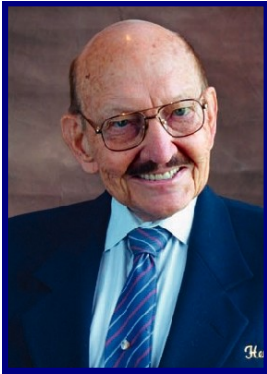


Rotary International District 5300

# George R. Hensel Essay Contest



## Ethics

*That branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions*

## George R. Hensel Ethics Essay Contest Finalists

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**Entry from: Arcadia Rotary Club**

"A single decision can shape your life."

How many of us have actually taken that sentence to consideration, and actual importance? I used to be merely acquainted with the concept, believing my decisions were only capable of affecting mostly myself, while slightly changing those around me. It was brought to my attention that I was terribly, terribly wrong.

February 23<sup>rd</sup> of 2012, I logged on to my account in a social network. Soon, I received a message from a friend, whose privacy I will protect by baptizing her simply as Jane Doe. Jane Doe's life was a constant series of dark memories and equally darkened moments. She relied on extremely frail ropes to keep her from falling into her insecurities. Her other friends and myself had open ears to her words, attempting to give her the best of counsel in order to improve the situations given. We convinced ourselves that circumstances around her could not possibly be as terrible as she depicted them to be. The message she sent me proved our beliefs otherwise.

She sent me her intentions of ending her life. Having been accustomed to her previous temporary moments of despair, I wrote about how life would be better in some years, and she only had to wait a little longer before she was as happy as she very well deserved to be.

However, she would not simply agree, like those previous times. Her point of view limited to an endless loop of hopelessness. Finally realizing that Jane was lost within the depths of depression, and that it was not a matter of teenage-moodiness, I messaged two other friends. I figured they would reason with Jane in the way I had failed to do so. The feeling of horror and panic grew within me, despite the others' comments that it was a moment that would pass, and that Jane would be alright.

**Entry from: Arcadia Rotary Club**

Hands shaking, helpless beyond belief, I called for my parents and told them what was happening. They quickly instructed me to send an email to every single one of the counselors in the school board, along with the principal and vice principals. I wrote in Jane's full name, copied the conversation she and I had where she revealed her intentions, and titled it, "JANE DOE SUICIDE ATTEMPT, URGENT."

In less than five minutes, one of the school counselors responded. From that point on, it was a blur. I kept repeating in my mind, "Please, please let her be okay. Please, please." not sure who I was pleading to. By the end of the day, Jane Doe had been prevented from her attempt by a quick phone call to her parents, along with 911. The event had taken a total of fifteen minutes.

The next day in school, I was looking for Jane. While I only worried for her sake, I was not expecting two of her friends to walk toward me and say, "You should have respected her wishes and let her be!" This brought a surge of rage within me. How could they possibly believe that this was a matter of 'respecting her wishes'? That it was an option to live through the guilt of knowing that something could have been done, but was not because of a loose definition of ethics? I retorted that I frankly did not care if I had respected her wishes or not, as long as she was still alive.

During that same week, those few who heard of her suicide attempt and my role in it would each comment on how Jane looked far more miserable than she ever had before, hinting that my intervention had been unnecessary. The counselor let it slip that Jane herself was angry and refused to have any communication with me whatsoever. While my parents and the counselor herself insisted that I had done what was required of me to do; that I had made the

**Entry from: Arcadia Rotary Club**

right decision, even close friends gave their input on how it had only been an attention call on her behalf, and how Jane had been in no real danger. Weeks later, Jane was taken to a mental recovery institution, proving how her intentions had been solid, and not a ruse.

Slowly but surely, a year passed by, and I continued to wonder how Jane was feeling. On Thanksgiving Day of 2013, Jane called me for the first time since the near-incident I was cringing, expecting her to express the very anger she could have harvested for a full year.

Unexpectedly, Jane Doe thanked me.

