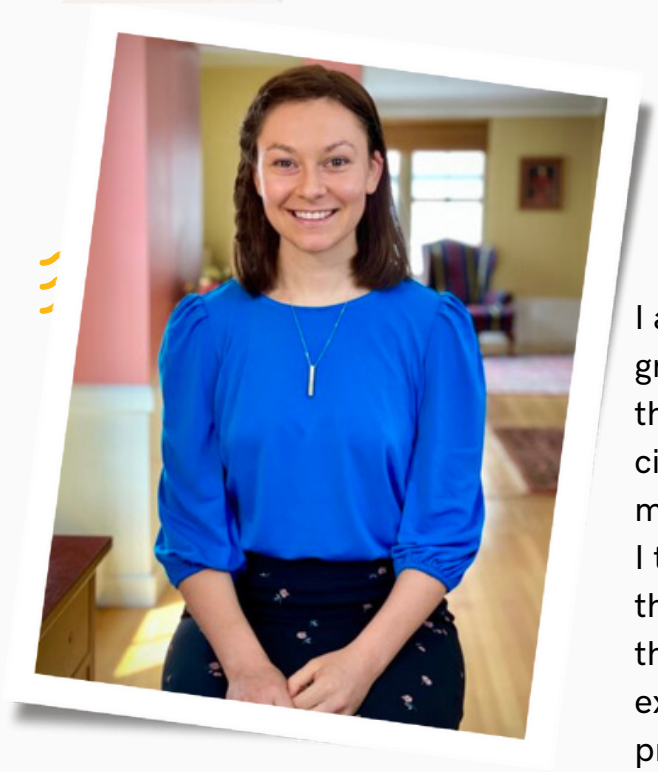
# LUMEN VERUM ACADEMY



## EMILY SCHWARTZ

### Humanities and English Teacher

I applied for Civic Spirit seeking to equip my ninth-grade American History and Literature students with the knowledge and skills they need to become active citizens one day, as well as with an awareness of their moral obligation to engage in the world around them. I teach in a Classical Catholic setting, meaning three things: first, I teach History and Literature thematically in tandem; second, I focus almost exclusively on exposing students to classic books and primary texts rather than textbooks; and third, I lead Socratic discussions centered around these texts in class as my main teaching strategy. I tied my Civic Spirit project into this framework by choosing texts, questions, and themes for the year that would prepare my students to embrace the project, and by integrating both Literature and History into its scope. The project is to write an original American myth that places a fictional American hero in a historical context. Students will complete this capstone project next month.

Beginning in September, my small group of six ninth-graders embarked on their discovery of America by reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* while simultaneously learning about French, Spanish, and Dutch exploration of the New World. They read letters sent by explorers and kings, studied treaties and maps, and contemplated big questions regarding the consequences of pursuing a "perfect" world as they read from St. Thomas More's *Utopia*. All along, they searched for the "American hero" and questioned what qualities would earn a character or historical figure such a grand title. Can a common boy like Tom Sawyer, who starts off as a cheater and scoundrel, come to be regarded as a true American hero? If so, how?; and who else in history has similarly achieved heroic status in spite of their flaws? Can a duplicitous explorer be regarded as a hero if he fulfills his duties to both the Queen and to God while forging his own path to discovery?

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Through Socratic discussions around these questions raised through Literature and History, my students identified three main heroic virtues: justice, authentic freedom, and self-sacrifice. This marked a departure from their previous understanding of heroes as epic saviors who perform superhuman deeds. Their new perspective opened their minds to think of heroism as an attainable goal for ordinary people - those threaded throughout history - and even themselves. One student wrote in his reflection, "Just like the early and young United States, Tom Sawyer was full of adventure and he wanted to explore; look for a call to go on an odyssey…Tom Sawyer represents the desire for freedom, independence, and adventure." Another wrote, "Tom is an American hero because he learns from his mistakes and also because he overcomes guilt and glory and starts to seek truth and honesty." Tom finally experiences the internal freedom he has been chasing after all along by answering the call of duty.

