This I Believe is an international project engaging people from all walks of life in writing, sharing, and discussing the core values that guide their daily lives by creating short statements of beliefs. This year, the Bonner Foundation developed a This I Believe exercise and asked every Bonner student at all 74 Bonner schools to participate. The project is based on the popular 1950s radio series of the same name hosted by Edward R. Murrow and most recently on public radio and www.thisibelieve.org.

Within the following pages, you will find excerpts from Washburn University’s 2007-2008 Bonner Leader members:

Niashia Baker  
Pamela Banks  
Matthew Brower  
Tasheka Cook  
Benjamin Cullan  
Kaitlin Cullan  
Andrew “AJ” Faunce  
Maria Gauvin  
Monica Gwinn  
Kristen Hearrell  
Dawn Hinson

Christina Hollis  
Kristi Hubbard  
Carole Jontra  
Lacey Keller  
Samantha Kostelecky  
Vicky Luttrell  
Megan Maes  
Brandy Mann  
Traci Nigg  
Meghan Olson

Hilary Pearson  
Erin Picolet  
David Reed  
Angel Romero  
Jill Schalansky  
Thomas Corey Simms  
Aundrea Shafer  
Sarah Stadler  
John Sykes  
Jacob Thomas  
Cristina Zenon Alvarez

We hope you find them as thoughtful, inspiring and hopeful as we do.

Cover art: “This I Believe” by John Paul
What do I believe? It’s hard to say. It seems that a whole lot has changed in my lifetime (as far as my beliefs go). When I was little, I believed that Santa Claus was real and that my parents were indestructible. I suppose both are true, in my heart. I have grown up fast, probably a little too fast for my parents’ liking. But they always stay with me. They are my guidance when I have to make a tough call. Their voices are the ones I hear in my head when I decide what is right or wrong. And their love is what I truly believe in.

I have lived a very blessed life. My parents have done more for me than any child could possibly ask for. I am so thankful for everything they have done. But being thankful is not enough. I must give back to a world that has given me so much. I must help those who are not as fortunate as I. This is what I believe. I know that the world is a pretty tough place and ofttimes, people can be overlooked. I cannot do that. They deserve all of the loving and caring that I received from my parents. Now I know that I am not going to be able to help everyone in the world (I get tired just from reading my textbooks!), but I have to do something. I have to care.

It seems that so often, many people drift through life ambivalently, just riding the waves. That or they do not have the courage to stand up and fight for something they care about. I cannot do this. I truly believe that if you care about something enough, you can make a positive change in this world. Why? Because I care; I care when people go hungry at night, or when our air is polluted, or when sick individuals need medicine, or even just when someone is lonely. If someone truly cares about something else (anything at all), then they are already ahead of so many other people.

~Jake Thomas

I truly believe in humanity. I believe we all need a foot up once in awhile and sometimes, we can get help from the most unexpected places and people.

~Maria Gauvin

My belief is to follow my own heart. I believe that it does not matter who everyone thinks I am but who I believe I am. I can decide what I will accomplish or do.

~Dawn Hinson

I believe that journeys of a special kind illuminate themselves to us everyday. The growth experienced on such a journey allows for the destruction of the old self and the creation of the new self through deep, painful, heart-wrenching evaluation. I will continue working towards the utopia I know and believe is attainable through this process called growth.

~AJ Faunce
In my life, I have come to realize how important my friends and family are, how stupid little arguments and spats can be, and that I should cherish everything and everyone with whom God has put me in contact. Each person I meet and every event I get to experience is amazing and teaches me something new. Life is worth living to every extent possible and no matter what happens, it is more important to be happy, share optimism and make the world a better place filled with joy. My philosophy on life is when you are given lemons make lemonade and I plan on sharing that mantra with as many people possible every day of my life.

~Brandy Mann

I know a lot of individuals who will never have the chance to continue their education beyond high school; this usually revolves around money problems. Some do not even realize that furthering their education is an option. For others, it was never really instilled in them to actually want more after high school. I believe that everyone should have the chance to attend college. I believe people should at least know their educational options.

~Tasheka Cook

I can change,
I have changed,
I can be,
I can be me,
I can live for others,
I can live for me!
I can be what I put my mind and heart to.
I believe.

