



ROTARY INTERNATIONAL DISTRICT 5300

GEORGE R. HENSEL ETHICS ESSAY CONTEST

PETE SANDOVAL

District Winner 2006 - 2007

SPONSORED BY THE ROTARY CLUB OF MONTEBELLO

An Ethical Lifestyle

I grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by gang activity where it was difficult to know the difference between right and wrong, an unethical existence. What was right at school and in my home was wrong on the streets of Los Angeles. I was confused by what I saw and lacked a consistent measure for the ethical structure every child needs. Everyday I witnessed the effects of drugs and alcohol abuse on the young people who were trying to make their way through life. I read the signs of graffiti representing the hopelessness and fear behind closed doors. Each morning, as I made my way to school, I fought off criticism and ridicule because I chose not to get involved in the deep-seeded power of street gangs.

Each day was a battle to keep safe and unharmed. I walked down city streets looking over my shoulder, wondering when it would be my turn to take a bullet. It would have been easier to join a gang and accept the protection of my neighborhood and its convoluted value system. I knew at an early age that this would have long term consequences; I knew that the gang life would fill my life with regrets. To grow up in Los Angeles without a gang affiliation was the ethical thing to do. But to walk alone was a dangerous way to grow up.

This knowledge came to me with my father's death. My dad was a member of "Choppers" and to this day, I haven't been told much about his life. I do know that he maintained an affiliation that resulted in his death when I was only five. I was too young to understand the situation. One day I woke up to find he was gone forever. Not much was said. I filled the silence with fear and suspicion. I found it difficult to trust anyone. Eventually, after a few difficult years and many disappointments, I found my role models within my own family. My grandfather and Uncle Robert would become the measure of my manhood. I listened to their advice and followed the rules of my family. I found my friends at school, not in the neighborhood. I learned to trust my teachers and enjoyed playing sports instead of walking the

streets. Consequently, I was able to grow up with a measure of pride and an ethical code to live by.

Although there seems to be a code of honor on the streets, there remains a distinct lack of ethics on city streets. Our jails are filled with dishonorable young people who traded in their morals and disrespected their families with criminal activity. Random attacks are common where women and children are no longer safe from their own sons and brothers. Where there are stories of retaliation and justified homicide, however, the truth is that the violence is senseless and has no merit on any level. It is as though young kids have no supervision and there is no one to tell them what's right or wrong. In addition, the media sensationalizes the situation and the impressionable youth begins to believe that this chaotic unethical lifestyle is their only choice. Teenagers forget that they have options for sensible solutions.

What keeps me in line is my fear of disappointing my family. I go home to a house governed by logic and compassion. I know that when I go home, there's love to guide me. When I feel lost and alone, I have people I can go to for true protection. But this is not the case for most of the L.A. youth. I see young impressionable boys turning to gangs for the structure their families don't provide. It feels powerful to have friends who will back you up, and so a lot of kids turn to the power of gang affiliation when they have no structure and love at home. I see young people throwing their lives away in prison and getting caught up in a heartless system, never having the chance to build a future. With their spirits broken, the question of right and wrong is overshadowed by their need to survive. In this way, the ethical core of our youth is deteriorating.

With the help of my school, service organizations, and other community organizations like the Boys and Girls Club, I have hope in my heart that I can live my life as a strong ethical, contributing member of my community. I hope that when I have a family, I can help my children stay off the streets and help make the world a better place. I think about what my life would have been like if my dad were here, listening to these words I write. I know that if my dad was still alive, he would be proud of me, proud that I was able to overcome the situation of my life. He would be proud that I know better than to bring gang related activity into our household. Since his death I have had to make important choices and I choose to respect the wishes of my father and take the right road.

Each day I find a new measure of my ethical dimension;

Each day I find a reason to do the right thing.