She said that on that Thanksgiving, she was thankful that she was still alive, and she had a wake up call in her time at the institution. She met worthwhile people, her once shattered family had been brought back together, and Jane finally was beginning to understand that she was better than what she made herself to be. After we hung up with the promise of meeting up soon, a feeling of lightness stirred within me. You see, despite repeating to myself that I had done the right thing, I had doubts. I still was afraid that Jane would forever resent me. Yet, in the end she was thankful. And so was I.

The official definition of the word 'ethics' is: "Moral principles that govern a person's or group's behavior." Ethics vary between each person. It is inevitable, just like the way one can enjoy a movie that another does not find appealing. What seems 'wrong' to some, is really what is 'right' to others. Ethics shape a society, establishing a sense of what should be done under each separate event.

If given a second chance, I would have done the same exact move. I would have told my parents, the counselor, any grown-up who had the resources and capacity necessary for

**Entry from: Arcadia Rotary Club**

protecting Jane from herself. Because I believe that ethics only have one definition: leading yourself into making the decisions essential for the wellbeing of those around you.

**Entry from: Boulder City Sunrise Rotary Club**

"Bash." The sickly sound of body against chilly metal twisted my stomach and made my heart's focus dwindle as it stumbled over itself, losing its beat. My ears stung with poison as slithering words left tongues, morphing into daggers that were capable of piercing iron with one swift swipe. I met his eyes. They were light in color, but dark in emotion, and he approached me frantically.

"Please don't tell anyone. It's fine, I'm fine. It was just a little argument." His tone trembled just as his muscles did, matching an odd rhythm like the boisterous dance of an African celebration. But it was not a celebration. On a crisp fall day, I witnessed the abuse of a sixteen-year-old boy. He was quiet, full of artistic wonders that were capable of making a memorable impression on any group of eyes-- and he was in love. Love made him brave. It made his turtle body creep out of its shell and expose its vulnerable, scarred, naked, honest body. It uncovered itself and proclaimed its love to the rock it had always stood by. But the rock was not honest. It didn't offer a shady place for the naked body. It did not reside by a humble pond from which the turtle could drink. Instead, it smeared itself in salt, deceived its comrade into comfort, and when the innocent turtle entrusted itself to the rock, the salt coating blistered its partner's scarred skin, all because it couldn't accept that it was a creature who lived in its shell too.

That quiet boy begged me not to tell anyone that a nasty creature had latched itself to him and made bruises form on his bones. He was terrified that others would discover that his lover was gay.

"It's better this way. He just doesn't want other people to know because they'll give him a hard time, and if his dad finds out then we can't be together. He's really sweet to me when it's

**Entry from: Boulder City Sunrise Rotary Club**

just us, I promise. He feels really bad, but what else can we do? You understand, right? So you won't tell?" I kept on replaying those words in my head. Those dismal, painfully lonely words of pleading. Although my heart faltered in step more often than it should have, it was always honest. It pumped itself faster every single time I met that boy's light-colored, dark-emotioned eyes. It flung itself against my ribs whenever a new patch of black and blue stained that boy's jaw and arms. It ordered my vocal chords to announce the secret I had taken part in, but every time they tried to vibrate, a layer of frost would cover them. I was too afraid to ruin the boy's relationship. I envisioned that I would unintentionally smash his shell and demolish his existence.

I know today what I should have done. I should have lit a fire in my stomach so that the heat would rise smoothly and defrost the ice that had made my voice still. I should have helped that boy, regardless of what he told me, because the truth is that neither of us knew for sure whether or not his world would have tumbled down around him. Now I know that it was wrong to have sacrificed his fragile psyche, to have let his body be slammed against the chilly metal and the fist of his lover make unpleasant contact with his delicate face.

I no longer sit by and allow violence to destroy turtles who, every now and then creep from whatever shell they struggle to bear and expose their vulnerable, scarred, naked, honest bodies. Perhaps I cannot harbor every one of them, but by following my own ethics (which I have defined as my moral principles) I can learn from my falters and abandon my shell with the others who have already made a difference.

**Entry from: Monrovia Rotary Club**

Essence of Ethics

As a little girl growing up in a loving, cozy middle-class home, I had considered myself privileged. Moreover, I firmly believed that the quality of my upbringing would correlate to moral rectitude. I always had absolute certainty that I would uphold my personal values-until I was put to the test.

