

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 2022. 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 the theme – *how they and their loved ones supported each other through all of the changes that have happened during the year*. This included things like remote schooling, the pandemic, and finding new ways to stay connected with friends and family.

The contest was open to all New Jersey high school and middle school students.

1st Place – High School -- Artwork

Olatomi Gabriel

Freehold Township High School

Words of Encouragement



2nd Place – High School – Artwork

Yaxuan Wang

Livingston High School

Journey of the Music

Teacher: Quinling Guo



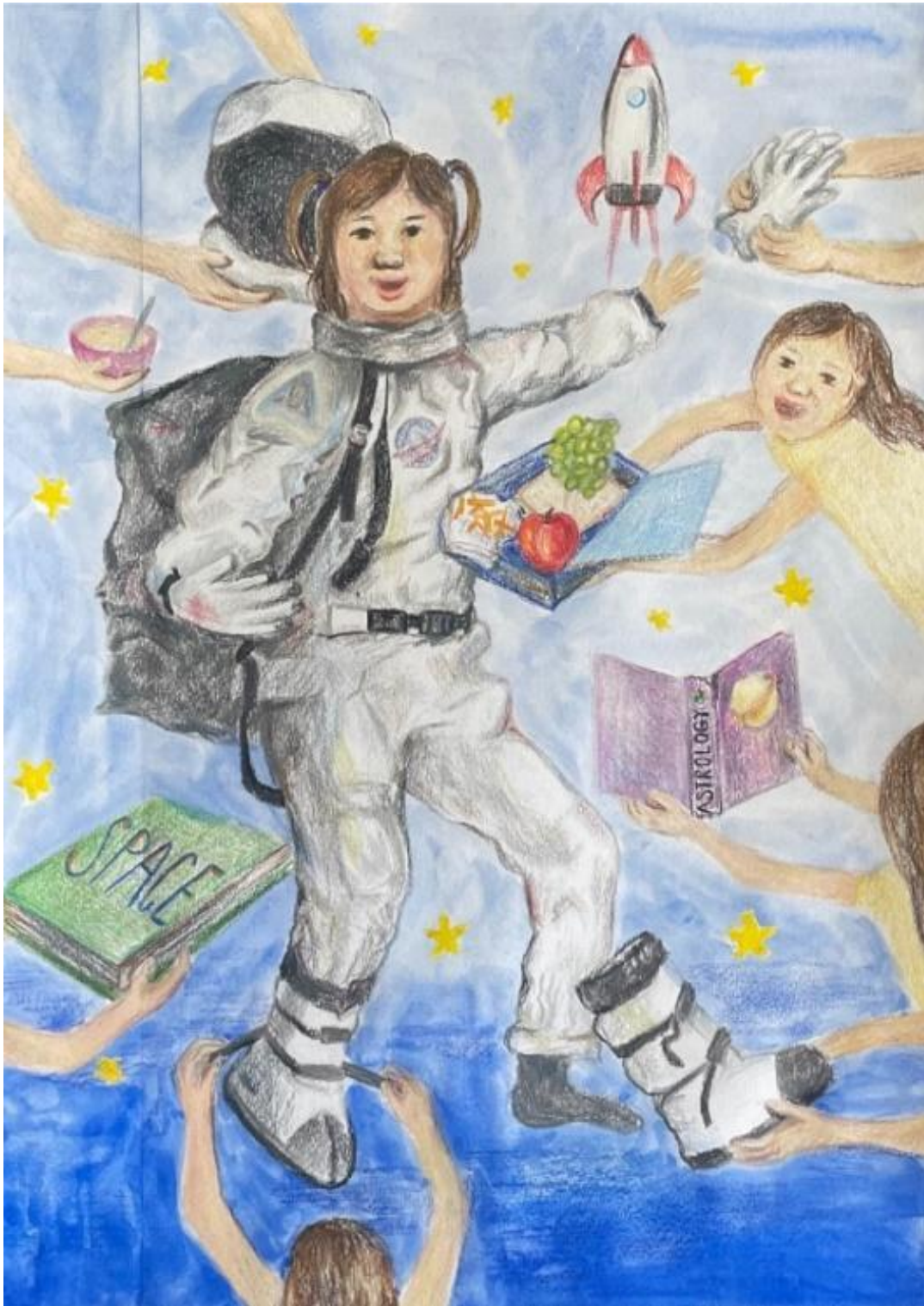
3rd Place – High School -- Artwork

Erin Park

Bergen County Academies

Supporting Hands

Teacher: Hye K. Choi



1st Place – Middle School – Artwork

Yoojin Jeon

East Brook Middle School

Encourage for the Artist's Future

Teacher: Kristi Dreher



2nd Place – Middle School – Artwork

Sharon Lee

East Brook Middle School

Precious Support

Teacher: Kristi Dreher



3rd Place – Middle School – Artwork

Hajin Kim

Brookside Middle School

Love of Family



1st Place – High School – Written Word

Samma Faragalla

Dwight Morrow High School

My Hair and I

Teacher: Anna Markowski

My Hair and I

Wow, it feels exactly like the silver sponge my mom uses to clean our pots. Those words hit me so hard. I could remember all the times the girls in my predominantly white elementary school would make remarks about my hair. Even though their intentions were not bad, those words affected me so much that I still carry the weight of their words.

I have never had a materialistic dream; instead I have always dreamt of gaining confidence in my hair. To me, my hair has consistently been what has defined me. It is the most important feature of my melanated body. Coming from African descent, our hair has always been used as a symbol in societies. A simple hairstyle could tell you so much about a stranger. That one hairstyle signifies marital status, age, religion, wealth, and rank in society.

Growing up, my mom never knew how to style and take care of my hair as she had manageable silky, wavy hair. I was on my own. Due to this, I would beg my mom to straighten my hair. I hated my natural curls. I would spend hours getting relaxers and being extra cautious making sure I didn't sweat or let water touch my hair. I wanted to be like all the other girls in my school, with long blonde or brunette hair. That was not me, though, that was not the real me. But regardless of all my efforts to abandon my true colors somewhere deep down within me, the real version of myself was waiting for me, but I was too scared of loving her. My insecurity did not just feed on my peers' words but also on my family. My mom made unkind comments about how my hair looked, not understanding the connection between my hair and self-esteem. Instead of helping me love myself, she further aided my self-hatred.

