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Twin sisters and Tokay High School students Valerie, left, and Victoria Winters, 17, have excelled academically despite the death of their mother. (Dan Evans/News-Sentinel)

## Twins excel at Tokay High School, despite life's hardships

By [Jennifer Bonnett](#)  
News-Sentinel Staff Writer  
Thursday, May 27, 2010 6:01 AM PDT

[Comments \(12 comment\(s\)\)](#)

At first glance, Victoria and Valerie Winters look like average teenage girls.

They each have their own cell phone. One likes to play video games. The other would rather be knitting or reading a book.

But both are smart. Way smart.

They don't mind rattling off answers to random chemistry questions or talking about taking six advancement placement classes this semester and earning 4.8 grade-point averages each.

Ask about what they've overcome, and the room becomes quiet. Gone is the giddiness, the talk of Mr. Torso (an anatomy model) or taking their first plane rides last month.

Victoria and Valerie grew up faster than most young women their age.

Around the time the two were hitting puberty, their mother had weight loss surgery but became ill shortly after. Her health deteriorated so badly that she couldn't stand or sit up. But the single parent begged the girls not to tell anyone.

Valerie finally called her aunt. And, when the medics came in, they said had the woman waited four more hours she would have died.

Apparently, the doctors had removed too much of her intestines, and while recovering in the hospital she developed gangrene and sepsis, medical terms her daughters now throw out like their peers would rattle off movie titles.

As they were coming of age, she was in and out of hospitals. They took care of her throughout their seventh-, eighth and ninth-grade years. And then she died.

Wanting to remain in their Dublin high school, the twins lived alone in an apartment during their 10th-grade year. They cleaned on Sundays while excelling in their first advanced placement classes.

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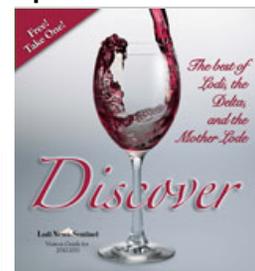
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- [Lodi man shot in chest during alleged drug deal](#)
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"It wasn't hard," says a humble Valerie.



Tears form in the eyes of Susan Heberle as she talks about her experiences with Victoria and Valerie Winters. (Dan Evans/News-Sentinel)

Most impressive, they got themselves to school every day.

Nearby in a new Tokay High science lab, Science Olympiad coach Susan Heberle's eyes are turning red and she is on the verge of tears. She says every time she hears the twins' story, the teacher learns something new.

"They are so motivated. Even when their mother was sick, they still got to school," she says.

Each had to fill out their federal student aid forms, and there has been no one to run to the store late at night to pick up forgotten glue sticks to finish a project, Heberle points out.

Now, they live in Lodi with their grandparents. "They have made things easier, like getting health insurance," says Victoria.

Valerie can't wait to chime in: "Our grandparents are awesome."

The two are preparing to not only leave Lodi and head off to college, but they're leaving one another. It will be the first time they are apart after experiencing so much together, from life to death.

### The Nobel prize

Heberle has unintentionally emerged as a bit of a mother figure. But that's just how she is.

The way any encouraging mother would, Heberle reminds one of the 17-year-olds to keep her head up during the newspaper interview and be ready to answer a reporter's questions. It is, Heberle said, good experience for future job interviews.

She also admits to nagging Victoria about getting a second pair of glasses since she's moving across the country at the end of the summer. She has, after all, already temporarily lost a pair — at Six Flags a few weeks ago when she got a first-hand lesson about gravity.

Heberle is not even the twins' teacher. Instead, they became her teacher's assistants this school year when there wasn't enough room in AP English. Now they spend one period a day grading papers and helping students with biology laboratories.

When they competed in the Science Bowl, both showed up early to help Heberle set up.

"We've already agreed that if they win the Nobel prize, they have to fly me out," she says.

In addition to coaching the twins on both the Science Olympiad and Science Bowl teams, Heberle has spent hours helping them fill out financial aid forms and scholarship applications in order to go to college.

The Career Center's Melody Knee, too, has played a role in helping to secure money. She said it has been her pleasure to work with them.

She remembers the first time they visited the Career Center. It was two years ago, and like other high school students, they were in search of scholarships for college.

"Valerie had stated that she loved her sister very much and that their dream was to attend college. They knew at that time the cost of their education was their responsibility," Knee says. "I was touched by their sisterhood."

She helped them search out grants and scholarships.

Heberle has a harder time putting into words exactly how she feels. "I've fallen in love with these girls. I enjoy being with them and respect them immensely," she says, as the girls lower their heads. One even sniffles a bit.

In her 31 years in front of a classroom, Heberle has never felt the ways she does about the Winters twins.

"They've touched my heart and made a difference in my life from the moment I met them," she says.

Part of that, she admits, is how their eyes lit up with wonderment about all things science. When they clinched the county Science Olympiad title, Victoria said it was the best day of her life, according to Heberle.

"That kept me going for, like, five years," Heberle says.

### In opposite directions

Victoria, who has a confident but reserved aura about her, is heading off to the Massachusetts Institute of



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Technology (her "dream school") where she said the students are more laid-back than those at Harvard or Stanford. MIT flew her back last month for a face-to-face interview. It was her first plane ride ever.

She will major in chemical engineering.

Her sister plans to eventually go to medical school, but she'll start in the fall at University of California, Los Angeles, as a double major in biochemistry and English.

Valerie wants to become a neurologist, not only because she's always been interested in medicine, but since she was little she determined she would find a cure for AIDS.

