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Volume 4, Article 19

June 2011

PASSION AND PERSISTENCE—A WINNING COMBINATION

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE CINCINNATI REDS

You've heard the adage – “Where there's a will, there is a way”. It is a wise and true saying and a key to overcoming obstacles, barriers in life. Just ask the nine winners in the 2011 *Breaking Barriers: In Sports and Life* essay contest who wrote about barriers they faced and how they overcame/faced these challenges. Their stories, which touched on a variety of adversities including living with health challenges to the impacts of Hurricane Katrina to immigrating to the U.S. from war torn Gaza, centered on a common theme of moving forward despite life's challenges.

Of the nine essay contest winners, two are from the Greater Cincinnati area - Meggie Zahneis, 8th grader at Lakota Ridge Junior High School in West Chester, Ohio who was chosen the grand prize winner, and Jacob Summerhill, 5th grader at Taylorsville Elementary in Taylorsville, Kentucky, a 1st prize winner in the 4th-5th grade category.

The Breaking Barriers Essay contest, an annual essay contest open to students in grades 4-8, recognizes students for their efforts to overcome personal barriers using values exemplified by baseball great Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player to integrate Major League Baseball (MLB). Using



Cincinnati Reds mascot Rosie Red with (left to right) Meggie Zahneis, Sharon Robinson, and Jacob Summerhill at the Breaking Barriers on-field recognition ceremony at Great American Ball Park.

his values of courage, persistence, justice, determination, integrity, commitment, teamwork, citizenship, and excellence, Jackie Robinson, with the will to persevere and accomplish his goals, broke the color barrier to play America's favorite pastime in 1947. He went on to become a member of the Hall of Fame.

The nationwide essay contest is a major component of *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life*, a multi-curricular character education program developed by Major League Baseball, Scholastic, Inc., and Sharon Robinson, educator, author, and daughter of Hall of Famer, Jackie Robinson. Students were asked to write about and share their personal stories demon-

strating how they used Jackie Robinson's values to face their own barriers. The 2011 Breaking Barriers Essay Contest inspired 9,700 students from across the country to submit 200 – 700 word essay entries.

“Selecting the winners is always a labor of love because each essay is poignant, insightful, and a testimony to the resilience of youth,” said Sharon Robinson, who traveled to Cincinnati to honor the local winners. Meggie Zahneis, an 8th grader at Lakota Ridge Junior High School in West Chester, Ohio, wrote an essay that was a unanimous choice of the judges as the grand prize winner. Said Sharon Robinson, “strength of character” is what made Meggie's essay standout.

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PASSION AND PERSISTENCE—A WINNING COMBINATION (CONT'D)

Meggie, who has a rare disorder (only 50 known cases in the world) called HSAN II (Hereditary Sensory and Autonomic Neuropathy, type 2), has a passion for baseball, is a diehard Cincinnati Reds fan, and loves to write. Meggie wrote in her winning essay:

"I know what it's like to be different from everyone else around you, to overcome obstacles, to confront adversity. It may not be on the baseball field, but I face many of the same social and emotional barriers that Jackie Robinson did ... Since I can't feel pain, temperature, and touch to the same degree as everyone else, I've run up against quite a few obstacles over the years. More than anything, I've had to rely on persistence, determination, and commitment to get me through those obstacles. Because of my disability, many kids I know have judged this book by its cover, without taking the time to look a little closer and see that I'm just like them inside. This is where I personally identify with Mr. Robinson, as he dealt with the same issue...Every day, I try to make a conscious commitment to focus on the things I CAN do, and not the ones I can't. I like to think I have the determination to forge forward with my strengths and use them to the advantage of not only myself, but of other kids with special needs. It's my dream that someday, just like Mr. Robinson paved the way for African-

Americans to play baseball, I can pave the way, through my writing, for other kids with special needs...I really do believe taking that chance will pay off."

And, taking the chance to share their story has begun to pay off indeed. Many are becoming familiar with the stories of the winners and are inspired by their passion, persistence, and will to persevere.

On May 18, the Cincinnati Reds hosted a pre-game ceremony at Great American Ball Park with Sharon Robinson and members of the Reds on hand to honor both Meggie Zahneis and Jacob Summerhill (whose Aspergers Syndrome was the topic of his winning essay) with an on-field recognition of their achievement.

Sharon Robinson also visited the winners at their respective schools where she not only met with the winners and their classmates but also spoke to an assembly about her father, late Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson, as it relates to the *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life* program. Robinson said that she was impressed by the thoughtfulness of the questions the students asked during a Q and A.

As the grand prize winner, Meggie will join Sharon Robinson at the MLB All-Star Game in July in Phoenix, Arizona where Meggie will be recognized. In addition, Meggie and

Jacob and their teacher will receive a laptop computer. All winning contestants were given one class set of *Breaking Barriers T-Shirts* and the book, *Promises to Keep: How Jackie Robinson Changed America*, a picture book biography that examines Jackie Robinson's hard-won victories in baseball, business, politics and civil rights, and the inspiring effect he had on his family, community and country.

As stated in a press release announcing the 2011 winners, "The principles that Jackie Robinson demonstrated when he broke baseball's color barrier serve as an inspiration for us all," said Baseball Commissioner Allan H. (Bud) Selig. "The *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life* program empowers thousands of children through the story of Jackie's achievements in baseball, both on and off the field. Major League Baseball is committed to the positive values highlighted by the program and proud of all the children who participated in this year's contest."

Since its inception in 1997, *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life* has reached more than 19 million children and 2.7 million educators in the continental United States, Canada and Puerto Rico.

To learn more about *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life*, visit the community section on MLB.com, the official website of Major League Baseball.

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