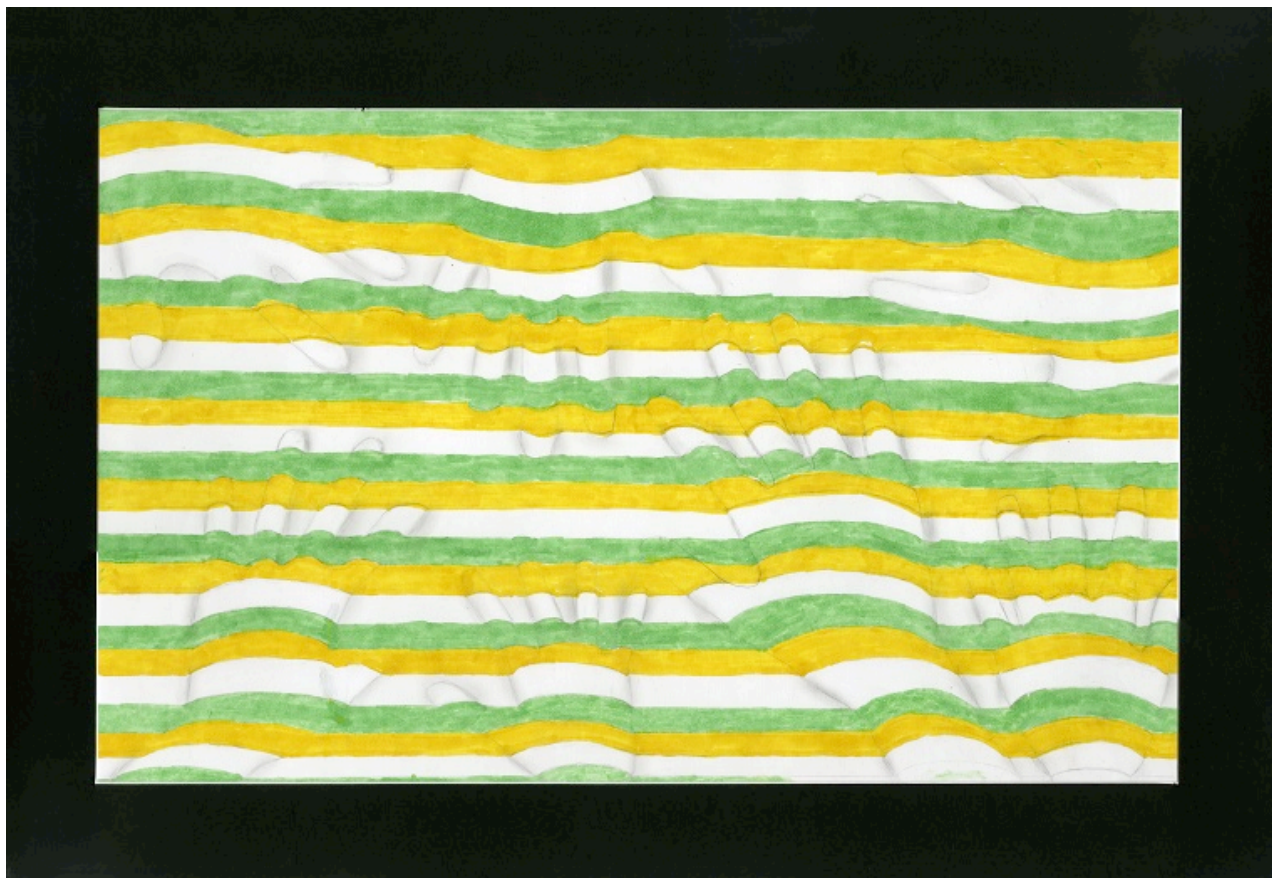


3rd Place – Middle School – Artwork

Kacey Zuniga

Levitt Middle School

Illusion Hand Family Tree



1st Place – High School – Written Word

Sophia Ginet

Ocean City High School

Typical

Teacher: Kelly Cunningham

Typical

With a gleaming smile that illuminates the room,
And an infectious laugh that echoes within the heart,
He's just like everyone else.

Whether he's chanting in the stands with a foam finger,
Or skillfully surfing on the nose of his board,
He's just like everyone else.

Feeling fulfilled from everyday activities with friends,
And hosting romantic dates over frozen delights,
He's just like everyone else.

Splintering boards with a kick in karate,
Or backstroking his way to another gold medal,
He's just like everyone else.

Becoming involved in a variety of clubs,
And donning a dapper tux at prom,
He's just like everyone else.

