



MLKSB



2026
Essay
& Poetry
Awards Program

**Sponsored by the Martin Luther King, Jr.
Committee of Santa Barbara**

Congratulations!

To all our 2026 Essay & Poetry awardees!

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Essay & Poetry

Ages 6-12

To Lead Is to Love

Takunda Chikowero

Poetry 1st Place

Brandon Elementary

As I listen to the radio,
As I watch the news on television,
I hear desperate voices, cries, anger,
and pain.

I see hopelessness, fear, disbelief.

I pause and I wonder: I wonder
about the future of my generation.

Then I hear a voice,
a timeless voice,

The voice of Martin Luther King Jr.,
Echoing, rolling like thunder through
the years,

Booming across the mountains and
deep into the oceans,

“We need leaders, not in love with
money

but in love with justice.

Not in love with publicity,
but in love with humanity.”

To lead is to love.

We need leaders in love with human-
ity.

My generation longs for
Love that leads with empathy,
Love that leads with compassion,
ove that leads with kindness.

Such love, steady, just, and brave,
is the kind our future deserves.



We Need Leaders

Stella Lappico

Poetry 2nd Place

Riviera Ridge School

We need leaders
not in love with money,
but in love with justice.

We need leaders
not in love with fame,
but in love with Humanity.

We need leaders
who hear the cries of the broken,
not the clatter of coins.

Leaders who see
the faces of the forgotten,
not the crowds that cheer.

We need leaders
who build bridges
not walls

who find peace
Not fame
who lift up
not tear down.

Let justice ring
from every city
from every village
from every heart.



A Leader in Full

Eleanor Hwang - Poetry 3rd Place - Mountain View School

A Leader in full:

Leaders are a twinkling light,
glimmering through our darkest night,
speaking out against waging wars,
and braving storms to reach the shores.

Their spirits never, ever hide,
but they're not obsessed with preserving pride,
earning their way up towards the stars,
not setting themselves the lowest bars.

The brave souls stand pure and true,
like golden light on the sea of blue,
for peace and equality is our dream,
because we are all one team.

Early in April, a fair Spring day,
a shot rang out - and there he lay,
the bringer of love, battling hate,
but this was not the end of him for he had a defining trait.

The voice of a leader, that echoes strong,
Beautifully truthful like a bird's easy song,
Worth more than diamonds; more than gold,
for empowering people is the true bold.

By: Eleanor Hwang

A Strong Community

Jude Marshall

Poetry Honorable Mention

Foothill School

We need a strong community
that stands up for what is right
We need a leader
Who's bold and brave
Who listens to their people
and who takes their words to heart
Who doesn't care for
money
publicity
but for their people
and the people's rights
And we need people who
don't judge others by
Skin
Status
Voice
Or ethnicity
And who cares for one other
and family and friends
And that is a strong community.



Lead with Love

Patricia Kerr

Poetry Honorable Mention

Riviera Ridge School

We need to start speaking
out for the things we care about
A confident stride where we walk
Bold opinions and ideas whenever we
talk
Even though it's scary
we have to stand together
During these roaring storms
we have to weather
Be the one that chooses to lead
With the love we really need
Take the love you feel and show it
Until the entire world knows it
Stand up and say what you really
think
Just like Dr. Martin Luther King
But now you get to say
what you believe is right
Show them you want to share the light



The Day Nobody Asked Where I was From

Yunyi Mu

Essay - 1st Place

Isla Vista Elementary School

When I first moved to the United States, people often said, “Your English is amazing!” It always made me feel like I was in the spotlight and everyone noticed how hard I was trying. At the same time, each compliment reminded me that I was an outsider, who was trying to belong, like a tree in the middle of a grass field.

After I came to California, things started to feel different. No one talked about my English anymore. Instead, people asked if I wanted to play with them, or to eat lunch with them.

At first, I was surprised. Did they forget that English wasn’t my first language? Soon, I realized that this is what inclusion really feels like.

It’s when people don’t treat you like someone different, like a tree becoming a pretty flower in the same green field. They treat you the same as you treat them. They just see you as you.

Sometimes my mom says people in California don’t ask, “Where are you from?” Instead, they ask, “How are you liking it here?” or “Where did you move from?”

The voices are soft and kind, because it means you already belong, you are part of the same community, not

someone standing outside of it.

In another state, before I came here, people were friendly too. They meant well when they said nice things about my English, but I often felt there was a small gap between “you” and “us.”

Here, that gap is filled with inclusion and kindness. People don’t step around differences; they just walk through them.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that we need people who love justice and humanity.

