



Writing Against Hunger 2026 – Winners & Finalists

Presented by the West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH)

www.wscah.org

About the Contest

Each year, WSCAH invites young writers to raise their voices against hunger through poetry and essays. Writing Against Hunger empowers students to reflect on food justice, community, and equity—putting their creativity to work for change.

We are grateful for the powerful submissions from students across New York City and beyond. We are proud to present the selected winners and finalists whose work resonated deeply with our panel of judges and community members.

Special Thanks To Our Judges:

Brenda Bunting

Ashley Steves

Henry Crawford

Their care, discernment, and literary expertise helped shape this year's publication.

Read on for inspiring words from a new generation of writers working to end hunger.

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DIGNITY. COMMUNITY. CHOICE.

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Winners – Poetry & Essay

Lily Volpp, 10-12 years old

Hunger Unleashed

An empty hole
Shutting you off
Drowning you in a pool of fog
Invisible in the whirling tsunami

Growling pain
Screaming silence
Mouth watering
Endless wanting
Desperate yearning
Echoing rumble within you

A nightmare of gray
Spirit switched off
Abandoned in a dark realm

Fears racing rapidly
Will I ever eat again?
Will my body ever feel full?
Will the pain ever stop?

Knives stabbing
Sending a piercing shock through you

An inferno of hunger

Angelina DeCasare, 10-12 years old

The Battle of Hunger

Have you heard of the battle that children and adults alike lose every year?
The only way to defeat it is to obtain something millions can't,
A meal packed with nutrients seems so simple,
Until you see companies draining the water from places already parched,
Until you see families working for minimum wage,
Earning only enough for a meal that still leaves stomachs hollow.

Children's clothes hanging loose off their bones,
While the rich scroll on their phones,
Food that isn't "pretty" enough,
"Misfits in the market"
Gets thrown out without a thought,
Yet the poor fought,
And fought,
And fought until the very end,
But they were defeated.

Have we forgotten what food is?
It's not to be wasted,
It's a meal that nourishes our body and heart,
And that feeling deep inside your soul,
From past memories,
The nostalgia that makes food the way it is,
For if it's rice and beans your Mamá made,
Or even the pancakes your Papá made,
Food is something that should be cherished,
Still you might not know,
How hard your parents work to put food on the table.

Now I walk down the street,
I see a line of people with their carts,
A mother holding her baby,
Her eyes tired and drifting,
Just wanting to provide for herself and her baby,
I know she is fighting the tireless battle,
Yet she, Along with all the others,
Has a glimmer of hope at winning this battle.

Nikhil Mehra, 13-15 years old

Our Thanksgiving Food Chain

November. Leaves crackle beneath my feet on West 114th Street
As I walk toward the Broadway Presbyterian Church, silent against
The metallic roar of the M104 and the frantic chaos of students
Trying to drown out the city.

I join hands with fellow students to form a lifeline
Youngest to oldest
A living stream from our chapel at St Hilda's St Hugh's School
Into the church basement's quiet mouth.

Hand to hand, we transfer the weight of
Cans of food, heavy and cold as river stones
Boxes of rice that shift like silty sand
The rhythmic flow of tiny palms against tin and cardboard.

The transfer of love and caring
Not just food, but a current
Each member of our community necessary
By the simple act of not letting go, until the next child had a grip.

The chain is soon gone but the weight remains

floating

A realization that tethered me
to the Thanksgiving tables of others
We are only as full as the things we choose to pass along.

Emilia Epstein, 13-15 years old

Just a Piece of Bread

Just a piece of bread.
That's all I have at home.
Tucked away in a bag,
on a shelf that's almost empty.
Every morning I take small bites,
reminding myself, wait.
You need to wait for later.

But at school, the trash cans are heavy by noon and
I watch a girl laugh as she tilts her tray over the bin.
A full plate of fries.
A sandwich barely touched.
To her, it's just garbage.
Something to get rid of.
Something that she doesn't need.