Whether heartbreaking tears roll down his cheeks,
Or joy bubbles within his soul,
He's just like everyone else.

Loving the wisps of wind streaking his face on a coaster,
And the sun gently tanning his cheeks on the beach,
He's just like everyone else.

While pushing himself to the point of drenched hair during a workout,
Or eagerly awaiting to learn at his desk,
He's just like everyone else.

Cherishing his floppy-eared and fluffy lab,
And the toastily sincere hugs from his family,
He's just like everyone else.

He's an average teenager,
Exploring the spoils and sufferings of life with spirit,
So why do you treat my brother differently because he has Down Syndrome?

2nd Place – High School – Written Word

Hannah Malcolm

Point Pleasant Beach High School

Interlocked

Teacher: Stephanie Voit

Interlocked

Deep and down and tightly wound,
My roots grow stronger and stronger.
But up to the sky and all around,
My branches grow longer and longer.

Through great lightning storms and hurricanes,
No such wind could ever sweep us away.
For the blood is so strong within our veins.
I am reminded of this tree each and every day.

My grandfather tells me oh how I will be bright,
Grandmother tells me it is not worth your worry,
Father tells me never back down from the fight,
And mother tells me I must not hurry,

For “You and your sister have so much to learn,
So much growing and many mountains to move.
Do not let your youth so quickly burn
There is still so much time to improve!”

We are not alone, we are one,
Starting from within, we then expand.
Up and down with waves of the sun
Crashing on the shore exploring the land.

Even moreover there is more than just us,
Forests are filled and rich with love.
Our branches they brush and form a great trust!
It is us and them that make it thereof.

No matter how broken or beaten,
No matter how many branches have snapped,
Life is only something for us to sweeten
And so our roots will forever overlap!

Individuality, it creates us,
Strength, it supports us,
Loyalty, it connects us,
And family, found in the forest, is what makes us.

3rd Place – High School – Written Word

Lauren Mirsky

Ocean City High School

American

Teacher: Kelly Cunningham

American

From Jewish ghetto,

to the bright lights of Ellis Island,

my grandparents sailed towards their American Dream.

Headed for salvation,

only with their life-savings in hand.

They built a life in the Bronx slums,

and tried to assimilate.

America was not just a new opportunity,

it had saved their lives.

The stars they worn on their hearts,

reminded them of what their fate could have been.

As Hitler stole the lives of the rest of their family,

the pair was living comfortably in New York.

In the land of equality,

Their lives were able to be rebuilt.

They were no longer *Jews*,

they were *Americans*.

1st Place – Middle School – Written Word

Isha Shrivastava

Linwood Middle School

Family Has No Boundaries

Family Has No Boundaries

Jolted awake by a heavy weight, I sat up face to face with my sister, Claire. Her curly brown hair was disheveled and she was wearing her purple shirt backwards. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and sat in the heap of blankets for a few seconds, trying to recall what day it was. Oh, no... it was Saturday. Unlike the other kids my age, I hated weekends. To them, it was a time when they could sit at home and watch TV. To my sister and I, it was a time to be feared.

Our Dad would be home, he worked in California during the weekdays, but as soon as he and our mother were put in the same room, chaos ensued.

“Charlie, I’m scared,” Claire whimpered.

Anger shot through my veins- they were fighting again. This isn’t how a five-year-old should be living, in fear of her own parents. Although Claire didn't know exactly what was going on, she understood that it was terrible.

“Don’t worry,” I cooed, “I’m right here,” I rubbed her back, setting her into my lap and covering her with a warm blanket. “Did you eat breakfast yet?”

She shook her head, “Mommy was mad that I not practice piano yesterday, so she yelled at me to do it before breakfast. I not wanting to, so Mommy got angry.”

“You didn’t say anything more to her, right?”

“No. I stay quiet.”

“Good. Remember, don’t say anything otherwise Mom will become more angry,”

I had stopped bothering to correct my sister’s grammar, there wasn’t any time to. I had to do all the shopping and make sure we both got to school on time. It was a relief that Dad provided us with enough money and Mom took care of the bills, otherwise we’d be in a dump.

My stomach then growled, reminding me of a breakfast I have yet to eat. I tiptoed to the upstairs fridge, quickly grabbing the can of milk I left there last night. Re-entering my room, I took a box of cereal, two bowls and spoons from my drawer. While I poured the milk and cereal, Claire put her ear to the carpeted floor.

“It’s quiet,” she whispered.

We simultaneously sighed in relief, but I still had to go downstairs and check. Once I made sure every room was empty, I brought the food that would be our lunch and dinner and stored it in the little fridge. In the process, an orange post-it note caught my eye. This was the only way Mom communicated kindly with her daughters, while Dad actually spared the time to have conversations with us.

