



The **Young Writers Project**, **Council on the Future of Vermont** and the **Northfield Savings Bank** proudly announce the winners of the 2008 'Future of Vermont' Writing Contest.

The following pieces were selected for special recognition:

Gold (\$100)

- *Living in Vermont*, Stephanie Brown, Leland & Gray High School, Grade 12
- *You're from Where?* Dustin Finer, Woodstock Union High School, Grade 11
- *You Can Find Me Here*, Ethan Mitchell, Mt. Abraham High School, Grade 12
- *Diversifying Vermont*, Lianna Reed, Randolph High School, Grade 11
- *Tomorrow*, Katy Turner, Bellows Free Academy St. Albans, Grade 10

Silver (\$25)

- *Opinionated*, Jessica Austin, Westford School, Grade 8
- *Vermont*, Chas Burbank, Spaulding High School, Grade 12
- *My Vermont Story*, Aliasha Anne Clark, Oxbow High School, Grade 11
- *The Seasons of Life*, Amber Currier, Bellows Free Academy St. Albans, Grade 10
- *What it Means*, Abby Emmons, Woodstock Union High School, Grade 10
- *Aichan*, Bridget Iverson, Mount Mansfield High School, Grade 10
- *A Love that Is Not Human*, Sarah Levine, Brattleboro Union High School, Grade 9
- *Vermont*, Emma Lodge, People's Academy Middle Level, Grade 6

Included here are the winning entries:

Gold Winners

Living in Vermont and Living Well

By Stephanie Brown

Leland and Gray Union High School, Grade 12

When I wake up in the morning to the pristine sight of a Vermont landscape, I can't think of anything I would rather see. In summer, the lush emerald grass and thick leaves bright as green money take me by surprise every time I step out my front door. The smell of freshly cut hay warmed by the sun hits my nose in a strong gust. Winter brings a blanket of pure white snow, sometimes so thick that even the cars in the driveway are briefly hidden. In the spring, peepers come out from a long winter's rest and lull me to sleep while the gentle breeze blows in my open bedroom window. And

finally, there's fall, with the leaves the vibrant shades of a wildfire out of control. This is where I grew up, and where I hope to raise my children.

The scenery isn't the only thing that keeps me here in southern Vermont; it's the people and atmosphere too. It's an outing to the Dam Diner in West Townshend where one hears all the old Vermonters talk about everything from the weather to who got the biggest buck during rifle season. It's going into the store or post-office and having at least a few people say hello. It's the genuine, comfortable, welcoming character of this state. Everyone knows each other and is willing to help another person out, even if they don't necessarily have to. Some may say that everybody is into each others' business, but I don't look at it that way. News does travel fast in a small community, but that just goes to show how close everyone is. In most Vermonters, honesty is a common trait. They tell it like it is and aren't afraid to voice their opinions.

One of my greatest memories is riding around with my grandparents, looking for deer at dusk, checking progress on a new house being built, or even visiting a new logging site. To a lot of other people, this may sound about as exciting as watching paint dry, but to me, it was time spent with two of the people I love most. Memories like these and so many others will remain with me for a very long time. I hope that when I have my own children they will learn to enjoy the simpler things in life, and not just dwell on material things. Growing up in Vermont has led me to look at the big picture, not just at things we can acquire. Spending all day outside, enjoying the fresh air and scenery is something you could never buy, or even capture in a photo. I think some of the best memories I have are of me, my friends and family, and the fairly simple lifestyle of a typical Vermont person.

In 10 years when I'm living on my own, I hope Vermont is like it is today; still evolving, but with the down-to-earth, honest vibe that it's had for years and years. With more and more buildings and roads being constructed, I worry about the landscape and environmental impact on the forests, wildlife and people. Vermont is known for its clean air, endless fields, and mountainous horizon. Some of the best experiences I've had include my family, and just doing simple things together: apple picking in the orchard or going to pick out our Christmas tree in early December. This is where I was brought up, and where I hope I will be able to raise a family of my own; teaching them to enjoy small things in life, and what it means to grow up in Vermont.

"You're From Where?"

By Dustin Finer

Woodstock Union High School, Grade 11

“Yes, I'm from Vermont, and yes, it is a state.” As soon as these words left my mouth, the true definition of my upbringing flashed before me. It was a warm, sunny day in southern Florida and I was in the middle of a painful explanation to some beachgoers about what it meant to be a local where I'm from: Vermont, VT, the 802. While I had a strong, personal way of defining where I was from, trying to explain what being a “Vermonters” truly means to a pair of blondes who thought I was Canadian was a difficult task.

I tried to start simple, “Maple syrup, bright fall leaves...snow?” I hinted as gently as I could, trying to conjure some primitive, stone-age picture in their indolent minds.

