

# 2011 WKCD GRADUATION SPEECH CONTEST

## EMBRACING MISTAKES



*It was a humid September morning in Philadelphia in 2008, I was about to enter Abraham Lincoln High School through the lunchroom doors and finalize my re-enrollment into high school. Each face that I glanced at evoked as much familiarity as an individual blade of grass; I was completely lost . . . I was sixteen years old, with fractions of a credit, two years behind everyone else my age. My decision to go back to school seemed like another mistake.*

**- Karl Scheel, 19, Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia, PA**

## INTRODUCTION

We spend much of our time as students trying to get things right—avoiding mistakes as if they turn us into losers. But mistakes can also prove useful and even shape our lives in positive ways. "Embracing Mistakes" was the theme for the 2011 WKCD Graduation Speech Contest, because we wanted to hear from students—whether a senior or a freshman—about the good side of getting things wrong. (The writer did not need to be an actual graduate.)

We offered some questions to get the creative juices flowing:

- What new paths in life or learning have you discovered by mistake?
- Has taking the risk of being wrong ever released your imagination or your intelligence?
- How might making mistakes actually change your world for the better?
- Should schools teach students how to "get it wrong" and not just "get it right"?

We received over 300 essays, from students from all over the country and in grades seven through 12. Here we present the six essays that most caught our fancy and five runners-up. Winners receive a \$100 gift certificate at a bookstore.

To all those students who entered the contest, we salute you for your ideas and effort! Your essays pushed us to think harder about the mistakes we all make—part of being human as so many of you pointed out—and the lessons they teach.

## 2011 WKCD GRAD SPEECH CONTEST WINNERS

**Johnnay Bradford**, 17, Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia, PA  
**Grissel Castellanos**, 18, Central Union High School, El Centro, CA  
**Torrey Riley**, 14, Dillard University Upward Bound, New Orleans, LA  
**Karl Scheel**, 19, Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia, PA  
**Josephine Strecker**, 12, North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO  
**Cary Tieng**, 17, Road to Success Academy, Santa Clarita, CA

## 2011 WKCD GRAD SPEECH CONTEST RUNNERS-UP

**Peter Hardin**, 12, North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO  
**Kayla Renee Krigger**, 13, J. Graham Brown School, Louisville, KY  
**Claire Mullen**, 14, North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO  
**Madeline Varner**, 16, Metro High School, Columbus, OH  
**Brandon George Washington**, 16, Suitland High School, Forestville, MD



## **2011 WKCD Graduation Speech Winners**

### **Embracing Mistakes**

**Johnnay Bradford, 17**  
**Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia, PA**

All my life, I've been told to be like my sister, and to follow in her footsteps. But as time went on I realized I couldn't. From early as five, I knew that to be like my sister I would have to try harder, and that's what I did. Whenever my father came over, he helped my ten-year old brother with anything he was having a difficult time with in school, and whenever they went over work, I watched. I paid close attention to whatever they were doing. And when I finally felt capable of learning it, I joined in. At only five I learned to spell, read, write, add, subtract, use fractions, and how to navigate encyclopedias and dictionaries. I felt so accomplished. But my dad thought I still had a lot of work to do. For my first two years in elementary school all I worked on was becoming the best.

Finally, in first grade, my teacher asked me a series of questions. I could tell by her face she was impressed by my answers. Within the next couple of months, I was tested and enrolled into the mentally gifted program. I thought my work was done. But little did I know it had just begun. As a gifted student, I thought I was smarter than everyone, and being as though I was ahead of others, I thought I could do what I wanted. I slacked in class, I gave the teacher attitude, and I made sure that students knew that I was superior.

Before I knew it, I was getting bad grades, getting into all kinds of drama, talking back, and acting like a different person. By the time I was in middle school, I was sure that I couldn't go back to being good. I just couldn't, I had already set myself up for failure. Because of my bad record, I was denied at every high school I applied for, and landed

myself in summer school for the first time, and then in Lincoln High. At Lincoln, I cut class, hooked school, and basically became the person I never wanted to be.

A year went by and I spent my second year in summer school, and that's when I realized that I was failing myself. All through summer school I thought, "This is not how I imagined spending my high school life." I needed to get on the ball, and I needed to do it fast! I worked hard in summer school and even harder my sophomore year. I went from a C/D student to getting A's and B's. I felt great, and the weird part was the better my grades got, the more of a pleasant person I became. I changed myself, just when I thought I couldn't. But I couldn't do that without embracing my mistakes. I had to admit to myself that for all these years I was wrong, and I'm happy I did because it made me into the person I am today.