*Will be back at 9 PM. Gone to work.
Your Dad has gone grocery shopping.
He'll be back at 4, and his flight is at 8.*

Rolling my eyes, I crumpled the paper and chucked it into the recycling bin. I glanced at the clock, which now read 2:30 PM. We had time.

"Claire! It's time to do your homework!"

Monday came around and I was overjoyed to go back to school.

"CHARLIE!" I was once again attacked, this time by my best friend, Ava Mori.

"Hi, Ava!" I managed to squeeze out, as we headed to first period.

During lunch, Ava asked me the usual question: "So how was your weekend?"

"It was fine," I glumly replied.

"Ah, okay,"

I could tell that she was suspicious, but she shook it off, "That's why you should've come with my family on the hiking trip! Well, at least you got to spend quality time with Claire! You two are so close! My brother barely acknowledges me," she shook her head, smiling at me.

I smiled back and continued to eat the tasteless cafeteria food. I discreetly glanced at Ava's cheese and mushroom ravioli, making sure that she didn't notice. Unfortunately, I failed, because three pieces of perfectly cooked pasta were plopped onto my tray. I stared at her with both my eyebrows raised, and she countered by shoving a ravioli in my mouth. Shortly thereafter, the bell that signaled lunch was over, rang.

"See you after school! Same time, right?" Ava yelled across the crowded hallway.

"Of course!"

I was supposed to be at Ava's to tutor her at 5:30, two hours after I got back from school. It was still 4:30, so I had to pick up Claire from the bus stop, made sure she ate, and did her homework. Then I'd bring her to Ava's with me, as there was no way I'd leave her at home by herself.

"Charlie!" Claire attacked me with a hug as she ran off the bus and almost threw me off balance. I lifted her onto my back and she giggled, burying her nose in my neck.

"I want chocolate ice cream today!" she whined.

"We only have strawberry,"

"Hmmm, that's fine,"

I smiled to myself as I set her down on front of the steps of our house and unlocked the door.

At 5:30, Claire and I biked to Ava's house, which was pretty close to our house, thankfully. As we approached the white, two story house, surrounded by beautiful flowers and tall trees, the smell of cookies reached my nose. I kept our bikes in the house's open garage while Claire went and rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, a woman answered the door.

"Charlie! Claire! It's so nice to see you two again. I can't thank you enough for agreeing to tutor Ava, Charlie!" she greeted us.

"Thanks Mrs. Mori, but it's my pleasure. Ava is my best friend anyway..." I trailed off.

Mrs. Mori ushered us in and we walked upstairs, into Ava's room. Ava was there, along with a box of pocky sticks and a bowl full of potato chips. Her textbooks and notebooks were laid out on the fuzzy unicorn rug I bought her for her last birthday.

"Hey! Thanks for always coming!" she grinned and patted a spot on the rug next to her. I sat down, and Mrs. Mori went downstairs with Claire to watch a Disney movie.

About two hours later, when I finished teaching Ava the mystery which is graphing functions, and finished all the pocky sticks, we sprawled out on her bed.

"Dude, you're so smart! What's your secret?" Ava joked.

"I guess I have a lot of time to study, aside from taking care of Claire," I laughed.

"You take care of Claire?"

"Yes,"

"All by *yourself*?"

"Yeah, well, it's not like Mom cares, and Dad's too busy,"

"What do you mean by that? Are your parents not around?" Ava's eyes were as wide as her Mom's china plates.

"It's nothing..."

All of a sudden, Mrs. Mori came running into the room, "Claire started crying as the movie finished, and she keeps on saying something about you and your Mom. I can't get her to stop!"

Without even hearing the rest of Mrs. Mori's words, I thundered down the steps and scooped Claire into my lap.

"Claire, it's okay," I cooed,

"It is never okay, you always say that but Mommy and Daddy keep on being mean to each other and they don't like us and Mommy always tells me that she's gonna go away and I just wanna have a Mommy like Merida in Brave! Her Mommy was mean in the beginning but then she turned nice! Why does our Mommy not do that?" she wailed.

At this point Mr. Mori had come back from work and Ava's brother, Mark, left his mess of a room to see what all the commotion was about.

"Shhh... Claire..." I didn't dare look at Ava right then, because I knew accusation would be on her face. I knew that she'd be furious that I never told her anything.

When Claire finally stopped crying, she had fallen asleep. Mr. Mori picked her up from my lap, put her on their leather sofa, and covered her with a thick blanket.

