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About the Contest Celebrate America Creative Writing Contest

The American Immigration Council works to strengthen America by honoring our immigrant history and shaping how America thinks about and acts towards immigrants and immigration. As part of this mission, the Council partners with American Immigration Lawyers Association Chapters to host the Celebrate America Creative Writing Contest, which challenges fifth graders across the country to reflect on and write about the theme “Why I Am Glad America Is a Nation of Immigrants.”

About the 2019 Winners

We are proud to announce that the first-place winner of the American Immigration Council’s 2019 Celebrate America Creative Writing Contest is Kate Jentz, whose poem was submitted by AILA’s Indiana Chapter. In an interview, Kate shared, “This story was inspired by the experience of learning my family’s immigration story. I wanted to capture the hardships of immigration, the hope and determination that go into immigrating, and how important it is to learn your family’s story.”

The second-place winner is Lillian Balet, whose poem was submitted by the Washington State Chapter. Honorable mentions were awarded to Sarah Reinert from the Carolinas Chapter, Boyana Nikolova from the Minnesota/ Dakotas Chapter, and Nola Kra-Caskey from the Northern California Chapter.
First Place Winner: “Tell Me A Story”
By Kate Jentz
Indiana Chapter

The rain splashes down
It covers the world
Like a blanket of water
That’s been gently unfurled
Drops land on the window
Knocking to come in
I open my book
I’m ready to begin

But the book has no words,
Not a single at all
I drop the book
And watch it fall
I grab my coat
And head for the door
I’m searching for stories
I’m searching for more

Up the avenue
Across the street
Lies an old house
With people to meet
Wind in my hair
Hope in my eyes
My Abuela steps onto the porch
Where a story lies

“Tell me a story.”
That’s what I say
To my grandmother
On that rainy day
She responds with a smile
And points to a chair
Abuela begins
As rain splashes her hair

She tells of festivals,
Dances and lights,
Fiestas and siestas
On warm summer nights
“This is my story.”
Abuela starts to explain
“I was a little girl
Living in Spain.”

“Why did you leave?”
I wonder aloud
Her shoulders square
Tall and proud
“There was a war
That broke out
Our family fled
And traveled about
Looking for a home,
Safe and sound

**America**
Was the land we finally found
I met new people
From all different places
Everyone was unique
All different races.”

Her smile twinkles
And a tear slips by
“America is beautiful”
Is all I reply

“America is beautiful.”
Abuela says loud and bold
“Every immigrant has a story
and every story must get told.”
I listen as her words fill my heart
Every culture is beautiful
Like a piece of art
I smile to myself
Knowing that it’s true
“America is beautiful
Because of immigrants like you.”
I look at Abuela
As I utter these words
She simply points to the sky
She points at the birds

The eagles glide
And soar through the air
A rustle of wind
Blows through my hair
I step off the porch
To get a better view
Abuela smiles
And steps down, too
Our eyes meet
As Abuela starts to speak
She grabs my hand
And the eagles reach their peak
“You have to stay strong
Like an eagle with might
When things get tough
You have to fight.”

“Thank you!”
I call as I start to leave
I know what to do
I have a story to weave

Down the avenue
Across the street
Lies my house
With people to greet
Hope in my eyes
Wind in my hair
I rush inside
With lots to share

I dash to my bedroom
Pick the book off the floor
And write Abuela’s story
Until my hand is sore

I think about Abuela,
America’s glory,
And immigrants’ impact
On our country’s story

I’m busy working
When I hear a knock
“Come in!” I call
The only response is a quiet walk
I set down my pen
My sister walks in
She asks for a story
And so, I begin
Second Place Winner: “Land of Dreams
By Lillian Balet
Washington State Chapter

The world is made of dreams
Towering ones, tiny ones, all different from the other
Some may even seem impossible
The dream of immigrants
A new life in a new country
Safety, education, equality
But why am I glad we are a country
A country of immigrants?
A small question with big meanings
Maybe because of the stories
Maybe the dreams
Or maybe even the feeling that they are safe
But then the question circles again
Maybe it is what unites us to together
Together hand in hand as a community
Even a country or even a nation
Together as one

But then I wake up
Not in the dream country
But in my own country
A country of fear
A country controlled by fear
I feel as if I need to hide
Hide and lurk in the shadows
Keep my head down not to be seen
Keep my ideas and words to myself

My father’s brother is in the country of dreams
He wants us to follow in his footsteps
Walk the miles he walked to the border
The border of the dream country
Me, mama, and my dear sweet sister want to make the journey
My papa thinks it is too dangerous
Until he hears there are hundreds of others
Making the long dangerous trek
We leave at sunrise with two heavy bags filled
Filled with our most precious possessions
We start the journey to America, the land of dreams

I feel as if the journey will never end
The blistering sun shining on my back
The water is running low
My throat hurts
It feels as if I have swallowed sandpaper
The days are hot and the nights are cold
We keep on trudging to America, land of dreams

My dear sweet sister is ill
My mother thinks we should turn back
My papa is determined to keep going
I am too, then my parents
My very own parents part ways
I cry, I scream at my mother to stay
My papa and me keep on heading to America, land of dreams

The journey seems longer since my dear sweet sister and mama left
There are only a few of us still walking
I think the border will never come
Then I wonder, will the dreamland be everything I imagined?
I told papa about wanting to go back, he said we have come too far
He also told me to be brave
Be brave through the hard times
My papa, my own papa, never loses hope
Unlike me, through everything, I keep heading towards
America, land of dreams?