So, I constantly thought about how people saw me and imagined how they would treat me if I looked like them. I had an obsession with people's opinions, but I never once thought about my feelings. I longed for self-acceptance and I knew that one day I would completely love myself. I always wondered that if my parents had helped or reassured me in any way the outcome would have been different. My parents never used to be there for me. My parents and I have a struggling relationship and always seem to disagree no matter what. This made me turn to my sister and friends for the support I needed. I applaud my sister and my friends for so much as they both aided my journey. I could recall the time my sister stayed up all night helping me manage my hair as I had an important event the next day. Even though we rarely say I love you to each other, I know my sister truly cares for me. It is evident through her actions. My sister, Saba, has become a mother figure in my life. As time went on, I gained some courage as I started seeing actors and models who also struggled with their hair. It made me relax, knowing I was not the only one who struggled. Despite my relative insecurity, I have now gained confidence in myself. I have been able to accept the fact that I do still struggle with negative comments, however, now I can openly discuss my feelings. I know that one day I will be able to fully love myself.

2nd Place – High School – Written Word

Ayah Abbassi

Pillars Preparatory Academy

With the Help of a Promise

Teacher: Rida Ahmed

With the Help of a Promise

Many years ago,
When I was about five or so,
On a warm summer evening,
I discovered what I now know.

There were glowing rays of light,
Shining into the night,
And my heart filled with wonder,
At this dazzling sight.

Though the stars I do adore,
It is my parents who helped me soar.
Mom and dad, you always had time,
To stand by me and watch me shine.

Journey to journey, star to star,
Each told their own story,
Each gleamed from afar,
Filling a distance from here till Mars.

Lining the sky like spots of gold,
Like a tale, waiting to be told.
Shimmering through even the dark,
Admired by both young and old.

I was amazed, and I was astonished.
I wanted a telescope to explore.
So my parents did what they promised,
And they gave me just what I wanted.

With this telescope I could see,
All the stars on top of me.
Reappearing every night,
A constant reminder of my dream to be.

Enchantment piercing in the sky,
Arrays of color all around,
And this vision I will describe,
When someone decides to ask me why.

Why is it an astronomer you want to be?
Why not a doctor, a lawyer, something special?
Why on Earth would you choose astronomy?
Well it was this summer night that inspired me.