“Oh, like Mrs. Butterworth’s!” the more eloquent of the two attempted.

“NO! Mrs. Butterworth’s is fake syrup! Vermont is real!” Real. That was the first resounding hit I made on what it meant to hail from the Green Mountain State. While the Sunshine Twins may have missed it, I had just sent an entire history screaming through my brain. Vermont has always been a land of genuine products, people and ideas. Whether it was the maple syrup I had boiled on my own stove last winter, or the fifth-generation farmer who talked at my school a week ago, lies and masquerade have no place in my home state. Truth is all that matters. At times we may be excruciatingly blunt, but it always leads to a better, more pure outcome.

Clearly, based on their fake tans, there was no point in explaining this idea further to my new beach buddies. I tried an even simpler approach. “You gals like fashion right?”

“Oh yeah...like it’s like the best,” they bubbled.

“Right. Well Vermont is all about color. In summer we have rolling green hills that reach as far as the eyes can see. In fall all of the leaves on those mountains become crisp rainbows of red, orange and yellow. In winter everything is an effervescent white.”

“What about spring?” one of them, who had learned her seasons, asked.

“In spring everything is mud,” I replied in my blunt, yet honest, Vermont fashion.

“Ew...you can keep your mud,” they told me, turning up their noses.

Of course I would keep it, it’s my mud and I’m damn proud of it. Pride.

Vermonters have an overwhelming sense of pride and admiration for the land we live in. While people travel the world to witness the colors I described, they sat just outside of my window every day. That wasn’t enough for me though. Having so much pride in the land that surrounded me, I dedicated myself to spending almost an entire summer deep in its heart on the Long Trail. Should I try and explain to these girls what such a meaningful connection to the land meant? Brag about my achievement? No, Vermonters are filled with pride, not hubris.

As I began to grow frustrated with their parochial knowledge, they began to be annoyed by me and snickered, “You’re so weird.”

“I’m not weird; I know a whole state full of people like me. We’re a unique group, but we stick together.” And there it was: the true definition of being a Vermonter. We may be the state with the smallest population in the Union, and some people might think we don’t exist, but even with all our quirks, we stick together. Proud of this authentic land we inhabit, being a Vermonter is like being a member of an elite club with a truly beautiful clubhouse.

As I left the beach, I was unsure whether the two girls had learned anything, but I knew I had learned about both myself and my state. Vermonters are a real people. We don’t try to hide who we are, but rather embrace it. Whether or not others are interested in our affairs, we stick together and prosper, allowing no measure of beauty to go unturned. Perhaps the only way to know what it means to be a Vermonter is to be one, and, if that is the case, then I’m glad that I am.

You Can Find Me Here

By Ethan Mitchell

Mt. Abraham Union High School, Grade 12

“If it keeps snowin' the way it is, I ain't comin' to school tomorrow. I'm goin' huntin'.” After living in the Green Mountain State of Vermont for my entire life, I can't imagine life anywhere else. Among my friends who often talk of escaping what they see as a horrible place, I am the only one who hasn't thought of leaving. There are too many things holding me back that one could not explain or even begin to comprehend, unless you come from this great state. Being a Vermonter isn't just being born here, it's something unique that each of us is privileged to learn and cherish as we grow. Ten years from now, I don't expect to be anywhere else but here and like many others, Vermont will always lie true in my heart no matter where my life takes me.

Picture it: It's only a couple weeks before Thanksgiving and you wake up Sunday morning to the smell of a warm wood stove and freshly cooked pancakes with real Vermont maple syrup. You slip out of bed into your favorite slippers, walk slowly to your window and pull back the curtain. Peeking through the cold glass, you can see the blanket of snow that the night has left. It has knocked the remaining colorful leaves off the trees and sits quietly on pine branches. It's the first snow of the year and deer season just started. It's a tad cold but, after eating just about as many homemade pancakes as possible, you throw on your hunting attire and head out into the backwoods for a walk. The cold wind nips at your face as you track three deer through the freshly fallen snow. It's going to be a great day.

I'm sure that to someone who has never lived in this state, that wouldn't mean much, but to me it's glorious. There's no other place where you can find something like this. Seeing the first snowfall of the year is a feeling like no other; your heart slows down and your eyes widen as you watch the delicate white flakes drift to the ground. The excitement grows and a big smile creeps onto your face as you stand silently in complete awe. That's what it's like for me each year.

