

Has God ever made you stop and say 'Wow'?

Answers from our
student essay
contest winners

The beauty of creation, the joy of meeting new siblings, powerful encounters with Christ in the sacraments — these were among the “Wow”-inducing experiences that Catholic-school students from all around Western Washington wrote about in their entries for the fourth annual NORTHWEST CATHOLIC Student Essay Contest.

The essays were judged by a panel drawn from the staffs of NORTHWEST CATHOLIC, the Office for Catholic Schools and the Fulcrum Foundation, which supports Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Seattle. We are proud to present the winning high school, middle school and elementary school essays.



HIGH SCHOOL WINNER

A silent whispering in my soul

By Emma Van Hollebeke

August 4: just a regular day. The sun rose at 5:52 a.m. and set at 8:38 p.m., and my grandfather would have turned 82 years old if he hadn't passed away just three weeks before. It was also the first day of Ignite Your Torch, a Catholic conference I'd been hearing about from my family and friends for what seemed like forever. I'd been longing for this day for years, and now that I was a freshman in high school, I was finally old enough to attend.

I remember waking up that morning, knowing I still hadn't really mourned my grandfather. I was just waiting for the ball to drop. Maybe I was in denial, maybe I just couldn't wrap my head around the fact that he was gone, but either way, I knew I'd fall apart any minute.

As I was walking out to the car, carrying two enormous bags — I definitely don't pack light — I suddenly started crying. And then it came to me — he would have been 82. Grandma would have been making him eat fruit with his breakfast, and he would have been expecting a champagne cake and a big gathering, and he would have been here. And in a split second I remembered how lucky I had been to have him as my grandpa. It was hard to remember that part of him sometimes, because for a few years he wasn't completely there, especially at the end. But when he was there, he was really there. He built us nightlights and boxes to put toys in, he sang funny songs about us and our parents, and he drove faster than he should have. He was always there, and now he wasn't anymore.

Fast forward to the second night of Ignite Your Torch, the night we all received Benediction. Father Lappe, who happened to have celebrated my grandpa's funeral Mass, was holding the monstrance and making his way through the semi-organized crowd.

As soon as I knelt down on the floor after confession, I burst into tears again, and I knew it was because God was there, in an exhilarating, almost addictive way. I could feel him in everything. I wanted to kneel there forever, and every step Father Lappe took toward me, my aching knees hurt less and less. When the monstrance was directly in front of me, all I could do was plead with God: Stay with me. Every time I whispered those words into the cloth, I could feel him behind me, hand on my shoulder.

And I could feel it in my soul, a silent whispering that I was loved and Jesus was there and he would be forever. I knew suddenly that my grandpa was safe and loved, too, and he always would be. And that someday, I would be with him, and he would sing songs and drive fast and never have to ask for help again. He was happy, and I would be too.

Emma Van Hollebeke is a freshman at Bishop Blanchet High School in Seattle.



MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNER

What God will never let me forget

By Abigail Nolan

Crickets, the sound of crickets filled the black sky. I sat on the little porch of my quaint cottage in Wisconsin. Mosquitos surrounded me and the moths crowded the dim bulb light like it was the last brightness on God's earth. Yet I knew that in the morning he would create a beautiful daybreak that would take my breath away. But strangely, I didn't want that night to end.

I walked down the cold, creaking stairs to the shore of Cranberry Lake. My flip-flops made loud smacks against my feet. The wet sand was squishy, occasionally crawling over the rim of my sandals to linger between my toes. That should have been a sensation to remember, but it has faded over time.

In the distance, bright beams radiated from the windows of my grandpa's cottage. I opened the magnetic screen door. The smell of old wood and my grandpa's perfume filled my nose ... more impressions that would eventually fade from memory.

I found my sister Emily and Grandma watching TV. Just as I was about to sit down on the scratchy couch, I looked out the window at one of God's perfect gifts. It was a full, bright red moon like I had never seen before! I dragged Emily, Grandma and Grandpa outside to see it. Emily called out, "A strawberry moon!" as she ran down to Grandpa's dock. I followed, and my grandparents helped each other down the bumpy path.

The dock was slick. I was afraid Grandpa would slip, but he got to the old wood bench and sat down, and Grandma joined him. Emily and I sat on the edge and put our feet into the cold water. The smooth lake reflected the moon like it was a mirror. Grandpa started to sing an old song about Wisconsin, and Grandma slowly chimed in. Their deep crackly voices harmonized with the crickets like a heavenly choir of angels. Emily and I stirred our feet in the water, rippling the glassy, glowing surface. This is the image that God will never let me forget from that Wisconsin night.

Abigail Nolan is a seventh-grader at St. Madeleine Sophie School in Bellevue.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WINNER

Generous hands of God

By Alicia Spearman

One early summer morning, my mom, grandmother, aunt and I went to the beautiful Grotto in Portland, Oregon. The Grotto looks like an ancient site with historic statues, birds chirping, bees buzzing and flowers blooming.

The car overheated on the way home. We got off the freeway. It looked like a desert with nothing around for miles. We called AAA, but it was a long wait on this very hot 98-degree day. A man stopped to help us. His name was Richard. I was told to stay in the car but my curiosity got the better of me and I got out of the steaming car. Richard offered to drive us to an auto parts store, but only two people could go. He was homeless and his car was filled with his belongings.

I stayed with my grandmother and the car. I started to worry. Where were they? Was Richard dangerous? Then a man in a truck asked if we needed anything. Twelve other people stopped. We were offered treats and drinks. Each person seemed to be doing a different generous act of kindness. We were never alone for long.

After about an hour they returned with the car part. I was relieved. Richard accepted some money for helping us. Everyone who stopped was friendly and kind. When I think back on it, I felt like God was sending his angels down from heaven to save us. Wow! Ω

Alicia Spearman is a fifth-grader at All Saints School in Puyallup.



Photo by Jane Olson