

MARIAN A. SPENCER

EDUCATION AWARDS

Recipient Essays

AVA DATTILO

Growing up as a female, I have learned what it means to trust my voice and make it heard, to empower others for the common good. I have learned that just because my voice isn't the loudest doesn't make it unimportant, and my words are worthy of being heard. Throughout high school, I stepped into multiple roles in which I used my voice to advise, support and uplift those around me.

Through an upperclassmen leadership group at our high school, SIBS (Students Involved in Befriending Students), I took part in a mentoring program for middle school girls struggling with difficult home lives, loneliness, and mental battles. This consisted of weekly meetings with my assigned student talking through challenging life situations, giving encouragement, and simply listening. Through my consistent attentiveness and kindness each week, I built a relationship with the girls that I know will continue to impact them beyond middle school. Through gratitude lists, vision boards, and friendship bracelets, I was able to empower a group of girls with confidence and value that wasn't there beforehand.

Education has played a large role in my journey to exploit my voice mainly through writing and environmental science. Writing has always been one of my passions, but throughout English class in middle school, I struggled with public speaking. I couldn't get a hold of my words in a way that enabled me to share them to a large audience. With this being said, my middle school English teachers nominated me to be a part of The Write Place in high school - a peer tutoring group for

others. As a writing tutor, I was quickly thrust into atmospheres that demanded my voice, and most of all, my opinion. One on one discussions, group discussions, and whole classroom visits became a part of my day to day routine. I began to trust my capabilities, and therefore developed the confidence to help others elevate their own writing. As I was continually placed in unfamiliar and often uncomfortable situations, I grew into a woman with the power to educate others with my words. My involvement in AP Environmental Science furthered my growth of using my voice as I learned fascinating, real world concepts that affect our planet in dramatic ways. New knowledge fueled me with a passion to use my voice to explain what I learned in class to my friends, family, and classmates, ultimately leading to my decision of majoring in Environmental Engineering in college.

In a sports atmosphere, my voice was continually challenged as a female in a sport seemingly overpowered by males. As a captain on the Girls Varsity Golf Team, I led with a competitive, driven, and motivating spirit for my teammates to follow after regardless of their performance, grade, or experience level. Through all of these opportunities, I have witnessed the power in speaking up with the aim of strengthening those around me. Being a female has shaped my perspective of confidence, devotion, and most of all, unity.

MARTHA GARCIA

Growing into citizenship for me meant learning when to stop staying quiet and start using my

GRACE PHILLIPS

voice. I learned the cost of silence before I learned the power of my voice. My brother was taken during the first wave of deportations in 2017. I was nine. Overnight, everything changed, and I grew up in a family where survival came before expression. My mom would always say, keep your head down and don't draw attention to yourself. I carried that with me for years. Silence felt like protection. By thirteen, survival took priority over childhood. I worked where no child should have to, hiding behind a mask that covered how young I really was. I created a fake story to explain who I was, and over time, I started losing myself in it. Comments followed me every shift, and they took advantage of my silence because they knew I wouldn't speak up.

I carried everything alone because my family needed the money. But silence came with a cost. The longer I stayed quiet, the more I felt like I was disappearing. Eventually, silence stopped feeling like protection and started feeling like suffocation. I knew I couldn't keep living like that. That changed when I secured an internship with the Greater Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. For the first time, I didn't have to hide. I was trusted with responsibility, valued for my ideas, and encouraged to speak. I helped connect Hispanic owned businesses to resources they had long been excluded from, using my bilingual skills to close that gap. Sometimes it was translating or simply listening, but I saw how one conversation could open doors for a business and the family behind it.

In that space, my voice mattered. I carried that into my school and community. I asked why we didn't have clubs that celebrated diversity, and that question led to the creation of the Multicultural Club. That work grew into my involvement with the Hamilton Hispanic Festival, where I became the voice of the youth in a room full of adults. I shared what students wanted to see and helped shape an event that made people feel seen. It showed me my voice had a place. I've also used my voice in quieter ways. After struggling with access to mental health care, I turned to journaling and scrapbooking to cope, then created a scrapbooking club so other students could have a free space to express themselves. Support should always be accessible. I spent years learning to stay quiet to get through the day. Now, even when my voice shakes, I use it. Growing into citizenship has meant trusting my voice, using it to advocate for myself and others, and refusing to go back to silence.