My alarm goes off at 5:30 a.m.; that same annoying beeping that I hear each morning, and I slam my fist onto the power button. Not the SNOOZE button; today I'm excited. It's the first day after opening weekend. I've gotten about six hours of sleep, but it's nothing a hot cup of Green Mountain Coffee can't fix. Practically jumping out of bed I slip on a pair of warm Rocky long johns that haven't seen the outside of a box for almost a year. After throwing on a couple of layers of clothes and pouring myself a cup of coffee, I move back the curtain of my kitchen door and flick on the outside light switch. The first snow of the year has fallen, about 3 or 4 inches maybe. I sip on my coffee as I stare blankly into the white powder. I pry myself from the window before I can't move and double check that I have everything I need for the day. The rest of my clothes lie scattered throughout the living room along with the rest of my gear.

Sunrise is at 6:45 and I manage to make it out of the house by six. State law states that legal shooting time begins a half hour before sunrise. I don't have too far to walk, so it is perfect. After throwing on my green and black wool coat along with my blaze orange hat, I am ready to go. I cross the small brook that runs alongside my house and walk slowly up the snow-covered path that leads to a shooting range upstream until I reach the path that leads almost straight up to a patch of sugar maples. The climb up

this hill alone takes at least ten minutes. There isn't much wind, but the air is frigid. It is a beautiful morning, and the clean, fresh cold shoots through my nostrils. Following the old barbed wire fence along the sugar maples, I cut a fresh track. To my right is a thick patch of pine trees for a good 150 yards until it comes to a brook ridge. To my left over the fence, is a patch of downed trees and sugar lines. It's only about seven at this time and the day has just begun. Out of the white-gray sky come a few small flakes of snow. I stop to catch my breath and the snow begins to thicken, covering my Remington 770 30.06 and piling up on my wool coat. I stand and watch the intricate, cold flakes glide to the ground in silence. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and listen to the surrounding nothing -- so quiet. It feels so good just to be in the woods, where nothing else matters and everything seems so simple.

When I take my next step forward, my foot lands on a branch concealed in the snow, creating a loud, echoing snap. Behind me I hear movement and twist around to see what I have startled. I catch a flag only thirty yards in front of me and suddenly everything slows down. The only thing I can hear is my steadily beating heart. THUMP-THUMP, THUMP-THUMP. THUMP-THUMP, THUMP-THUMP. The deer stops with the front of its body hidden behind a couple of trees and I pull up my scope to watch it. "Come onnnnnnn, come onnnnnnn." It sits there for awhile, leaving only its rear end visible. I keep my sights on it, waiting patiently to get a view of its head. Soon, no longer feeling in danger, the deer moves back toward me, shifting its body so that it is facing directly toward me. Doe. She moves slowly through the pines, her head low near the ground, feeding on something under the leaves. She is a medium-sized deer, maybe last year's breed. She takes her time turning up leaves, slowly walking closer to where I stand. She circles down into the pines and I watch her tail disappear over the side hill. I don't want to let her out of my sights so I begin to move in the direction of the hill and I startle her again.

One, two, three flags. I should have known there was more than one. I don't catch the sex of the other two deer; they are gone before I can get a bead on them. From the way they run, it seems like they are headed toward the thick hardwoods that stand in front of my brother's sitting spot. Beyond that is another small brook that crosses into a safety zone. I don't want to push them there, but I have no actual idea where they are headed so it won't hurt to follow their tracks for a bit. I sit for a moment, just to take it all in. The cold air leaves a refreshing feeling in my lungs. I pick up their trail in the pines. They move in large zigzags: down the hill, up the hill, down the hill, up the hill. They are dragging me all around, hoping to lose me somewhere along the way. At one point, the tracks split; one going up the mountain and the others heading toward the safety zone. I have no choice but to follow the loner and hope to meet up with it again.

For the rest of the day I follow and cut tracks heading off in thousands of different directions on that mountain. I don't see another deer, but it doesn't matter. My day has already turned out great.

I have never gotten a deer, but I still get out in the woods every chance I get. It's a place to get away from everything, where all the problems in the world don't seem to matter, and you can just take a deep breath and disappear into the silence. And you know what I tell my friends when they talk about leaving? I tell them: if you ever need me in the future, you can find me right here, just as long as you can track me through the woods.

Diversifying Vermont

By Lianna Reed

Randolph Union High School, Grade 11

Having lived in Vermont for seventeen years I have witnessed the varying lives of many different Vermonters. We are not all one Vermonter. Although we may all live upon the same soil with the same maple trees and similar rolling hills and mountains, we find ourselves in niches in which we are then stereotyped. I value the different people and have found myself learning more and more from these people as I have grown older. The different stereotypes that Vermonters have given each other shape our identities. I know the categories: there are the young urban professionals, the rednecks, the five-generation farmers, the liberals and the down-to-earth people who are deeply devoted to Vermont. But having grown up in one of the hundred small rural towns, I have found myself exposed to many different people who have shaped who I am and I have come to realize how diverse a small town can be.

