

Searching for the American Dream

Historian James Truslow Adams popularized the term “American Dream” in 1931 when he defined it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.”

Since then, the American Dream has come to represent different things to different people—from the idyllic, 1950s “Leave it to Beaver” suburban family to rags-to-riches success stories like that of millionaire Christopher Gardner whose autobiography inspired the popular film “Pursuit of Happyness.” The concept finds its roots as far back as the ideals of our Founding Fathers and extends to familiar patriotic notions such as the “Land of Opportunity.”

But in practical, modern terms, what is the American Dream and is it achievable? A group of Morenci High School juniors were asked this question earlier this spring, as part of a unit in Heather Walker’s AP English class. Before tackling their writing assignment, the students watched the documentary “The Heist: Who Stole The American Dream” and the film “Pursuit of Happyness,” and read a variety of essays and research reports on the subject.

Below is some of what the students had to say. For this article, they were asked to submit excerpts of their papers that they felt were particularly compelling.

– HLW

The American Dream can’t be dead, because if it were, everyone in the country would be mindless drones, just moving through day-to-day life like zombies. No. The American Dream isn’t dead. People will always hope and always pray and always dream that one day life will be as good as it should be.

What we as Americans need to do is to stop putting down others’ dreams and goals and start dreaming along with them, because they’re going to be the ones who help us out of this recession and change the world. What if Martin Luther King, Jr., hadn’t dreamed? What if Nelson Mandela hadn’t dreamed? What if Thomas Edison hadn’t dreamed?

– Jazmin Smith

My mom grew up in a poor family with barely enough money to put food on the table. Whenever my mom or her siblings needed something, like a pair of sweatpants for cold days, my grandma would go without. They worked their whole lives trying to better themselves and the future of their kids, but never moved an inch in the economic class system. Now my mom is in the same boat. With no money for college, she had to give up her dream of becoming an accountant and work in a factory to make a living. Sure she doesn’t have to work two jobs, but she does go without so that my brother and I can have what we need.

Growing up, I admired how hard my mom worked to get a better life for herself because of the life she had growing up, but I also witnessed how hard it is to better yourself. She has worked her whole life, yet she is still in the same class as before. Seeing this has made me really understand that the American Dream is dead. It is not achievable for anyone, especially me.

–Cheyenne Stone

Some people like to think of the American Dream as a kind of formula. If you get a good education, work hard, and are kind to people, you will be able to make the American Dream come true. As much as people like to think of the American Dream as the white picket fence, with the giant house in the suburbs and the four person family, this is not the American Dream at all. All that is, is just a dream—a fantasy that people continue to try to achieve even though they know it isn’t going to happen. If you spend all of your life working hard, and you make



enough to be comfortable with a house for the size of your family (whether it be one or seven kids), then you have made your dream a reality.

– Jacie Biehl

Many people believe that “the American Dream is alive and well” (Graff). Even though there are frustrating obstacles in the United States, like unemployment rates and a significant wealth gap, this country “has the largest and most technologically powerful economy in the world” (Roemer). With a powerful economy like this, Americans should be able to achieve what they are looking for. The only thing that should determine whether or not they achieve their dream is how hard they work.

Some examples of people who worked hard to achieve their dreams are Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg. These people came from a variety of social classes and backgrounds, but they all found great success.

– Abby Travis

Children are taught the American Dream at a young age. We were always told we could be whatever we wanted to be when we got older, but at a certain age that stops being the case. We laugh at people trying to get a degree in art, we know that most aspiring actors will be in commercials if they’re lucky, and suddenly the five-year-old that was going to be an astronaut is sitting in a cubicle doing data entry.

– Grace Acuña

Another reason the American Dream has become harder for the middle class to achieve is that the middle class is becoming poorer. Edward McClelland states “Between 1970 and today, the share of the nation’s income that went to the middle class—households earning two-thirds to double the national median—fell from 62 percent to 45 percent.” McClelland shows that the middle class is changing into the lower class fast. He also states, “Last year, the wealthiest one percent took in 19 percent of America’s income.” This demonstrates that the rich are accumulating more of America’s money, leaving less for the middle class.