~John Sykes

I believe that people’s human rights are not contingent on their country of origin, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or economic status. Rather, human rights are fundamental and nonnegotiable. Our wonderful planet produces enough food to feed every man, woman and child. Why then are so many people starving?
I believe that the root lies in inequality. The results of this inequality are poverty, starvation, war, and illiteracy. It is difficult to believe that millions of people sleep in cardboard boxes while others live in the gluttony of luxury. It is difficult to believe that millions of people starve while others throw food away. It is difficult to believe that people are treated as second-class citizens based solely on their gender, ethnicity or economic status.

I do believe that everyone can alter this inequality. Simple things like a smile can change the course of someone’s day. I have come to believe that people just want to feel that they matter, that their lives mean something to someone. The great thing is that everyone can accomplish this. It is empowering to realize that you have the power to make someone’s day or help someone when they are down. I believe that we all should be treated as equals and that every one of us has the power to alter the current inequalities that exist.

~Megan Maes
Much of what I have come to know, expect and believe draws from my experience with disabilities. Google defines disability as “a condition that curtails to some degree a person's ability to carry on his normal pursuits.” Most people view being disabled as not capable of doing or unable to do. I believe that it is not the inability to achieve and be ambitious, but a mindset of extreme prejudice and lack of understanding. I believe being disabled means you get to exercise your creativity and problem-solving skills to a much greater level than those around you.

I believe that there are most certainly personal limitations, but the ways in which to overcome limitations are infinite. If you accept that you are incapable of achieving your goals, it means you place yourself in a category much lower than your true worth. Imagine if Stephen Hawking thought he was disabled. What would have happened if da Vinci, Hans Christian Andersen or Agatha Christie adopted the attitude of disability?

Attitudes toward being disabled have changed positively through the years. Though I still cannot help pondering if you or I or Leonardo adopted the attitude of disability, where would we be as a society?

~Kristen Hearrell

I was sitting in the backseat of my parents’ car, watching the rolling yellow hills of North Dakota pass by my window, and as I gazed, a slow prayer crept into my ears...

’Tis the gift to be simple; ‘Tis the gift to be free; ‘Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be; And when we find ourselves in the place just right; ’Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
’Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return; ’Tis the gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn; And when we expect of others what we try to live each day; Then we’ll all live together and we’ll all learn to say.
’Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be; ’Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of me; And when we hear what others really think and really feel; Then we’ll all live together with a love that is real.

(Shaker hymn)

It arrived as a simple melody and it spun around in my head, sweeping questions to the front of my mind. I wondered if God lay on the other side of the bluff. Maybe from there He could examine the plight of the Earth a bit closer. I wondered how I could help fix things, keep man's dignity from eroding away. I wondered what He would say once He saw the complexity of the situation, and I worried, but then the melody disappeared. In its wake shimmered a golden sunset. "Live in moderation," it whispered. This I believe.

~Samantha Kostelecky
In my everyday life, I go through the motions of an average college student: I worry about the homework I need to get done, whether I have enough money to pay rent and buy groceries, or even being late to work or school. What I overlook are the basic necessities that I assume will always be there and easily take them for granted. There are parts of my life that seem so simplistic such as a bed to sleep in, a private toilet, or even clean water. My outlook on this aspect of my life completely changed when I traveled to a rural village in Nicaragua with fellow Bonners. Our purpose in this village was to help dig trenches that would connect all the homes to a local stream. This would be their opportunity to have water at their homes so the women would not have to carry pails long distances just to wash dishes or cook.

All of us stayed with a local family and I moved into a 20 by 20 house with dirt floors, one light bulb and a latrine. While living there, I reached a point where I realized that all the simple things I took for granted, they cherished and lived for. The most important part of their lives was having a happy connected family. They left a lasting impact on my life because they opened my eyes to how a family or community can lead a happy or rewarding life without all the things that I felt were necessary to my lifestyle in the U.S. I do not know if I had as great an impact on their lives as they did on mine, but I know that they changed my heart and they will forever have a place in it.

It has been a year since my trip and I think a lot about my Nicaraguan family when facing certain challenges in my life. I will no longer take for granted the simple things in my life that are often overlooked, such as a bed or a toilet. But even simpler than that is the basic human connection that everyone has--a family. Before I left that small village, the mom told me that I would forever be a part of their family and that is a greater gift than money could ever buy. This I believe.

~Traci Nigg

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I believe that an individual is more than the sum of their circumstances, even if those circumstances would appear deleterious to the development and prosperity of that person. Environment does not dictate the character of the individual immersed in it.

~Meghan Olson

...[Every] action reverberates like a ripple in water. My belief is founded in the simple principle of exhibiting integrity and efficacy. This leads me to be conscious of the ripple effects of both my good and bad decisions for those decisions will effect others and stay with me throughout my life.