This kind of diversity that I have experienced does not deal with race, religion, or politics, but rather the nurture and nature of each individual person. The personal identities of each person create the Vermont that I have loved living in. Vermont is a diverse state, even disregarding the “Vermonters” stereotypes. Not only are there people, like myself, who have lived in Vermont their whole lives, but also, people who have come to Vermont because they have heard what a marvelous place it is.

Vermont has become increasingly diverse with the resettlement of refugees from around the world. There are over 4,000 refugees currently living in Vermont, according to the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program. These refugees come from Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Congo, Senegal, Burundi, Liberia, Namibia, South Africa, Rwanda, and Burma. Having gotten involved with the New Sudan Education Initiative, I was able to talk with one of the refugees from Sudan. I remember him telling me about his first reactions to the shocking cold of his first winter in Vermont, and I admire his perseverance and his dedication to his work. Despite our major cultural differences, we both have the desire to learn and the yearning to help others become educated. Despite differences in culture, religion, politics, or education, we as Vermonters are pulled toward each other. After helping a neighbor shovel four feet of snow out of their driveway in the winter, we were able to get to know one another. This again opened a door and I found that we have more in common than I would have expected, including our ambitions to educate ourselves about the world around us, which connected us within our small community.

Having attended public school I have been taught alongside many different people. I tremendously value the diversity that a public school brings and the qualities that each student leaves with. As we continue in school, we are segregated by our academic goals, but the respect and kindness that each person gave me when we were young still shows up as I pass them in the hallway.

The benefit of living in these small towns is that our most important and valued education comes from each other. I love learning about my friends who slaughter their pigs and then eat pork for weeks in a row. As young adolescents we talk a lot and in our side conversations in class or quick chats in the hall, we teach each other about the

latest cabinet member nominations, the headlines in the New York Times, the biggest buck so far this season, or the latest up-and-coming artist on iTunes. Students, teachers, grandparents and doctors take the opportunity to continually understand and learn about the world. This education is what will prepare us for the future and for us to be the leaders of tomorrow's world. The most important thing to me about life in Vermont is the uniqueness of each individual person and the perspective that each Vermonter gives.

Tomorrow

By Katy Turner

Bellows Free Academy, St. Albans, Grade 9

Green trees and grass and leaves and scenic *everything*, they all say, but I beg to differ. I take my feet and stroll down the road, crafted from dirt and rocks that cut into my shoes and toes. Above I study the spectrum of light shifting, fading, as the sun tinted with inky reds and golden blues ripples and tucks its way around and in, then down, away. I cannot go far. A cage complete with bars and locks, only they forgot to add windows or doors, --something, anything, to connect this little world with the outside. I can barely stretch my arms, let alone my mind. Isolated confinement -- pictures and stories from the life beyond just taunt and frustrate me and deepen my disconcerted thoughts. A painting of Munich, a Polaroid or two stolen from the Alps and Tokyo; they coat my walls and my heart, eat away at me, and my eyes will shut with fatigue, condemned to capitulation. This is the future, the life and brilliance of the generation ready to dominate our lovely world. But Vermont is not my future.

I am brainwashed, controlled into thinking my eyes can see nothing but sunsets and trees, that I can walk for miles on earth merely sprinkled with a house or two. A handful of tomorrows, a gulp of clarity, boredom to the brim -- a recipe for new, for places that don't exist in states with minute borders, with limits so small and trivial. To cross the street as my stomach turns, to walk on concrete sidewalks and feel out of place; perfect and pathetic examples of the manipulation Vermont has had on my soul. But so many *want* to feel that way. To feel as if there may be walls closing in on them, although as long as family and friends are by their side, they will never get crushed entirely. Risky odds to take, to my mind.

Life in Vermont is filled with constants. The seasons may change with the orange of leaves and the white opaqueness of snow, but the silence and monotony will stick firmly, unbending and stubborn; similar to many of the people. We'll continue to guzzle our maple syrup, to foster our separation from the universe with minds too new and raw to know otherwise.

But that's not always the case; some have been around the world, dipped their feet in Mediterranean waters or walked along British cobblestone. And after all this, their eyes educated and scholarly on the exterior life, perhaps they chose to come to Vermont. Maybe their decision to trek through mountains and forests was their own, and one they made happily. It is not unreasonable, and surely not uncommon. It's not as though I've done all I can to escape, not as though I'm suffering beyond comprehension. I am still here, still a participant in the eccentricity and composure Vermonters supposedly possess. It's not a terrible life.