When I was younger, I thought justice was something big, which is saving a person, standing up for someone. Now I know that justice also lives in small places too.

Justice can be quiet and simple. It doesn’t always shout or carry a sign. Sometimes it smiles to you, sometimes it passes you the little ball in four square, sometimes it comes and catches you in a game of tag. Maybe kindness is another kind of justice. It makes room for everyone to stand on the same ground.

When I realized that, I understood what Dr. King meant by love for humanity. It’s not about noticing our differences, it’s about seeing how we are the same. We all want to be understood, accepted, and respected for who we are.

These days, when I meet someone new, I try to remember how it felt

when no one asked where I was from. That's when I truly felt at home. Maybe one day, I'll help someone else feel that way too.



How Leaders Should Act

Felicity Gray

Essay - 2nd Place

Los Berros Visual & Performing Arts School

What does it take to be truly great? For Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., greatness came from fighting for civil rights. He wanted all people to be treated equally and fairly. He wanted people to stand up for themselves in peaceful ways. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "We need leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice; not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity." What that means to me is we need people in leadership that do the right things and help others because they care.

By following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I have found ways to perform acts of service to help my community and be a leader. While I am still little, I hope that I can achieve greatness through helping others. I help others in my community by reading to younger students, cooking and bringing flowers to others, and by doing dance performances at old people's homes.

At school, every Wednesday, I go to a TK (transitional kindergarten) class at

my school and read to a younger student. By reading to younger students, I can be a positive role model. My reading buddy also gets to hear a story that they might not hear at home. It is nice to make new friends and share my love of reading.

Another way I help my community is by spreading kindness and love by cooking for others, baking, and sometimes bringing flowers. Sometimes when family members are sick I help by cooking with my grandma and delivering food to them. We make things like chicken noodle soup, menudo, enchiladas, or lumpia and pancit. Feeding others when they might not be up to cooking makes them feel good and maybe sometimes relieved. During the holidays, one tradition I do with my grandmother is spreading joy to community members by bringing them potted poinsettia flowers. It is nice to see the happy faces when the people receive a holiday surprise.

During the summer, I perform for the elderly in group homes. I dance Salsa for all the residents that want to come see. They are always excited to see us perform. My dance group allows us to share the arts with these older people. Our performance seems to bring joy, music and entertainment to all that attend.

In conclusion, people should help others because they are trying to be kind. By helping others we make the world a better place. Acts of service should not

be for fame, but to show kindness to others and make them feel good. Even small acts can make a difference. Like the famous words of Aesop, the Greek storyteller, "No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted."!



Humanity & Justice

Arrow Moyer

Essay - 3rd Place

Ballard Elementary School

What is justice? Justice is the impartial and fair treatment of people. It is the principle of moral rightness. Justice is a dream. It is a vision. It is a goal. But justice isn't always reality. Just because we are striving for fairness and equality doesn't mean we have achieved it. Just because we tell our children that they can be anything they wish, just because we pledge liberty and justice to all in front of the American flag, doesn't mean we are living in a world with it.

What is humanity? Humanity is having empathy, compassion, and kindness for all beings...treating others with respect regardless of differences. The desire for humanity is humanity in itself. But humanity is lost if we don't express it; if we don't spread it. Because we can't have empathy and kindness if we don't know how to understand it, if we don't know how to believe in it.

However, this doesn't mean justice

and humanity aren't worthy goals - it simply means that we must accept that change is necessary. The way we change the world is through the world's leaders. We need leaders who aren't tyrants, but liberators. We need leaders who aren't attackers, but defenders. Leaders who lead not for power, but for empowering others.

Martin Luther King said, "We need leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice. Not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity."

This powerful quote communicates the need for leaders who lead with the purpose of helping others. We need leaders who will work to make the vision of justice and humanity a reality. We need leaders with compassion, integrity, and selflessness.

The first important trait in a leader is compassion. The deep kind of sympathy for others' pain, and the strong desire to reduce it, is called compassion. Compassionate leaders are not only empathetic, but feel the need to help people. Leaders who lead with compassion will do everything in their power to aid others, and because they have so much power, they will aid others. The leaders we believe in need to believe in us. They need to have one mission, and that is to make the world a better place. They need to be driven by this mission, and work everyday to achieve it. Because this is the reason we have leaders at all. A true leader

wants to lead for those they lead, and not just because they do not wish to be led.