Thus, my students began to formulate a new definition of freedom - one that rests on a delicate balance of individualism and responsibility - a foreshadowing of the values described in America's founding documents. As the students made their way through the establishment of the colonies, the Revolutionary War, and the Declaration of Independence, they also read the novel *The Last of the Mohicans*. This epic American tale of war, cultural blending, and self-sacrifice raised the importance of mercy in pursuing justice, and of self-restraint in exhibiting great courage. Just as George Washington became a war hero through his great humility, and the Framers knew that Congress could not grow strong without constraints, the protagonists of *The Last of the Mohicans* learned to achieve a just victory through self-sacrifice. Ultimately, these historical and fictional actors end up the most free when they selflessly fulfill their duties.

By now, my students had discovered that the American hero is a paradox: ordinary yet great; free yet responsible. The natural conclusion that I steered my students toward was that they - ordinary, free citizens - must therefore assume certain responsibilities if they wish to become great. Specifically, they must carry out civic duties for the good of society. Our subsequent studies of the Bill of Rights, the abolition of slavery, and the dangers of mob-mentality in *The Crucible* provided further fodder for discussion on one's civic duties and the common good.

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Having analyzed historical and literary figures as American heroes, and having considered what virtues they must espouse should they seek to become American heroes of the future, my students are now ready to take on their project: my Civic Spirit project. They will each create a fictional character who embodies the characteristics of the American hero and craft a mythic narrative placing that character in a real chapter of history that we have studied. They can use words, pictures, music, or even a board game to communicate their original American myth with the class at the end of the year. I can't wait to see what they each come up with!

Although my main goal this year was to impart knowledge on my *students*, I also find *myself* coming away with deeper knowledge. The speakers that Civic Spirit brought in to touch on topics such as alienable rights, the four freedoms, and the first amendment exposed me to primary sources and ideas that I had not previously considered. I brought many of them into my classroom. I now feel both more able and more inspired to carry out my civic duty in the world.

Finally, my Civic Spirit experience culminates in my coming to understand that the virtues and values that make up the American ideal - whether expressed through fiction or history - align with the virtues and values that the Catholic faith demands. In Lumen Verum Academy's faith-focused mission, we state that a graduate of our school should love God, love their neighbor, and love learning. These three loves surely require authentic freedom, self-sacrifice, adventure, and responsibility. I must conclude, therefore, that to become a stellar citizen is to do what's moral and right in the eyes of God. I hope that my soon-to-be tenth graders will walk away from my class inspired to do just that.

Check out some of their student work!

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American History and Literature
End-of-Year Project

Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience. A **myth** is a fictional story that explains something deeply **true**. Like the novels you read this year, myths tend to incorporate both real and imaginary elements. They may even contain supernatural characters or events.

Unlike fairy tales, myths are not always optimistic. True to the nature of life, the essence of myths is such that they are as often warnings as promises; as often laments as celebrations. Many myths are instructive and act as a guide to social norms, taking on cultural taboos such as mob-mentality, racial injustice, and greed.

Classic works like *Tom Sawyer, The Last of the Mohicans,* and *The Crucible* have achieved mythic status in the American literary canon because they have helped to explain how America came to be and what it means to be an American. They have given meaning to the American identity by creating a new kind of hero: the American hero. The American hero embodies values and virtues that serve as a model for Americans to follow.

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**Project Instructions:**

- Craft an original "American myth" that reveals some essential truth about what it means to be an American.
- This can be in any creative format: a play, a story, a film, a graphic storyboard, a children's book, or even a board game.
- Your myth should include a fictional American hero placed in a real historical context that we have studied this year.

**Due:** Tuesday, May 30th in class.

**Presentations:** Tuesday, May 30th and Thursday, June 1st.

Exploration of the American myth capstone ninth grade project.