### **Grissel Castellanos, 18** **Central Union High School, El Centro, CA**

A new path that I discovered by mistake, but has been clear for millions of decades in the world as well as in the Bible, was that without God nothing is possible. It all started when I wanted to stop being myself and tried to fit in with so called "friends." I realized that my relationship with my parents and God was not as close as it was before. Even if I had my friends, I felt that I was alone; I had my family, but I didn't feel love within me. I felt as if I needed a love and peace that no one was able to give me. Not even by going out with friends to the beach and relaxing, going to the mall and buying thousands of outfits—it just wasn't that kind of love and peace that I needed. I knew that I couldn't take it anymore; I felt as if I were an orphan, unwanted and left out. So I took a risk and attempted to commit suicide a day before my mom's birthday. In the hospital, my mom and dad talked to me and prayed for me. I felt that I was loved and that I was cared for. Tears were the only thing that dripped down my face and I realized that I was made for a purpose. God had a reason why he kept the beat of my heart going; he still wanted me to stay here, in this world because I'm needed here. My dad told me that, "Life is like a school because you learn from each mistake that you make." Making this mistake showed me that not only did I change, but the things that surrounded me did too. Schools should not only teach about math, English, or that we are made from monkeys or apes. Students should be taught the reason *why* we are made, *why* we are living in a world that not even scientists know the answers to many questions, and *why* we should know that making a mistake may have consequences. Some may be good or some may be bad. I have embraced my mistakes to my way of living because I know that each and every day I will overcome either big or small obstacles.

**Torrey Riley, 14**  
**Dillard University Upward Bound, New Orleans, LA**

Everyone makes mistakes in life; some may be small and the others very big. Mistakes are a part of being human; no one can be perfect in the world. Even though mistakes are not great, they can also help you become a better person. I have had many mistakes in my young age. Some were severe. The worst was when I took a step down from being a leader to becoming a follower. Two of my friends and I rode our bikes to Academy Sports & Outdoors. When we arrived there, we walked around the store acting all normal, but we had plans to steal a BB gun. We all split up. I went to the sports section, one friend went by the clothes, and the older cousin went by the guns, to get the gun. When my friend got to the gun section, he picked up a BB gun and hid it so that he could cut the plastic open and take the gun out. He put the gun in his pants, then met back up with us in the front of the store. The younger cousin tried to make it seem like we hadn't come in the store for nothing, so he got a drink and stood in line to purchase it. But as soon as he could purchase it, a man came up behind us and said, "You're not in trouble, but you must come with me." We walked in the back to his office. He was a red-faced, heavy weight, head security manager.

As we walked in, he told us to take a seat and asked where the gun was. We all stayed silent, scared for our lives. Then the manager put the plastic the gun had been in on the table and asked again, "Where is the gun?" The older cousin finally took it out and put it on the table. The manager started to ask why we had taken it and did we know how much trouble we could be in. After listening to our answers, he called our parents to come to the store instead. When our parents arrived, the manager told them what had happened. We could go to jail for this, he said. The manager told them we wouldn't because we had been very polite and told the truth about everything. That day the manager could have easily called the police to take us, but instead he called our parents so that we could fix our mistakes. That mistake really helped me. It taught me a big lesson on how to watch what you do and who you hang with, because you're always being watched, even if you think you aren't. Mistakes will follow you everywhere you go in life, but it's all on you to embrace your true mistakes.

**Karl Scheel, 19**  
**Abraham Lincoln High School, Philadelphia, PA**

Believe it or not, the perfect student is not actually so perfect. A student who gets good grades and excels in school academically does not always get things right the first time. A good student is only a good student because they are able to work with their mistakes and improve their deficiencies. Personally, I have experienced a new world through transcending the biggest mistake of my life.

After attending the most prestigious high school in my city for half an academic year, I transferred out because of my sub-par grades. I thought I was preserving the integrity of my high school portfolio by taking away the only challenge in my life. Eventually, I ended up dropping out of school completely. I did not attend school for my sophomore year, adding two semesters to my academic deficit. At the end of the summer of my sophomore year I realized I had made the biggest mistake of my life. Without an education, I would not be able to achieve anything, including my biggest dream.