Another important trait in a leader is integrity. The people we choose to lead us are the people we trust to have power over us. To truly trust someone, you must believe that they have strong morals and honor. This is integrity, a trait every great leader possesses. Not only do these people want to help others, but they want to do it honestly and honorably. They strive to always be righteous and decent. Those who are corrupt will stop at nothing to get what they want—and while leaders should have goals and want to achieve them, they should never do so in a way that isn't fair and true. What is the point of justice if you cannot achieve it justly?

A final important trait in leaders is selflessness. The words "justice" and "humanity" refer to all humans - all people. They are words that mean everyone, not just a single person. This is why an important quality in leaders is selflessness; leading isn't about oneself. It's not about one's own gain, about money or publicity. It's about leading the people for the people. A true leader can't be caught up in their own wants, but in the needs of everyone else. Everyone they've been entrusted to lead. Leading is a responsibility, and one that should only be given to a person with the ability

to think not only about themselves, but about the greater good. Leaders must be leaders so they can lead, not so they can receive the money, publicity, or power that is given to the individuals we choose to lead us.

If we can have leaders who possess compassion, integrity, and selflessness, we can have leaders capable of leading. We can have leaders capable of making justice and humanity not just a vision, but a reality. As Martin Luther King said in his quote, humanity and justice are the key to being a leader. I believe that if we all try to embody these traits, and choose our leaders the way Martin Luther King encouraged, we can truly form a nation of justice and humanity.

In her poem, *The Hill We Climb*, Amanda Gorman said, "for there is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it, if only we are brave enough to be it."

It is my hope that we are all brave enough to choose leaders who lead with integrity. It is also my hope that individually, we all chose justice and humanity over money and publicity.



Choose to Play in Peace

Max Varing

Essay - Honorable Mention

Riviera Ridge School

MLK Jr. didn't just stand up for rights just to be famous, he did it to make the world better; he wanted all people to treat each other right.

I also want to make a difference in this world; I want to end bullying, to promote the use of kind words over mean ones, and encourage people to stop their fighting and choose to play in peace together. I am nice, I am kind, and I love when people treat people right. I want to be a leader for a reason. I want to be a leader so no drama happens: no fights please!

Please be kind to other people. The world would be such a better place. I want to be a leader because I will listen, I will help people, and I will try to make the world a better place. I don't care about money at all, not one bit. I care about love, kindness, and leadership. I love nature- please don't kill animals, what did they do to you? I hate racism- it's not nice.

I want a world without racism. I pray that racism ends. I think it should because it matters how people treat each other. My mom and dad always say "treat others how you want to be treated". It will be a dream come true if someone that's being mean to you stops.

MLK Jr. had dreams too. To make his

dreams a reality he never gave up. He was peaceful and stood up for himself and if I met him I would ask him". "How can I be like you?" I think he would say that we can all be leaders in our own way.

I think leadership is an amazing gift. Leaders have the power to make things better. MLK Jr. was able to make the world a better place. I bet it took a lot of courage and hard work. We need leaders with courage. We need leaders like Dr. King.

Thank you for reading bye!!



Dear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Maison Collins

Essay Honorable Mention

Riviera Ridge School

You believed, you hoped, you dreamed, when no leader did.

You strived, you fought, you marched, for the sake of a better world, a better life and future for us all.

You gave us all light and hope in the darkness, a chance, a plan, an opportunity to change.

You gave everyone a time to speak, a voice, you did more than just speak, you listened. You were determined, strong, promising.

You stood up for us, confident, encouraging, upholding. That's what makes you a true leader. Maison.

Essay & Poetry

Ages 13 - 18

Where Power Rings

Thorin Rasmussen

Poetry 1st Place

Carpinteria High School

We search the halls where power's
echoes ring,
And listen closely to the songs they
sing.

But let the call not be for crowns of
gold,
Nor for the tales on eager tongues
unrolled.

The leader that the world demands
must hold a different purpose in their
hands.

Not one in love with money's cold
embrace,
Whose every venture seeks a richer
place.

Whose balance sheet outweighs a
human soul,
And where the soul of service is quite
lost.

For greed, a blinding shadow clouds
the sight,
And turns the morning of a cause to
night.

But give us those in love with sacred
justice,
Who see the gap and feel the deep
injustice,
Who build a bridge where chasms
tear apart,
And make equality the nation's heart.

Whose resolve for fairness is the fire
that burns away the selfish desire

and fights for those who can not plead
Not one in love with fame's bright
eyes.

Who chases headlines through the
public roads,
Whose actions bend to win the
crowd's applause,
And break the spirit of forgotten laws.
For vanity's a pedestal too high.

Where truth is sacrificed beneath the
sky,
And every move is measured, poised,
and neat, To claim the spotlight on a
busy street.