"Charlie, I think we need to talk," Mrs. Mori said quietly.

We all sat down at the patio table in the backyard. No one said a word, and I was just looking at the cherry blossom tree, observing the little green buds and imagining how they'd look like in full bloom. Although I've seen them every year, the memory always fades away.

"Charlie. We'd really like to know what's happening at home, if that's fine with you," Mrs. Mori murmured. Everyone nodded, even Mark, who I believed was sixteen now and "didn't need to talk to girls."

After loads of poking and prodding from the Moris' I ended up "spilling the beans." I explained that my parents frequently argued and seemingly hated each other. Blinded by that hate, they grew distant from their daughters. Amidst all the drama, we still tried to love them and get them to function as a family. That backfired though, and led to the two of them taking out their anger on us as well.

"I think we've all," Mrs. Mori gestured to the rest of her family, "agreed that you and Claire will stay at our house until everything's sorted out,"

Once again, everyone nodded.

"Thanks for the offer Mrs. Mori, but all our stuff is back at the house, and even though Claire and I'd love to sleep over, I really don't want to make things hard for you."

"No darling, you're not making anything hard for us- and to address the fact that your necessities are back home, we can just go and get them."

As Ava and I were in our sleeping bags, side by side, she asked, "Why didn't you tell me about your situation before? Then my family could've helped you a long time ago,"

"How?" the coldness in my voice even surprised me.

"Hey, you can always talk about these kind of things with me, we're the best of friends," Ava whispered, a sympathetic expression on her face.

“You really don’t understand this, do you? Look, your life is perfect. Your family doesn’t hate you, and you all love and support each other. You guys go on trips and take pictures and talk together! My family? If we can actually be considered a family, throw poisonous words at each other. Claire and I, we don’t live with our parents. We don’t know those people anymore. They have left us alone, and spend their time at work or shaking up the house with their arguments. It’s just so unfair!” and with that, I burst into tears.

“I know it may seem impossible, but you have to be strong. Be strong for Claire. Be strong for your parents. Be strong for yourself. It might seem like there’s no hope and everything will collapse, but you have us by your side- me, my Mom, Dad, brother, and Claire. Soon enough, we’ll show your Mom and Dad that they should be by your side too!” Ava declared.

I could only smile at her through my tears, there was nothing left for me to say.

In a few days, the weekend came around. The day the Moris’ decided to let Claire and I sleep over was a Sunday, the day Dad left for work again. Mom wouldn’t have noticed our disappearance during the weekdays. After all, she came home late and never bothered checking on her daughters. Only hours after agreeing to Mrs. Mori’s proposal, we went back to our house to pick up some important items, such as our brushes, toothpaste, clothing, our school supplies, and other belongings. Dad was probably on the way to the airport, and Mom wasn’t home, so we executed our task efficiently and effectively.

Suddenly, putting a damper on my bright mood, I remembered, that since it was the weekend, Mom would probably wake up and notice that the other two residents of the house were nowhere to be found. I relayed this piece of information to Mrs. Mori, but she replied with a serene smile and a not-so-reassuring, “don’t worry about it darling.”

Just then, Mark and Mr. Mori walked into the kitchen where Mrs. Mori, Ava, and I were standing.

“We bought chocolate cake!” Mark sang.

Without a moment of hesitation, Ava jumped at her brother for the box of cake. He was almost six feet tall, so Claire joined in by trying to climb up his legs. Mark remained unfazed and waddled his way through the kitchen, holding the cake above his shoulders. Because I was greeted by this hilarious sight after turning around from helping Mrs. Mori take out six plates and forks, I could only giggle.

When our bellies were full to the brim with delicious chocolate, Ava and I lay down on her unicorn rug. It was peaceful and quiet until the melodic sound of the doorbell ringing brought Ava to her feet.

“I’ll get it!” she yelled.

An unpleasant surprise was waiting for us behind the oak door; it was my parents. Ava just stood there for a couple of seconds before Mr. and Mrs. Mori came to the rescue. Claire and I were still in the living room with Mark, who was trying to distract Claire so she wouldn’t go running to the front of the house.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, what brings you here?” Mrs. Mori said cautiously.

“Well, we can’t seem to find Claire and Charlene, and we’re really worried about them. Your family is the only other family who know our girls so well, so we just wanted to let you know to keep a lookout for them. Also, by any chance, do you know where they could be?” Dad spoke up.

“They are actually staying at our house, and have been since Sunday. Why is it that you have only noticed now?” Mr. Mori questioned.

Our parents looked visibly relieved yet confused, but Mr. Mori continued, “Maybe you two should join us for dinner. There’s a lot we need to discuss.”