I would, surprisingly enough to even myself, change nothing about Vermont. People love it, and with the bias peeled back from my accustomed eyes, I can see why. The calm and tranquility, the stillness of a winter day and the vibrancy in July; it's all beautiful, but it is not the sort of beauty I want to immerse myself in any longer. I need the race of cars and legs down streets in cities that can be seen from space, billboards and signs painted, photocopied and plastered anywhere and everywhere. I've let the quiet and serenity of Vermont touch my heart for many years -- now it's time for change, and it will come, ready and welcomed with my arms and eyes both wide with zeal. Yet I've never been one to forget.

Silver Winners

Opinionated

By Jessica Austin
Westford School, Grade 8

Vermonters are opinionated.

Go take a walk on Church Street and you will find people who love something with a passion. Whether it's organic, cotton, vintage tees, or new-age music that *no one* has ever even heard before, or the new banana-lima-bean smoothie that is "all the rage," Vermonters are opinionated.

Try telling one of the banana-lima-bean smoothie guys that you tried it and didn't really like its texture. They will most likely go into a story about how the texture is better for you because it allows the fibers to be broken down in your stomach, which releases antioxidants that prevent cancer and can sometimes raise your IQ level because of some other free-radical destroying micro-nutrient that only works in people who drink it at precisely 5:47 p.m. and have eaten an oyster 12 minutes beforehand. You'll walk away with a whole new frame of mind, and a free smoothie.

Vermonters are opinionated.

Tell one of the new-age musicians that you didn't like their music. Well, in this situation there are two logical outcomes: a) They smash their guitar/maraca/French horn ensemble over your head, or b) They tell you that music is in the ear of the beholder. The less-than-traditional instruments they use create a sound that you can't hear anywhere else. Besides, they're just trying to make their way in an industry in which you have to be cutting-edge, New Age, and unconventional just to get recorded. They'll go on to list all the people who tried new things just to make it in the world. Then, once they persuade you to listen to "just the chorus" of their best song (when in reality you listen to the full length of all twelve of their songs), you'll begin to like the way the French horn complements the guitar and maraca parts. You'll walk away with a new frame of mind, a free smoothie and a free CD.

Vermonters are opinionated.

Walk up to the organic, cotton, vintage tee guys and tell them that the material they use is itchy and unnecessary. Why don't they just use polyester? It's more comfortable anyway. "Well," they'll say, in a voice that is clearly offended, "Polyester and acrylic fabrics can give off toxic vapors - especially when they are brand new. Do

you want to be wearing all polyester on a day when you are sick and your immune system is damaged anyway, then suddenly drop dead because of all those toxic vapors? Besides, organic cotton is hypoallergenic and therefore good for everyone.

"And regular cotton, well don't even get me started on *that*. It is the most heavily sprayed crop in the world! Mankind uses it for all sorts of things: flavoring snacks, drying off when you get out of the shower and almost everything else that we use. But pesticides and insecticides can contaminate this natural alternative to polyester. That is why *organic* cotton is best." You'll walk away with a whole new frame of mind, a free smoothie, a free CD, and a free T-shirt.

Vermonters are opinionated.

Vermont

By Chas Burbank

Spaulding High School, Grade 12

What is the most important thing about life in Vermont? It is hunting and fishing. This keeps me busy year after year because there are several game species throughout the state. For hunting there are small game from squirrels and hares to coyotes. Then there are big game animals, including wild turkey to moose. There are even the migratory species of Canada geese and mallard ducks. Fishermen have the choice of brook, rainbow, brown, and lake trout, or bigger fish such as northern pike and large mouth bass.

Every year I look forward to hunting and fishing no matter what time of the year. There is always something to do in one of these categories. I start with spring turkey season, my favorite because there's nothing I can compare to hearing a big tom gobbler in the roost at 5:45 in the morning. Then there comes brook trout fishing with my fly rod and taking my canoe out on the lakes to angle some chain pickerel or large and small mouth bass. That keeps me busy for most of the summer till bear season comes or, if I'm lucky I get a moose permit. Shooting a moose isn't the hard part -- it's getting a permit. It took me six years before I got mine and only one afternoon to harvest a 568 pound cow.

Bow hunting comes next. I just can't explain the excitement I get when I harvested my first white-tailed deer with a bow and arrow. If I have any time left after slaying a nice doe, I go fall turkey hunting with my bow and I might be able to stalk down and shoot one of those elusive hen turkeys that I'm not allowed to shoot in the spring. Opening day of rifle season might as well be considered a holiday because it is the greatest thing about being a Vermonter. There is nothing like going to deer camp and hanging with my friends and then getting up and hoping to get my chance of shooting a white-tailed buck. A deer camp is also known as a redneck church that holds service for two weeks straight. If I don't get a buck in rifle season, then I have one chance left to get a buck in muzzleloader season. If I have a really good year I tag out in deer season and tag out in turkey season, too.