But give us those in love with
humanity,
Who will find their worth in sanity,
Who will feel the wounds and hold the
pain,
And will work not for a profit, but for
gain

Of Dignity and comfort for the poor,
and Content to serve without a named
place.

Let us rise up and seek the truer way,
For leaders forged in justice light the
day.



A Dream that Lights the Way

Vivi Ralston

Poetry - 2nd Place

Riviera Ridge School

In the heart of a hopeful man,
a dream took flight,
A vision bold and shining,
piercing the darkest night.

Dr. King stood tall,
his voice a fearless song,
Calling all to justice,
o right what was so wrong.

With words like thunder,
and love his guiding light,
He marched through streets of
struggle, demanding equal rights.

Not with fists or fury,
but with peace as his sword.
He fought for every brother,
every sister, every soul ignored.

He dreamed of freedom's rainbow,
a world where hearts unite,
Where skin would paint no barriers,
and wrong turns into right.

He walked through fire's trial,
never once did he sway,
Because he held onto hope—
and showed us all the way.

Though hatred sought to silence,
his spirit will not die,
His dream lives in our actions,
in every tear and sigh.

So stand with courage,
lift your voice,
and hold his dream alive,
For Dr. King's dream is ours
as long as we survive.

Peace Starts with Us

Kalia Stump

Poetry - 3rd Place

Riviera Ridge School

Peace isn't loud,
it doesn't shout
It grows in quiet spaces,
inside and out.

It starts with respect,
a listening ear
With kindness that's real,
not just what we hear

Dr. King said leaders
should love what's right,
Not money or fame,
but justice and light

So I try to lead
in the ways I know
By being kind
and helping peace grow

It's not just big speeches
or fancy plans,
It's holding the door open
with gentle hands

It's learning from cultures,
old and new,
And seeing the world
from another view

Peace starts with us,
with what we choose

In every moment we choose not to
waste

We grow through kindness,
respect, and grace
That peace is built
by me and you.



In Love & Wealth

Carson Weber

Poetry - Honorable Mention

Carpinteria High School

Money is something that we require,
Money is something we desire.
We need less of those who long for
wealth,
More who desire commonwealth.

Leaders who put you above fame,
Leaders that put justice above blame.
We need more leaders with love of
good,
Less of them who think "I" could.

"I" is not a leader we want,
They put themselves first and you
they will haunt.

"We" is the leader that we need,
They will wrap our wounds and stop
the bleed.

Maybe someday we will have our "we",
But right now this is all I need you to see.
We might need coins, might need cash,
But in the end that all burns to ash.

Love is something that you cannot burn,
Trust, that is what the leader will earn.
If we trust them they will trust us,
If we accept good leaders, it won't
cause a fuss

Peace

Elias Sprague

Poetry - Honorable Mention

Riviera Ridge School

Peace flows like water through a fire,
evaporating yet still prevailing

Peace sounds like the whisper of a
dove's wings on a sunny day

Peace feels like getting beat down
over and over and still getting back
up.

Peace is not something you are born
with

Peace is something you acquire over
time by finding your balance even
through struggle and hardship.

Peace is the light in your room warm
and comfortable yet still strong
through the whole night.

You can find peace in many things: a
big accomplishment in life or a small
moment.

Martin Luther king found peace
through haters and friends and fought
with it for what he believed in.

Find your peace.

Whether it's a small moment or a big
one, take time and think,
What can I do with my peace?



Letter to Dr. King from the Future

Stella Burnett

Essay - 1st Place

Riviera Ridge School

Dear Dr. King,
Its me, a dreamer that woke up in your tomorrow
I thought you should know your voice still walks here
Not as an echo
But as a heartbeat
Steady beneath the noise
It is different today
Different, both good and bad
We don't have all the answers you matched for
But the world still lingers within your visions shadows
Your light did not die that day, on that balcony
It multiplied
It lives in classrooms, in protests, In intertwined hands still reaching across divides
They quote your words on walls in remembrance
But the real ones
The true leaders
They live them
They show up without cameras They chase change not fame
They honor your legacy by being the kind of people you wanted in our world
We need more of these leaders, we fall short sometimes

We build taller buildings instead of building character
We hold cell phones instead of seeking meaning
We speak of justice in boardrooms but whisper it to quiet in the streets
Sometimes I wonder how heavy your dream felt
People pushing against your effort and hope
Did the chaos ever scare you?
Like the silence scares us now
When we speak truth into rooms built to ignore it
We've come so far Dr. King
But the dream still breathes, barely, bravely
We will rise
You taught us what leadership is
Leadership is not the gold plated letters on a nameplate
But the dirt underneath your fingernails
Form planting seeds you might never see bloom
I am telling you that your seed is going to bloom
Your sacrifices are going to pay off
There are young hearts listening
Faint voices learning to project
Feet learning to march again
They don't lead for gain, they lead for good
Insistent on a better future beyond themselves like you were

So, if you could look across time you
would see your dream is alive
The ladder you build is standing tall,
just waiting for us to climb it
Waiting for a true leader to take the
first step

Sincerely, Stella -

I promise to keep marching.