An average child out of dozens of average children, I behaved much like the others at my elementary school. Gleeful, enthusiastic, rambunctious, I energetically raced about during recess and chattered with others at lunch. I joked with my friends in the way that friends do, teasing them until we all collapsed into a pile of giggles. Everybody knew that the words were perfectly harmless and simply meant to inspire laughter. We knew the limits of our mockery and kept within a safe distance as we bantered with each other. As such, I clung to the idea of affableness in this manner of joking, and I rejected the idea that it could easily evolve into bullying instead.

One particularly wintry day, a new girl named Jess moved into our class. As thrilled as we were to have the opportunity to make a new friend, we were hesitant to initiate introductions. Despite initial shyness, I managed to stretch out a friendly hand to the lonely girl. We soon grew immensely close, and I took her under my wing, bringing her into the clique, so to speak. As such, I was pleased with the other children's welcoming reactions that followed. I genuinely believed they had accepted her.

A few days later, I came upon her and a group of other girls huddled in a corner of the yard. The leader of the posse, May, was hovering over Jess and mocking her. She jeered at Jess' ponytail, ridiculed her jeans, and taunted her short stature. Just as quickly as she spit out her



### **Entry from: Monrovia Rotary Club**

tirade of harsh words, she grinned and laughed with the group, clearly expecting Jess to join in. However, it was clear to me that Jess took the stinging words as a slap to the face and not as a joke. Yet I still searched to justify May's actions, grabbing at explanations and excuses. I lamely decided that it was a way of relaying her acceptance of the new girl. It was a simple act of joking around with a friend. Besides, there was not anything I could have done, or so I kept telling myself. I was one child who would be opposing a much larger group, and all because of a silly joke. In truth, I had known the extent of May's hurtful words. I had seen the crushed look on Jess' face, a portrayal of abject misery and sinking self-esteem. I finally accepted that I had an obligation to speak out. But by that time it was too late. They had walked away, and I was left to myself.

I swore to myself that I would immediately step in if such a situation arose again. True to my internal vow, I did exactly that when May began to again hurl mean comments at Jess. My denunciation of her actions had an astonishing result. May apologized profusely to both Jess and me. She had not even realized the brutality of her "jokes" until I pointed it out and asked her to stop. That very moment had defined ethics for me, and my epiphany was blunt and jarring. I discovered the very meaning of ethics, of being willing to stand alone for what you truly, fervently believe to be right. At first glance, I thought of myself as insignificant in the battle of good. I was one of a million, just another child. But taking action completely changed my perspective. I came to the jerking realization that I did make a difference. I had the ability, and even more importantly, the responsibility to step in. Therein lies the very essence of ethics: the personal commitment to support what one inherently knows to be right. I had argued with myself, and sought out a preposterously tenacious reasoning to justify the bullying, but deep

**Entry from: Monrovia Rotary Club**

down, I had always known the truth of the matter. The only question had been whether I would throw away my ethics and turn a blind eye, or if I would proudly stand up for my beliefs in defense of another person.

In the end, I stuck to my principles and voiced an objection to the verbal harassment. Yet the damage from the first experience had already been incurred. Why had I not intervened earlier? Was I truly such a shameful, stonehearted child? Simply put, I had given in to my desire to do the easier thing as opposed to the right thing. I had chosen the easier path and in doing so, had turned my back on the values instilled in me. If I had spoken out at the first instance of bullying, I would have saved one child from emotional anguish and another from unknowingly acting as a tormentor. With the realization of the impact of my actions, I accepted my own obligation in such ethical dilemmas. I would do my civic duty by speaking out to defend my own beliefs in the future. More importantly, I would do so to preserve the civility of our society, upholding all that is right and good, because even one, average girl can make a resounding difference.

