

**AWC SPRING CONTEST  
WINNING SUBMISSIONS - ARTICLE**

**FIRST PLACE: I Should Have Asked for the 911 Turbo - Linda Sands**

I used to be jealous of the Valentine's Day bride. Everyone's thinking of love when she gets married. The world is pink and white and red, covered in hearts and cupids, dipped in chocolate, sprinkled with champagne. Floral shops overflow with long-stemmed roses. Love songs are more meaningful. People who aren't in relationships begin to think they should be, because who doesn't like a little romance?

February 14<sup>th</sup>. Who could ever forget that anniversary? It's perfect. Unlike my anniversary—a date that usually elicits a groan, and not just from my dearly beloved.

It's tough to be joyful when your wedding anniversary falls on September 11<sup>th</sup>. There are people all over the world mourning loss while you rejoice in a union, one with a beautiful beginning that has grown into something comfortable and expected.

We didn't choose our wedding date. It was given to us by the Italian consulate in Florence, when we eloped fourteen years ago, well before terrorists became commonplace. We joked after the wedding, "Hey, 9-1-1. That's what you'll be calling if you ever forget our anniversary." Of course, being in Italy, it wasn't 9-1-1, it was 1-1-9 like all the other European day, month, year countries. Still, we liked the play on numbers, until 2001 when US media tagged a tragedy with a date and our personal memorable day became something else to the rest of the world.

Some couples might choose to celebrate on an alternate day, or do something low key, but I don't want the Bin Ladens of the world to think they won where I'm concerned. After all, September 11<sup>th</sup> is also the day someone's first child was born, the day a winning

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lottery ticket was drawn, the day somebody got the key to their dream house.

So, we celebrate big whenever we can, focusing on one-of-a-kind adventures that remind us of where we started—two poor backpackers standing in wrinkled clothes in a red velvet room in the Palazzo Del Vecchio in front of a magistrate in a sash and a woman we'd found for a witness whose only word in English was yes.

In the beginning, big was a trip to The Broadmoor in Colorado, where we learned that announcing a wedding anniversary could get you a room upgrade and complimentary champagne. We toyed with the idea of working our way through the alphabet with each following year, but figured we'd already blown it by starting with "B." And then there were babies and moves and jobs and our anniversary plans shrunk to dinner and a babysitter, until the kids were older and less dependent and we weren't as tired or broke.

By the time we moved to Georgia, we'd started taking the day off and devoting it to one other. Last year, it was my turn to plan the anniversary celebration. I was compelled to one-up my husband's previous surprise gift of hang gliding in Tennessee. How sweet was he to think of jumping off a cliff on our 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary? Clearly, my work was cut out for me.

I thought about us—who we'd been, who we'd become. I thought about a trip. But we only had one day. I thought about what other people did and then I thought about him. What would my husband enjoy the most? How could I thank him for being my better half? It took a few weeks to pull it all together, but I managed to score big.

The morning of Sept 11<sup>th</sup>, I got the kids off to school, packed a secret bag and told my husband to dress nice. We were going out, but I wasn't telling him where and I was

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driving. I was nervous that my gift might flop, but as we passed a mini speedway and no less than seven luxury foreign car dealerships, each one elicited comments that assured me my husband's grand passion had a powerful motor and shiny chrome wheels.

When I pulled into an unassuming office/storage facility, then drove to the rear and parked by a broken dumpster, I watched beads of sweat pop out on Mr. Cool's forehead. "Wait here," I told him as I ran inside. When I returned with the proprietor, Dean, a big handsome guy, my husband was pacing the lot.

They introduced each other and just as my husband was about to ask me what was going on, Dean said, "Here she is!" A sleek black Porsche Cayman-S roared down the street, turned in and glided across the blacktop stopping directly in front of us. My husband's eyes went as wide as the time I painted the washer and dryer blue.

"For the day," I said. "It's yours for the day."

Riding next to him that afternoon, I could feel happiness beading off him, rolling down his arm and pooling on the custom designed Alcantara leather. He smiled at me as we ate lunch after our couples massage at a posh country club. He held my hand and with tears in his eyes said, "This is the best day of my life. Thank you."

We sat at that table overlooking the pristine golf course, him thinking how lucky he is to have a wife who knows him so well, and me, no longer feeling jealous of the Valentine bride. She could keep her cupid and ready-made day of love. After all, she had to share her day with millions. We had a day no one else wanted—a day we'd made as unique as our marriage.

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**SECOND PLACE: An Uplifting Experience - Kathleen Gizzi**

While driving in my car, I listened closely as one of Atlanta's morning radio personalities profiled a website which provides free implants. Lest you think this website is dedicated to serving the extreme dental needs of underprivileged children in Ethiopia, don't reach for that tissue box just yet. It is actually a website dedicated to serving the breast augmentation needs of under-endowed women anywhere. The idea behind this "prosthesis panhandling" is that women who desperately want but can't afford breast implants can now post their photos on the website, along with their story, in hopes of reaching the hearts (or other organs) of altruistic male benefactors who want nothing more than to fill a woman's hope chest...while hoping to get a peek inside.

