

Yes Pa: The Power of a Positive Attitude

Fred W. Sarkis, author and motivational speaker

Fred Sarkis was born in Rochester, New York, in 1926, the second of ten children in an immigrant Lebanese family. During the Depression, his father lost his confectionery business and had to sell fruits and vegetables for a living. Fred had to help him. In school he was a below-average student with very low self-esteem. In *Yes Pa* Fred tells the story of how he gained confidence, overcame adversity, and went on to graduate first in his high school and become a very successful businessman. Now 80 years old, Fred has given over 150 talks to nearly 50,000 students and educators. On his Foundation's website, he provides a free *Yes Pa* character education program based on the inspiring story of his life. A recent research study showed *Yes Pa* to be effective in helping 6th-graders believe that they can influence their lives by their choices.

From age eight to fourteen, I had to work on my father's fruit and vegetable truck—100 hours a week in the summer and 19 hours every Saturday during the school year. I felt like a prisoner of that truck. Self-pity ruled my life.

At age 12, three five-minute lessons from my Pa changed my attitude. What he taught me about selling strawberries boosted my self-esteem. I learned that failure could be turned around—that my success was related to my attitude and enthusiasm.

Another conversation with Pa gave me the motivation to study and to excel in whatever I did. I realized that I could be the author of my own life story.

As human beings, we often become trapped in prisons of our own making—habits of self-pity, blaming others for our failures, addictions, or unhappiness. We lose ambition. We fail to set goals.

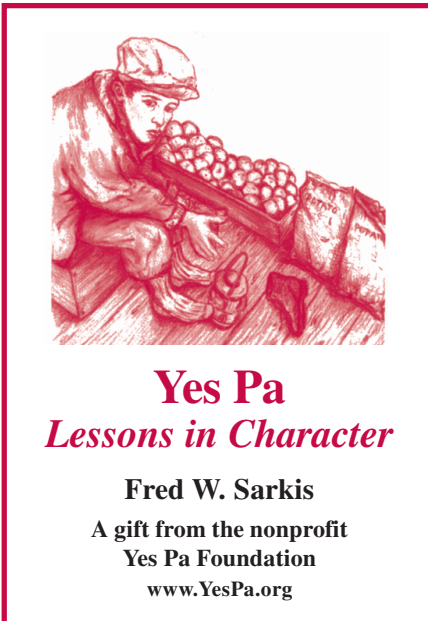
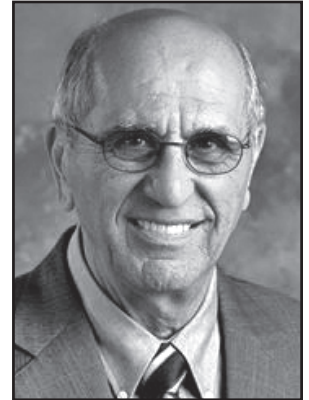
At age 12, I realized that I was responsible for what I made of my life—no one

else. I became a millionaire by the time I was 34—then lost it all. But guided by my Pa's lessons and with faith in God and the support of my family, I never gave up, and once gain turned failure into success.

Now I have a new mission in life—to inspire others to overcome whatever hardships they face. In my 70s, I began to give motivational talks to kids, sharing my life story and the lessons I learned. My message to kids is this: ***Turn your adversity into an opportunity. Get rid of bad habits. Set realistic goals. Find resources for***

help with problems, including addiction and abuse. And never give up.

After I would speak at a school, I'd receive hundreds of letters from kids telling me how they were affected by my story. Encouraged by that response, and with the help of teachers, we have created the *Yes Pa* program, a character education curriculum for 6th-graders, based on my life story. *Yes Pa* is available to any



Yes Pa Lessons in Character

Fred W. Sarkis

A gift from the nonprofit
Yes Pa Foundation
www.YesPa.org

school or group at no cost and includes a *Teacher Resource Guide* and a video of my live presentation.

