

Americans Who Tell the Truth

The Samantha Smith Challenge Guidelines 2026-27 Make Lemonade!

Samantha Smith's Story

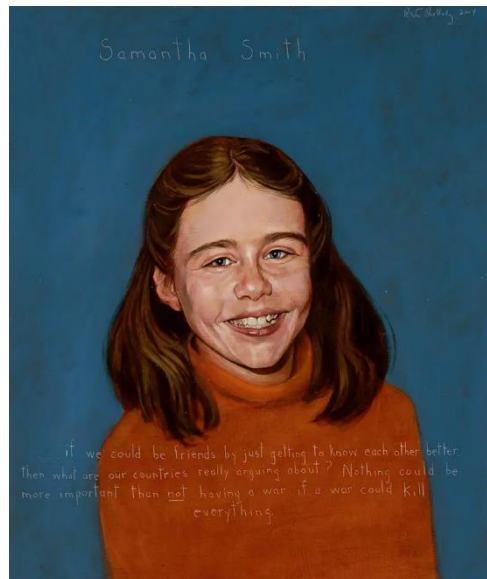
In December 1982, ten-year-old Samantha Smith of Manchester, Maine, asked her mother if there was going to be a war. She said, "I asked my mother who would start a war and why. She showed me a news magazine with a story about America and Russia, one that had a picture of the new Russian leader, Yuri Andropov, on the cover. We read it together.

It seemed that the people in both Russia and America were worried that the other country would start a nuclear war. It all seemed so dumb to me. I had learned about the awful things that had happened during World War II, so I thought that nobody would ever want to have another war.

I told Mom that she should write to Mr. Andropov to find out who was causing all the trouble. She said, 'Why don't you write to him?' So I did."

Samantha's journey began 44 years ago when she wrote a letter to Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov asking him, "Please tell me how you are going to help to not have war."

From that one question, a peace-making venture unfolded that brought Russian and American students together, building a bridge of understanding and appreciation of one another. Learning the truth, they built connections instead of armies. Sadly, in August 1985, both Samantha and her father were killed in a plane crash. But Samantha's memory lives on in her courageous example.



Watch [Samantha's journey on the news](#)

Courage turns fear into compassionate understanding

Like Samantha, be willing to listen, learn others' stories, and find the truth. She learned to be friends with people she had been told were her enemies. Keep her memory alive. Find ways to create hope!

Check out [Barbara Johns – Americans Who Tell the Truth](#), her story and her quotation:

"It was time that Negroes were treated equally with whites, time that they had a decent school, time for the students themselves to do something about it. ... There wasn't any fear. I just thought – this is your moment. Seize it!"

Like Barbara, Samantha found her moment and seized it – **and you can, too!**

What's the Challenge?

The **Samantha Smith Challenge** has been an important part of AWTT's education program since 2015 – more than a decade of young people seeking truth, building connections, taking action, and creating inspirational art.

- Choose a problem you care about—social, political, environmental—and take action to make a difference. Speak up about your issue—climate change, racial justice, poverty, voting rights, mental health . . . You choose what inspires you!
- Build research & critical thinking skills. Investigate your topic deeply, ask big questions, and find smart solutions.
- Use your voice. Just like Samantha, your voice *matters*.
- Be inspired by courageous Truth Tellers in the Americans Who Tell the Truth [Portrait Gallery](#)
- Use the creative arts—visual arts, music, drama, a speech, a website—to tell your truth, bridge divides, make change, find hope!
- Create a community celebration. Share your work to inspire others, start conversations. Be the catalyst for change in your community!

The world needs your voice! You have the power to speak up, take action, bridge divides, and inspire others—just like Samantha. Make some lemonade!

Key Dates

Sept. 28, 2026 – February 5, 2027

Register and view launch video

Nov. 2, 2026 – April 9, 2027

Connect with AWTT and AWTT portrait subjects.

Plan and implement a project.

Connect with other SSC Schools.

April 26 – May 28, 2027

Celebrate with your community.

Encourage young citizens to listen, get to know each other, and work for the common good. Honor Samantha and join this year's Samantha Smith Challenge.

Prepare for the Challenge

The following guidelines are meant to help teachers and students. Use whichever activities will help you and your students address the issues you identify as important and help you take action!

STEP ONE

What does it mean to be a Truth Teller?

Essential Questions:

Why is truth important in our world?

What causes truth to be compromised?

How do personal desires, emotions, or social pressures change how people see the facts?

Discuss the following ideas of Truth:

1. **Foundational Truths:** The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution express our ideals of equality and justice, which are defined truths of our nation.
2. **Truth and Trust:** Unless people try to tell each other the truth as they know it, they cannot trust each other. And, obviously, any relationship, personal or public, fails without trust.

3. **True Challenges:** Unless we are willing to name the true causes of a problem, we cannot fix it. For instance, if we deny that the burning of fossil fuels plays a role in climate change, we will not be able to avert climate catastrophe.
4. **True Knowledge:** If we don't teach our true history, its shame as well as its nobility, we cannot know who we are. People who don't know themselves are dangerous to themselves and to others because they act from ignorance and self-serving myths.

Complete these Lessons:

[Who are the AWTT portrait subjects?](#)

[What are Truth Teller Characteristics?](#)

[Introductory Lesson for Speaking Truth to Youth](#)

Let music inspire you!

“Music opens the heart so the mind can learn.” – [Noel Paul Stookey](#)

- What music moves you?
- What music moves you to action, to work for the common good?
- Identify two songs that open your heart, engage your mind, and move you to action.

