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Derek Sargent

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Margaret Chase Smith Library 2012 Essay Contest

FIRST PLACE ESSAY

The Pursuit of Happiness

by Derek Sargent

Each year, the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. This year, students were invited to assess the current state of national affairs and describe their vision of the American Dream for the 21st century. We feature here the 2012 first-place prize-winning essay.

It is impossible to live a week in the U.S. and not hear something about the “American Dream.” The American Dream has inspired artists, writers, politicians, and teachers for centuries. Every year newspapers and magazines have articles about the American Dream from native-born Americans to immigrants. Every election, politicians speak of their dreams in speeches. The film industry shows this dream in movie after movie to the enjoyment of millions. The American Dream is a powerful symbol. It is part of America like apple pie, baseball, and rock-and-roll music.

The phrase “American Dream” has been around since historian James Truslow Adams coined it in 1931 during the Great Depression. He described it in his book *The Epic of America* as a dream “in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be

recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

Adams gave it the name, but the idea of America as a land of unlimited possibility and opportunity has been around since the country’s earliest days. Immigrants have been coming to America for nearly 400 years, searching for something better than the life that they left behind.

The wonderful thing about the American Dream is that the individual defines it. It does not come with a government mandate or “how to” manual. In America, it is possible to design your own fulfilling life, create your own reality. You—and only you—are its architect, builder, and owner. Yet, the words “American Dream” are misleading because it implies that there is only one dream. Really, the American Dream has many definitions, and its definition depends on factors such as age, cultural identity, and citizenship status.

I conducted a survey of more than 200 people, asking them to describe the American Dream. For the majority, material prosperity is at the heart of the American Dream. For many, their dream is symbolized in home ownership. Also, there is a hope that their children will be able to rise to a higher social class. Their American Dream was the opportunity to save, invest in the future, and own things. For some adults, financial abundance was second to quality of life in their vision of the American Dream. These people said the ability to enjoy good health was a primary priority. As one person said, “You can have all the money in the world, all the spare time, all the friends, but what good is it, if you are dying of an incurable disease?” Interestingly, many said that freedom was an important part of the American Dream. They spoke of the right to decide how to live one’s life.

For others, the American Dream is living in a country where all citizens have equal rights and opportunities. America’s minorities who have experienced discrimination have a dream to eliminate inequality and prejudice. Martin Luther King Jr. described his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, on a hot summer day on August 28, 1963, that all citizens will receive equal protection under the United States Constitution and that “they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Sadly, discrimination still exists, but since the civil rights movement more Americans have achieved their dream.

For many of America’s immigrants today, the American Dream is primarily about enjoying civil rights as well as the opportunity for economic success. This is especially true for new Americans emigrating from countries that suppress political and religious diversity and persecute those who disagree with the government. An American immigrant from Vietnam said, “My parents came here for opportunities, better living standards, equal rights, but most of all freedom of speech, thought, and worship.” These immigrants can take comfort in the words inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty: “Your huddled masses yearning to be free.”

With the 21st century, Americans continue to pursue the American Dream—economic prosperity, personal liberty, civil rights. But still, achieving financial success seems to be fairly consistent with most Americans’ dreams. Few Americans will deny that we are intently focused on the “dollar.” In a society dedicated to capitalism, the ability to purchase a big house and a nice car separates those who are considered successful from those who are not.

Unfortunately, the method of acquiring this financial success has changed over the years. Earlier versions of the American Dream honored thrift and hard work as the preferred way to become successful. Today, however, many Americans dream of shortcuts to wealth. Get-rich-quick schemes have replaced industry or perseverance. Rather than adhering to the traditional work ethic, far too many Americans are pinning their hopes on “easy” money.

Instant wealth has not always been part of the American Dream. During the Colonial period, Benjamin Franklin counseled people on “The Way to Wealth” in *Poor Richard’s Almanac* with “early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,” and “industry pays debts.” This was not extravagant wealth, but rather economic independence and the opportunity for social advancement through financial gain. Abraham Lincoln insisted that the greatness of the American North was “the prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or lands, for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another beginner to help him. This system opens the way for all.”

Following the Civil War, Americans still believed in thrift and hard work with the tales of Horatio Alger who overcame adversity through hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, and self-discipline. The rags-to-riches legend became part of the American story—anyone could succeed and achieve wealth if they worked hard. Then these ideas of financial success were wrapped together in religion with the Protestant “work ethic.”

These ideas shifted with the rise of American industry. The machine and assembly-line production required a different worker. Now Americans became consumed by desires for material goods and status. Americans lost the sense of individuality, thrift, hard work, and

craftsmanship that had characterized America before.

However, this shift did not lessen people’s desire for the American Dream. The difference is people feel like it is almost an “entitlement” and not something to work towards. For some Americans, hard work and thrift are no longer part of the vision of the American Dream. Now work is something you do until you “strike it rich.” The media tells Americans that the road to financial success is more luck than hard work. Look at the game shows with thousands of people wanting to participate and win huge amounts of money. Yes, this is achieving the American Dream, but without hard work. Lotteries are just like game shows—easy money with little effort. One does not need to work hard to choose a series of numbers. Now you only work until you hit the Big Lotto or Powerball. Yes, these people believe in the American Dream. Although they admit that winning is a longshot, they nevertheless fantasize about the possibility.

Hope has always been part of the American Dream, but for many people today, hope in the American Dream emphasizes luck. The ethic of work, sacrifice, and moral responsibility is replaced with the ethic of luck. Beyond game shows and lotteries opening a path to the American Dream, there is “million-dollar injury.” Americans file tens of thousands of lawsuits each year in hopes of cashing in on a personal injury or product-liability case. This is like a lottery because your chance is based on whether you can prove you are injured by someone whose product or conduct can be proved faulty, and your party’s insurance is sufficient for a large award, and whether you have a good lawyer. Just like game shows and lotteries, injury and product-liability lawsuits can be extremely lucrative. Once again the traditional path to the American Dream is bypassed. For many people today, the ways of Benjamin

Franklin and Abraham Lincoln are not the components of financial success.

But even today, after all of this, the rags-to-riches myth is still part of the American Dream, and people are still taught that hard work, frugality, and self-sacrifice can help a person achieve financial success and social mobility. Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Horatio Alger instilled hope in generations of Americans. All three helped to establish basic guidelines for success in a land of infinite possibility—America.

In a great country where people are different from one another in so many ways, the American Dream is one of the strongest ties we share with one another. North to south, east to west, across all lines of ethnicity, color, religion, and gender, Americans share in the aspiration of the American Dream. America’s immigrants remind us—by their success—that the American Dream is alive and well and within reach of anyone willing to work for it. What Americans should worry about is the day immigrants no longer find America attractive. 🐟



Derek Sargent

graduated from Acadia Christian School in 2012 and is enrolled at the University

of New England on a merit scholarship, planning to major in exercise science. While attending Acadia Christian, he was on the honor roll and received the Maine Principal’s Award. His extracurricular activities included captaining the soccer and basketball teams.