Yes Pa shows kids the secret of a happy life—how they, too, can develop a positive attitude, make the most of their gifts, and become the author of their own life story. ■



A Teacher's Experience with Yes Pa

Joanne Agrasto

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Imagine being the student in the middle school classroom who is continually thrown out for bad behavior. Imagine being the student who is capable of doing the work but has no support at home.

About nine years ago, this was my classroom. I took on the position of alternative education teacher for our

middle school. My class was made up of 12 boys (grades 6-8), a teaching assistant, and myself. I knew that I had to give those kids a sense of purpose for coming to school.

The hardest thing to teach my students was that they were worthwhile human beings. Most did not believe in themselves; they did not see themselves as going anywhere. They had no goals. I was searching for activities and materials to help them when one morning I picked up the local newspaper and read a huge article about the “Motivational Millionaire, Fred Sarkis.”

Yes Pa shows kids the secret of a happy life—and how to become the author of their own life story.

At the end of the article was Fred Sarkis’ telephone number. I called him that day to set up a speaking engagement for my class. I remember the day he came, dressed in a clown outfit, and wondered how the boys were going to react to this speaker. They were totally engrossed! For days afterwards, they referred to his words and lessons. In fact, even today, when I see these young men out and about, they ask about Fred.

I now teach 6th-grade English at the same middle school. I have been using *Yes Pa* for the past seven years in my English classes. Each spring, over a 6- to 7-week period, we read the book (see page 3 for excerpt) and complete the activities.

On a typical day, we go over the vocabulary words for the chapter, read the chapter aloud, and discuss it as we go along. For each chapter, I developed questions aligned with the NYS Standards for English/Language Arts. The kids complete the student questions in class and do the “Parent Connections” questions at home with an adult in their family. The next day, we discuss the parents’ answers and do related writing activities.

I have found that this book enables my students to feel empathy—not only for Fred in the story—but for each other. As we read, I can actually see them becoming more accepting and caring toward each other. Thus far, I’ve read the book towards the end of the school year in hopes of preparing them for final exams and “life beyond sixth grade.” I am happy to report that last year, in my class load of 85 students, I did not have a single student fail my English class. I’m sure that one factor was that the kids took Fred’s message of hard work and perseverance to heart. ■

What Students and Parents Say About *Yes Pa*

STUDENT COMMENTS

“This is the best book I’ve ever read.”

“We had to do a report on heroes. I chose Fred Sarkis as mine—he sure fits the definition.”

“I learned that a positive attitude and hard work can help you overcome your problems.”

“Wow. That dude had a lot of problems, and he beat them all.”

“If Fred can do it, I can do it.”

PARENT COMMENTS

“Why don’t they have more books in school like this—morals and values instead of all that violence and stuff you can’t understand?”

“This is a fantastic book. I picked it up, started reading, and read the whole thing.”

“My kid never talked to me before like he has since he started reading *Yes Pa*.”

“*Yes Pa* has become a family affair because my son is reading it, I am reading it, and my father is reading it. We all talk about it. It has brought out a lot of family stories.”

“I wish someone had taught me these keys to success when I was a kid.”

From Yes Pa: A 5-Minute Lesson of a Lifetime

It was the summer of 1938, and I was 12 years old. I was serving my fourth year of what seemed like a life sentence as prisoner of my father's vegetable and fruit truck. Ever since I was 8, my father got me up at 4 a.m. I had to work a grueling 100 hours a week. I was drowning in self-pity. My warden-father and I rarely spoke, and if we did, I still answered most of his questions with, "Yes Pa."

That summer, three 5-minute lessons from my father would change my life forever.

The first lesson occurred during the three-week strawberry season. My father would bring along my 8-year-old brother Joe to help sell fresh strawberries. My father handed Joe and me two large flats of berries, each holding 3 baskets. He told me to cover one side of the street, while Joe covered the other.

After calling on about 30 homes, I came back to the truck to get six more boxes of strawberries. My father's voice was gruff and angry. "Fred, where have you been? You must be doing something wrong. What are you, dumb? Your brother is only 8 years old and you are 12, yet he comes for more strawberries, four baskets to your one. What are ya doin' wrong?"