I sit there, staring at my hands in my lap.
I say that I don't bring lunch to school because I'm not hungry
but I feel the hollow space under my ribs.
It's hard to breathe in a room where people treat the things
that I'm praying for like they're nothing at all.

The bell rings and they leave,
talking about dinner,
unaware,
while I just sit there.
Staring at the plastic bin.

I have to go home to a house that feels too quiet,
and stare at that one piece of bread.
Like it's a prize that I'm not allowed to win.
At night, I take small bites,
reminding myself, wait.
You need to wait.
Just a piece of bread

Vivienne Azzopardi, 16-18 years old

The Chase.

He follows me
With every breath-
On the stairwell
When my head goes light, with every ache.
He looms-
A presence
no half-smile can shake.

Can they see it-
How hungry I am
walking unnoticed in the halls.
Do they picture
the rationed meals my mother breaks in half
again- finding one more way to stretch the day?
Can they hear it
in the way I wince
when wrappers crumple
too loudly in my hands.

The malnourishment I carry
burns brighter
with every lie I tell.
Every question my counselors ask is answered the same:
All is well.

So I keep moving. Down the stairs.
Because if I stop my body might remember
it has nothing left to give.

Hunger doesn't disappear.
It continues to wait.
And when it arrives again for good
there is no more biding of time-

just a mouth
wide enough
to take me whole,

another child
deserving of more
than the world was willing to provide.
But I can never outrun what's starving from inside.

Cameron Barr, 16-18 years old

We Insist

When the pot turns over, everyone leans forward.
A circle of hands waits as the rice slides free onto the platter.
At the bottom, the treasure appears —
tahdig, golden and crisp,
smelling of saffron and steam.
Wrinkled hands break the crust. It shatters —
that sharp, satisfying crack of perfect rice.
My grandmother waves away the hands,
pretending not to love the fuss.
She always saves the biggest piece for me,
her first and oldest granddaughter.
The house smells of parsley, cilantro, spinach,
dried lime softening in a pot of *ghormeh sabzi*.
Plates refill themselves. Stories stretch longer than the meal.
On the *sofreh*, the cloth spread wide,
no one sits too far away.
Take more, insists my grandmother, my mother and my aunt.
Your plate is empty.
Generosity required, not optional: *ta'arof*.
"No thank yous" are met with *I insist*.
Matrilineal heritage. I am not a mother and yet I am my mother
And my grandmother. We all insist.
I cannot help but think of the hungry as a guest at the table.
The guests number in the millions, and yet, they are all my own.
Ta'arof does not just mean generosity within my family. *Ta'arof* means every hungry soul is a guest at our
table. We insist.

Anjali Patel, 16-18 years old

My grandmother should have owned a restaurant. Cooking is her passion, her talent, and her love language. She always dreamed of opening a restaurant and becoming a chef. Unfortunately, she was an unmarried woman in India, and once she was married, she was an immigrant in the US with many mouths to feed. So no, she doesn't own a restaurant.

But she still cooks for her family, her friends. I might be biased, but I think her cooking is the best Gujarati food the world has to offer. But to me, my grandmother's cooking represents more than her love, her skill, her passion. It offers a reminder of my privilege, of never having to know the hunger she sometimes grew up with. I'm reminded of it every time she gives me the last bite or reminds me to clean my plate. My grandmother's cooking is a link to my heritage too. Her cooking offers a window into the world she and my mother grew up in. When my grandmother fasts, she teaches me about Hinduism. When she makes traditional foods eaten during holidays, she teaches me about the history and culture of India.

