

September 2007

# Virtue In Action

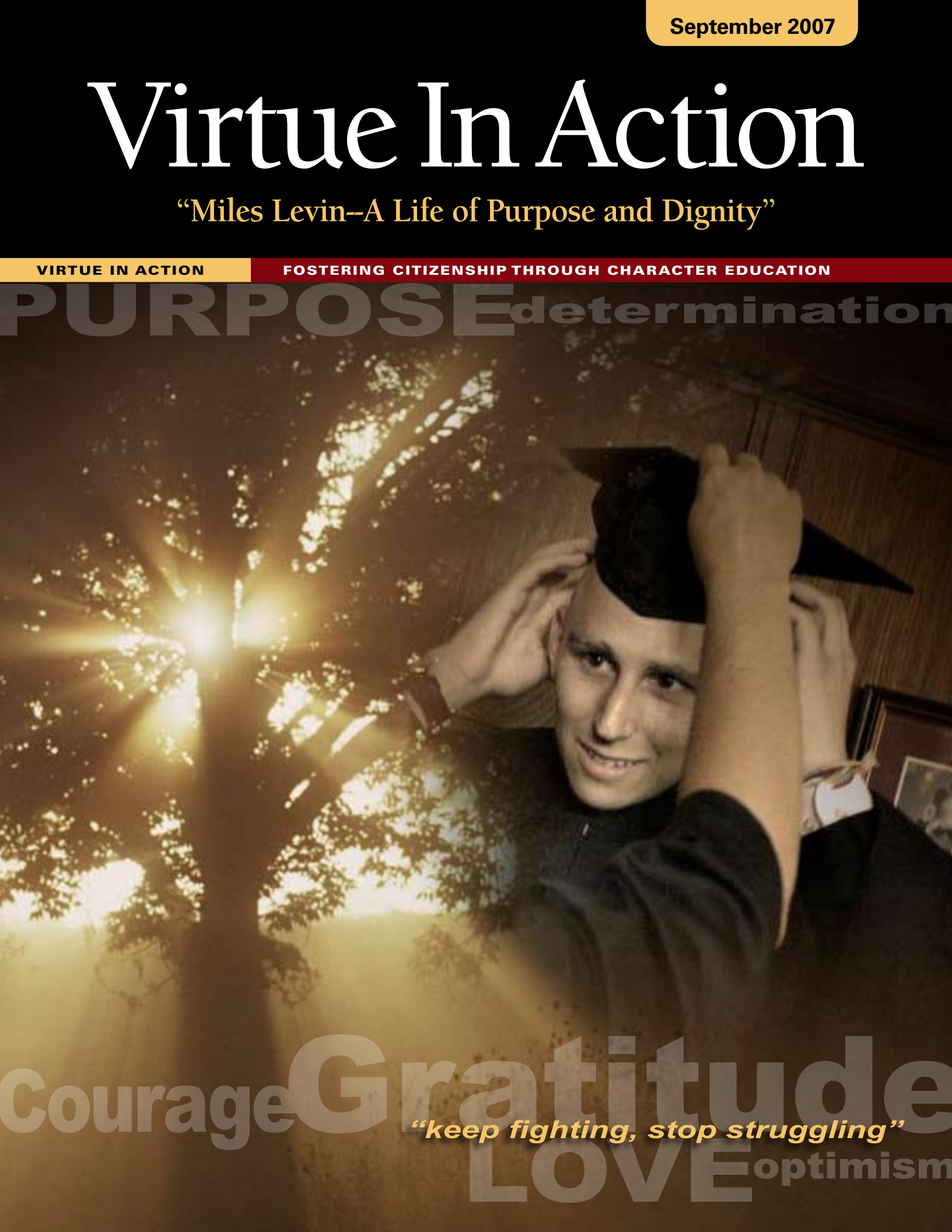
*“Miles Levin--A Life of Purpose and Dignity”*

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

PURPOSE *determination*

Courage *Gratitude*  
*“keep fighting, stop struggling”*  
LOVE *optimism*



**A** rare muscle cancer robbed the world of an exceptional teenager in August, but it couldn't take away the gifts he has given to the world. It couldn't take his optimism, his determination to have a positive impact on others, and his belief that his life had meaning.

Despite his suffering, Miles Levin refused to give up or become embittered by his fate. His one wish was that he would not die before he made an impact. His blog within [carepages.com](http://carepages.com), and the response it invoked worldwide, demonstrate that he achieved his goal.



#### **Accepting What We Cannot Change**

“The way I see it, we’re not entitled to one breath of air,” Levin wrote in the blog that chronicled the last years of his life. “We did nothing to earn it, so whatever we get is a bonus. I might be more than a little disappointed with the hand I’ve been dealt, but this is what it is.”

Those words might sound strange, “more than a little disappointed” considering Levin’s level of physical suffering. As a junior at Cranbrook high school in Michigan, Miles Levin should have been planning for college. Instead he was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare and fatal form of cancer that attacks the soft tissue-muscles.

“I remember my first chemo round, staring at the ceiling and trying not to cry,” Levin recounted in a blog entry dated May 9, 2007. “I’ve long since learned to go ahead and cry. How could this have happened?”