She also wants to make her patients feel better emotionally, because her mother didn't receive that when she was sick, according to the twins.

When asked why they wanted to be on both Science Bowl and Science Olympiad teams, the girls respond in unison, "It's fun."

Like most twins, they finish each other's sentences. But they occasionally like to also best one another.

When Victoria announces she got a four on the AP European history exam, Valerie adds, "I got a five."

"They're both so even-tempered," Heberle says, beaming. "I've never met anyone who hasn't walked away so impressed with them."

For years, they've been the only ones there for one another, so when talk turns to being separated by thousands of miles come fall, the girls turn a bit somber.

But they already have plans to get webcams. "Hopefully we'll be able to see each other and our dorm rooms," says Victoria, who appears to be more of a planner. She was the first born, after all. By 43 seconds.

In addition to their full class schedules, the two are members of the National Honor Society and the California Scholarship Federation. Last summer, they helped coach the Vinewood Elementary Science Olympiad and volunteered at the World of Wonders Science Museum.

They are simple young women whose natural beauty shines through as they talk about their grandparents, Ronald and Barbara Winters, and other people who have influenced their lives.

Valerie knits, crochets, does cross stitch and occasionally writes. Victoria also cross stitches, but enjoys computer video games. She's frugal and only likes the ones she can play for free.

In her free time, Valerie is looking for a job to save for school. Although she's worked hard to get more than \$15,000 in scholarships, she needs a few thousand dollars more per year.

"It's just a matter of looking around (for jobs)," says a reassuring Heberle.

The girls' social security survivorship benefit runs out June 19, on their 18th birthday.

Victoria secured a \$42,000-a-year need-based scholarship from MIT.

They are remarkably humble after all they've been through, from taking care of an ailing parent to attending her funeral — all before age 18.

The twins say their grandparents have always been there for them, especially grandpa, who is like a father. "We didn't have a father. Well, we never knew him, so it was hard," Valerie says about losing her mother.

Shortly after, grandpa calls Valerie wondering where the two of them are. It is, after all, more than two hours since school ended, and tonight is Tokay High's awards night, where they will accept a long list of scholarships.

Even though these twins will surely excel, the teenage giddiness is still there.

When it comes time for photos for the newspaper, Valerie wants to pose with Mr. Torso, so named because the teaching tool is a replica of human internal organs located between the pelvis and shoulder blades. But he's unavailable.

Out rolls from the back room a skeleton model. "Quick! Time me to see how many bones I can name in a minute," she shrieks. She ticks off 29, but is disappointed. "I know I can do more."

Contact reporter *Jennifer Bonnett* at [jenniferb@lodinews.com](mailto:jenniferb@lodinews.com).

## Reader Feedback

**Hey Mama** wrote on **May 28, 2010 2:19 AM:**

" What a wonderful story about two extraordinary young women. It sounds like they are enjoying themselves along the way, which not all high achievers do. Your Mom did a wonderful job raising you and I'm sure she's very proud of you.

I have pre-school aged twin girls who look as different from each other as you two do; one blond and one dark brunette. Seeing all you've accomplished makes me even more excited and hopeful for their futures. I can only hope that they'll turn out to be as sweet, ambitious and humble as the two of you are. "

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**steve** wrote on **May 28, 2010 12:18 AM:**

" Great story, outstanding comments, congratulations all around. "

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**knittedbrow** wrote on **May 27, 2010 8:57 PM:**

" Valerie and Victoria,  
Your story is one of the most inspiring I have read anywhere--not just the LNS.  
Your mother left a wonderful legacy in you two young women.  
In this awful current climate of anti-intellectualism, it was so refreshing to have read about your achievements.  
All the very best to you both in your chosen fields of study. "

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**LUSDParent** wrote on **May 27, 2010 3:06 PM:**

" Congratulations to both girls! Yours is such an inspiring story. Kudos to Melody and Susan for providing such amazing support to students. I hope our LUSD Board takes note of how crucial it is to have staffing levels that allow for this type of one-on-one assistance to those who need it most. "

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**Mrs. S.** wrote on **May 27, 2010 1:45 PM:**

" What an inspiring story! These girls will go far in life. "

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**Taffy** wrote on **May 27, 2010 1:38 PM:**

" Very compelling story. Girls like these give me hope for our future. "

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**jedsell** wrote on **May 27, 2010 1:18 PM:**

" This is an awesome story. You girls are amazing and I wish you all the best. Many people don't realize how good they have it until they read a story like this one. "

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**amityark** wrote on **May 27, 2010 12:20 PM:**

" Way to go girls keep on going and good luck to you. "

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**Sheesh** wrote on **May 27, 2010 9:23 AM:**

" Congratulations, you two beautiful young ladies. Keep up the good work and you will go far! Ladies, your mother would be soooo proud. She must have been a great lady to have been blessed with each of you!

To the editor: this is a great story and we need to hear such wonderful roads to success stories to counter balance the 30 arrests. PLEASE more good news. "

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**Whoa Nellie!** wrote on **May 27, 2010 8:03 AM:**

" Something tells me that these two impressive young ladies are going places. MIT & UCLA? Holla! Best Wishes! "

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**Vickster** wrote on **May 27, 2010 8:02 AM:**

" WOW!! That is a fantastic story. I can only imagine what these two young ladies have been through. Lived alone in Dublin to attend 10th grade?? Unbelievable. Congratulations Girls and I wish you the Very Best of