

# THE WHITE HOUSE PROJECT



GirlZone



You Can Lead



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## Pillows

By Isabelle Miller

This essay was written in 2001 by Isabelle Roth Miller, granddaughter of Regina Roth Dembo. It won National First Prize for nonfiction writing in the 2002 White House Project arts competition.

My family doesn't often talk about my great-grandmother's sacrifice, or about my grandmother's struggles to protect her younger sisters and to survive in a city where she didn't speak the language. I feel as though I was born knowing; I inherited the pain and the memories along with feathers that crossed the ocean.

When my great-grandmother kissed her daughters goodbye, she told them that the family would reunite in New York. She told a lie, but it was a lie to strengthen her daughters. After crawling through a maze of red tape designed to bind her up and tie her to death, she had won her prize: three tickets to freedom. She struggled for three more passports, but time was running out. She knew that she, her husband and her toddler son would never escape Nazi-controlled Austria.

Her oldest daughter Regina, my grandmother, was twelve when she felt her mother's lips on her cheek for the last time. Regina saw her mother's tears drop to the pavement as the train pulled from the station, but she never heard her mother's choking sobs. She saved those for when she was alone, for when the girls could not hear. She wanted them to be brave, and what child is brave when she sees fear in her mother's eyes?

She cried when she packed the girls' suitcases. How many memories could she smash into three suitcases, and how would they be light enough that the girls could carry them? How did she sift through their lives and reach down to the bottom and pull out their roots? How could an object have worth when their lives were nothing but ashes? I can see her holding the feather-soft comforter to her face and letting it soak up her tears and muffle her sobs. She placed the comforter on top of the life-saving passports, the black-and-white photographs, the silver candlesticks, the little pieces of jewelry, and the dresses. These feathers would hug her daughters at night and keep them warm when she could not. She shut the suitcases and never let her daughters hear her cry.

My grandmother carried that comforter to New York, and she cut it open when she married. Pouring the feathers into new white cases and sewing the seams, she made new pillows from her mother's tear-soaked comforter. She gave these pillows to her own two daughters, but she never mentioned the pillows' history. Her practical nature would not allow it.

Always lumpy, the pillows became harder and flatter as they aged. I did not learn their secret until after my mother gave one of them to me. When my grandmother told their story, my mother realized that she had spent every night of her childhood on feathers belonging to the grandmother she never knew. This pillow is my only possession that my great-grandmother held; I imagine that each feather holds one of her tears, one of her memories, one of her hopes for her daughters' future. This flat mass of seventy-year-old feather sits on my bed next to a new feather pillow. While they are covered in identical flowered cases, I know which one carries the history. I sleep with that one on top, next to my face.

I want my grandmother to tell me her whole story, the journey from old comforter to new pillows. I know just fragments of her early life, just jumbled feathers. I wonder why she held the secret inside for decades, just as the seams of the aging pillow held the feathers together. She didn't forget the feathers, and I know she meant for me to have the pillow. Perhaps she thought I would be happier not knowing; she was used to containing the pain. Perhaps in giving the pillows to her daughters, and to me, she was sharing some of the pain without

having to explain with words. Perhaps I knew about the feathers that I sleep on before she revealed their secret. After all, I was born knowing.

I'm not brave like my grandmother. I don't have the spiritual strength to become a martyr like my great-grandmother. But every night I go to sleep cushioned by my great-grandmother's love that was strong enough to save her daughters. These feathers have enveloped and warmed four generations of women through dark nights. Each morning, I make my bed and fluff up the pillow, and sometimes a little white feather leaks out through the seams and floats to the ground.

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[http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org/become\\_leader/Pillows\\_essay\\_2002.htm](http://www.thewhitehouseproject.org/become_leader/Pillows_essay_2002.htm)

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## Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

The White House Project partnered with [Scholastic, Inc.](#) to add a new award to their 80 year-old competition for students in junior and senior high school. The White House Project Women's Leadership Award recognizes young artists and writers who submit original work focusing on political or non-political women's leadership.

The goal of the award is to create a dialogue on women's leadership in American classrooms and give students in grades 7-12 the opportunity to express themselves in unique, personal and creative ways.

The White House Project congratulates the first winners. The six works chosen to receive these awards are exceptional in quality and represent women's leadership in one of its many forms. We recognize these pieces for their bravery in addressing and speaking out against issues that affect girls and women across the nation as well as portraying the growth of young women as leaders. The student winners received a cash award of \$500 in and participated in a national reading for exhibition in Washington, D.C. in June 2002.

## Winners

### WRITING

Liesel Yamaguchi - 17 - Culver City, CA  
[A Delicate Balance \(click on title to read essay\)](#)

Isabelle Miller- 17- Huntsville, AL  
[Pillows \(click on title to read essay\)](#)

### ART

Robert Antonuccio- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Debrah Bell- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Julie Burns- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Matthew Dabrowski- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Alan Porfret- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Jaclynn Sorenson- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Andrew Stewart- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Ashley Verbicky- 17 - Burlington, MA  
 Borany Wogan- 17 - Burlington, MA

[Group Portraits \(click on title to see art\)](#)

Meredith Black- 17 - Oklahoma City, OK  
[Automatic Blink Ink \(click on title to view art\)](#)

Erika Kline- 18- Landisville, PA  
[Yellow Caution Tape Dress \(click on title to view art\)](#)

Jenna Olson- 17- Red Wing, MN  
[Baby Doll Self-Sculpture \(click on title to view art\)](#)