I was angry. "Maybe it's because he has the better side of the street."

"No, Fred, you're doing something wrong. I'm going to watch you."

I wanted the world to open up and swallow me. All I ever did was obey him, and now he was going to humiliate me by standing over me to make sure I was selling strawberries the correct way.

Iwent to the next house, with my father standing behind me. I knocked on the door, and when the lady of the house appeared, I said, "You probably don't want to buy any strawberries, do you ma'am?" I was shaking my head no, and the lady looked puzzled and started shaking her head no, too. She said, "I guess not today, sonny."

After we got back to the truck my father said, "Fred, we won't go home until we sell all these strawberries. There's a smart way to sell straw-

berries and your way. I'll show you the smart way. Are you ready to learn?"

"Yes, Pa."

My father took the two flats of berries and walked up to the next house. He put a big old smile on his tired face and rang the doorbell. When the lady of the house appeared, he said, "Good evening, ma'am. These strawberries were picked early this morning on a farm not far from here. See how fresh they are." He turned the basket so the lady could see that there were no bad berries at the bottom. With excitement in his voice he said, "You can see there's not one bad berry in the whole quart."

With a Cheshire-cat smile on his face, he said, "They are only ten cents a quart or three quarts for a quarter. Do you want one or three, ma'am?"

The lady only had a choice between one and three, not yes or no. To my utter amazement she said, "I'll take three, sir."

He gave the same sales pitch to the next lady, and she also took three. "Now," he said to me, "Do this from now on and we'll go home a lot sooner."

I practiced and perfected the new skill I had just learned. I was inherently shy, but I quickly learned the art of selling strawberries the smart way. I caught up and then surpassed the sales of my little brother, Joe. This 5-minute lesson from my father had a big impact on the rest of my life. It changed my attitude from negative to positive. I immediately stopped being shy and timid. I became friendlier and happier.

It's almost as if we have this invisible control panel on the side of our body that controls our attitude and enthusiasm. You can turn the knob to low, medium, or high. People can choose to move that knob. They can change their outlook on life.

I thought about my problems at school. Maybe if I had been more positive and outgoing, I would have made more friends. Maybe I wouldn't have felt so lonely and dejected. From that day forward, I tried to remember and incorporate my father's life lesson into everything I did or said. I realized that I was in control of my attitude and enthusiasm. I could turn my knob as high as I chose. 🍓





Another Teacher's Perspective on Yes Pa

Dan Green

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I have been a 6th-grade teacher for the past 12 years and have read numerous books with my students, such as *Hatchet*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Shark Bait*, and *Ghost Canoe*.

Three years ago I was introduced to Fred Sarkis and his *Yes Pa* program. He asked me if I would consider reading it with my class. I took the autobiography of this local businessman home with me and began reading his story. I couldn't stop reading. Into the wee hours of the morning I read as Fred rode the proverbial roller coaster of life and somehow always managed to come out on top.

In his book he talked about "keys to freedom" and "strategies for success." The book covered history, so-

cial issues, moral values, bullying, and substance abuse. I thought to myself, I have to read this book with my students *this* year, not next year. So I rearranged my schedule and found time to read *Yes Pa* with my class.

My students immediately fell in love with Fred and his story. They didn't want to stop reading to answer discussion questions or do writing activities. They didn't even want to stop at the end of the period.

This book gave my students so much more than other books. There was an amazing connection between these 12-year-olds and this nearly 80-year-old man. They laughed with Fred, they were sad with Fred, and a few of them even cried with Fred. I went on to help develop the teacher's guide for the program.

We have received many positive comments from parents about *Yes Pa* and the conversations it has stimulated between them and their child. And when we finished *Yes Pa*, every one of my students wrote to Fred Sarkis and delivered the cards in a big brown envelope. ■

Visit www.YesPa.org for the free *Yes Pa* character education program and *Teacher Resource Guide*. Fred's e-mail: YesPaCares@aol.com.