When those several weeks of deer hunting are over there's ice fishing, and then rabbit hunting. The only thing I don't like about ice fishing is the cold, but if I have a shanty it makes for a fun day fishing for lake trout, perch, and your occasional northern pike. Rabbit season is quite cold as well but if I have my own beagles it's a lot of fun. The howl of a

beagle on the tracks of a snowshoe hare beats watching television any day of the year.

This is what makes me a real Vermonter. If I'm not in the woods or out on the lake, I'm either dead or sick or at school writing this report. I live to go hunting or fishing and that's what makes me a Vermonter.

My Vermont Story

By Aliesha Anne Clark

Oxbow High School, Grade 11

I'm proud to say that there are several things I do in Vermont that some people can't do where they live. I enjoy these things a lot and practically live my life around them. The reason I like to do what I like to do is because of the environment I was raised in. In this essay I'm going to write about three of my most favorite things I like to do in Vermont.

One of the things I enjoy most in Vermont is all the land and trails I can go riding on, whether it be on my dirt bike or on horse. When I'm out on Red (a horse) I can take time to look at the mountains, or go into the fields. Sometimes I see deer or other Vermont wildlife grazing on the mowed-down grass we had just cut so we could ted it, rake it and then bale it. But other times, when I'm on my dirt bike, I can go fast through the trails, with no time to stop and look at anything. Or I can try to make it through that deep, wide, rocky mud hole that is filled with Vermont's finest mud.

Farming is another one of my favorite things to do in Vermont. The fresh smell of cow manure and the tractor exhaust in the morning during the summer starts my day off great. I love walking into the chilled barn around 7 a.m. to go turn the recently fed cows out into the field. Then coming back up to the barn to jump in the John Deere 7400. Starting up the tractor, I let it warm up. I go into the barn to see where we will be haying for the day. When haying is done I go back to the barn to do barn chores. I shovel cow poop and then I throw sawdust. I take care of the calves and the Black Angus heifers. I'm a country girl who ain't afraid of getting dirty.

The third and last thing I love to do in Vermont is to go muddin'. I love to climb up into the big Chevy truck and hear the engine start. As it idles you can hear the engine rumbling. When you step on the gas and the truck revs up it just makes me happy. It makes my adrenaline rush even faster than it did before with every step of the gas pedal. When we drop down into the mud hole, I grab onto the door and hold on tight, 'cause I know it's going to be a bumpy ride. Sometimes the mud hole gets too deep and we get stuck. But when we do we just jump out of the truck and down into the mud hole and go hook the wench into a tree. Then we slowly pull the truck out of the mud and get back in for more.

Being a Vermonter is the best thing. I can't imagine being from the city. I love the way I live and I'm not afraid of whom I am. I'll wear Carhartts and boots to school, and I don't care what other people have to say. I know deep down inside they wish they could be the type of person who dresses or does the things they want to rather than being someone they're not. I'm proud to say I'm from Vermont and I do what I want. And whoever has a problem with it can just deal 'cause I won't change for anyone!!

The Seasons of Life (excerpted)

By Amber Currier

Bellows Free Academy, St. Albans, Grade 10

I have lived in Vermont all my life. My life here hasn't always been the best, but, hey, it's the Green Mountain State and things change all the time. I believe that no matter where you live, there is always adventure; I just found mine right here. What is adventure? Something that happens to a person unexpectedly, not knowing when or where or who will be involved.

If it were not for Vermont I wouldn't be where I am today, though Vermont is not always a vacation spot; it doesn't always support you in the ways you would like. Growing up as a little girl I didn't have the best family. My parents were, well, a little crazy. Secret: that's an understatement. At the age of three, I was put into foster care, which is a bummer for the people who know what that's like. That was when I really experienced my first winter. Cold, alone and unable to communicate the way I would have hoped. I felt a little like I had been lost in the woods for so long that people would just give up hope and stop looking. I was tossed around foster homes and went through hell (there is really no other way to describe it). I was separated from my mom, whom I thought was supposed to be my best friend, and my dad, who was in jail at the time, my brother and my best friend.

Over the next five years I was in foster care and back with my mom and then back in foster care. Leaving her again really got to me. I was so frustrated; I remember wanting to shrivel up into a ball and stay there forever.

I remember one day during all that, a day when Vermont brought me yet another curve ball. I was brought to a place -- it was called SRS (Social and Rehabilitation Services) at the time. Now it's DCF (Department of Children and Family Services.) I was supposed to meet yet another family. I was living with my mom again. I didn't want to leave. Who can blame me? I was just a little girl and what little girl wants to leave her mom? But they said I had to go to this new family. I must have thrown the biggest fit in the world. I was screaming, kicking and swearing up a storm. Once I was put into my foster mom's car, I smashed my Barbie on the window, I don't know why. That was my most favorite Barbie in the world. Down the road I calmed down and I was OK. I was safe. I began the process of moving on. I was seven and a half.