The radio host took a call from one of the website's clients wishing to justify her participation in the program. (Apparently *some* people have an issue with using donated money to stuff your bra.) The client explained that the men who are donating to her cause probably wouldn't be donating to the orphans in Darfur anyway. Point well made. The caller went on to say that as a middle-aged registered nurse with a Master's degree, she was an intelligent woman who earned the right to have some fun (at other people's expense). Her touching story begins when she became divorced several years ago. After the divorce, she lost a good deal of weight along with her "huge knockers" (her words). While admitting she missed the attention her cup size used to get, she insisted she was not seeking implants to get a man. Her goal was simply to feel better about herself. However, she readily admitted, men will strike up a conversation with a woman just to

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Title: An Uplifting Experience

look at her breasts. If you don't follow the logic here, let me explain. Knowing the only reason a man approaches you is so he can ogle your silicone valley, while you have talk into the follicular wasteland on top of his head, is apparently a real self-esteem boost.

I don't have a problem with mature adults having plastic surgery. But the nature of the fundraising does pose some interesting questions. Will the benefactors receive updates, Christmas cards and pictures of their sponsored breasts like I receive from my sponsored child in the Philippines? (I think the answer to this one is yes.) Does the fact that other people have contributed to your breast implants create an ownership problem? Is it like a timeshare, where the investors get dibs on your breasts for two weeks during the year (one week during peak season)? And what about the tax implications? If their investment grows in size (and isn't that what this is all about), do the investors have to report a capital gains tax or is it only when they "touch" that investment that those gains are realized? Let's face it, our government officials will find some way to get their hands in this. So forget about children who go to bed hungry, the rising unemployment rate or those left homeless by recent natural disasters. Here is a way you can make a *visible* difference in the lives of those who truly need it. Now you can get the tissues.

**THIRD PLACE: This Light Won't Be Dimmed - Rosemary Brittain**

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Mrs. Charmine Johnson is a bright light on the horizon of the murky waters

in which Clayton County Public Schools finds itself

It is only 9:30 a.m., but she has already made her rounds and visited several classrooms to observe dynamic teaching taking place. This makes her smile. She is young and petite, energetic and full of confidence, and one of the many reasons Clayton County Public Schools has not completely sank. Despite the stark conclusion of the site visit team representing the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) that "...the schools are like a ship without a rudder in dangerous waters," there is a glimmer of hope because of committed educators like Mrs. Charmine Johnson.

Johnson is the principal of M.D. Roberts Middle School and she firmly believes, "We are going to get out of this above water...the hole will be filled and things will be patched up and fixed. It can be done. The challenge is to re-earn the trust from the community." She and her staff are doing their part to maintain that trust as they strive for excellence and move M.D. Roberts from a "good school" to a "great school."

She truly believes that "every child can learn, given the appropriate opportunity to be successful." This opportunity comes in many forms as children learn differently. One of the innovative programs Mrs. Johnson has implemented this past year is the "Rise and Shine Math Academy," a tutoring program that meets on Mondays and Thursdays at 7:15 a.m. "It's gratifying to see kids coming to programs like this eager to learn," she says.

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Strengthening the relationship between the teacher who is the expert in the subject matter and the special education specialist is key in ensuring that “no child is left behind,” says Johnson. To this end, she has created a Learning Academy that will meet two to three times per month. It is designed to enhance the knowledge base of special education instructors in areas such as math and science. The sessions will provide practical information through an interactive and hands-on approach taught by master teachers.

She is determined that M.D. Roberts makes Adequate Yearly Progress, so throughout the year she has involved parents in preparing their children for the annual Criterion Reference Test (CRCT). She used Title I funds to create CRCT Blitz, a twice weekly program to help students work on CRCT review skills.

“I love teaching,” says Johnson. “I wasn’t one who wanted to become an administrator to get out of the classroom...It is our jobs [as educators], our responsibility, it’s not just something we come and do every day; we are impacting lives for years and years to come.” Her master’s degree is in Special Education and she relishes every opportunity to teach. One of the most rewarding experiences she has had this past year is working with a small group of special needs children in reading comprehension and testing strategies in preparation for CRCT.

Being a principal is not without its challenges. She recognizes that “everybody doesn’t buy into everything all the time,” but she understands that everyone needs to feel part of the bigger picture. She relies on her teachers and other administrators to help develop a shared vision for the school and to implement it.

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Although she toyed with the idea of becoming a child psychologist and a judge, Johnson always knew she wanted to be a teacher and entered college with her mind set on a degree in education. She recalls that when she was five or six years old, she would teach her cousins. Always a bossy child, she would tell them, "I will play with you if you play school with me." After teaching for only four years, she had the opportunity to receive a scholarship for a two-year program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to earn an additional Masters in School Administration. "I couldn't pass up the opportunity. I didn't have children then, and my husband and principal kept encouraging me to do it." After completing the program, she served as a vice principal at several schools for nine years before accepting her current post at M.D. Roberts. She has since returned to school and will complete a Ph.D. in Administrative Leadership and Supervision in about two and a half years.

Balancing a busy and demanding career with her personal life requires special effort, but Mrs. Johnson believes that her number one priority is family with her career a close second. With the help of her husband, Chad, and family, she puts in the time needed to do the best possible job. Arriving at M.D. Roberts around 7:30 a.m. every morning, she is often there long after everyone else has gone home for the day. She tries not to take work home in the evenings and rarely works on weekends, although admittedly she breaks this rule occasionally. "I try to reserve this time for my children and family," she says.

The site visit team representing SACS also acknowledged that, "The staff and principals in particular [of the Clayton County Schools] are commended for their leadership and professionalism in ignoring the existing situation and attempting to put forth the best

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image possible of the school district.” Mrs. Charmine Johnson and the staff of M.D. Roberts Middle School are among those to be commended.