

Anita Neuer, Brenda Medina-Guzman pen top essays

ACA Foundation, Ross Trust graduate student essay contests draw record numbers of entries

A \$2,500 scholarship grant to help underwrite graduate school costs. Free registration to the 2010 American Counseling Association Annual Conference & Exposition in Pittsburgh, plus three nights lodging at one of the conference hotels. Publication of your essay in *Counseling Today* and on the ACA website at *counseling.org*. Add these all together and you have the grand prize for the 2010 ACA Foundation Graduate Student Essay Contest and the 2010 Ross Trust Graduate Student Essay Competition for Future School Counselors.

These two top prizes, plus four runners-up awards in each competition of \$500 scholarship grants and free conference registration, helped attract a record number of entrants for this year's contests. But as several counselors who served as volunteer judges for the competitions noted, it was the high overall quality of the essays rather than the pure quantity that made the judging process difficult. As one judge noted, "It was clear that many of the writers cared deeply about the subjects being addressed and had put a great deal of thought and work into their entries."

Each competition required entrants to be student members of ACA as well as current graduate students in counseling programs at an accredited university or college. Participants submitted 600-word essays that addressed one of the five essay questions selected for this year's competition. The Ross Trust essay competition also required all entrants to be working toward a career in school counseling.

Anita Neuer, a counselor enrolled in the doctoral program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., submitted the winning essay in the ACA Foundation Graduate Student Essay Contest. Brenda Medina-Guzman, enrolled in the doctoral program at Wayne State University in Detroit, wrote the top essay in the Ross Trust Graduate Student Essay Competition for Future School Counselors.

Top runners-up in the ACA Foundation essay competition are Julie Hammontree of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Cyndi Dennemann of Xavier University, Donny Baca of the University of Northern Colorado and Thomas Sherman of the University of Virginia.

Top runners-up in the Ross Trust essay competition are Clare Mulach of Ohio University, Candice Roberson of Slippery Rock University, Xavier Lovo of San Francisco State University and Roshanda Neal of Missouri Baptist University.

Entrants answered one of the following questions in their essays:

- 1) Should the national debate about health care reform include the delivery of counseling services as a covered treatment? Why?
- 2) Name the population in this country that you feel is most underserved by the counseling profession, and explain what you think could be done to better address this group.
- 3) Do today's school-aged students present new issues and problems for counselors, and are counseling students today being adequately prepared to deal with these issues?
- 4) Is bullying an issue that the counseling profession is adequately addressing both in terms of education about the problem and in dealing with the overall issue?
- 5) In your opinion, have recent economic changes led to new problems which the counseling community should address? If yes, what actions would you suggest?

While the current focus in the media on health care reform and recent economic conditions helped channel a number of entrants toward those subjects, the questions about underserved populations and the issue of bullying drew the greatest number of responses. Entrants were encouraged to share their personal perspectives and insights on these subjects, but many supported their opinions by citing facts and findings from recent counseling research.

The ACA Foundation extends its

thanks to the counselors who volunteered their time to read and evaluate the essays: Courtland Lee, University of Maryland; Brooke Collison, emeritus, Oregon State University; Casey A. Barrio Minton, University of North Texas; Jane Goodman, emeritus, Oakland University; Suzanne Degges-White, Purdue University Calumet; Nita Jones, Dyersburg, Tenn.; E. Christine Moll, Canisius College; Mary Jane Anderson-Wiley, Augusta State University; Lois Wedl, College of Saint Benedict; Melanie Harper, St. Mary's University.

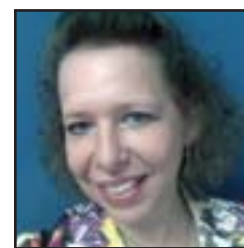
ACA Executive Director Richard Yep offered his thanks to the ACA Foundation for once again sponsoring this popular competition, as well as to the Ross Trust, which was created to help provide scholarship grants to counseling students working toward careers in elementary, middle or secondary school counseling. Yep said he looks forward to meeting the winning graduate students at the ACA Annual Conference in Pittsburgh and hopes other attendees will make a point of searching out these talented students.

Following are the two grand prize-winning essays from this year's competitions. The runners-up essays will be published in subsequent issues of *Counseling Today*.

Note: *Counseling Today* has edited the following essays only for spelling and minor style issues. The views expressed are those of the authors.

Grand Prize Winner

2010 ACA Foundation
Graduate Student Essay Contest



Anita A. Neuer

Anita Neuer began her work in the

doctoral program at Old Dominion University in the summer of 2009. Prior to that, she spent 10 years in private practice in Birmingham, Ala., after earning her master's degree in rehabilitation counseling from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Born and raised in New Jersey, Neuer's current goal is to work toward a career as counselor education faculty in a CACREP master's and doctoral program. Counseling is her third career, following earlier work in retail management and executive recruiting. Her current research interests are in clinical supervision and counselor wellness.

Should the national debate about health care reform include the delivery of counseling services as a covered treatment? Why?

The national debate about health care reform has changed direction several times since its inception and is likely to continue to evolve even more before a final decision. Regardless of basic design, any plan will surely be improved by including coverage for the delivery of counseling services. There are a number of factors supporting this argument.

As professional counselors, we know about the connection between mental and physical health. Recent wellness studies indicate what we have known for years: that improved mental health is correlated with improved physical health. Therefore, offering counseling as a covered service may help reduce overall medical costs throughout the country. Additionally, we would expect that as a result of counseling being more accessible to more people, rates of substance abuse would decrease because people would have a way to process and resolve their issues instead of self-medicating. We might also anticipate a reduction in suicide rates for the same reason.