Food means so much more than sustenance. Food reflects who you are. Your heritage, your socioeconomic status, your location, your family structure, your health, your community. All these things are reflected by food. Food is most certainly important because it makes us full. For that reason alone, we as humans have a right to it, a right to be healthy, nourished, and alive. But food is also a human right because it gives us pride in ourselves, having food provides a unique feeling of humanity, capability, and choice. The ability to feed your kids, to participate in your religion or culture, to not rely on others, to help someone else feed their family, these are all things people take pride in. When you don't have these abilities that we call privileges, your pride takes a hit. You lose the ability to choose, you're forced to take what you're given. Society tells you that to be a functioning adult all you have to do is put food on the table, so when you can't, you feel shameful. You feel less than when self-sufficiency proves not to be an option. When you have to ask or beg for help. You feel diminished when you need others to affirm and uphold your right to food, the preservation of your life.

There is a certain degradation and feeling of inferiority that comes with hunger. If the world does not find you worthy enough to be guaranteed the basic right of food, does the world even value you as a human being? When communities, corporations, and governments all see people in need and ignore them, they are telling the world that those in need are not worth it. They are telling those who are hungry that they are not worth the effort, the money, the humility it takes to accept culpability. Hunger inflicts damage on the stomach and the heart.

Food defines our world in so many ways: its production is a measure of human progress, its preparation is a celebration of who you are, and its absence is a reflection of where humans still have work to do. So the next time you look around the abundance that is a grocery store, take a moment to appreciate the preservation of your life, your humanity. And the next time you travel through a food desert or walk by a homeless person, think about what you can do to restore someone else's humanity.

Finalists – Poetry & Essay

Colby Gaspar, 10-12 years old

Breakfast Line Barista

"Black, four sugars"

"Light and sweet"

"Cream with two sugars"

Serving the community at the rectory door
For people who start their day with few choices
For people who can't enjoy breakfast the way I do
For people who are hungry on the cold and scary streets
Not knowing what the future will bring them
And how I feel joy to give others a choice
To create the cup of their choosing
One of the most simple and treasured things of all
How it pains me to see people without the love and care I receive
I never turn down a chance to be the Breakfast Line Barista
Even when I'm tired after a long week
I'd rather miss one hour of sleep
That is why I'm the Breakfast Line Barista
As I serve I can tell that the orders are locked in their minds
As God watches over us I serve them their cup
With pride and joy I stir and pour
Knowing that this choice is special and their own
Each time I become a better Breakfast Line Barista
Day dreaming about the impact if everyone joined
"Black, four sugars"
"Light and sweet"
"Cream with two sugars"
Breakfast Line Barista

Lazlo Newelt, 10-12 years old

NYC FULL

NYC is always "full."
The lights dance along the skyline.
Noise and music fill my ears.
As I hustle through the lively streets.

The City is alive. It breathes and sings.
People packing theatres and restaurants.
Feasting their eyes on billboard brands
Food for thought from all nations fill the sidewalk shelves.

But down these shiny dancy avenues,
Are dark corners not shone in news
Hungry humans full of despair
The City keeps on rat tat tatting, clack clacking
The sound from underground,
Distracting from disgraces above,
Pay attention.
The City can only be full when all are fed.

The City cries when its people are hungry.
People lose their smiles.
The lights dim with sorrow.
The fire engines blast their sirens.

Food being tossed as waste.
The cries and the weeps of hunger.
The homeless and the hungry.
The city can't turn its back.

Isabella Passero, 10-12 years old

Language isn't always understood,
but flavors are.

It doesn't matter if you're
young or old
happy or sad

when everybody is fed,
everything seems easier,

A weight lifted,
a problem solved.

It's not that easy though.

But, everyday at school I see
those free lunches for everyone.

A step forward,

I see people handing out food to
those who need it.

It warms my heart,

And fills their belly

A step forward.

Our community is trying everyday,
to make sure we have the food
we need.

One step,

one dish,

one life,

at a time.

Yhonniel Rodriguez, 10-12 years old

Hunger

When I was younger, I realized everyone has hunger, some are dunkers, some live in bunkers but people around the world are hungry. When I was a kid I realized that anyone could be hungry, maybe a monkey or bunny or people in or out of the country. Some people could be hangry, or just angry, because of food or because their favorite team lost, the Yankees. When I helped my mom cook, I had a machete. I cut the spaghetti. I almost fell, but I was steady because I realized some people have never eaten something heavy. I saw somebody starving and that alarmed me about all the people that haven't eaten at all. People are sweaty looking for food that may not even be ready, even though there are some kids that are petty who don't want to eat their veggies. While hungry people wait to eat, good food gets wasted on the street.