Growing up deaf with profound sensorineural hearing loss, learning to use my voice was a deliberate journey. When I was younger, I used to cringe when people asked, "What's on your head?" It was a hot pink cochlear implant. Because I was the only person in my family and school with one, the constant questions made me self-conscious, and I eventually began hiding my devices. However, as I grew older and gained a deeper understanding of my disability, my perspective shifted. I realized that being deaf wasn't something to hide; it was a unique platform to advocate for myself and the hard-of-hearing community.

I put this advocacy into action during the summer when I volunteered as a youth leader at White Oak Christian Church. I guided a group of young children who were naturally curious about the devices on my head. Instead of feeling annoyed, I embraced the opportunity to educate them about what it means to be deaf. Guiding them in their journeys with Christ while also serving as a living example of disability representation was a profoundly rewarding experience. Helping kids build positive childhood memories reinforced my belief that engaging with the younger generation is the key to breaking down stigmas and bringing communities together.

Beyond youth mentorship, I am passionate about uniting people through broader community involvement. Taking an active role in our local homecoming parade was an incredible way to bridge different clubs, organizations, and residents. Events like these are vital because they foster representation and civic pride. When Colerain Township comes together to support these initiatives, it creates a more inclusive, supportive environment for everyone. This strong sense of community is exactly what provided me with the resources and confidence to advocate for myself when I was a student.

Last, I recently participated in the America 150 Next Generation Ohioans project. I was asked to be on a podcast with the Ohio School for the Deaf about my experiences and activism. And I was honored to be selected as student of the month by a local civic organization. I want to continue being a resource for others as I move past high

school. As I begin a new chapter at Miami University majoring in Speech Pathology and Audiology, I am eager to combine my personal experiences with my academic pursuits. Through continued community service and my future career, my goal is to inspire the next generation and ensure that everyone, whether through speech or sign, has the opportunity to find and trust their voice.

TAZARA PROPHETT

Growing up, I watched my parents volunteer with many organizations. Community Service has ALWAYS been part of mine and my sister's DNA. Not only were we taught to serve in the community in which we live, we were taught to live and contribute to the communities where the greatest needs are- the underserved communities. I have volunteered with the Martin Luther King, Jr (MLK, Jr) Coalition all my life as it's a staple not only within my community, but also within my family. Every year as a little girl, I would participate in the annual march held on Dr. King's birthday with my family. As I got older, I wanted to get more involved with the events of the day which not only included the march but also a program so I started working with the program coordinator helping to plan and coordinate the day's events.

My community also include my church, Greater New Light Baptist (GNL) where I am actively involved with the youth group and the praise and worship team. Volunteering at GNL is very important to me because of the respect that I have for its founding member-Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, a civil rights activist who marched alongside Dr King. Shuttlesworth's daughters (ages 81 and 83) are still active members and often share stories of their turbulent childhood shaped by turmoil and hate, and how they always felt powerless. The thing that has inspired me so greatly is how they found their voices by sharing their stories and becoming educators.

Today, they speak to the young people in the church with encouragement and great passion about the responsibility we have to make a difference in this world. As I have thought about their words, I must admit that sometimes I have also felt powerless. Most recently that profound realization struck me on a visit to the Emmett Till memorial at the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C. After the visit,

I could not comprehend why the images clung to me so relentlessly. It wasn't just the graphic nature of the images that disturbed me. The unsettling feeling I experienced ran much deeper.

Then it dawned on me. I felt guilty for being able to live my life as a young black person in America, for doing things that Emmett never had the chance to do. I also have felt powerless to change the system that causes such injustice, both then and now. I cannot change America's history nor defeat it. But I am determined not to let my feelings of powerlessness defeat me. As I contemplate my future, I know that I WILL NOT remain powerless. I refuse to feel guilty for living my life. Instead, I am empowered to live a life in honor of those who can no longer do so, like Emmett Till by educating myself and becoming the best version of Tazara. My life will serve as my voice and my success will serve as my honor to him.

ISABELLA SAMMUT

"Are you the artist? When I saw your work for the first time, I started crying." These simple words, spoken to me by a stranger, shocked me. Sketching in my notebook and painting portraits is my passion. Art had always been my escape, but I never thought it could be a way to create change until last spring, when I won an art competition for migraine visibility. My work was displayed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., as part of a migraine awareness installation. I had no idea that a spontaneous family road trip to see my art would lead to some of the most unforgettable moments of my life.