It was a humid September morning in Philadelphia in 2008, and I was about to enter Abraham Lincoln High School through the lunchroom doors and finalize my re-enrollment into high school. Each face that I glanced at evoked as much familiarity as an individual blade of grass; I was completely lost. I found myself fumbling with my new roster, trying to navigate a labyrinth of corridors. I was sixteen years old, with fractions of a credit, two years behind everyone else my age. My decision to go back to school seemed like another mistake. Confused as to where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to be doing, I sought out the name at the top of my roster, Jacqueline Burton, my academy coordinator. Although this was only the first time I met the math department chair, who is also the National Honor Society Sponsor, the Honors coordinator, the credit recovery liaison, and the head of the Law Academy, she had already planned out my road to rejuvenation.

It is a brisk May afternoon in 2011. I am standing here anticipating receiving my third report card for my senior year and I already have enough credits to graduate. A typical student earns seven credits each year, but over the course of two years, with the support of staff and encouragement of a fellow student, I earned 22 credits. Presently, I am the cadet commander of the Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Unit at

my school, the captain of the Boys Varsity Volleyball team, a member of the National Honor Society, recipient of the Philadelphia School District's Superintendent Arlene Ackerman Award for Excellence, recipient of the perfect attendance award, and soon to be eleven-time distinguished honor roll recipient. I am expecting to graduate amongst the top ten of my class. I have achieved the unachievable. I have beaten the odds. I am no longer a statistic; I am a high school graduate.

## **Josephine Strecker, 12** **North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO**

We all make mistakes. Most of us remember our mistakes. Others don't. For those of us who do, we most likely learned something from it. Learning from our mistakes is a part of life. It's not a bad thing when you make a mistake. Yeah it's not good, but it's not bad either. The lessons we learn from our mistakes are what make mistakes good. When we learn from our mistakes, it makes us a better person in life.

In fact, pretty much everyone you know has at least made one mistake in his or her life. I have made countless mistakes in my thirteen years of life. From at least half of those, I have learned a lesson. One example of a mistake I made was when I was nine. I stole something from a store. At the time it seemed all right but now, even after all these years, I still feel guilty. It is like a shadow following me around everywhere I go. It seems like every time I turn around that toy is there, starring back at me, as if to ask me "why" and "why did you do it?" I've regretted the day for almost four years now.

I learned a valuable lesson from my mistake: never steal anything. If you want something, buy it or wait for a birthday or something. What ever you do, never steal anything, or you will regret it for the rest of your life. There are plenty of lessons you can learn from mistakes. For example, never touch a hot stove. Never stay up late on a school night. Never lie. Never do anything your parents wouldn't like. Of course that last one only applies if you're still living with your parents.

Making mistakes is just another big part of life. We need mistakes in our life in order to become a better person. Also remember we all make mistakes. Mistakes are like friends, parents, or siblings. You have to learn to live with them or things will never work out.

**Cary Tieng, 17**  
**Road to Success Academy, Santa Clarita, CA**

For being seventeen years old, I have seen a lot and been through a lot. I had to live through my father's deportation, my sister's cancer, and my best friend's death. These events led me to my life and the decisions I made. I made careless mistakes, left and right. In spite of the fact that I embrace my mistakes, no matter how hard or easy, I still seem to repeat them. My biggest mistake was getting involved in the juvenile justice system and coming to a camp for incarcerated juvenile delinquents.

I could go on and on about what my mom did wrong, what my judge thought, or how my family treated me. However, landing in a place like this, when I was seventeen years old, was a result of a series of bad choices. It took me three years to realize it was not my mom, my judge, my friends, my family—it was I. I was the one in the wrong and no one else. Although I suffered a lot of pain and frustration, I have never been so glad as I am today that I put myself in this hard situation. I used to be naïve, manipulative, cunning and mean. To be quite honest, I am not even sure who I was. Never in a million years did I think someone like me could change so dramatically.

I am not someone who runs the streets or sells drugs, but before my camp program, my life was spiraling out of control. Once I came to camp, my eyes lit up like gold. I realized that places like Camp Kenyon Scudder do not only punish girls like me but also rehabilitate and enable us to rejoin the community. Once I got hold of every program I could get my hands on there, all hell broke loose! I was on a spree; I wanted so many transitional programs. I met as many people as I could who might help me with school and jobs when I got out. I started to be more open-minded and actually started listening to people I should have listened to in the first place—and stopped listening to people I should not. I was introduced to multiple people who had so much knowledge on college, jobs, wages, and even technology. My world opened up to new opportunities so magnificent and inspiring that I began to have hope.

In conclusion, I have made plenty of mistakes, even the ones that are life changing, but I have learned to embrace them and learn from them. It is my belief that even more life-altering mistakes are heading my way, but I will hug and kiss every single one because I know for a fact that something good is going to come out of it. You know how the saying goes, "It is always darkest before the dawn."