It's a tragedy that must be shown, meals are wasted, while people have none a feast for some, while others pine,

A cruel divide, a crooked line abundance rots in bins of steel, While millions ache for one real meal the plates are full, the bellies bare, a silent cry for those who care, we throw away what life requires to quench the hunger of our desires, gourmet delights meet trash and grime, the greatest scandal of our time.

(when reading read very fast)

William Outhwaite, 13-15 years old

Help the Hungry

The Irish Potato Famine
Killed a staple, millions hungry.
The Great Chinese Famine,
Spawned by greed, the worst recorded.
Hunger haunts our past.

Our history repeats itself,
And hunger follows humanity
Like a wretched shadow;
A horseman of the apocalypse
Riding to our shame.

Even today, on street corners,
People starve, rejected and ignored.
Today, pantries empty,
Never enough to fill the stomachs
That rely on them.

We see all of this happening,
And some try to shoulder their burden,
But most won't share their wealth,
They will eat it, waste it, but no,

Hundreds, thousands, millions hungry,
Help them when you see them, they need it,
That dollar in their cup
That can of beans to put on their shelf
The miracle of hope.

Eli Prawer, 16-18 years old

Can And Can't

I see Matzoh Balls, Schnitzel, Sufganiyot
The food of Jewish history, of my history
Recycling recipes represent a tapestry of community
Unbroken tradition that bleeds into the broken present
A present of inequality, of injustice

Every Friday, I Can

eat Challah during Shabbat, a passed down sweetness that fulfills my spirit and soul

Every Spring, I Can

prepare a full Seder table, and taste the inspirational stories of my ancestors who escaped
enslavement eternities ago

But every day

I see the news, chronicling the crises of today. I feel it deep down

Other members of our community Can't

Put the food of tradition, The food of community, The food of life

On the table

To think we've moved past the days of starvation, of deprivation,

That has plagued the journey of my people, and the people of the world

To hope and pray would be an understatement, that maybe one day we all Can

Sit together, a connected humanity

To do away with the struggles of the past, To embrace community with compassion,

Nourishment of the body and souls

Maybe one day we all

Can.

Sara Ivanov, 16-18 years old

Hunger Speaks

I seize your frame
Wrapping my hands around your ribs
Like I own every bone

I watch you wither away
A hollowed-out cathedral
Prayers answered by silence

I steal your sleep
Growling in your mind like a hungry wolf that never tires
Hunting, searching, seething for its next victim

I hear your stomach grumble
A thunder with no rain
Your body starting to dwindle
Flame reduced to smoke
Then nothing

I am the ghost that haunts your mirror
The hands that shake before the feast
I am an untameable beast

But you - you press your palms against the table
You rise
You say "It is time"

You rise with nothing in your belly but the anger that will outlast me
And that is the one thing I cannot devour

Brielle Bonugli, 13-15 years old

WSCAH: Doing Good in My Neighborhood

From the Samba beats to my açaí treats, my Brazilian heritage shapes my life and perspective in many ways. My visits to the authentic Brazilian café, Tap, in my neighborhood allow me to embrace my culture on the Upper West Side of New York City, even though I am thousands of miles away, because Brazil is always in my heart. As both an American and Brazilian citizen, I cherish this ritual, which brings together both parts of my identity.

At Tap, all the employees speak Portuguese, as do I when I excitedly place my order. The café's interior displays videos of açaí harvests, photos of the Amazon Rainforest, and Brazilian beaches. The percussive beats of Bossa Nova music in the background encourage me to sing and dance. Tap offers a taste of Brazilian culture in my American neighborhood, and its ambiance reminds me of joyful visits to Brazil with my father's family.