Everyone was seated at the dinner table, except for Mrs. Mori- who was cooking, Mark who was setting the table, and Ava- who was helping Mrs. Mori. Claire instinctively took a seat far away from our parents, and I followed suit. The room was completely silent as Mrs. Mori and Ava set dishes such as spring rolls, miso soup, teriyaki chicken, yakisoba noodles, tempura, and more in front of us. Only when Mrs. Mori finally sat down did the polite conversation between the adults start.

Minutes passed, and Mr. Mori was becoming agitated by our parents’ relaxed faces and voices. “I believe we should explain to you why your daughters were staying at our house.”

“Yes, please do,” I could tell Dad had put on his “businessman voice.”

“Due to the fact that the two of you are neglecting the needs of your daughters and paying more attention to your selfish selves, we decided to let them stay with us for a while. Until you become suitable parents again, we won’t let them go back to living in such a destructive environment.” Mrs. Mori interjected.

“I’m sure Claire and Charlie want to come back home though...” Mom said unsurely.

Unbeknownst to me, I had begun glaring at Dad. After hearing Mom’s words, however, I turned that glare onto her.

“Do we really? You guys never speak to us, leave us alone, and never show any love for us. We only feel your presence when we’re curled up in bed with the blankets over our head, trying not to hear the screaming and shouting from downstairs. How are we supposed to live in fear that both of you will divorce and leave us? Who will take care of us then? Oh, right, you guys weren’t caring for us either. How are we supposed to feel loved and protected? How are we like a family? Furthermore, you must have forgotten that I am only 10 years old, and Claire is only 5. It’s not easy for us to manage by ourselves if you abandon us, and that’s why the Moris’ helped us. They’ve been more of a family to us than you two ever have!” my voice grew louder and stronger until I was bellowing.

My parents sat there, eyes wide, brows raised, and mouths open. I guess they haven’t interacted with me enough to know that I was actually capable of speaking. Claire was beside me, nodding at my harsh words, as if she understood exactly what I was saying.

Nevertheless, I perceived that she did understand the key parts, because she stood up and shrieked, “Mommy and Daddy are bad guys and they don’t like me so I don’t like them!”

“Charlie, Claire, I didn't know you felt like this. I know that work is making it seem like we ignore you and don't give you any attention, but you are my precious daughters, the stars in my life. That doesn't justify my actions, but I still love you both so very much. Thank you for being strong-” Dad broke off, choking back a sob.

“I'm so sorry as well. Your father and I haven't been getting along that well right now, but I assure you both, that it'll change. We'll definitely become the family you've always wanted. I am so sorry Charlene and Claire” Mom sniffled.

It's only been a few weeks since this whole incident, and I've started to notice tremendous changes. I'm spending more time with my family, which sadly means less time with Ava. On the bright side, Dad can work from home now, so we won't be left alone. Mom is starting to come back home earlier and makes dinner for us, and is even thinking of hiring a babysitter for Claire. I cannot express my gratitude to the Mori family enough, because they turned my lopsided life back into its place. I've learned that families expand and become stronger in times of stress and sadness, and concluded that the Moris' are part of my family too. On the other hand, my parents have learned that they both have to work together to enhance and fix their children's futures.

2nd Place – Middle School – Written Word

Davian Small

Memorial Middle School

Word to the Wise

Teacher: Karen Maks

Word to the Wise

Energetic

Bouncing off the walls
And running quickly he is
He's energetic

Competitive

Two members compete
One challenging the other
Still love each other

Lazy

Laying on the couch
Realizing I need something
I'll ask my siblings

Hard-Working

Comes home after shift
Walks in and sees craziness
Still has strength to share

Resilient

Sister looks alright
But, on the inside, is stressed
Yet still watches us

Wise

She thinks on her feet
And can always solve problems
She is very wise

Caring

Hear the sound of hurt
We all come running to help
That shows that we care

Bright

Can answer questions
And puts logic into it
We are very bright

3rd Place – Middle School – Written Word

Kelsey Besser

Olson Middle School

Never Ending

Teacher: Jean Drozd

Never Ending

There's trust in our family tree,
and happiness around.

Its roots are strongly planted
in the rich and dark soil.

We love the droplets of water
and a beam of sunlight,
and when a leaf tumbles from our tree,
together we blow in the wind.

Yellow, green, brown, red and orange,
Our leaves grow different colors.
My family tree is very unique.
It expresses what we feel on the inside.

Our tree is never ending.
Never ending with life,
Never ending with love,
Never ending with hope.