In sixth grade, I started experiencing migraines, but I didn't want anyone to know how it was affecting me. I hid it from everyone in my life, never asking for help from teachers or coaches, and refusing to take breaks even when I really needed them. I didn't know anyone else who had migraines like I did until that stranger approached me. I immediately knew that she understood the emotions behind my art in a way that no one else had. After our exchange, I ran over to my mom and cried at the unexpected realization that my art had profoundly impacted someone. Art opened a new door I hadn't seen before. It led me to a new opportunity: the chance to speak out as a trained advocate. Since then, I have visited Capitol Hill, shared my personal story with Congressional officials, and discussed the

challenges I've faced in an effort to lobby for legislation that can help migraine sufferers and make the healthcare system more fair and equitable. I began to view my situation differently and chose to unburden myself from the weight of keeping everything a secret. This year, I readily agreed when the superintendent of my school district asked for permission to share my story in a speech he gave to local residents. Also, choosing Overcoming Migraines as my theme for my high school art class has been a meaningful way to continue expressing myself and raising awareness through art.

Finally, I chose to testify before the Ohio House Insurance Committee in support of a bill to help Ohioans with migraines. Standing in front of those representatives during my testimony, I knew something had changed. Through my actions, I discovered that I had a community of support all along and that there is strength in vulnerability. In the years since my first migraine, I've learned a lot about myself and have become a more resilient person. I've realized that I am braver than I ever thought I could be back in middle school. I've become part of the solution instead of hiding from my problem, and I've now learned what I didn't know when I was younger: I am not alone, and I can advocate for myself and others who may be facing any challenge. After years of staying silent, I finally found my voice.

EMORI WITMER-GAUTSCH

In 2026, more than ever, young people are often seen by generations ahead of them as Chronically Online—subsequently labeled as lazy, unwilling, or weak in the body or mind. These generalizations, while not always wrong, are in fact stereotypes that often discredit the sheer grit and leadership Generation-Z has for change. Seven days into the new year citizen-activist and mother Renee Good was shot and killed exercising her first amendment right to peacefully protest the increase of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Minnesota. Shortly after, five-year-old Liam Ramos was detained and deported. In a country founded by immigrants, affectionately termed The Great Melting Pot, these tragedies were absurd and out of standard America's rich history of citizenship beyond status. Citizenship, by definition, is so much more than paperwork: the quality of an individual's response to membership in a

community. How you led an extra egg to a neighborhood baker, volunteer at a local library, or build meaningful relationships with those around you. In school, students got quiet; carried passports, carpooled, slowed enrichment activities. Not because many of my peers are, or are not, of legal status, but because the color of their skin or texture of their hair flagged as potentially "ethnic." Despite the in-person delays, online is where my generation thrives. When would ICE stop in Cincinnati when they already had plans for Springfield? How can we serve our neighbors? And, most importantly: How can we fight for each other? On January 29 at 8:00 P.M. my best friend Mar texted me: "Are you going to school tomorrow?" The remark seemed innocent, but in reality was layered thick with concern about the following day's national ICE OUT black out: "No

Work, No School, No Shopping." Within the hour, we'd decided: we needed to have a say. So by 9:30 that night @saltteensohio was formed, a play on words she and I developed along with the hashtag #SaltMeltsIce. The two of us did what we knew best, stretched online, texted peers, demanded graphic reposts, and informed everyone we knew about our after-school walkout. Together we reached over 10,000 views online about the action. I picked up packs of posters and pasted QR codes for passers-by and participants to scan. Together we developed over 50+ posters for students to hold the next day. 40 minutes into the action, we ran out of posters. Yet, we continued to inform those around us about the impending Federal Funding and Ohio House Bill 26's potential impact on our local law enforcement's ability to meet our community needs over national agendas.

This fall, I'll be attending George Washington University to study Political Communications. I'm not finished yet. There is more work to be done. More issues to tackle. I remain committed to empowering my neighbors, understanding that when we step-up to bias the relationships we form with those different than us are often the most valuable. This 'Chronically Online' girl wants to change the world.

THE AWARDS WERE PRESENTED AT THE 2026 AGNES B. SEASONGOOD LUNCHEON

For more information contact Woman's City Club at www.womanscityclub.org