My father is an immigrant who arrived in the United States a few years after graduating from college, with a job, several suitcases, and no friends or family. At Tap, I order pão de queijo (cheese bread) to bring home to him, honoring his roots. I also order an açaí bowl, whose sweetness reminds me of time spent with my Brazilian family. The strawberries and bananas reflect the abundance of native fruits in Brazil. Beneath the sweetness, the granola is easy to miss, like the poverty in Brazil, often overshadowed by its vibrant culture.

As I walk home, eating my açaí bowl, a refreshing respite from my hectic days, I cannot help but notice people begging for food. Their struggle does not escape me. While visiting Brazil, I saw that homelessness was less visible on the streets than in New York City. My father explained that many of the poor live in favelas on the city's outskirts, out of sight but not out of need. In my own neighborhood, homelessness has become increasingly visible, inspiring me to take action.

West Side Campaign Against Hunger (WSCAH) has been part of my life since nursery school, when I dropped off turkeys for Thanksgiving and canned goods during the Jewish High Holidays. In seventh grade, my class mitzvah project included volunteering with WSCAH and raising money to fight hunger in New York City. Beyond WSCAH, my family and I have led the brown-bag lunch program at my temple's Mitzvah Day, organizing an assembly line to maximize our contributions to local food pantries.

With food insecurity affecting about 12% of New York City households, more than 2.4 million residents, my concern has only grown, especially amid cuts to SNAP benefits that limit access to basic necessities. In response, I organized and led a WSCAH Fall 2025 volunteer day, mobilizing 20 teens from my temple community to package over 300 spice kits. Our teen group also raised nearly \$2,000 to help provide families in need with food during the holiday season.

My goal has been to show my peers that we can take action and make a difference. At Tap, I reconnect with where my family comes from. Through WSCAH, I take responsibility for where I am. My heritage has taught me to celebrate abundance; my religion has taught me to share it.

Serena Siegel, 16-18 years old

Seven Cupcakes

The warm, buttery smell of chocolate chip cookies usually signals that my sister's baking business is underway. On those mornings, afternoons, and nights, our kitchen transforms into structured mayhem. Flour coats the countertops, the sink fills with dishes, and the fridge handle inevitably becomes sticky. By the time she neatly packages the pretty ones, the mess remains, but so does my reward. My family and I keep whatever doesn't make the cut.

For a long time, I saw that abundance as normal. Freshly baked goods appeared every week, almost guaranteed. Sometimes I was not even in the mood for dessert and the extras were thrown away without a second thought, but I never questioned that there would always be enough.

As I have learned more about food insecurity, that assumption has begun to shift. Last year, a group of students at my school led an initiative to raise awareness about food insecurity. They shared statistics, stories, and solutions to address the issue, but one part deeply resonated with me. Many bakeries often discard unsold food daily because it is no longer considered 'fresh.'

I could not stop thinking about that when, just the day before, an entire tray of cookies had been thrown out in my own kitchen.

As I thought about families who could not afford fresh, healthy meals, the leftovers no longer felt harmless. Approximately one trillion dollars' worth of food is wasted every year, which is enough money to feed two billion people. That is more than twice the number of undernourished people in the world (World Food Program USA). *How can so much be discarded while so many go without?*

This was a question I constantly asked my parents, teachers, and friends, yet no one had an answer.

The following week I woke up to a fresh batch of Funfetti cupcakes sitting on the countertop. There were seven extras, and this time, I noticed them. I knew all the cupcakes would not be eaten by the next day, so instead of leaving them on the counter, I carried them outside and offered them to my neighbors.

It was a small act, seven cupcakes, but it changed the way I think about abundance and responsibility. I realized that confronting hunger doesn't have to start with large-scale efforts, but instead with awareness.

I know I cannot solve food insecurity on my own, but now that I understand it, I can make conscious choices and take small steps to reduce waste in my community. It is worth trying to narrow the gap, even just one cupcake at a time.