**Entry from: Ontario Rotary Club**

### The Trials of Adolescents

In the sixth grade my class was shown a video on how puberty is a "magical" time in a person's life and how it can be "fun" and "exciting"; whoever said any of this never spent a week in middle school. People treat rats with more respect and dignity than I got at that forsaken school. Never in my life was I treated with such disregard and malice. Every day held new horrors that picked at the previous days festering wounds, some not metaphorical. I detest the term "bullying" as it makes what many students go through sound trivial when what they have gone through is serious physical and emotional trauma. Ethics is simple treat everybody you meet with respect and basic human kindness, yet ethics in a middle school scarce.

I was always a bit of a social outcast, likely due to a speech impediment and a crippling case of awkwardness. I was well aware of the fact that I was a chubby, ugly nerd and was reminded so on a regular basis. Middle school changes everybody: students so desperate to be cool and accepted often resort to low cunning bully tactics, and I was the perfect target for three reasons. First, as I mentioned before, I was a nerd and everybody thought it was hilarious to pick on the awkward kid. Second, I was big and tall but instead of warding off bullies, it drew them in because if they could mess with a giant they would "prove" their "machoness". Finally my ultimate undoing was the fact that I simply let them they knew picking on me would be easy; teachers had always said don't fight back go and get a teacher, so I didn't fight and teachers often did little to help and more often than not made matters worse. Every day got worse, name calling, pantsing, rock throwing, pushing me on the ground while I wasn't looking, and many other acts of humiliation and ridicule any way to make me feel like a subhuman. But perhaps the most memorable incidents were around the time of March. Fed up with all the

### **Entry from: Ontario Rotary Club**

abuse, I planned a final confrontation. I would rally my friends, and I would confront one of my chief tormentors in a playground melee, I proposed the idea to my friends and not one would risk getting in trouble on my behalf. So I confronted my tormentor on the soccer field solo. I issued my challenge, but he turned tail and ran, claiming he couldn't afford to get in trouble. Coincidentally, that was his last day at school, a small victory for me which would result in a crushing defeat. The next day, I was followed home from school apparently friends of my former tormentor and as I was walking home with my best friend, someone came from behind and stole my hat, naturally we gave chase to the hat thief. A second individual came from behind and trips me and then my friend. This fall broke my arm and gave my friend a concussion. I spent a few days out of school and several months in a cast. Not to sound needy, but I was hoping for some pity for having my arm broken, I received probably the exact opposite. The very first thing I was told was, and I quote "you wouldn't have broken your arm if you weren't so fat", and "he's probably going to be the kid who shoots up the school". To joke that I would shoot up the school when such tragedies are real and have occurred for the same reason is not a slap in the face to me but a spit in the eye to families who have lost loved ones in incidents like this. There was not a single ethical fiber to be found in these bullies.

Ethics should be without compromise. As I said before ethics are simple always treat your fellow human with respect and dignity. I was too bitter and stressed at the time to appreciate what I learned from my suffering and only now in truly analyzing these events do I see what I did right and wrong. Perhaps what I'm most proud of is what I didn't do during this time. Never once did I compromise who I was or what I believed to be right and wrong. No matter how bad they made my life, I didn't conform to their image of cool. I never did drugs or

**Entry from: Ontario Rotary Club**

alcohol or acted like the "cool" kids; I behaved and continued my education. My biggest regret is not standing up for myself; perhaps if I would have taken a firmer stance it wouldn't have escalated. These miscreants didn't care about school. As high school came around, these delinquent dregs began to fade, many became dropouts. On the other hand, I'm currently deemed a college bound student. Perhaps it is this difference of ethics that has set us on such opposite paths.

My struggle is a tale that can be found in every school in America some far worse and with sadder endings. Bullying is perhaps the ultimate display of lack of ethics in youth. I do not dwell on the past but am disgusted at the thought that individuals are going through the same dilemma. I believe that middle school can be a magical time in a person's life if its occupants would display some basic ethical standards. While it's not entirely their fault they are the way they are it is their duty to rise above issues they may have. Individuals who stood up for me were few and far between, but those who did confirmed that ethics are not lost in America's adolescents but obscured and suppressed by young tyrants, those individuals who dared to help displayed a level of empathy and personal ethical fiber that is rarely witnessed. Those individuals are paragons; more students should aspire to show the level of ethics these individuals displayed.