



FIRST PLACE RECIPIENT

# The Move That Mattered Most

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The quiet clicking of chess clocks echoed through the room. Players hunched over their boards, brows furrowed, hands hovering mid-air. Behind the velvet rope, the soft shuffle of spectators barely broke the silence. It was the final round of a regional chess tournament, and I was one win away from states. Every move could decide the outcome of the season.

We were deep in the middle game when my opponent sacrificed his knight: an aggressive choice, but one I thought I could punish. But then, as I reached for my queen, I noticed something: his score sheet was tilted toward me. On it, he had already written his next move.

It gave away his plan: a trick to trap my queen using a knight and a bishop. If I kept my current move, I would almost certainly lose my queen and, with it, the game. If I changed my move, I could dismantle his plan entirely, taking both attackers and crippling his defense. I saw the two paths diverging in front of me, and two voices clashed in my head. One whispered, It wasn't your fault. Take the win. The other asked, Is this really your victory if it isn't truly yours?

I sat there, frozen, the seconds ticking louder in my ears. I saw the winning sequence unfold. Then, in the reflection on my queen's polished surface, I saw my face, and suddenly, I remembered a phrase my parents repeated often: “君子爱财，取之有道” — a gentleman values gain, but pursues it with honor. I'd grown up hearing it at dinner, in car rides, and it echoed in my mind now.

Slowly, the storm in my head began to clear. I knew what I had to do.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “I can see your notation. You might want to cover it.” He blinked, surprised. “Oh. Thanks.” He adjusted the page. I kept the move I had planned before I saw his notation. My queen fell a few turns later, and soon after, my king. Checkmate.

Walking out of the competition hall, I felt the sting of the loss. But it wasn't the same hollow feeling I imagined I'd have if I'd stayed silent.

Chess is often called a game of honor, of trust. Just like in life, there's no undo button for your choices, no referee watching over your shoulder. There are countless moments when no one else will see what you do; when cutting a corner, taking credit, or staying silent could easily go unnoticed. But that's exactly when your ethics, and the choices they guide, are the most important.

That summer, I lost a match. I didn't make it to states. But I walked away with something deeper: Character isn't defined by what you do when the world is watching. It's defined by what you do when it isn't. Those quiet, unsupervised moments are the ones that reveal who you really are.

And in that silence, I made the move that mattered most.



SECOND PLACE RECIPIENT

# What Stuck With Me

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The summer before junior year. My uncle pulled a few strings and suddenly I was waking up at 6 a.m., throwing on dusty work boots, and riding in the back of a beat-up work truck with guys who'd been doing this kind of labor since before I was born.

It wasn't glamorous work—mostly sweeping sawdust, hauling in heavy boxes of flooring, and trying not to screw up—but there was something kind of satisfying about it. My hands got calloused fast, and at the end of each day, I felt like I'd actually earned the dirt under my fingernails.

One job we did was in this massive house in Del Mar. Picture wide windows, ocean air sneaking through open sliding doors, and rooms big enough to get lost in. It was the kind of place that made you wonder what the owners did for a living.

Midway through the week, one of the guys on our crew, probably late 30s, always joking around, always chewing sunflower seeds—asked me to grab a few extra boxes of planks from the truck. Nothing unusual. I brought them in, dropped them near the stairs, and went back to sweeping.

Later that afternoon, I saw him loading two of those boxes into the bed of his own truck. Real casual. Like he was moving his lunchbox or something. I remember thinking, Wait, those aren't extra. We still have the back rooms to finish.

I didn't say anything. I was sixteen, barely knew what I was doing, and the last thing I wanted was to start drama with a guy twice my size who actually knew how to install flooring. But the

thought followed me around the rest of the day, like a splinter under the skin—small, but sharp.

That weekend, I told my dad what I'd seen. He didn't lecture me. Just looked at me while he stirred his coffee and said, "Would you be okay with someone doing that if it was your name on the truck?"

That stuck.

The next Monday, I told Tyler—the site manager—what I saw. I wasn't trying to get anyone fired. I just couldn't ignore that splinter anymore. Tyler thanked me, didn't make a big scene. But the slacker wasn't on the job the next day. Or the day after that.

The crew got quieter around me after that. Fewer jokes, less small talk. I felt like I'd stepped on something sacred—some unspoken rule about keeping your mouth shut.

But even now, years later, I don't regret it. That summer taught me that integrity doesn't come with applause. Most of the time, it's quiet. It's choosing to speak up when staying silent would be easier. It's doing the right thing even when it costs you comfort, or popularity, or an easy ride.

It's a lesson that's stayed with me—like the glue under my fingernails that took weeks to finally scrub off. Some things just stick.





THIRD PLACE RECIPIENT

# Ethics: Not Up for Debate

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My school has a strict anti-AI policy and has been adamant about the harms of using it. I saw the harm of it firsthand last Spring. As a Speech and Debate competitor, I commonly support or reject resolutions based upon ethics. Because of this, I have researched the ethical harms of AI and why its usage in specific situations can be considered ethically wrong.

Last year, I was selected to be captain of the debate team, something that came with numerous responsibilities. One of these responsibilities is to ensure that everyone completes their cases on time. Everyone on the team then shares their documents with me for review. While reading through one of my teammates' cases, I noticed that the third section sounded significantly different from the other two and was not written in the format she typically used. I was immediately suspicious and did not want to think the worst. I found an online AI checker and copied the third segment from my teammates' case. It came back within seconds as being 98% AI-generated.