~Matt Brower

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In my lifetime, I have tried to help people, even when I had very little to give. As a little girl, I remember seeing my parents helping others just by giving out bags of groceries to people in the neighborhood. From the example they set, I knew that one day, I would like a career helping people no matter the color of their skin.

~Pamela Banks
Although there are many things that I feel strongly about, one of my core beliefs is that everyone deserves a chance to improve their environment. Many times people blame the problems of society on those who are uneducated and have little money. While I believe that it is true that many things need to be improved, blaming them is not where we should be concentrating our thoughts. Rather, we need to understand where they are coming from and make a legitimate attempt to ensure that they have the power to change their environment.

~Benjamin Cullan

I believe that the purpose of volunteering is to serve others, regardless of who the individual is, where they come from, or financial circumstances.

~David Reed

I believe that the love and support you get from your family is very important. But I also believe that finding a good friend is like having a second family.

~Cristina Zenon Alvarez

When I was little my mother used to tell me, “Treat others as you would want to be treated.” Everyone should be treated equally and everyone has the ability to change. You should not judge someone for what they have done in the past. A person should merely be judged on the action he or she takes now.

~Aundrea Shafer

It was once said that “some of the world's greatest feats were accomplished by people who were not smart enough to know that they were impossible.” I believe this and that is why I try to live life to the fullest. Life is too short to waste one minute, for an eternity is in it. Samuel L. Jackson said, “Anything lost can be found again, except for time wasted.” My goals are to seize each and every opportunity to give, live, love and learn in life. Whether the situation is good or bad, I want to experience it because it always provides an opportunity for growth and exploration. I believe this is true for every person.

I have always had an affinity for those individuals that society has given up on. There was a time in my life when I was one of those individuals. I have experienced many obstacles in my life. I also know that with perseverance and determination, these obstacles can be overcome. But this cannot be done without the help of caring individuals. As a child, there were many individuals who nurtured me and helped me become the person I am today. Now it is my turn to do the same. If I can do but one thing to improve the life of another person, I will figure out a way to make it happen.

I know that every life has value and importance. Even the most deviant people in the world have the potential to improve when caring individuals nurture them. Tupac Shakur wrote, “Even a rose could grow up through the cracks in the concrete.” This I believe.

~Niashia Baker
As I have grown older, my beliefs have become more central to shaping who I am as a person; the things that have shaped my beliefs have evolved and changed as I have been exposed to various experiences. My faith has taken an increasingly more important role in shaping me and has instilled several key values: integrity, humility and hard work. As I grow stronger in my faith, I seek to grow stronger in my beliefs as well.

~Angel Romero

I believe that every human being has the freedom to determine his or her path in life by providing every person with the correct amount of opportunities necessary to accomplish his or her goals. People’s dreams should not be hindered or suppressed by the economic, physical, social, governmental and other factors they face every day.

~Lacey Keller

I believe in treating others as we would wish to be treated. However, is this really possible? Can one realistically consider the effects of one’s actions on all other people? Is what you would want done to you in a given situation what another person in the same situation wants or needs? Do you really know what it is like to "be" the other person? Problems of misunderstanding and miscommunication may (and in all probability will) always persist. To lessen the ill effects of this, I must constantly educate myself in cultural diversity. This will enable me to have a greater understanding of people from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. This will make empathizing, understanding and applying the "Golden Rule" more effective.

~Kaitlin Cullan

This I believe: you hold your own destiny in your own hands. This statement means that you can control the outcome of your own life and change it when you do not like the direction in which it is going. I have learned that in my quest to find my identity, I have found, in myself, a person who can accomplish anything. I used to feel like I was a failure, unable to complete anything. But now, I truly believe that I can accomplish anything I want to accomplish with hard work, dedication and determination. I have gone from being nothing in my own self-image to a person who works for and tries to make a difference by improving the world in which we live.

~Jill Schalansky

I believe in love, marriage, faith, trust, individuality and the list goes on. People are raised in different environments with different mores, ethics and values. My parents are the ones that taught me things like never throwing food away, the value of a dollar, telling the truth, the importance of having a good work ethic and that doing what is right is not always the easiest thing. It is all the knowledge my parents taught me that makes me who I am today and has shaped my beliefs and attitudes about the world.