When I first arrived at this family's house, I was fine. I remember my foster mom told me that she had a husband; I was excited -- I was going to have a dad, well, a pretend-dad anyway. I waited and waited until he got home. I sat right in front of the window until he got there. Once I saw him, I ran and hid under the bed. Not because I was scared but I wanted to be a surprise. But my foster mom thought I was scared and she hadn't told her husband that I was coming that day and didn't know I was hiding on him like cat and mouse. After a while I came out and met him. Things were great.

Now I guess I am a daddy's little girl. When I was eight, I was told I was going to be adopted.

People go through things like this everyday, curve ball after curve ball. Now I am sixteen. I have a great family. I still live in Vermont, and I now have had a home for the past eight years. I have a mom, a dad and a very annoying sister whom I love. She was adopted as well.

I am glad I caught that last curve ball because without it and Vermont with its wonderful people, I might not have this great life. I hope Vermont and I are not done with each other. I hope I will live here forever, and I am grateful for the time I have. And I hope that my adventures with Vermont will never stop.

What it Means to be a Vermonter

By Abby Emmons

Woodstock Union High School, Grade 10

To me, being a Vermonter is and does and always has meant many things. It means taking pride in living in the only state in the United States of America that doesn't have billboards. It means mocking tourists for driving too slowly, getting lost and taking too many pictures... haven't they ever seen a chicken before? It means drinking ice-cold lemonade in the summer, fresh apple cider in the fall, hot chocolate in the winter and maple syrup in the spring. It means enjoying hay season even though there are a million other things you'd rather be doing than getting hay chaff down your shirt and dust up your nose. It means getting arrested for whistling underwater... "I didn't know that was illegal! I swear!" It means going on wild horseback riding adventures in the woods and not coming back until after dark. It means approaching life head on and never taking anything too seriously. It means sitting out on the porch at sunset during peak foliage and watching the last lingering rays light up the leaves and create the illusion of a forest fire. It means eight months of what feels like winter and four months of whatever's left. It means never having to worry about mowing your lawn because the cows do it for you. It means sitting next to the fire on a freezing winters night wrapped up in blankets and watching old reruns of "I Love Lucy". It means going over the river and through the woods to cut your own Christmas tree and stopping at Grandma's for cookies on the way home. It means waking up on Monday Morning and seeing that it snowed three feet since Sunday night and watching channel 31 to see if school's cancelled. It means five seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter, and mud season. It means hiking up the tallest nearby peak to get the best cell service. It means not caring that the state bird is the mosquito and the state flower is the satellite dish. It means having tractor races in the fall and lawnmower races in the summer. It means seeing all the locals with "Got Milk" and "Gut Deer" bumper stickers on their cars. It means driving a Subaru- "no, that's not dirt, that's an off-white paint finish..." It means being the only state in the United States to not have a Walmart until 1996. It means knowing that your supply of Ben & Jerry's ice cream is never going to run out. It means looking out into a blizzard and pondering over the theory 'No two snowflakes are alike'. It means growing up watching PBS and very little of anything else. Being a Vermonter means a lot of things, but all of those little definitions add up to one sole word... UNIQUE.

Aichan

By Bridget Iverson

Mount Mansfield Union High School, Grade 10

After almost two years of living in Japan, I had gotten used to the stares. The pointing fingers. The whispers. Even the small child who once burst into tears when I smiled could not surprise me. I was the American; I was the foreigner. I was different. I was weird. I was the walking oddity of Isahaya, brown-haired and blue-eyed and utterly, completely strange.

First conversations always began the same way. A knot of girls would huddle, glancing over at me sitting at my cramped desk or on a park bench or, sometimes, halfway up a tree. One would walk timidly over while the rest giggled from a safe distance. Her English would be halting and uncertain, but proud.

“What is your name?”

“Bridget.” The Japanese head-bow had become instinctive almost immediately; to this day I appear to be constantly ducking when I’m nervous. I must also reluctantly admit to bowing while on the phone.

The girl will try to fit the awkward Irish syllables into her mouth. “Ba-ri-ji—Ba-ri-jye-to—”

“Aichan.” My Japanese nickname.

Relieved face. “Aichan. My name is—” and here will come a long and complicated jumble of letters I shall never remember. I bob another bow.

“Yuroshikun onagaishimasu.” Nice to meet you.

In the uncertain pause that follows, she will glance back at her friends. They will giggle.

“Where...where are you from?”

“Amerika.” I try to use the Japanese pronunciation.

“Ooooh.” Giggles. “Where in Amerika?”