MEASURED EFFECTIVENESS OF YES PA

Rob Lillis, Evalumetrics Research

The *Yes Pa* program elicits enthusiastic feedback from students, parents, and character education professionals. But Fred Sarkis wanted to know if the program was actually making a measurable change in kids. He commissioned me as an outside evaluator from Evalumetrics Research to design and conduct an outcome study.

A focus group of teachers who had used the *Yes Pa* program, school administrators, and academics met to suggest measurable outcomes of *Yes Pa*. Together, we decided that the program addresses young people's self-efficacy—their perception of the influence they have over their lives.

Research finds that accomplishment and healthy lifestyles include the belief that one's life outcomes generally result from effort as opposed to luck or other external factors. This "internal locus of control" predicts positive youth development and reduced problem behaviors.

We believe that when students read *Yes Pa* and watch the video of Fred telling his story, they develop

their own self-efficacy. The *Yes Pa* curriculum emphasizes the similarities of Fred's childhood to the issues faced by young people today. For example, Fred talks about being socially rejected and teased because he was different.



To test the effects of the *Yes Pa* program, 825 sixth-graders in eight school districts completed the Control Agency Means-Ends Interview (CAMI) prior to the *Yes Pa* program (pre-test) and following the *Yes Pa* program (post-test). A control group of students from the same schools who did not participate in the *Yes Pa* program also completed the CAMI.

Students who participated in *Yes Pa* were *six times more likely* to show increases in the belief that their successes are directly related to their efforts. The program had equal impact whether students viewed the video of Fred or saw his live performance. ■

Rob Lillis can be reached at rlillis@rochester.rr.com.

The World's Response: Ineffective So Far

While much of the global community has denounced the killing in Darfur, they cannot agree on how to address the problem. Since 2004, a group of African nations known as the African Union has sent peacekeeping troops to the region to enforce a cease fire. Unfortunately, they have been able to do little to stop the bloodshed due to their small size, inadequate resources, and a limited mandate that prevents African Union peacekeepers from being able to get directly involved with the conflict.

Recently, demonstrations have been held in major cities throughout the world with citizens urging the United Nation's Security Council to send a contingent of peacekeeping troops and more humanitarian aid. President Bush and some international leaders have voiced their support for such actions. However, other nations such as China and Russia, which have the power to veto Security Council resolutions, have said they would only support a UN peacekeeping force if the Sudanese government agreed to its deployment. So far the Sudanese government refuses to let UN peacekeepers enter.

Students Take the Initiative

While world leaders have been unable to come up with an effective strategy in Darfur, a group of college students have taken it upon themselves to pressure the Sudanese government to stop the killing.

Students are making a difference.

In 2005, Daniel Millenson, a 19-year-old student at Brandeis University, created the Sudan Divestment Task Force, a national program designed to convince university endowment funds and state government investment funds to sell investments in companies that generate profits for the government of Sudan. The goal of a divestment is to put economic pressure on a government to encourage them to reconsider a specific policy. Divestment "is a smart kind of activism that recognizes the role universities, and really money, can play," said Adam Gentleson, a student involved with the movement.

For a divestment strategy to succeed, its organizers must do research to determine which companies should be targeted for divestment (understanding that some of these companies often also provide needed services and jobs) and then create a campaign to convince investment officers that divestment is an effective response. The team of students behind the Sudan Divestment Task Force has done this.

The students' efforts have paid off as they have convinced a number of states and colleges to sell their investments in companies identified by the task force.

INTERNET RESOURCES:

Sudan Divestment Task Force

<http://www.sudandivestment.org/home.asp>

Save Darfur.Org. (Check this site for most recent developments.) <http://www.savedarfur.org/content>

Darfur: A Genocide We Can Stop

<http://www.darfurgenocide.org/> ■

Virtue in Action: info@virtueinaction.org.

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON VIRTUE IN ACTION

The following interview was conducted with Gina Guarino-Buli when she taught 9th- and 10th-grade English at the Renaissance Academy in Phoenixville, PA.

How do you use Virtue in Action in English class?

I use the VIA lessons to meet a number of the state learning standards, such as being able to express a point of view, develop one's ideas, hold a conversation, and respond to another's viewpoint. I find my students need a lot of help in these areas. For many of them, their education until now has been mostly "listen to the teacher, read the text, answer the questions."