## 2011 WKCD Graduation Speech Runners-Up

### Embracing Mistakes

**Peter Hardin, 12**  
**North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO**

Everyone makes mistakes. We are all familiar with that line. We have all been comforted by mom or dad with those same words to make us feel better after some kind of mishap. My mom has always told me that making mistakes is one of the best ways to learn. Are making mistakes really just learning the hard way? Why is that better?

I am the oldest of four kids. My brother and sisters and I are always finding something to climb, jump over or off of. It doesn't help that I am also a clumsy kid. Most of my mistakes occur from personal injury. I know now that sprinting down the wood stairs in my socks is not a good idea. Sure, I was told over and over not to do this. Is it really better to learn not to by almost breaking my neck?

I love bacon. It is my favorite food. I can't wait until every Sunday morning to have it for breakfast. So I should know by now than to touch the sizzling pan while it is still on the stove? Did I need a scar to remind me that this was not a good idea?

Wearing a helmet is important. You have to protect your head from brain injury when you ride a bike. You also need to wear a helmet when you ride a scooter. But what I didn't know until it was too late was that you should also wear shoes. Another painful lesson learned. What did I gain from the pain?

I would like to say that my mistakes have given me courage. Instead, I think I am just more cautious. Now I just know what things to avoid. My experiences have also made me more careful with my brother and sisters. I tell them to take off their socks when they go down stairs. I warn them to stay away from hot stoves. I check for helmets and shoes when we ride bikes and scooters. My scars are permanent reminders of what I don't want to happen to them. I have had to learn most of my mistakes the hard way. Do I agree it is better that way? I would have preferred to learn pain free but I am happy to pass those lessons on to my siblings. I guess that my mistakes have made me a better big brother.

**Kayla Renee Krigger, 13**  
**J. Graham Brown School, Louisville, KY**

Elementary is kind, gentle, designed to make the transition from youth to adolescence easy. But after the given 6 years, I still hadn't changed. As a result, during the first few months of middle school, I became lost. Drifting from clique to clique, from unspoken rule to unspoken rule, the line I had drawn between right and wrong began to blur. There were groups that skillfully added cuss words into their everyday conversations, and then there were those that looked upon them in disgust. There were kids who actually spent hours preparing to cheat, and then there were students who studied around the clock. And then there were the groups that floated in between the workaholics and the slackers. *Where did I fit in?* There were dozens of groups for me to choose from, yet I still chose wrong.

After school one day, it was too chilly for my current pair of friends and me to hang around outside, as we usually did. As it was, they had another place in mind. I probably should have ducked out right then and there; but otherwise, I never would've gotten a sense of where I belong. That day, they led me to the entrance of the locked, glass-walled school meeting room. "Are we allowed in here without a teacher?" I asked. "Oh yeah," they replied. Lie. But did I attempt to correct them? No. After they flagged down a janitor, *he* asked what business we had in the meeting room. And without hesitation, one of them lied for a second time, "Oh we're waiting for a meeting to start."

For a second time I kept quiet. Despite this, I could tell that he had seen through their lies. Even so, the custodian unlocked the door and walked away. And throughout all this, a frown had grown across his face. He didn't trust the two people beside me. But more importantly, he had tied me in with them. Yet after their performance, I no longer wanted to have anything to do with the two girls I had previously thought of as "friends."

Now, I still don't know which group I belong to. I'm still traveling from clique to clique, trying to find the perfect fit. But I *do* know one thing that I didn't know before: "fitting in" is more about how I feel when I'm around a group of people, not so much about how many people are in the group. So while I'm *able* to "fit into" many groups, cliques that test the difference between right and wrong are not one of them. In order to discover this however, I had to go against my common sense, take a chance and make a mistake.

**Claire Mullen, 14**  
**North Kirkwood Middle School, Kirkwood, MO**

Mistakes are like root canal, its very painful to go through, but in the end you know that it will create a convalescent result. When I was about five years old, I convinced myself that my parents had made the most traumatizing mistake of their lives. They got divorced. At the time, it was very painful for everyone in my family and cost us a lot of grief, anguish, and sad days. However, I now realize how fortunate I really am because if I had the absence of that pain in my life I would never have my wonderful stepdad, or my funny little sister, and I would have never gotten to see that warm, bright smile appear on my baby brother's face. If I had to choose from my old life or facing the price of one "mistake" for three miracles, I would choose my new life in a heartbeat.