“Vermont.” No reaction. “Bamonto-shu.”

A slow dawning of recognition. “Oh! You have...ah, choto ma-te kudasai. One minute.” She confers briefly with her friends; I mentally review the possibilities. I have...what? Trees? Maple syrup? Ice cream? Cows?

She returns with apologetic bow. “You have apples!”

Apples?

“Yes, we have apples.”

“What kind of apples?”

Edible ones? “Um, MacIntosh, Granny Smith...” Is this a test? “Red Delicious.”

“Delicious?”

“Yes?”

I look at her. She looks at me. Awkward giggles eventually replace awkward silence. Finally, she bows.

“Very nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

She returns to her gaggle; I to my tree.

Eventually I found out that there is a popular packaged meal sold in the area known as "Vermont Curry." Displays of the slim white boxes grace every Japanese store in the city where I lived. The curry is unique for containing honey and apples. Apples.

In Japan, that is all they know about us here in Vermont. That is what's most important. Apples.

A Love that is Not Human

By Sarah Levine

Brattleboro Union High School, Grade 9

If I told you that I had fallen in love by the age of two, you probably wouldn't believe me. If I told you that I live on a dirt road where the trees are crowned with pure gold from September to December and I can see a diamond suspended in the sky every night except for once every two weeks, you might just call me crazy. But if I told you that the thing I fell so deeply in love with was Vermont, or that the gold and diamonds were the autumn leaves and the glowing moon, I can only imagine you nodding your head and chuckling in agreement.

I have never been asked what it means to be a Vermonter, but if I were, I would look that person right in the eyes and answer: "It means sparkling winters when the snow is whiter than my grandmother's hair and taller than her, too, and golden summers that the word 'beautiful' comes nowhere near describing. It means civil unions and no death penalties. It means the only building in the world where you can't see up into the dome from below, and the smell of wood smoke constantly wafting into your nostrils. It means cow's milk and two-room school houses, swift rivers and Bernie Sanders. But most of all, it means hope. Hope that we can all be so much more than we promise ourselves we can be, and hope for the perfect life, whatever your definition of that is."

We all worry about the future once in awhile; after all, today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday. Will next week mark the time when we secede from the union? What's going to happen to our farms? Will the economy always be this bad in our state that is in need of so much more? All we can do to make sure that the outcome is what we hope for, is to keep on working and coming together as we always have - but also work and come together more than ever. And I know that because of who we are and what we stand for - freedom and unity - we can - no, we WILL - go forth and live as a people connected by peace and a common dream for the future.

No one can ask you to fully understand this world; it is far too complex. But we can all begin understanding one little bit at a time, starting with our own love and wonder for this state. Sing to the rolling mountains and smile to the bright blue sky, and maybe, just maybe, one day we will be able to spread our love to the entire country, and then to the continent - and then to the world.

I'm already seeing the beginning.

Vermont

By Emma Lodge
People's Academy Middle Level, Grade 6

Vermont is full of beauty and teeming with life. From almost every point in Vermont you can see mountains rising above all else. The mountains are my favorite thing about Vermont. People come from all over the world to see Vermont's picturesque mountains. The peaks change with every season. In the summer they are a radiant green. They are scattered with waterfalls and places to go hiking. In fall the trees turn brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow. That makes the mountains look like they're on fire! When the mountains reflect off lakes in the fall they turn the water deep shades of crimson. Winter brings thick white snow. Skiers and snow boarders come from far and wide to ski on Vermont's icy slopes. In the spring all the plants start blossoming. You can watch the tree line burst back to life right before your eyes, and you know it will soon be summer all over again.

You may have noticed I didn't mention cities, or anything urban for that matter. That's because Vermont is a very rural state. Because of this rural environment, many people are very trusting. People don't have to lock their doors when they leave their house for a while. Sometimes you see cars in town with their keys left in the ignition while their owners pop into the post office for a few minutes. The thing I think makes people the most trusting though is so many people are willing to help. One time we went off the road and were stuck in a snowdrift. Some people, teenage boys, in a pickup noticed us and decided to haul us out. They didn't have to, but they did. That's just a personal example, but I'm sure there are examples of that kindness all over Vermont.

Overall, I like Vermont the way it is. There is one thing that bothers me though. When you get around the Burlington area you see the city spreading into the countryside. Where once there were fields now there are box stores. I don't like to see that countryside destroyed, but that puts me in a dilemma. When I graduate from college, I'm going to want a job. In rural areas, there are less economic opportunities. For me now, rural is good, but will it be when I'm looking for a job? I'd like to stay in Vermont when I get older, but if there are no available jobs, I'd have to move to a more urban area with more job opportunities. The challenge for Vermont is to preserve life as it is now, yet still offer a future for everybody.