– Name withheld by student

Our society has set standards of success far higher than some of the citizens of this nation can achieve. As these standards have risen, so, too, has the oppression grown. As a high school student you are told the only way to get anywhere in life is to get a col-

lege education. Meanwhile some students’ families are struggling to pay for clothing or the next night’s supper. Some students go to school wearing the same clothes their brothers and sisters wore or clothes they may have worked in the previous day. Their peers ridicule them and tear them down, regardless of what this student has done or what the conditions are at home or what they have.

Society is told that the working class is inadequate, and not as valuable as the upper class. If you work in a factory, or a fast food restaurant, or a gas station, you are not equal

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to or worth as much as the stockbroker in New York. Even parents of today’s students reinforce the idea that without a college degree, their children will not be an acceptable cog in the machine of society.

Society has changed the working middle class into the leper. “I grew up in an automaking town in the 1970s, when it was still possible for a high school graduate—or even a high school dropout—to get a job on an assembly line and make more money than a high school teacher.” (McClelland). McClelland speaks of a time when the working class was the pride of America. When our automakers drove the American middle class and provided an ample symbol for our nation. He goes on to state “That all began to change in the 80s. The recession at the beginning of that decade—America’s first Great Recession—was the beginning for the end of the bourgeois proletariat.” (McClelland). After that point in our history the working class was degraded and our children were told that a college education was the only way to make a life for themselves.

– Riley Terry

“What is more fundamental to most Americans than the belief that we are the authors of our own fate—that we are in control, particularly when it comes to our economic success?” (Graff, Birkenstein, Durst). Americans like feeling powerful. Feeling like the world is in our hands. What is more reassuring than the idea of a fate

determined entirely by ourselves? What drives Americans crazy is the thought of their choices and opportunities being taken away.

According to one study, 59 percent of Americans believe the American Dream is unachievable. They have an idea of what the American Dream would mean for them, but they feel as if it’s impossible to reach. I used to believe that anything was achievable. In many cases, this is still true. But the American Dream is hopeless. There are countless rag-to-riches stories, which I used to believe were the basis for believing anything was possible. Those stories are luck. When it comes down to it, good fortune mainly correlates with good luck.

– Ariana Roseman

My dad may not be making \$139 million dollars a year, but he found himself successful in accomplishing the American Dream. He is part of the eight percent who rose from the bottom to the top. He did his part to be a part of the change. The change that stops blaming the economy and government, and instead takes it upon oneself to stop focusing on the odds going against you, and starts looking at all the possible ways you can succeed.

We are in desperate need of a shift, a shift that stops focusing on negatives and starts focusing on positives. If you focus on the negatives too long, you are likely to find yourself in a negative situation. This correlates to the American Dream. Tell yourself you won’t accomplish it too often and you won’t. Tell yourself you can do anything, and you may just find yourself living your own version of the American Dream.

– Darian Double

The American Dream is definitely alive. Sometimes you have to take small steps to get to where you want to be. The American Dream is what you make it. If you don’t want to work to achieve it, then that’s your problem. An excuse is an excuse. I have witnessed many people struggle to achieve it, but it is achievable.

– Haylee Green

Because of a lack of unionship, jobs themselves are becoming less enjoyable and are accompanied with lower payoffs. Take jobs associated with education as an illustration. Teachers in my small hometown school have taken multiple pay cuts over the past few years due to reduced government funding. Teaching and other middle class jobs are losing their value as we speak. Jobs that were once fundamental to the American Dream just aren’t good jobs anymore. On top of that, due to the Right to Work Act, teachers and other union workers have no way to fight back and get what they deserve. Instead of being rewarded for their hard work, they instead are handed more and more curriculum to cover. This sounds nothing like a dream to me. It sounds like a nightmare.

– Tyler VanBrandt

The American dream isn’t what we perceive it to be. The American Dream is just a figment of our imagination. No matter how far we make it in life, we will never reach it. The American Dream is the “perfect” living standard; it is the life we want to live. No matter how rich or how successful we come to be, we will never reach the American Dream. The white picket fence picture in our head gets larger and larger; as our success grows, so does our interpretation of the American Dream. It is impossible to live the American Dream because it will always be “what we don’t have.” We can always have a little more money, or another child, or another vehicle. We will never have the ability to finally live that perfect life we all call the American Dream.

– Nathan Smith