3rd Place – High School – Written Word

Soojin Kim

Dwight Morrow High School

Teas, Herbs and Love

Teacher: Anna Markowski

Teas, Herbs and Love

Over the years, my mom has curated our home kitchen to be full of cabinets neatly lined with herbal medicines and tea packets. She intentionally organizes them this way. Every morning she prepares vitamins for us to start the day with energy, and every evening she boils herbal tea for us to wind down. Her care and dedication to not only her kitchen but also to those around her—myself gratefully included—truly amazes me. But she doesn't only care for her family; she's just as dedicated to her community.

Even on holidays or special occasions, it is common for most people to gift neighbors and family friends with chocolates or wines, for example. However, it is at these times of year that my mom specifically chooses teas and herbs that will help alleviate the pain of my elderly next-door neighbor who suffers from arthritis or my friend's mom who struggles with back pain.

Moreover, every day my mom teaches me a new word in Korean, usually words about nature or food. A lot of the Korean words I learn from her are Hanja. Hanja is the Korean name for Chinese characters. Even though Korean and Chinese are two distinct languages, Hanja refers to the Chinese characters that were borrowed from Chinese and were incorporated into the Korean language with Korean pronunciation long ago.

So, my mom not only teaches me about medicines and herbs but also about language and culture. In fact, ever since the Covid-19 pandemic started, I spent most of my time at home as the rest of the world did. This meant I was able to spend more time with my mom, learning how to cook, navigating the kitchen better, and intentionally having more wholesome conversations together.

It is my mom's consistent consideration for other people's wellbeing and her occasional language lessons in the kitchen that always culminate in the daily doses of joy and knowledge I receive from her. This inspires me to pursue Eastern medicine, or Traditional Chinese Medicine, in the future. My mom wholeheartedly supports me and my studies. From making me plum tea to green tea to oolong tea, she always knows how to support me when I'm studying, when I'm tired, and even when I'm stressed.

In the future, with a TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) license under my belt, I hope I can help my mom when she is older. In the meantime, I will study what low-oxalate herbal teas she can drink despite her kidney stones and I'll research the best brand of kitchen cabinet organizers to buy for her next batch of herbal medicines.

1st Place – Middle School – Written Word

Chayenne Rojas

Soaring Heights Charter School

Steadfast Dad

Teacher: Samantha Berman

Steadfast Dad

A line

The string that never ends

Family,

The connection never ends.

A line and a family,

A sacred thing never to be messed with

something that could never be broken

No matter what

Encouragement, support, peace, happiness. These are the things that helped me get to where I am now. This is all thanks to my parents, especially my father. "Practice makes perfect" he says, "Try before you give up". My father has helped me all my life. He stays at home and helps me with my homework, while my mother goes to work. Helps me get ready for school in the morning. So busy, so stressful. Lots of things to get done with two kids in the house. A bond that would last forever. From a newborn to a teenager, my father is still my very first love. My father is my hero.

2nd Place – Middle School – Written Word

Victoria DeVito

Bernardsville Middle School

Dream Dust: Elongated Haiku Poem

Teacher: Mrs. McMillan

Dream Dust: Elongated Haiku Poem

I am a light dream.
Ancient stardust that shines bright,
Dust that flies through air,
Dust that flies through time—
Or settles underneath beds,
Colors are hidden.

Who will pull the rug,
That lets stardust fill our breaths.
And inside our minds,
Orbital planets,
Kaleidoscope images,
Deep, dark-sea diving.

Only when it's lit,
Can average eyes see dust.
Who is by your side,
To send it blazing.
The two halves that become one,
Lift up your stardust,
Into the time clock,
And when the last grain is gone,
With hands holding you,
The two beside you,
Your stardust begins to rise.

3rd Place – Middle School – Written Word

Vinaya Vittal

Academy 1 Middle School

Seams of My Support

Teacher: Dawn Ryan

Seams of My Support

I have many dreams,
Wishes of my own to create,
These dreams are elaborate seams,
Very pleasant and ornate.

However, these dreams are not easily stitched,
Into the fabric of my intricate life,
The threads are often switched,
And the needle stitches with strife.

I, myself, cannot complete the task single-handedly,
It is far too difficult to get there.
And to achieve my dreams outstandingly,
My parents and loved ones lessen the weight I bear.

It is their help that I am grateful for,
They are there every step of the way,
From every spool of thread to every thimble on a sore,
They are there to always save the day.

It is their assistance,
That brings me to my desired destination,
They have helped me to go the distance
While I held myself from procrastination.

This journey will be strenuous both ways,
There may be a few detours,
But still, it is with love, always,
And I will be very thankful, for sure.