But Levin soon drew lessons from the chemotherapy he described as a moonwalk between life and death. He realized the chemotherapy – sickening and painful as it was – would pass, but so too would precious time if he spent it questioning his lot in life.

Instead, he opened a window into his own suffering with a blog within the CarePages site, an online destination and virtual support group for the chronically ill and their families.

“Thinking about what it could be is pointless,” Levin blogged. “It ought to be different, that’s for sure, but it

ain’t. A moment spent moping is a moment wasted.”

Those insights on how Levin came to accept what he couldn’t change – and two years worth of other uplifting writings – helped others suffering from cancer or other serious setbacks. It also gave Levin a purpose.

#### **Living for a Purpose**

“Dying is not what scares me; it’s dying having had no impact,” Levin blogged. “I know a lot of eyes are watching me suffer; and – win or lose – this is my time for impact.”

He told CNN, which featured his story several times, that he was put on earth to show people how to die of the rare disease with grace. His journey not only eased the suffering of others, it transformed him in the process. It widened his heart, he often remarked, according to family and friends’ accounts.

“The boy Miles was in June of ’05 was sweet, innocent, disorganized and ungrounded (“earth to Miles”),” wrote Miles’ mother Nancy, who quit her psychotherapist job to care for her son full time. “The man that Miles is today is clear, focused, heart centered and purposeful.”

Levin’s father, Jon, also was proud of his son’s outlook: his undefeatable human spirit, his generosity in working to helping others through their suffering, and his perseverance in continuing to write and reach out to others in spite of his own pain and suffering. Jon Levin posted on [carepages.com](http://carepages.com). “We are pretty sure that God’s at work here, that his life was intended to play out this way...on a big stage.” Fortunately, Levin’s efforts paid off.

Levin’s doctor, Charles Main, said Levin’s blog was very effective to a special audience, who was urged on by his motto: “keep fighting, stop struggling. The feedback that they always got on his blog was that it was very, very helpful for other children with cancer,” Main told the Detroit Free Press.

#### **Optimism**

Levin continued to see the sunny side of things in life. A lover of the outdoors, Levin wrote about the seasons as much as he did his sickness:

“I couldn’t be more glad it’s summer,” he blogged. “Nothing but sunshine and chemotherapy. Well, it’s better than schoolwork and chemotherapy. And you can’t beat the weather.”

# Optimism appreciation POSITIVE impact

The optimism wasn't lost on those who came to read his messages of strength and encouragement from as far away as Japan, Germany, Australia and Brazil. Bloggers, by the thousands, sent Levin words of support and encouragement. They helped him as he helped them.

"A true test of a person's courage and conviction is how they handle their life in the face of extreme adversity,"

Joseph Kowalski of North Huntington, Philadelphia posted on Levin's page. "Your life is a difficult one, Miles, but you have discovered something most people fail to realize in an entire lifetime. Life is a precious gift and we must face life with a smile."

## Determination

Levin – as Kowalski and other admirers note in their postings – was determined that his cancer would not prevent him from achieving his goals. He rejected the bitterness and anger he saw in other cancer victims. He resolved to graduate from high school, continue writing in his blog, and to spread his message by appearing on programs like Anderson Cooper 360, local Detroit broadcasts and the pages of the Detroit Free Press. He encouraged others through his example.

Levin's determination also helped him to experience life more fully. "I don't think there has been a dull moment once this year," Levin blogged in April of 2006. "There have been some hard moments as well as some good ones, but not a dull one. So, while in many respects this has been the worst year of my life, I don't think I can say I've ever been more alive. Sublime ups, staggering downs. Now that's living."

Levin's mother also stepped in to lend support to those who needed it when her son was too sick to blog. She too was convinced that people could learn to face and handle whatever life handed out. "Plain and simple, we do what we have to do; we rise," Nancy wrote. "You would do it, too. We don't know what we can do, will do, until we have to do this."

## Appreciation

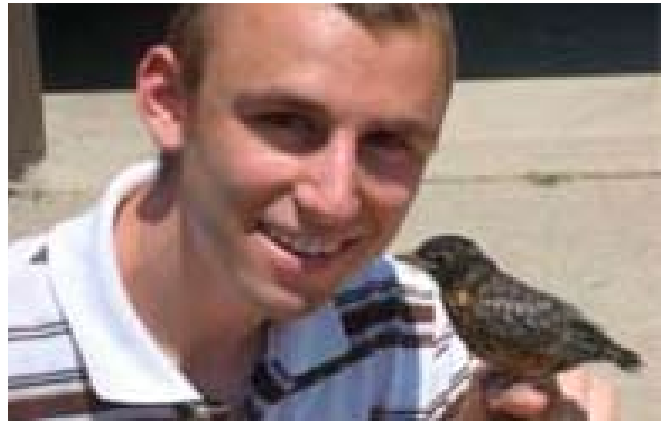
But it's not just those who are ill who need to be challenged to rise. In everyday life, there are people who do not see the gifts set before them. Because of his love for others, Levin allowed his struggles to serve as inspiration for people of all backgrounds and life experiences to appreciate all that they have, and not question all that they lack.