Listen here for a couple of songs to get you started.

Songs by Americans Who Tell the Truth portrait subjects:

- [It's Who We Are](#) Reggie Harris
- [I Still Can't Breathe - 2020 \(Message from John Alston\)](#) Chester Children's Chorus and director John Alston

Additional important musical messages for you:

- [Natasha Bedingfield - Unwritten \(Lyrics\)](#)
- [One Person :: Samantha Smith Challenge](#) – Monte Selby

And join this group and AWTT portrait subject Steve Ritz taking on the world!

[This World is on Fire \(Alicia Keys cover\)](#) by GEMS Modern Academy MODERNISTS and Mister Ritz

Finally, listen to this song, inspired by Americans Who Tell the Truth portraits:
[Truth Be Told](#) music by Robert S. Cohen, lyrics by Ronald W. Cadmus, performance by the Rocky Mountain Chamber Choir

STEP TWO

Choose an important issue!

Individual students, a group, or an entire class pick a meaningful issue—a problem in the community, state, country or the world that matters to them, a concern that they are motivated to help solve.

Look at the recent AWTT portrait of [Rivera Sun - Americans Who Tell The Truth](#), read her biography, and think about her words.

“When fear is used to control us, love is how we rebel. [If there is any hope for humanity,], it will be found in each of us saying, ‘I am no longer willing to do nothing.’”

What will you do to bring hope and a bit of joy to your issue?

But first...

Understand the difference between sympathy and empathy.

[Brené Brown on Empathy](#)

Approaches to choosing an issue:

- Have the class brainstorm together.
- Present an issue that you know is of concern in the community.
- Invite a panel of community members to talk with your class about community concerns/issues.
- Go to the AWTT website for ideas. Use the Themes filtering tool on the [Portrait Galleries page](#) to focus on particular issues, or read about issues that are of concern to specific portrait subjects.

STEP THREE

Discovery! Do research and find the facts about the issue.

Suggested approaches:

- Students generate a list of questions about all the things they don't know or understand about their chosen topics.
- Individually or in teams, students find answers to the questions and become fact-gathering machines!
- Go to the [Portrait Galleries](#) on the AWTT website and explore by themes. See if the student-chosen issue is represented there. If so, read about the portrait subjects who have addressed that issue. Use them as starting points.
- Use the resources listed on the portrait pages.
- Contact AWTT if there is a living portrait subject with whom your students may want to connect. Many of them are happy to speak with students! (connie@americanswhotellthetruth.org)
- Interview local stakeholders (people concerned about the issue).
 - Why is this issue important to them?
 - What connection does this issue have to their identity?
 - What are they doing to address the issue?
 - What is their strategy/plan for making a long-term difference?
 - What are the obstacles to improving this issue?
 - What else needs to be done?
 - How can we help?

STEP FOUR

Create a message!

- Determine your audience – Parents? Teachers? Lawmakers? Other students? People in your community?
- State the issue the individual, group, or class has selected as a question, e.g.,
 - Why are there homeless people in my community?
 - What should the minimum wage be?
 - What kind of energy can take us sustainably into the future?
 - How can our school/town reduce its carbon footprint?
 - What can we do to address bullying in our school?
- Tell the story of your issue

- Pick one incident or critical moment and tell it as a first-person story (as though you were [Claudette Colvin](#), [Samantha Smith](#), or [John Lewis](#)).
- Check out storytelling suggestions from *This I Believe* ([This I Believe Essay Writing Guidelines](#)).

Decide the purpose of your message or action!

Consider the following possibilities:

- Help people in their communities to re-imagine where they live.
- Provoke local authorities by calling out an injustice in the community.
- Encourage and demonstrate how to connect across differences, across real and perceived boundaries.
- Inspire people to join the fight against climate change, homelessness, inequality, etc.
- Shed light on a practice or event most people don't know or don't understand.
- Encourage or challenge people in power who are doing helpful/not-helpful work.

STEP FIVE

Use the power of the Arts to make your message come alive!

The arts create a context for conversation, a way to bridge divides. The creative arts cause people to ask questions that need to be asked.

- Make paintings, original musical compositions, essays, theater skits, or any other form of creative expression that communicates the identified concern and responds to the academic needs of your classroom. (*Some students may choose their medium while others may be working in a specific class that teaches drawing or painting, theater, or filmmaking, where the medium will be defined by the teacher.*)
- Check out some examples of delivering messages of truth and hope using the creative arts:
 - [Darius Simpson & Scout Bostley - Lost Voices](#)
 - [Jamey Williams - Speak](#)
- Let this video inspire you to take action!
 - [HANSON - I Was Born OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO](#)

FINAL STEPS

Share your project with AWTT

Submit your project participation reports to Connie Carter

connie@americanswhotellthetruth.org

Celebrate!

Choose one of the following:

School Celebration

- Invite other teachers and students to view your projects in your classroom
- Take over the hallways – display your art
- Ask for a time when you can be the docents of your projects and have students and teachers experience your work through your eyes and voices
- Use parent conference time to also share your SSC projects

Community Celebration

- Exhibit your project at your local library, art museum, town hall, community center
- Meet with your town government, school board, local organization representing your issue
- Plan a conversation time at a local coffee shop or restaurant when you can have “table conversations” about your issues

Beyond your Community

- Write letters about your issue to your state representatives and senators
- Write letters to your representatives in the U.S. Congress and Senate
- Contact local TV and radio stations to share your work
- Create a video about your issues and share with any of the above
- Write a letter to the editor or an op ed piece for your local paper