Being a Leader

Addy Parker

Essay - 2nd Place

Riviera Ridge School

Being a Leader To me, being a leader is a complex combination of elements. On one hand, to be a leader, you have to LEAD. Leading isn't bossing around, or judging people by their abilities. It is guiding them into the right direction to a successful future. I have this vivid memory from Kindergarten. At my elementary school, there was a clear hierarchy. The "bigger" kids, (6th graders) and the "small fry" kids. (K-1st) Looking back, it was just some way we created more walls between ourselves. Now that I'm in 8th grade, it all seems pointless. Stepping into this chapter into my life, going into highschool, then college, I'm honestly nervous. Sometimes, I wish there were more leaders while growing up to show me how to treat myself and others. Many people would call me kind, and caring, and going with the flow. But I don't think anybody

would call me a leader. I often wish I could be like people who are naturally leaders, like my parents, who own a restaurant. and my grandma, for raising 7 kids, even if not all of them were her own. But being a leader doesn't come as easily to some people. Like riding a bike, or surfing. I didn't learn to ride a bike until I was 8 years old, and such a minor difference between me and my peers made me feel so much less than them. I've tried really hard over the years to come to terms with the fact that I sometimes self deprecate myself, for not understanding fast enough. Lately, I've set a small goal for myself, to learn the material, and not just get it done so I'm not behind everyone else. At first glance, this paper might appear to be a simple attempt to earn some quick money, but I assure you that is not the case. Martin Luther King Jr constantly led with this example, guiding his followers to act for civil rights. He showed the world that leadership is one of the most powerful forces of nature. It is as strong as gravity, which pulls us closer. And as strong as love, which teaches us compassion and kindness. I think we need a lot more people, willing to risk their heart and soul, just so that people looking up to them can be proud, and live a better life. Addy



Like the One King Imagined

Kazimir Graham-Szopa

Essay - 3rd Place

Riviera Ridge School

A little less than seventy years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said these words to a crowd gathered in Buffalo, New York. As with any quote, you wonder why the person said it. At that time, there were many leaders, so if society needed ones that weren't in love with money and publicity, there must have been many leaders who were. Who is King referring to when he talks about leaders in love with money and publicity? Are they the ones who jailed peaceful protesters and fought against voting rights? What type of leader would King want to replace them? I believe that last question matters more than the others. A new question rises from that one, though: can we be those leaders? Being a Baptist minister who was without pride, he wouldn't admit it, but I believe King perfectly exemplified the characteristics of love for justice and humanity. He spent his whole life preaching social justice to a government and to people who didn't want to hear it. He was killed because of that. I believe King was a great man for that reason. How can we reflect those values in our own lives, though? We can become more civilized and just

people by showing real kindness to others. Many schools' health and wellness curricula talk about helping each other through small acts of kindness, and that those acts can be as powerful as King's. I highly doubt any of us will make as big a difference as he did, but that doesn't mean our actions don't matter. If every single person were mean to others in everyday interactions, King's message wouldn't change anything—nor would it if we were all already nice to each other. That message, though, showed a mostly spiteful and segregated society the possibility of being kind to one's neighbors. I believe when enough people are just and truly love the rest of humanity, our world will be like the one King imagined. Kazimir



Thank you

**To the teachers, families, friends and volunteers
who encouraged and supported the students who
submitted their work this year.**

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**With gratitude to the following who donated their
time as judges**

Lori Anaya
Stephanie Barbé Hammer
Melinda Palacio



Thank you to the Schools

Ballard Elementary
Brandon Elementary
Foothill Elementary
Isla Vista Elementary
Kellogg Elementary
Los Berros Visual & Performing Arts
Academy
Carpinteria High School
Mountain View
Riviera Ridge School
Santa Barbara Unified School District
Home Based Program
Santa Ynez Valley Home School Program

& School Districts

Carpinteria Unified School
District
Goleta Unified School District
Lompoc Unified School District
Santa Barbara Unified School
District
Santa Ynez Valley Unified School
District