~Christy Hollis
I believe that all people have goodness in them. The Bible talks about seeing things through the eyes of a child because there are no prejudices or biases in their eyes. It is not about what the person has done, it is about who the person is and I think that is where some people get confused. I think if we start looking for the good in someone, instead of always looking for the bad, we would encounter a world of good people.

~Monica Gwinn

No one makes it through life without the help of another person or people. A simple act of generosity and compassion can have a profound impact on an individual and it enables them to then help another and thus a chain and a cycle of compassion is formed. I believe that each individual has the right to equality and to have a life of quality. Good health, intimate relationships, connection to the world and community you live in, and a connection to nature itself are just a few of the factors that give meaning to life and thus establish a life of quality. At some point in the history of humanity, we became disconnected from each other and nature. I believe that the problems our nation faces today can be corrected if each person could just follow the Golden Rule, live simply and have a connection with Mother Nature and each other.

~Erin Picolet

My personal belief is that everyone needs to have a pet, any kind of course, way before one ever decides to become a parent. My belief is based on what I have learned from my pets: cats, dogs, a horse, a rabbit and a chicken. My cats have taught me not to smother and to let independent souls be just that: independent. My dogs have taught me what all dogs teach us—unconditional love. (Of course, they are far better at it than I am.) My dogs have also shown me the benefits of long walks and stopping to enjoy a beautiful day because the next day might just bring cold and snow. My horse taught me about power and control. Any horse, just by their nature, is a magnificent creature. Mine easily outweighed me 100 times over, but instead of overpowering me, she instead followed the slightest command I would give her by the touch of the rein against her neck. This compliance to someone else’s wishes is very humbling and has left a significant impact on me regarding when to lead and when to follow. The rabbit that I had as a child taught me not to judge others: its best friend was our Great Dane. My pet chicken preached this non-judgmental lesson as well because it too was friends with the rabbit and Great Dane. My pet chicken also taught me not to judge a book by its cover; it was just as loyal a pet as any dog we ever had on the farm and would run out to greet you as soon as you got home. Through the process of having pets, I believe that I have learned some of the fundamental responsibilities needed to become a parent: humility, how to love and how to provide for the needs of someone else in a selfless manner.

~Kristi Hubbard
“A flower”, when planted in the pot of society, is dependent upon how much sun or shade it receives. How often you are watered reflects your hunger for interaction. Whether you are embraced by love or neglected for days affects what view you see your world through. In my own life, the degree of shade in which I have occasionally been hidden has increased my compassion for those struggling to find their voice, as they peer out into the fluorescent, vast array of possibility.

~Hilary Pearson

I am so small. I shared this insight with a friend and she said it made her feel kind of sad. I told her that for me, being so small was not something discouraging but instead, an idea that helps me keep my life in perspective.

In my life, I serve in many different roles. I am a daughter, sister, friend, student, and public servant. I am many things to many people. I hold a place in the center of their hearts, just as they hold a place in the center of mine. I am a beating heart, an active mind and a creative spirit. But I am just one tiny part of a vast universe. I am one human being among billions on Earth. Like me, each of these people has needs, hopes, and dreams. Some of them have a life much easier than mine. Many of them have a life that is much more difficult.

When life seems overwhelming, when my spirit is all out of strength, and when hope hangs on only by a string, I think of these other people, and I wonder what they are encountering on any given day. Do they have basic food, water, shelter, and clothing? Are they missing a loved one? Are they facing a crisis that seems insurmountable? I am not the only one who faces obstacles. It is something I have in common with each person I meet, and with those I will never meet. And when my problems threaten to crush me, I remember how small I am, and how the world does not have me as its center point. For this reason, I must keep walking down the path that has been set before me in this life, all the while embracing each joy and sorrow I encounter. Each person must keep walking, and while we do not take the same road, we are all on the journey. We are united by the human condition. There is so much more in this world than me, and when I pause to reflect on this. I am completely humbled.

I am so small. This I believe.

~Sarah Stadler

Every experience is a learning experience. This I learned from my late guardian angel whose life was spent acquiring and sharing knowledge, always moving forward, never wavering to ridicule.

~T. Corey Simms

I believe that every person deserves the right to have access to meaningful employment. Every person should be able to feel that she is a contributing member of society and that she is capable of providing for herself.

~Carole Jontra

I believe the world can change through the expression of good minds, peace and community. Art, music and literature are necessary to sustain life, as well as physical and emotional wellbeing, and the world and all its inhabitants need LOTS AND LOTS of laughter.

~Vicky Luttrell