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2024 Character Essay**

Legacy of Love: The Impact of Valuing Others

In Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, she writes, "The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters." This profound statement resonates deeply with me, as it encapsulates the essence of our journey through life. For me, what matters most is the impact we have on others and the legacy we leave behind. This belief is intricately tied to character, which I have come to understand through a deeply personal experience.

My biggest role model in life is one of my greatest friends, Reese Rios. I met Reese in March 2022 when she was new student at our school. She was petite, radiant, vibrant, and a motivator. She loved the color pink and TikTok, and she was that friend who would uninhibitedly jump out of the passenger seat at a red light to sing her favorite song. You could feel her energy, and she lifted your spirit to the joy of hers. Tragically, Reese was only 15 when she lost her life in an ATV accident—an event that profoundly impacted our school and community.

Through her loss, I learned that our greatest accomplishments aren't about the awards we put on paper, but they are about the way we impact and love others. I have earned many esteemed accomplishments in my academic and athletic career; however, I consider my greatest achievement learning to live my life loving others and leaving them better than I found them. Reese's life and untimely death taught me that it's the small, everyday actions of kindness and the genuine connections we make that truly define our character.

Reese's legacy is a testament to the power of valuing others. She showed me that character is not just about personal success but about lifting others up and making a positive impact on their lives. Her vibrant spirit and the joy she brought to those around her continue to inspire me every day. As I prepare for my career and to move on to the next stage of my life, my desire is to make a positive impact on others, just as Reese did for me.

Valuing others is what carries a strong legacy that will stand long after life on earth. It's about the smiles you bring, the encouragement you offer, and the love you give. To me, this is what truly matters. The way Reese lived her life—full of joy and love—has shaped my

understanding of character and has motivated me to strive to leave a positive mark on the world. Her legacy lives on through the lives she touched, and I hope to honor her memory by continuing to spread kindness and positivity wherever I go.

In conclusion, what matters most to me is the impact we have on others and the legacy we leave behind. This belief, deeply connected to character, was profoundly shaped by my friendship with Reese Rios. Her life and the lessons she taught me continue to inspire and guide me as I navigate my own path. I strive to live a life that values others, makes a positive impact, and leaves a lasting legacy of love and kindness.