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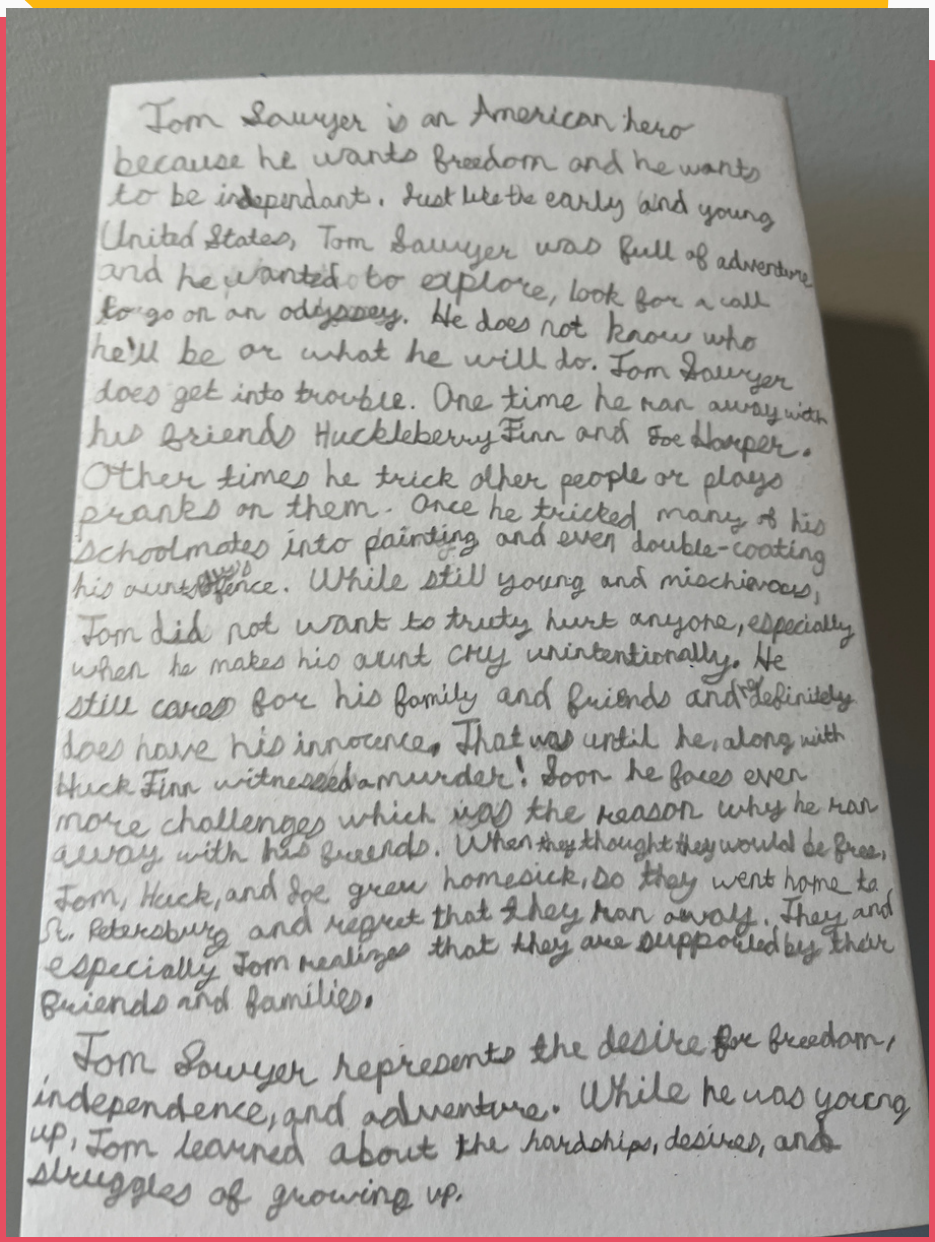

Tom Sawyer is an American hero because he wants freedom and he wants to be independant. Just like the early and young United States, Tom Sawyer was full of adventure and he wanted to explore, look for a call to go on an odyssey. He does not know who he'll be or what he will do. Tom Sawyer does get into trouble. One time he ran away with his friends Huckleberry Finn and Joe Harper. Other times he trick other people or plays pranks on them. Once he tricked many of his schoolmates into painting and even double-coating his own fence. While still young and mischievous, Tom did not want to truely hurt anyone, especially when he makes his aunt cry unintentionally. He still cares for his family and friends and definitely does have his innocence. That was until he, along with Huck Finn witnessed a murder! Soon he faces ever more challenges which is the reason why he ran away with his friends. When they thought they would be free, Tom, Huck, and Joe grew homesick, so they went home to St. Petersburg and regret that they ran away. They and especially Tom realizes that they are supported by their friends and families.

Tom Sawyer represents the desire for freedom, independence, and adventure. While he was young up, Tom learned about the hardships, desires, and struggles of growing up.

Tom Sawyer, an American Hero.