

Let Grow Announces Winners of National Think for Yourself Scholarship Contest

Four high school seniors earn \$14,000 in scholarships for essays about independence, courage, critical thinking, and learning to trust themselves.

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, August 24, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Thirty minutes into Ricardo Martinez's all-important Eagle Scout project, one of the volunteers walked over with a wooden post and asked: "Where does this go?"



Martinez, of Pico Rivera, California, consulted all the diagrams he'd painstakingly plotted and realized: Nowhere. "The measurements were off because the wood had been cut wrong. The holes we started digging weren't deep enough because the soil was harder than expected. A group on the far side was waiting for tools that hadn't been freed up yet."

And that was just the beginning – of his project, but also of the piece he submitted to [Let Grow's](#) "Think for Yourself" high school essay contest. The lessons he learned about stepping up and dealing with chaos and confusion won him First Prize, and an \$8000 scholarship. He will use it to attend the University of Southern California.

Since 2018, The Think for Yourself contest has awarded more than \$70,000 in scholarships. It is open to U.S. high school seniors and the prizes – including three runner-up awards of \$2000 each – can be used at a four year college, community college, or trade school. Over the years, many of the winning essays have been published in major newspapers, including USA Today, The New York Post and The San Francisco Chronicle. This year the contest received over 4000 entries.

"The whole idea of Let Grow is that we believe kids can and must think for themselves," said Lenore Skenazy, co-founder of the resilience-promoting nonprofit. "Let Grow was founded to make it easy, normal and legal to trust kids with some independence." That includes the independence to do things on their own in the real world – walk to school, play outside, run

errands – but it includes independence of thought as well.

The two go together: When someone else is telling you what to do or think, you don't get a chance to grapple and grow. In psychological terms, instead of developing an "internal locus of control" – the belief that you can handle some things – you develop an external one: Expecting someone else to take charge. Kids with an internal locus of control feel less anxious, more open.

The Think for Yourself contest questions get young people thinking about how much they are -- or could be -- doing and figuring out on their own. These include:

*Write about a time someone changed your mind about an idea or belief you strongly held. How did this change occur and what did you learn from the process? Is there anything you'll do differently from now on?

*Write about a time you did something new and important on your own, without adult supervision or assistance, that changed you. Why did being independent matter?

*Write about a time you didn't speak up -- or almost didn't -- for fear your idea or viewpoint might be unpopular. Was this the right decision and would you do the same thing again?

And this year the contest added an AI question:

*What issue did you consult AI on, only to realize you had to think for yourself? How did you realize that and how did things turn out?

In response to that last prompt, runner-up Ryan Gomez of Elmwood Park, Illinois, wrote about mastering math on his own in middle school, but starting to rely on AI his junior year in calculus class. "At first, AI felt like a miracle," he confessed. "I used it constantly." But when he looked at a quiz and couldn't make head or tail of, "I realized I had lost something I had worked so hard to build: the ability to think for myself."

He built it back.

Runner-up Emma Penton of Auburn, Alabama, wrote about the time her softball teammates started gossiping about a girl who wasn't there. "I knew what they were saying wasn't right. She worked just as hard as everyone else."

Emma stayed mum but her silence haunted her. Gradually she came to realize, "standing up for someone doesn't always have to be a big confrontation." But it does take some courage.

This year's other runner-up, Madelyn Bellissimo of Greensburg, Pennsylvania, wrote about the horror of seeing her dad go into anaphylaxis from a hornet sting and having to keep him alive for the 23 minutes it took the ambulance to arrive. "I learned that day that I never wanted to wait for someone else's help again."

“These kids and so many of the other entrants just show how brilliant and brave kids can be when they have to be – and when we let them,” said Skenazy. “At Let Grow we truly believe that when adults step back, kids step up.”

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