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Honorable Mention, Middle School Division (\$25)

What's Important to Me

To some people, money is everything; it is a way of life and, without it, they would feel as if they had nothing. However, growing up in the family that I did, money was not something that had the slightest importance to me. The toys donated from Salvation Army every Christmas still meant the same to me, as if they were brand new. Since the day I was born, I had lived in a 2 bedroom, 1 bathroom duplex whose living room was only big enough to fit a couch and two small chairs. Because of the lack of space, I was required to share a room with my sister (and I still do to this day). Some children would have seen this as a disadvantage, but in the end, it happened to make the bond between us that much stronger. In the bed that I shared with her, I would frequently fall asleep at night, only to be awakened by nightmares. Some scared me to the point of tears. I would awaken, only to have my sister roll over, wrapping her arms around me. She would whisper to me that everything was alright and I would soon fall back asleep.

I always remember being close to my family. They have taught me so many things, so many values of life. My mother, who has taught me to have pride in myself and taught us to take care of one another, had always been a stay-at-home mom, given that my sister and I were always sick and we couldn't afford to hire a babysitter or nanny. Even though she didn't have an expensive office in some building or make thousands of dollars a week, I still saw her as a role model. She tended to our every need, by cooking us dinner, taking us everywhere we needed to go and making the house spotless when it seemed that was impossible. Then there was how she took care of my dad. I especially noticed it in the weeks when he was recovering from his back surgery in 2002.

My dad had always been a hard worker, and since the time he was 15, he would endure strenuous hours working with concrete. This is what taught me the values of hard work and not fussing about it, because no matter how hot it was (sometimes in 100 degree weather), I would still hear him getting up at 5:00 every morning, getting ready to go to work, not returning home until 4:00 or 5:00 in the evening. His job consisted of laboring concrete, constructing walls and bridge decks, and pouring highways. Every day that he came home, I saw the tired lines in his face get more and more noticeable. There were so many times when he would come home, trying not to let us see the pain he was in. Over the years he had suffered from degenerative disk disease in his back and his 3rd and 4th disks were deteriorated and out of place. But finally, there came a day when the pain became too much for him, and with no choice, he went to the doctors, hoping surgery would fix the problem. Afterwards, while he was recovering, my sister, my mom and I were always there for him....we got through it together.

Since as long as I could remember, I had always been aware that I was overweight; and, yes, it bothered me. But it never really sank in until the day we went to a clinic in Akron and I actually heard the doctor say the word "obese". It broke my heart to think, "how did I let myself get this far"? It was then that I decided I had to do something. I couldn't put it off any longer. My mother's trips to the grocery store now became an activity we did together so that I could help her pick out the "healthy food". I started exercising as a daily routine, determined to lose 35 pounds. It really amazed me though, how supportive everyone was. My family no longer bought junk food (which was a sacrifice for them as well) and my friends willingly accepted the fact that I wouldn't eat "midnight goodies" when they spent the night. Over a period of 8 months, I lost 51 pounds and I was down to my ideal weight.

Everything that I have been through in life has made me learn many things. I learned that even though I had lost weight and looked and felt so much better, my family and best friends treated me no different. It showed me that they would have loved me no matter what, that it was what's on the inside that counts. I have been taught the value to never treat anyone differently, no matter who they are; to always get to

know someone before I judge; and most importantly, never make fun of anyone. Then when it comes to money, not having much made me value my family so much more. I know that even if we would have been completely poor, we would have still loved each other just as much.

So in the end, even through the toughest times, I wouldn't have traded my life for anyone else's. Every single experience that I have ever had has made me *who I am*.