

2014 NOPE Life Choice Scholarship Winners

This year's winners reflect how young people today are doing their best to stay clear of drugs, despite pressure from peers and the media.

By Karen Perry

Let's meet this year's NOPE Task Force Life Choice Scholarship winners.

The work these students produced was really good, reflecting how young people today are doing their best to stay clear of drugs, despite pressure from peers and media influencers. They told stories, did research and brought to life their fears on what dangerous drugs can do to them and their friends.

Little background: Every year, NOPE runs a competition as part of our Life Choices Scholarships. It's open to high school and middle schools students who can best produce essays, multimedia presentations, videos or advertisements that reveal their understanding of our nation's drug abuse challenges and how to resolve them.

Here are three of the winners:

Sabrina Fusco

12th Grade

Garnet Valley High School- Glen Mills, PA

Category: Best Video- Be the Hero- Tell Someone

Juliana Castro

9th Grade

Boca Raton Community High School- Boca Raton, FL

Category: Best High School PowerPoint- Addiction and the Teenage Brain

Abigail Richards

12th Grade

Spruce Creek High School- Port Orange, FL

Category: Best High School Essay- Be the Hero- Tell Someone

We've asked these students three questions about their work and their reflections on what they learned from participating in the contest. Here are their responses:

What was your contest entry about?

Sabrina Fusco:

The contest entry was about three friends with a situation in a car. The situation being their one friend in the back is passed out and looks terrible after taking

implied undiagnosed prescription drugs. The one friend thinks they should just leave him and the scenario plays through the driver's head and she doesn't like the outlook. So she speaks up, as should all...and takes the title of "Be a Hero, Speak Up" into her own hands, and saves the day -- because telling someone could save a person's fragile life.

Juliana Castro:

My contest entry was a PowerPoint presentation and an advertisement. For the PowerPoint presentation I chose the topic "Addiction and the teenage brain" because I found it very interesting. My presentation was about addiction: what it is, the factors that can cause it, and the effects it has on the teenage brain. For the advertisement, I decided to draw a poster, and the topic I chose was "Be the hero-Tell someone." I drew a girl taking prescribed drugs out of a medicine cabinet, and then I wrote: "If you know someone who is taking drugs, tell someone and be a hero."

Abigail Richards:

My first contest entry was an essay about an experience my friend had with addiction, and how I made the choice to tell her parents about it, so she could get the help she needed. The topic was "Be the hero, tell someone". But I was not being a hero; I was being a friend. My second entry was a PowerPoint about what narcotics do to a teenage brain. I got the idea when my Anatomy and Physiology teacher explained to us what methamphetamine does to the brain. Neurobiology has always been one of my favorite topics.

In doing this project, what did you learn about drugs that you didn't already know?

Sabrina Fusco:

Well I looked up facts, like at the end of my video, that I thought were very interesting. I actually didn't even take into account people "popping pills" or any of that as a serious drug problem because now a days people think the only bad drugs are weed and heroin and all that, when in reality deadly drugs could be sitting on a window sill above your kitchen sink. So the whole project really did reach out to me and so did the presentation they (NOPE Task Force) gave at my school. It is what inspired me to want to do something.

Juliana Castro:

While doing this project, I learned a lot of things that I didn't already know about drugs. For instance, I didn't know that prescribed medicine could cause addiction or that combining drugs can cause overdose. I didn't know that addiction was an illness or that it could damage the brain. I also learned many interesting facts about

the brain and what addiction can do to it. For example, I learned that the brain is not completely developed until the age of 25 or that drugs can affect your brain circuits.

Abigail Richards:

I learned quite a bit about the physical damage drugs can do to the body. It really is insane. The human body is this wonderfully complicated machine, and when you abuse a substance, it affects you on a cellular level.

Has this contest changed your viewpoint about drugs? If yes, how?

Sabrina Fusco:

Yes, it definitely has. You don't really think of people getting their hands on prescription drugs as a high...or it being dangerous. We think weed and alcohol and that's that, but in reality, it is very scary to think people keep out highly dosed medications that their kids could even accidentally take. The fact that these drugs can be easily accessible and that people can get them for basically free (by taking from a parent, friend, sibling, etc.) is even scarier. The presentation and the contest both showed me that prescription drugs are serious...that they are meant for the person they are prescribed too, and that people put their lives in danger everyday teetering on the edge of a high that could ultimately result in their destruction. It needs to be known and people need to speak up, as I felt inspired to do.

Juliana Castro:

Yes. Before this contest, I didn't know that if you tried drugs for the first time they could possibly kill you. I always thought: "drugs are bad for people but that will never happen to me." After researching about addiction, I learned that there are a lot of people that die because of it, especially teenagers just like me. Just because you believe that nothing will happen to you doesn't mean it won't happen. This is why I now believe that you should be aware of the effects that drugs can have on you and that you should think twice before using them because they are really dangerous and can even cause your death.

Abigail Richards

I would say no, only because I have always been against recreational drug use.

Karen Perry is the executive director of NOPE Task Force.