We finally made it to the border
When I stepped across it was not what I imagined
I felt sad that my dear sweet sister wasn’t there
Or my mama—could I even call her that anymore?
Everybody speaks in a mumble jumble language
I wonder if I will ever get use to this place, America, land of dreams?
Honorable Mention: “Journey”  
By Sarah Reinert  
Carolinas Chapter

My heart is galloping  
Make it stop, make it stop  
I escape finally from North Korea  
On my way to America  
Hopefully  
Across the ocean  
On my little boat  
Land is near  
And so is my fear  
The waves float me to land  
But also could crash me under  
In darkness  
After hours at sea I reach land  
Hopefully they do not hurt me  
Or even kill me  
I step out of the boat and fall  
Covered with sand  
Hungry  
Two men run to me  
Help me  
Give me food and a home  
A new family  
I have a new job  
To tell my story  
I am an immigrant  
But I feel as I am at home  
Safe  
At last  
American
Honorable Mention: “Little Bogomila”
By Boyana Nikolova
Minnesota/ Dakotas Chapter

It happened so fast,
But I remember
That special letter,
The letter addressed for me
Whispering:
I’m going to America.
And yet, here I am.
Goodbye Airplane,
Goodbye Bulgaria,
Goodbye Orphanage,
Goodbye Life,
I miss you, but I must move on.
Now that I see it,
America,
I’m breathless.
Finally saying,
‘Goodbye’ to that
Small orphanage.
Too many feelings.
I’m excited, but
I miss you, Bulgaria.
„Липсваш ми” I whisper.
But now...
I think I’ll just say goodbye.
The airport: overflowing.
Immigrants, everywhere.
One of them though;
Is going to be me.
And I’m going to live
Like a real American.
They’re coming toward me.
I see the family.
But... something is wrong.
It’s missing something,
Maybe they’re missing
A girl like me.
Later the family comes
Surrounded by people:
Very formal.
When they sign a paper
The little child,
Says “welcome home.”
Thankful,
Thankful that somebody
This kind is here.
Actually willing
To claim me.
I wonder why....
I was happy, but now?
Questions surround me,
“What will they think?”
“Am I an outcast?”
Its too many questions.
How do I answer?
Weeks later,
They drive me somewhere.
Somewhere unfamiliar,
Overfilled with kids
Pushing through and I wonder,
“Is this school?”
Everything: so different.
They talk strange,
A much different language.
And nobody understands me.
Yet I’m supposed to be
In 5th grade.
“Some much stress” I think,
“The teacher is always talking
But I can’t hear...
Or understand
She’s always
Facing me... Why?”
Then when everyone,
Hurriedly piles out
I realize why they’re always staring
It’s the wheelchair on my feet.
I’m angry, it’s just helping me.
How does this matter to them?
And then I see that
We all came from somewhere,
Someplace else.
And suddenly, I can feel a shot of joy
Like I’m not the only one.
But maybe I’m right.
And this may not be
My true home
But I know,
I still belong
And that’s really
All that matters to me.
I feel so proud,
I’ve gone so far,
I’ve inspired many people,
I’ve learned about many other cultures,
I’m just thankful,
That I could see it all happen.
My friends,
My family,
My education,
My life,
Thank you, America
For helping them.
And it warms my heart
To hear others
Who could also share;
Share their struggles
And remind themselves
Just how far they had went.
Other countries,
Other people
Other stories,
Other traditions,
They’re in another world
But here, they can be together
I see it
But differently.
It’s unique.
It’s America.
Това е живота ми.
Това е иммиграция.
Honorable Mention: “Eleanor Traube”
By Nola Kra-Caskey
Northern California Chapter

Poland, 1941
War is raging.
Children dying.
Little girl, Little Hope.
One Brave woman,
And her newborn
Daughter,
Eleanor Traube.
Jews in danger.
They resist,
Yet stay out of trouble.

Poland, 1945
They struggled through,
And when light shines again,
The women and her little
Four-year-old
Run to
America.
Away, they say,
Only Hardship and
Trouble in Poland.

America, 1949
Finally, in America.
Brave mummy,
Fast growing girl.
8 now, little Eleanor Traube.
With a supporting
Cousin,
Mother and
Daughter
Face a new world.
Eleanor goes to school
The next day.
Kind teacher
Gives thick paper
And pretty, colorful sticks.
Eleanor draws, while
other kids speak
Sharply.

2 years later, America
World,
Whirring world.
Eleanor’s world.
She speaks with them now,
Plays with them now.
Knows their foods now.
Toast!
Cream cheese!
Jelly!
Peanut butter. Ew.
All new,
But still
Her world.
Eleanor, and brave mummy.
And Baby Rosely.
Soon enough,
They will be citizens
Of this strange new place.

America, 2019
Eleanor has lived
Long.
Sons and
Daughters of
Her own
Growing old.
Even grandchildren.
In each one,
She sees brave mummy,
Wishing to
Thank her for
Her protection.
But
Brave mummy is no more.
But she’s in Eleanor’s memories
And Eleanor’s children.
And because of mummy,
Eleanor’s children,
And children’s children
Live in America today.
Irwin

Wandering in the World,
Danger
At every turn.
Escaping Hitler.
Crossing borders.
Never time to rest.
Or catch your breath.
But with a change
In laws,
And a Lucky Turn,
Irwin Finds himself In America.
After Setbacks,
An Accidental Trip to Cuba,
And A Displaced person camp,
A burning desire Leads them.
To their New home.
Friends,
Relatives in Jersey,
And support All along the way.
Bring Irwin And his family To a new place.

Eventually Irwin will Marry, and Have children, But not then. Back then, He was just a child,

Trying to make sense Of his new life.