

# *Chagrin Falls, Bainbridge, Bentleyville* **N E I G H B O R S**



## *Two Christmases?*

### *- The Soryals Say Yes*

***Inside:***

*A Girl's Best Friend... page 7*

*House Selling Tips page 8*

*Perfect Pictures page 9*

*Strong Words page 10*

*Find A Pet page 12*



# The Pen Is Mightier Than The Sword

WRITTEN BY **CHRISTINE WEISS**

Solve a problem in 600 words. Make it clear, concise and convincing.

These are the objectives of the Chagrin Valley We Solve Problems Essay Contest.

The brainchild of Chagrin Falls-based lawyer Alex Gertsburg, who teamed up with the Chagrin Valley Chamber of Commerce to raise awareness of important issues among high school students and get them talking.

The essays, written with the support of English departments at surrounding high schools, are judged by CVCC members who have sponsored the program. Winners are chosen from each class at each school, and awarded prize money. From among these a first place essay is chosen.

"Originally I envisioned this contest would take off at the intermediate schools," Alex said. He had two children in those grades when he first floated the idea to principals.

But once he started talking about it, area high schools took interest and worked with the business team to create a new opportunity for learning.

Alex explained that not only does this contest lift and support creative thinking, writing and persuasion skills but also addresses common issues in young people's minds and gets them problem solving together.

The contest was piloted last year in Chagrin Falls and Kenston high schools where students wrote poignant essays solving the problem of cyberbullying.

"In that case," Alex said, "what if those discussions and that awareness we created kept just one kid from posting something unethical? If so, then we made a difference."

The 2016-17 contest has been expanded this year to also include Orange and Newbury High Schools. This year's topic? Solve texting and driving.

Out of 730 entries last year, 16 finalists were chosen and invited to an awards event, where prizes were given and the overall winner announced. Last year's top honors went to Morgan Walker, a junior from Chagrin Falls High School.

Chagrin Valley Chamber of Commerce executive director Molly Gebler said: "Alex came to the chamber interested in doing something to develop persuasive writing among students with support from the com-

munity. There is a lot of synergy here between that kind of thinking and the chamber."

"This was an opportunity for our business community to support the schools in a real way, both by sponsoring the contest and by judging."

"We ended up with 175 judges including courtroom judges, business owners, political leaders and community leaders contributing to this in some way."

State representative Dave Joyce was among those judging. Chamber members, Priceline co-founder Jeff Hoffman and Cleveland Cavaliers chief executive Len Komoroski got very involved acting as both sponsors and final round judges.

"Jeff Hoffman also came and spoke at the awards banquet and he was phenomenal, if you ever have a chance to hear him speak, well let's just say everybody in that room benefitted from him," Molly said. Hoffman is slated to sponsor, judge and speak again at this year's event.

Having this kind of support was something that Gebler immediately recognized as an important community value. "We are very excited to be a part of such a student-oriented venture," she said, "Area business people and professionals were happy to help judge and support this with sponsorship dollars."

As the contest grows to include more high schools and hundreds more students, Alex and Molly are looking to the supporting community to grow as well. Molly said: "Obviously sponsoring with dollars is a great way to get involved. It allowed us to give significant awards to the students last year and to provide money for the schools."

More than \$10,000 was raised last year with \$5,000 split between the schools and the remaining \$5,000 as prize money. The list of last year's sponsors included Pepsi, Motor Cars Honda and Medical Mutual.

Judges are also very much needed. "Each judge is provided a rubric and no more than five essays, so it's very doable for the community member who wants to get involved," Molly said.

Anyone interested in helping as a judge or a sponsor can contact Molly Gebler at the chamber or email Alex at [essay@gerstburglaw.com](mailto:essay@gerstburglaw.com). For students interested in putting pen to paper, or more likely typing them to your screen, contact your English department for information.

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