At this age they love to share their opinions, but I want them to really listen and share *in light of* what someone else has said. We sit in a circle to encourage eye contact. We set ground rules for good discussion. I don't make them raise their hands; I want them to be able to follow the conversational cues. I pose an occasional question: "Have you experienced something similar to this?"; "If you were in this person's shoes, how would you feel?" I give credit for participation and also give them a rubric defining levels of participation.

Do the lessons work equally well with students of different backgrounds and ability?

I have honors students, and I have struggling students. These lessons give all of them the opportunity to think about what they believe and express their beliefs with greater confidence. It's refreshing for me to listen to their ideas about these issues.

I have also been pleased by the connections kids make across lessons. About a year ago, we did the lesson about the high school hazing incident that happened in a Chicago suburb, and discussed the "mob mentality" that can lead people to go along with what the group is doing rather than exercising individual judgment. More recently, when we discussed the lesson on the abuse of prisoners of war, they brought up the hazing incident and the similarities they saw between the two situations.

—T. Lickona & M. Davidson, *Smart & Good High Schools* (www.cortland.edu/character/highschool)

Putting Virtue Into Action: The Darfur Crisis

www.VirtueInAction.org

The following October, 2006 lesson is abridged from VIRTUE IN ACTION, an online character education resource that provides monthly lessons easily incorporated into English and social studies curricula as well as advisories or homeroom periods.

Lessons focus on a current event, issue, or person in the news that illuminates a virtue. By highlighting events and individuals relevant to students' lives, lessons inspire students to live out the virtues.

As we learn about horrible events in the world we often ask, "Why hasn't somebody done something about this?" The human rights atrocities in Darfur, a remote region in the African country of Sudan, provide a compelling example.

What Has Led to the Darfur Crisis?

After Sudan gained its independence from Britain in 1952, different groups have struggled for power. Civil wars have raged for decades between the Arab-dominated government in the North and Christians living in the South.

In 2003, opponents of the government in Sudan's western region of Darfur formed militias and began a rebellion. Their goal was to obtain a larger role in the Sudanese government and to receive a greater share of the money earned by the selling of natural resources from their area. The militias launched attacks on military bases and kidnapped government officials. In response, the government began arming an unofficial militia of their own called the Janjaweed to stop the rebellion. However, instead of focusing on the rebel militia, the Janjaweed and Sudan's Air Force launched massive attacks and bombing raids on the civilian population of Darfur.

Water wells have been poisoned, crops burned, men castrated, women raped, and children brutally murdered.

Most estimates place the death toll in Darfur at more than 200,000. Thousands of towns and villages have been destroyed forcing an estimated 2 million

people to become refugees, without a home and searching for food and shelter. The attacks of the Janjaweed have been horrific: Water wells have been poisoned, crops burned, men castrated, women raped, and children brutally murdered. The Janjaweed has tried to eradicate any opposition to the government by wiping out the population from which rebel militias might recruit.



Those who make it to the refugee camps are still living with violence and extreme poverty. Children who leave the camps to search for firewood and food are often attacked and raped. You can read an eyewitness account of the atrocities and view pictures taken by an international observer, Brian Steidle, by going to his web site, www.ushmm.org/conscience/alert/darfur/steidle/.

DARFUR DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the keys to the students' success in convincing some large investment funds to follow their recommended disinvestment strategy?
2. Under what circumstances, if any, do you think nations as an international community should intervene to end a brutal dictatorship or genocide?
3. If the international community can't agree on a unified approach, should the U.S. and a smaller number of other countries attempt to intervene outside of the UN?
4. What are the similarities between the genocide in Darfur and the Jewish Holocaust? What are the differences?
5. Why are many Americans apathetic about horrific events that are taking place around the world, such as those in Darfur? What could be done to change these attitudes?
6. Think about some of the problems that you have noticed in your school and community. What are some ways you could turn your feelings of empathy and compassion into an effective plan of action?