If counseling were a covered service, our profession would have to become more internally consistent in terms of professional identity and branding. We would have to become more "user-friendly" in every setting. This would create a welcome opportunity for leaders in the counseling field to pave the way for more public education and awareness about the advantages of utilizing mental health counseling services and could also enhance the way we work with other

helping professionals instead of focusing on turf issues.

The number of people reporting symptoms of depression, anxiety and other mental health disorders each year continues to rise, and although some are able to get medications through their insurance, many are unable to afford counseling services. Underutilization of counseling services contributes to both overdependence on medications and further stigmatization of counseling, leading to even less utilization. Employers are also reducing benefits offered to employees, and those who are fortunate enough to have coverage for counseling are eligible for fewer and fewer sessions.

Our country has experienced significant economic changes that have increased the need for counseling in local communities. With unemployment and mortgage foreclosures on the rise, homeless shelters are bursting at the seams, Internet and substance addiction continue to increase, and more and more couples divorce each year. We can predict corresponding higher needs for grief, substance abuse and family counseling. Additionally, as

we look at demographic patterns and the growing aging population, we can predict more needs for gerontological and caregiver counseling services.

Today's school-aged children face a more complex world and deal with more serious issues than in years past, including bullying, gang activity and violence. Due to administrative responsibilities, school counselors are frequently ill prepared to deal with these kinds of problems and must refer children and families out to community counseling providers. However, services are accessed only if the family can afford them or if they have counseling coverage as part of their insurance plan. Even then, many plans only cover services provided by psychologists and social workers, but not licensed mental health counselors.

Likewise, we have more and more soldiers returning from war with symptoms of PTSD, yet many hesitate to access available counseling services due to fears that their confidentiality may be violated and they may suffer retribution. As a result, they frequently don't access mental health services until



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If delivery of counseling services were a part of health care reform, many more people would have the opportunity to access services, resulting in improved physical health and relationships, reduced medical expenses, reduced instances of substance abuse and suicide, and improved professional identity for the field of counseling.

Grand Prize Winner

2010 Ross Trust Graduate Student Essay Competition for Future School Counselors



Brenda Medina-Guzman

As is likely the case for many counselors, Brenda Medina-Guzman entered the counseling field because of the sense of fulfillment it brought her. After working for 10 years as a computer operator for Detroit newspapers, she felt something was lacking. Upon taking a part-time job working as a bilingual in-home counselor, she found she enjoyed working with Latino youth who had run afoul of the law. After her son Adrian was born in 2005, she decided to apply to Wayne State University for graduate studies. She was accepted into both the rehabilitation and school counseling programs and decided to enroll in both. She has since completed majors in substance abuse and agency counseling and has discovered a real passion for the counseling profession. She will be completing her internship this year, with graduation set for December. Her goal is to work within the Hispanic population in an underprivileged community such as Detroit and to make a difference.

Name the population in this country that you feel is most underserved by the counseling profession, and explain

what you think could be done to better address this group.

I am a Latina/Hispanic. This is my story: Brenda Medina, a smart Hispanic female student, graduates cum laude from Western International High School in Detroit. She's a member of the National Honor Society, homeroom representative and has lettered in varsity basketball and swim team (diver). You probably think you know the rest of the story, but you don't. There was no full ride, no letters of acceptance, no applying to colleges, no top-three college choices and no college entrance.

Just another Latina falling through the cracks, you might say, and, well, you'd be right. You see, when this first-generation Mexican American high school junior went to see her guidance counselor and the counselor asked: "What are your plans?" I responded, "I want to move away from home, go to Texas and work." OK, said the counselor, and in my final year as a senior, there were no further conversations about me wasting my talent, no conversations about how much I could do or what I might accomplish, no discussions convincing me to reconsider going to college.

Both my counselor and my parents were OK with that. Heck, my parents came from a long line of farmers, and neither of them had made it past elementary school. My mother was proud I graduated cum laude, although she didn't really know what that was. My parents knew nothing of college, ACTs and SATs, letters of recommendation or any of the application red tape that goes along with getting into college. Nobody reached out to my parents and helped them understand the importance of college. Nobody made me or my parents see the value in a college education, nor did we know the difference that a college degree would make in my life.

But I had one thing going in my favor — I was smart.

I did go to Texas, worked as a waitress, made minimum wage and struggled for years to make good money. I got tired of going nowhere, moved back to Michigan, enrolled at Wayne State University and was accepted through their Chicano-Boricua studies program. In 1999, I became the first person in my family to graduate from college. I was hired

at a post-production plant for the local newspaper, *The Detroit News*. The job included managing a robotics delivery system and riding a hi-lo. The plant job, for the first time in my life, allowed for a middle-class lifestyle. Initially, it seemed great. It was all about the money and, for a while, I was happy, or so I thought.

But then this graduate surprised everyone, even herself. I left my job and went back for a graduate degree in counseling. I will graduate in 2010. My goal is simple: I want to help the Latino community. Hispanics are the most underserved population by counselors. Here is my five-point plan:

1) Encourage Hispanic students to get involved with extracurricular activities/clubs/groups. The more connected they feel to the school, the better they will want to do at school.

2) Involve the parents of the students. Hispanic students are raised in family-centric homes.

3) Be sensitive to the Latino culture, where many students are first-generation Americans and their parents don't understand what benefits there are to a college education.

4) Expose Latino families to positive examples. Many low SES (socioeconomic status) Latino families don't know any professionals who are Latino. They don't see or meet Latino engineers, doctors, lawyers or scientists. They need to have community mentors and Latinos who have "made it" and who can be examples of positive achievement.

5) Make college education and community colleges a realistic expectation for Latino students. All Latinos should be made to feel that a college degree is essential and required. ♦

Letters to the editor:
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**Coming next month:
Counseling
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