People have this image set in their minds of the "perfect" person. Is he/she beautiful, flawless, or simply living a life of luxury? He/she is none of these because the "perfect" person doesn't exist. Everyone has made a mistake. Everyone has flaws.

After my parents got divorced, my mother met a courageous guy who was willing to love and nurture her despite the fact that she already had three kids. That guy is now my stepfather, John, and he later adopted two more incredible children with my mother.

This just goes to show that mistakes are not the small things that ruin our lives; they are the big things that shape our lives. Without mistakes, we wouldn't be able to learn and grow into better mature people. Without mistakes, we wouldn't know right from wrong. Without mistakes, we wouldn't be the people that we are today.

**Madeline Varner, 16**  
**Metro High School, Columbus, OH**

Throughout time, people have been obsessed with perfection. From mathematics to mythology, we revel in the beauty of the ideal. This leads to a rather skewed view of how people are supposed to act and think. We are expected to do well at everything, and avoid failure and being wrong at all costs. A social hierarchy is all too often created in schools where those who get better grades are favored over those who, even though they may be just as smart as their high-performing peers, do not test as well.

It's good to try and be the best we can be, but I also feel that sometimes we get wrapped up in this fear of failure and imperfection. Studying and trying to get a good grade on a test is one thing, freaking out and avoiding doing anything all together because you fear failing a test is another, and it's not good.

Boxing yourself into a certain role because you're afraid of branching and failing is counterproductive. We can only improve by pushing our limits, and to do that we have to go through a process of trial and error. Good scientists don't do the same high school labs over and over; they try things that have never been done before. People try, and people sometimes fail and make mistakes, but that's okay. It's human nature.

I took my first college class, calculus, in the winter of my sophomore year in high school. Before this, I had lived a somewhat sheltered academic career in which I could retake any assignment, test, or even class I felt I didn't score high enough in. Calculus came with no such safety net—how well I did in this class would be kept on record forever in some mysterious room at Ohio State. I only had one chance, and the thought both terrified me and spurred me on to do study as hard as I could, and to be the best that I could be. I got a C on my first midterm, and my two close friends both aced it.

I felt like a failure. I knew that I could, *should* be able to do well in this class, but in my eyes I had completely and utterly failed this midterm. At that point I could've given up and dropped the class, but instead I chose to double my efforts and try and study as hard as possible in an attempt to fix my grade before the end of the quarter. I completed the class with an A-.

Sometimes we stumble, but being able to pick ourselves up and realize that we should probably avoid tripping over large rocks or tie our shoelaces properly next time is an important skill. We need to be able to understand that mistakes happen, and sometimes things don't go according to plan, and that it's normal. After all, we're only human.

**Brandon George Washington, 16  
Suitland High School, Forestville, MD**

Mistakes. When we all leave here today we will enter the world with hopes and dreams. We will build goals and move on to our separate lives. Some will travel **to foreign destinations**. Some will go to college. Some may face obstacles and some may not even know what they want to do. But we all will make Mistakes. We all will **choose** one path that might not be the right one, we all will take one step towards **our** future not knowing that **this** step will push us three steps back. My point is **every single person on this earth** makes mistakes. **But one thing we all don't have to do** is give up! You see Mistakes aren't necessarily bad, because with mistakes comes learning, opportunity, and correction.

You see I've made millions of mistakes during my years. But what I have realized is that all those mistakes that I've made **have** only done one thing. **All of the mistakes that I have made in my life** make me who I am today. I've learned from my mistakes and sometimes have even changed to make them right or gone a different way about it to make them right. You see **mistakes aren't** bad thing at all. Without mistakes, how could we as human beings possibly even think of the word perfection?

I say let's get it wrong to get it right.

Do you think we would have the light bulb if Thomas Edison didn't make a mistake before he got it right? Do you think we'd have music if musicians didn't make mistakes and sometimes hit the wrong key creating a new sound? I say no. They had to get it wrong to get right. In life we all are going to have to take chances and go for our dreams and goals. **We are** all going to have to make Mistakes.

**I wish that school leaders would create a new course for students in schools called "Get it Wrong to Get it Right." It would be a class designed to help students prepare for the real world. The class would** show them that the word Mistake isn't a bad thing. When you make a mistake is when you plan on doing something and it doesn't turn out how you wanted it to. But then you try to change or fix it. You try again, or even go to a different path. You can't get it right if you give up.

So I'm leaving here with this message stuck in my brain. **Say it with me:** "Get It Wrong To Get It Right." Try! Go For Your Dreams! Take A Risk! Be You! Live Your Life! And Make Mistakes! **"Get It Wrong To Get It Right!"**