My head spun. I had known this competitor for years, and would never have suspected that she would cheat. I took a step back, weighing my options. If I told my debate coach what she had done, then she would be disqualified from the tournament and risk getting kicked off the team. My parents ingrained within me a strong moral code; I knew right from wrong very well, but they also taught me that people make mistakes, people struggle, and that one wrong turn should never define someone's life. I chose to approach my teammate about the issue.

The next day, during class, I pulled my teammate aside and showed her what the AI checker displayed. I asked her what she was thinking using AI like that, and she immediately began to apologize. She told me that she didn't fully understand the resolution and, with exams that week, could not take the time to understand it. I told her about the consequences of using AI

and how, if I found her using it again, I would tell our coach. I then offered her help, because making the right ethical decisions means offering assistance to those in need. She willingly accepted that help, promising never again to use AI for cases. We sat down and began working on the case.

The following day, I checked her case, and there was nothing copied from AI. At the next tournament, she presented her case proudly, as she made the right ethical choice.

Reflecting on this, I would have made the same choice. A person's life should not be defined by a single mistake, and she was well-intended but just did not know how to ask for help. Making strong ethical decisions means weighing the consequences of one's choices and considering the possible outcomes. That's what I did in this scenario, and I helped her truly succeed.



FOURTH PLACE RECIPIENT

# 100 Reasons to Do the Right Thing

## Delaney Shamaya

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The mall buzzed with life that day, but for me, everything slowed down the moment I saw it: a crisp \$100 bill fluttering to the ground. It slipped unnoticed from the wallet of the elderly man in front of me as he struggled to pay for his purchases. My heart raced. That \$100 could change everything. I was just a hundred dollars short of buying my ticket to see Coldplay live coming up in Las Vegas—a dream that I'd been working toward for weeks at the snack bar. Four more shifts of flipping hot dogs and making slushies stood between me and that ticket. Four shifts I didn't have time for.

No one else noticed. No cameras. No witnesses. Just me, the money, and a choice. I bent down, picked up the bill, and looked at the man. Hadn't I worked hard enough already? Didn't I deserve this break after all those late evenings and sticky counters? The questions lingered for a moment, tempting me. But then I heard my mom's voice in my head: "Who you are when no one's watching—that's your true self."

I tapped the man's shoulder and said, "Sir, I think you dropped this." His eyes filled with gratitude as he took it from my hand. "That's for my granddaughter's birthday," he said, his voice soft and sincere.

I walked out of the store with empty hands, but a full heart.

I was raised to believe that doing the right thing matters, especially when it's inconvenient. Ethics weren't just talked about in my house—they were lived. My parents showed me that honesty, fairness, and responsibility aren't optional; they're essential. And the older I get, the more I see why.

Ethics are the foundation of trust—something the world needs more of. Whether it's a person, a business, or an organization, people should feel confident that they'll be treated fairly and honestly. That trust is built through choices like the one I made at the mall. Every act of integrity, no matter how small, strengthens the invisible contract we all rely on.

I think back to that moment often—not because of what I gave up, but because of what I gained. I will finish high school in the next two years, and I'm driven by the same principle. From science class to group leadership to job shifts, I hold myself to doing what's right, even when it's tough. I earned the money the hard way and bought my ticket a few weeks later. But going to the concert isn't the highlight. The real win was knowing I stayed true to who I am, knowing my commitment to integrity will guide me wherever I go.

That \$100 could've bought a ticket—but I walked away with something no one can take from me: self-respect.





FIFTH PLACE RECIPIENT

# BBB Ethical Torch Scholarship Essay

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It was the 3rd quarter, and we were up by 1, a lead that was unstable in a game as fast and unforgiving as lacrosse. My lungs burned as the crowd roared. We were on the verge of making history: the first CIF Championship in women's sports for our school. The roar of the crowd faded, replaced by the low hum of Izabela's car stereo that morning. The morning air was thick, filled with anxiety and anticipation. My stomach turned; I knew this would be the last game of the season, whether we won or lost. But for the sake of our seniors, we had to win.

As I go to defend the opposing team, I tighten my grip on the stick. I had to stop this goal from going in, otherwise we'd tie. A risk I didn't want to take. However, the attacking woman was fast and agile with her movements, passing each defender, and she finally got to me. In a panic, I made an illegal play, one too aggressive against the opposing girl and one that the referee didn't see. I caused a turnover, and for a moment, I was relieved that I had gotten away with it; however, my heart became heavy. I didn't want to win based on a lie. I looked around at my teammates, their faces lit with hope. I could keep silent and continue the play, or I could be a leader and own up to my actions. My stomach turned, I caught the attention of the referee and signaled that I had made an illegal pick, the ref blew the whistle, and overturned the ball on the opposing team. In the moment my teammates were confused, and angry with me. Why couldn't I just continue playing? Why would I give the opposing team an advantage?

And for a moment, I did regret my decision. However, looking over to my coach, they gave me a nod of approval. As if I had done something right. The game restarted, and the energy on the field shifted. The crowd was quieter, waiting to see what would happen next. I could feel the eyes of both teams on me; some skeptical, others respectful. I focused on my breathing, reminding myself why I had made that choice. It wasn't about being perfect; it was about being honest.

As the minutes ticked down, we played with renewed determination, not just for the scoreboard but for the integrity of the game. Every pass, every sprint, felt like proof that we were earning this win the right way. The final whistle blew, and we had done it. We had won the CIF Championship, fairly and with our heads held high. That moment changed how I think about leadership and success. Since that day, I carry that lesson with me in everything I do. Whether in sports, school, or life, I strive to be the person who stands up for fairness and honesty, even when it's not the easiest path.