

My name is Nicholas Oeffinger. I was born and raised in San Mateo, California. Since I was a young boy I have been fascinated with history, especially the history of weapons and Japanese culture. I joined this contest so that others like me might one day be changed by my story. As for now I do not know what the future has in store for me, but I plan on joining the United States Coast Guard.

L E V E L T H R E E



Denise Cisneros, Age 16, Grade 10
Huntington Park College-Ready Academy
Huntington Park, CA

Dear Sandra Cisneros,

Since I have read your writing
my life has never been the same.
My way of thinking has changed through your words.
You motivate me like no other writer has;
you are the reason why I want to become a writer,
like you,
powerful
successful,
and known for your strong words.
Most importantly your writing has helped me
with my pride
and passion.
You make me feel like being
a Chicana
is a very
powerful
thing,
and it is.

You have played a big part in my life, not only with how you feel about your culture, but also in your poetry. “You Bring Out the Mexican in Me,” in *Loose Woman*, is not only a poem but a vehicle to make me feel independent and potent. Every time I read it, it makes my blood run faster through my veins and pumps my heart with pride. As I read it, I daze into different worlds. Being an Aztec warrior in Tenochtitlan, the Popocatepelt exploding, or in Mexico City’s earthquake in ’85. Your lines all bring fierce, powerful, and passionate words that make me feel dominant almost like taking over the world. It’s true what you say.

It brings out the Mexican in me.

Every poem or book you have written and I have read excites me to know that I am not the only person who feels the same way. Being proud of who I am and thinking everyone feels the same pride. But one particular book showed me that not all people feel the same way as I do.

The House on Mango Street is a book I will always feel a special bond with, and has shown me the way of life. As I read through the book, I start feeling what Esperanza feels. Even though Esperanza and I think and feel so differently, we connect. It surprises me how close I get to her. And as I analyze her thoughts and feelings, I say to myself, why does she feel this way? So ashamed to what she has, and what she is. And I say to myself, is it so bad to be Mexican? I don't feel that way. Or is it because so many people think down on us?

This has all made me reflect on who I am: an independent Chicana who has culture, heritage, background, beliefs, pride, and passion. With passion towards the Mexican art, for the greatest painters in Mexican history. Frida Kahlo, with her conspicuous self portraits, or Diego Rivera with his famous calla lilies. It shows passion and poise towards who they were, and shows a part of who I am, as well. I am not perfect but I do know where I came from, and will never forget. I am a Chicana, trying to make it in this world, a world where there are people who undervalue Chicanos. Many people might try to bring me down, might not approve of me, but I will succeed, I will keep my head up, and my pride will help me get there.

Your words have helped me recognize that. Your words of power, passion, and dignity. *Me sacas lo mexicana en mí.*

I am an avid reader and especially enjoy the works of Sandra Cisneros, J.D. Salinger, Isabel Allende and J.K. Rowling. I enjoy playing soccer, traveling, and admire the works of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. I would like to be a writer of fiction one day.

L E V E L T H R E E



Chandler Corallo, Age 15, Grade 9
Half Moon Bay High School
Half Moon Bay, CA

Dear Ms. Morrison:

I never want to be a Pecola Breedlove. Yet, this is the reason why I'm grateful that you brought her into my life. She alone represents to me all of the fear and loathing that we as women have had to endure for centuries. I've experienced the world through her eyes and I don't want to revert back to that filtered vision again. It is