"I don't believe you can ask for any more, but if I could ask for something, it would be able to go outside into the glorious spring air, feeling healthy and blissfully clueless as to how lucky I was for it, if only just for an hour."

Well-wishers during his struggle, and mourners, in the wake of his August 19 death, seem to have gotten his message loud and clear. "How amazingly selfless and brave and honest," Tammy C. of Berwick L.A. posted on Levin's site. "I think Miles Levin has figured out what some people never do about life... Maybe sharing his fight to live and acceptance of the unacceptable was part of his destiny."

The loss of Miles Levin is powerful and deep because he died so young and suffered so much, even though he made peace with his condition and encouraged others to do the same.

"He captured the hearts and souls of everyone here at



CarePages, and the lives he touched far beyond as his story began making national headlines. He was a boy who exemplified the compassion, wisdom, altruism, insight and creativity of a very special man. He showed us all how to live a full human life, and how to make a profound impact on others."

Levin's life and his words are reminders that nothing is promised, that challenges are a part of life to be accepted with dignity, and to always appreciate the many simple gifts we have. If a teenager who suffered deeply could see and share the beauty of a world he was only briefly allowed to occupy, surely we – who have so much – should be able to do the same. We can also look to Levin's life as an example of how to live our lives with a sense of purpose, especially the purpose of making a positive contribution to others.

### **Vocabulary**

**Bloggers:** people who keep Web logs (blog) or publish an online diary

**Chemotherapy:** the treatment of disease by means of chemicals that have a specific toxic effect upon the disease-producing microorganisms or that selectively destroy cancerous tissue

**Chronically:** continuing a long time or recurring frequently

**Chronicled:** to record in or in the form of a historical record

**Exceptional:** unusually excellent; superior

**Generosity:** giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

**Humility:** modest opinion of one's own position; an honest self appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride

**Love:** to freely give of ourselves for the betterment of another person, without expecting anything in return

**Persevere:** trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

**Perspective:** a way of regarding situations or topics

**Rhabdomyosarcoma:** a rare, deadly cancer that attacks soft-tissue muscles

**Sublime:** supreme or outstanding

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**Virtue In Action**

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# Virtue In Action

## “Miles Levin—A Life of Purpose and Dignity”

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FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

### Lesson Goals

- Develop understanding of the virtues of appreciation, determination, generosity, love and perseverance
- Help students see how these virtues can assist them in addressing life’s challenges
- Inspire students to live out these virtues by sharing the story of a brave teen whose maturity was exemplary
- Inspire students to meet, rather than shrink from, life’s challenges and face adversity with strength and grace

### Virtues Highlighted

- **Appreciation** – to be grateful, thankful for all that we have
- **Determination** – firmness of purpose, resolve
- **Generosity and Love** – to freely give of ourselves with our time, talent and resources for the betterment of others, not looking for anything in return.
- **Perseverance** – trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

### Discussion Question Options:

1. How did Miles Levin turn the adversity of cancer into a positive? Explain why and how he began blogging about his experiences.
2. Explain what Miles meant by “keep fighting, stop struggling.” How did he live out this philosophy?
3. What was Miles’ initial reaction to his cancer diagnosis? What made him change his mind?
4. How does perseverance factor into Miles’ story and outlook?
5. Do you know anyone personally who has had to overcome a huge physical or mental challenge in life? What do you think was key to them overcoming that obstacle?

Despite his suffering, Miles Levin refused to give up or become embittered by his fate. His one wish was that he would not die before he made an impact. His blog within carepages.com, and the response it invoked worldwide, demonstrate that he achieved his goal.

### Journal Writing Options:

1. How does Miles Levin serve as a role model for you? What did you learn from his experience? Explain how one of his teachings could impact your life and provide a practical example.
2. Write about a time when you or someone you loved faced a physical challenge. What was your or their attitude during that time? Were you able to see any positives in the experience? What were they and how did they help the situation?



### Extended Learning Activities:

1. Think of something that you have considered a setback in your life, and figure out how you can make it a plus. Develop a motto – such as Miles did – that will inspire you the next time you face that same challenge. Teachers may use this as a writing exercise or ask students to share their experiences in small groups.
2. Have the class create a collage tribute to Miles Levin, highlighting the virtues that he embodies through pictures and have them present it as individuals or in teams.
3. Miles Levin won a 2008 Leadership in Courage Award from the Sarcoma Foundation. To encourage oratory skills as well as understanding of the lessons, have a mock ceremony where students present Miles posthumously with an award, highlighting the lesson virtues and including personal details from his blog.

### Internet Resources:

**Sarcoma Foundation, urges research to improve sarcoma treatment**

[www.curesarcoma.com](http://www.curesarcoma.com)

[www.carepages.com](http://www.carepages.com) name: LevinStory

**CNN: Anderson 360 Blog, “Young blogger loses battle with cancer.”**

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/HEALTH/08/20/obit.miles.levin/index.html>

**Detroit Free Press: “Miles Levin: Giving hope to others was his mission.”**

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070819/NEWS08/70819029/1001/NEWS>